Highlights of a Conversation with Members of the Aboriginal Acquired Brain Injury Community Support Group within the Saskatchewan Abilities Council of Saskatoon

This program is designed specifically for Aboriginal adults with acquired brain injury to provide a connection between participants and their Aboriginal community. In addition to facilitating independent living and peer interaction, the program provides opportunities to engage in cultural activities and events. (SK Abilities Council website)

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The Conversation focused around the various residential school experiences of each group member as this informed later life substance use and subsequent healing journeys. Each of the participants highlighted the connection between their early life experiences and the return to traditional cultural practices for healing. The lines between cultures were often blurred and overall a positive sense of identity and self emerged as the most important element for healing. Traditional cultural practices were a place of knowledge exchange between Indigenous communities and a space that provided for personal growth. Group members identified the process of learning and engaging with cultural practices to be part of a holistic healing journey. Language was highlighted as a central component for engaging cultural practices and these practices were essential for learning language. One cannot come before the other.

~One participant shared that while he took trades training with SIAST he also took some social work courses to find “ways we could help each other with different languages such as Cree, Soto, Dakota, Blackfoot - all trying to understand each other and how we could cope with different tribes. Teach ‘em how we got trained [in cultural ways].” The participant spoke about negotiation with others “…tribes, we exchanged feathers to honour those around us” and said how culture helped with getting through broader societal changes.
~All participants recall participating in what they call ‘cultural dancing’ and ceremony, such as powwows and rain dances.
~Another participant shared the story of how he got his traditional Native name and the significance of this name for his life journey.
~One participant described the ceremonial dress for dancing – emphasizing the importance of Eagle feathers (while noting that there were more Eagles at that time than now) and he described the importance of a prayer offered in Dakota language that was provided for him.
~The importance of young people knowing their culture by emphasizing traditional ways was considered the most important job for anyone today. This was followed by a story of how one participant’s Band hired many teachers of various backgrounds for the school on his reserve to help know the specifics of their culture in a broader frame.
~A story was shared about how traditional food was changing away from hunting to buying canned meat in the stores and that this leads to a connection where members of this community started building ‘traditionally based’ stores to buy these meats. Community members still had their own gardens and due to the existence of these new stores “the white people would come and purchase this food too” and this led to sharing a vision of economic development. The participants then referred to what he deemed successes in development such as the casino for promoting economic sustainability that he notes is required when living outside a subsistence way of life. This move from subsistence to a capital base economic model is connected to the broader social shift mentioned previously.
~One participant emphasized working toward translating between various languages such as Cree, Dakota, and others. Knowledge exchange was said to be central to growth, emphasizing that this occurred between different Bands and to a lesser extent with the white population, but explained how his experience in the city going to school was something he always tried to bring back to people on reserve. He explained that he did this so that his people could flourish in the new society that was being built around them.
~One participant spoke about how Elders helped put them in places where they could get help with health related issues.
~Medicine was understood by all participants to be contained in Sweetgrass specifically, but in the practice of picking it more than in its ceremonial uses.
~Residential schools did not take all of the cultural practices and these practices existed alongside despite efforts toward their elimination.
~Urban and rural living experiences were mentioned; living in the city is understood to induce a distancing from cultural contact points, including Elders and ceremonial practices.
Overall language was emphasized again [and from different participants than the first meeting] as central to cultural practices and understandings for holistic healing practices. One participant expressed concern about how to reach her adult children with the traditional values she thinks would help them with their current substance use. The Elder present during this conversation suggested that in hearing the teachings and having contact point with other Elders meant that her children would have the teachings when they were ready to engage the practice of sobriety.

Eating traditional foods was emphasized as important for the healing journey [brought up as bannock is being served to everyone at the table over dinner. This statement is met with consensus around the table].

Several group members shared stories of fond childhood memories. These memories are not specific to ceremony or practices but were interpreted to be articulating a ‘way of life’ that each considers culturally specific and significant. Berry picking was mentioned several times.

Members of the group noted that sharing how culture is important would be easier and more appropriate in sharing daily practices such as art or making bannock together rather than ‘only’ conversation. Conversation should grow from the sharing of practices, from the ‘doing’ or the ‘crafting’ that is present in daily activities.

The Elder present referred to the project video as inspiring and noted that the project is following a good path by listening and helping to share stories. This approach is praised at length in contrast to what is seen as the ‘usual’ practices of some projects. The team member speaks about some of the different ways of knowing that must be negotiated when several organizations and community members come together. All parties agreed that there is ‘never enough time for organic processes’.

One group member says that he will do a painting to share for the project about culture specifically but that it may take some time to produce.