

**TACKLING POVERTY THROUGH HOLISTIC, INTERCONNECTED,
NEIGHBOURHOOD-BASED INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING:
THE CASE OF WINNIPEG'S SELKIRK AVENUE**

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On June 24, 2014 the Premier of Manitoba joined a large crowd outside of the Merchants Hotel on Selkirk Avenue in North End Winnipeg. Premier Selinger joined community members, educators, community development workers, Aboriginal Elders, youth and others to announce his government's contribution of 11 million Canadian dollars toward the redevelopment of the Merchants Hotel into a housing and education complex in the heart of Winnipeg's very low-income North End.

This transformation of the old "Merchants Hotel" into "Merchants Corner" is the latest project among several that, together, are transforming Selkirk Avenue. Transforming the Merchants Hotel into a place of learning has been part of a broader vision first imagined by Aboriginal Elders. For the North End community, what once seemed like a far too ambitious dream is soon to become a reality. The community was initially given hope when in April 2012 the Manitoba government purchased the hotel and closed its doors. Today, the Merchants fundraising committee inches closer to raising the final \$1.7 million required to ensure that this once seemingly impossible project comes to life. It will bring the community yet closer to realizing the dream of reclaiming Selkirk Avenue as a place of healing, learning and opportunity for Aboriginal people.

Merchants Corner will be a multi-faceted complex spread over seven city lots. It will feature 30 units of subsidized two and three bedroom rental units, with first preference given to students with children, thus removing an important barrier to educational success for many students. These units will help address the desperately short supply of low-income rental housing in the community, and will complement the integrated educational strategy that continues to develop on Selkirk Avenue.

In what is a unique partnership in Canada, the University of Winnipeg's Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies and CEDA-Pathways to Education - a North End high school support program - will share 9,000 square feet of space. The space will include classrooms, a computer room, a large common space, office space for UW and CEDA-Pathways staff, and a community space and coffee shop. The educational space will be fully shared and utilized throughout the day and evening: Urban and Inner-City Studies will schedule classes during the day; CEDA-Pathways to Education will utilize the space after classes finish.

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The fact that North End high school students are participating in an after-school program in a university space will serve to “normalize” the idea of attending university. So too will the fact that some forty percent of the university students in the building are Aboriginal and from the inner city. Merchants Corner will be right in the neighbourhood, making university something that will increasingly come to be seen as familiar and “normal,” rather than unfamiliar and distant, “intended for someone other than us.” Similar to other education initiatives on Selkirk Avenue, the architectural design of Merchants Corner and the pedagogy practiced by CEDA-Pathways to Education and UW’s Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies are strongly influenced by Aboriginal values and Aboriginal educational practices.

The educational space at Merchants Corner will be consciously designed in a “non-institutional” manner, and will represent and reflect Aboriginal traditions. It will feature space that is open and circular, and designed so as to promote maximum interaction between students, and faculty and staff. The environment will be warm and friendly and personalized. The complex will include a “community common space” where the community can gather for various purposes so that residents of the North End come to see the whole complex as “their place.” A small coffee shop will be located in the space, and will be operated by students, creating an employment-based learning opportunity.



The Premier of Manitoba, with Ministers and community leaders, announces to the crowd the contribution of the Province to the Merchants Corner project.

In the community common space a wide range of programming will be offered. For example, Frontier College, a well-established organization experienced in running literacy programs in

low-income and Aboriginal communities, will offer such programs to pre-schoolers and their parents, and programming for 13-16 year olds in the summers. The Winnipeg Public Library will offer programming in the community common space, providing a much-needed service to the community. This kind of integrated and strategic approach to education in the North End is needed because of the damage that has been and continues to be done by the process of colonization.

Colonization and Education

The colonization of Aboriginal people in Canada dates back to European contact. The Canadian government has a long and tarnished history of policies designed to destroy Aboriginal cultures and ways of being (Milloy 1999). Perhaps the most destructive of these was the residential school system, which forcibly removed Aboriginal children from their families, effectively incarcerated them in residential “schools” where abuse was common, they were denied the right to speak their languages and were taught to be ashamed of who they were as Indigenous people. The purpose, as was infamously described by one of its architects, was to “remove the Indian from the child” (Milloy 1999). The last residential school closed in 1996; the intergenerational damage to individuals and especially to families has been devastating for generations of Aboriginal people.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada was established in 2008 to gather the stories of residential school survivors as a means of healing and seeking a way to move forward. The TRC report titled *They Came for the Children* describes the experience of Aboriginal families who lost their children to residential schools. The report begins with a quote that cuts to the core of why Aboriginal people in Canada have, for generations, mistrusted the education system.

