

# Perceptions of Postsecondary Education in a Northern Ontario First Nation Community

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From my position as ally to an Anishnawbe community in Northern Ontario, I explored the relationships of community members to postsecondary education. From their stories, it became clear that in Northern Ontario, the transition from the on-reserve school system at any level is very difficult, and is exacerbated by family violence and tensions, racism faced by Aboriginal students who enter non-Aboriginal society, and a perception of lower quality teaching and resources in the Community school. Participants in this study chose more college programs when first entering postsecondary education, and attended the college in the nearby town most frequently. Suspicion of and isolation from the non-Aboriginal school system as a result of the impact of residential schools still exists, and continues to have an effect on Community participation in education. However, analysis of participant interviews and Community policy clearly indicate the desire for community members to attend postsecondary education. Postsecondary education is seen as an essential tool to improve Community conditions as well as the life prospects of individuals within it.

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## INTRODUCTION

It was in the summer of 2008 that I first arrived in a First Nation community in Northern Ontario, where I had been hired to work as a camp counselor. During that summer, I spent time with community members whose endless patience, trust and kindness, profoundly changed me. I returned home to Toronto that fall with a strong desire to continue my new friendships, but I was also struck with an overwhelming need to attempt to give back to people who had shared so much with me. I had no fantasies of having “helped” any person or any situation. Rather, my eyes were opened to a set of Aboriginal circumstances which exist all over Canada, and to the overwhelming ignorance of these circumstances amongst the general population, as represented by my Italian-Canadian family and my non-Aboriginal (however quite multicultural) group of friends. I thus pulled an

abrupt about-face on the Master's program I was set to begin at OISE<sup>1</sup>, and began the process of inquiry into a question which had slowly germinated over the course of that first summer in the community namely, that of the perceptions into postsecondary education held by Community youth.

## HISTORY AND CONTEXT

It is important for me to balance an anonymous identity for the Community with the acknowledgement that the information in this study reflects a particular context and set of people. This study was conducted with members of a remote First Nation community, on what is designated by the Canadian government as being a reserve. The reserve system began in New France in 1637, initially as a way to preserve Aboriginal peoples ways of living, but in conjunction with the Indian Act and inadequate resources resulted in isolation, impoverishment and oppression (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996). Despite being initially forced onto these reserves, many First Nations people gladly choose to continue to live in these communities, for many reasons, one being that they are located on their traditional territories.

In the case of the Community in question, large scale tragedies at the hands of both the government and private corporations have created poor health (Kirmayer, Simpson & Cargo, 2003; Clark, Piben & Nowgesic, 2002; Young et al., 2000), housing (Assembly of First Nations [AFN], 2005), environmental (Ahni, 2009; Office of the Auditor General, 2009), and educational conditions on reserves today (First Nations Education Council, 2009). These complex relationships within First Nation communities set the backdrop for the participant comments included in the paper.

While on a national level, a disparity exists between the proportion of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people attending university (Preston, 2008), the rates of postsecondary attainment for the Community in particular are half that of the national Aboriginal population in all three categories (trade school, college, and university).<sup>2</sup> There are programs for Aboriginal students, as well as culturally appropriate pedagogical and curricular interventions

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2 This information was retrieved from Statistics Canada Community Profiles, updated as of 2006, but to maintain the anonymity of the community, the exact online address cannot be provided. The Profile search engine is available at <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2006/dp-pd/prof/92-591/index.cfm?Lang=E>

that have been implemented at the postsecondary level in Canada. In Ontario, for instance, most universities have some academic programming specifically for Aboriginal peoples (Naokwegijig-Corbière, 2007). The history of postsecondary funding for Aboriginal people in Canada is tumultuous (see Stonechild, 2006 for a detailed discussion). Despite a growing population and increased interest in postsecondary education, funding from the government has not increased since the mid-1990s. Approximately three hundred million dollars is given to the Post-Secondary and Student Support Program (PSSSP) by the government on an annual basis, an amount that used to serve approximately 30,000 but now is only able to send 22,000 Aboriginal students to postsecondary education per year, and is increasingly unable to meet growing demands of a population expanding at a rate far exceeding the rest of Canada (Scofield, 2010). Today, the very future of the PSSSP is uncertain, as media reports speculate on the use of the funds, and the amount of money dedicated to the program remains unchanged (Scofield, 2010; CBC News, 2010).

