ACTIVE AFFILIATION AS A PROCESS FOR ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE
FOR MARGINALIZED HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

A Thesis Submitted to Faculty of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education
Brandon University
Brandon

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November 2013
Brandon University

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommended to the Senate for acceptance, a MASTER'S THESIS entitled:

Active Affiliation as a Process for Engagement and Social Change for Marginalized High School Students

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In partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

Date: November 19, 2013

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ABSTRACT

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Brandon University, 2013

Cultural diversity and demographic change are major challenges to the education systems in Canada and the United States. American researchers have examined disproportionately low academic achievement, high discipline incidence, and inflated dropout rates for African-American and Latino students when compared with their white counterparts (Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011). Canadian research and statistics indicate that almost 50 percent of Aboriginal students do not complete high school (MacIver, 2012). There is evidence that current educational practice is not equitable in its service to students of non-dominant cultural backgrounds (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Cultural diversity in our schools continues to increase, warranting further examination of the inherent challenges; along with this examination comes the exploration of effective ways to meet these challenges. Extant research on program-specific interventions suggests possibilities in meeting the challenges of cultural diversity through programs that enhance school connectedness (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2013).

Following the recommendations of such research, the Active Affiliation Group Program was devised to increase school connectedness among the culturally diverse students at the high school in which I work as a guidance counsellor. Active affiliation is a phrase I use to describe the intentional creation of a structured opportunity for emotional and contextual connection to take place. Through the process of active affiliation, the students in the program explored and shared their identities, experiences, and ideas, thereby increasing their sense of school connectedness.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Johanna Leseho, my advisor, my mentor, my friend. I would like to thank the other members of my thesis committee, Dr. Lee Anne Block and Dr. Karen Rempel, for their time and expertise.

Thank you to my friend, Erin Kowal, for her excellent assistance with this document and her unflagging support in trying times - sympathetic company, indeed. Thank you to my friend, Jenna Cuggy, for her hopeful encouragement and patient proof-reading. Thank you to my friend, Lili Jardine, for getting me organized at the beginning of this process. Thank you to my former principal, Mathew Gustafson, for the opportunity to flourish and explore possibilities under his visionary leadership.

Thank you to my parents, Harold and Diana Gilleshammer, for supporting me and believing in me throughout my graduate studies. Thank you to my sister, Barbra Gilleshammer, and her family for their support and encouragement.

Finally, thank you to my partner and best friend, Derek Irwin, who believes with me every day that when something is special, you have to take care of it.
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Chapter One: Introduction and Purpose

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Cultural diversity and demographic change are major challenges to the education systems in Canada and the United States. American researchers have examined disproportionately low academic achievement, high discipline incidence, and inflated dropout rates for African-American and Latino students when compared with their white counterparts (Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011). Canadian research and statistics indicate that almost 50 percent of Aboriginal students do not complete high school (MacIver, 2012). There is evidence that current educational practice is not equitable in its service to students of non-dominant cultural backgrounds (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Cultural diversity in our schools continues to increase, warranting further examination of the inherent challenges; along with this examination comes the exploration of effective ways to meet these challenges. Extant research on program-specific interventions suggests possibilities in meeting the challenges of cultural diversity through programs that enhance school connectedness (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2013).

Following the recommendations of such research, the Active Affiliation Group Program was devised to increase school connectedness among the culturally diverse students at the high school in which I work as a guidance counsellor. Through the process of active affiliation, the students in the program explored and shared their identities, experiences, and ideas, thereby increasing their sense of school connectedness. Active affiliation is a phrase I use to describe the intentional creation of a structured opportunity for emotional and contextual connection to take place. Active affiliation began as a concept and set of strategies to increase engagement but as I progressed through this study, active affiliation evolved into a theory and philosophical lens.
through which to view my interactions with students. The philosophy of active affiliation has also influenced my contributions to systemic change in my high school.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the lived experience of culturally diverse student participants in the Active Affiliation Group Program using a hermeneutic phenomenological research orientation. Designed and implemented for the first time as a part of this study, the Active Affiliation Group Program provided participants with structured opportunities to build connections with other group members, the facilitator, and the school environment. Two questions guided the development of this qualitative research: What were the experiences of the participants in the Active Affiliation Group Program? What were the common themes of the lived experience of participation in the Active Affiliation Group Program?

**Need for the Study**

The impetus for the study was complex and multi-faceted, including both my professional interests and personal experiences. Prior to my time in Brandon School Division, I taught overseas in Taiwan for 5 years. I experienced culture shock and homesickness. I felt the profound disconnect of living in a community where I was not of the dominant culture. These challenges were difficult but, unlike students of non-dominant cultural backgrounds living in Brandon, Manitoba, I had the cultural capital of being an educated, white adult in a society that valued these traits. Following my time in Taiwan, I returned to Canada and to Brandon to attain my Education degree.

My first year of employment in Brandon School Division was 2004 which coincides with the beginning of unprecedented growth in immigration to Brandon, along with a growing
Aboriginal/First Nations population. This growth has had a significant impact on the demographics of our community’s schools. As a high school classroom teacher I saw the cultural diversity in our schools increase dramatically. I watched our classrooms transform from a homogeneous white, middle-class population to a diverse population of students with widely varied cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. During this time of change in our schools, I began my Master’s degree in Education. I began to read about critical pedagogy. I began to think about the systemic oppression experienced by certain groups in the school system and in society. I began to think about white privilege. I began to recognize the inequities in the school system and the lack of voice for students of non-dominant cultures. During this time, I moved from the classroom to take a position as a high school guidance counsellor. This move allowed me to look at the school system from a different vantage point and has allowed me to contribute to decision-making and planning in my school.

As a guidance counsellor, I have had opportunities to work with students from all cultures but I am always struck by the positive impact that is possible when we actively support and engage with those students historically marginalized and disenfranchised by our system. I became increasingly aware of the need for this study as more students of non-dominant cultural backgrounds enrolled at my school. Through my interactions with these students, I became aware of challenges and barriers that contributed to their feelings of school-disconnectedness. It became apparent that something would need to be done to provide support and to increase school connectedness for this growing demographic. One student in particular, to whom I have referred as Sheena, has a story that resonates with the transformative power of active affiliation to create positive change on an individual level.
Sheena’s Story

Sheena was an Aboriginal student who faced many personal challenges and systemic barriers. Sheena arrived at my high school in mid-September of 2009 to register for classes. She was 17 years old and had not yet completed her Grade 9 credit requirements due to multiple relocations and interrupted schooling after Child and Family Services removed her from her mother’s care during her elementary school years. She moved back to her mother’s care with the stipulation that she attend school; this stipulation was the cause of much personal stress and angst as her previous school experience was one of frustration and alienation. She was hostile to authority figures and she was disillusioned with a school system that had not provided the necessary supports and programs for her success. High school graduation seemed like an impossible feat to Sheena. Four years of classes stretched out interminably before her; she already felt defeated by the prospect of attending classes with much younger classmates, in an environment profoundly lacking in connection for her.

I worked with Sheena to create an ambitious plan for her to graduate in three years rather than four by accessing alternative academic programming and by working on course modules over the summer months. Along with a school team of resource teachers, classroom teachers, educational assistants, and the school principal, I crafted an academic program and support system to work towards Sheena’s success. I checked in with her on an almost daily basis, slowly building trust with her through persistent support and encouragement. A relationship began to take shape. I listened to Sheena’s stories about her previous school years and began to understand the deep disconnection she experienced. She described feeling invisible and lost as she transferred from family to family and from school to school. We laboured through that first year, celebrating every completed assignment, every passed test, and every day of attendance.
We began to tell a new story of success for Sheena, one in which she felt known and valued. I printed a new transcript for her every time she successfully completed a course; she proudly counted her credits each time and she revisited the plan for her graduation to assess her own progress. At the end of the first year, Sheena had surpassed the goals we had set for her and she was well on her way to achieving high school graduation.

**Overview of the study**

Sheena’s accomplishments and growth planted the seed of an idea in my mind; if this proactive approach of personal support and connection worked for one youth who felt disconnected, I believed it would work for other youth. I began to work on creating a group program that I could implement in the hope of producing the positive relationships and experiences that had begun to change Sheena’s school experience. I implemented the 10-week Active Affiliation Group Program in April of 2011 with 10 female participants, including Sheena, who had diverse cultural backgrounds. In June of 2011, I interviewed the participants to collect their reflections of participating in the program. I analyzed the collected responses and I identified common themes.

**Theoretical Framework**

A number of theories provided the foundation from which this research took shape. Fundamental to this study, the philosophy of critical pedagogy “aspire(s) to link practices of schooling to democratic principles of society and transformative social action in the interest of oppressed communities” (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009, p. 2). The work of Maslow and Adler in the area of belonging and connectedness provided a theoretical framework to support the concept of active affiliation. The theories of Adler and Maslow support the benefits of connection and belonging in the development of healthy, successful human beings (Adler &
Brett, 1998; Beck & Malley, 1998; Rettie, 2003). According to the literature, a student’s greater sense of belonging and connection can result in better attendance, greater participation in co-curricular activities, increased gains in academic achievement, and the development of confidence to make plans for a future beyond his or her current situation (Brown & Evans, 2002; Chapman et al., 2013; Cho, Hallfors, & Sanchez, 2005; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Percy Calaff, 2008). The literature review section of this study will connect the sociological and psychological frameworks which support my approach and intervention with these youth.

**Significance of the Study**

The data amassed by the Brandon School division has captured the quantitative aspects of the demographic changes occurring in the city of Brandon and in the Brandon School Division. However, there is a dearth of research on the experiences of students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds in the division. This qualitative study, which includes description of the experiences of individual students, could enrich discussions around demographic change in the school division by including the human element parallel to the numerical data. Currently, program decisions are well-informed by quantitative data, particularly in academics. By deepening the discussion to include qualitative information, program decisions will include a consideration of social needs for belonging and connectedness.

In Brandon School Division, it is likely that many educators are working to build strong relationships with students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds; improving school connectedness might be a goal that they have for their students. The concept of *active affiliation* could fuel the development of other structured, intentional opportunities for connection.
Definition of Terms

Active affiliation. The intentional creation of a structured opportunity for emotional and contextual connection to take place.

Students of non-dominant cultural backgrounds. Students with a cultural background that is different from the prevailing cultural norms within a community. Cultural background could include: language, religion, behaviour, values, rituals, and/or social customs.

School connectedness. “The extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow, as cited in Chapman et al., 2013, p. 96). “The belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012).
Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

Before examining active affiliation, it is necessary to begin with a discussion of the theories of critical pedagogy and of connectedness and belonging. These theories provide the foundation for engaging in the study of active affiliation. It is also important to examine research regarding the experience of culturally and linguistically diverse students in the context of their school community. To further support the study of active affiliation, this literature review will include an exploration of extant research concerning the benefits of school connectedness for culturally diverse students, and the efficacy of existing programs relating to school-connectedness.

In order to provide contextual background for this study, it is helpful to look at the demographic change that has taken place in the Brandon community; to that end I have included information on population growth and cultural make-up of the City of Brandon, the Brandon School Division and the high school in which the research took place.

