

## Sticks and stones may break our bones and names can also hurt us

### Alumni of the Plains Indians Cultural Survival School reflect on their experiences

Cynthia J. Gallop, David Turner, Jerry Arshinoff, Marlena Bullee et Reanne Arcand

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Résumé de l'article

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## *Sticks and Stones may Break Our Bones and Names can also Hurt Us*

*Alumni of the Plains Indians Cultural Survival School reflect on their experiences*

Cynthia J. Gallop  
*Mount Royal University*

David Turner  
*Alberta Health Services*

Jerry Arshinoff

Marlena Bullee  
*Mount Royal University*

Reanne Arcand  
*Mount Royal University*

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### **Abstract**

*One of the earliest attempts to Indigenize the Canadian curriculum began with Cultural Survival Schools (CSS). This grassroots approach to Indigenous education emerged in Canada in the mid 1970's. These schools were established in recognition that education is key to the survival of First Nations people. The CSS approach to education involved reaffirming Indigenous identity by selecting aspects of the traditional Indigenous ways and blending them with non-Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Despite various efforts to meet the learning needs of Indigenous youth over the years, significant problems are still present. In the wake of the report released by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2015, the concept of cultural safety has become a major focus of the institutional justice and oppression conversation when considering K-12 education for Indigenous learners in Canada. As placing "culture" at the forefront of the education experience was the primary goal of CSS, and thus focusing on "cultural safety", perhaps it is time to look back at past practices and re-implement these educational approaches. This study offered an opportunity to ask alumni who had attended a CSS to reflect on, and speak more formally of, their experiences in mainstream schools and a CSS, 30 to 40 years after they graduated. The findings of this study support the results from research conducted around the world. However, what is notable about this study is that the participants were able to share how the positive experiences of attending a CSS persisted over time.*



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*Peyak*

‘hey squaw!’

Her ears stung and she shook, fearful of the other words  
like fists that would follow. For a moment, her spirit drained like  
water from a basin. But she breathed and drew inside the fierce  
face and screamed till his image disappeared like vapour (Dumont, 1955)

## **Introduction**

The education system in Canada has represented institutional injustice and oppression for Indigenous people since the government set up the Residential School System in the 1880’s (MacDonald & Hudson, 2012). Although the last residential school closed its doors in 1996 (Kuhl, 2017), and despite the comprehensive investigations and reports released on the matter (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; Erasmus & Dussault, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report, 2015), there are still many sites of oppression and injustice for Indigenous learners in Canada (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011).

There have been many theorists and practitioners who have challenged Canada’s Eurocentric education system over the last fifty years. One of the earliest attempts to Indigenize the Canadian curriculum began with Cultural Survival Schools. This grassroots approach to Indigenous education emerged in Canada in the mid 1970’s (Davis, 2013). The first Canadian Survival School, Wandering Spirit, opened in Toronto, Ontario in 1976 (McCaskill, 1987) after the Canadian Federal government accepted the basic goals expressed by the National Indian Brotherhood in the document “Indian Control of Indian Education” (1972). Shortly after Wandering Spirit opened, seven other Survival Schools were established across Canada. Five were in large urban centres, two were on reserves, and one opened in a rural setting near the Village of St. Charles in Ontario (McCaskill, 1987).

These schools were established in recognition that education is key to the survival of First Nations people. The Cultural Survival School approach to education involved reaffirming Indigenous identity by selecting aspects of the traditional Indigenous ways and blending them with non-Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Barman et al., 1987). Indigenous culture and language were central to the curriculum, as was respect towards others, particularly Elders (Barman et al, 1987). While formal teaching of the curriculum was the responsibility of a trained teacher, learning could also occur through guided experience, such as rituals, ceremony, and outdoor field school (Barman, et al, 1987). The overall purpose was to promote and preserve Indigenous languages, values, beliefs, and history (McCaskill, 1987). More generally, these schools sought to create a broad-based sense of community among Indigenous people, protect urban Indigenous rights, and improve relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Davis, 2013).

Central to the Cultural Survival School movement was the Culturally Responsive Schooling/Education (CRS/E) scholarship. CRS/E was first officially recognized in the literature in 1928 in the United States, with the publication of the Meriam Report<sup>1</sup>, and then more

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<sup>1</sup> Note, some scholars disagree with the claim that the Meriam report can be considered as part of the CRS/E literature.

substantially in the 1980's (Castagno and Brayboy, 2008). This scholarship, based largely in educational anthropology literature, combined work in the fields of education and multicultural education. CRS/E required teaching methods, curricular materials, teacher dispositions, and school-community relations be altered to include Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Castagno and Brayboy, 2008). It was this theoretical shift in understanding diversity in education that supported the work of Cultural Survival Schools (Castagno and Brayboy, 2008).

Despite various efforts to meet the learning needs of Indigenous youth over the years, significant problems are still present. Although the numbers are slowly improving, only 70 percent of Indigenous youth aged 20 to 24 had completed high school in 2016, compared to a 91 percent completion rate for non-Indigenous youth (Anderson, 2021). Research also indicates the grades K to 12 curricula is still primarily dominated by Eurocentric education ideologies that largely exclude Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Bastien & Kremer, 2004; Battiste, 2014; Crooks, et al, 2015; Dei, et al, 2022; Harrington & Pavel, 2013; Pidgeon et al., 2014; Waller et al., 2002).