An exhaustive review of the literature revealed very few studies which examined the relationship between Aboriginal youth in Canada and high school to postsecondary education transitions. In 2010, the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) released a report on Aboriginal peoples' transitions from high school to postsecondary but as a Canadian government organization, its discourses are firmly rooted in the neoliberal tradition which does not align with the framework underpinning my study. Their literature review did identify that education and transition programming at all levels for First Nations people face underfunding, yet made no reference to the history and current reality of colonization. It instead found that lower educational outcomes for Aboriginal people were negatively affected by "living in neighbourhoods with a higher proportion of low income families" and youth experiencing excessive mobility (CMEC, 2010, p. 25). The report also takes note of the large gaps in the literature, including lack of details on the so-called "delayed transitions of Aboriginal persons from high school to postsecondary education" (CMEC, 2010, p. 25).

A series of reports from Taylor and colleagues have focused on the relationship between First Nation and Métis communities in Alberta, postsecondary education and training, and work. In their study on the institutional and personal factors that influence career pathways of First

Nations youth from a reserve community, Taylor and Steinhauer (2010) found that persistent challenges existed for community members who wanted to pursue education such as lack of educational funding, limited availability of further education opportunities on or near the reserve, and a lack of support provided by institutions for Aboriginal students. It was also noted that participants did not take linear pathways towards a career as a result of prioritizing their responsibilities to community, and focused on incremental steps towards their goals (Taylor & Steinhauer, 2010). Work goals were found to be held in balance with “other goals related to family, spirituality, culture, and community” (Taylor & Steinhauer, 2010, p. 7).

Taylor & Friedel (2011) found that, in the context of public-private partnerships intended to promote economic development while providing employment opportunities to First Nation and Métis communities in Alberta, youth often have trouble fulfilling the many requirements to access these programs, whose entry criteria is set primarily by industry (who are identified as the chief decision makers in partnerships with Aboriginal communities). Youth living in remote communities had additional barriers to accessing these programs and employment opportunities in general due to the geographic separation from high-school and postsecondary education, and their increased likeliness to be placed in high school course streams that did not lead to postsecondary education (Taylor & Friedel, 2011). This study and Taylor, Friedel, and Edge (2010) both found that the funding coming from PSSSP was severely lacking in its ability to meet the realities of postsecondary education for First Nations students.

When examining the transitions of First Nations and Métis youth in Alberta, a third study noted that youth faced racism in schools in town, and are often moved to unskilled work if they enter the workforce (Taylor, Friedel & Edge, 2010). These youth are sometimes sent by their families to stay with others in town to attend high school due to perceived low quality of on-reserve school (Ibid., 2010). Whether moving away from the community to attend high school or postsecondary education, or to find work, the transition of living away from the support networks of the community were strongly felt by the study’s participants (Ibid., 2010).

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

The question which community members and I agreed upon to guide the research were: what perceptions do youth living in First Nations

community hold about postsecondary education? Further I wanted to explore what circumstances contribute to the decision youth make about whether or not to attend postsecondary education, and if they do, what types of programs they choose. The purpose of the project was to gain an in-depth understanding of these questions in specific to this particular First Nation community and communicate these results to the community's Postsecondary Counsellor and Band Council in order to inform their policy.

At the urging of new friends and colleagues in the Toronto First Nation community, I met with two Elders in Toronto prior to initiating dialogue with the Community about the project. Both women I consulted with were encouraging and thought that even as an outsider, there was a good way forward to conducting the research; if the community indicated that they wanted to participate. Their stories were very important in helping me to reflect on my first months in the Community. One Elder in particular shared with me that within her community, outsiders are watched for their behaviour, and that community members can see right into that person's heart. From these words I realized that the relationships I had built and the invitations I had received to come back to the territory indicated that people had placed a level of trust in me, and that I in turn should trust myself. She also encouraged me to continue to question my motives throughout my research, and stressed to me the importance of being respectful during the work, especially towards the people whom I would work with and their stories.

In the fall of 2008 I approached the community's Postsecondary Counsellor and the Chief and Council to propose the project, and we discussed whether or not the area of research was of use to them, and if they could see the results being of benefit to the Community.

