



Little Red Spirit, Aboriginal Head Start Program

March 2016

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NURTURING CAPACITY
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Preface

Nurturing Capacity: Building Community Success

Indspire's *K-12 Institute* is focused on dramatically increasing high school completion rates among Indigenous students by building strong foundations in their K-12 education. Through various programs, resources and events, the Institute fosters collaboration between educators, communities, and others to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

Indspire conducts research to identify and document educational best practices from across Canada and shares these successful practices through the *Indspire's K-12 Institute*. Indspire also champions Indigenous approaches to education, those that honour Indigenous culture, values, and worldviews.

Project Abstract

Little Red Spirit, Aboriginal Head Start is a community-based early childhood education program for Indigenous children between the ages of 3 and 6. Programming is based on six key components: culture and language, education, health promotion, nutrition, social support, and parental involvement. In addition to interviews with parents, teachers and program staff, the evaluation methodology includes an experimental design that assesses the academic outcomes (math, reading, writing, and school attendance) of former Little Red Spirit students currently attending Grades 1-6 at Dufferin School in Winnipeg. The findings of this evaluation reveal that former Little Red Spirit students exhibited higher attendance levels and more favourable teacher-rated math, reading, and writing assessments compared to a grade-matched group of peers who had not attended the program. Furthermore, current Little Red Spirit participants also demonstrated a high degree of positive change with regard to their academic and social development skills since joining the program.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to express gratitude to Cathy Howes and staff at Little Red Spirit Aboriginal Head Start program, as well as Wayne Wyke, Principal at Dufferin School in Winnipeg, for their generous support during the evaluation study. A special thanks is due to Maria Morrison for her excellent research assistance and Kris Pikel for his excellent editing and invaluable feedback. I also wish to express special thanks to the children's parents and guardians who agreed to participate and share their insights into the Little Red Spirit program.

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Executive Summary

For 20 years now, Little Red Spirit Aboriginal Head Start has offered an early childhood education program for Indigenous children between the ages of 3 and 6 in the Broadway Neighbourhood Centre (hereinafter referred to as Little Red Spirit-Broadway). Each year, the program serves about 35-40 Indigenous families living in the immediate West Broadway area and other surrounding neighbourhoods in Winnipeg. Similarly, Little Red Spirit is also offered to another 20 children at its satellite location in Dufferin School in the inner-city Centennial neighbourhood (hereinafter referred to as Little Red Spirit-Dufferin). These are high-poverty areas that have relatively high levels of inadequate housing, unemployment, crime and gang activity, among other social inequities. Not only must Indigenous youth contend with the enormous economic disadvantages associated with poverty, they also experience higher school dropout and pushout rates than children and youth from more affluent neighbourhoods. Little Red Spirit is based on six key program components that are central to mitigating some of these disadvantages: culture and language, education, health promotion, nutrition, social support, and parental involvement. Thus, this program is able to address the unique circumstances of families in these neighbourhoods because it recognizes that children's schooling and learning challenges cannot be addressed in isolation.

The program is primarily funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, and runs from September to June each year. Each day is structured into two parts: a morning program running from 9-11:30 which integrates the Ojibway language and an afternoon program from 1-3:30 which integrates the Cree language (Ojibway in the morning and afternoon at Dufferin). There are no fees to attend, and transportation (i.e. pick up and drop off) is provided within limited geographic boundaries.

This evaluation was conducted through the use of qualitative and quantitative methods and used an experimental design to address some intermediate-term impacts on student outcomes. This was made possible through being granted access to data on the academic achievements of former students (experimental group), and comparing their outcomes to a group of their peers (control group) at Dufferin School in Winnipeg's inner city. The results strongly indicated that Little Red Spirit is an invaluable program that helps prepare children for school and assists parents in playing an active role in their child's growth and development.

The evaluation findings revealed that former Little Red Spirit students had higher rates of attendance and more favourable teacher-rated math, reading, and writing assessments compared to the control group. The students were also rated favourably by their teachers on confidence in learning, social skills, and 78% of former Little Red Spirit students also had a parent or guardian who was usually or almost always supportive and involved in their child's education. Furthermore, current Little Red Spirit participants were also rated as showing a high level of positive change with regard to their academic and social development skills since joining the program.

Little Red Spirit, Aboriginal Head Start Program

Context

Little Red Spirit is a community-based early childhood education program for children between the ages of 3 and 6. Its programming is based on six components: culture and language, health promotion, nutrition, education, social support, and parental involvement. The program runs from September to June each year, Monday to Thursday, with each day being divided into two blocs: a morning program running from 9-11:30 which integrates the Ojibway language and an afternoon program from 1-3:30 which integrates the Cree language. There are no fees for attending, and transportation (i.e. pick up and drop off) is provided within limited geographic boundaries (e.g. primarily in West Broadway and some adjacent neighbourhoods). Similarly, Little Red Spirit is also offered at its satellite location in Dufferin School in the inner-city Centennial neighbourhood, which integrates Ojibway into both, the morning and afternoon programs. The satellite program serves approximately 20 Indigenous families.

Table 1: Context in Which the Project is Being Realized

	Description	N=	%
Indigenous language groups	Ojibway and Cree		
Province and region	Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada		
Number of students the organization serves each year:			
Little Red Spirit-Broadway		38	
Little Red Spirit-Dufferin		19	
Percentage of students who are Indigenous			100
Development focus	Early years intervention and primary school years		
Years in operation:			
Little Red Spirit-Broadway		20	
Little Red Spirit-Dufferin		9	
Board members who are Indigenous			90
Average number of people the organization serves each year	Students and parents or guardians	110+	
Category of Indigenous educational practice applies to this project	Indigenous ways of knowing; experiential, hands-on learning; culturally-based (Seven Sacred Teachings and Medicine Wheel); storytelling; formal and informal knowledge.		
Learning Environment	School readiness such as reading, writing, numeracy, language; reclaiming Indigenous language and traditions through storytelling.		

The objectives of the program are clearly highlighted in their literature. Specifically the program aims to:

- To facilitate the social, educational, cultural, mental, physical, and spiritual development of each child and their family in the program;
- Improve the skills of the children involved in preparation for school;
- Establish parental involvement in the education of their children;
- Foster an understanding of Aboriginal culture, language, and spirituality;
- Access a community network of resources that will contribute to the development of the child and their family.

Little Red Spirit's sponsoring agency is Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Inc. (Ma Mawi agency), and the program is funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). Parental involvement is crucial to the success of this program, and Little Red Spirit is guided by a parent advisory committee that is comprised of the children's parents and guardians. Some parents participate as members of a 9-person board of directors, which also includes representatives at Ma Mawi agency, an Elder, and the Executive Director at Little Red Spirit. Moreover, given Little Red Spirit's Indigenous-related mandate, it is significant to note that approximately 90% of members of the board of directors and parent advisory committee are also Indigenous peoples, which is crucial for the program's ability to meet its students' needs.

Geography of the Area (socio-economic characteristics):

The community surrounding both Little Red Spirit programs (Broadway and Dufferin satellite) is increasingly becoming more diverse as a result of the rapidly growing population of urban Aboriginal peoples - primarily First Nations and Métis, and new Canadians – who together represent the fastest growing populations in both the immediate neighbourhoods and Canada as a whole. Indeed, Indigenous people represent more than 11% of Winnipeg's population and account for 20.2% of inner-city residents, while new Canadians comprise almost one quarter of inner-city residents (City of Winnipeg, 2015a-b). Despite the local cultural richness and diversity, these surrounding neighbourhoods are high-poverty areas that struggle with inadequate housing, unemployment, and relatively high level of crime and gang activity, among other social inequities. Moreover, Winnipeg is located in a province (Manitoba) that is frequently referred to as the child poverty capital of Canada, as 62% of First Nation children live below the poverty line compared to only 15% of non-Indigenous children (Macdonald & Wilson, 2013). In this city, almost 70% of Indigenous children under 6 years of age live in families with incomes below the low-income cut-off (LICO) poverty line (Winnipeg Harvest, 2015). Not only do Indigenous youth face enormous economic disadvantages associated with poverty, but they also experience higher school dropout and pushout rates than children and youth in more affluent neighbourhoods.