In the wake of the report released by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2015, the concept of cultural safety has become a major focus of the institutional justice and oppression conversation when considering K to 12 education for Indigenous learners in Canadian provinces and territories (Webb & Mashford-Pringle, 2022). The term “cultural safety” has been defined as the effective teaching of a person or family from another culture by a teacher who is critically reflective and recognizes their culture and impact within their classroom practice. Cultural safety also includes “the absence of any cultural practice that demeans or disempowers a person from another culture” (Harrison et al., 2012, p. 324). In this report, the TRC highlighted how the K to 12 curriculum is dominated by Eurocentric ideologies and largely excludes Indigenous knowledge and worldviews, and therefore creates culturally unsafe spaces. The Commission members made several calls to action. However, numbers 10.3, the need to develop culturally appropriate curricula, and 62.2, provide teacher education on how to integrate and utilize Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into the classroom, are meant to specifically address the systems that create unsafe spaces for Indigenous children and youth (TRC, 2015).

Many education administrators continue to deny that the current education system is culturally unsafe for Indigenous learners. This denial and unwillingness to act has led some scholars to suggest the current education system has more potential for harm than for good for Indigenous learners (Battiste, 2014; Louie & Gereluk, 2021). Clearly something must be done to create safer school environments for these students. As placing “culture” at the forefront of the education experience was the primary goal of Cultural Survival Schools, and thus focusing on “cultural safety”, perhaps it is time to look back at past practices, and re-implement these educational approaches. As such, the aim of this project was to explore the experiences of interpersonal racism of Indigenous students and recover past learnings from these Cultural Survival Schools in Canada.

## **Study Background**

The Plains Indians Cultural Survival School (PICSS) was a joint initiative between the Board of the Plains Indians Cultural Survival School Society and the Calgary Board of Education (CBE). PICSS was in operation in Calgary, Alberta from 1979 to 2002. The school was initiated by Howard Green, a self-professed “60's radical” who moved to Canada from Pennsylvania, United States during the Vietnam war. Howard became the first Principal of PICSS. He was a

teacher by training, and very passionate about Indigenous issues and quest for sovereignty. His initial efforts to create this Cultural Survival School involved reaching out to the Elders and knowledge keepers he knew from some of the Treaty 7 nations in Alberta, namely Tsuut'ina, Siksika, and the Kanai nations. A group from PICSS also visited the Red School House, a Cultural Survival School that opened in 1973 in St. Paul, Minnesota, to learn about their structure and approach to education. Together, Howard and these community members approached the CBE with a structural, curricular, and pedagogical plan for a new pilot school based in Calgary that focused on Indigenous traditions, culture, and language. An annual contract was signed every year between the Plains Indians Cultural Survival School Society and the CBE outlining the funding structure and expectations for both parties.

When PICSS first opened it had approximately 45 students. At its peak, the school had 44 staff and 704 students enrolled. The salaries and benefits of all the certified teachers were paid by the CBE. However, the PICSS Society had to reimburse the CBE for all costs for students over the age of 19 years of age, which was often the majority. To cover these costs, the Society sought out funding from a variety of grant applications, fundraising activities, and corporate donations. As such, there was never any charge to students, parents, or guardians.

PICSS, like other Survival Schools of the time, focused on grades 7 to 12, as that was a high drop-out time for many Indigenous youth, particularly in urban centres (McCaskill, 1987). Students ended up at PICSS for a variety of reasons. Some were kicked out of school, or dropped out, and had no other suitable options in the mainstream system. Some students were sent by their parents. Many learned of PICSS through word-of-mouth. While some students may have needed to focus on studies from grades seven to nine, most of the students who attended PICSS were over the age of fifteen.

The school largely followed the standard curriculum guidelines for mandatory subjects such as math, biology, and chemistry. However, to ensure culture remained at the centre of the school pedagogy, the grade 10 and 11 English and Social Studies curricula primarily focused on Indigenous peoples' history in Canada and contemporary Indigenous issues. In addition to the modified Alberta Education curriculum, PICSS offered culturally-based electives. These courses included Blackfoot, Stoney, Cree, and Dené languages, pow wow drumming, singing, regalia-making, and Indigenous art. The shop and woodworking classes concentrated on making canoes, snowshoes, and moss bags. Cultural programming extended well beyond daily classes. Every day began with a sweetgrass ceremony, and Pipe ceremonies were held in the gym on a regular basis. In addition, students were encouraged to paint the interior and exterior walls with traditional art. Indigenous speakers were often invited to give presentations. Such speakers included well-known community Elders, lawyers, politicians, and prominent Indigenous athletes. Wilderness Survival classes were also offered bimonthly for up to eight to ten students. These outings involved canoe trips in spring and fall, and camping trips in winter, where students were expected to forage their own food for themselves. In addition, several field trips were held in places of particular interest to Indigenous people, such as the Southern Alberta, Northern Saskatchewan, Montana, Grand Canyon, and Alaska.

Given the familial and societal challenges many of the students faced, PICSS endeavoured to create a home- and community-like experience. Teachers were called by their first names and strove to be support persons to students. Hot lunches were served every day for free, and flexibility was allowed for students who struggled with attendance due to family life challenges that made it

difficult for them to be at school some days. Like most survival schools, PICSS was not a school for teachers and staff looking for strict discipline policies and structure (McCaskill, 1987).

Like other Cultural Survival Schools of that time, PICSS suffered from several systemic barriers. Namely, the school was under-staffed, under-funded, and under-resourced (McCaskill, 1987). PICSS structural relationship with the larger mainstream school system often put them at a disadvantage, and the school administrators and students were treated as if they had a lack of legitimacy within the system (McCaskill, 1987). Like the experiences of their Indigenous students, Cultural Survival schools like PICSS were also often marginalized (McCaskill, 1987). The school eventually succumbed to the systemic pressures after the school principal, Jerry Arshinoff, was falsely accused of misappropriating funds from the Plains Indians Cultural Survival Society. Eventually, Arshinoff was fully acquitted and received an official apology from the CBE (Toneguzzi, January 10, 1998). However, the loss of Arshinoff's leadership and fundraising abilities had a significant impact on the school. Despite its enrolment and need, PICSS was forced to close its doors in 2002. To this day, no other urban Indigenous high school has existed in Calgary, Alberta.

