Inner Strengths for First Nations Success

The research project titled "Building Skills for Success Through the Cultural Realities and Values of First Nations Communities" began in December 2024 and concluded on March 31, 2026. Among other achievements, this project led to the creation of the "Inner Strengths for First Nations Success" tool and the development of the "First Nations Inner Strengths Framework". The following summary outlines the three main phases of this project as well as the results achieved.

The Fruits of Collaboration with First Nations

Jointly led by the First Nations Adult Education School Council (FNAESC) and the Institue de cooperation pour l'éducation des adultes (ICÉA), the project "Building Skills for Success Through the Cultural Realities and Values of First Nations Communities" was made possible through funding from the Skills for Success Program of Employment and Social Development Canada (HRDC).

This financial support enabled the creation, in collaboration with members of six First Nations communities and adult learners from an Indigenous Friendship Centre (the Mamik Centre), of the tool *"Inner Strengths for First Nations Success"* and the *"First Nations Inner Strengths Framework*."

These two tools are the result of an action research project designed to be both collaborative and cooperative. Collaboration and cooperation are more than mere intentions in this project: they are real commitments that the Council, ICÉA, and the research team members have progressively transformed into the conditions for the success of this research.

Regarding collaboration (and the project's objectives)

At the outset of this project, collaboration took shape in the partnership between the Council and ICÉA. These two organizations dedicated to adult education—one Indigenous, the other non-Indigenous—combined their expertise to define a research project that would respond to the realities and cultural values of First Nations communities.

The objectives of this project were as follows:

1. To design and validate a framework of generic socio-emotional competencies for First Nations through an action research approach.

   Expected outcome: to create a new framework of socio-emotional competencies based on the traditional knowledge of First Nations cultures and aligned with the Canadian government's Competency Framework for Success.

2. Adapt a tool for recognizing generic competencies based on the new First Nations-specific framework (objective 1), using an action research approach.

   Expected outcome: to create a tool for recognizing social-emotional competencies based on the new framework developed from the traditional knowledge of First Nations cultures, which will include a process for validating prior learning adapted to First Nations practices.

3. To study how this new framework and these new recognition tools can foster the development of skills for success in order to better support labour market participants and the socio-economic development of First Nations communities.

Overall, these objectives committed the Council and ICÉA to addressing issues of recognition and skills within an exploratory framework that would emphasize traditional knowledge, cultures, and the realities of First Nations.

This exploration was innovative: it did not seek to apply non-Indigenous concepts of recognition and skills to First Nations. Rather, it encouraged First Nations members—people from the project's host communities—to bring forth, in collaboration and cooperation with a research team, experiential knowledge inspired by First Nations knowledge, traditions, cultures, and realities.

From collaboration to cooperation

The collaboration resulting from the partnership between the Council and ICÉA was a first step toward achieving the project's objectives. This initial collaboration was essential for generating new experiential knowledge. Without this knowledge, it would have been impossible to create the Inner Strengths tool or to develop the First Nations Inner Strengths Framework.

However, it took more than a strong partnership between the Council and ICÉA to bring this knowledge to light. Indeed, the knowledge, traditions, cultures, and realities of First Nations belong to First Nations people and their communities. A second step was therefore to invite communities to participate in the project. The communities of Gesgapegiag, Kanehsatà:ke, Pessamit, Wemotaci, Opitciwan, and Unamen Shipu chose to engage in this research, as did the leaders of the Mamik Centre. Finally, it was necessary to establish a relationship of trust with the members of these host communities. To this end, the Council (FNAESC) hired a research team composed primarily of members of the research host communities.

The fieldwork carried out by these First Nations leaders helped secure the cooperation of members of the project's host communities. For those who participated in the various stages of the research, this collaboration even turned into opportunities to work alongside members of the research team.

For example, the individuals who participated in testing the Our Strong Skills (OSS) tool and in piloting the Inner Strengths tool[1] served as both research subjects and co-researchers. During the workshops, these individuals engaged in learning by doing: they discovered self-awareness, their competencies (generic and socio-emotional), and their inner strengths. Then, during data collection periods, they were encouraged to formalize these learnings: these individuals then helped define, as a group and with members of the research team, knowledge related to the mechanisms of recognition, the usefulness of skills, and the functioning of the new Inner Strengths tool.

