

ABORIGINAL HEAD START – THE NEXT GENERATION – THEN AND NOW ANALYSIS OF THE 2015 YOUTH NOMINATION SUBMISSIONS

Introduction

Aboriginal youth from across Canada who attended one of the Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) programs in their primary years were invited to submit a nomination letter to attend the 20th Anniversary Celebration of Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities. The celebration took place on the unceded traditional lands of the Musqueam people at the University of British Columbia (UBC) from July 6-9, 2015.

The former Aboriginal Head Start participants from across Canada submitted individual letters to the selection committee outlining why they should be chosen to represent their province or territory. The youths' submissions are contained in this section of the report to capture the essence of their narratives in support of their nominations. While responding to why they should be chosen to attend, the youth were also asked to include memories that stood out for them during their AHS experience and to demonstrate how their experiences have impacted their present life. The invitations to attend the conference were extended by the selection committee.

Eight key themes are identified from the nomination letters which are categorized according to the theoretical concept of the Medicine Wheel: the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. The holistic theory provides the context that values the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual as essentials of the whole being. This concept reinforces the positive sense of self, desire for learning, and the opportunities to be successful as young people. The categorizations of themes according to the Medicine Wheel framework are found later in the report.

Aboriginal Head Start Nominee Participants

Included in this report are 46 respondents from all of the Canadian provinces, Yukon, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. Of the 18 nominees who indicated their gender, 9 were male and 9 were female. Only 5 of the 46 indicated their current age.

The participants' geographic location was predominantly identified directly from their letters. If the location was missing, the secondary method of identification was by locating the AHS site by province or territory using a google search over the internet. Of the 46 submissions 29 locations were determined and 17 were not. The physical locations are as follows:

Alberta	British Columbia	Manitoba	Northwest Territories	Nova Scotia	Nunavut	Ontario	Quebec	Saskatchewan	Yukon
3	5	1	4	3	2	6	2	2	1

It is noted that of the 29 identified locations the two larger provinces of British Columbia and Ontario are represented by 17% and 21% respectively which corresponds to the representative sizes of these provinces.

Aboriginal Head Start Nomination Outcomes

The Aboriginal Head Start nominees responded to one statement and two guiding questions in their letters. The statement and questions referenced were: 1) Explain why you should be chosen to represent your province/territory; 2) What are the memories that stand out for you from your AHS experience? and 3) How has this experience impacted your present life? The resultant themes were generated to capture the value of the responses as some letters were detailed while others were brief. Some of the youth indicated that they had difficulty remembering a lot about pre-school because they were so young and it was quite a few years ago. The challenge to bring back memories is understandable given that the age range of the five who mentioned their age is between 14 and 22. This correlates with the nominees' ability to recall.

Theme Analysis

Initially the nomination letters were numbered from 1 to 46 for classification purposes and read in its entirety to acquire a general sense of the features within each submission. Secondly, the letters were analyzed using the constant comparative method described by Kleiman (2004) as open coding to generate a list of themes by highlighting similarities and differences in the youths' narratives. The following themes emerged: culture/traditions, language, education/school readiness, future schooling, social development, parent/family/community, physical/nutrition, and AHS support as the important and reoccurring features in the letters. Excerpts from the 46 participant narratives were distributed among the corresponding themes to create meaning from the passages. The themes and topics are guides to examine the participants' experiences as they relate to the six components of AHS.

Consequently, the eight themes selected for analysis closely corresponded with the six component areas of AHS which are: culture and language, health promotion, education and school readiness, nutrition, social support and parent and family involvement. The reoccurring themes found in the narratives are examined to further define how the youths' experiences correspond with the four elements of the Medicine Wheel – physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.

Reflections from the Participants According To Each Theme

Based upon the nomination letters the meanings from each theme are summarized below and the significance of how the youth felt the AHS experience impacted their lives is illuminated with a closing quote from one of the letters in each theme.