Anecdotally, the school saw several "successful" graduates; university professors, award-winning and famous actors, nurses, teachers, and council members from various First Nations communities, to name a few. Several of the alumni have informally discussed the profound impact the school had on them, and attribute much of their current success to their time there. Despite historical evidence that highlighted the benefits of attending these schools, today standardized curricula and pedagogy have largely replaced many of these alternative culturally responsive education programs (Sleeter, 2012). This study offered an opportunity to ask alumni who had attended PICSS sometime between the 1980's and 2000's to reflect on, and speak more formally of, their experiences in mainstream schools and PICSS, 30 to 40 years after they graduated.

## **Literature Review**

### *Interpersonal Racism*

According to the Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, racism is the combination of racial prejudice (discriminatory attitudes based on assumptions and perceptions about race/skin colour), and power (the ability to influence others, and having access to decision-makers and resources to accomplish goals and tasks) (<http://www.aclrc.com/racism>). The idea of "racism" arose out of colonial ideologies of the superiority of white Europeans over all other races (Fleras, 2014; Hippolite & Bruce, 2010; Milne, 2013). These Eurocentric ideologies reflect the belief systems that the concept of "race" is closely associated with physical characteristics, especially skin colour (Hippolite & Bruce, 2010; Milne, 2013).

Racism can occur at the interpersonal, institutional, or systemic levels (Fleras, 2014). When experienced at the interpersonal level, it can take various forms, such as verbal and psychological abuse, negative attitudes and low expectations, and exclusionary policies and practices (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011). Overt racism is understood to involve a pattern of dislike that occurs at the individual and relationship level. It is expressed as hatred of the "Other" because the racialized person is believed to be culturally or biologically inferior (Fleras, 2014). Although the concept of race lacks any scientific validity, it continues to gain social currency because it allows for the distribution of unequal power (Fleras, 2014).

### *Impact of Interpersonal Racism on Students*

The experience of racism can create devastating impacts, such as a forced sense of inferiority and shame (St. Denis & Hampton, 2002; Sellers, 1992). Minority youth who experience racism and discrimination may develop oppositional cultural values that can lead to further problems, such as poor academic performance, disengagement, high risk behaviors, and general problems at home and school (Laframboise et al., 2006). Racism in schools has also been linked to poor mental health outcomes for all minority youth, which has been further linked to substance abuse and depression (Whitbeck et al., 2001; Whitbeck et al., 2002; La Framboise et al, 2006). Macedo et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review of 121 studies on the effects of interpersonal racism on ethnic-racial minorities. Generally, the researchers concluded negative mental health outcomes were an effect of racism. Specifically, the researchers found associations between racism and lower self-esteem, depression, suicide ideation and attempts, aggression, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder, higher anxiety and stress.

### *Impact of Culturally Responsive Schooling and Education (CRS/E)*

Many studies have been conducted on the positive effects CRS/E has had on Indigenous learners, and their ability to mitigate the negative impacts of racism on Indigenous students. The findings have been quite positive and focus on Indigenous student persistence in schooling (Brayboy & McCarty, 2010; Bui & Fagan, 2013; Cabrera et al., 2012; Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Dee & Penner, 2017; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Larson et al., 2018). Traditional activities and ceremonies were found to provide a stable foundation for Indigenous students, particularly for adolescents. Having pride in one's culture has been found to lead to increased academic achievement, competence, and self-esteem (Laframboise, et al, 2006; Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Phinney et al., 1997). However, what is missing from the literature is a reflexive look at the long-term impacts Cultural Survival Schools might have on Indigenous learners.

### *Autobiographical Memory*

The act of being reflexive involves remembering the past and thoroughly considering how it impacts our current and future selves. Research on remembering the past and linking it to the present and future experiences has increased dramatically over the last several years (Klein, 2013; Schacter et al., 2007; Schacter et al., 2012; Szpunar, 2010). Although there can be concerns around memory and accuracy of events that happened in the far-off past, it is important to understand that memory is not a literal representation of the past. Instead, the act of remembering involves piecing together bits and pieces of information from various sources. It is a constructive process (Schacter & Addis, 2007). Namely, one's sense of self and personal identity is intimately tied to autobiographical memory; a collection of personal stories of what has transpired in a person's life (D'Argembeau et al., 2012; McAdams, 2001).

Autobiographical memory emerges around two years of age (Howe & Courage, 1997; McAdams, 2001). However, it is not until adolescence that people can begin to create causal narratives that explain different biographical events (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). By the time individuals have reached young adulthood they are quite eager to construct stories. As such, typically individuals between the ages of 15 to 25 tend to recall a disproportionately large number of autobiographical events. It seems this period of development is rich in emotional and

motivational content (McAdams, 2001; Thorne, 2000). Autobiographical memory consists of episodic and self-defining memories. A self-defining memory is a remembered episode from the past that is “vivid, affectively charged, repetitive, linked to other similar memories, and related to an important unresolvable theme or enduring concern in an individual’s life (Singer & Salovey, 1996, p. 13). The participants of this study were primarily between the ages of 15 to 25 when they attended mainstream schools and PICSS; an important emotional period in their lives.