As for the consultation on life skills for First Nations[2] , it allowed for the integration of the interviewees as co-researchers. These individuals were selected because they were witnesses to the traditions, cultures, and realities of their communities; because they were the custodians of knowledge that only First Nations members could express or share. As such, these individuals participated directly in defining

[1] These two activities were carried out during phases 1 and 3 of the research project. They involved facilitating group workshops focused on identifying individuals' strengths (the "generic skills" for the Our Strong Skills tool and the "inner strengths" for the Inner Strengths tool).

[2] This activity was carried out in phase 1 of the project, in parallel with the piloting of the Our Strong Skills (OSS) tool.

the new concept of inner strength and in identifying the strengths that make up the First Nations Inner Strengths Framework.

Knowledge, traditions, cultures, and realities

Overall, this project created new assessment tools based on knowledge from First Nations members. While aligned with tools representative of non-Indigenous realities, such as social-emotional skills or the Skills for Success[3] , the tools created reflect the traditions, cultures, and lived realities of these First Nations members.

To a certain extent, the project's objectives outlined fairly specific validation criteria. The value of the results obtained was directly linked to the quality of the research team's efforts to take into account the knowledge, traditions, cultures, and realities of First Nations. Ultimately, any tool that did not meet these criteria would have little value for First Nations members.

Alongside these validation criteria, the project's objectives also outlined conditions for carrying out the planned research activities. These activities were intended to encourage the active participation of First Nations members, as well as their effective integration into the research team's deliberations.

In hindsight, it can be argued that these validation criteria and implementation conditions were met. This compliance is evidenced by the decisions made by the Council and the ICÉA: to hire First Nations research officers; engaging several communities across Quebec (Gesgapegiag, Kanehsatà:ke, Pessamit, Wemotaci, Opitciwan, and Unamen Shipu); engaging an Indigenous friendship centre (the Mamik Centre, Roberval, and Alma); and involving 136 participants as co-researchers.

Methodological Choices

Compliance with these criteria is also evidenced by the methodological choices made within the framework of this project. The following choices supported the research operations:

1) Prioritizing cooperative action research

The initial approach proposed for this project was action research. This choice was justified, but it was necessary to go further in order to truly draw on knowledge from First Nations members. It was necessary to focus on the participatory and partnership-based dimensions of cooperative action research in order to draw out the knowledge needed to create the Inner Strengths tool and design the First Nations Inner Strengths Framework.

This approach allowed participants to engage in a collective process of discovery, learning, reflection, and formalization of knowledge related to the mechanisms of self-recognition, skills, and inner strengths. This approach enabled us to guide participants toward shared areas of reflection, to draw out experiential knowledge, and to ensure that this knowledge directly influenced the choices—particularly creative ones—made by the research team. It was this approach, in particular, that allowed us to integrate the participants into this project as co-researchers.

2) Fostering the exchange of knowledge among all those involved in this project

[3] The federal government's Skills for Success framework identifies twelve skills classified as "foundational," "transferable," and "necessary" to ensure a person's employability: https://www.canada.ca/fr/services/emplois/formation/initiatives/competence-reussir.html.

In line with the participatory and partnership-based dimensions of cooperative action research, it was essential to foster dialogue among all those involved in this project and to value all the knowledge they could contribute. For this reason, this project drew inspiration from the principles associated with the convergence of knowledge.

This approach, developed with the Indigenous peoples of Latin America, allows for the recognition and legitimization of knowledge. Strategies were therefore implemented during the data collection periods to foster various forms of knowledge exchange between the participants' knowledge (experiential and indigenous), that of the individuals responsible for research operations in each community (practical and indigenous), and that of the research coordinator (scholarly and non-indigenous).

These cross-pollinations were made possible in particular through the group interviews conducted during the data collection periods. These interviews facilitated dialogue among participants and with those responsible for the research; they also helped foster the complementarity of the perspectives expressed by the participants.

3) Drawing inspiration from the principles of the dual perspective

Because the intersection of knowledge from all those involved in this project gave rise to multiple visions of recognition, skills, and inner strengths, it seemed important to draw on the principles of the double perspective to allow these visions to coexist and take shape within a common, shared vision.

