Evolving constraints and personal "choices":

Understanding the pathways of students in First Nations communities

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the institutional and personal factors that influence the career pathways of Aboriginal youth living on a reserve in Alberta, Canada. The youth in our study participated in a provincial summer work experience program that was designed to interest high school students in health services careers. This internship, like many school-to-work initiatives in OECD countries, aims to attract young people to a sector with reported skills "shortages" and to help smooth their transition to work by making career pathways more transparent (cf. OECD, 2000). Designers of the internship program also assumed that students would go directly to university upon completing high school, and would then secure work in their occupational area. However, our interviews with youth and others within a First Nations community suggest the need to look more closely at why youth do not tend to follow linear pathways.

Conceptual influences

The idea that young adults follow a developmental process that involves a linear and sequential movement toward their goals has been critiqued by a number of writers (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Looker & Dwyer, 1998; Raffe, 2003; te Riele, 2004). For example, Dwyer and Wyn (2001) argue that the idea of a linear pathway was only ever applicable to a minority of young people (e.g., middle class white males in the 1950s) and therefore researchers need to explore the conditions under which different groups of young people are living and the meanings they attach to life events. For example, Looker and Dwyer (1998) report findings from two longitudinal studies of youth in Canada and Australia, which suggest that the transition experiences of rural youth are qualitatively different from those of urban youth and do not conform to the "linear pathway" metaphor. The fact that their "horizons for action" are different (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae, 2001) is evidenced by the fact that rural high school drop out rates were nearly twice as high as the urban drop out rate in 2004/05 (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006).

Some of the findings related to rural youth also describe the lived experiences of First Nations youth. However, Gabor, Thibodeau, and Manychief (1996) add that a lack of housing, transportation, and employment opportunities also limited the options for Aboriginal youth who

wished to stay on reserves. Early experimentation with alcohol and drugs were common and made it difficult for youth to pursue healthier lifestyles. At the same time, youth who left the reserve often dealt with discrimination and conflicts between their values and those prevalent in the mainstream culture. We begin from the assumption that the lived experiences of First Nations youth are qualitatively different from those of the non-reserve population and examine some of the institutional and personal factors that need to be recognized by policy-makers if they are to better support Native youth in their transitions.

Research method and context

Three visits were made over two years to the First Nations community that is the focus of our study. The first visit was undertaken with the purpose of assessing the summer internship (work experience) program. A total of 16 individual and group interviews were conducted with students, workplace supervisors, educators, and coordinators in August and September 2004 (Taylor and Steinhauer, 2005). A second visit occurred in August 2005 and three follow-up interviews were conducted with a health department representative, tribal council coordinator, and student. Since we were "outsiders" (although Evelyn is from another First Nations community in northern Alberta), we recognized the need to gain a better sense of the context in which this work experience program occurred. We therefore returned to the largest community in February 2006 to conduct eleven more interviews. Five interviews were conducted with individuals representing the school district, two schools, the college, health department, and employment and skills training department and six follow-up interviews were conducted with students who had been involved in the internship in 2004. Five of the six students interviewed were female. While this undoubtedly reflects the association of females with health services work, it also is consistent with the finding that Aboriginal post-secondary students are disproportionately women (Malatest, 2002). In total, we conducted 30 interviews or focus groups between 2004 and 2006. Interviews were fully transcribed and N6 was used to code data and organize our analysis.

The reserve that is the primary focus of our research is one of the largest in Canada with a population of approximately 10,000 people. This treaty area is seen as average in comparison with other First Nations communities that were analyzed in a national study (Armstrong, 2001). However, "the First Nations communities in the best of socio-economic circumstances compare only with the poorest regions of non-aboriginal Canada" (Armstrong, p. 22).

Evolving constraints

Although respondents used the term "band control" to describe areas of education and healthcare on the reserve, it was apparent that the institutionalization of federal practices as well as the continuing federal control through funding relations make it very difficult for communities to move forward in a self-directed way. One respondent from the health department described the process of moving from very tight federal regulation of programs to more open agreements as the "evolution of constraints." Therefore, the legacy of colonial relations persists. This section describes the institutional context that shapes the realities of First Nations youth with a focus on compulsory schooling, access to post-secondary education (PSE), and access to employment.

Secondary schooling

Our analysis of interviews highlights some of the institutional challenges that affect the experiences, attitudes, and horizons for action of First Nations youth. School board and school respondents suggested that 40 percent of all students living on the reserve and 60 percent of high school students attended school off reserve. Further, the observation that reserve schools tends to retain a higher proportion of students with special needs was supported by the finding that while provincial schools enrolled between 4 and 8 percent of students in integrated occupational programs (IOP), which lead to a certificate of achievement requiring fewer credits, approximately 40 percent of eligible students attending schools on reserve were enrolled in IOP courses. However, resources for students with special needs were reportedly lacking in comparison with provincial schools. Resources were also stretched because of the priority (without federal support) given by the school district to cultural programming (e.g. language immersion).