### **Study Methodology and Research Design**

Due to the nature of the topic and participants, Critical Indigenous and Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology methodologies were used for this study. These approaches involve respect, protection and preservation of knowledge, and continuous consultation and negotiation with all stakeholders. Our research team was composed of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous members, academics, practitioners, former teachers, and students. We also identify as male and female. We are mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and partners. As such our research follows from our unique understandings of the topic. The main research question of this qualitative study was: How might former students of PICSS understand their success? How might it relate to their time at PICSS?

The study was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). It received research ethics approval in spring 2019, and officially began with a blessing ceremony later that summer. The project wrapped up approximately four months later with a closing ceremony in late fall, 2019.

#### *Recruitment*

As Kovach states, “Indigenous researchers often hear Heidegger’s Phenomenology calling” (2010, p. 30). The method focuses on idiographic human experience that is based on individual, subjective understandings of a specific phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). As such, this qualitative method sits well within Indigenous methodologies. Sampling in Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology is typically quite small to maintain the focus on the particular experience (Smith, et al, 2009), rather than look for generalizations or grouped themes. The project collaborator, who was one of the former Principals of PICSS and the Chair of the Board of the PICSS non-profit Society from 1980 to 2001, contacted a large group of alumni, told them about the project, and asked them to contact either the Primary Investigator (PI) or Co-Primary Investigator (Co-PI) if they were interested in participating. The snowball sampling method was used to ensure diverse sampling, capturing differences in participant gender identification and age, as well as different years at the school and cohort groups. Several of the alumni who participated said they knew of others who would want to participate, so they were encouraged to share the PI and Co-PI’s contact information with anyone they thought might be interested.

#### *Participants*

A total of 14 alumni, who self-identified as “successful” and attended PICSS were recruited and interviewed. Approximately 79% were female (11), and 21% were male (3). There was a close split between participants who attended PICSS in the 1980’s and those who attended in the 1990’s. Just over half of the participants (57%) attended in the 1980’s, and approximately 43% attended in the 1990’s. There was another close split between alumni who were teenagers versus adult



students while attending PICSS. Less than half of the participants were up to 18 years of age while attending PICSS (43%), and approximately 57% were over 18 years while at PICSS. The project included a diverse breakdown of participant Indigenous identity and age ranges. Thirty-six percent of the participants identified as Blackfoot, and 36 percent identified as Cree. Fourteen percent identified as Dené, seven percent as Métis, and seven percent as “Other” First Nations. The former students ranged in age. Thirty-six percent were between 40 and 49 years, 43 percent were between 50 to 59 years, and approximately 21 percent were over 60 years of age at the time of the interviews. The occupations of the participants were also quite diverse. At the time of the interview, participants were current or retired health care providers, community workers, university academics, graduate students, and actors. Many participants were also Elders and Knowledge Keepers, and well respected within their communities.

### *Data Collection*

The research data was collected using an in-depth, semi-structured interview format. The interview process involved following fixed questions and prompts, while also allowing the direction to be set by the interviewees. Participants were asked questions that involved them using their autobiographical and self-defining memories. They were asked to describe their experiences in mainstream school and their experiences when they attended PICSS. Participants were also asked about their experiences of success. A total of 14 interviews were completed and lasted anywhere from 60 to 90 minutes. After completion, each interview was then transcribed by a professional transcriber, and then analyzed by the PI, Co-PI, and two research assistants.

### *Analysis*

The Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis method was employed for the qualitative data analysis. The data analysis included most of the research team. As both the Co-PI and the Research Collaborator knew the participants, they were not involved in listening to the audio data, to ensure confidentiality would be maintained. Once an interview was complete, the two research assistants and PI would individually listen to each interview and write out our thoughts and impressions. After each transcript was prepared, the Co-PI would join in the analysis. As an idea or word emerged that struck us, we would each take note. The four of us would then meet and discuss our individual findings. We took these words and began to tie them together by moving back and forth between the participants’ understanding, our individual and group understandings, and the literature. To be clear, interpretive analysis is not meant to find themes, instead, it is a way of seeking experiences that draw our attention to the unique (Lawn, 2006).

### *Study Limitations*

A social desirability bias was something considered when conducting this research. Given the nature of the questions about their perceived success or challenges with their past school programs, participants could have altered their responses in an attempt to avoid feeling ashamed, exposed, or inadequate (Bernard, 2013). The researchers attempted to mitigate most of this bias by providing sufficient conversational space for participants to feel shame and embarrassment without perceived repercussions (Bernard, 2013). In addition, having the two research assistants who are Indigenous lead or co-lead the interviews visibly put the participants at ease.

Having confidence that the data collection and analysis are trustworthy and credible are very important in qualitative research. Recognizing that qualitative research is an iterative rather than linear process, steps were taken along the way between design and implementation to ensure congruence between the question formulation, literature review, participant recruitment, data collection strategies, and analysis (Morse et al., 2002). One of the greatest benefits to using Indigenous methodologies with an interdisciplinary team is the number of built-in verification strategies from the beginning through to the end.

## Findings

### *Mainstream Schooling - Overt Experiences of Racism*

According to Tatum (1997), a good way to understand racism is to think of it as “prejudice plus power” (p. 7). It is this relationship between prejudicial beliefs about the “Other” combined with the power to impact the “Other” that helps us to understand how racism is constructed. Without access to power, a person is only left with biases and beliefs that are largely ineffectual. Many of the former students described experiences of interpersonal racism from fellow students, teachers and school administrators while attending mainstream schools. Typically, the racism was experienced through name calling or acts of physical aggression towards the participants.

**The power of words.** Students described being called names like “Squaw-Bitch” and “Savages”. Often the name-calling led to angry outbursts and physical retaliations by the victim. Despite being emotionally and physically injured, the participants received very little, to no, support from teachers and school administrators to manage or mitigate the abuse. Instead, these students were typically punished instead of the aggressor.

