

Education and Employment Patterns Among Northern Aboriginal Youth: A study of resiliency, development and community health

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Overview

In light of overwhelming evidence indicating that obtaining a formal education and being engaged in school are strongly correlated with health (Raphael, 1996; Nutbeam et al., 1993), as well as social and economic well-being (Radwanski, 1987), educational disengagement among Aboriginal students has become a pressing health and development issue in Canada. It was mentioned in the 2002 Speech from the Throne, the most enduring contribution Canada can make to First Nations is to raise the standard of education on reserves and to improve the educational outcomes¹ of First Nation people.

This paper provides the background for an ethnographic study that will examine school, schooling and education among Aboriginal youth in a resource-rich area of northern Canada. The research began with an orientation, for members of the research team, to the issue of Aboriginal school 'drop-out' in the context of northern Canadian communities, as well as an opportunity to foster relationships with a variety of stakeholders in the region. As in qualitative tradition, the planning phase of this study provided necessary background information that informed the further development of the project's aims, objectives,

research questions and methods. In particular, the goal during planning was to identify the exact study setting, cases and initial sample. Subsequent phases of research are expected to include participatory, nested case studies (including interviews, participant observation and document review with youth, community, corporate and government representatives) surrounding the issue of schooling and education for northern Aboriginal youth in resource-rich settings. The use of 'high school completion', regardless of contextual factors, as the most significant educational outcome for this population will be critically assessed. The 'value-added' nature of a high school diploma in a setting where employment opportunities may be available regardless of high school completion or where higher educational opportunities are miles away, socially, culturally and geographically will be explored in a collaborative process. This study may help point to factors associated with educational disengagement and resiliency among this population, particularly in relation to resource development and employment opportunities, and by identifying these factors, may help inform the future development of effective interventions, practice guidelines and policy aimed at positively impacting the health of Aboriginal people.

Context of the Study

It has been estimated that currently, less than 50% of Aboriginal students in Canada finish high school. In contrast, the current drop-out

¹ The phrase 'educational outcomes' was used directly in the Speech from the Throne. It should be noted that interrogating assumptions inherent in this statement is a main thrust of this research.

rate among non-Aboriginal Canadians is 12%² (Bowlby and McMillen, 2002).

Resource development, particularly in northern Canada, has increased significantly over the past thirty years. This economic boom, along with current moves towards Aboriginal self-governance and the recent development of corporate guidelines regarding Aboriginal employment and the use of local contracting agencies, has resulted in a considerable increase in the number of, and need for, Aboriginal workers (Suncor Energy, 2001a). At the same time as northern communities are raising concerns about the alarming 'drop-out' rate of Aboriginal students, there are employment opportunities in the industrial sector, that allow some young people to become financially independent, regardless of high school graduation (Margaret Fenton, BC Oil and Gas Commission, personal communication, August 10, 2003). It should be noted however, that although employment positions for those with minimal levels of education are initially appealing, these positions are often laborious, may be dangerous and have limited opportunity for professional advancement. There is a clear need to more clearly understand the relationships between resource development, youth employment and education.

Definition of Terms

Educational Disengagement – this term refers to the extent to which students participate in academic and non-academic school activities, and identify with and value school outcomes (Audas and Willms, 2001) it is manifested in school drop-out (students who are between the ages of 6 and 16 who have not graduated yet are not attending public, private or home schooling), truancy (missing school time without permissible cause) or withdrawal from overall school-life (definition taken in part from Alberta Learning, 1995).

Aboriginal - although the preferred form of nomenclature in Canada varies from one community to the next, 'Aboriginal' will be

2 Reports of national drop-out rates vary, this value is taken from the Canadian Youth in Transition survey and refers to 20-year-olds who on December 1999 had not finished and were not attending high school. Full-time members of the armed forces, inmates of institutions and residents of Indian reserves were excluded from this sample. Provincial drop-out rates given in the same document range from 7.3 to 16.4 %.

used as a generic term to refer to people of Native ancestry (First Nation/Indian, Inuit and Métis). When referring to Aboriginal peoples who are not Inuit or Metis, the term 'First Nation' seems to be emerging as a preference in the literature; however, other terms are also in use: Indigenous Peoples, Amerindians; First Peoples; Indians and North American Indians (Raphael, 1996; Friesen, 1997).