Similar to other rural districts that lack the economies of scale of urban centres, there are also challenges associated with trying to offer the required range of courses to a small number of students. One indication of resource deficiency is the fact that teacher salaries on reserve are reportedly six to seven thousand dollars less on average than those in provincial schools. Further, because of funding uncertainties, teachers are hired on limited-term contracts. Reserve schools also faced challenges in trying to provide work experience and other career exploration opportunities for students because of the size of the reserve, a lack of public transportation, limited placement opportunities, and scheduling challenges.

We see the influence of these constraints in discussion with student participants. For example, more than one noted that in aspiring to post-secondary education (PSE), they had to leave most of their peers behind. Participants who attended reserve schools also faced questions from

people inside and outside the community about whether their aspirations were attainable (partly because of negative perceptions about the quality of schooling on reserve). These factors and others discussed in the sections that follow provide insight into why it is more difficult for students attending school on reserves to develop clearly-defined horizons for action with respect to future education and work.

Access to and challenges associated with post-secondary education

Aside from factors associated with K-12 education, other factors affecting students' pursuit of PSE include the availability of student funding, the availability of further education opportunities on or near the reserve, and the support provided by institutions for Aboriginal students. In terms of federal funding for PSE, more First Nations students are competing for fewer resources. Citing an increase in costs and the number of eligible students, the federal government introduced new guidelines in 1989 that tightened eligibility and funding restrictions for Indian and Inuit post-secondary students (Wotherspoon and Satzewich, 2000). In the community that is the focus of our study, a representative of the band-controlled college that administers post-secondary funding suggested that 60 percent of applicants do not receive support because of the scarcity of funds. The college gives preference to recent high school graduates and continuing students and continued funding depends on students following a linear pathway. It therefore penalizes students who drop out, fail, or switch programs. For example, of the five student participants interviewed who attended post-secondary institutions, two lost their funding (one dropped out and another failed courses because of a personal crisis which affected his performance).

The availability of PSE opportunities on and off the reserve also impacts student decisions regarding further education. The band-operated college opened in the latter part of the 1980s in an old residential school building. It has been brokering courses through local colleges and universities for several years. However, one significant concern for some students taking programs at the tribal college is whether their certification will be recognized off the reserve. Aboriginal institutions may obtain accreditation of programs through an affiliation agreement with an accredited university or college (usually for a single course or program) or they may apply to provincially established accreditation agencies or bodies (Morgan and Louie, 2006). As the president of a tribal college commented, "The only way to get recognition is to work as a mainstream institution" (Barnsley, 2005). Alternatively, colleges can seek accreditation through the First Nations Accreditation Board (FNAB). However, the current status of the FNAB is unclear (Morgan and Louie, 2006). Therefore, tribal colleges appear to face a "catch 22" situation in that they are often established in opposition to

mainstream institutions yet must harmonize with these institutions if their students' credentials are to be recognized off the reserve.

Beyond programs on the reserve, there were at least three colleges and two universities within 300 km of the centre of the reserve. When asked about the support provided for Aboriginal students by off-reserve institutions, an administrator from the tribal college noted that most institutions have a centre for Native students. Participants agreed that off-reserve institutions offered some support for Aboriginal students and most acknowledged that this support was very important. This is partly because youth in rural communities who want to pursue PSE usually face higher financial costs and are likely to feel cut off from social support networks (Looker and Dwyer, 1998). For example, when asked what might hold her back from achieving her career goals, a 16 year-old participant replied:

> *"Um, maybe schooling. If I wanted to go that way [nursing], I think to get a good one [program], I'd probably, like go to the U of A [approximately 500 kilometres away]. But I'm the baby of the family, so it'll be kind of hard for me like to let go of that whole support system of my family."*

Added to this, student participants suggested that it was common to feel self-doubt because of negative stereotypes about native peoples. Indigenous writers note that many students experience feelings of alienation within mainstream PSE institutions (Smith, 1999). The preceding discussion helps us to understand the reasons for the extended and non-linear pathways of many Aboriginal students (cf. Breaker and Kawaguchi, 2002). For example, of the students interviewed, one student had dropped out of a university "transition program" and another drooped out of a two-year college certificate program. A third was enrolled in a three-year diploma program at a college in a nearby city and had moved. A fourth had been unable to graduate from high school on the reserve as expected because of illness and had taken an additional year to upgrade and complete her diploma. She planned to apply to university for general arts. A fifth (who was only 16 years old) was attending high school off reserve also planned to pursue post-secondary education although she had changed her career goal from paediatrician to massage therapist. The last student was attending her first semester of university in a general arts program and had changed her career goal from psychiatrist to psychologist. This student was the only one following a "linear" path from high school to university. The previously mentioned challenges associated with further education and the fact that further education does not guarantee employment in the community (discussed in the next section) help to explain the incremental approach of students.