So, when I started at [mainstream school] in grade nine I got into three fights that year and the last one was outside of the principal’s office and I remember her name and I remember who she was, and I remember her calling me a ‘squaw-bitch’ and I remember fighting with her outside of the office and I ended up having black eyes. The principal, you know, told me ... I took the first punch, like I swung first, so I was the one that got in trouble.

Although the meaning of the word “squaw” has been debated among scholars, the word “...was first recorded at the time of European contact in the early seventeenth century. Algonquin in origin, the word is based on the Massachusetts’s word for ‘woman’, *squa* or *ussqua* (*eshqua*), the Natick’s *squa* or *squáas*, and the Narragansett’s *squáw* or *eskwa*” (Parezo & Jones, 2009, p. 376). By the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries the word “squaw” became racialized and sexist. It also came to symbolize powerlessness, victimization, and sexual violence, particularly in the American Midwest, where American Indigenous women were routinely abducted and raped. By 1928, Indigenous people in North America understood that calling a woman a “squaw” was an insult (Parezo & Jones, 2009).

The word “bitch” also has a history of negative connotation. Although it has been long recognized as the word for a female dog, it was not linked to women in the English language until the fifteenth century (Hodgson, 2008). At best, the word “bitch” denotes someone, usually a woman, who is difficult or annoying. The word can also imply someone or something that should be conquered or dominated. Similar to the word “squaw”, “bitch” has also been used to describe sexually depraved beasts (Kleinman et al., 2009).

The difficulty with words such as “squaw” and “bitch” is they associate women with a problem. The name “Squaw-Bitch” denotes a lack of power; someone who is less than human (like a dog) and meant to be dominated. These words sustain a social climate where Indigenous women are not taken seriously, and they have very little value or worth.

Students could also be called names by teachers. As this one participant described her experiences in a residential school, not all name-calling and aggressive acts were done by students.

I had no confidence - well, you were always put down at the boarding school. Always. You were a dirty little savage. “You are a savage. Do you hear me?” They were mean. “You are a savage,” and they would shake you.

The original image behind the word “savage” derives from “...a variant of the Latin, *silvaticus*, meaning a forest inhabitant or man of the woods...” (Berkhofer, 1979, p. 13). It is a term associated with “wild man”, or Germany’s medieval legend of the “Wilder Mann” (Berkhofer, 1979). He was described as existing somewhere between humanity and animality. The savage was a creature without morality and was ignorant of God. By calling Indigenous people, “savages”, the destruction of Indigenous people was held as a virtue; Europeans were ridding the “civilized” world of sin (Berkhofer, 1979).

Teasing and name calling is a common occurrence among children and youth. Children wearing glasses may be called “Four-Eyes” or “Scaredy Cat” if they appear timid or nervous. The names described in this project are different. Words are thought tools; they reflect as well as construct our social reality. Whether used consciously or unconsciously, words evoke responses. They can raise us, or tear us down. They also highlight equalities, inequalities, privileges, and oppression.

The term “ethnophaulisms” was created by Abraham Roback in 1944. It comes from the Greek roots “ethno”/“ethnic”, which means a cultural group, plus “phaulisma” – to disparage (Nuessel, 2008). Ethnophaulisms are pejorative names or designations for people who belong to an ethnic group. These names are usually based on several observable phenomena, including skin colour, culturally-determined eating and drinking practices, and clothing customs (Leader et al., 2009). They are one form of ethnic discrimination and racism, and ethnic degradation (Pankiw & Bienvenue, 1990).

Whether used consciously or unconsciously, the use of ethnophaulisms are meant to reinforce group inequality. And, like stereotypes, ethnophaulisms, when repeated over time, are generally assumed to be true depictions of the people targeted (Leader, et al, 2009). Although it might be argued the perpetrators were not aware of the specific intent or impact words such as “Squaw-Bitch” and “Savage” might have on these youth, ultimately these words were used to convey a sense of superiority over the Indigenous students.

**The power of colour.** The colour black in Western cultures is often associated with negative connotations, such as darkness, death, decay, evil deeds, disgrace, and suspicion (Allan, 2009). As such, when applied to humans, being “dark” is generally viewed as something unfavorable (Allan, 2009). So, when one of the participants discussed his negative experiences in mainstream school systems, it was not surprising that he associated them to being “dark”.

I have to say they [experiences at previous mainstream schools] weren’t that good because at that time I used to attend a school in [a part of town] which is the richer part of town. So, there were a few knocks against me, and apparently, I didn’t have

these one-hundred-dollar clothing items that everyone else was expected to wear... Also, some of them knew who my siblings were, some of whom were dark-skinned and my friends, such as I had, themselves were dark-skinned, Indigenous... So that sort of thing is never one-on-one, it is usually a cowardly several against one. So, I had some quite negative experiences.

The dysphemistic connotations of being “black” or “dark-skinned” has a long history in the Western world. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a German scientist from the Enlightenment period first coined the term “Caucasian”. He adduced *Homo sapiens* came from one region of the world, the Caucasus Mountains, and eventually spread to other areas; any divergence from the original Caucasian form was considered a “degeneration” of the preferred human form (Gould, 1994, p.68). The assumption was, the darker the person was, the more divergent they were from the *Homo sapiens* ideal (Durodoye, 2003).

Although this scientific classification system was soundly discredited (Diamond, 1994), the stigma surrounding it still exists today. Blumenbach’s work led to a stream of scientific race theories that condoned the negative treatment of non-Western people and provided a rationale for white supremacy and domination (Diamond, 1994; Durodoye 2003; Gould, 1994; Guthrie, 1998; Jones 1997). In essence, these race theories categorized individuals as sub-human, or inferior which has supported interpersonal racism over time (Fleras, 2014).