**Demographic Change in the Brandon Community**

The demographic change that has recently occurred in the Brandon community was another important factor contributing to the need for this study. Since 2004, the city of Brandon has undergone unprecedented growth and demographic change that has significantly altered the cultural make-up of the community and, more pertinent to this study, of schools in the Brandon School Division. Due to this period of rapid growth, there have been increased demands placed on the community school division, health services, language supports, transportation and housing (Moss, Bucklaschuk, & Annis, 2010).
According to the 2013 Community Profile issued by the City of Brandon’s Economic Development department, the city has experienced significant growth in immigration from 2004 to present:


The following figure illustrates the growth in immigration to the city of Brandon in recent years:

![Immigration by Landing Year](image)

The Brandon School Division (2013) includes the following enrolment information on its website under Division Profile:

Table 1

*Brandon School Division Enrolment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Group</th>
<th>June 2010</th>
<th>June 2011</th>
<th>June 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>4894</td>
<td>5053</td>
<td>5293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>2588</td>
<td>2694</td>
<td>2780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAL</td>
<td>769</td>
<td>999</td>
<td>1251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal (declared)</td>
<td>1297</td>
<td>1295</td>
<td>1409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Immersion</td>
<td>671</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bussed</td>
<td>2582</td>
<td>2625</td>
<td>2846</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


According to Brandon School Division enrolment records, the high school involved in this study had a student population of 822 in 2011. In the five years prior to the study, the demographics of the school had changed dramatically. The influx of immigrant families from South and Central America, as well as a significant number of Asian immigrants, had drastically increased the cultural diversity of this historically white, middle-class high school population.

At the time of the study, there were 113 (14% of total school population) English as Additional Language (EAL) learners registered at the school. This number does not include students from non-dominant cultures who are not receiving English language support; therefore the actual number of immigrant students in the school is somewhat higher. The self-declared Aboriginal population of the school was approximately 116 students (14%); this figure combined with the
number of EAL students indicates that approximately 28% of the student population came from a non-dominant cultural background.

**Building a Theoretical Framework for Active Affiliation**

**Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy explores the inequities present in the educational system. As I learned more about critical pedagogy, this philosophical stance provided the impetus for me to engage in educational research related to issues of equity. A critical perspective informs our thinking about educational issues by asking that we, as educators within an institutionalized system, step outside of that system to reflect upon and question our participation in educational processes previously accepted as valued common practice (Torres, 1998). A critical perspective demands the courageous and honest examination of equity in our classrooms and the dynamics of power within our schools, with the underlying purpose of facilitating fair access to learning for all, in particular the traditionally oppressed and disenfranchised (Freire, 1998). Critical pedagogy insists on the acknowledgement that oppression exists in our current system (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). I engaged in this study grounded in my personal recognition of the existence of oppression, inequity and systemic racism in the current school system.

In the context of critical pedagogy, Freire (2009) discussed the concept of the “banking method” of education versus the humanist and liberating praxis of problem-posing education (p.60). The banking method analogy exposes the oppressive ideologies inherent in positivism; static, absolute knowledge becomes the currency in the one-way transaction from the teacher to the students. The banking style of education serves to uphold and reinforce the imbalance of power through the universal acceptance of the teacher’s superiority to the students. The praxis expounded by Freire is a mutually liberating interaction of thought, dialogue, action and
reflection around questions posed relating to the students and to their world. There is a shared responsibility for teaching and learning among teachers and students by valuing the process and the transformative power therein. The concept of sharing and valuing each person’s contribution was a norm adhered to in the group program of this study. The goal was to create an empowering dynamic for students that may have previously, and repeatedly, experienced the power imbalance in traditional classroom settings (Bishop, 2011).

McLaren’s (2009) explanation of dialectical thinking, in terms of educational theory, connects the social context and the world experienced by teachers and students. By considering multiple perspectives within the dialogue that takes place in response to problem-posing, students can examine the greater social issues at play in their worlds. Students can discover that there are political and economic forces at work, resulting in the oppressive constructs of knowledge traditionally passed down from those colluding (knowingly or not) to maintain the power and privilege of the few over the many. In this study, a certain level of examination of power and equity took place within the group but more importantly these perspectives informed and guided my actions as facilitator and researcher.

**Connectedness and Belonging**

The concepts of connectedness and belonging are central to this research. Alfred Adler and Abraham Maslow developed theories that recognize belonging as fundamental to the success of individual psychological and social development. When individuals achieve fulfilment in the areas of connectedness and belonging, this accomplishment acts as a building block to reach greater goals of achieving self-actualization and making contributions to the whole of society.

Adler identified the concept of social interest or social connectedness as a determining factor in a person’s success in life and in achieving good mental health (Seligman, 2006). Beck
and Malley (1998) noted that Adler “believed that failure in school usually stemmed from feeling unconnected to the teacher, other students, or the school community” (p. 134).

Abraham Maslow hypothesized that human beings have a hierarchy of needs that include the following: physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization (Seligman, 2006). Maslow included belongingness with love in his theory of the human hierarchy of needs; he identified that lower order needs must be met before people can achieve higher order needs. Based on Maslow’s theory, students who do not have the opportunity for belongingness will face significant barriers to achieve the higher order needs of self-esteem and self-actualization (Beck & Malley, 1998).

**Challenges of Increasing Cultural Diversity**

Students experience cultural diversity and demographic change in the context of the school community created by school leaders and teachers. In order to fully understand the student experience, we must also consider the perspectives, attitudes and behaviours of the adults in the school context. From their positions in this complex system, each group has a unique understanding of diversity and the challenges that diversity creates.

**Students**

Students who are culturally and linguistically diverse in relation to the dominant culture face many challenges that affect their school experience (Kaylor & Flores, 2007). These students may have difficulty engaging or connecting to school due to language barriers. Their academic performance may be below grade level due to differences in prior school systems or gaps in past schooling. Behavioural problems may be an issue with these students, perhaps resulting from misunderstandings encountered in communication or from frustration while dealing with cultural
differences. The cultural contrast between home and school may cause distress and create barriers to success for culturally diverse students (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

Students may find that they are in the same classroom or the same school as cultural groups for whom there is a political or historical context of conflict. This type of negative, shared past between two cultures may result in cultural wars erupting in a school (Gause, 2008). Violence between cultural groups is an extreme example of conflict that could possibly take place, but more pervasive is the quiet discrimination that takes the form of a lack of recognition of racial differences or passive exclusion of racially marginalized students by the dominant culture students.

The classroom dynamic may operate on distinctly white norms. Nunn (2011) suggested that non-dominant culture students may perceive a classroom space as feeling “white” due to the experience that “styles of interaction, modes of humor, and general sensibilities that dominate the classroom space are aligned with White and middle-class values” (p. 1234). Students of non-dominant culture may interact in a more traditionally respectful manner towards the teacher; their quiet participation stands in stark contrast to the boisterous debate and free-flowing discussion that often characterizes the privileged white students (Nunn, 2011).

Schools may fall into the practice of celebrating diversity as their main method of including cultures other than the dominant one. Knight (2008) referred to these types of celebratory events as “exoticizing the Other” (p. 95); cultural identities are reduced to costumes, dances and traditional foods. While these types of celebrations are socially acceptable and encouraged within school systems, they fail to address the discrepancy of power inherent in the construct of the quaint foreigners entertaining the dominant cultural group (Knight, 2008).

Sharing culture through food and performances allows for comfortable interaction among the
members of a school community but emphasizes the separation between dominant culture and non-dominant culture.

**Contextual Considerations: School Leaders**

School leaders play a significant role in addressing the challenges presented in schools that are becoming increasingly culturally diverse. School leaders have numerous stakeholder groups that they must consider as their schools’ demographics change. The school board and community exist outside the walls of a building, but still have a significant influence on school leaders and their decision-making. Communities are often undergoing other social and economic changes that drive the demographic change in a school. A school leader must be sensitive to these changes, without sacrificing the good of the building in order to serve these outside interests (Evans, 2007). Inside a building, the administrative team, the school staff and the students are all part of the internal school context. To further complicate matters, all of these groups can be broken down into various subgroups that should be considered by school leaders when dealing with any issue with which a school might be confronted. These multiple contexts create a complex and multilayered environment that a school leader must navigate in order to face the challenges that changing demographics present (Gause, 2008).

School leaders can set the tone in a school for the response to changing demographics, reflecting the multiple contexts of the school environment (Evans, 2007). Some school leaders choose to consult stakeholder groups and to open lines of communication so that progress can come about. Others may download and delegate responsibilities to the level of the classroom teacher, without clear direction as to the action that should be taken. Depending on how these leaders understand the changing demographics in their school systems, school leaders themselves may actually become one of the barriers to creating a successful school experience for culturally
diverse learners. If school leaders move too quickly in trying to institute change, they may lose the support of their staff or risk staff members delegitimizing their leadership (Evans, 2007). School leaders may choose to take no action, thereby legitimizing the status quo in a building, for better or for worse. School leaders may only grudgingly recognize the issue of racism in their learning communities for fear of tarnishing their own reputations or that of their schools (Evans). Oftentimes, acts of racism must be blatant in nature for school leaders to take action. Unfortunately, it is the more subtle resistance to fully integrating non-dominant cultures into a building that goes unchecked and unrecognized (Nunn, 2011). It is imperative that school leaders choose to address issues of diversity directly, so that a school can adapt in a positive manner as a system to meet the needs of all students. When school leaders fail to take action, this complacency may justify a school’s pre-existing racial stereotypes and ignore the significance of increased cultural diversity, thus maintaining the marginalization of non-dominant culture students (Evans, 2007).

**Contextual Considerations: Teachers**

Demographic change directly affects teachers as their classrooms transform in composition and they struggle to meet the requirements of learners with unfamiliar needs (Gause, 2008). These students’ needs may be academic, linguistic or social-emotional in nature; many teaching staff feel ill-equipped to offer effective support in any of these areas. Conversely, some teachers see no need to change their teaching methodology due to racial, cultural and other differences among their student population, adopting a Darwinian philosophy in building their classroom climate. Some claim “colour-blindness” (p. 184), denying that racial and cultural differences have an impact on students’ needs and, therefore, there is no reason to alter the way things are done (Evans, 2007). By denying that differences exist, individuals may feel that they
are being more even-handed in dealing with students and with people in general. In fact, denying racial differences sometimes results in equal treatment that can actually be discriminatory towards a group (Knight, 2008). Teachers must recognize that differences should be explored to create a positive learning environment and find the best instructional practices to produce success for all students (Milner, 2010).

Many teachers feel empathy towards groups of students that they assume are living without necessary resources and supports. Evans (2007) identified the danger of “deficit thinking” (p. 176), whereby certain racial groups are viewed as lacking in such things as a stable family, economic security, proper housing, and access to healthy food. These areas of deficit are causally linked to these students’ being at risk of academic failure. The reinforcement of stereotypes occurs when responsibility is placed on the students, their families, or their racial group for academic problems, allowing teachers to sympathetically tolerate these pitiable, underprivileged students (Evans, 2007). This perspective relieves the responsibility of those working in the system to examine institutionalized racism, and to acknowledge historical and present-day conditions that have contributed to the disadvantaged situation of certain racial groups (Knight, 2008). Without a critical examination of systemic racism and of the accepted stereotyping in schools, there may be no real gains made towards a truly inclusive school system that could support students of all racial backgrounds.

Many challenges emerge with changing demographics and cultural shifts in a school population. Culturally diverse students battle stereotyping, language barriers and discrimination in their quest to succeed in a school system that is foreign to them. School leaders face the responsibility of charting a new direction for their schools while balancing the expectations of their school communities, their staff and their students. Teachers face more diverse classrooms
than ever before; the old way of doing things will not suffice. The experiences of non-dominant culture students are complex and multi-layered, especially when considered in the context created by school leaders and teachers.

**Benefits of School-Connectedness**

Culturally diverse students can benefit from an increased connection to school in many ways. A greater sense of school belonging has been attributed to improved academic motivation and performance, as well as to a decrease in misbehaviour, drop-out rates, delinquency and substance use (Brown & Evans, 2002). Students can become more connected to their school experience through instructional practices that connect a student’s identity to the material being studied (Faircloth, 2009). Positive relationships with teachers and other caring adults can bolster a sense of belonging in students; these kinds of positive relationships have been found to increase students’ academic achievement (Kaylor & Flores, 2007). Students’ involvement in extra-curricular activities can have a positive impact on feelings of school connection (Brown & Evans, 2002). By increasing culturally diverse students’ connection to the school context through the above methods, there is hope for greater success within this student population.