Recent statistical analyses in Manitoba have indicated that high school completion rates in the poorest urban families (i.e. lowest income quintile) could be as low as 55.3%, which is alarmingly lower than the 98.5% completion rate recorded in the highest income quintile (Brownell et al., 2012, p. 207). In Winnipeg, the students failing to complete high school frequently come from Indigenous families who face numerous barriers in the educational system such as an absence of cultural content and high levels of distrust resulting from the legacy of residential schools. Likewise, in Winnipeg, a large gap persists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people regarding university education completion rates – 12.3% versus 30.4% respectively (Statistics Canada 2013a, 2013b, 2010; Hallett, 2006). Thus, this

disparity results in the potential loss of economic and social contributions from a growing segment of the community.

Families of Indigenous youth in high poverty areas can barely afford the basic needs of food and shelter, let alone a preschool education for their children. This economic fact presents an area of great need, especially considering that a 2010 Environics Aboriginal Peoples Survey cited education as being a top priority for urban Aboriginal families (Environics Institute, 2010). These challenges are profoundly significant because, as a percentage of all Aboriginals in Winnipeg, the number of Aboriginal youth under the age of 18 is more than double that of their non-Aboriginal counterparts (35.4% and 17.2%, respectively) (Statistics Canada, 2013a, 2013b). Given the disproportionately high number of Aboriginal youth in Winnipeg, Little Red Spirit head start programming will become even more important to the inner-city community in the future as it will help young Indigenous people prepare for school and lay the groundwork for future socio-economic advancement.

Brief History of Project

Head Start programs began in the United States during the mid-1960s as initiatives that attempted to combat poverty by addressing the developmental needs of disadvantaged preschool children living in high-poverty families. Three decades later, on May 29, 1995, the Honourable Diane Marleau, Federal Minister of Health, announced the launch of the Aboriginal Head Start Initiative in Canada. She asserted that:

“The initiative fulfills the government's commitment, as stated in the Red Book, *Creating Opportunity*, to develop an early intervention program for Aboriginal children and their families who live in urban centres and large northern communities, in consultation with Aboriginal groups in Canada.” (Government of Canada, 1998)

Following this announcement, consultations addressing how Aboriginal Head Start would be designed and implemented occurred in 25 cities and towns, and involved the participation of approximately 300 organizations across Canada, including government stakeholders and Indigenous organizations.

In Manitoba, this initiative evolved into fourteen Aboriginal Head Start programs with four being located in the City of Winnipeg.¹ Funded through the Public Health Agency of Canada, the community-based Little Red Spirit Aboriginal Head Start program has been operating out of the Broadway Neighbourhood Centre for the past 20 years, making it one of the longest running programs in the province. About 9 years ago, Little Red Spirit expanded to include a satellite location at Dufferin School in the inner-city Centennial neighbourhood of Winnipeg. This expansion has allowed Little Red Spirit to increase its capacity, and it now serves over 50 Indigenous families annually. The satellite location serves approximately 20 of these Indigenous families. Although it operates independently from Dufferin School (and the Winnipeg School Division), the advantage of locating a satellite program in a community school is that it can leverage the school's resources to its maximum advantage, such as the gym, a parenting outreach program, and a family room.

¹ Since then, the Aboriginal Head Start programs have reorganised into 13 programs and 8 satellite locations, including Little Red Spirit-Dufferin.

The program is unique in that it addresses multiple challenges that stand in the way of family success and well-being through a range of holistic supports and learning opportunities. While there is a significant focus on ensuring the school readiness of Indigenous children between the ages of 3 and 6, the overall mandate of the program involves six components that include:

- culture and language
- education
- parental and family involvement
- health promotion
- nutrition
- social support

The program is largely based on a student- and family-centred model. Strong partnerships with parents are integral to the program's success, as Little Red Spirit's philosophy is based on the premise that a child's first teacher is their parents. Little Red Spirit deviates somewhat from standard Aboriginal Head Start programs in that a broader connection to community resources is made in order to support parents, and supports tend to be specific to each family's experiences and needs. For instance, program staff frequently advocate on behalf of parents with government agencies, such as employment and income assistance, child and family services, housing agencies, and they also help parents connect to resources in the community (e.g. a speech or behavioural therapist for their child, medical practitioners, and employment agencies, among others). Moreover, the program places a huge emphasis on parental learning, training opportunities and personal supports in order to help them identify and reach their own goals as well as to better nurture their children. Little Red Spirit's governance is parent-driven in that the program is guided by a parent advisory committee made up of the children's parents and/or guardians and staff. In addition, some parents also participate on the board of directors, which is made up of representatives at Ma Mawi, an Elder, and the Executive Director of Little Red Spirit. Approximately 90% of members of the board of directors and the parent advisory committee are Indigenous peoples.

At the Little Red Spirit-Broadway location, the program uses a space of approximately 2,000 square feet, in addition to having access to the centre's gym and outside playground. The Dufferin satellite location occupies a large-sized classroom in the school, which includes kitchen facilities, and the students also have access to the school's gym facilities and outdoor playground. The program staff are both educated and dedicated to improving their ability to better serve the program's participants. Some staff are certified childcare workers with five holding certificates in an early childhood education (ECE), while a few others hold university degrees, for example, Social Work or a Bachelor of Arts. Most significantly, however, is the fact that all staff participate in regular training that focuses on child development and assists their continued efforts to create an environment that nurtures the children's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual growth.

Activities Accomplished- Output Statistics from the Annual Operating Report

Operating statistics were only available for the Little Red Spirit-Broadway location. The age range of children attending the program is 3-6 years old, and the ongoing a wait list of approximately 70 children indicates that the school is operating at full capacity. In 2014-2015, program departures were minimal (approximately six children) with two-thirds of these departures (n=4) being related to child care issues or problems accessing the program (e.g. transportation). In staff and parent interviews, we determined that the children's daily structure involves a number of academic activities such as learning to master skills in reading, writing, numeracy and language. The daily cultural activities emphasize the Medicine Wheel tool and the Seven Sacred Teachings and include smudging during circle time, cultural games and songs, drumming, arts and crafts, practicing letters of the alphabet, and learning words (e.g. names of animals) and numbers in Ojibway or Cree. The children are also taught safety rules, personal hygiene, and the benefits of eating healthy foods and snacks.

Table 2: Little Red Spirit Program-Broadway: Registrations, Graduates, and Departures (2013-2015)

Registered children	2014-2015	2013-2014
First Nation	33	30
Inuit	1	1
Métis	0	1
Non-Status	2	3
Total registered children	36	35
Program graduates	12	0
Program departures	6	4

Contact with parents is a very significant part of the program. In fact, in 2014-2015, the staff had 47,902 contacts with parents regarding numerous issues, which are identified in Table 3. As we know from the Little Red Spirit program philosophy, parents are thought of as the child's first teacher, and Table 4 demonstrates the program's emphasis on active parental engagement in their children's education.

Table 3: Little Red Spirit-Broadway Location: Operating Statistics 2013-2015

Reason for contacting parent or guardian	2014-2015*	2013-2014*
Attendance issues	5,314	5,463
Transportation	4,523	5,059
Illness/health issues	2,092	2,367
Parental involvement	4,073	4,090
Referrals	7,628	9,111
Educational opportunities for parents	3,269	3,505
Schedules	4,362	4,027
Upcoming special events	5,412	5,867
Board meetings	1,354	1,481
Parent advisory meetings	1,833	1,531
Other (summer programming; housing, food, clothing issues; Child and Family Services; income assistance; etc.)	8,042	12,778
Total contacts	47,902	55,279
*frequently two or more staff may contact a parent or guardian on any particular issue, thus inflating the number of contacts. Staff also conducted home visits 162 times (72 times in 2013-2014).		