### *Mainstream Schooling – Impact of Racism*

While not all the experiences of attending mainstream schools were negative for all the participants, the ones they primarily remembered and focused on were. During their time at mainstream or residential schools, participants often described themselves as “floating”, “invisible” and “lost”.

**Floating.** An early definition from the 14th Century defines the verb “float” as “to drift about, hover passively” (<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=float>). This aptly captures the experiences of many of the participants. Specifically, to be passive implies someone who is not visibly reactive or engaged. It also implies a lack of personal agency.

I was, you know, the typical kid trying to smoke and all that stuff! And then what else? Just hanging out with the wrong people, not ... not focusing on bettering myself, just floating and not really any direction, just existing even, you could say.

Personal agency is undermined in a system that does not value what Indigenous students bring to educational institutions (Harker, 1990). As a result, those students who do not have the various forms of capital that are valued within the public education system have more difficulty “fitting-in” and, subsequently, completing their school programs (Harker, 1984, 1990; Pidgeon, 2008).

**Being invisible.** The origins of the word “invisible” date back to the mid-fourteenth century, and meant, “not perceptible to sight, incapable of being seen,” ([https://www.etymonline.com/word/invisible#etymonline\\_v\\_12197](https://www.etymonline.com/word/invisible#etymonline_v_12197)). True to the experiences described, these participants were not seen for who they really were, which lead them to withdraw.

It was like that at every school you went to. The students, [would say] “You are a squaw. You are a dirty Indian,” you know, all that stuff. And, the teachers never stood up for you. If you stood up for yourself, you would be the one going to the principal’s office, not them, right? Even though you were the victim you would be

looked at as the one causing all the trouble. So, I learned to just kind of stay back and not talk too much and try and be invisible.

Students who are subjected to racist slurs and threats on a continual basis often lose a positive sense of self and their culture (Archibald, et al., 1995; St. Denis and Hampton, 2002). Racism leads to students dropping out of school, alienation, and social marginalization (Dei & Linton, 2019; Huffman, 1991; Wilson, 1991). More importantly, experiencing these acts often lead to the isolated person taking poor care of themselves and participating in self-defeating behaviors (Abrams et al., 2004).

**Being lost.** The word “Lost” was an interesting word choice by some of the participants, in that the original etymology of the word dates back to fourteenth Century Old English, and means to be “wasted, ruined, spent in vain” ([www.etymonline.com/search?q=lost](http://www.etymonline.com/search?q=lost)). This word succinctly captures the overall impact of their time in mainstream schools prior to attending PICSS. These participants did not feel appreciated, understood, or valued.

...I was still kind of a lost person. That is what brought me, just out of curiosity because everyone was going there [PICSS], so I thought I would check it out, why not?...I didn't have no plans, no hopes, no nothing...Like I said there, I was lost in a world of unfortunately, drugs and alcohol and as a young person that is exactly what a lot of us did.

Like the findings of this study, Hare and Pidgeon (2011) found the youth participants in their research also described being “lost” while attending mainstream schools. Typically, it was tied to a sense of inferiority, particularly around curricular demands. For the participants of this study, being “lost” meant alienation and social marginalization, which lead them to drop out of school. Many of the participants described being without hope or future aspirations. All the participants of this study discussed how after a while, they lacked the ability to find the words, language, or physical energy to fight the negative impact of racism in their mainstream schools.

### *The PICSS Effect*

Once the participants of this study began attending PICSS, their school experiences changed quite dramatically. Despite their age or stage, or specific reasons for attending PICSS, all the participants discussed the positive effects the school had on them. Instead of feeling threatened by classmates and abandoned by school administrators and teachers, these alumni described feelings of “belonging”, “pride”, and “dignity”.

**Belonging.** Many of them spoke passionately about the sense of belonging they developed while at PICSS.

PICSS was lifesaving. It was the first time in my life that I felt like I belonged somewhere. It filled in all of the voids that were so huge inside of me of what it meant to be Native, and it was positive...Going to PICSS, it felt like I wasn't a part of the ... I don't know, that little tiny speck. They ... yeah, so at PICSS the cultural teachings were just ... I keep saying it, but it filled this huge empty hole inside of me.

Providing a culturally responsive and safe education has been found to have many positive impacts that are similar to those experienced by the PICSS alumni. Specifically, a study conducted by Hare and Pidgeon (2011) found a sense of belonging is one of the single most beneficial

indicators of educational success. This study found that providing youth cultural programming and support and giving them the respect they deserved helped them develop a strong sense of belonging that was very positive while they were attending school, and then after they graduated.

**Pride.** The project participants also spoke of other positive impacts from their time at PICSS, such as feeling proud of who they were and gaining back their dignity.

It is so strange, because once I found that [pride] it just changed everything about my personhood. Like I just got confident about everything, where before I had no pride in who I was. “Once I found that pride, it just trickled down to everything else”.

A study conducted by LaFromboise et al. (1993) found Indigenous students who participated in culturally responsive school programs also had an improved sense of pride, as well as positive self-identity tied to their Indigenous culture, and improved leadership skills.

**Dignity.** The word “*Dignity*” comes from the Latin word “*dignitatem*”, which means “Worthiness” (<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=dignity>). This sense worth legitimizes students as active participants in the learning process and validates the knowledge these students bring to the classroom and world (Lee & Quijada Cerecer, 2010).

It [PICSS] gave me back my dignity. Like a five-year-old, six-year-old and you don’t know who you are yet, but you do know that you are loved and cared about. That is what I felt. Innocent. Wide open to learning the new ways and it was all because of PICSS and I love those people so much for everything they did for me and my family.