The search for identity can be a powerful process for teachers to draw upon in their campaign to make course content relevant to adolescent students (Faircloth, 2009). Faircloth studied an ethnically diverse grade 9 English class in order to address whether issues of identity had a relationship to the students’ feelings of school belonging. The students were given weekly opportunities to engage in assignments connected to aspects of personal identity throughout a semester of study. The author concluded that school activities and assignments that connect to the exploration of identity contribute positively to a sense of belonging and could, therefore, contribute to motivation and achievement. When students draw upon their own experiences,
family history, and cultural background to make sense of their learning, they can be empowered to build meaningful connections to the subject matter. These connections, in turn, support students’ sense of belonging in the classroom and in the school. Students in Faircloth’s study reported that they felt a stronger relationship to their teacher and to their classmates after participating in the identity development exercises. There is compelling evidence that identity exploration when linked to classroom subjects can increase school connectedness.

Another significant factor contributing to school-connectedness is the impact of positive relationships with teachers and other caring adults in the school community (Kaylor & Flores, 2007). Percy Calaff’s (2008) ethnographic study of supportive school practices targeting Latino immigrant students found that academically successful students in the study were able to identify at least one adult in the school context who had encouraged them and helped them feel a sense of belonging. Percy Calaff was careful to point out that “authentic caring” (p. 105) was valued by the students and seen as positively affecting motivation and learning; those teachers deemed lacking in sincerity were either endured or outright rejected. Those teachers naturally endowed with the ability to form genuine, positive relationships with students must themselves be nurtured so that they can continue to grow and to influence young people (Stewart, 2009). According to Brown and Evans (2002), “One theme in any successful outreach or involvement effort is the quality and sensitivity of staff” (p. 55), emphasizing the importance of having caring individuals involved in projects that target diverse student populations. Students’ engagement in learning and sense of belonging can be improved by the encouraging influence of understanding adults, but support for these adults must not be overlooked.

Participation in extra-curricular activities can create a stronger school connection for many students (Brown & Evans, 2002). As hours spent involved in extra-curricular activities...
increase, there tends to be an increase in academic effort and achievement (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Taking this evidence into account, there is a strong argument for creating greater access to extra-curricular activities for all students. Greater accessibility may mean providing transportation, changing the time that activities take place, or providing more user-friendly information. The most important strategy to increase at-risk student involvement in extra-curricular programming is to involve those at-risk students and their families in the discussion, so that their concerns are addressed (Brown & Evans, 2002). Strategies that provide greater access to extra-curricular activities for culturally diverse students would certainly be worth the investment, especially when higher academic engagement can be a result.

Existing Programs Relating to School-Connectedness

There are many programs designed to increase school-connectedness, decrease risky behaviours and facilitate relationship-building among peers with diverse backgrounds. These programs can be universal prevention programs delivered school-wide through classroom teachers as an add-on to regular curriculum. Targeted intervention programs or “indicated” programs are models which target youth belonging to a specific high-risk population.

Chapman et al. (2013) reviewed fourteen articles describing seven different programs at the elementary and high school levels, noting the importance of school connectedness as a protective factor and its positive link with academic motivation and achievement (p. 96). Significant in their review was the recognition of the difficulty and complexity of implementing universal prevention programs. These types of programs require a long-term commitment from the school and staff, along with active support from school administration; all of which becomes increasingly more complicated in the context of teacher and administration mobility (p. 112).
While there is no dispute that school-connectedness is a worthy goal, the results of existing programs are mixed, and these authors concluded that more research is necessary.

Cho, Hallfors, and Sanchez (2005) examined the effectiveness of a prevention program called Reconnecting Youth (RY), which “was specifically designed to ‘re-connect’ truant, underachieving high school youth by helping them to develop a greater sense of personal control, adaptive coping behaviors, and improved interpersonal communication and relationship skills” (p. 364). This program was a one-semester class for academic credit with very structured units and lesson plans which included topics such as: self-esteem, decision making, personal control, and interpersonal communication. Students monitored attendance, drug use and emotional mood on a daily basis throughout the program. Unfortunately, the findings in this study did not support the expected positive effects on GPA, hard drug use, and school bonding (p. 367). There may in fact be the potential for negative effects in clustering high-risk peers in prevention interventions, where negative or risky behaviours are perceived as normative and “complementary imitation, socialization and reinforcement” (p. 371) take place creating stronger bonds to the group members than to the leader or to more conventional peers in regular classes.

A study in London, England scrutinized a high school program which targeted underachieving, misbehaving students for an in-school intervention program which uses Behaviour Support Units (BSU). Gillies and Robinson (2012) described the “deficit thinking” referred to earlier in this chapter, as the foundation for this exclusion program; the personal and family deficit ascribed to the mainly black and ethnic minority students in this program, justified the decision to “remove pupils from the classrooms with the aim of making them ‘includable’ in institutions still broadly driven by white, middle-class ideals” (p. 158). The intent of this program was to stabilize students for a six-week period in a BSU removed from the mainstream
school, and then return them to regular classes once they had improved in terms of conduct and behaviour. The researchers observed that many students remained in the BSU for years, with some having entered directly from elementary school (p. 160).

There were positive aspects of this intervention however, that serve to emphasize the importance of points made earlier in this chapter regarding the impact of strong, positive relationships with a trusted adult. Gillies and Robinson (2012) noted that “BSUs were popular with pupils and could be experienced as a haven from the fraught and sometimes hostile relationships characterising their time in the mainstream schools. Staff, particularly black mentors, built strong relationships with the BSU attendees, demonstrating affinity with and sensitivity to students’ experiences of marginalisation” (p. 160).

Griffin, Brown, and Warren (2012) described a more forward-thinking social justice program grounded in the engagement of young people through an after-school intergroup dialogue (p. 159). Intergroup Social Change Agents (I-SCA) was a collaborative project created by the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor’s School of Social Work in cooperation with four public high schools. I-SCA occurred after school once a week for 20 weeks following a curriculum that addressed privilege and oppression around race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and ability status (p. 163). Participation in the group was voluntary with parental/guardian consent required to participate. Facilitators were well-trained and knowledgeable in social justice issues as well as being well-versed in the dialogue process. Meetings included one program staff member, one or two social work interns, and a school staff person. Griffin, Brown, and Warren’s (2012) qualitative analysis of the effect of this program found that:
Interviewees reported being more likely to build relationships with those that are different from them and more likely to challenge stereotypes they held about others. They reported noticing and interrupting discriminatory and bullying behavior more frequently and being less likely to engage in discrimination or bullying themselves. In addition, multiple students reported that the skills they learned in I-SCA helped them learn to resolve conflict more peacefully and communicate more effectively and respectfully – particularly with those who held beliefs different from their own. (p. 165)

The I-SCA program was not without challenges. The authors identified the critical partnerships with high schools as being fundamental to the success of the program. Issues to consider and address included: sustainable funding, recruiting a diverse group of students and adults, defining appropriate roles for adult stakeholders and fitting into current school schedules.

**Summary**

Once we consider critical pedagogy and the importance of school connectedness, then we can engage in active affiliation as a method of enhancing the experience of non-dominant culture students. Culturally diverse students can gain a sense of school-connectedness in a variety of different ways including participation in curriculum-based tasks that incorporate identity exploration, development of positive relationships with adults in the school, and participation in extra-curricular activities or other structured programs. Each of these factors has a significant impact on school connectedness, and ultimately, academic motivation and achievement. Active affiliation provides a structured and purposeful method to fulfill multiple aspects of school-connectedness.
Chapter Three: Methodology of the Study

Rationale for Research Method

The understanding of the human experience is at the heart of counselling and it is through the dual lens of counsellor and researcher that I undertook this study. In the initial stages of this project, I considered which type of research, quantitative or qualitative, was most appropriate to examine the experience of the group program participants. The statistical focus in quantitative research requires that data be collected using very specific questions that are narrow in focus; the collected data is quantifiable, numerically measured and analyzed (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). Qualitative research differs from quantitative in that the data consists of words rather than numbers; the researcher can use broad interview questions with participants to collect textual data which is then analyzed for themes (Creswell, 2008; Silverman, 2000). Qualitative research permits the researcher to examine the personal experience of individuals in a deep and meaningful way (Maggs-Rapport, 2001). Qualitative research can also explore the impact and potential change the experience may have instigated for the participant. In reviewing the literature of research methodology, it became clear that the qualitative method, and, more specifically the hermeneutic phenomenological orientation, was best suited to the research and exploration of participants’ experiences in the Active Affiliation Group Program.

Creswell (2008) summarized qualitative research as follows:

In qualitative studies in which you both describe individuals and identify themes, a rich, complex picture emerges. From this complex picture, you make an interpretation of the meaning of the data by reflecting on how the findings relate to existing research; by stating a personal reflection about the significance of the lessons learned during the study; or by drawing out larger, more abstract meanings. (p. 57).
Through one-on-one, open-ended interviews with participants, I was able to gather information that created the rich and complex picture to which Creswell refers. I interpreted and reflected upon the experiences of the participants in order to look at overall themes in the context of the existing literature, as well as the situational context in which the phenomenon occurred.

Edmund Husserl was a founder of the phenomenological philosophical movement within the context of qualitative research. He sought to explain the nature of consciousness and the relationship of consciousness to reality (Spinelli, 1989). Bentz and Shapiro (1998) posit that phenomenological inquiry intends “to understand phenomena in their own terms – to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person herself” (p. 96).

It was not until I encountered van Manen’s (1990) explanation of hermeneutical phenomenological research that I felt a true sense of recognition and resonance towards a research orientation. The descriptive phenomenological piece of this methodology addressed my desire to capture the “lived experience” of the group participants while the interpretive hermeneutical aspect allowed a way of making meaning through the analysis of text. In the Active Affiliation study this text would be the transcripts of the digitally recorded participant interviews.

Van Manen described six methodological themes put forth as practical approaches to engage in as a researcher of human science, according to hermeneutic phenomenology. I will summarize these methodological themes as research activities in the context of the Active Affiliation research I conducted. These methodological themes are employed by the researcher in “a dynamic interplay” throughout the research process (p. 30).
Research Activity 1: Turning to the Nature of Lived Experience:

The phenomenon of lived experience in question for this study is the experience of participating in a 10-week group program entitled “Understanding Diversity”. In orienting myself to this phenomenon, I identified my interest in this human experience from the perspective of high school guidance counsellor, and facilitator of the identified group program. According to van Manen, while turning to the nature of the lived experience, it is necessary to “bracket” one’s assumptions and suppositions by first examining them and making them explicit. As the facilitator of the group program, I could clearly identify my own vested interest in proving the positive impact of a program designed and conducted by me. There is ego involved in this enterprise; ideally such a program could be sustainable and highly beneficial, significantly altering young lives for the better. I allowed myself to entertain these thoughts and, in fact, immersed myself in hopeful conjecture as creator and facilitator. By knowing and naming such bias, I could step away from my own experience of the group to more objectively approach the collection and analysis of the real data, the group participants’ lived experience according to their own words.

The practice of bracketing bias also assisted in my ability to step into the experience of the participants through their words and find meaning in their words. My personal expectations were examined throughout the research process through journal-writing and ongoing reflection. In suspending bias, however, the researcher must retain the orientation of interest that generated the original desire for the research. A balance of objectivity and subjectivity exists in this human science, according to van Manen: the researcher acts as a guardian of the true nature of the inquiry while insightfully and perceptively sharing the richness and depth of the experience (p. 20).
As both the facilitator of the group and the researcher, I experienced the role of participant-observer identified by Glesne (1998). As participant-observer, I was better able to develop trust with the participants resulting in rich data from the interview process, as well as to interpret their answers with greater insight (p. 43).