Table 4: Little Red Spirit-Broadway: Operating Statistics 2013-2015

Reason for Parent Involvement and Participation as Volunteers in Little Red Spirit	2014-2015	2013-2014
Orientation session at start of the school year	235	342
Serve as a bus monitor	841	1,171
Food preparation (lunches, snacks, special events)	3,177	3,062
Storytelling	171	188
Participant in a training session or a workshop	2,344	2,590
Special events	3,339	3,412
Craft sessions or craft-making workshops	1,775	1,907
Parent committee meetings (n=37 meetings)	912	1,016
Board meetings	205	304
Clean-up activities	3,323	3,803
Fundraising activities	614	1,302
Activities/interactions with children	5,852	2,956
Other (administrative assistance, shopping trips, graduation preparation, etc.)	1,142	1,078
Total parent/guardian contacts	23,930	23,131

In 2014-2015, parents took part in several training sessions and workshops that included the following topics:

- Nutrition workshops and sessions such as Healthy Eating, Food Talk, Learn to Bake
- Sewing Club
- Parenting and the importance of routines
- Healthy Living; fitness classes such as Zumba and yoga; walking club; self-care workshops on safer sex, stress management, positive affirmations, body image; and spa day
- Sessions on Goal Setting and Dream Boarding
- Christmas on a Budget
- First Aid and CPR

Workshops in the previous year (2013-2014) included family budgeting and healthy meal planning, diabetes awareness, drum making, a session on bullying, family violence sessions, and the Nobody's Perfect parenting program which examined parenting styles, how to build high self-esteem in children, and other related topics.

To further support and assist the families, Little Red Spirit staff also made contact with numerous government and other community agencies in Winnipeg, such as:

- Aboriginal and other community agencies/organizations (e.g. Ma Mawi)
- Businesses (e.g. Staples, storage companies, Canada Inns)
- Charities (e.g. United Way)
- Child and Family Services
- Community kitchens
- Educational institutions (e.g. community schools such as Dufferin School, Mulvey School; Red River College)
- Family resources in the community, day cares, early childhood resources
- Food banks and clothing depots
- Health organizations
- Libraries and other literacy organizations
- Mental health agencies
- Municipality: City of Winnipeg
- Police and other justice system contacts
- Provincial housing providers
- Recreation centres (e.g. Broadway Neighbourhood Centre)
- Women's shelters/crisis centres

In addition to the above output statistics, 10 individuals volunteered each year (2013-2015). These volunteers spent 19 hours in 2013-2014, and 32 hours in 2014-2015 introducing the children to the joys of storytelling using both the written and oral traditions.

The staff also undergo regular training in first aid/CPR, food handling, cultural teachings, self-care workshops, a health and wellness workshop, Trauma Informed Care (how to integrate a trauma-informed perspective in the workplace), and Vicarious Trauma (trauma exposure responses). Staff also

participate in annual curriculum meetings, Individual Education Plan (IEP) workshops, development testing training, Academic Communication Skills training, the Respect Children with Diverse Cultures program (an accredited training program at Red River College), a meeting to review of policies and procedures, strategic planning sessions, and smart board training.

Logic Model

The logic model is based on the six program components, namely: culture and language, education, parental and family involvement, health promotion, nutrition, and social support.

Table 5 Logic Model Used for the Project

	Planned Work
Inputs	<p>Staff resources (a primarily Indigenous staff of 10 employees): 1 Executive Director, 4 Early Childhood Educators (ECEs), 1 educational assistant/aide, 1 cultural adviser; 1 bus driver, 1 family community outreach coordinator, 1 parent leadership training coordinator. Other human resources include janitorial/maintenance staff at the Broadway and Dufferin locations, support staff at the sponsoring agency (Ma Mawi), parent volunteers, parent board members, and advisory committee members. In addition, the agency uses the services of 10 other volunteers.</p> <p>Other inputs include the facilities at the Broadway Neighbourhood Centre and Dufferin School satellite location, including gym facilities and playground equipment; educational supplies required to deliver programming; food and kitchen equipment and supplies; laundry equipment and supplies; cleaning supplies; a van for transporting families to and from the Broadway location; school infrastructure at the Dufferin School program location; funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada.</p>
Strategies/ major activities	<p>Program Components:</p> <p>Educational program: The program emphasizes early childhood development with a focus on nurturing the child’s physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and social development. Thus, staff in the preschool program focus on enhancing children’s reading, writing, and numeracy skills, gross and fine motor skills, language skills, cooking skills, group-based games, phonetics, and puzzles. The staff also support children in developing social skills such as playing well with others, sharing, good manners, and expressing needs and feelings in healthy ways.</p> <p>Culture and language: Staff in the preschool program teach the Aboriginal languages of Ojibway and Cree to the children; the physical environment embodies culture; a cultural adviser works on staff, and Elders are also invited to participate in programming (e.g. to lead traditional healing circles or ceremonies); children smudge on a daily basis, participate in traditional dances, storytelling, traditional songs/singing, arts and crafts; children’s and parents’ knowledge of the Medicine Wheel tool and Seven Sacred Teachings is enhanced; traditional meals and snacks are prepared in the kitchen. Indigenous cultural values are applied to all aspects of Little Red Spirit programming and governance.</p>

	<p>Parent and family involvement: Parents act as supervisors and participants during field trips and outings such as sweats and pow-wow ceremonies; parents rotate as bus monitors, contribute to classroom activities, participate on the parent advisory committee or as a member of the Board of Directors, and assist with program policy development; parents do fundraising, clean-up activities, and food and snack preparation. The staff provide parents with learning opportunities and personal development through regular workshops and training sessions.</p> <p>Health promotion: parents are provided with information on immunizations and lice control; parents are provided with opportunities to participate in diabetes education, non-violent crisis intervention, and the Nobody’s Perfect parenting workshops; Parents are also encouraged to improve their health and well-being through workshops on healthy cooking and eating, self-care, and fitness classes such as yoga and Martial Arts. The program staff also encourages/organizes physical activities for families.</p> <p>Good dental hygiene is encouraged in the program, and an oral health professional (i.e. a dental assistant from the Healthy Smiles program) comes to the program every 3 months to conduct dental cleanings, fluoride treatments, and examinations. Program staff support families by connecting them to other resources such as vision and/or hearing assessments for their child.</p> <p>Nutrition: The Aboriginal Food Guide and Canada Good Guide are used to help parents understand the nutritional needs of their children, including the effects of nutrition on a child’s ability to learn; children participate in cooking and baking activities; traditional foods and snacks are prepared in the centre’s kitchen; staff and parents participate in group food shopping trips and budgeting exercises (e.g. buying healthy foods on a budget). Little Red Spirit supports families to become members of the ‘Good Food Club’, in which they purchase local food at discount prices (mostly fresh fruit and vegetables).</p> <p>Social support: Parents’/guardians’ awareness is raised regarding community resources such as residential housing supports; availability of income assistance and other financial supports; staff assist in making referrals when the need arises. Informal supports are offered during the summer months such as trips to the beach, home visits, and other outings.</p>
	<p>Intended Results</p>
<p>Outputs</p>	<p>Immediate Countable Results</p> <p>Enrolment: 38 children registered at the Broadway location (Dufferin location: 19 children); attendance rate; number of program departures; number of graduations; number of home visits; number of children on the wait list for admission; number of agency contacts in the community (e.g. income assistance, child and family services, the sponsoring agency Ma Mawi, etc.); number of staff training sessions; number of volunteer hours, board meetings, and parent advisory committee meetings.</p>