Resource – Rich – This phrase is used to refer to areas of northern Canada in a phase of heightened natural resource development. At the present time in northern Canada, this primarily relates to areas of oil and gas, oil sand and diamond mine activity.

Youth – this research will primarily focus on Aboriginal young people between the ages of 15 and 25 years.

Northern Canada - this study will examine the role of school in the lives of Aboriginal youth in a resource-rich area of the North West Territories, Canada.

Theoretical Underpinnings of this Research

It is essential to orient the study by making the theoretical underpinnings of the research explicit. As Fetterman points out:

“Theory is a guide to practice, no study, ethnographic or otherwise, can be conducted without an underlying theory or model. The researcher’s theoretical approach helps define the problem and how to tackle it” (1989, p.5).

This study is being undertaken in a Department of Community Health Sciences and has a population health orientation. Education and schooling are being studied in a health context based on theory in the field of research concerned with social determinants of health.

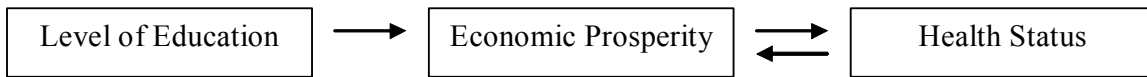
Social Determinants of Health: Education, Prosperity, Attending School and Health

The direct relationship between educational attainment and economic prosperity is well documented. Although exceptions exist, generally an individual who completes high school will be more prosperous than someone who does not. While the nature of the relationship between economic prosperity and an individual’s health is less clear, the relationship between health and wealth is unequivocal. Communicable diseases, for example, have been described as ‘diseases of

the poor', while in recent years we have seen an increase in 'non-communicable' diseases among the 'rich' primarily attributed to diet and lifestyle factors (Raleigh, 1999). Those who are economically prosperous are usually able to afford better quality housing, food and leisure activities, for example, positively affecting their health. This relationship is also reciprocal as those who are healthy are also more able to be economically prosperous.

Educational attainment (successfully completing a specific level of education) must be clearly differentiated from attending, or being engaged in, school. In the past 'Stay In School' campaigns have encouraged students

to continue with their schooling because *educational attainment* is linked to future opportunities for economic prosperity. As mentioned above however, students should not



In such papers as the Lalonde Report and Health Fields Model of 1974, and the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986), the link between education and health was theorized to be more complex than previously shown by the economic prosperity explanation. Evans and Stoddart (1990) put forward a model of social determinants of health that places importance upon such things as physical and social environments, genetic endowment, health services, and individual response *along with* prosperity in predicting health outcomes. The school, as a physical and social environment, was identified as a critical setting that directly impacts the health and well-being of those who engage in that environment. Schools also have the potential to provide direct health education and health services to their students and staff. There is now a significant amount of research indicating that attending, and being engaged in, school positively affects mental and physical health as well as health behaviours (WHO and UNESCO, 1999; UNESCO, 2000; Bond et al., 2001). This is irrespective of the economic outcomes educational attainment may afford.

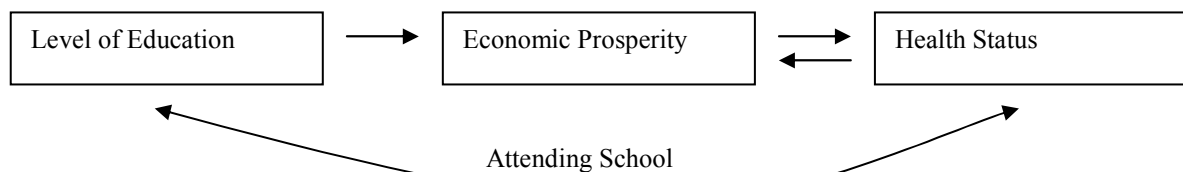
only be encouraged to stay in school for economic reasons, but also because, by being disengaged from school at a young age, they are putting themselves at risk for poorer health than their attending peers.

Literature Review

A brief review of the existing literature surrounding Aboriginal health and educational issues, specifically educational disengagement among northern Aboriginal youth and relevant labour market studies, will help illustrate 'gaps' in current knowledge.