Culture/Traditions

The summation of phrases for this theme is: Respect for culture is important; what stands out is learning Aboriginal culture, about our medicines and the importance of smudging and the teachings from our Elders; drumming and singing brought me closer to my culture; AHS jumpstarted participation in Aboriginal heritage by dancing at Pow Wows and drumming; the program creates pride of Aboriginal culture; Elders told traditional stories in class; experienced the traditional ways of my people by ice fishing, being on the land and the language; learned traditional songs and dances; sharing circles; introduced to culture with stories and games; program helped connect to community and culture; introduced to culture; the base helped me be a traditional drummer and dancer; the traditional activities stand out; fostered a desire to practice Dene tradition; fondest memory is learning Cree, smudging and cultural field trips; proud of Aboriginal heritage and standing tall; received Metis sash at graduation, learned the tradition of living off the land, grew up square dancing and Red River jigging; stories of Aboriginal legends were read; many Aboriginal families were impacted by residential schools and loss of cultural identity; represent AHS because I know the importance of Indigenous based education with the integration of our spiritual culture; learned about the sacred medicines and their importance, showed the importance of being connected to your roots, to stay spiritually grounded to mother earth and live in peace and harmony according to the Creator.

The responses overall are very positive with a strong emphasis on the youths' remembrance of being connected to their cultures, traditions, and languages. Many of the participants recall being involved with Elders in the program and in the community. There is one response that acknowledges how the residential school experience impacted the loss of cultural identity.

The summation quote that describes the strength of culture and traditional practices in the AHS program is,

Memories that stood out from my experience as being an [A]boriginal [H]ead [S]tart student are mainly the traditional activities. I remember trekking through the snow to set snares for rabbit stew. I remember our nature walks to collect cranberries for homemade jam to spread on our bannock. I also remember celebrations in the gymnasium of traditional dancers and drumming.

Language

The reference to language is not as prevalent as the seven other themes. Language is recognized as a separate theme because of its significance to cultural identity and the contribution to a positive self-image. The AHS program combines culture and language as one component.

The participant responses for this theme are: Cree language; learned through Aboriginal culture and language; try to learn the Dene Zhahti; learning Cree earlier helped me win the Cree award in grade 4/5; I learned to count in Kwa-Kwa-La, sing songs, and heard stories from my Elders; Cree words with pictures of animals; I was raised in a hunting, Michif speaking home and I hope to be a fluent Michif speaker, I know the Michif language is fading; remember learning different Ojibwe words, colours, animals and counting to ten; Head Start was the first place that exposed me to the Saulteaux language; I was given the opportunity to learn my language.

The youth associate language with culture. They learned the language by listening to stories, counting, and naming of colours, family members, and animals. Some youth continued to practice what they learned while one youth acknowledged how learning Cree early helped them win an award in grade 4/5. A strong sense of the importance of language is drawn from one of the youths' expressions which is captivated in this quote,

Head Start was the first place that exposed me to the [S]aulteaux language. We learned basic counting words, family members and names of animals. I can still count to ten in [S]aulteaux.

Education/School Readiness

The youths' excerpts for this theme is as follows: Learned to excel, to be creative; develop artistic abilities; helped stimulate curiosity; they taught me the importance of respect; I am told by my mom that Head Start is exactly that a Head Start in your school years; graduating from AHS 4+ program created the path; the program gave me confidence to 100% be me; it was a healthy, relaxing and inclusive program; the mixture of pedagogical approaches with less time feeling constrained, learning from others gave me advantages for my following school experiences; I am a successful graduate of the AHS program; I am proof that AHS is a successful program that teaches important values; early childhood shapes who we become; my fondest memories were playing with children, being happy and comfortable with everyone; grateful for hearing the stories at a young age; we did art projects and I learned how to sew with a large needle and yarn on felt; met at lunchtime to do crafts and talk, this helped me overcome my shyness; I learned a lot that would help me be better prepared to start school; AHS gave me a foundation that shaped my entire life; we learned to prepare fish, set up camp, hiked and safely cut and gather wood; my time at AHS is highlighted with warmth and acceptance; AHS kept me engaged and interested with every activity we did, especially field trips; my best memories took place in the playground; all the children were friendly and the teachers were even friendlier; what I do remember is feeling safe and welcome; what impacted me the most was the hospitality shown by the teachers at the school, I always felt so at home; I felt respected, independent and supported by everyone; I learned how to share at AHS; the memories that stuck are making small hand drums, taking naps, and learning how to treat others with respect; my memories are going to school with aunty, playing with friends and lunch time; one of my best memories is from the time our teacher Peggy pinned a large paper to the wall for the entire class to coat our hands with paint and put our hand and finger prints on display; one memory that stands out from AHS is getting my graduation pictures taken and when I was