**Research Activity 2: Investigating Experience as We Live It**

In gathering the data for this study, it was important to understand the nature of the material of lived experience while recognizing the two distinct parts of the process. The first part was the collecting of the participants’ experience as an original text. The second part was the reflection on and analysis of the written protocol. To gather data, I chose to digitally record oral interviews with the participants using broad, open-ended interview questions designed to elicit authentic responses from the participants describing their lived experiences (see Appendix I). The oral interview method was preferable due to possible linguistic barriers involved in asking EAL students to provide written response or journal entries. By asking the participants to describe their experiences of being in the group, by prompting the sharing of concrete examples and by exploring the experience with each participant, the data was at once recollected and reflective. I was able to reflect on the participants’ shared experiences in multiple modes: as they spoke during the interviews, in listening to and reviewing the audio data, and as a written text. The repeated review of the digitally recorded and written data provided rigour and led naturally to a multi-faceted reflection of the information in the research process, allowing me to move smoothly into the next research activity.

**Research Activity 3: Hermeneutical Phenomenological Reflection**

“The purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try to grasp the essential meaning of something” (van Manen, 1990, p. 77). The interpretation of the data in this study was
undertaken by conducting thematic analysis in accordance with van Manen’s methodology. The selective or highlighting approach involves carefully reading and re-reading the text to find phrases essential to the participant’s experience. The researcher then highlights and re-examines these phrases and sentences to identify common themes in the collective participant data.

Before looking at the interview data, I began with some ideas about the overall themes that had surfaced in our final session in the group; we created a “graffiti wall” together as one of the culminating activities during our last meeting. During the session, I recorded the words and images the participants used to express their thoughts and feelings about themselves, each other and their impressions of belonging to the group for the previous 10 weeks. The information from the notes I had taken throughout the program, in addition to the final session feedback, increased the credibility of the information and provided a foundation from which I could approach the interview data. This foundation allowed me to identify four overarching themes that were common in each participant’s interview data. Once I had identified these four common themes, I assigned each a colour code with highlighter markers and corresponding coloured post-it notes. I reviewed and reflected on the data again to assess the appropriateness of each theme, striving for the insightful discovery, of which van Manen speaks (p. 79). In this review and reflection process I highlighted and colour-coded data that fit under each major theme using large, coloured post-it notes to create a visual map for myself. On these notes, I recorded my thoughts and feelings as I read the data, noting significant words and phrases that struck an emotional chord for me in my personal memories of the group program. As I continued to re-visit the data I recorded the information in a chart according to major theme. I then analyzed each thematic cluster and found sub-themes that emerged from examining the finer details of the
data. These sub-themes supported and contributed to the depth and richness of the four major themes identified in the initial stages of data analysis.

**Research Activity 4: Hermeneutical Phenomenological Writing**

As I studied van Manen’s perspective on hermeneutical phenomenological writing, I began to understand how well-suited this method is to me as a guidance counsellor, a former English literature teacher, as a writer and as a person. Van Manen identified the need for the researcher to be a sensitive listener, thereby becoming an authentic speaker, infusing the written text of the research with the subtleties and tonal depth of language to capture the lived experience (p. 111). The quest for attaining the qualities of being an intuitive listener, a sensitive, interpretive reader and an effective communicator led me first to teaching, then to counselling and now to hermeneutic phenomenological researching. In endeavouring to tell the stories of the research participants, I had to value and trust the complex process of writing, reflecting and re-writing to make visible the essence of the phenomenon and to thoughtfully explore the participants’ experiences.

**Research Activity 5: Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Relation**

“Our texts need to be oriented, strong, rich, and deep.” (van Manen, 1990, p. 151). Van Manen emphasized the need to orient ourselves to our research and to the real world simultaneously, recognizing our place as pedagogic human scientists working between theory and life, seeking to find that which connects the two in praxis. As we describe the human experience that is the focus of our research, we remain strongly oriented to the subject matter from the perspective of pedagogic researcher. The explication of the depth and richness of the phenomenon of the study must also be a commitment of the researcher in order to more fully express the character and nuance of this particular human experience (pp. 151-153). It is
noteworthy that van Manen positions hermeneutic phenomenology as critically oriented action research; the personal engagement inherent in phenomenological studies requires the acknowledgement of our responsibility, once knowing of the human experience, to take action – philosophically, personally and pedagogically – ultimately leading to greater pedagogic competence (p. 156).

My research has certainly informed my actions as a guidance counsellor and educator, and as a member of the Student Management Team at my school. My professional conversations are infused with the language of diversity and are grounded in my commitment to increasing equity in our system. My contributions to school planning and programming come back to the importance of personal connections and the recognition of each person as an individual, within the context of social and cultural dynamics. The themes and subthemes that emerged in the data analysis allow me to be specific in my suggestions to colleagues and to provide evidence to support my recommendations to my administration. When I lobby for time and space and human resources for students of non-dominant cultures I can refer to the benefits identified in my research.

**Research Activity 6: Balancing the Research Context by Considering Parts and Whole**

Van Manen recommended that the phenomenological researcher consider the parts and the whole of the study at various critical points to ensure that the detailed story of the research does not interfere with the overall effect. He also cautions the researcher against allowing the whole to eclipse the story of the lived experience.

Engaging in this particular research aspect spanned the duration of this project; I moved back and forth, much like the lens of a camera, narrowing my focus to the details of the human experience then widening and taking in the total picture of the study, aligning and re-aligning to
maintain the balance of parts to whole. My thesis advisor was instrumental in this process, moving with me and guiding me to consider the stories of the individual then back to the overall themes and their meanings in the greater context.

**Process**

The Active Affiliation Group Program was comprised of ten one-hour sessions in which group members shared their stories, their struggles, their achievements, and their plans for the future. At the conclusion of the 10-week program, one-on-one interviews took place with each group member who was available to do so.

Initially, I approached the administrator of the high school for permission to run the 10-week group program and for permission to interview student participants at the conclusion of the program. The administrator granted permission for the program contingent on school division approval of the research proposal and ethics approval from Brandon University’s Research Ethics Committee. The Brandon School Division Research Advisory Committee and the Brandon University Research Ethics Committee both approved the Active Affiliation research project.

Following the acquisition of necessary permissions and approvals, I selected participants for the group program and research study. I implemented and completed the 10-week program following the Initial Group Proposal Notes (see Appendix J). At the conclusion of the 10-week program, I interviewed the participants and asked them to describe the experience of participating in the group program. The interviews were conducted in the counsellor’s office over a three-week period. Each interview was no longer than one hour in duration. The strong rapport established between the researcher and the individual interviewees by virtue of their interaction in the group program enhanced the level of comfort and openness in the interviews.
Interviews were voluntary, open-ended, and loosely structured around the following statement: Describe the experience of participating in the Active Affiliation Group Program. A research assistant transcribed the digitally recorded interviews verbatim. I analyzed the data and identified common themes that emerged during the analysis.

Research Participants

To study the effect of the Active Affiliation Group Program on non-dominant culture students, it was necessary to select ethnically diverse participants who were not only willing to participate in the group program but who were also willing to share their experiences at the conclusion of the program. My initial goal was to study a group comprised of participants whose cultural backgrounds represented an inverse reflection of the school demographics. This goal proved to be challenging due to the voluntary participation aspect of the group program. I visited 3 EAL classes, 2 Spanish classes and one Native Studies class to do a short presentation outlining the group program and to explain the research component (see Classroom Presentation Script: Appendix C). Copies of the presentation script and my contact information were supplied to the teachers. The classroom teachers followed up with students who expressed interest in participating in the program and in the research study.

I met with interested students to discuss the program and to explain the expectation of confidentiality. The first 10 students who volunteered for the group program were invited to participate. The participants were all female and ranged in age from 14 to 18. Participants had diverse cultural backgrounds which are summarized in Table 2. As indicated in Table 2, three of the original 10 participants were unavailable for the interview.
Table 2

Summary of Participant Background Information (pseudonyms assigned)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Students in grade 9</th>
<th>Students in grade 10</th>
<th>Students in grade 11</th>
<th>Students in grade 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Alita</td>
<td>Jacinta Sofia</td>
<td>Lena Monica*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Gabriela</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>Kerri</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada (Aboriginal)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sheena</td>
<td>Summer**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada (White)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jennifer*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *Unavailable for interview. **Moved to a different city, discontinued group program.

Ethical Considerations

The Brandon University Research Ethics Committee approved this study. I obtained informed consent from the students and their parents or guardians for participation in both the group program and the research study. I sent a letter and a consent form home with each student; letters included a statement of confidentiality, assurances of voluntary participation/withdrawal and that no penalties would result from non-participation (see Appendices D and E). Participants signed an oath of confidentiality prior to the commencement of the group program (see Appendix F).

A pseudonym was assigned to each participant to ensure confidentiality; only the pseudonyms appear in the research report. All data collected through this research project is securely stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home office and will be stored for a period of seven years. After seven years, all data will be destroyed unless other appropriate arrangements are made and agreed upon by the relevant parties. Now that the reports are written, all interview tapes have been erased.
Chapter Four: Presentation of Findings

Themes

In analyzing the interview data, common themes emerged regarding the experience of participating in the Active Affiliation group program. The four central themes were: (1) Positive Experience of Participation, (2) Safe and Supportive Environment, (3) Opportunity to Explore Future Goals, and (4) Valued Connection to Adult Facilitator. Participants expressed these themes in varying degrees throughout the interview process. Each of the central themes is comprised of subcategories or subthemes that show the depth of meaning in the participants’ experiences (Table 3). Each participant has been given a pseudonym and italics will be used to identify direct quotations taken from the interview data.
Table 3

**Major Themes and Subthemes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major themes and subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Positive Experience of Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Being in the group was reported to be a positive experience for each of the group members interviewed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Group members experienced personal growth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. All of the participants agreed that the group program should continue in subsequent years. Four of the seven group members suggested that the group be held twice per week instead of once per week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Being in the group helped individuals feel positively about themselves and about school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Safe and Supportive Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. The group was a safe and comfortable place to talk about feelings and experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Students felt better at the end of each meeting time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Students reported that it was healthy to share their thoughts and feelings rather than bottling their feelings up inside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Students felt supported and understood by the other group members, mitigating feelings of isolation and loneliness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Through talking about life stressors such as school pressure and family issues, students found common ground and created positive connections to the group as well as among the group members. These connections resulted in group members seeing each person as an individual rather than stereotyping individuals according to culture or background. For some students this skill transferred to outside of the group, allowing them to see all people as individuals – even teachers!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Opportunity to Explore Future Goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Group members were able to share their ideas and goals for the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Verbalizing these goals and envisioning themselves achieving their goals created a positive energy and increased motivation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Students felt supported and encouraged by other group members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Students talked about the stress and pressure surrounding their goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Valued Connection to Adult Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. All of the students expressed that they would feel more comfortable talking to the facilitator in her guidance counsellor role now that they had gotten to know her through the group program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Group members expressed the positive impact of knowing there was an adult in the school that they could talk to and trust.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme 1: Positive Experience of Participation

Participants unanimously expressed that participation in the group program was a positive experience. The students looked forward to participating in the group each week; they used words to describe the group such as *happy*, *fun*, *good*, *relaxing*, *nice* and *awesome*. They also found benefit in belonging.

*It was fun and I felt free because I can express my thoughts and say what I felt. I felt free with you guys. I felt good because I got to meet more people and we did some things fun, like fun things. The music was...I think it was good too, relaxing.* (Jacinta)

*We kind of got to know each other’s feelings, maybe people we did not know as well. We got to be a little closer. We got to share our feelings and our stress and stuff. We got to know that we might have the same problems at times, but we can solve them differently.* (Gabriela)

A few participants saw the group as an opportunity to connect and interact with others that they usually would not have had the chance to meet. They recognized the support the group members could provide.