	<p>Parents become full participants in the school by volunteering their time, attending workshops, and community events (e.g. pow wow ceremonies and others): number of parent contacts; number of hours and type of parent volunteering; number of learning opportunities provided to parents (workshops, training sessions, etc.) and number of participants.</p>
<p>Outcomes (related to the objectives/mission of the program and six program components)</p>	
<p>Short-term outcomes</p>	<p>Short-term (2-3 years when the child is attending Little Red Spirit)</p> <p>Education: children learn numeracy, reading, writing skills to prepare them for kindergarten and/or Grade1; children improve their fine and gross motor skills; children become confident learners; children learn independence; children develop a positive outlook about school and learning new skills; children have strong social development indicators (e.g. plays fair, takes turns, is less shy, follows teacher’s instructions, expresses needs and feelings in positive ways).</p> <p>Culture and language: children gain knowledge of (and speak) words in their traditional language (Ojibway or Cree) and gain awareness of their cultural traditions; children internalize Indigenous culture and demonstrate evidence of pride in their identity; family is engaged with the Indigenous community.</p> <p>Parental and family involvement: parents become more involved in the program; parents interact with their child more frequently; the program helps some parents to maintain employment while their children are being cared for in a safe and caring environment. By participating in program governance (parent advisory committee and board of directors), parents also build self-confidence and assertiveness skills.</p> <p>Health promotion and nutrition: children internalize good health habits such as brushing their teeth regularly, washing their hands, and a willing to eat healthy foods; parents have more knowledge of parenting issues and awareness of their child’s nutritional needs; parents increase their awareness about family budgeting and the benefits of cooking nutritional meals, child health issues such as vision and dental care for their children, as well as community resources that are made available to them; parents practice their cooking skills, and the family eats healthy meals more frequently.</p> <p>Social support: parents have expanded their social network and emotional support system; families make use of community resources; families participate in summer outings and field trips, as well as community events that involve other Indigenous families.</p>
<p>Intermediate term outcomes</p>	<p>Intermediate term (3 years and longer, after the child leaves the program)</p> <p>The children are ready for school insofar as their numeracy, reading, writing and language skills are adequate to meet requirements of public school; the child is a confident learner, socially adept, physically active, and has internalized cultural pride/is proud of his or her identity; the entire family has a sense of cultural pride; the family has a positive attitude about healthy eating and healthy living, and actively incorporates these ideals into their daily lives; the program contributes to positive outcomes for parents such as improved parenting capacity, as they continue</p>

	to be their children’s first teachers and to be involved in their children’s education; parents are empowered to pursue their own personal goals including education and employment; improved income self-sufficiency of families; families experience positive outcomes with government agencies such as Child and Family Services; families have stable housing arrangements; there are positive spillover effects in the community, as more families become aware of and wish to have their children participate in the Little Red Spirit program.
Ultimate goals or impact	<p>Long-term (the child’s educational and life outcomes) Throughout their years of schooling, Little Red Spirit children’s math, reading, writing, language, and social skills exceed those of children who did not attend program; the program generates resilient children that can advocate on their own behalf, and children who have a high probability of graduating from elementary school at or above grade level; positive spillover effects are passed on to siblings and other family members.</p> <p>Little Red Spirit participants graduate from high school and have opportunities to pursue post-secondary education; children pursue a healthy lifestyle that includes a strong cultural component.</p> <p>Social impacts: the child is a contributing member to society; Little Red Spirit has helped to create strong youth leadership in the Winnipeg Indigenous community; community capacity/social capital expands in high-poverty areas of Winnipeg; the Little Red Spirit program becomes the hub of the local community and inner-city schools.</p>

Performance Indicators and Measures

Some of the key performance indicators that were identified earlier in the section regarding activities accomplished — including Tables 2, 3, and 4 — show that the outputs were relatively consistent over a two-year period. The variables listed in these tables primarily capture program outputs such as the number of parents participating in the program and reasons for contact with them.

However, in order to measure program success in relation to its list of objectives, we need to know whether or not the children who attended the Little Red Spirit program in past years have demonstrated positive academic outcomes and social development over time. As will be shown in the next section, the most meaningful way to measure success is to construct an experimental design that compares a group of students who attended Little Red Spirit in past years (experimental group) to their current grade-matched peers (control group). To accomplish this task, the evaluator received the cooperation of the teaching staff for Grades 1-6 at Dufferin School in the Winnipeg School Division. Nine homeroom teachers in this grade range currently have between 3-7 former Little Red Spirit students in their homeroom. If there are statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups on a number of measures – for instance, math, reading, writing assessments, and attendance records – we can attribute these positive academic outcomes to Little Red Spirit with a reasonable degree of certainty. In addition, if teachers are asked to assess Little Red Spirit participants on a list of social development skills compared to their grade-matched peers, this may provide further evidence of positive student outcomes. The ultimate measure of academic success will be whether or not there is a

significant improvement in the rate at which students graduate from high school and go on to participate in post-secondary programs. Unfortunately, this data will not be available for many years to come.

With regard to current registrants in Little Red Spirit, program activities are deemed successful if the evaluation results reveal that children are happy to come to the program each day. Another indicator of success is if parents are satisfied with their interactions with staff, and whether or not they would recommend the program to other families in their neighbourhood or social circle. In addition, Little Red Spirit teaching staff were asked to identify measurable changes in the children's school readiness and social development skills since joining the program through a series of Likert Scale statements, and parents were given an opportunity during semi-structured in-person interviews to describe the ways in which the program has supported them. If there are few discrepancies between parents' interview answers and how staff describes the program, this may be deemed another measure of outcomes.

Evaluation Framework – Methodology

Little Red Spirit (LRS) - Broadway and Dufferin Locations

The Executive Director of Little Red Spirit Aboriginal Head Start, Cathy Howes, agreed to have the Little Red Spirit program evaluated at their primary location at 185 Young Street (Broadway Neighbourhood Centre) in Winnipeg. The staff at the Dufferin location also agreed to participate, although fewer parents were available for an interview, as many of them are employed full-time. Given that the primary focus of the evaluation was to assess the academic and developmental outcomes of children who participated in Little Red Spirit, including former students, data collection instruments were directed at the children's parents and guardians, teaching and program staff, as well as Grade 1-6 homeroom teachers at Dufferin School.

Responsibility for setting up interviews: Cathy Howes was responsible for setting up interviews with all parents, guardians and staff, and the program's cultural adviser and bus driver. The evaluator and a graduate student research assistant administered the qualitative and quantitative measurement instruments shown in Table 6.

Interviewed staff (in-person interviews with 8 staff at Broadway location and 2 staff at Dufferin) included:

- 1 Executive Director (ECE III, B.A. in Psychology and Development Studies)
- 6 Early Childhood Educators (ECEs), educational assistants/aides, and a Cultural Adviser
- 1 Family Community Outreach Coordinator (Bachelor in Social Work)
- 1 Parent Leadership Training Coordinator (Red River College diploma – Family Support Worker)
- 1 bus driver

Table 6: Sources of Data Collection

Little Red Spirit-Broadway	Type of instrument	N=
Parents or guardians	Qualitative: In-person interviews	18
Parent or guardians	Quantitative: Likert scale statements	18
Teaching and other staff, and administrator	Qualitative: In-person interviews	8
Teaching staff	Likert scales completed for each child*	38
Little Red Spirit-Dufferin and Dufferin Elementary School	Type of instrument	
Parent – Little Red Spirit	Qualitative: In-person interviews	1
Parent – Little Red Spirit	Quantitative: Likert scale statements	1
Teaching staff at Little Red Spirit-Dufferin	Qualitative: In-person interviews	2
Teaching staff at Little Red Spirit-Dufferin	Likert scales completed for each child*	19
Grade 1-6 teaching staff at Dufferin elementary school	Likert scales completed for each child**	41
<p>*We asked Little Red Spirit teaching staff to complete a Likert scale for each child who is currently registered in the program. Statements were concerned with general themes on the child’s academic and social development. With the exception of one child, all participants had been with program for at least six months.</p> <p>**We asked nine homeroom teachers in Grade 1-6 at Dufferin School to assess a list of Likert scale statements in regard to each child who attended the Little Red Spirit program in past years compared to other children (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who had not attended the program.</p>		

Dufferin Elementary School

Dufferin Elementary School was an experimental design (based on quantitative data) between former Little Red Spirit students and their grade-matched peers (i.e. classmates in Dufferin School who had not attended the program). In this part of the study, the research design is experimental (it includes an experimental and control group) and quantitatively focused. With the support and approval of the Winnipeg School Division and Dufferin School’s Principal, Mr. Wayne Wyke, the evaluator reviewed data that tracked attendance records, math assessments, writing skills, and reading proficiency scores for 197 students, 41 of these students had previously attended the Little Red Spirit satellite program at Dufferin School, and are currently students in Grades 1 to 6 at this school.

The purpose of this part of the research was to quantitatively assess the outcomes of students who participated in the Little Red Spirit program compared to a control group of students who had not attended the program. The research did not directly involve student participation. Additional information required for all students (experimental and control groups) included grade level and current homeroom. The hypothesis is that students who attended the Little Red Spirit program will exhibit more positive academic and developmental outcomes. The plan was to develop a two-stage data collection process.