asked what I wanted to be when I grew up I said a Cheerleader; we did a lot of crafts and it was the start of learning about life for me; AHS made a big impact on my life, I learned to be brave and deal with hardships; in AHS, I learned compassion, team work, confidence; I loved how safe and welcoming it was there; my only memory is doing crafts and playing outside; I made friends in Head Start that I have today; AHS taught me some of the small things in life such as how to wash my hands or brush my teeth; Head Start offered me the knowledge of my culture, healthy living, and life in general; I was taught the importance of healthy eating; in the class, the teachers read Aboriginal books to us and we would discuss the books afterwards; most memories I have from the Head Start are listening to stories and learning about Inuit culture from the staff; it was a model preschool that needs to be more observed and integrated in the standard kindergarten classrooms by our municipal/provincial education system so that we can really achieve some reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples across the country; the AHS program helped me to learn valuable life skills and make connections that allowed me to become involved in my community and culture; I remember my incredible teachers and my comrades; I remember the feeling of familiness when entering my AHS; I really like the singing that we did and playing with the blocks and the physical activities; AHS helped me practice and understand routine.

The recollection from the youths' early year experiences resoundingly affirms that AHS gave them a strong foundation for education and school readiness. There is a strong sense of support from parents, community, and teachers. Cumulatively, the youth recognized the value of their development in the program as expressed by one student,

While I was too young to remember much, having a mixture of pedagogical approaches, having less time feeling constrained, learning from others around me, including community members who I grew up respecting and continuing to learn from, were all advantageous to the following years of my schooling experience.

Future Schooling

Future schooling is included as a theme to demonstrate how AHS influenced the youths' progression from preschool to further their educational aspirations as follows: was a long journey to high school education; first in family to graduate; moving on to university to become a certified welder; I would like to encourage other Natives in North America to stand up and speak about issues and resolve some conflicts; currently in university, was on the Youth ambassador program; I graduated from post-secondary as a dental assistant; graduated in 2005; worked hard in school, at home and on myself; I am a positive role model because I am healthy and stay active; I won medals in soccer, volleyball and track and field; I represent my school, community and Metis heritage; works on snowmobiles and ATV engines; seeks further knowledge about Inuit history at the Nunavut Sivuniksavut in Ottawa; auditioned for a film and played a fairly important role; I am graduating school with 100 career hours; I am involved in groups like Junior Canadian Rangers, choir, youth group; I want to be a Head Start teacher just like my mom; went on to Early Childhood Education as my profession; I learned how to appreciate what I have and not be wasteful to the environment; I have an important decision to make regarding my future after high school; I received an Aboriginal Achievement Award in

grade 12; we narrated two stories in Kwa-Kwa-La at our Spirit Square in Campbell River; became a part of the provincial aboriginal youth council as well as a youth mentor; I fully credit AHS 18 years ago for creating the foundational stepping stones of my learning journey; since I was 16-17 I have been involved with youth through an initiative known as the Metis settlement youth network society; moved away to attend a 2 year post-secondary program in Digital Photography; education is my main focus; I have been on the honour role for two years; going to school at Saskatoon Business College for Medical Administration Assistant/Clinical Assistant; goals...graduating from college, finding a great job; goals of becoming a member of the RCMP; I teach my son to Red River jig; I carry the urge to live off the land; always been determined to finish high school; since Kindergarten I have excelled in school, earning many academic awards; taking my pre-Pharmacy program to get into Pharmacy school; I was given my first volunteer experience through AHS which gave me the confidence to apply for a camp counsellor position; I made myself a part of the Native American based programs offered by our local community center; I overcame the obstacle of failure and low self-esteem and completed high school.

The importance of accomplished and future education is manifested in the youths' experiences in a variety of ways. The fulfillment in their lives is celebrated by continuing their cultural practises, completing high school or post-secondary level programs. Some have completed college or university and entered into a profession. The quote that demonstrates how future education is valued is described as:

My most recent accomplishment was attending and graduating from post-secondary to become a Dental Assistant. I've been a Dental Assistant at PDG, where I was a patient since I was 2 years old. After a year of working I went back to school to get my Orthodontic module so I could do even more.