In order to educate the children properly we must separate them from their families. Some people may say that this is hard but if we want to civilize them we must do that. (Hector Langevin, Public Works Minister of Canada, 1883 as cited in TRC, 2012)

The residential school experience included countless cases of physical, mental, and sexual abuse: it left many not knowing how to parent and support their own children, setting in motion an intergenerational cycle of poverty and related problems. It also left many with a deep distrust and even fear of the formal education system.

There is now a significant body of research showing that the schooling experience for many Aboriginal learners continues to be negative (Huffman, 2008; Silver, 2006; TRC, 2012). For many the experience of residential schools has left grandparents and parents psychologically and spiritually damaged, passing on to their children their distrust of schools. This has resulted in a lack of engagement of many Aboriginal parents in their children’s education, a concern because parental engagement has been shown to be an important factor contributing to student success (Mackinnon, 2012). The continued use of Eurocentric content and teaching styles, a shortage of Aboriginal teachers, and the disbelief that education leads to a better life, lead many Aboriginal youth to drop out at an early age. Data for 2009/10 show that while more than 90

percent of students in suburban and more well-off Winnipeg neighbourhoods graduated high school within six years of entering grade 9, in Winnipeg's low-income inner city the comparable figure was 55 percent, and in some North End neighbourhoods it was closer to 25 percent (Brownell et al. 2012: 207). The effect has been high levels of illiteracy, absence of hope, and a perpetuation of poverty. It is this challenge that the education initiatives on Selkirk Avenue seek to address through a holistic intergenerational approach.

The Promise of Creative Educational Strategies

Peoples' lives will be changed by Merchants Corner. We know this is the case, because peoples' lives are already being changed by the innovative educational institutions—the University of Manitoba's Inner City Social Work Program; the Urban Circle Training Centre; the University of Winnipeg's Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies; the Makoonsag Intergenerational Childcare Centre and others—mainly located on the 500 block of Selkirk Avenue (Clare 2013; MacKinnon 2013; Silver 2013). They comprise what some are calling an emergent “North End Community Campus.” Through these initiatives we have learned a great deal about the power of intergenerational neighbourhood-based learning for individuals and families deeply affected by social and economic exclusion, the lasting damage of colonization and racialized poverty.

The experience we have seen typically unfolds as follows. First, someone in a family begins an educational program at one of the Selkirk Avenue institutions, enjoys it, and does well. That person feels better about herself or himself, and in a great many cases then moves into the paid labour force. This alone produces enormous societal benefits.

But then, as the result of that person's example, her/his cousin, or sister, or nephew may be encouraged to attend and they typically choose the institution that has worked well for their family member. This creates a “ripple effect” that produces positive outcomes for entire families and generations to follow, thereby ending the intergenerational cycle of poverty. One graduate and community leader described her personal experience and the ripple effect for her family:

Once one person graduates, boy does that open a door. It's huge! My youngest sister and my nephew went to school there so all together there were five of us that graduated from Urban Circle. My two sisters are in their last year at the Inner City Social Work program. My daughter has graduated and she's been working and my other daughter is on main campus and is hopefully getting into nursing in the Fall. So within a matter of ... seven years ... we will have five university degrees—every woman in my family will have a university degree. My granddaughter is graduating from grade 12 this year. She's talking about what university she's going to. My grandson who's 16 is talking about what he's going to do. It's the norm now. It's not just a dream (MacKinnon 2011, 233).

In addition to this “ripple effect,” there is a “trickle down” effect: when a parent is attending school, their children are more likely to succeed in school. Individuals benefit, families are strengthened, and in many cases graduates of the kinds of programs that comprise the North End

Community Campus want to “give back” to the communities from which they have come, so that communities benefit as well.

That a comprehensive, interconnected, intergenerational educational approach grounded in Aboriginal values can have a powerful impact is central to the vision for the North End Community Campus. This approach is built from the recognition that the damaging effects of colonization require new ‘decolonizing’ approaches designed to reverse, as much as is possible, the damaging effects of colonization

While not all education programs on Selkirk Avenue are exclusive to Aboriginal students, all are designed with Aboriginal students in mind. Programs operate from an understanding that the historical context of Aboriginal students has been horrific and the contemporary context continues to be oppressive and unjust. Educational strategies respond to the need for unique and flexible education approaches that draw attention to our colonial history while also creating a safe space to heal, learn and move forward. Selkirk Avenue and other inner-city programs increasingly operate from the understanding that improving the social and economic outcomes of urban Aboriginal people requires that decolonizing methods, holistically designed to support Aboriginal people along their journey must be integrated into programming. Given its history and current demography, it is no surprise that the North End, and in particular Selkirk Avenue, has become a hub for such an approach.