## PARTICIPANTS

I conducted ten sets of interviews exclusively within the Community. Eight participants were selected with respect to their interest in postsecondary education. They were between the ages of 18-23, except Charlotte who was in her late 30s. All had lived and/or worked in the Community and had strong family connections there, but Charlotte, Alison, Mike, Carl, and Lucy had attended school and lived in the nearby town for a period. All but Carl had strongly considered postsecondary education. Charlotte had spent years attending various postsecondary programs in college and university, Alison

and Mike had already spent some time enrolled in college, and Lucy, Pat and Dan were in their last years of high school and planning on advancing to college. Maria and Carl had not attended college up until that point but were currently employed full-time in the Community. At the time of writing, Maria had graduated from high school, and Carl had not (but was planning on taking the General Equivalency Degree exam in the next five years).

Formal interviews were also conducted with one band councillor, and one high school teacher. Many conversations, both formal and informal, were held with the Postsecondary Counsellor, one of the vice principals, the Education Director and other members of the community. Those conversations were not recorded on tape, though field notes were taken.

#### METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

The colonization of Turtle Island, and more generally of Indigenous peoples around the world has weaved colonial structures throughout Canadian society, and has resulted in the oppression of Aboriginal peoples and a legacy of intergenerational trauma which is felt in the Community and in Aboriginal families across Canada (RCAP, 1996; Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2009). Scholarly research has a legacy of reinforcing colonial mentalities and power dynamics, so research today must be committed to the process of decolonization (see Menzies, 2001; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2003). As a result of this research project and specifically its methodology, I was determined that, as discussed in Menzies (2001) more knowledge and power should accrue to the Community, rather than the dominant Western academic institution at the expense of the Community.

Moving forward I knew that I would have to develop a deep and critical consciousness of my identity as an Italian-Canadian woman, a process which continues today. Regan (2010) outlines important considerations for settlers working and researching with Indigenous communities arguing that, “settlers cannot just theorize about decolonizing and liberatory struggle: we must experience it, beginning with ourselves as individuals, and then as morally and ethically responsible socio-political actors in Canadian society” (p. 23-24). I continuously explore the ways I have accrued privilege living in Canada and benefitted from the oppression of Aboriginal peoples. In the words of Nishnaabeg scholar and activist Leanne Simpson, as a settler and a Canadian I, among other things, “directly benefit from Indigenous poverty” (Klein, 2013). I attempted to reflect these realizations in my process, and saw

myself as a learner throughout the research, rather than an expert (Regan, 2010).

My pre-existing relationship with the Community, the conditions in the Community itself and my desire to decolonize the research all influenced the methodology, procedure, and documenting of the research. As a person who is not Indigenous, I had concerns, but ultimately decided that the emphasis on relationality in Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (2008) was important to incorporate into the project, in that it reflected my prior and continuing relationship with the Community and my desire to be accountable to those relationships. Wilson's work highlights that the perceptions and biases that I had already formed of the Community could not be removed from the work, or as Wilson (2008) states "we can not remove ourselves from our world in order to examine it" (p. 14). The methodology was specific to the spatial and temporal location of the Community, as well as to my history and identity (Menzies, 2001; Stewart, 2008).

I sought to use the OCAP principles as the foundations of my project (Schnarch, 2004). The OCAP principles emerged as a response to the colonizing legacy of research in Aboriginal communities, and were first articulated together by the Steering Committee of the First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey in 1998 (Schnarch, 2004). The four principles which make up this research guideline are Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (see Schnarch, 2004). While my intention was to fully follow these principles, I realized as the research progressed that it was impossible for me to do so in practice (Nardozi, 2011). The Postsecondary Counsellor, who agreed to be the project's Community Liaison played a crucial role in the project. The Counsellor was an important source of information, and one of the intended beneficiaries of the research, and was included in the research in accordance with the OCAP principles of research with Aboriginal communities, specifically "Ownership" and "Control" (First Nations Centre, 2007). Care was taken to balance the OCAP principles and my requests of this individual, who holds many responsibilities in the Community.