*If you didn’t go to the group, you would never talk to those people, then you went to the group, met them and start talking to them. Then you say hi and walk up to them.* (Sheena)

*Because if you are struggling, you have more people to talk to.* (Sheena)

*Talking was great because you may know some people, but you may not know the others.*

*So it’s good talking with other people.* (Sofia)

Group members identified personal growth as a result of their involvement. Through the activities and discussions that took place in the group, students learned coping strategies, goal-setting and problem-solving skills from each other.
More free and happy because I know how to cure my problems somewhat. Yeah because now I know how to fix my problems, like relax. (Jacinta)

Gabriela believed that she grew in her ability to look at other perspectives and to make better decisions due to taking part in the group program.

*I think it made myself stronger and see life at different angles, not just straight forward. Sometimes it’s better to step aside and let go, or sometimes it’s better to step up and make your choices at that time. I think it really made my decision making skills a lot better.*

Alita acknowledged a change in her attitude.

*Sometimes I am negative but I know that sometimes I have to let things go. So yeah, I pretty much changed myself. I became more positive.*

The participants were all in agreement that the group program should continue in subsequent years. Four of the seven respondents suggested that the group be held twice each week rather than the once per week schedule of their group. The students not only valued their own experience in the group but could see themselves taking part in the group in the future as leaders and mentors to students new to the group.

Sheena stated that continuing the group program would be a way to

*be more connected with more people and maybe have more grade nines, because they would be new.*

Alita spoke with enthusiasm when talking about future participation in the group.

*For sure I’d be in that group. I had lots of fun and I’d like to help other people and make them think that everything will work out. I know as a teenager, I know what they are*
going through. Maybe I don’t know their lives but I have an idea what they are going through just being in school, and having problems at their house.

Being in the group helped individuals feel positively about themselves and about school, sometimes giving them a reason to attend.

*It makes me feel more positive to myself. That’s what it’s all about; being in that group will make you feel positive.* (Alita)

*If you knew you had group that day, you may come to school just to go to the group.* (Sheena)

**Theme 2: Safe and Supportive Environment**

Participants felt that the group was a safe and comfortable place to talk about feelings and experiences. The concept of confidentiality was introduced to each student prior to the beginning of the program, as well as being reinforced as a non-negotiable rule at each group meeting. Respectful behaviour was encouraged and expected; group members reminded each other of this mutual expectation:

*When some person talk, you have to be quiet and listen to that person. Don’t talk about the group with somebody else.* (Lena)

The participants saw the group as a confidential venue to share information about their experiences, a safe place to cry or to share happy memories and experiences.

*I felt that they would save my secrets.* (Jacinta)

*Because you may have some problems or some memories that you never want to let go of but, we have some memories that were good ones, so we may show them. You may trying to say no I don’t want to talk about it because it’s bad. Or sometimes you might want to cry about it.* (Sofia)
Students felt better at the end of each meeting time. The students participated in an emotional “check in” at the beginning of the hour and then a “check out” at the end; a one to ten scale was used with a one indicating the lowest or most negative emotional state, and a ten indicating a happy, highly positive mood. All students felt that they left in a better emotional state than when they arrived:

*Like hear other people’s problems. When we meet, sometimes I was in a bad mood. But then I am not sure how it goes up, but I just felt more comfortable.* (Jacinta)

*Better, like if I came in down, then we talked, and I’d leave happy or better than before.* (Sheena)

*We all had 10!* (Lena)

Students reported that it was healthy to share their thoughts and feelings rather than bottling them up inside. They could experience bad feelings dissipating through participation in the group.

*For me it was a good program because I got the opportunity to talk to you and let my friends know how I was feeling about stuff. For me it was a good program because it helps me. I was having some bad days, but when I was I that meeting, my bad feelings were gone, and then I had a really special day.* (Alita)

They recognized that the support from the group could have a positive impact on students’ ability to be attentive in class when emotional issues threatened to overwhelm them.

*Yeah because sometimes we have our problems and we need somebody to talk about our problems and it feels good. Sometimes I think it affects our classes because you feel sad or bad, and you don’t hold attention in the classes, so I think it’s good to have somebody to talk about problems.* (Lena)
A few participants pointed out that we simply feel better by talking:

*If we talk, we feel better. We don’t have to worry someday. I think it’s good to talk to somebody, the friends you have in your life.* (Lena)

*Yeah it did help because if you are mad at your friends, or family or something about school it makes you change everything when you are in the group because you talk about it. Sometimes they have the same thing you talked about so it’s a good way to get the stress out.* (Sofia)

*Because if it’s inside it’s just going to make you mad or something, or get mad with other people.* (Sofia)

Students also felt supported and understood by the other group members, mitigating feelings of isolation and loneliness.

*I am not the only one.* (Alita)

*I felt that I am not the only one struggling with these problems, like, I found other people who are struggling with the same problems. Not necessarily showing that they were struggling with it, but through this group they said they were. I felt like I am not the only one...In a weird way it is kind of comforting because I know that there are other people like me in the school.* (Kerri)

*I felt more free and some people gave me more support, and I didn’t feel alone.* (Jacinta)

*If you were having a bad day, you could talk about it, or if you weren’t feeling great, you could talk about it. They would listen, or they would say like, “I had this happen to me before too,” and how they dealt with it.* (Sheena)

Through talking about life stressors such as school pressure and family issues, students found common ground and created positive connections to the group as well as among the group.
members. These connections resulted in group members seeing each person as an individual rather than stereotyping individuals according to culture or background. For some students this skill transferred to outside of the group, allowing them to see all people as individuals – even teachers.

Sofia tried to explain how her perspective on other people’s behaviours changed; she no longer assumed that a teacher or student was angry with her. She understood that everyone has stress and problems they are dealing with that affect their interactions with those around them.

*It helped but sometimes like, when a student teacher maybe came, sometimes she’s happy, sometimes they are not. I think like when they are mad, they have some problems that we don’t know. I don’t want to see her mad because she may have some problems… We don’t know them but they don’t know us either. It changed because you see some people that maybe they are mad at you and they don’t even know you. It changed because they may not be mad at you, they may be mad at something else. The way they look at you, it’s terrible. But yeah, it changed. I don’t know why but it changed. You see people and you don’t even know them. It’s good to know all the people.*

Gabriela saw similarities and connected to students in the group that she initially viewed with envy for their seemingly problem-free lives. Through the sharing that took place in the group, students were able to see that the stress of school, family dynamics and peer interactions were underlying issues for all group members regardless of individual differences in background.

*Yeah, because for some of them that I didn’t know, I was like “omg, I wish I had their lives,” because they seem to have no problems at all. But for some of them that you get to know you realize “oh they are just like me, or I am just like them”. So, I think it makes me value them more as human beings because I know them a little better now.*
Alita found that sharing laughter transcended cultural differences in the group and she was surprised to find similarities among the all the individuals that made up the group. Just that it was fun to be in the group. It was amazing how we are all the same. Have you heard that quote, “we all laugh in the same language”? You know, even though we are not from the same country as other people, we always laugh. So kind of more like that.

Theme 3: Opportunity to Explore Future Goals

Group members were able to share their ideas and goals for the future, including graduation from high school, post-secondary education plans, career aspirations and having families of their own. Verbalizing these goals and envisioning themselves achieving their goals created a positive energy and increased motivation.

Participants felt an inner momentum growing to follow their dreams into the future. They felt that talking about their plans with other group members helped them to make the decisions to pursue specific programs to accomplish their goals.

In my subjects, I used to let myself down when things didn’t go how I wanted it to go, I’d give up. It [talking with the group] made me realize that sometimes school will be hard, and sometimes it will be easy. So I should never give up and keep trying. That’s what it meant to me....Yeah just because you have one really bad day, you are not going to give up but keep trying. (Alita)

Realizing everything, like actually thinking about it and how much you’ve changed from the past and what you want to change or keep to go to the future. Yeah to have some positive energy. You want to be something good in life and talk about it. (Kerri)

First I am going to finish high school and then I am going to take that course of homecare. (Lena)
Students felt supported and encouraged by other group members.

*Because you know other people, and they want to graduate or go to class. We kind of helped each other and pushed each other to go.* (Sheena)

*This group is where people can go and express their thoughts and express what they feel and what their problems are. It’s about trying to work as a team, help each other.* (Alita)

*It helps people let go of things for a little bit. If they are having problems they can talk about it, and we can help each other. I think that’s really good.* (Gabriela)

Students were able to talk about the stress and pressure surrounding their goals.

*They want to feel like they can graduate and they want to feel like they want to have a good career.* (Sofia)

*It’s mostly I can say for Spanish speaking cultures, a lot of people don’t graduate. They don’t get Dr. Diplomas or anything like that. I think that for us, we have a good change and just the opportunity to go farther, it’s just kind of the pressure of “I am here, I have to go farther than what my parents or grandparents got.”* (Gabriela)

Alita summed up the expectations of her family and recognized that her mom has worked to provide her with opportunities for the future:

*Have a great career, work hard for my mom who has worked really hard for me in the past, and try to be the best person I can be in the future.*

**Theme 4: Valued Connection to Adult Facilitator**

All of the students expressed that they would feel more comfortable talking to the facilitator in her guidance counsellor role now that they had gotten to know her through the group program.
Yeah because I have seen you in the school but never talked to you. It was amazing because I know you more and I didn’t know you. So it’s good to know you. Yeah. Because for me you are a good friend, like another mom. You give good advice. (Sofia) I guess so. I am not too sure because my friends are kind of shy to talk to teachers. I guess it would be easy to talk to you, not to other adults around school. We haven’t shared feelings so we don’t know each other. For you, it’s more easy because we know each other because we have been together in that group. It would be easy for the people who go to that group, and then just try to be more open. (Alita)

Group members expressed the positive impact of knowing there was an adult in the school that they could talk to and trust.

Yeah because then it doesn’t feel that you are the only one who is struggling, you can actually go to a trusted adult like you and spill. Frustrating because maybe they don’t have someone at home that understands them or to talk to. Maybe the trusted person is far away and they can’t really talk to them. It would be good to have someone like an adult. A friend is good but they don’t understand the same level as a professional would. (Kerri)

Yeah I think it does because maybe you don’t quite connect with the teachers you have. I think it’s really nice to have someone in the school to be like “Oh I know I can talk to her, I know I can trust them”, so I think it’s really important. (Gabriela)
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

Discussion

Students with non-dominant cultural backgrounds are a growing demographic in our school system. Intervention, support and a system-wide shift in perspective are required to increase engagement and school-connectedness for Aboriginal and immigrant youth. Our immigrant students and Aboriginal students exist in a school system designed to support the success of the dominant culture. We must examine how to better serve a culturally and racially diverse population, rather than expecting these students to adjust and change to fit the current educational model. It is not enough to provide strictly academic programming for non-dominant culture students and it is not acceptable to run programs that segregate learners of certain demographics; omission and separation serve only to perpetuate the systemic oppression that results in the continued silence of the disenfranchised and reinforces the cycle of poverty. EAL programs must balance language acquisition classes, which are exclusive by definition, with academic and social/emotional programs that encourage cross-cultural integration and connection. Programs for Aboriginal learners must consider the cultural disconnect so many of these students experience.

Positive Experience of Participation

Participants stated that participating in the group was a positive experience. Each week the energy in this group increased; the participants began to greet each other warmly each time we met. I observed many group members talking to each other in halls at lunch or during breaks. Group members experienced personal growth by expanding their social boundaries and establishing new relationships with individuals they would never have interacted with before.

All of the participants agreed that the group program should continue in subsequent years. Since the school year in which the program took place, several of the participants have
asked if we will have the group again. I plan to run the group in the next school year with some of the original group participants as leaders. We will plan the sessions together so that these young women will continue to experience further personal growth in leadership and organization.

Being in the group helped individuals feel positively about themselves and about school; rarely did any participant miss the group meeting. The participants identified that belonging to the group and looking forward to attending the meetings, provided motivation to attend school – even if it was just for that day the group acted as an anchor to their week, sometimes impacting their attendance on the day prior or following the meeting day.