North End of Winnipeg – A complicated history of poverty, racism and resistance

The transformation that is now taking place on Selkirk Avenue is the most recent example of a community that is tough and resilient in spite of its many challenges. Just as it was at the turn of the century, Winnipeg is in many ways a segregated city.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s the North End of Winnipeg became home to large numbers of Eastern European immigrants who found work in the industries associated with the massive rail yards that physically divided the north and south ends of the city. In the North End, low wages, overcrowded housing and discrimination created difficult living conditions (Silver 2010). The south end of the city was home to the predominantly British political and business elite. After the Second World War those North End families who could afford to, moved to the suburbs, a process that continued through the 1970s, when de-industrialization began to remove large numbers of working class jobs. As people left the North End, housing prices declined. When Aboriginal people began arriving in Winnipeg from rural and northern First Nation communities to seek new opportunities, they moved into the North End where housing was least expensive. Many arrived damaged by the residential school experience, and just as jobs were leaving, they faced a wall of racism that continues today. As a result, the character of Winnipeg’s North End, and in particular the neighbourhoods surrounding Selkirk Avenue, continues to be poor, but today it is largely Aboriginal.

Selkirk Avenue is a symbol of the changes that have occurred, and that we hope will continue to occur in the North End. It developed as the thriving commercial heart of the North End in the first part of the twentieth century. But the majority of the Eastern European-owned retail stores and services have long since closed as the consequence of suburbanization. The Merchants

Hotel, once a thriving meeting place for business people, became in more recent years a centre for the growing illegal drug trade and street gang activity (Comack et al. 2013). But while violence and street gangs have increasingly been associated with the North End, there has also been a current of quiet resistance. It is this resistance and the vision behind it that has led to the transformation now taking place.

Education as the key to the future

The active presence of Aboriginal people in Winnipeg’s North End, and in particular that of Elders and youth, has led to a revived interest in cultural reclamation. In addition to Merchants Corner, Elders and others have been actively involved in the development of many programs including Urban Circle Training Centre, Makoonsag Intergenerational Children’s Centre, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc., (Ndiniwe), and Aboriginal Visioning for the North End. Youth have recently been mobilized through Aboriginal Youth Opportunities, which consists of Aboriginal youth “committed to representing ourselves in a positive way, sharing our gifts and bringing unity back to our community” (AYO nd).

The focus on formal but alternative education as a means toward Aboriginal self-determination started with the Urban Circle Training Centre (UCTC), which has inspired other educational programs to locate on Selkirk Avenue. The Elders of UCTC have slowly and methodically moved forward their vision to transform Selkirk Avenue into an Aboriginal space of learning, healing and development.

Also of great importance is that the provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) government has been sufficiently far-sighted and community-oriented to provide financial and other supports not only to UCTC, but to each of the Selkirk Avenue educational institutions described below. The emergence of the North End Community Campus on Selkirk Avenue has been and continues to be a genuine partnership between leaders in a low-income community, and a supportive government.



Street art on Selkirk Ave.

Urban Circle Training Centre

UCTC began in 1990 as a small training program for Aboriginal women on Stella Avenue, a few blocks from what would become its permanent home thirteen years later. After relocating several times, the Elders who led the non-profit board agreed in 2000 that it was time to find a permanent space, and strategically chose 519 Selkirk Avenue, which they saw as a space they could reclaim for UCTC, but also as a centre of learning and development for all Aboriginal people.

The vacant building that they redeveloped was a stone's throw from the Merchants Hotel, which was well known to UCTC as a damaging force in the community. But in keeping with their vision to reclaim the street, the problems associated with the Merchants Hotel didn't deter them. They believed it too would be reclaimed one day. UCTC hired a local architect to design a building aligned with their Indigenous values and beliefs, and opened their doors in 2003. The illegal and sometimes violent activity surrounding the Merchants Hotel remained a constant reminder of the damaging effects of our colonial history. But it also reminded them that there was much more work to do. UCTC became determined to "take back" the street. They were confident that one day the Merchants Hotel would be transformed into something positive.

They continued to develop a unique educational strategy rooted in the reclamation of Aboriginal cultures. Between 85 and 90 percent of their students graduate from the program and find work in the areas in which they have been trained—as health care aides, family support workers or educational assistants, for example. Eleanor Thompson, founder of Urban Circle, has calculated that moving people from social assistance through Urban Circle and into the paid labour force has saved Manitobans \$53.5 million since UCTC's inception (Silver 2013: 13). In addition to improved economic outcomes, UCTC graduates report having a newfound understanding and appreciation of who they are as Aboriginal people (MacKinnon 2013).