Social Development

The key phrases indicated in the letters that correspond to the youths' social development include: hardworking, empathetic, sociable, energetic, understanding, respectful, engaged; comfortable in public; likes challenges; comfortable in self; expressed feelings; learned to be kind, patient and respectful; learned patience; interacts with other parents for fundraising, planning and organizing; pushes self to do her best; being taught respect for others and their things; taught to be a friend; had huge influences on my social actions and reactions as a child; AHS helped me come out of my shell and feel comfortable with other children; I am a good role model for Aboriginal youth through my success in education and community involvement; AHS reflects the pride of knowing who you are and where you come from; the first steps introduce us to independence and social interaction; taught how to interact with other people; peers look up to me because I hunt, repair engines and I am a good friend; AHS helped me with my self-esteem; taught how to interact with people; helped me grow into a person with opinions and personality; the program helped me break out of my shell; AHS helped me make a lot of friends, I am a friendly and helping guy; I am a young leader; I inspire people when I hoop dance; I am good and strong; I avoid bad influences and things that can affect my life in the wrong way: I feel that each person should be equal and be allowed to be themselves; I am a young role model in my community of Sts'ailes; I made a choice to be drug and alcohol free; I am a young

athlete; I enjoy playing soccer and canoe pulling and I love to encourage the youth that are coming behind me to follow the path of living a healthy lifestyle; I learned to be social; I am friendly and a good helper to all I come into contact with; I don't get swayed or pressured into doing anything that I am not supposed to; I am a hard worker and I treat everyone with respect; I am a role model for my siblings and my peers; I live a healthy life style; always looking for ways to get out of my comfort zone; I am a motivated, comfortable, positive role model for young people; I am friendly and outgoing; I am a dedicated and hardworking student; in school I communicated with others and showed respect to my peers and teachers; I am friendly towards other people and try to help others as much as I can; I have never been scared about who I am and what I stand for; I love seeing my Head Start family outside the walls of our room, in our community, at socials and Pow Wows and other festivities.

In the narratives, the participants' articulate how their AHS experience provided them with a solid foundation in their social development. They learned to be sociable citizens in a respectful way, based on cultural and social norms. Many of the youth are comfortable role models and prefer healthy life styles. The quote that highlights the contribution of AHS social development in the lives of the youth is,

The program creates a positive learning environment based on caring, creativity and pride of allowing knowledge of traditional values and beliefs that are the basis of [A]boriginal culture. It is important to be proud of who you are and where you come from and I believe the [A]boriginal [H]ead [S]tart program reflects this.

Parent/Family/Community

The parent/family/community theme importantly reflects the holistic nature in early childhood development for Aboriginal youth in terms of family and community support. The youth expressed the meaningfulness of their association with this theme in their early years as follows: gives back to community and to other people; parents and other community members involved in the learning process of the child may themselves benefit from an educational environment that promotes their own cultural heritage and learning methods; AHS kept me in the Aboriginal community and helped me learn new things; AHS visited my great grandparents; I was proud to have my friends visit them; I was fortunate to know my community especially the Elders; we had a graduation party and I felt so special, our moms made us regalia; she painted ravens on the front to represent the crow clan; she used caribou buttons and large beads to accent it; we went fishing on skidoos with our parents; my mom was a teacher; the one memory that stands out is when my mom's partner said women with the AHS program asked if I wanted to learn how to hoop dance; I enjoyed my time at our community's traditional remote camp in Willow River; my mom taught me to not only be respectful to myself but to others as well; my mom started working with Head Start 10 years ago; a lot of my cousins went or go to Head Start; it was incredible to be in an environment where I felt safe to be Anishinaabek; as a kid AHS has allowed me to grow up being a part of my community and my city while giving me the chance to make life-long friendships; AHS was all about community and bringing us together to remember our history and build our future; without this experience I

probably would have missed out on getting to know some of the most important people in my life – my best friends and people I can rely on to this day; my parents pass on wisdom and knowledge that I try not to forget; I remember my incredible teachers and comrades; as a child I can effortlessly remember learning my culture from many different elders in our community; I was being taught outside school my traditions and engaged in my annual longhouse ceremonies; it was open to family participation; my mom, aunts and cousins would all attend field trips with us; AHS influenced not only my life but my mother's as well; the program really encouraged parental involvement where the parent participated in the parent council meetings and continued when I entered the mainstream education system; this helped me build relationships with my teachers and the community which helped increase her [mom] involvement in my life and helped her get a job within the program.

A sense of inclusivity is a robust description of the youths' experiences from their letters. The participation of parents, family members, Elders, and the community as a whole are revered as valuable contributions in their development. The youth appreciated the safe and supportive environment. The influences upon the youths' learned behaviours in connection with parents/family/community holistically is expressed in this quote,

I take the opportunity to give back to my [N]ative community and to the people around me, every chance I can. I love meeting new people and spending time learning from others. It is my passion to support people, physically, mentally or sometimes even spiritually.