Table 7: Sources of Data Collection for the Experimental Design

What to analyse	Where/who will provide data	Time lines for the data	Delivery date	Expected outcomes
Math assessments for all students in Dufferin School	Wayne Wyke, Principal at Dufferin School	Sept, 2015- March, 2016	March 15, 2016	(1)
Reading assessments for all students in Dufferin School	Wayne Wyke, Principal at Dufferin School	Sept, 2015- March, 2016	March 15, 2016	(1)
Writing assessments for all students in Dufferin School	Wayne Wyke, Principal at Dufferin School	Sept, 2015- March, 2016	March 15, 2016	(1)
Attendance records for all students in Dufferin School	Wayne Wyke, Principal at Dufferin School	Sept, 2015- February, 2016	March 15, 2016	(1)
(1) More positive academic outcomes and higher attendance for students who participated in Little Red Spirit in past years compared to students who had not received the intervention.				

Stage One:

Compare teacher assessments in math, reading, writing, and attendance for two groups of students:

1. Experimental group: Identify students in Grades 1 to 6 at Dufferin School who previously attended the Little Red Spirit program (n=41 students).
2. Control group: Identify students in Grades 1 to 6 who had not attended Little Red Spirit program, including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (n=156 students).

Compare aggregate assessments in each outcome category of reading, writing, and math proficiency between the groups, as well as their attendance records (n=197 students).

Stage Two:

Nine homeroom teachers in Grade 1-6 completed a list of Likert scale statements regarding each child who attended the Little Red Spirit program in past years, yielding a sample size of 41 students. The teachers were asked to compare the former Little Red Spirit students to other Indigenous and non-Indigenous students at the same grade level on social development variables including:

- confidence as a learner
- independence as a learner
- levels of curiosity
- social/emotional development/maturity
- cooperation with other children
- ability to solve problems
- level of parental/guardian involvement

Evaluation: Summary of Key Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Evaluation Participants

Table 8 lists the demographic characteristics of the parents, guardians, children and staff who agreed to participate in the evaluation. The average age of the parents/guardians was 30.5 years, and 89.5% self-identified as Aboriginal. Most participants had completed high school, and just over 40% had some post-secondary schooling. The majority were not currently employed (63.2%) and, although this estimate seems high, our sample was mostly likely biased in favour of parents who were not participating in the workforce and who had higher availability when the evaluators conducted interviews. We also note that the majority of staff had been with the program for a significant period of time.

Table 8: Evaluation Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Parent/Guardian characteristics (n=19 interviewed)	N=	Years	%
Age (range: 22-41)	16	30.5	
Age not specified	3	-	
First Nation	15		79.0
Métis	2		10.5
Non-Indigenous	2		10.5
Highest level of education			
Less than high school	3		15.8
High school or equivalent	7		36.8
Some college or university	5		26.3
Completed college or university	3		15.8
Not specified	1		5.3
Employment status			
Not currently employed*	12		63.2
Employed casually to full-time, including self-employment	6		31.5
Employment status not specified	1		5.3
Children's characteristics (n=57)			
Registered children	57		
Children of interviewed parents/guardians (1)	22		
Age: range 3-6 (2)	22	4.3	
Years attending Little Red Spirit	57	1.7	
Less than one year	28		49.1
Second year in attendance	16		28.1
Third year in attendance	13		22.8
Staff positions and education (n=10)			
Executive Director (ECE III and Bachelor of Arts degree)	1		
Teaching staff (4 ECE's and 1 Educational Assistant)	5		
Cultural Adviser	1		
Family Community Outreach Coordinator (Bachelor of Social Work)	1		
Parent Leadership Training Coordinator (Red River College Diploma- Family Support Worker)	1		

Van Driver	1		
Staff tenure			
<5 years	1		
5-10 years	5		
>10 years	4		
<p>*some participants were in school full-time or a homemaker with young children, etc. (1) Some interviewed parents had more than one child registered in the program. (2) The evaluator only acquired data on the children’s ages if a parent or guardian was interviewed; however, the average age of 4.3 years was consistent with the 2014-15 operational report where the average age was 4.2 years.</p>			

Outcomes

Former Little Red Spirit Students

In comparing Dufferin School students who attended Little Red Spirit in past years (experimental group) to grade-matched peers or non-participants (control group), the evaluations revealed the following outcomes:

- From September, 2015 to February, 2016 Dufferin School students who attended Little Red Spirit in past years were less likely than the control group to have a cumulative attendance rate below 85%. For instance, 26.8% of Little Red Spirit students fell under an 85% attendance level compared to 35.3% (the control group), which is a difference of 8.5 percentage points (though not statistically different²).
- Little Red Spirit students appear to have good mathematical thinking skills. A total of 41 math assessments were completed by Grade 1-6 teachers based on the Winnipeg School Division’s Learning Pathway assessment scales. As shown in Table 9, 46.3% of former Little Red Spirit students were at grade level, which was statistically different from the control group. Students in the control group were more likely to be approaching grade level in math (31.5% compared to 14.7% in the Little Red Spirit group), and the results also showed a statistically significant difference between the two groups.

² Statistical significance is a technique to determine whether or not a result occurred by chance. It is usually expressed by a p-value. The smaller the p-value, there more certainty there is that the difference in the estimates is reliable or one that is probably true; that is, not a fluke. Put differently, statistical significance simply means there is reasonable certainty that the difference in the estimates is reliable or real. However, a finding that the difference in the estimates is statistically significant does not necessarily imply an important finding, and neither is the difference necessarily assumed to be large. It is a finding that could be evaluated further for practical relevance or decision making. If the difference between two estimates is not statistically significant, this just means that the difference has a higher chance of not being a true difference. Quite often, this occurs when the sample size is small or there is variability in the data, as is the case with the current sample.

Table 9: Comparison of Teachers' Assessments of Math Skills of Experimental Group (n=41) and Control Group (n=149)

Teachers' Math Assessments	At Grade Level		Approaching Grade Level		Below Grade Level	
	N=	%*	N=	%**	N=	%
Former Little Red Spirit students	19	46.3	6	14.7	16	39.0
Control group (did not attend Little Red Spirit program)	31	20.8	47	31.5	71	47.7
Total (n=190 students)	50	26.3	53	27.9	87	45.8
Statistically significant difference between former Little Red Spirit students and the control group, *p=.003, **p=.013						

As indicated in Table 9, fewer Little Red Spirit students fell below grade level than those in the control group (39.0% compared to 47.7%). However, for students who were assessed below grade level based on the Learning Pathway assessments, 56.3% (9 out of 16 students) were assessed at approximately one year below their grade level, 37.5% (6 out of 16 students) were assessed at approximately two grades below their grade level, and 6.2% (1 student) fell at least three grades below their grade level (not shown in Table 9). The comparative estimates for students in the control group were 42.3% (n=30 out of 71 students), 40.8% (n=29 out of 71 students) and 16.9% (n=12 out of 71 students) respectively. Thus, former Little Red Spirit Students were less likely than their grade-matched peers to be assessed at two grades or more below their grade level.

As shown in Table 10, 22 out of 41 reading assessments completed by Grade 1-6 teachers at Dufferin School indicated that 53.6% of former Little Red Spirit students were above, at, or approaching their grade level in reading proficiency. Of the 22 students, 10 were rated as being above their grade level in their teachers' reading assessments. Nineteen were assessed as being one reading level below their grade, 11 (or 57.9%) fell about 1-1.5 years below their grade level and the other eight students were at least 2 years behind (not shown in Table 10). The evaluator also examined comparative data for the control group and found that 11.4% of these students were rated above their grade level, 20.8% were at their grade level, and 18.1% were approaching their grade level.