Safe and Supportive Environment

The group setting was a safe and comfortable environment for participants to talk about their feelings and experiences. Rather than suppressing their feelings of frustration, isolation and loneliness, the participants sought support and understanding from the other group members. By talking to each other about life stressors such as school pressure and family issues, students realized that others shared their problems and worries - regardless of cultural background. These connections resulted in group members seeing each person as an individual rather than stereotyping individuals according to culture or background.

Opportunity to Explore Future Goals

Within the group setting, group members were able to share their ideas and goals for the future while experiencing support and encouragement from the other participants. Participants were able to talk about the stress and pressure surrounding their goals; parental expectations of success caused stress that crossed cultural boundaries. Participants who were recent immigrants
expressed surprise that the aboriginal participants and white participants also experienced this pressure.

**Valued Connection to Adult Facilitator**

All of the participants expressed that they would feel more comfortable talking to me as a guidance counsellor because of getting to know me through the group program. Group members expressed the positive impact of knowing there was an adult in the school that they could talk to and trust.

Several of the students maintain their connection to me by dropping in frequently to give me an update on their accomplishments and struggles. Some make regular appointments for ongoing support or academic planning. Others know that they can ask for help in navigating scenarios encountered outside of school such as obtaining a passport or setting up appointments with post-secondary institutions. One participant, who graduated last year, returns to visit with her baby – she confidently explains her plans to complete a college diploma program while balancing life as a young mother.

**Contextual Considerations**

Discussions with my school principal confirmed that school administration is a balancing act in which a school leader considers multiple perspectives and endures a variety of pressures from diverse stakeholder groups (Gustafson, personal communication, September, 2011). Internal and external forces can result in a school leader facilitating growth in a school so that non-dominant culture students can thrive. Conversely, these forces may support inaction on the part of the administrator so that demographic change goes unaddressed and status quo is the order of the day. My principal had the level of openness required to begin dialogue regarding the issues of racism and institutional marginalization. He identified that administrators must
gauge school climate and staff readiness carefully, so that change is not demanded too quickly or too radically (M. Gustafson, personal communication, September, 2011). If the timing and level of change is inappropriate according to school climate, teachers may feel burdened and end up rejecting not only the proposed changes but the administrative leadership as well.

Cooperation and support from the school administrator is imperative for the initiation and success of any program, whether academic or co-curricular. In the context of this study and in the greater reality of the school system, the principal of the school controls access to time, human resources, physical space and the political clout to support a program – or not. Open communication about cultural diversity and its challenges is the starting point; political will coupled with research data provide the foundation from which to address the needs of non-dominant culture students through programs designed to provide active affiliation opportunities.

Teachers at the high school level are very protective of their instructional time. While some teachers expressed support for this program, recognizing there was something missing in our support for non-dominant culture students, others reacted negatively towards students missing class to attend the group meeting. Presenting the results of this study to teachers will provide a more solid argument for the benefit of using class time.

Teachers must connect curricular outcomes to the real world with teaching strategies that engage students in meaningful, active inquiry. This program could provide current and relevant information to teachers that this so-called “real world” differs for individual students, based on culture, socio-economic status, learning needs and social/emotional issues. To ask a teacher to relate to each of these individual students on a case by case basis seems like an insurmountable task until we view this task from a team and community perspective. Resource teachers, guidance counsellors, school clinicians, parents and the students themselves must all commit to
being part of the process to maximize each student’s learning. Parents can be valuable team-
members in the educational process – a process which extends beyond the physical boundaries of
the school. As Cowley (2004) explained, it is the school that must reach out to parents and draw
them in to the school community by initiating and maintaining two-way communication (p. 12).

School connectedness stems from the relationships fostered in a building; this sense of
connectedness has been credited with improved academic motivation and performance, as well
as a decrease in misbehaviour, drop-out rates, delinquency and substance use among students
(Brown & Evans, 2002). School connectedness could mitigate the stress experienced by teachers
as student misbehaviour decreases and classroom management issues diminish.

Limitations

Originally, I intended to have the group composition inversely reflect the demographics
of the school population to create an opposite majority/minority environment in the group. This
intention was unrealistic due to the voluntary aspect of participation in the group. I see this as a
limitation because by having only one participant from the dominant culture, there was less
opportunity to cause shifts in perspective that could “ripple” into the general dominant culture
population. The inclusion of dominant culture participants in this group program is an integral
aspect that allows cross-cultural dialogue to take place.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, not all participants were able to participate in the
interview portion of the study. One participant from El Salvador was not available for the
interview but the data includes interviews from four other El Salvadorian participants so the
perspective from this group is well represented. The dominant culture perspective is not
represented in the interview data and, therefore, the experience of this participant has not been
analyzed. The inclusion of the dominant culture point of view would have added an interesting dimension to this study.

**Recommendations**

Ideally, this study would be longitudinal so that long-term effects of participation could be examined, beyond the immediate lived experience of the participants. Research could include attendance data, academic achievement data and post-secondary education data. If the program ran several times in consecutive semesters, data could be collected from the whole school population to gauge the impact on the entire school community.

Many studies identify participation in extra-curricular activities as a factor in increasing school connectedness for culturally diverse students. However, it is not a simple task to increase participation from students who feel like outsiders in their own schools. High school sports participation is highly competitive, requiring a high level of athletic expertise and financial cost for equipment, uniforms, transportation, and accommodation. There is certainly funding available to assist students who do not have the financial means to join school teams – but disenfranchised youth may not advocate for themselves to receive such funding when language differences and cultural barriers prevent them from doing so. Other school clubs are inaccessible for many students because the meetings take place outside of the school day when some students are working or caring for younger siblings while parents work. The school must ensure that extra-curricular offerings are accessible and appealing to all students. School should consult non-dominant culture students regarding what types of activities, scheduling and supports would increase their participation.

This group program acted like an extra-curricular without the barriers – no cost – no transportation – no time after school. The 10-week program in this study had a one-hour session
each week that was integrated into the school day. The logistics of the program were important. Consistent access to a specific space allowed a level of comfort to develop. Scheduling the meeting time for a different class period on a different day each week mitigated the impact on academic obligations. The staggered schedule caused less disruption to the students’ class schedule and also acted as a preventative measure to address the possibility of a teacher having a negative reaction if the group program repeatedly occurred in the same class period each week. In terms of scheduling, the program could run during the noon-hour or after-school but in general, students are resistant to losing the lunch-hour social time and many have after-school commitments, as previously described.

Ultimately this study becomes a discussion about equity and an appeal to school systems to recognize issues of systemic oppression and unacknowledged privilege. The starting point is open dialogue to critically and honestly examine issues of race and cultural diversity. Cultural diversity in our schools creates challenges on many levels, but with these challenges come significant opportunities for positive change. There are strategies and approaches that have made a difference and contributed to success for many schools facing challenges related to diversity. It is imperative that school leaders and teachers examine the challenges of diversity so that meaningful educational experiences are possible for all students.
Chapter Six: Researcher’s Reflections

The Lived Experience of the Researcher

Understanding the Stories of My Students

In my experience as a high school guidance counsellor, I have observed many issues that complicate the lives of non-dominant culture students. These issues include socio-economic challenges and complicated family structures that require students to bear responsibilities that adversely affect school engagement. Non-dominant culture students have shared with me that they are often required to work at part-time jobs or, in some cases, full-time jobs, to make a financial contribution to their household for rent and basic necessities. Regulation and monitoring of student work schedules is seldom in place; it is often the case that these students will choose to work rather than attend class, or they will work late hours that do not allow the proper amount of sleep for the student to be alert, engaged, and participatory while at school. Non-dominant culture parents in Brandon may work shift-work in manual labour employment situations, which is not highly conducive to creating structured and stable family routines. If there are younger siblings in the home, the older child may be expected to take on parental duties such as readying the younger children for school, preparing breakfast and lunch, staying home from school to provide supervision in the event of a younger child being ill or otherwise unable to attend school, and preparing the evening meal.

In my observations and interactions with students and families from non-dominant cultural backgrounds, I have noted that the family unit takes many forms, including single-parent families, blended families, grandparents, aunts or uncles as guardians. Child and Family Services (CFS) have apprehended children from unsafe environments, to be placed with foster families. There are also students who live in specialized group homes where CFS is the legal
guardian but rotating group home workers are the primary adult contact and influence in the home. Still other students may come to our school from isolated northern communities; a band or tribal council funds their schooling and they live with local “house parents” that may be related to the student or may be complete strangers to the student. These students experience culture shock and homesick feelings that are very similar to the feelings of students who are recent immigrants. The liaison counsellor who works with students from northern communities has shared with me that many students from these northern communities have experienced lifelong trauma in the form of violence, abuse, murder, and suicide (M. Lynxleg, personal communication, September 27, 2011). Alcohol and drug use are commonplace in their home communities, and substance abuse serves as a coping strategy to escape traumatic memories and to numb the emotional, psychological, and physical pain endured by these students.

Based on conversations with students, parents, teachers, and other school staff members, I have learned that some immigrant students at our school may have joined their parents in this community after being apart for several years. In some cases, a child has joined the immigrant parent and his or her new Canadian partner. In this scenario, not only did the child face separation from extended family, disruption of his or her education, adjustment issues, culture shock, and a new language, but also contended with a new family structure with a Canadian stranger taking the place of mom or dad. Some students left behind grandparents and other extended family members who were a constant source of support and connection as they grew up in their home country. Other students may have had an elderly grandparent or other relative who joined the family in this new country. Both situations can cause emotional challenges; students may feel guilt for those left behind to fend for themselves in difficult circumstances or they may feel stress and worry as they watch an older family member struggle with language and culture in
their new surroundings. Some immigrant students may have come through substandard education systems that result in learning gaps that are difficult to identify due to language differences and almost impossible to close when compounded with the task of language acquisition. Other students have brought with them a history of trauma that may be particular to the individual or that may be the result of war or civil unrest in their home country.

Non-dominant culture students may face challenges and complicated situations in their home lives, in addition to adapting to a school environment based on dominant culture norms and beliefs. There is a need for these students to have a safe place at school where they can share their stories and, through sharing, feel a sense of connectedness and belonging that may otherwise be lacking. By creating meaning in their school experience through authentic relationship-building, there could be increased motivation to attend school and to work towards achieving academic goals. This study explores the possibility of addressing the existing disconnection by creating new relationships and connections through active affiliation.

**Effects of Perception**

A further complicating factor for non-dominant culture students is the manner in which their teachers and school administrators view them. I have heard teachers dismiss, and therefore tacitly accept, the macho behaviour of some of the Latin American boys or the non-participation of an Aboriginal girl, by saying “Well, that’s just part of their culture.” When behaviour is dismissed as “part of a culture”, we are shaping behaviours and subtly rewarding the stereotypes, both negative and positive, of the various social classes and cultures. This expectation and encouragement of preconceived notions affects students, both in school and out, informing and reinforcing their culturally-scripted next move.
In Brandon, our Spanish-speaking students come from places such as El Salvador, Mexico, Columbia, Ecuador, and Honduras. Educators cannot assume that the experiences, history and individual differences of these students can be neatly described as “Latin American”. The same is true for our Aboriginal students. Growing up on the isolated reserve of Crane River is not the same as growing up in inner-city Winnipeg. Teachers must remain cognizant that there is diversity within each cultural group; there is the ever-present pitfall of lumping together a group of individuals and over-simplifying a culture.

**Disconnection Leading to Lack of Success**

Disconnection can result in non-dominant culture students struggling to attend, achieve, engage, and, ultimately, succeed in school. These students may completely disengage from the school community to search for a feeling of belonging or a means of escape elsewhere: street gangs, drug use, alcohol abuse, promiscuity. As Faircloth and Hamm (2005) suggested, due to the cultural disparity between home and school, students from non-dominant cultural groups may experience barriers to their participation in sports teams, extra-curricular groups and clubs, resulting in a less-developed connection to the school community than their white peers (p. 294).