To begin recruitment, the Postsecondary Counsellor and I made a list of youth, both who were aspiring to postsecondary education and those who were not, whom the Counsellor thought would be appropriate to approach. Participants were approached with the help of the Postsecondary Counsellor to ensure anonymity of those that were approached and refused. In some cases, potential participants approached me after hearing about the study. In

all cases, a preliminary letter was given to possible participants, introducing the project and when interest was registered by a potential participant, the Postsecondary Counsellor asked permission for me to contact them.

Participants sat down with me for two interviews, the first lasting forty-five minutes to ninety minutes in length the second lasting thirty minutes to one hour. I did not record notes during interviews to maintain the comfort of participants. Between the interviews I identified the major themes using a mind map methodology. The major themes which emerged and which are explored in this chapter are (1) the desire for postsecondary education within the community, (2) an exploration into the multiple transitions which community members must negotiate if leaving the community to attend postsecondary education and (3) the personal issues that participants voiced and their connection to systemic concerns and oppression faced by First Nation communities.

I adapted the idea of a mind map from two different sources to fit this study. The first is from the work of OISE/UT professor Dr. Suzanne Stewart, who in her work includes a method that utilizes a chart organizing participant statements under themes and separating them into past, present and future (Stewart, 2007). In the follow-up interview, participants are then asked to add, delete, or comment on the story map as presented to them. The mind map analysis method I used is less structured, not using the same temporal delineations. This was influenced by Wilson (2008), who advocates for research processes which are responsive to their participants and build relationships between ideas. I thus sought a more personalized way to organize the data. My resulting process consisted of transcribing all interviews and crafting them into a series of first person statements from the perspective of the participants so that participants could review them, and then tell me whether or not they felt the statements reflected what they wanted to communicate. During the second interview, I read each participant statements from their map and asked them to expand, verify, change, or delete as they saw fit. As an outside researcher, I felt this step was useful to confirm that I had not misinterpreted what participants said during interviews as a result of my unfamiliarity with the context and with their worldview. Most participants spent a short time reading over the statements, however, and only a few amended statements. In some cases, reviewing the statements independently prompted a story or further explanation from the participant.

From these first person statements I created the mind maps which highlighted the connections between the statements. From these maps, themes emerged through a process located in Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). I then used these themes in crafting the final report. After writing the results, the report was made available to all who asked to read it, and a condensed summary suitable for community consumption was given to research participants and distributed to community and school workers.

#### THE DESIRE FOR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

The following sections contain the data gathered from participants during interviews connected where possible to related reports. The data is organized into the three main themes, which are reflected in the title of each section.

In 2010, the Assembly of First Nations identified increased access to postsecondary education as the primary priority for First Nations peoples in Canada (Assembly of First Nations, 2010; Scoffield, 2010). Postsecondary education has been cast by Indigenous scholars as potentially significant to the self-governance and self-reliance of First Nations peoples today (Stonechild, 2006; Hampton, 2000). Community policy, as well as the testimony of participants, suggests that emphasis on postsecondary education is increasing on the local level as well, especially among the younger generation. Many of the participants felt that postsecondary education was important for others in the Community to attend, so to increase the job prospects of Community members, as well as the prosperity of the Community as a whole. In terms of their own personal decisions, the reasons that participants stated for considering postsecondary education echoed those of non-Aboriginal culture. For example, Pat and Dan were both enrolled in grade 12 when I interviewed them. When asked why he valued education Pat replied,

[b]ecause it broadens your horizons. It allows you to see more things than just like, say you're at home; all you would know is what your grandparents told you or what your parents told you.

Dan also valued education because it helped him "learn something new" and to gain insight from "all types of perspectives." But in addition to this, he appreciated that attending school "kept him busy." Some of the other participants also mentioned keeping busy as well as escaping boredom. A few participants indicated to me that school was a way for them to escape their chaotic home life.

Parental encouragement of education seems to have some influence over whether or not a participant went on to postsecondary education, however, the interviews suggest that even if students are not encouraged in school by family members, those with a high degree of self-motivation, who have access to support systems, or who have gone to school in town may advance on. Dan enjoyed attending high school in town and was planning to attend college immediately after graduating, but he said that he felt pressure to attend postsecondary coming from the Community as a whole, rather than from his parents. Dan explained that he knew his family is happy for him and were quite excited that he would soon be graduating, but he emphasized how much they missed him (as he currently lived in town to attend school) and how they asked him frequently to return home. "Yeah, they're not saying you should come back home when you're done school, they're just like, come back home now. I miss you. Come back home." Other participants shared with me that their parents seemed to encourage, if not expect, that their children would attend postsecondary education. Lucy, who just graduated from high school and lives with her family, had consulted with her parents about her decision to attend college, and she told me that she was strongly encouraged by them in her desire to continue, based partially on their own lack of experience with education:

L: They actually want me out of here.