Physical/Nutrition

The physical/nutrition aspect of AHS was captured in the memories of the participants as shown in the following phrases: made crafts with friends; outings to the pool, train trips, traditional graduation party; learned to be active; attended gymnastics every month then for many years after; extra-curricular such as eagle watch helped; saw the bald eagle in its natural habitat; my grandmother made us bannock, fruit and juice; every day we went for walks around town; it was fun to see Elders on our way; we played in the snow, went sliding, stomped in the puddles and ran, played in the park; we had a playhouse that was a cabin where we shared stories, sang songs and hung out; eating healthy snacks; I enjoyed going on field trips; one of my best memories is camping; we learned to set nets, properly pack canoes, boats, went hunting, learned camp safety, first aid and gun safety; the environment was welcoming, the food great and the people wonderful; AHS kept me engaged and interested with every activity we did, especially field trips; one of my memories is when we went to visit the chicken farm and I rolled around in the chicken poop and I smelled like a chicken afterwards; I remember Christmas concerts and singing Christmas songs in Michif; they would serve us fresh vegetables/fruit with milk or juice; we cooked traditional food such as fried bannock, fried fish and made tea; in the summer we went camping, strawberry picking and went on nature walks; we went on trips to the zoo, ROM and Ontario science centre; we went on trips outside the city to Six Nations and the Petroglyphs; these outings helped me learn to navigate the city and build resources while having fun; the annual field trips to the Maple Sugar Bush, Strawberry Fields and Apple Orchards; I shared these memories with my family.

The youths' narratives clearly describe how the physical activities and nutrition in the AHS program were pleasing. The practises were nature and culture-based and the physical activities were age appropriate. Overall there is a strong sense of joy. The physical aspect of Head Start is highlighted in this youth's experience as it connected with the importance of Dene tradition,

...my time spent at the AHS program helped foster my desire to practice our Dene tradition...As a Dene, I enjoyed my time spent at our community's traditional remote camp in Willow River. There, we learned to set nets, properly pack canoes, boats, went hunting, learned camp safety, first aid and gun safety. We also learned to prepare fish, set up camp, hiked and safely cut and gather wood.

AHS Support

The final theme AHS Support was created to capture how the youth felt toward the program and the caregivers in terms of how each supported their growth as shown in their words: I think the AHS Centre in La Tuque has shown me that each child is unique and has the power to excel; attending AHS and learning from great teachers has had a positive impact on my life; my mom wanted me to learn who I am and my heritage and by me attending AHS I did learn; AHS gave me lifelong friends and lots of different memories and important values; grateful for the two year gift of teachings from all the staff; joined a family drum group, write songs; drum and sing for community events; was motivated to become a foster parent; the teachers were kind and gave me a good start in my learning process; I am grateful for the experience at AHS; I still use the skills and knowledge I learned; AHS gave me a very good start in education by surrounding me with wonderful teachers; I think about the little moments of comfort and happiness that keep us going; I hope to take what I have learned and pass it to the youth I work with; this is impressive when taking into consideration that I have moderate to severe ADHD; I remember crying on my first day at a different school because I wanted to go back to my teacher Zelda, no one could ever be as nice, friendly, enthusiastic, and caring as teacher Zelda; I would like to thank all the F4NAHS workers for giving me the most amazing head start experience; the Head Start program impacts my life every day; I took what I learned by being a helper to my mom and I offer my services as a child care giver to other moms; if it wasn't for AHS experience, I don't think I would be who I am today; Peggy is a favorite memory of mine for she was and still is an incredible teacher who puts her all into caring about her students and their learning progress; learned how to interact with others, to respect property and authority figures; the teachers were always smiling and eager to teach; the workers at HS made a huge impact on my life; their love as well as the love from community visitors and elders encouraged me to help others; Head Start gave me knowledge of my culture, healthy living and a good life in general; The AHS program has influenced my attitude towards learning by providing me with the head start I needed to excel in my academic abilities; I believe that without Niwasa HS I would've entered foster care without any language or pride in my cultural identity; from a child this program sculpted the person I am today, the father I will be soon; I am excited for my child to be part of the future generation of AHS so he/she will enjoy the same experience; living in an off reserve urban setting the opportunity to freely learn your cultural customs is scarce opposed to the numerous culturally based programs provided in the Head Start and schools on

The Medicine Wheel As A Holistic Framework

The concept of the Medicine Wheel is used to provide the context to describe how the youth connected with specific principles of AHS that are reflected within the narration of their experiences. The three relevant AHS principles are:

- To support the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical growth of each Aboriginal child;
- To support and encourage each Aboriginal child to enjoy life-long learning; and
- To recognize and support the role of the extended family in teaching and caring for Aboriginal children

In the following diagram, the holistic Medicine Wheel model conceptualizes how the participants' experiences fit within the four quadrants namely the emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical realms. The model and outcomes are described further following the diagram.