Table 10: Comparison of Teachers' Reading Assessments of Experimental Group (n=41) and Control Group (n=149)

Teachers' Reading Assessments	Above Grade Level		At Grade Level		Approaching Grade Level		Below Grade Level	
	N=	%*	N=	%	N=	%	N=	%
Former Little Red Spirit students	10	24.4	6	14.6	6	14.6	19	46.4
Control group (did not attend Little Red Spirit program)	17	11.4	31	20.8	27	18.1	74	49.7
Statistically significant difference between former Little Red Spirit students and the control group, *p=.076								

We also asked home room teachers to assess the students' writing skills. Table 11 reveals that 20% of former Little Red Spirit students had writing skills at grade level compared to 13.5% in the control group (although the estimates were not statistically different).

Next, we asked the Grade 1-6 teachers at Dufferin School to rate the students in the experimental group to the control group with regard to a number of variables including learning confidence, social behaviours, personal hygiene, communication skills, and optimism about school. We also asked the teachers if the Little Red Spirit students identified with their culture more strongly than the other Indigenous students.

Table 11: Comparison of Teachers' Assessments of Writing Skills of Experimental Group (n=40) and Control Group (n=148)

Teachers' Writing Skills Assessments	At Grade Level		Approaching Grade Level		Below Grade Level	
	N=	%	N=	%	N=	%
Former Little Red Spirit students*	8	20.0	12	30.0	20	50.0
Control group (did not attend Little Red Spirit program)	20	13.5	47	31.8	81	54.7
*does not add up to n=41 because information was missing for one student who moved. No students were assessed above grade level.						

The results in Table 12 indicate that approximately 2/3rd of former Little Red Spirit students have internalized very good social skills such as cooperating, sharing with other children, working well in group situations, playing fair, taking turns, and also showing awareness of the effects of their own behaviour on other people. The students were also rated highly on their ability to follow the teacher's verbal directions and in demonstrating confidence in learning. These results held true regardless of whether the comparison group was adjusted to include only Indigenous or non-Indigenous students. Just under 80% of Little Red Spirit alumni had a parent or guardian who is supportive and/or involved in their education. As we know from the Little Red Spirit program philosophy, parents are thought of as the child's first teacher, and the program emphasizes active parental engagement in their children's education.

Former Little Red Spirit students were also rated higher than their counterparts on several other variables, such as level of curiosity, verbal and written communication skills, staying on task, bringing healthy lunches and snacks to school, and expressing their needs and feelings in healthy ways. They also had a more optimistic attitude about attending school, which may be related to their high performance levels.

Table 12: Teacher Assessments on Former Little Red Spirit Students' Social and Personal Development (n=41)

Statement: Compared to other students (or other Indigenous students), this Little Red Spirit student:	Compared to all other students in my homeroom at the same grade level, this Little Red Spirit student:				Compared to other Indigenous students in my homeroom at the same grade level, this Little Red Spirit student:			
	N/A	Never or Rarely	About the same as other students	Usually or Almost Always	N/A	Never or Rarely	About the same as other students	Usually or Almost Always
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Demonstrates a high level of curiosity	-	9.7	29.3	61.0	-	9.8	19.5	70.7
Has good verbal communication skills	-	14.6	22.0	63.4	-	7.3	24.4	68.3
Has good written communication skills	-	19.5	29.3	51.2	-	17.1	24.4	58.5
Demonstrates confidence in learning	-	12.2	26.8	61.0	-	9.7	22.0	68.3
Follows teacher's verbal direction	-	0	29.3	70.7	-	0	24.4	75.6
Demonstrates positive social behaviours	-	7.3	34.2	58.5	-	12.2	24.4	63.4
Cooperates/shares with other children	-	0	31.7	68.3	-	4.9	24.4	70.7
Has an optimistic attitude about attending school	-	17.0	22.0	61.0	4.9	14.6	14.6	65.9
Shows resilience when things are not going his/her way	-	21.9	29.3	48.8	-	21.9	29.3	48.8
Works well in a group	-	7.3	24.4	68.3	-	7.3	17.1	75.6
Stays on task	-	14.7	26.8	58.5	-	12.2	26.8	61.0
Plays by the rules, take turns, plays fair	-	2.5	26.8	70.7	2.4	2.5	31.7	63.4
Expresses needs and feelings in healthy ways	-	7.3	36.6	56.1	-	9.7	29.3	61.0
Is aware of effects of own behaviour on other people	-	7.3	26.8	65.9	-	4.9	31.7	63.4
Has a parent or guardian who is supportive and/or involved in their child's education	2.5	9.7	9.8	78.0	-	9.8	12.2	78.0
Usually brings healthy lunches and/or snacks to school	4.9	14.6	31.7	48.8	4.8	17.1	24.4	53.7
Is shy/timid	2.5	36.5	36.6	24.4	-	48.8	31.7	19.5
Practices good personal hygiene (oral hygiene; hand washing, etc.)	-	4.9	24.4	70.7	-	2.4	31.7	65.9
Is physically active	-	0	26.8	73.2	-	2.4	17.1	80.5
Identifies well with his or her culture/traditions	-	-	-	-	2.5	0	51.2	46.3
N/A: No answer or Not Applicable								

Current Students Registered in Little Red Spirit

The children who are currently attending the Little Red Spirit were highly rated regarding improvements in their social development skills since joining the program (Table 13). Parent and guardian responses were typically within 5-7 percentage points of the teaching staff's, although parents appeared to be slightly less optimistic about improvements in their children's social skills. Some of the teaching staff and parent/guardian discrepancies are shown in the categories below:

- Positive attitude about coming to the program (Teacher: 98.2%)
 - Independence and confident learners (Teacher: 93%)
 - Demonstrates a high level of curiosity (Teacher: 89.5%)
 - Stays on task (Teacher: 73.7%)
 - Follows the teacher's verbal directions (Teacher: 89.5%; Parent: 68.4%)
 - Works well in a group (Teacher: 93%)
 - Cooperates and shares with other children (Teacher: 96.5%);
 - More awareness of effects of own behaviour on others (Teacher: 94.7%; Parent: 73.7%)
 - Plays fair/takes turns with other children (Teacher: 89.5%; Parent: 73.7%)
 - Expresses needs and feelings in healthy ways (Teacher: 86%; Parent: 68.4%)
 - Less shyness (Teacher: 87.7%)
-
- 56.1% of children (typically 4 and 5 year olds) who currently attend Little Red Spirit have improved their numeracy skills to a Kindergarten or Grade 1 level, and 49.1% had achieved an adequate level of school readiness in terms of their reading skills (not shown in Table 13). Furthermore, 82.5% of children had improved their verbal communication skills since joining the program, and 56.1% were deemed by their teachers to be more ready to attend public school.
-
- The teaching staff reported that, since the children had started the Little Red Spirit program, 93% (parents: 73.7%) had demonstrated more awareness of their culture, and 75.4% (parents: 57.9%) spoke words in either Ojibway or Cree more often. There were other positive signs of increased engagement with culture, as parents remarked that their children regularly enjoyed drumming, smudging, and singing Aboriginal songs at home.
-
- 100% of parents or guardians indicated that their child has fun at the Little Red Spirit program, and 73.7% indicated that their child has developed a positive attitude about eating healthy foods at home.