A: (laughs) They want you out of here?

L: (laughs) Yeah, they want me to go out there, do what I got to do.

A: Why do you think they're so, they want you to go?

L: Because they've never made it that far in school.... Well, my dad made it up to grade 11, my mom made it up to grade nine. So, they want me to get out of here.

It was different at home for Carl, however, whose father had steered him towards education, at the expense of completing high school.

There is a concern among some education workers and band councillors regarding the lack of parental involvement in the Community's education system, which was ultimately traced to the devastating experience of residential schools, yet it was noted that some have used traumatic experiences of the past as an impetus to become involved in the school system.

In order to get information about postsecondary education, those participants who lived in town spoke to guidance counsellors, and peers who were planning on attending or had attended a postsecondary institution. For Pat, Lucy, Alison, and Maria, the four participants who spent their graduating year of high school in the Community, their primary source of information regarding college was the Postsecondary Counsellor, as well as their own research for information on where to attend school and what programs to apply to, and had no conversations with peers. Pat and Lucy did not speak to family about their postsecondary education choices and would both be the first in their immediate family to attend.

Where participants considered attending postsecondary education depended on the amount of experience and confidence they had living outside of the Community. When they did decide to attend postsecondary education, participants most often chose college programs based the programs available leading to jobs desired, and because of the perceived ease of college over university (Alison and Mike, for instance, both said they wanted to pursue university after they had mastered college). When discussing why he was considering college over university, Dan revealed that part of what factored into his decision was his perception that college programs were not as challenging as those at universities and that the material was taught at a slower pace. As he expressed it, he wanted a challenge that he could meet, and he felt that attending college would “be better for me, for my own emotions too.” He was more confident of finishing “with all [my] trouble,” as he termed it. Thus, while he is determined to go on in school, he preferred that school and other things in his life unfold at a slower pace, so that he did not have to sacrifice personal balance, or his own emotional well-being to keep his grades high.

The proximity of a community college to the Community factored into the decision of all participants considering postsecondary education. Mike who had spent considerable amount of time living in the nearby town, had mindfully chosen a college in a bigger city, but was only interested in those that have “a small town feeling to it.... So I’m comfortable living [there].” Dan and Alison both changed their mind from their initial plans to attend college a plane ride away from the Community. While Alison was concerned about navigating big changes without a friend who had planned to move with her, Dan changed his mind about where he wanted to attend

school because he did not like the look of Southern Ontario when he visited campuses there. When I asked him to tell me what part of the city in Southern Ontario was not “his scene” (as he described it), he replied that the distant city,

Didn't seem [like] the place I wanted to be 'cause near the [Great Lakes], there's not much bush area around. When I was down there... it ... didn't really catch my eye, [I] didn't see anything special I could walk to or walk around in. If [there] was a park, it was a [town] park, not natural or anything. [In the nearby city], there's a bunch of bush area there.

It was also noted that some youth in the Community hold the view that it is not necessary to attend postsecondary education. The high school teacher I interviewed explained:

I've heard the kids say, “well why do I need to get my grade 12 'cause there's people that work at the band office who make [decent] money and ah, they don't have grade 12. So “why should I have grade 12?” Do you know what I mean? “I could get a job just like that, so why do I have to go to school?”

Indeed, the reality that the Community is not always able to afford to hire Community graduates because of their credentials was a source of frustration for many that I spoke with.

Finally, only Charlotte had attended postsecondary programs which had Aboriginal structure and content, and spoke about how positive experiences there had taught her, in her words “how to be Native.” During our first interview, Dan shared that he felt Aboriginal traditions are “too personal” to be taught in school. He also noted that it was his understanding that Aboriginal teachings were only shared with a person when they were deemed ready for them by their Elders and teachers, and that teaching them according to a course schedule would go against this practice.