Developed by elders of the Mi'gmaq Nation, the dual perspective approach proposes combining the strengths of different viewpoints—particularly Indigenous and non-Indigenous—to create a new one where tradition and modernity coexist. The principles of the dual perspective were therefore used to reconcile the non-Indigenous and Indigenous perspectives associated with the multiple visions and conceptions of recognition and competencies expressed during this project.

In particular, the principles of the dual perspective helped evolve the conventional notion of competence (specifically generic and socio-emotional) into a new concept—that of inner strengths—which is more aligned with both the traditions and the realities of First Nations.

4) Relying on group interviews (during data collection)

Ultimately, the group interviews format was adopted as the primary data collection strategy. This choice was most likely to foster dialogue between participants and the research team, and to facilitate the exchange of knowledge among all those involved in the project.

The group interviews allowed participants to engage in several reflective processes necessary to achieve the project's objectives: reflecting on their experiences; sharing and debating ideas; bringing social representations (opinions, values, beliefs, ideologies, etc.) to the surface; and identify areas of consensus or disagreement regarding recognition mechanisms, competencies, and the tools used (the OSS tool and the Inner Strengths tool).

Other data collection methods were used as part of this project, notably semi-structured interviews to identify the elements that make up the framework of First Nations' inner strengths.

Innovative Outputs

These methodological choices were critical to the success of this project. In addition to the strategies implemented to ensure the collaboration of First Nations communities and the cooperation of their members, these choices made it possible to generate products that are both innovative and culturally appropriate.

Three major outputs resulting from this project are worth highlighting:

1) The First Nations Inner Strengths Framework

The First Nations Inner Strengths Framework is a major innovation in understanding how First Nations members perceive competence and its utility in various everyday social roles.

This framework is one of the first and few reference tools—if not the only one—to have been designed by First Nations members specifically for use by First Nations members and to present elements that First Nations people would describe as "competencies."

This framework consists of the 29 "inner strengths" identified by the participants in this project. These strengths are useful in all everyday social roles. They can be described both as "competencies"—particularly socio-emotional ones—and as "values" that are important to First Nations.

2) The concept of inner strength

Drawing on the traditional knowledge, cultures, and realities of First Nations has made it possible to introduce and define the concept of inner strength. Used in facilitating workshops based on the Inner Strengths tool, this concept enables First Nations people to value their experiences and recognize their inner strengths—complex skills whose characteristics are comparable to those of generic or socio-emotional competencies.

The concept of inner strength serves as the foundation for a better understanding of how First Nations members perceive and conceptualize what non-Indigenous people commonly refer to as "generic competencies" or "social-emotional competencies."

The research process conducted in cooperation with the project's host communities revealed that the terms "generic competency" and "social-emotional competency" held little meaning for their members. It was therefore necessary to introduce and define a new concept that would be more meaningful to First Nations people.

For First Nations, inner strength is viewed simultaneously as ***a competency***, ***a social bond***, and ***an expression of identity and culture***. Here is the definition of inner strength:

- Inner strength is a high-level capacity (skill, knowledge, behavior) that enables us to act with fairness, discernment, and consistency in a given context.
- Inner strength is the sum of the integration of our knowledge, our personal history, our connection to the land, our cultural values, and our lived experiences.
- Inner strength manifests itself in observable behaviors, attitudes, and decisions that benefit us, others, and the community.
- An inner strength contributes to individual, collective, and cultural well-being: it reflects how we transform our knowledge, emotions, values, and experiences into meaningful actions.

3) The Inner Strengths for First Nations Success Tool's

This tool also represents a major innovation for First Nations members. It is based on the First Nations Inner Strengths framework and offers an approach to recognizing strengths that is tailored to First Nations practices.

Like the Our Strong Skills (OSS) tool from which it draws inspiration, the Inner Strengths tool emphasizes oral tradition, sharing experiences, and discovery-based learning. This new tool also focuses on calls to action, debate, and discussion.

This tool enables a group of people to discover knowledge related to recognizing the strengths they use every day. The shared understanding that emerges from this group facilitation process allows participants to value the actions they take in various social roles and to recognize the strengths they employ to carry out these actions.