Table 13: Teaching Staff and Parent and Guardian Assessments of Little Red Spirit Students' Social and Personal Development (current students)

Statement: Since coming to this program, this Little Red Spirit student:	Staff (n=57)				Parent/Guardian (n=19)			
	N/A	Very Untrue/Untrue	About the Same as Before	True/Very True	N/A	Very Untrue/Untrue	About the Same as Before	True/Very True
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Demonstrates a higher level of curiosity	-	-	10.5	89.5	-	-	5.3	94.7
Has improved his or her verbal communication skills	-	-	17.5	82.5	-	-	10.5	89.5
Is more independent (e.g. separation from caregivers)	-	-	7.0	93.0	-	-	10.5	89.5
Is more ready to attend public school	36.9	-	7.0	56.1	-	-	5.3	94.7
Shows more confidence in learning	-	-	7.0	93.0	-	-	-	100.0
Follows teacher's verbal directions	-	-	10.5	89.5	5.3	-	26.3	68.4
Speaks his or her Aboriginal language more often	-	3.5	21.1	75.4	-	5.3	36.8	57.9
Demonstrates more awareness about his or her culture	-	1.8	5.2	93.0	-	-	26.3	73.7
Cooperates/shares more with other children	-	-	3.5	96.5	-	-	10.5	89.5
Has a positive attitude about attending the program	-	-	1.8	98.2	-	-	-	100.0
Handles it more easily when things are not going his or her way	-	3.5	8.8	87.7	-	-	21.1	78.9
Works well in a group with siblings or other children	-	-	7.0	93.0	-	-	10.5	89.5
Stays on task more often (i.e. not easily distracted)	-	-	26.3	73.7	-	-	21.1	78.9
Plays by the rules, take turns, plays fair	-	-	10.5	89.5	-	-	26.3	73.7
Expresses needs and feelings in healthy ways when things are not going his or her way (e.g. doesn't throw tantrums)	-	3.5	10.5	86.0	-	5.3	26.3	68.4
Is more aware of effects of own behaviour on other people	-	-	5.3	94.7	-	-	26.3	73.7
Is less shy	-	-	12.3	87.7	-	-	10.5	89.5
Has a positive attitude about eating healthy food at home	-	-	-	-	-	10.6	15.7	73.7
Pays more attention to good personal hygiene (e.g. hand washing, oral hygiene)	-	-	7.0	93.0	-	-	-	-
Is more physically active	-	-	1.8	98.2	-	-	15.8	84.2
Has fun attending this program	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	100.0
N/A: No answer or Not Applicable								

Parent and Guardian Perceptions of the Little Red Spirit Program

During interviews, we asked parents and guardians to reflect on the ways in which the program has supported their child’s learning journey. They all reported being pleased that their child or children’s social, academic, and cultural development had grown from participating in Little Red Spirit. Participation in the program provided an opportunity for their child to take social risks, be more independent, and to have a chance to develop a circle of friends outside of their immediate family. As shown in Table 14, their responses fell into four broad categories.

Table 14: Parent/Guardian Perceptions of Little Red Spirit Program Supports to Children

Categories of Supports to Children	N=	Percentage of parents/guardians*
School readiness preparation – reading, writing, numeracy	16	84.2
Social skill development such as socializing with other children	16	84.2
Cultural teachings and songs; drumming; counting, alphabet, and learning words in Aboriginal languages (Ojibway and Cree); having a cultural adviser in the classroom teaches children to care for and honour sacred items in a respectful way (e.g. the drum).	8	42.1
Community resources in support of the child such as specialists, resources for delayed speech, medical practitioners, and others.	2	4.8
Total responses	42**	
*Calculated as the number of responses in the category as a percentage of 19 interview participants.		
**some parents and guardians indicated more than one response.		

Parents gave accounts of their children learning the alphabet and numbers in Ojibway or Cree, as well as the Medicine Wheel tool and the Seven Sacred Teachings. Frequently led by the cultural adviser, the practices of smudging (as well as the feather ritual during smudging), sharing circles, drumming, and the singing of traditional songs and cultural dancing helped the children to build a strong foundation of knowledge of and pride in their cultural identity. One parent commented that their family has come full circle in terms of the parents’ and school’s efforts to integrate culture and language into the child’s life. There was a strong sense of commitment on the part of the parents who said the program provided a solid model for how they wish to raise their children.

By attending formal Pow Wow ceremonies, some families have become more integrated into Indigenous community life. When asked whether or not their family socializes with other people in the Indigenous community, 15 out of 19 parents/guardians (78.9%) stated that they attend community events such as Aboriginal Day celebrations, events at the Friendship Centre, community Pow Wow ceremonies, and MMIW events (missing and murdered Indigenous women).

In an attempt to assess the program’s impact on parents, we asked about the ways in which they felt personally supported by the Little Red Spirit program’s staff and participants. The program’s literature emphasizes that the agency supports parents with information about resources in the community, health information, and informal supports such as providing opportunities for socialization and parenting advice. The program also offers learning opportunities to parents through workshops and training sessions. Many parents stated that the program helped them to better understand the stages of

learning and child development, as well as to develop strategies that use Indigenous approaches for addressing the needs of their children (e.g. Medicine Wheel teachings, drumming, smudging, etc.). However, the most frequent responses were related to the socialization aspects of the program. The benefits of a family room must be underscored because it is a place that creates a sense of community; families can come together in this space to celebrate, enjoy each other's company and have light-hearted fun, thus forging meaningful bonds with each other. As shown in Table 15, the responses of the parents and guardians, which were corroborated in the interviews with the staff, fell into four broad categories.

Table 15: Parental Supports in the Little Red Spirit Program

Categories of Parent/Guardian Supports:	N=	Percentage of parents/guardians*
Informal parent support system – feeling welcomed, supported, and understood by other parents and staff; socializing; organized physical activities such as yoga, Zumba, running club.	17	89.5
Formal supports: parents have opportunities to develop their skills through workshops, training and other learning opportunities (e.g. First Aid/CPR training, food handlers certificate, diabetes awareness, parenting seminars, cooking workshops, family violence prevention, food budgeting, etc.).	7	36.8
Staff help parents to become familiar with resources in the community that are available to families (E.g. housing services, employments skills for lone-parent mothers, speech therapists, child and family services, clothing depot, counselling, cultural events, etc.).	6	31.6
Cultural: focused on the emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental aspects of a person; drum making.	3	15.8
Total responses	33**	
*Calculated as the number of responses in the category as a percentage of 19 interview participants		
**some parents and guardians indicated more than one response		

We also asked parents/guardians about the ways in which they have gotten involved in the Little Red Spirit program, as well as the average number of times per week they volunteer in the program. As shown in the table below, their involvement in the program ranged from daily to once or twice per month. Their volunteering activities were mostly related to food preparation and planning snacks for the children, clean-up activities, and occasionally helping in the classroom.

Parent/guardian volunteer commitment	N=
5 times per week	1
4 times per week	5
Twice weekly	7
Once weekly	4
1-2 times per month	1
Not specified	1
Total parents/guardians interviewed	19

In addition to their usual volunteer activities, parents also participated as volunteers at special events, such as community feasts, field trips, summer barbeques and fun days, the annual Christmas party, along with many of the other events that are integrated into the program. Seven out of 19 parents (36.8%) stated that they participate on the parent advisory committee and three indicated that they are members of the board of directors. The feedback indicated that 10 out of 19 parents (52.6%) participated in the workshops and training sessions that had been offered to them. It should be noted, however, that some parents had fewer opportunities to volunteer because they are employed in the workforce or are enrolled in a post-secondary program of studies on a full-time basis.

We also asked the parents and guardians what they learned about family nutrition and health from their participation in this program. An overwhelming majority (94.7%) stated that their family is becoming healthier which they attributed to program activities such as cooking lessons, recipe sharing, and learning how to make creative snacks for children. Workshop sessions included diabetes awareness, Aboriginal Food Guide, buying healthy foods on a budget, and reducing consumption of high sugar fruit juices. They learned how to cook healthy meals such as spaghetti squash and bannock pizza, and they reported eating more fresh fruit and vegetables, brown breads, and oatmeal at home. Parents also reported that they participate in physical activities more frequently including hot yoga, Pilates, Zumba, walking and running club, and kick boxing. Significantly, their remarks were also highly consistent with data gathered in staff interviews.

One way of understanding the effectiveness of the program is by asking parents and staff if they would recommend Little Red Spirit to other families in their social circle. To this question, 100% of responses were affirmative. In fact, some interviewed participants had already introduced other families to the program, or had regularly recommended it to friends, neighbours, and extended family members. Similarly, all parents and staff stated that they would use the program again for any of their other children or grandchildren. Their feedback suggested that this type of programming is absolutely essential in Indigenous communities.