<u>Work Opportunities</u>

> *One of the biggest problems I find on the reserve is just lack of work. … What I find is if you take, for instance, a city you'll see that 80 to 90 percent of its work comes from the private sector, and our private sector is very small. (Representative from Employment and Skills Training Department)*

The main employers on reserve are the tribal administration, departments and entities (e.g. health, education), and an agriculture project. However, the unemployment rate on the reserve is very high—estimated by the participant cited above at 40 to 50 percent. Youth unemployment is also a concern. For example, although the Employment and Skills Training department runs a summer employment program for students, only about one third of students find placements.

An important tension in the discussion of pathways for First Nations students concerns the goal of trying to attract professional people back to the community when much of the available work on the reserve is said to be unskilled, and opportunities, even for professional work, are limited in certain ways. For example, two of the largest employers are health and education departments, which each employ approximately 200 people. Both departments seek to hire Aboriginal people and have seen their numbers increase over time. In fact, around 90 percent of their teachers are Aboriginal and the district is "running out of positions" on reserve for newly trained teachers.

In the health area, although shortages are reported, there are also constraints. For example, the federal government closed the on-reserve hospital in 1999 and therefore, the health department is unable to deliver the range of services and to offer professionals the range of work experience that is available off reserve. Like education, health department staff point out that while they compare favourably to other reserves, the level of resources (and hence service) is not comparable to the provincial system. Partly because of funding guidelines, the health department has traditionally had a much higher ratio of full time to part time and casual staff as the provincial system. Therefore, even where there is the rhetoric of shortage, actual opportunities for new graduates may be limited.

Life transitions and culture

Our goal has been to identify some of the institutional constraints faced by First Nations youth in the areas of compulsory education, post-secondary education, and work. While this analysis is useful in highlighting reasons for their "non-linear" pathways, we need to acknowledge that youth participants do not give the same priority to career transitions as policy-makers (cf., Dwyer and Wynn, 2001).

For example, when students were asked how they saw their past and future pathways, one commented: "I won't" follow a straight path in the future, but added, "I don't mind it; I like trying different things." Another student expanded the idea of pathways when she replied, "I'd say that my educational path has been pretty straight but my spiritual journey and my personal path has been kind of wavy—you know, not really figuring out if I should do this or if I should do that." Further, participants valued family and community as well as a satisfying career. For example, when asked about career goals, one participant stated, "I think my career goals are to follow and help our community," and other student participants echoed this strong sense of responsibility to community. Similarly, as mentioned, a number of female participants were already taking responsibility for family members (parents, siblings, grandparents) and were clear about the priority given to these relationships. Therefore, following a linear path to further education and career was not seen as critical.

In fact, some participants perceived a tension between community values and professional career goals. For example, a participant from the school district spoke about the price of mainstream success in terms of the loss of culture, because as schools and families become better at grooming their children for "success," they often have no choice but to leave the reserve. Therefore, cultural programs (e.g., immersion programs) appear as exercises that are "not really going anywhere."

At the same time, the comments of student participants demonstrate that culture and spirituality have been and continue to be critical in their pathways to adulthood. For example, they had attended and taken part in traditional ceremonies and some had accepted or aspired to take on respected roles within cultural societies. Most spoke about their cultural and spiritual traditions as foundational for their past development and future lives. The words of First Nations youth suggest that the priorities and values of students are not those of policy-makers. Career transitions are part of broader life transitions and students clearly felt the need to balance work goals with other goals related to family, spirituality, culture, and community.

Implications of findings

The comment of a student participant that "I just go step by step" is typical of the incremental approach to pathways exhibited by the First Nations youth in our study. Although these young people were no doubt different from many peers in that they had expressed post-secondary aspirations early and had either completed or were on track to successfully complete high school, most of their pathways were not linear. Our analysis identifies some of the institutional and personal factors

related to compulsory schooling, post-secondary education, and work that provide insight into student "choices."

The example of the health internship suggests that facilitating career pathways for First Nations youth requires greater attention to ensuring that students are made aware of and are able to meet the requirements for entry to post-secondary programs, and that post-secondary institutions support Aboriginal students. Ideally, a broader range of accredited PSE programs would be available on reserves. In addition, adequate federal funding must be provided to increase access to PSE. At the same time, given the incremental process followed by young people and the large number of adults on the reserve involved in upgrading, it is equally important that opportunities be provided for adults to re-enter the education and training system (particularly in areas of labour shortage) and that employees be given opportunities to "ladder" into more highly skilled positions. Finally, it needs to be clear to graduates that they will find appropriately-skilled work.

The priority given to community by the student participants, and the fact that the development of transparent and viable pathways requires the collaboration of several groups, challenges the characterization of pathways as individual. Rather, *community pathways* that involve a holistic approach to facilitating life transitions for youth and adults while meeting community needs may be a more appropriate metaphor. Such an approach would acknowledge that while the "non-linear" career pathways of First Nations youth reflect institutionalized constraints that need to be addressed, they also encompass values that are likely to contribute to social cohesion.

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