During our second meeting, Dan and I continued to talk about Aboriginal traditions and their place in school. At this point, Dan was more open to the possibilities of such programs. He told me of a recent experience he had where an Aboriginal storyteller gave a talk during a workshop he attended for Aboriginal high school students at a university in Southern Ontario. He shared that he really enjoyed the storyteller, and that he was excited to receive teachings new to him. After attending the workshop with

Aboriginal youth from urban and remote communities, Dan said he had realized the benefits these programs could have. “[In the audience] were Natives, but ... they grew up in a White Society, not in their own. So they have a course like that open to them.” This led to the realization -- “what if I want to explore my own culture and myself?” Other participants like Mike and Alison did not choose Aboriginal-based programs because they were seeking skills and knowledge apart from Aboriginal knowledges, and both critiqued the presence of services geared toward Aboriginal students at college. Alison told me that:

It’s not a big deal to me. It’d be nice you know. You’d have that support, that extra crutch basically if you really needed help.... They usually have, if they have those kinds of programs, something there, like a student help [program]. If you’re struggling and stuff. But it wouldn’t be a big deal...because they usually have student help programs anyway. I wouldn’t need one specifically for Aboriginals.... Why do you even need one for specifically for Aboriginals? You shouldn’t even.

Dan’s changing ideas and statements by Alison and Mike who were unaware of why separate services should exist in postsecondary institutions suggests that perhaps there needs to be more awareness brought to Community youth about what these Aboriginal programs can offer, and also maybe consciousness needs to be raised about the unique struggle of Aboriginal students and Aboriginal-specific ways to address these issues. The reluctance to enter these programs also suggested to me that there exists some awareness among participants that they are being racialized.

## TRANSITIONS FROM COMMUNITIES TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

A survey of First Nations across the country suggested that the primary reason that people leave their communities is to seek out education opportunities at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary level (EKOS Research Associates, 2006). During interviews, participants expressed concerns about leaving the Community, specifically about how they would attend to their family and personal responsibilities while living away. Lucy expressed her feelings towards the transition to postsecondary and to living in town plainly when she told me “It’s very scary.... I’m kind of scared to

go out there.” If they do leave, participants described negotiating a host of transitional issues such as difficulty finding work and/or a place to live, the loss of community support systems, and cultural differences, and facing racism in town.

Instead of celebrating their successes, the world that greets Aboriginal students leaving their reserves is often not a welcoming one. The teacher speculated that individuals attending school outside the Community for the first time may have difficulty navigating postsecondary institutions:

They may or may not know where to go for help when they’re in college. Most colleges that I know do have student success centres that will help people that struggle. But the kids might not know about that, and they might not know how to access it, or even know who to ask for help, or may think that help’s not available to them when they’re out there. Unlike in the Community where school employees are often well acquainted with the life stories of the children and youth, workers at their new schools also may not be aware or acknowledge their unique life histories.

While in town, participants said they were constantly told by non-Aboriginal people that they were different in a negative way and that being Aboriginal and from a reserve had made them so. Many reported experiencing isolation and racism from public school employees and other students. Lucy encountered racism from adults who worked at the school in town during her one month attempt to attend there. She reveals,

I spit in the Janitor’s face. Um, I was pretty angry. I was angry. Real angry...because they kept saying “Natives don’t belong here,” and I was like, “man, shut up,” so. I did what I had to do.... I was just walking by.

According to informants such as the Postsecondary Counselor, even though the town is within a short drive of the Community, youth still have a difficult time navigating new experiences like rent, groceries, and a more complicated school system. The Community does attempt to ease the financial transition by providing a monthly allowance that is given along with academic funding, but Alison finds the money she receives every month from the Band Council inadequate as a sole source of funding, even though she does not have to pay

rent at the house her parents own in town. As she puts it, “if I was living on my own and not in my parents’ house, I wouldn’t be able to live off that. Rent in [town] is \$650 a month. You get \$637 a month from the band.”

None of the participants expressed concern at their ability to maintain their traditions when away from the Community, as those that classified themselves as “very traditional” felt that they would be able to participate in ceremonies in other communities with ease, based on the welcoming nature of Aboriginal cultures. Dan said,

I think no matter where I am, as long as I try to be or I want to learn something, I want to go to the sweat lodge. No matter where I am, it’s going to be there...because I know for a fact that, we’re all over the place.... And I can go to [local communities] and ask for them to give me a sweat, and ask for guidance, just because [in] our culture, we are supposed to help anyone. We’re open to anyone. We’re not supposed to be judgmental of anything.