By creating a school culture that promoted a sense of belonging, pride, and dignity, many of the effects of racism these participants experienced were negated. Developing a sense of safety from belonging, and then pride and dignity gave these former students purpose and personal agency. These students no longer felt “invisible” or unworthy. Instead, they felt “seen” while attending PICSS, and more importantly, wanted to be seen. Being seen and feeling worthy meant these Indigenous students were able to engage in a process of reclamation, recuperation, and revitalization of Indigenous knowledges, which are the necessary steps in their empowerment (Dei, 2000).

### *Finding Success through PICSS*

According to the Miriam-Webster Dictionary, “Success”, is defined as a “favorable or desired outcome, as well as “the attainment of wealth, favor, or eminence”. As such, when defined by Western society, the term “success” is often related to external measures and performance outcomes, such as professional employment, high levels of income, and material possessions. The participants of this study were all established professionals in the fields of Health, Social Services, Justice, Education, and the Fine Arts, and self-identified as successful. However, when asked how they understood their current “success”, participants described something different than professional and financial success. Specifically, success was described by the participants as being a role model and an advocate/activist for change. These findings are similar to the ones reported by Michelle Pidgeon in her study on the experiences of Indigenous students in postsecondary education. Pidgeon found success was understood as the “ability to maintain cultural integrity,” and “responsibility of reciprocity.” Specifically, “maintaining cultural integrity,” involves “having

a sense of oneself and keeping hold of one's Indigenous understandings", and the "responsibility of reciprocity" is the ability to give back to larger Indigenous communities (2008). This understanding of success is one that runs counter to the hegemonic discourse within most mainstream considerations.

**Being a role model.** As one participant explained, being a role model was important because this person did not have many. As such, this person understands the importance of the role to inspire other children and youth.

Well as I said, growing up and with my career, growing up I never saw strong Indigenous [people] on television. I never saw them in my family because my family was so hurt. I needed ... in order for me to feel good about how I was I needed that. I got into acting because I had this intense need to tell our stories from a place of honest and truth and I have always had that need to speak from a place of truth.

Strong role models are critical in all areas of a youth's life. Role models are vital to keeping youth in school, this is particularly true for post-secondary education. According to Wilson et al. (2011), "it is not uncommon for Indigenous students to be the first in their family or community to embark on university-level study, and therefore lack essential role models that could assist them in their education" (p. 60). What is also important to note is that many of the participants of this study are, or may soon be, recognized community Elders. Strong Elder role models who demonstrate physical, mental, and spiritual strength play a critical role in fostering intergenerational relationships with youth and helping to overcome the negative effects of colonization and racism (Kral et al., 2014; Yang & Warburton, 2018). In addition, traditional cultural knowledge is further reinforced for youth when Elders serve as key role models in the community, making it more possible for youth to develop positive Indigenous cultural identities and understanding of traditions (Yang & Warburton, 2018).

**Being an advocate/activist.** Many of the participants also described their success in terms of their ability to advocate for change or be activists. Given the ongoing effects of colonialism and racism in Canada, considerable injustices still exist for Indigenous peoples in the areas of education, health, justice and policing, land claims, and the environment. Any ability to affect change in these fields is not only a success for the individual, but also for the connected community. As this participant suggests, being able to affect change within the health care system for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people creates a ripple effect and makes her feel successful in life.

It [success] is how you bring humanity to what you do. If you don't do that then your knowledge is useless. I find there is a lot of brilliant professionals in healthcare, but sometimes they lose the humanity in what they do" ... Yeah, so to me, success is being able to impact somebody's life in some small ways to make change in the system, because the more representation we have as First Nations, in all kinds of professional sectors including health, the more that we will be able to make change.

As lateral oppression is also a growing concern on some reserves in Canada, being able to advocate within your own communities is also an incredible asset.

I was a community activist. I was speaking up against nepotism, I was speaking up against the monopolization that was happening in my community. I was speaking up because I wanted to change that...I believe my social conscious about wanting to have the world a better place came from my experience at PICSS.

Given the number of injustices that still exist in Canada for Indigenous people, a pivotal place for Indigenous leaders and activists is in policy and practice discussions, both within, and outside their communities.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

“It takes a particular kind of courage to write or read the word “racism” (St. Denis and Hampton, 2002, p. 4). As such, the purpose of this paper is not to create discomfort simply for affect. Instead, it is meant to create enough discomfort to inspire change. Over time people become desensitized to words like “squaw”, “bitch”, and even “savage”. They also do not think about the negative connotations of being associated with the word “dark”. However, these words have power. These words were used to put Indigenous students into situations and spaces where group inequality was enforced through discriminating beliefs and behaviors.

Attending a Cultural Survival School like PICSS helped these former students overcome the negative impacts of the overt racism they experienced in mainstream schools. Many of the episodic and autobiographical memories the participants of this study shared were self-defining. These mainstream schools were not culturally safe spaces for the participants. The experiences left them feeling lost, invisible, and without personal agency. However, education administrators like Howard Green and Jerry Arshinoff, and the teaching and support staff, and Elders who worked at PICSS, managed to create a culturally safe space for Indigenous youth, in the middle of a large urban city centre. Once these youth began attending PICSS, they felt a sense of belonging, pride, dignity, and self-worth. With these positive and affirming experiences the participants’ self-esteem and self-efficacy changed dramatically. Years later the participants went on to be positive role models for their families, communities, and professions. Attending a Cultural Survival School supported their positive identity development, academic success, and future personal and professional success.

The findings of this study support the results from research conducted around the world on the impact of racism, and CRS/E systems on Indigenous learners. However, what is notable about this study is that the participants were able to share how the positive experiences of attending a Cultural Survival School persisted over time. Namely, all the participants stated PICSS supported their current success and wellbeing.