By fostering recognition of inner strengths and the social roles where these strengths are useful, the Inner Strengths workshops help participants better understand who they are and identify the challenges they can overcome. At the end of this recognition process, these individuals develop their ability to take effective action in their lives, whether for themselves, their loved ones, or their community.

Specifically, the Inner Strengths tool helps achieve three formal learning and development objectives:

1) enable participants to recognize their inner strengths (and those of others);
2) enable participants to leverage these strengths in recognized social roles; and
3) enable participants to identify contexts for action where these strengths will be useful (for themselves, their loved ones, their family, and their community).

Useful and transferable tools

Overall, the tools developed as part of this project have enabled several First Nations individuals to become aware of their strengths and skills, develop their capacity for action, and recognize their autonomy[4] . Empowered by this newfound autonomy, these individuals acknowledged that they are better equipped to address the educational, social, and economic realities of their community.

The pilot studies conducted in January and February 2026 reveal that the Inner Strengths tool addresses real needs for the validation and recognition of individuals' strengths. These studies also reveal that the First Nations Inner Strengths framework is culturally suited to these needs for validation and recognition among the people for whom it was designed. Finally, these trials confirm that the concept of inner strength reflects the traditions, cultures, and realities of First Nations members.

In short, these pilot projects lead to the conclusion that the concept of inner strength, the Inner Strengths tool, and the First Nations Inner Strengths Framework are transferable from one nation to another and can be useful to all First Nations communities in Quebec—and even across Canada. In the short and medium term, these tools can be made available in French and English. In the long term, it is

[4] These positive outcomes were particularly evident among participants in the OSS workshops (42 people) and those in the inner strengths workshops (50 people).

desirable that future developments of these tools receive the necessary funding to be translated into Indigenous languages.

Insightful Testimonials

To present these innovative products to First Nations members, the Council invited all participants to an in-person meeting held on March 10, 2026, at the Lévis Convention Centre.

This event provided a platform for those who participated in the pilot testing of the Inner Strengths tool. While sharing the value of their experience, these individuals highlighted the versatility of the tools created as part of this project. They also confirmed the usefulness of these tools for use in a variety of contexts: learning, re-engagement, employability, social integration, healing, and more.

These individuals recommended that Indigenous communities and organizations use these tools to support all First Nations people. In their view, these tools should be used to build the capacity for action among members of their communities (through training and employment centres or community organizations), as well as among First Nations people living outside of communities (through formal educational settings, Indigenous friendship centres, correctional facilities, etc.).

Positive Future Outcomes

This project has provided First Nations with culturally appropriate tools for recognizing the strengths of their community members. These tools appear to be useful for individuals and communities; they also appear to be transferable from one community to another and from one Nation to another.

These initial findings are solid but require confirmation. The widespread dissemination of the Inner Strengths tool and the First Nations Inner Strengths Framework, as well as their future use, will help validate them. Numerous positive impacts are anticipated. Furthermore, it is reasonable to believe that these impacts will be equally beneficial for both individuals and First Nations communities.

On an individual level, the Inner Strengths tool allows a person to discover the principle of self-awareness, to recognize their inner strengths, and to understand how to use them in the various social roles of their daily life. It directly contributes to the development of their autonomy. Throughout this process, the individual gains new insights into the actions they can take and the tools they can use to carry out these actions. The Inner Strengths tool empowers this individual to develop their ability to take control of their life, as well as their capacity to act in their own best interest and for the good of their community.

At the collective level, the Inner Strengths tool offers communities the opportunity to leverage a tool for empowerment and recognition that aligns with the knowledge, traditions, and realities of First Nations. This tool introduces perspectives on recognition, skills useful for everyday life, and the inner strengths of individuals that have been inspired by First Nations members.

The Inner Strengths tool thus enables communities to move beyond non-Indigenous conceptions of skills and their utility. With repeated use, First Nations individuals and communities will have the opportunity to develop visions of skills and inner strengths that are increasingly aligned with their knowledge, traditions, and realities.

The Inner Strengths tool therefore has the potential to provide communities with the means to access new forms of sovereignty, particularly in terms of skills and recognition. This tool also has the potential to contribute to the self-determination of these communities, notably by empowering them to better value the skills useful in daily life and to recognize the inner strengths of their members.

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