During this time, another Aboriginal inner city-focused education program, The University of Manitoba Inner City Social Work Program was looking for a new home. The vision and spirit of UCTC inspired them to look to Selkirk Avenue.

University of Manitoba Inner City Social Work Program (ICSWP)

The University of Manitoba's ICSWP is one of several ACCESS programs in Manitoba. ACCESS programs were introduced by the provincial government in the 1970s to provide opportunities for Manitobans with multiple barriers who would otherwise have difficulty succeeding in a post-secondary program. ACCESS programs have made a concerted effort to recruit, support and graduate Aboriginal people. The ICSWP program was designed specifically with inner city and Aboriginal students in mind, however for many years its home was outside of the inner city. In 2005 the ICSWP relocated to Selkirk Ave. in a new building also specially designed to reflect Aboriginal traditions. Like UCTC, the program integrates Indigenous teachings into its curriculum, and it too has been successful in its 30 years of existence, graduating more than 500 fully qualified social workers, many of whom work in the inner city communities where they grew up (Clare 2013).

Since joining UCTC on Selkirk Ave, the two programs have developed a strong relationship. It is common for UCTC graduates interested in pursuing social work to do so through the ICSWP, and the ICSWP often refers students interested in but not ready for their program to UCTC. This is an example of the collaboration and laddering approach to education that continues to develop on Selkirk Avenue.

Makoonsag Intergenerational Childcare Centre

The two programs also collaborated to build the Makoonsag Intergenerational Childcare Centre in response to the need identified by students, staff and board members. Makoonsag reflects the vision of Elder Stella Blackbird and other Elders at UCTC to integrate indigenous cultural teachings so that children could learn through interaction with Elders.

Makoonsag, a 52 space childcare centre adjacent to Urban Circle Training Centre, gives first preference to parents studying at one of the educational institutions on Selkirk Avenue. Most of their qualified staff are people of Aboriginal descent, and Elders play a significant role. Elder Stella Blackbird's vision, as described in the 2013 video documentary (Makoonsag 2013), was to develop a childcare centre that would integrate Indigenous ways of teaching children who were lost as a result of the residential school experience. Makoonsag would provide families with an opportunity to reclaim traditional child rearing practices by involving all generations and integrating cultural teachings. At the grand opening of Makoonsag in 2012, which took place in a vacant lot now transformed into a beautiful outdoor learning space for Makoonsag's children, Michael Champagne, a young Aboriginal activist pointed next door to the recently purchased Merchants Hotel stating "that building is under new management ... we did that for you kids ... this is just the beginning" (Makoonsag 2013).

Murdo Scribe Centre

Murdo Scribe Centre is another important component of the Selkirk Avenue education hub. It is located across the street from Urban Circle Training Centre and Makoonsag. The Centre is owned by the North End Community Renewal Corporation (NECRC)—a driving force behind the acquisition and redevelopment of Merchants Corner—and is home to the Government of Manitoba Aboriginal Education Directorate. While the Directorate does not provide direct service to the community, its presence on Selkirk Avenue is important. By relocating to Selkirk Avenue, the Directorate and the Province have given a strong signal of the important role that education has in Winnipeg's North End. Murdo Scribe Centre has meeting space available to the community, and staff members of the Directorate are involved in many education-related initiatives in the community. Unlike many government offices, Murdo Scribe is seen as a welcoming place for community groups and educators who often hold events, meetings and classes there.

University of Winnipeg Urban and Inner City Studies Program

The University of Winnipeg's Department of Urban and Inner City Studies moved to Selkirk Avenue in 2010. Our purpose was to encourage inner city residents who are perfectly capable of succeeding in university, but who are unlikely to attend if it means going out of their neighbourhood to the main downtown campus.



Urban and Inner City Studies students attend a class on Urban Poverty and Policy.

The Department has drawn heavily upon the pioneering work of Urban Circle and the Inner City Social Work program in designing our approach to post-secondary education. Of primary importance is location. It is fundamentally important that we are located in the North End, on Selkirk Avenue, where the students we seek to attract are more likely to feel comfortable.

In addition, we offer: small classes (maximum size, 25 students); a warm and friendly environment in which faculty and staff interact closely with students; a curriculum that is rooted in the inner city and colonial experience; tailored supports including both academic tutoring and emotional supports that recognize the challenges arising from poverty and colonization; and a decolonizing pedagogy that places the Aboriginal experience at the centre of the learning process, and values students' experiential knowledge.