For some participants like Pat who identified as less traditional and who had also faced racism in town, there existed some desire to adapt to the mainstream as a reaction to being racialized.

Conversations with the teacher and other Community officials revealed that when students from the Community enter mainstream education institutions, they find that they are not prepared for the academic transition, since mainstream institutions set the standards not those who transition. I decided to ask the high school teacher whether they had seen many students go on and be successful in postsecondary education during the years they had been employed in the Community. They had not, and had the following explanation:

Sadly, I think a lot of it is (sigh) in my opinion, a lot of them might struggle with the school work that they get faced with when they get out [of the Community]. I mean, we try our best to keep things up to ‘standard’, or ‘par’ here [in the Community high school]. You know what I mean, what they should be doing or what they should be learning, but there is a certain point where we have to kind of lower it just a little bit, because so many of the kids are so much below grade level that we can’t possibly do everything. Look, I try so hard not to lower my standards.... I try to make them do as much work as they can. It’s what other kids will be doing in the Province, but there

are obviously times where you have to bring it down just a little bit 'cause they just don't have the knowledge or the background, or whatever basis for what [the Province requires].

It is not known why students are not achieving in school at the level of their mainstream peers. A lack of self-esteem, persistent absenteeism, and the lack of credentials of elementary school teachers were all potential causes put forward by participants. Recent literature, however, has placed great emphasis on the role of curriculum in Aboriginal student success, suggesting that the inclusion of Aboriginal histories, languages, and cultural values contribute to students' self-esteem which in turn has positive implications for student success and retention (for a fuller discussion see Kanu, 2011 and Toulouse, 2007). Ultimately, as discussed below, this discrepancy is inextricably tied to the disparity in government funding between provincial schools and schools in First Nation communities.

#### THEORIZING PERSONAL ISSUES AS SYSTEMIC PROBLEMS

Rather than being a reflection of themselves and their ability to adapt, many of the issues participants identified in themselves and in the Community are a consequence of the systemic inequities that are present for Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Participants shared many negative stories about the school in the Community which focused on both the quality of its academic offerings (as compared to those found in the provincial education system) and the abilities of elementary teachers from the Community. Further probing revealed that students did have positive stories about these teachers, while other teachers praised their abilities. Mike related,

Yeah, [name omitted], she still works here.... She um, she's really good, she also got us to ah, what's the word, to interact with her. I remember every time after school, when we'd go home for lunch or after school, she would get us to either give her a hug or a handshake before we left the door.

However, a negative stigma was attached to these teachers because most had not received professional mainstream credentials, and this was seen as the primary reason for the low standard of education offered at the school as compared to provincial schools in town.

While Maria and Lucy felt satisfied and challenged with the high school on reserve and its curriculum, participants who had attended school

in town for a substantial period of time like Mike, Carl and Alison leveled criticism at the Community's school for not having the same resources as schools in town, for not offering a comparable range of courses, and for seemingly not pushing students academically. Alison for instance was frustrated that her time in the Community high school did not prepare her for some of her experiences in college:

You don't learn [public speaking skills] in [the Community]. So then when you go to somewhere where you are expected to do that, or where you are expected to be open and out there, and meet new people..., I failed this one class three times. No, twice, because of the last project at the end, which is a presentation project, where I had to stand up and talk for 10 to 20 minutes about a certain topic.

The band councillor I interviewed felt that the workers at the school could do more in terms of promoting certain courses so that students could fare better in postsecondary education. They saw the problem residing in the teachers who "don't push" education at the students as well as the students, who they felt had to be "ready to take that extra learning challenge."

One large factor which contributes to these perceived deficits in the on-reserve school system and in academic achievement, and which none of the young participants seemed to be aware of, is that schools off-reserve in Canada receive approximately double the funding from the Provincial government than First Nation schools on reserve receive from the Federal government (AFN, no date; RCAP, 1996). As a result second-level services such as pedagogical, administrative, and professional development support services and third-level services, such as development of regulations and standards, certification and codes of conduct, and the setting of school curriculum all of which are usually administered by provincial Ministries of Education within community schools, suffer in comparison to those offered in the provincial education system (First Nations Education Council, 2009). In the meantime, areas such as libraries, technology, sports and recreation, languages, student transportation and school operating costs, employee benefits, and student data management systems are not funded at all (First Nations Education Council, 2009).