Northern Aboriginal Educational and Health Issues

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was undertaken between 1991 and 1996. Concerns raised during the Commission included the legacy of the residential school system, poverty and racism (Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1996). As a result of the commission, a comprehensive review of public policy relating to land entitle-



In a recent international study initiated by the World Health Organisation, it was shown that alienation from school is the most significant predictor of negative health behaviours among students (Nutbeam et al., 1993). It should be noted that the relationship between attending school and health has also been shown to be reciprocal, educational disengagement is associated with ill health and, at the same time, those students who are unhealthy are also less likely to attend school.

ment, governance, criminal justice, and education was also published. The Commission built to some extent, a new national consensus on Aboriginal concerns and highlighted the pressing need to address health and educational inequity in Canada overall.

In addition to the concerns of all Canadian Aboriginal people, there is a wide range of educational and health issues that either solely effect, or are more prevalent in northern populations. Although many definitions of 'north' exist (McNiven and Puderer, 2000), for

this study, northern Canada shall refer to the three Territorial regions (Nunavut, North West Territories and the Yukon) as well as Labrador and the northern halves of the provinces from Quebec to British Columbia. Previous research indicates that a disparity in the rates of, among other things, diabetes, suicide and educational disengagement exist between northern and southern regions of Canada (Health Canada, Statistics Canada & Canadian Institute for Health Information, 1999). It is hypothesised that this disparity may be due to a combination of factors such as the ethnic makeup or size of northern populations or the difference in access to goods and services, climate and environmental factors, housing, or educational and occupational opportunities (Veugelers et al., 2001).

The majority of communities in northern Alberta reported that among those people from 25 to 29 years of age in 1996, between zero and 28.5% of them were high school graduates. In southern Alberta, the proportion of high school graduates was more often between 65 – 74.9% of the population. This north/south trend was also seen on a national scale, northern regions across Canada consistently reported lower proportions of high school graduates (Natural Resources Canada, 1996).

Further data from Statistics Canada and the Canadian Institute for Health Information indicate that the proportion of high school graduates in a region is also associated with the life expectancy of people in that region. Figure 1 shows the general trend that regions reporting higher proportion of high school graduates also report a longer life expectancy.

It should be noted that northern populations are often, but not exclusively, Aboriginal. Where research exists that differentiates Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal northerners, health and educational outcomes are consistently poorer for Aboriginal people (Health Canada, Statistics Canada and the Canadian Institute for Health Information, 1999). There is evident need for further research pertaining to the health and educational inequity that exists between northern and southern Canadians. In particular, further examination of the educational and health issues impacting northern Aboriginal people is warranted.

Educational and Health Issues Among Aboriginal Youth

Mass media, and much of the existing literature, provide us with a rather dismal picture of the experience of northern Aboriginal youth. Multiple studies have confirmed that serious education and health issues exist among young Aboriginal Canadians and these concerns need to be addressed. For example, Davis et al. (2001) report that a recent survey completed by 16 of Canada’s most isolated schools, all of which serve Aboriginal communities, indicated that the principle challenges faced by staff and students included high student drop-out rates, high staff turn-over, lack of Aboriginal teachers, dysfunctional families and community substance abuse problems. Kirmayer et al. (1999) also note high rates of suicide, attempted suicide and suicidal ideation among Aboriginal youth.

The whole process of being ‘schooled’ in the mainstream educational system has been a relatively recent development for Aboriginal people. Binda and Nicol (1999) point out that one hundred years of centralized government and church control of Aboriginal education in Canada, aimed primarily at cultural assimilation, resulted in injustices, widespread inequalities and under development. McCorrister (1997) completed a study, which looked at the narrative perspective of seven Aboriginal children on the issue of inter-generational alcohol abuse. The author found that children had perceptions of ‘psychologi-