The results have been very positive, and include a steadily growing enrolment, large numbers of Aboriginal and inner city students and many examples of personal transformation. Approximately half of our students are middle class students from the main campus, many of whom also undergo a transformation in their worldviews as they are exposed to inner city realities and as they meet and develop relationships with Aboriginal students who have grown up in the context of racialized poverty. Many of our graduates end up working in the inner city with one of the many very creative and effective community-based organizations that have emerged in the past quarter century. Our Aboriginal and inner city students typically have a desire to "give back" to the communities in which they have grown up, and the combination of experiential and academic knowledge that they bring to their work is especially effective.

Our partnership with CEDA-Pathways to Education is adding further to the intergenerational learning model on Selkirk Ave.

CEDA Pathways to Education

The Community Education Development Association (CEDA) Pathways to Education program was established in 2010. “Pathways” is a community-based after-school program supported by and modeled after Pathways to Education Canada. Its aim is to provide North End youth the social, financial and emotional supports they need to complete high school and transition successfully into post-secondary education or the labour market.

CEDA Pathways has been involved in the planning of Merchants Corner and will share space with UW’s Urban and Inner City Studies. Some UW students currently volunteer as tutors in the CEDA-Pathways program and a significant number of CEDA-Pathways staff are graduates of, or students in, Urban and Inner-City Studies. We expect these numbers will grow when we co-locate at Merchants Corner. Bringing Pathways students together with university students who have grown up in the North End is important because it normalizes university for students who have believed it to be out of their reach. CEDA-Pathways staff also spend time in junior high schools, creating a greater sense of North End education as an integrated network, leading many students to post-secondary studies on Selkirk Avenue.

Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc

While not solely focused on education, Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc., (Ndiniwe) is another important program on Selkirk Avenue contributing to improving the lives of North End youth. It was established as a safe house for youth in 1993 and later expanded to provide recreational, cultural and educational opportunities for vulnerable youth in the North End, with a focus on Aboriginal youth. Ndiniwe provides programming through a youth resource centre located directly across the street from the University of Manitoba Inner City Social Work Program. It provides formal high school education for vulnerable youth as well as a youth care training program. Ndiniwe reports that through this program, “50 graduates have gained the skills necessary to smoothly transition to the youth care field or further attain their educational goals” (Ndiniwe 2014). For some, these educational goals may include pursuing a university education through the UW Urban and Inner City Studies program or the UM Inner City Social Work Program.

What communities and governments can do when they work together

The initiatives described in this paper are central to the development of Selkirk Avenue as a space for Aboriginal people to reclaim their identities, learn and grow. There are other initiatives located on Selkirk Avenue or nearby that are also important to mention. For example, Winnipeg School Division’s Songide’Ewin offers an alternative education program for grades 9-12 students on Selkirk Avenue through Niji Mahkwa school located a few short blocks away. Thunderwing, a new initiative funded by the Manitoba government and involving other levels of government and several community organizations in the North End, has identified education as a central focus for improving social and economic outcomes in the North End. Morningstar is a new program that provides “wrap around” supports for students attending nearby R.B. Russell High School, many of whom are also CEDA Pathways participants.

The dream to reclaim Selkirk Avenue as a place of learning, and cultural reclamation is coming closer to being fully realized. The imminent transformation of Merchants Corner is the most recent example of what is possible through determination and collaboration at the community level. But it also shows what is possible when a government is prepared to work with members of low-income communities in the interests of long-term change.

From the beginning, the provincial NDP government has supported the community vision in many ways. Its significant financial support has been the impetus for other governments, philanthropic organizations and private donors to come on board. Without this support much of what we now see on Selkirk Avenue would not exist, nor would Merchants Corner be possible. The Manitoba government has demonstrated its understanding and support for a community vision by allowing the community to take the lead in determining what is to be done, and then investing heavily in the educational initiatives that have emerged. They, too, understand that these investments will contribute significantly to building a better future not only for the North End, but for all of Winnipeg. Over time, such initiatives will make post-secondary education as common for individuals and families in the North End as it is elsewhere in the city, and high school graduation rates will steadily improve, leading to better social and economic outcomes.

The development taking place on Selkirk Avenue represents a carefully considered and *strategic* approach to positive social change in a low-income neighbourhood. The combination of innovative educational approaches, from pre-school to adult learners, plus student housing and student-centred childcare, all of which will be strongly influenced by Aboriginal values, is a strategy that works.

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