I have watched students from non-dominant cultures move from class to class, going through the motions of their day, surrounded by predominantly white middle-class peers. The white, middle-class resource teacher or guidance counsellor chose the courses for these students, in consultation with the students’ previous teachers, who were also white, also middle-class. The students’ parents may not be part of the decision-making process, sometimes due to language barriers, sometimes due to long-standing, ingrained disengagement with the education system or perhaps due to a lack of effective communication or method of engagement on the part of the school.
The classroom teachers that provided instruction for these students did not share a common culture or the native language of the students who came from Aboriginal backgrounds, from isolated northern communities, from Latin America, from Asia and from Eastern European countries. Given the cultural differences that exist, it is a challenge for teachers to acquire the multicultural competence for effective delivery of curriculum content and to provide culturally-responsive classroom management to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

**Finding Their Way**

Affiliation to their peer group also affects students. As Aronowitz (2004) pointed out, the power of the peer group can force an individual to conform to the inherent mode of being within that social class. Will they choose to imitate and integrate, seeing that the manners and behaviours of cultural capital are the way to be accepted by the dominant culture and social class? Or, will they choose to become exaggerated caricatures of themselves? Another alternative, proposed by bell hooks (2009), is that students don’t have to choose between these two options, that they can exist and succeed in both worlds. Non-dominant culture students can survive and thrive with this “double consciousness” (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995, p. 169) by exploring and sharing their individual differences and by examining their experiences in the dominant cultural environment of their school. As a student increases in self-awareness, he or she may better understand what his or her identity means in the context of the school community. Self-acceptance may foster greater independence and confidence, ultimately resulting in better choices for that individual. As non-dominant culture students gain independence and confidence, they may become increasingly aware of a personal sense of agency. This sense of agency is a sense of power and responsibility to speak, and act, on their own behalf in order to contribute to the betterment of the school community as a whole.
Active Affiliation

Students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds may be lacking connections at school. and by asking them to participate in a structured, regularly-scheduled group meeting, then we are actively organizing and providing time, space, and activities so that affiliation is fostered with the adult group leader and among the students in the group. An authentic and positive relationship with an adult in the school system along with an increased sense of connectedness and belonging to peers can have a strong influence on the engagement and well-being of an individual student.
References


APPENDICES
Appendix A: Superintendent Letter

Susan Gilleshammer
48 Aurora Crescent
Brandon, MB R7B 4G4

January 19, 2011

Dear Dr. Michaels and members of the Research Advisory Committee,

Attached please find my Research Application Form for Brandon School Division for my research project entitled, **Active Affiliation: a Process for Engagement and Social Change**.

I am nearing the end of my Masters of Education program in Guidance and Counselling and, to that end, I have begun work on my thesis. My area of focus is cultural diversity; more specifically, the enhancement of academic achievement in students from non-dominant cultural groups. Through my review of current research, I have found there to be evidence that increased feelings of self-confidence and positive self-image, growth in school connectedness, as well as feelings of authentic affiliation to peers and school personnel, are related to increased achievement in the identified population.

I would like to conduct a 10-week group program in which students would actively explore their identities, experiences and ideas with their peers and with me, as the group facilitator. The complete description of this program is included with my application package. Upon completion of the 10-week program, the participants would be interviewed to assess the effects of this
program. If the program is successful in terms of reported increases in the areas described, I would continue to offer the program in subsequent years once each semester to the target group.

Thank you for considering my application to conduct this research at Vincent Massey High School. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Susan Gilleshammer
FORM A

PROCEDURES 1017

RESEARCH APPLICATION FORM

Adopted: Motion 42/2008; March 10, 2008

Research Application Form Page 1 of 4

Brandon School Division

Research Application Form

The Brandon School Division welcomes researchers and appreciates the efforts to support student achievement. Numerous applications for research are received annually and, unfortunately, not all projects can be accommodated. The Research Advisory Committee WILL NOT CONSIDER incomplete application forms nor will the Committee accept research proposals attached to an incomplete application form. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the essential information necessary for the Committee to make an informed decision is provided in this application form. Policy and Procedures 1017, outline what is required by the Committee.

1. Information About Researcher

Applicant's Name: Susan Gilleshammer

Address: 48 Aurora Crescent, Brandon, MB   Postal Code: R7B 4G4

Telephone: Home: 204-727-7157   Office: 204-729-3179

Email: gilleshammer.susan@brandonsd.mb.ca

Position Title: Guidance Counsellor
Institution: Vincent Massey High School

2. Title of Proposed Research:

Active Affiliation: A Process for Engagement and Social Change

3. Complete if Applicable:

Name of sponsor/thesis advisor: Dr. Johanna Leseho

Department: Faculty of Education Phone: 204-727-7465

Institution: Brandon University

Position Held: Associate Professor

Form A Procedures 1017

Research Application Form Page 2 of 4

4. Type of Research: Proposed Research Sample:

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Other, explain:
5. Persons Conducting the Research: List all persons who will be involved in the data Collection

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>a) Susan Gilleshammer</td>
<td>Vincent Massey High School</td>
<td>204-729-3179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Research Assistant (TBA) for transcribing interview data</td>
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6. Research Design and Data Collection Briefly outline hypothesis, research design and procedures, and sampling techniques. Attach examples of all research instruments.

Vincent Massey High School has a student population of 823 students. Over the past five years, the demographics of the school have changed dramatically. The influx of immigrant families from South and Central America, as well as a significant number of Asian immigrants, has drastically increased the cultural diversity of this historically white, middle-class high school population. Currently there are 123 English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners registered at Vincent Massey. This number does not include students from non-dominant cultures who are not receiving English language support. The Aboriginal population of Vincent Massey is approximately 150 students; this figure combined with the number of EAL students indicates that around one-third of the student population comes from a non-dominant cultural background.
An alarming number of students from non-dominant cultures are struggling academically and absenteeism among these students continues to rise. If this issue is not addressed these students may completely disengage from the school community to search for a feeling of belonging or a means of escape elsewhere – in street gangs and in unhealthy behaviours such as drug use, alcohol abuse or promiscuity. It is imperative that our school becomes proactive in its approach to connecting all students to the school by implementing interventions such as the group inquiry described in this proposal.

The assumption that arises from this study is that all students will benefit, as individuals and as a community, from the opportunity for active affiliation and collective inquiry as they explore and share their identities, experiences and ideas with their peers and with empathetic, caring adults through a 10-week psycho-educational group entitled "Understanding Diversity." The anticipated benefits to students will include an increase in self-awareness and self-confidence as well as increased feelings of connectedness to peers, to teachers and to their school experience. These feelings of connectedness and sense of belonging, along with the empowerment of collaborative problem-solving, will result in greater student engagement as well as greater academic motivation and achievement.

Ten to twelve student participants will be interviewed regarding their experiences of participating in the 10-week "Understanding Diversity" program. The group will meet for one hour each week for the duration of the 10-week program. The researcher will recruit
participants through classroom presentations in which the group program, as well as the research component will be described.

Data collection will be in the form of qualitative interviews that will take place at the conclusion of the program. In addition, the researcher will keep an observational and reflective journal throughout the group process. All data collected through this project will be securely stored in a locked cabinet in my office at Vincent Massey High School. The data will be stored for a period of seven years upon completion of the project. After seven years, all data will be destroyed unless other appropriate arrangements are made and agreed upon by the relevant parties. Once reports are written, all interview tapes will be erased. Volunteer participants will represent an inverse reflection of the school demographics:

5 EAL students with English Language proficiency of Stage 2 or above
4 Aboriginal students
3 dominant culture students

The first 10-12 students who volunteer for the group program will be invited to participate. Informed consent will be obtained from students and their parents/guardians for participation in both the group program and the research study. The information will be provided in English as well as the participant's first language.

Interviews will take place in a classroom at Vincent Massey High School. The interviews will be approximately one hour in length and will be audio taped to be later transcribed.
The researcher may know some of the research participants through her role as guidance counsellor at Vincent Massey. This will support the interview process as the students may be more comfortable speaking to someone with whom they are already familiar and who has some awareness of their situations.

(Please see attached interview questions)

7. Subjects (indicate number and demographic characteristics of students, and other staff to be involved; approximate participation dates, and time commitments.) All permission letters must be attached.

(Please see attached letter of consent which includes statement of confidentiality, assurances of voluntary participation/withdrawal and that no penalties will result from non-participation.)

a) Students needed:

Total Number of Students: **10-12**

Ages Range: **14-18**

Gender Proportion (Percent): **unknown**

b) Will data include any information regarding subject's:

__Sexual behaviour  __Drug use  __Religion

__Alcohol Use  __Family Income  **X** Ethnicity

Other_______________________________________________________________

If any of the above are checked, please explain:

Non-dominant culture ethnicity is a trait of historically marginalized students therefore ethnicity is integral data for this research.
c) Number of sessions per student ___1_____

Approximate length of each session ___1 hour____

Maximum length of each session ___1.5 hours____

Testing procedure:  **X** individual  __group  __other

If group, give size of group(s): ______n/a________

Approximate time required of the teacher(s) ___n/a____________

8. **Facilities and Equipment**: (Indicate facilities and/or equipment which are required to conduct your study.)

    Vincent Massey High School will provide classroom space for group program and interviews. Brandon University will provide audio recording equipment.

9. **Ethical Approval**: Attach a copy of the appropriate ethical review committees of your external institution or agency.

    Please see attached BUREC application.
I have read the Guidelines for External Research Projects within the Brandon School Division and agree to the conditions under which research requests are granted by The Brandon School Division.

________________________________ ____________________________________
Date       Research Investigator's Signature

________________________________ ____________________________________
Date       *Faculty Signature

* (If the Research Investigator is a student, this form must be countersigned by the student's thesis advisor at the college or university to indicate that the advisor has read the proposal and deemed it to be a valid and worthwhile research project.)

Submit completed applications to:
Adrian Kuryliw
Research and Evaluation Services
Brandon School Division
1031 6th Street
Brandon, Manitoba
R7A 4J5

************************************************************************

Office Use:

- Brandon School Division Research Application Form;
- Copies of all questionnaires and testing instruments;
- Copies of Informed Consent letters for Students (if applicable)
- Copies of Informed Consent letters for Teachers (if applicable)
- Copies of Informed Consent letters for Parent/Guardians (if applicable)
- Ethical Review Approval Letter (where appropriate)

Date of Committee Review: _____________________

Committee Decision:

__________________________________________________________________________
Good morning/afternoon. My name is Ms. Gilleshammer and I am one of the guidance counsellors here at Vincent Massey. I am also a student in the graduate studies program in the Faculty of Education at Brandon University. As part of my courses, I am doing a research project here at our school. I want to tell you about the project and ask if you would be interested in participating.

Next semester, I am organizing a group program called "Understanding Diversity" which will begin on __________. This program is part of my research study entitled, Active Affiliation: A Process for Engagement and Social Change.

If you decide to participate in the Understanding Diversity Program, we will do activities in which you can talk about and show who you are and what your experiences have been in the past and in the present. You will be asked not only to share your stories but to discuss the challenges that you face. This group will meet in the Career Centre room at Vincent Massey for approximately ten weeks for one hour each week. We will meet at different times during the school day so you would not miss the same class each week. Assignments and homework are your first responsibility so participation in the group will not interfere with that responsibility.

At the end of the program, you will be interviewed to find out how this program has affected you. These interviews will be 1 hour – 1.5 hours long and will be audio taped, then transcribed for analysis. My hope is that you will benefit, as individuals and as a community, from the opportunity to explore and share your identities, experiences and ideas with the other group members and with me. The benefits could include an increase in self-awareness and self-confidence as well as stronger feelings of connectedness to your peers, to your teachers and to
your school experience. These feelings of connectedness and sense of belonging could result in greater school engagement as well as greater academic motivation and achievement.