If students do receive their high school diploma and wish to go to postsecondary education, it was revealed that there is not enough money available in the Community (as in many others) to fund every applicant. As

the Community grows and more people make their way through the school system, increased demand is placed on the money available each year, which has not increased across Canada since 1996 (First Nations Education Council, 2009).

The recent media attention to the state of postsecondary funding for Aboriginal people in Canada has left many Aboriginal people across the country frightened for the future of the program, and angry that the government continues to deny that access to postsecondary education is a treaty right (Carr-Stewart, 2001). When interviewed, the band councillor expressed frustration towards the rumours which s/he called "undermining." To prepare for this possibility, some participants who plan to attend postsecondary in the future are beginning to strategize to find funds elsewhere. Dan was worried because of the rumours surrounding PSSSP. He revealed to me that he has "thought hard" about a plan, and just in case the funding is cancelled he will "[t]ry to do my best in school so I can get bursaries." During his time in the town high school, Dan has heard about people receiving large scholarships and bursaries, and he wants to adopt their strategy and "apply to everything."

#### PROMISING FUTURE STEPS BEING TAKEN

After years of broken promises from various Federal governments, a new school building in the Community welcomed students very recently and the Education Direction expressed plans to hire a parental engagement officer, begin a parent council, and hold forums for children about absenteeism. These efforts also show that Community members are growing more ready and willing to discuss these past injustices together, which is an important step in the healing process. There are many positive developments in the Community to look forward to, but it is important to note that without adequate funding from any level of government, it will be difficult to make sustaining and meaningful improvements. In the meantime, decisions which adapt programming to fit the realities of life in the Community, such as the bold implementation of the block system in the high school will continue to be met with success, and will, I hope, inspire the Community to continue to make such innovative choices, and advocate for greater self-determination in their education system.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE PROJECT

Now that the research is written up, I would like to take some space to reflect on the process of this project. While I am satisfied that the findings of the project represent the experiences of a portion of the Community, I know that there are perspectives that my research did not capture. Given more time in the Community, the sample size of ten formal participants could have been expanded considerably. This was hampered by my limited budget, which meant that I was not able to stay in the Community for longer periods.

I also strongly feel that the work and my own insights could have benefitted from the participation of a Community Elder. Perhaps if I had approached or been introduced to a Community Elder, he or she may have shared their perspective on the history of the Community, and the desire for and role of postsecondary education. I felt great tension with the idea of asking to consult with an Elder from the community because I had a sense from conversations that Elders were not introduced nonchalantly to outsiders. As a settler-researcher who aspires to act as an ally to the Community, I sat with that tension, and as Regan (2010) writes accepted that as an outsider I can “never fully know [the Community and its members]; nor should [I] aspire to do so” (p. 26).

### CONCLUSION

While my study and its results are limited to one particular community, the findings may be of interest to other First Nation communities across Canada who might have concerns regarding access to postsecondary education. The conclusions which emerged from the stories I heard suggest that in Northern Ontario, the transition from the on-reserve school system at any level is very difficult for Community members, and is exacerbated by family violence and tensions, and a perception of lower quality teaching and resources in the community schools. At the postsecondary level, participants almost always chose college programs when first entering postsecondary education, and attended the college in the nearby town most frequently so to diminish the effects of this transition.

The emphasis on postsecondary education by the Assembly of First Nations identified earlier is evident in the Community. Suspicion of and isolation from the mainstream school system exists, and has an effect

on Community participation in education. However, analysis of participant interviews and Community policy clearly indicate the desire for community members to attend postsecondary education, especially among younger generations. Postsecondary education is seen as an essential tool to improve Community conditions as well as the life prospects of individuals within it. Future research may explore the experiences of a more diverse group of participants, or examine the journey of children through the Community's school system, an area of interest identified by many who worked there. Ultimately however, awareness needs to be raised about the gross educational funding disparities in order for the government to feel real pressure from its constituents to make meaningful and much needed change, and this realization guides my current role as an educator of teacher candidates.

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