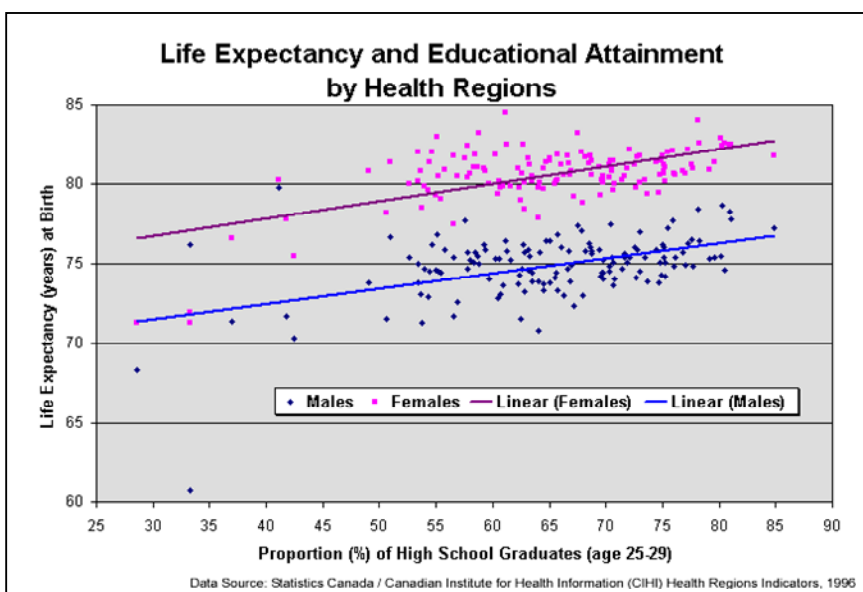


Figure 1: Life Expectancy and Educational Attainment by Health Region in Canada (Statistics Canada and the Canadian Institute for Health Information, 1996).

cal gaps' as a result of the inconsistent presence of adults in their lives.

Understanding Educational Disengagement

A variety of definitions of 'educational disengagement' and 'school drop-out' exist in the literature; however, there seems to be some agreement among researchers that early school leaving is a process rather than a single event or occurrence (Garnier et al., 1997; Ensminger et al., 1996; Jimerson et al., 2000; Audas and Willms, 2001). Some researchers prefer to use the phrase 'fading out' or 'becoming disengaged' from school, which denotes fluid, rather than isolated, developments. It has also been noted that an increasing number of people are moving back and forth between primarily being students and being employed (Krahn, 1996). Results from a recent, national 'Youth in Transition' survey show that many young Canadians who did not originally finish high school subsequently engage in 'second-chance' education. This may include completing high school at a later time or enrolling in post-secondary or on-the-job training opportunities that may earn them high school graduation equivalency (Human Resources Development Canada, 2000; Bowlby and McMullen, 2002). This pattern is particularly evident among Aboriginal populations yet seems to be rarely recognized in the 'drop-out' literature (Human Resources and Development Canada, 2000). The term educational disengagement has a broader scope than 'dropping out', as it refers to the extent at which students participate in academic and non-academic school activities, and identify with and value school outcomes (Audas and Willms, 2001).

Although it is generally accepted that the literature surrounding educational disengagement or 'dropping-out' is at still theoretically inadequate, there are approximately twenty years of research and academic discussion that proposes various theoretical positions, models and frameworks (Dei et al., 1997; Lawton, 1994).

Urie Bronfenbrenner has been widely recognised for the development of an environmental or contextual theory of adolescent development known as ecological theory (1986, 1995, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Bronfenbrenner's hypothesises that in addition to factors that are associated with the individual (sex, age, health status etc)

adolescent development is impacted by factors in five environmental systems: the microsystem (family, peers, school, neighbourhood, church etc); mesosystem (relationships between microsystems); exosystem (environmental factors which originate largely beyond the immediate realm of the individual, ie: mass media, social welfare, legal services, government etc); macrosystem (attitudes and ideologies of the culture) and the chronosystem (sociohistorical conditions or patterns of events and transitions over a life course). A large body of literature exists surrounding Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development. This theory underpins many studies that look at educational disengagement among adolescents. In answering the question, "Why do some students drop-out and others do not?" researchers have looked to factors in each of the environmental realms put forward by Bronfenbrenner and his colleagues.

Finn (1989) has proposed a frustration/self-esteem model that attributes school leaving to a process of disengagement that begins in the early grades. The same author also proposed a 'participation-identification' model in which the author theorizes that students who become involved in school activities identify and become socially attracted to other people in the school setting and subsequently are at less risk of dropping out. This model indicates that the likelihood of a student completing high school increases if the student maintains participation in school related activities.