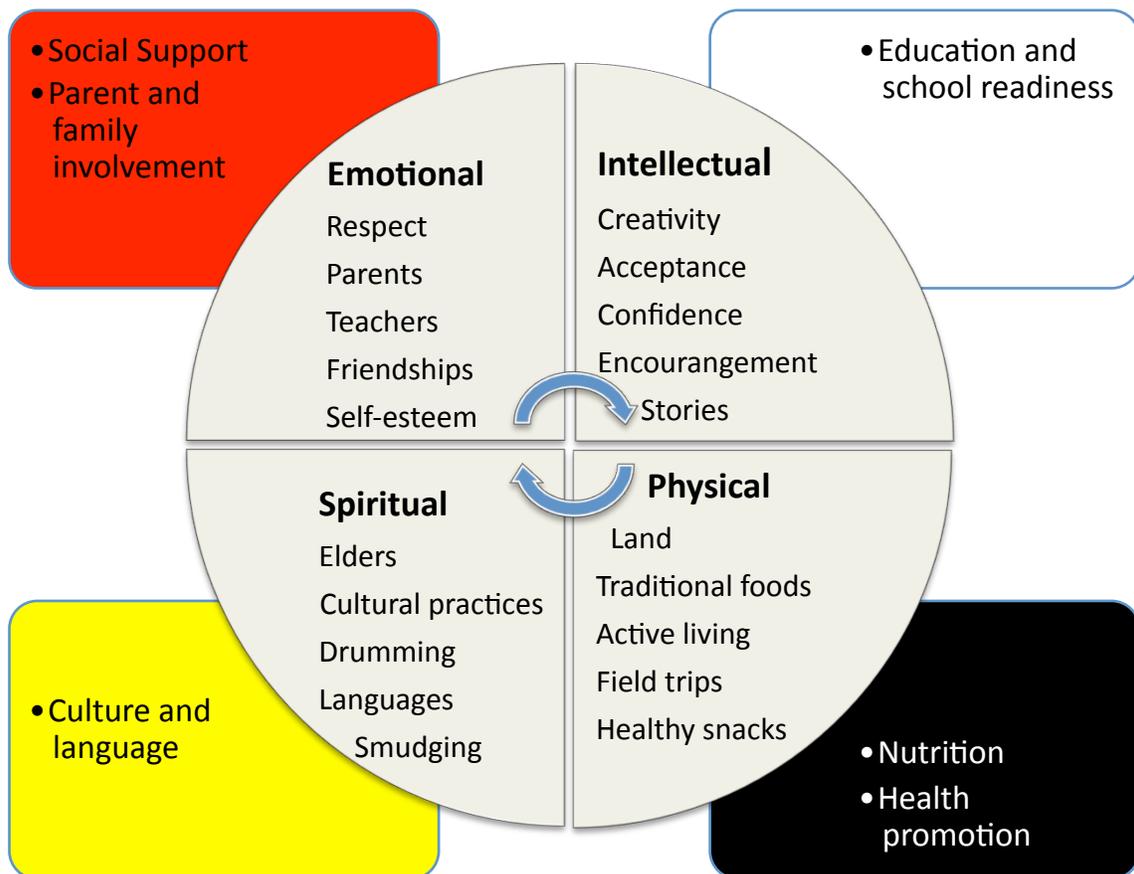


Figure 1. Medicine Wheel Holistic Framework

Discussion

The Medicine Wheel concept contextualizes the perspectives of the former Aboriginal Head Start participants as they expressed in their nomination letters. In the model, the six AHS components are placed on the outside of the circle as they theoretically correspond with the emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical aspects of the Medicine Wheel. The key terms within the quadrants relate to how the participants described the support, values and the people who helped them grow emotionally, spiritually, intellectually and physically while they were in the program. The noted terms positively reflect the three principles of AHS mentioned earlier. The youth affirmed that the AHS program gave them a very strong foundation in their development from child to teen and into young adulthood in a very positive environment. Many of the youth acknowledged how the lessons learned at AHS continually complements their self-image and self-esteem while others are currently involved with AHS or are young parents sending their child to AHS. Aboriginal Head Start definitely made a positive and intergenerational impact from past to present in the lives of the former participants.

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