Although closing the academic achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is a shared and urgent policy and practice priority, communicated by both educators and politicians, it is still not being prioritized the way it needs to be to create the desired change. Schools are not culture-free environments. Instead, being in school involves Indigenous students navigating their home culture and the classroom culture. Where students find themselves in a cultural conflict, there is a greater risk that this negative relationship can contribute to poor mental health, depression, suicide, substance abuse, or violence (Longboat, 2012). For Indigenous students to be successful and engaged in school, they need to feel safe and feel that schools belong to them, as much as anyone else (Howard & Perry, 2007). They want to see the things they value in themselves are also valued by others (Harrison, 2008).



Unfortunately, schools like PICSS did not proliferate, and so to this day, Western school systems have a colonizing influence over Indigenous students (McCarty & Lee, 2014), because the relationship between prejudicial beliefs about Indigenous students, combined with the power to negatively impact these students, has remained largely unchanged (Tatum, 1997). As such, Indigenous students continue to struggle with more barriers to school completion and success than non-Indigenous students. Rather than ignore the problem of racism in mainstream educational institutions, and blame Indigenous youth for poor academic outcomes, educators need to address overt forms of racism, as well as systemic forms (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011).

As of 2016, over 62 percent of Indigenous youth lived in urban areas (Anderson, 2021). As such, the need for culturally safe education is also increasing (McCue, 2020). While some promising practices are emerging, such as the creation of urban Indigenous high schools in Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg, there are still too few of these schools to meet the need of Indigenous youth who do not live on reserve. In addition, there is still a Eurocentric imposition placed on these schools by provincial education regimes that continues to be a major obstacle, impeding the successful education of Indigenous children (McCue, 2020).

The federal government has been called upon by the TRC to draft new Indigenous education legislation. These policies are meant to include the full participation and consent of Indigenous peoples (Lafond & Hunter, 2019). However, as Indigenous education scholars Lafond and Hunter (2019) have argued, the discussions around Indigenous curriculum have moved to a new level. “The move is away from adaptation within the existing provincial curriculum guide towards a land-based curriculum that fosters a sense of balance” (p. 176). Land-based curriculum involves exploring a system of reciprocal relations and ethical practices. Instead of talking about the land, as it is currently done in conventional classrooms, this move involves engaging with the land in a physical, social, and spiritual sense (Wildcat et al., 2014). Given their focus of placing Indigenous histories, culture, and language at the centre of the curriculum, having students practice their culture every morning in ceremony, and getting students to participate in field education outside of the class, Cultural Survival Schools and Culturally Responsive Schooling/Education may have a lot to teach us on this matter as we move forward in addressing the TRC Calls to Action in education.

If we are truly going to solve the problem of racism in the Canadian education system, we must be prepared to address the problem in multiple areas, and may include looking to our past, as well as the future. Moving forward, additional research is needed to better understand the long-term impacts of Indigenous focused curricular initiatives, and the best measures to determine effectiveness or success (Milne, 2017). More research is also needed on the experiences of teachers who taught in Cultural Survival Schools. How did the teachers at the past Cultural Survival Schools know how to engage and support Indigenous learners? What supported them to stay, or alternatively, want to leave? It is only through better understanding what specifically supports culturally safe learning and classrooms that we will be able to move beyond tolerance to acceptance, understanding, and celebration of racial and cultural differences in the education system (Parks, 1999).

## Notes

Jerry Arshinoff has passed since the publication of this manuscript. This paper is dedicated to his memory and life's work.

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### Authors

Cynthia J. Gallop is an Associate Professor in the Department of General Education at Mount Royal University. She holds a Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Victoria, and a Master of Social Work and PhD from the University of Calgary. Her postgraduate career was spent working as a consultant to non-profit organizations in the area of policy and program development and evaluation. She has combined her passion for making programs more equitable and accessible to diverse individuals, with her research interests, which include Indigenous student experiences in education, student engagement, organizational change, community development, Participatory Action Research, and interpretive research approaches.

David Turner is the Director of Indigenous Initiatives at FearIsNotLove in Calgary, Alberta. David graduated from PICSS high school in June 1993. He holds a Diploma in Social Work from Mount



Royal University. David has been dedicated to working with Indigenous communities for the past 30 years. He credits his time at PICSS as pivotal to his cultural learnings and life-long focus on community.

Jerry Arshinoff was originally from Montreal but moved to Calgary in 1971. He earned a Bachelor of Science from McGill University, a Bachelor of Education from University of Calgary, and a Master of Education from University of Portland. In his lifetime, Jerry had several notable careers: He was Principal of PICSS (Plains Indians Cultural Survival School) for 18 years, where he fought for equal academic opportunity for Indigenous students, Executive Director of the separate PICSS Society, and elected Rockyview County Councillor.

Marlena Bullee is of Cree ancestry and a member of Bigstone Cree Nation. Marlena holds a Diploma in Social Work from Mount Royal University and is currently attending Yellowhead Tribal College completing her Indigenous Bachelor of Social Work degree. During her time as a Social Work student, Marlena has taken on several research assistant roles through Mount Royal University and Athabasca University, as well as an internship with pipikwan pêhtâkwan.

Reanne Arcand is from the Enoch Cree Nation in Alberta. Reanne holds a Diploma in Social Work from Mount Royal University, and is currently attending Yellowhead Tribal College, completing her Indigenous Bachelor of Social Work degree. Reanne will begin her Master of Indigenous Social Work degree at Blue Quills college in Fall 2023. She is also a full-time mom, and outreach worker in Enoch.