Please understand that participation in the group is completely voluntary and the choice to participate will not influence your grades or future relations with me, with Vincent Massey School or with Brandon School Division. All participants are free to withdraw consent and to stop participation at any time without penalty. At any point in the group program or in the study, participants may refuse to answer any particular question or to stop participation altogether. Confidentiality within the group and the study will be addressed and respected. If you choose to take part in this group and in the study you will be asked to sign an “Oath of Confidentiality” which says that you agree that you will not share any information that comes out in the group program activities and discussions. The research assistant and I will also sign a confidentiality agreement. Your names will not appear on any research documents. If you would like to be a member of this group or if you would like more information, please come and see me in my office in Student Services or contact me by phone or email. Here is my card with all my contact information.
Appendix D: Parent/Student Letter

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Your child has expressed an interest in participating in a group program called “Understanding Diversity” which will begin on __________. This program is part of a research study entitled, Active Affiliation: A Process for Engagement and Social Change, which is being organized by Brandon University.

During the Understanding Diversity Program, participants will creatively express and share their stories of self-identity, of school experiences and of challenges they have faced. The participants will be asked not only to share their stories but to discuss possible solutions to address emergent social issues and to increase student engagement. This group will meet in Room 23 at Vincent Massey for approximately ten weeks for one hour each week for a total of 10 hours. We will meet at different times during the school day to minimize the content missed in each class. Classroom requirements will take precedence over group participation.

At the conclusion of the program, the participants will be interviewed regarding how this program has affected them. These interviews will last 1-1.5 hours and will be audio taped. The assumption that arises from this study is that all students will benefit, as individuals and as a community, from the opportunity for active affiliation and collective inquiry as they explore and share their identities, experiences and ideas with their peers and with empathetic, caring adults.

The benefits to students will include an increase in self-awareness and self-confidence as well as increased feelings of connectedness to peers, to teachers and to their school experience. These feelings of connectedness and sense of belonging, along with the empowerment of collaborative problem-solving, will result in greater student engagement as well as greater academic motivation and achievement.
Please understand that participation in the group is completely voluntary and the choice to participate will not influence grades or future relations with Ms. Gilleshammer, Vincent Massey School or Brandon School Division. All participants are free to withdraw consent and to stop participation at any time without penalty. At any point in the group program or in the study, participants may refuse to answer any particular question or to stop participation altogether. Confidentiality within the group and the study will be addressed and respected. The exception to confidentiality is my legal and ethical responsibility to take appropriate action in the case of an individual intending to do harm to self or others; if abuse or neglect is suspected, if illegal activity is reported to me or if I am required to do so by a court of law.

Please contact me at 729-3179 or gilleshammer.susan@brandonsd.mb.ca if you have questions or desire further information about the group.

In order for your child participate in this group, policy requires your signed consent. Please sign, date the following form and return it to the Guidance and Counseling office by ________________.

Sincerely,

Susan Gilleshammer

Guidance Counsellor
Appendix E: Consent Form

Consent/Non-Consent to Participate In Group

Please return to the Guidance and Counselling office by________________________.

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided by the Guidance Counsellor and have had an opportunity to ask questions about the group program and in the research study for your child. Your child’s signature below indicates that he or she has agreed to be in the group program and in the study and has been told that he or she can change this decision and withdraw consent to participate at any time.

___ I give consent for my child to participate in the Understanding Diversity group and the research study, Active Affiliation: A Process for Engagement and Social Change. I understand that participation is completely voluntary and that classroom requirements take precedence over participation in the group and in the study.

___ I do not give consent for my child to participate in the Understanding Diversity group and the research study, Active Affiliation: A Process for Engagement and Social Change.

Date

________________________________________________________________________

Student Name

________________________________________________________________________

Student Signature

________________________________________________________________________

Parent/Guardian Name

________________________________________________________________________

Parent/Guardian Signature

Ethical Concerns: Brandon University Research Office

(204)727-7445 burec@brandonu.ca
Brandon University Oath of Confidentiality

I, __________________________________________________________

affirm that I will not disclose or make known any matter or thing related to the
participants in the research study entitled, *Active affiliation: A process for
genagement and social change*, that comes to my knowledge during this research
project.

__________________________________________________________
Signature of Participant                 Date

__________________________________________________________
Signature of Witness                   Date
Brandon University Oath of Confidentiality

I, ________________________________________________

affirm that I will not disclose or make known any matter or thing related to the
participants in the research study entitled, *Active affiliation: A process for
engagement and social change*, that comes to my knowledge during this research
project.


__________________________________________  _____________________________
Signature of Researcher                  Date

__________________________________________  _____________________________
Signature of Witness                    Date
Brandon University Oath of Confidentiality

I, ________________________________________________

affirm that I will not disclose or make known any matter or thing related to the
participants in the research study entitled, *Active affiliation: A process for
genagement and social change*, that comes to my knowledge during this research
project.


______________________________________________
Signature of Research Assistant

______________________________________________
Date

______________________________________________
Signature of Witness

______________________________________________
Date
Active Affiliation: A Process for Engagement and Social Change

Research study interview questions:

Describe the impact participating in the Understanding Diversity Group Program has had on:

- Your feelings about yourself.
- Your feelings about your culture.
- Your feelings about your school.
- Your feelings about your peers.
Appendix J: Initial Group Program Proposal Notes

Group Duration, Format, Size

The group will run for approximately ten sessions for one hour each week. The group will have between ten and twelve members. The sessions will always begin with a “Check In” and end with a “Check Out” to allow the facilitator to gauge the emotional and psychological climate of the group. The “Check Out” will allow the facilitator to identify students that may need further closure if a discussion or group activity has triggered a worrisome emotional response to an issue.

Physical Structure

The group will meet in the Career Centre in a circular formation of classroom chairs. The counsellor will bring in an area rug to designate the group space and to create a warmer atmosphere. Other physical props may be brought in to facilitate activities or create a sense of space for the group.

Scheduling

Depending on group members’ availability the group sessions may take place at noon hour or during class time if there is a common spare period among the group members’ timetables. Another option would be to use a different class period each session so that in our five-period day the participants would miss two classes of each subject over the course of the ten weeks.

Pre-Group meeting

A Pre-Group Meeting will be held to provide specific information to the group as a whole. Practical details will be worked out at this meeting, including time, place, general expectations of behaviour, and to allow the group members to get acquainted. Confidentiality will be addressed again with the group. This Pre-Group Meeting will allow all participants to make a final
decision as to whether this group will have positive benefits for them and if they will commit to participate.

**Initial Stage (1-2 sessions)**

During the Initial Stage, the group members will participate in activities designed to build trust, create a safe environment and engender a sense of belonging.

**Possible Activities**

1. **Icebreakers**

   **The Name Game**

   Group members will introduce themselves using their first name and a describing word that fits their personality. The adjective must begin with the same initial sound as their name (Super Susan, Youthful Johanna). As the introductions go around the circle, each participant must repeat the names of those that have gone before them. (The co-facilitator and dominant culture students will be strategically placed in the circle to provide help and to insure the success and comfort level for the EAL students in the group).

2. **Creating a Safe Space**

   **Questions for discussion:**
   
   a) What kinds of things will make you feel vulnerable?
   b) What do you fear?
   c) What do you need to make this safe?
   d) What can you give yourself?
   e) What do you need from others in the group?
   f) Who in the group do you identify with?
   g) Who in the room might you feel uncomfortable with? (address that person)
3. **Establishing Constructive Group Norms**

   +/- Cards:

   a) Each group member will be given a pink index card to write on – write one thing that will help the group experience be positive.

   b) Each group member will be given a blue index card to write on - write one thing that would take away from the learning happening in this group.

   c) Share all the cards with the whole group – writers should remain anonymous.

   d) Come to a consensus to create the “rules” for our group.

   e) Create rules/group norms on chart paper discussing what each rule “Looks Like” and “Sounds Like” (see following chart)

4. **Guidelines/Ground Rules for Our Group**

   The following Ground Rules are suggestions to help generate additional group ground rules. Group members will delete and/or add items. The What it “Looks Like” and What it “Sounds Like” columns are included in order to allow group members to express in their own words what each rule means. -

   [http://missouricareereducation.org/CDs/ResponsiveServices/SmallGroupCounseling.pdf](http://missouricareereducation.org/CDs/ResponsiveServices/SmallGroupCounseling.pdf)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What it “Looks Like”</th>
<th>What it “Sounds Like”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. All group members understand and respect confidentiality.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. One person speaks at a time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Everyone has an opportunity to participate and share.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. No “Put-Downs” are allowed (e.g. snickering, name calling, negative comments, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. All group members will treat each other with respect.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Make every effort to be on time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. All group members are encouraged to actively participate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Group members have the right to pass on an issue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Group members will be have an open mind and accept where other group members are in their development.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Group members will have the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
opportunity to develop other
guidelines.

(Ludlow et al., 2002; Payne & Johnson, 2005; Sitzman & Leners, 2006).

**Transition Stage (1-2 sessions)**

During the Transition Stage, resistance and conflict in the group will be worked through to resolution before the group moves on to the Working Stage.

**Possible Activities:**

1. **Bibliotherapy – Using the poem “Desiderata” (included on last page)**

   Copies of the poem will be distributed to the students at the end of the initial stage to read as “homework”. Translations will be provided to EAL students. Students will be asked to identify and explain to the group one piece of advice in the poem that will be important for the group and one piece of advice that will be personally important for them. This discussion may lead to deeper examination of what each student needs from the group or what they fear may not be given in the group. Personal issues can be identified to work on at this point in the process.

   The facilitator will be alert to signs of a lack of trust through the group members’ body language, silence, defensive responses or superficial participation. This will be a time where facilitator self-disclosure may be appropriate. Other dyad sharing activities or risk-taking activities may be introduced to further link participants. Any obvious areas of conflict should be directly addressed by the facilitator during the transition stage.
Working Stage (4-5 sessions)

During the Working Stage, group members will be moving deeper into the process by identifying the goals and issues on which they would like to work. Participants will enter into that work, both within the group and within themselves.

Possible Activities and Topics of Discussion:

1. Personal Identity Road Map
   - Using markers and poster board, participants will be asked to draw a road map of their lives paying attention to the memories that have been significant in shaping who they are. Members will be asked to include earliest memories, key decisions, and important life events.

2. Goal Identification Through a Structured Activity - Phototherapy
   - Group members will be asked to choose a photo from a collection of pictures spread out on a table. Participants will be asked to choose an image that they connect with an issue that they would like to work on.
   - Discussion of general challenges cultural diversity brings to our community.
   - Discussion of potential benefits created by cultural diversity in our community.
   - Discussion of personal challenges that cultural diversity presents for the participants.
   - Discussion of personal opportunities and benefits created by cultural diversity.
   - Facilitator may deliver information on the stages of “Culture Shock” while using personal examples of her time living overseas.
Ending Stage (1-2 sessions)

During the Ending Stage, closure is attained by reflecting on individual and group accomplishments. Group members will be encouraged to identify plans for using their new knowledge and skills in other contexts in the future.

Possible Activity:

1. Web of Connection

   - Using a ball of yarn, students will identify a group member that they have learned something from. They will toss the ball of yarn to the individual while holding onto the end. Addressing the other student directly, the “giver” will tell the “receiver” what the learning was and how and when it took place. The receiver will respond to the giver, then will in turn become the giver, identifying another group member and throwing the yarn to them while holding on to their part of the “web”. This exercise allows the group members to recognize the learning that has taken place and creates a visual manifestation of the connections created throughout the group process.

   - Students would be asked to evaluate the group process using a survey (to be developed).

   - Group members would be asked to write a short “toast” to be given by a close friend or family member at their 25th birthday party. In this exercise, participants can express plans and goals for the future.

   - Follow-up interviews and a Follow-up Group Meeting will be conducted six weeks after the final session to allow group members to share their experiences of growth following the group experience or to learn effective strategies from other group members to face further challenges.