Outcomes: Most Significant Accomplishments and Lesson Learned

Overall, the evaluation produced significant evidence that the program has generated positive experiences in the participants' lives and made much progress towards achieving the short-term and intermediate outcomes outlined in the logic model. Considerable evidence from a variety of sources (operating reports, interviews with staff and parents, school records) indicated that the program was implemented in a manner which was consistent with the six components recommended by their major funder, the Public Health Agency of Canada. The evaluation also identified several key elements as being essential to the program's successes (i.e. what worked well). Little Red Spirit serves the Indigenous community in a number of important ways, and some of the key program successes were acknowledged by most interviewed parents and staff. Examples of these successes include:

- **The school's uniqueness.** Little Red Spirit addresses multiple challenges that stand in the way of a family's well-being, and wrap-around services such as free registration, food, and transportation, as well as its broader focus on the workshop series and learning opportunities for parents, were identified as key strengths that contributed to its success. These features encouraged the participation of low-income families who may not have the resources to send their children to an early childhood education program, and they also help to reduce stress levels for many parents who are already struggling financially. This is an important lesson that can be applied to future programs; for instance, these types of supports are as important as the program itself.
- **Academic accomplishments:** Because poverty is frequently a student's biggest disadvantage, many Indigenous children would not have these learning opportunities were it not for Little Red Spirit. The program levels the playing field for these children and broadens their life experiences by keeping them connected to their education – something which is especially critical for Indigenous children. The evaluation findings showed much evidence that it produces children who are ready to enter the education system and who are happy and confident learners with positive attitudes toward school. The results of the experimental design showed clear evidence that Little Red Spirit contributed to a stronger academic foundation for many of its former students, and particularly a higher level of confidence and parental involvement which will serve the students well over the course of their academic journey. Furthermore, parents repeatedly remarked that they appreciated the structured environment, and that it would benefit their children when they join public school.
- **Cultural accomplishments:** A commitment to Indigenous cultural teachings is the foundation of Little Red Spirit. It was further remarked by some parents and staff that these cultural teachings are rarely taught at other daycares, nursery schools, or kindergarten programs. At Little Red Spirit, children openly engage with their culture and rich traditions, and are consistently encouraged to have pride in their identity. All adults agreed that the opportunity to participate in Little Red Spirit is a huge benefit to Indigenous children because of being exposed to Indigenous language and culture. Moreover, the Medicine Wheel tool and Seven Sacred Teachings help to support families in developing healthy interpersonal relationships, and it was noted by some parents that they are used as a daily guide to teach their children respect, fair play, honesty, and teamwork.

- **Formal and informal social supports in a family environment is a key lesson learned:** The deliberative and active engagement of parents is essential to the program’s success and is the cornerstone of its philosophy that parents are their child’s first teacher. Parents and staff described the family room as an immensely important and positive space for socializing, cooking, holding workshops, and family events, the importance of which cannot be emphasized enough. As one interview participant put it, “We lift each other up in very positive ways.” The group outings to community events helped families to connect with each other, and also to feel like they were a part of the urban Indigenous community. Some commented that without the informal supports provided by the program, this would just be another daycare. Parents and staff described feeling a sense of community at Little Red Spirit where everyone is welcomed and gets along well. Moreover, the availability of formal supports were deemed equally important. Parents appreciated the fact that if they needed help with housing (e.g. a reference letter), an advocate at child and family services, or help with referrals in the medical system, the program’s staff was always available to help to address their unique challenges. The availability of these social supports is significant because they help to strengthen parental efforts in supporting their children at home.
- **Respectful empowerment of parents in decision-making creates an effective program:** The program staff described their commitment to respecting collective values by empowering parents to assume a leadership role in designing their own program activities (e.g. training sessions, workshops, and family outings). As one staff member noted, “It’s not us and them. We are all on the same level.” The program worked well when the parents had an opportunity to make decisions about which activities they engaged in and what types of topics and speakers were invited to conduct workshops. The most effective strategy for empowering the parents was to actively listen to their ideas and then to try to implement them. The staff were available to support the parents and to access the resources required to implement their ideas. As active participants on the parents’ advisory committee and board of directors, many parents were also empowered in developing decision-making and assertiveness skills.
- **Promoting healthy family nutrition as a group activity is another lesson learned:** As described earlier, 94.7% of interviewed parents stated that their family is becoming healthier. In their interviews, parents attributed this outcome to group activities at the Little Red Spirit program such as cooking lessons, recipe sharing, group grocery shopping trips (e.g. buying healthy food on a budget or bulk shopping to save money), and physical activities.
- **A highly committed staff:** Finally, having a staff that is supportive and highly respected by the parents and guardians is fundamental to the success of any program of this nature. The feedback from the parents indicated that the staff was viewed as being accessible, and that they made learning fun for parents and children alike. The parents remarked that the staff provided a safe and secure environment for their children. This highly innovative Indigenous early childhood education program would not be as successful without the strong vision, commitment, and a high level of dedication to teamwork of the long-term staff (and recent recruits) and Executive Director. The lesson learned over the past twenty years has been that a strong and dedicated staff is critical to the program’s success.

In sum, the program was viewed as immensely valuable to both the children and their parents. This evaluation shows that the program has at least achieved its short-term outcomes of creating an exciting educational opportunity for pre-school children, and the experimental exercise reveals that the program may have contributed to intermediate level outcomes regarding the largely favourable academic achievements of former program participants.

Next Steps: Growth Opportunities in the Program

While the program is rich in human resources, its financial resources continue to dwindle as time goes on, particularly since funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada has failed to keep pace with the rate of inflation. Staff wage levels are quite low, many unpaid hours are contributed to the program, and a wage increase has not been implemented for about a decade now. Given their current wages, staff are unable to meet their costs of living without either the financial support/assistance of their partner or having to work a second job. Nevertheless, the staff reported finding the work to be highly rewarding, and that they found tremendous satisfaction in seeing the children's academic progress and the helping the parents to achieve their own personal goals and be good role models for their children.

Despite these challenges, some staff suggested that the program should continue to build on its strengths by extending its reach and offering more satellite programs at inner city public schools. Little Red Spirit is a natural extension of the community-based schooling model in the inner city of Winnipeg. Given the positive results of the evaluation's experimental design at Dufferin School, this may be a good path to take, particularly since this would give Little Red Spirit access to the Winnipeg School Division's resources. There is also a growing interest in expanding the space at the Little Red Spirit-Broadway location to include a larger kitchen and family room, as well as a larger classroom space, and more equipment and technology such as computers. It was also suggested that the library in the family room would benefit from the addition of more resources.

Although parents generally indicated that their expectations had been met and that the quality of the program was high, when given an opportunity to offer suggestions for improvement some recommended that the program be extended to 5 days per week. There was also some interest on the part of parents in having flash cards sent home with Ojibway and Cree words and numbers so that they could practice with their children, which is a strongly positive sign of their engagement in their child's education. The Cultural Adviser is currently working on this project. If additional financial resources were made available, parents expressed a strong interest in using some of them to expand on current activities such as the family outings and field trips (e.g. visits to a sweat lodge, beach and picnic days, etc.) which help to build positive memories with their children. There was also some interest in increasing the number of learning opportunities for parents through additional workshops and training. Some parents also offered the opinion that Little Red Spirit should expand the van's pickup route to neighbourhoods beyond the current boundaries. Similarly, at the Dufferin satellite, a lack of transportation makes attendance particularly challenging over the cold winter months or rainy spring days. Moreover, the van is about 8 years old now (2008 model), and it is anticipated that it will need to be replaced in the coming years.

Concluding Remarks

The objective of this evaluation was to highlight the strengths and benefits of the Little Red Spirit Aboriginal Head Start program, and to assess whether or not it has provided its participants with the resource and tools to help them in reaching their full academic and social potential. The evaluation also documented the program's approach to supporting the developmental needs of students (program description), including parental engagement.

The Little Red Spirit program was delivered in a manner which was consistent with its mandate and objectives, and there were many positive signs that the children's academic skills and cultural knowledge had strengthened. The program was perceived as being invaluable to children and their parents who concurred that this is an educational model that is worth expanding, as it helps disadvantaged students to overcome barriers keeping them from reaching their full potential. Described as committed and supportive, parents felt a strong connection to the program staff who made great efforts to find constructive solutions to their issues and challenges. Parents and guardians reported feeling comfortable with their child's experience in the program, finding the environment to be respectful one that models healthy relationships. Moreover, improving the literacy and educational outcomes of Indigenous and other socially disadvantaged students serves to create stronger families, which are the building blocks of resilient communities.

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Appendix A: Project Model – Little Red Spirit Aboriginal Head Start