LeCompte and Dworkin have put forward a 'structural strain and alienation' model that argues that changes at a societal level reduce the 'fit' between school and society and that students and staff increasingly see their involvement in school as lacking purpose (1991). These authors theorize that this school-society 'ill-fit' leads to burn-out in teachers as well as alienation and drop-out in students. In the same sense, Tanner (1996) feels that industrialisation, has caused an increasingly complex division of labour in society. Unlike in the past, skills necessary for work cannot be learned solely from the immediate family and educational institutions now play a larger role in preparing youth for employment. This is felt to be a drastic shift for northern people especially whose traditional way of learning was from the parent or family unit to the child. This evolution in the purpose of schooling has taken time to occur and has not been equally assumed by all institutions.

The 'deviance theory' of dropping out was also put forward by LeCompte and Dworkin (1991). This theory looks at students who, through failing to support or respect school norms, values or rules, are labelled deviants. These students are then at greater risk of being denied supports and services designated for 'well-behaved' students. This theory can be conceptualized in a downward spiral pattern. Students who are labelled deviants may eventually re-define themselves, and in doing so, drift toward more deviant behaviours that may offer external rewards beyond the sanction of the school. Ultimately, because most schools do not tolerate, for example, frequent absenteeism, poor academic performance or truancy, 'deviant' students may be encouraged to leave the school system altogether.

Sociologist Stanley Cohen suggests that mass media may also add to 'deviancy amplification'. Youth, who previously may only have been loosely associated with deviant behaviour, have their identity strengthened as they are exposed to media representations of themselves or their peer group (1973). Researchers at St. Francis Xavier University looked at stereotypes of the Innu people in Northern Labrador (Claxton-Oldfield & Keefe, 1999). They found that among Newfoundland college students, at least 20% described the Innu as uneducated, poor, alcoholics, and gas-sniffers. These sources of these impressions were said to be TV and newspapers. When a content analysis was done of articles in the daily Newfoundland newspaper for 1996, the most frequent headlines about the Innu people (44%) revealed words of conflict or deviance (ie: gas sniffing and sexual abuse). Stereotypes appear to be supported by popular media and Cohen would argue this is affirming the deviant sub-cultural identity, thus encouraging further deviant behaviour including dropping out of school, among Innu youth.

Looking further at sub-cultural theory, deviant youth behaviour has also been described as, "...a collective enterprise entered into as a response to the problem of growing up in a fundamentally unequal society" (Tanner, 1996, p.31). A classic ethnography by Paul Willis (1977) entitled, *Learning to Labour*, suggests that anti-school peer groups actively engage in class-based resistance to what is viewed as middle-class schooling. Willis' study looks at how 'working-class' children end up in 'working-class' jobs; this may have much applicability to Aboriginal youth in Canada.

Educational Disengagement Among Aboriginal Youth

While the exploration of educational disengagement among 'mainstream' students has a long history, studies looking at patterns of educational disengagement among minority and Aboriginal students are less common. The literature does indicate however, that there is considerable disparity in the levels of disengagement between different cultural, socio-economic and racial groups in North America (Dei et al., 1997; Garrett, 1999; Hains, 2001).

Hamilton and colleagues (1998) examined the occupational and academic aspirations of rural Alaskan youth and found that Aboriginal youth were less likely, than non-Aboriginal young people, to want to leave rural Alaska for educational or occupational opportunities in larger towns or cities. The authors also noted that the opinions of parents and grandparents were important factors affecting young people's educational choices. Waller et al. (2002) and Garrett (1995) state that 'cultural discontinuity' between Aboriginal and mainstream cultural worldviews, can cause a sense of disorientation and distress for Aboriginal students and that this in turn has been associated with educational disengagement. The authors also found that students who must move from their home community for educational or occupational opportunities may be less likely to aspire to such goals. Those students who do leave frequently lack accustomed social support and do not always succeed away from these resources. Aboriginal students often report difficulty developing a positive ethnic identity while in school and may feel pressured to choose between traditional and mainstream values, beliefs, and practices (Dodd et al., 1994; Everett et al., 1983).

Additional risk factors associated with minority and Aboriginal student disengagement include the use of alcohol and drugs, poor relationships with teachers, early pregnancy, peer pressure, lack of role models, physical and mental health concerns, literacy problems, and the need to work (Hains, 2001; Garrett, 1999, Trueba, 1989). There has not however, been a study looking at the factors contributing to educational disengagement among Aboriginal youth in northern Canada that looks specifically at how resource development may be impacting the educational and occupational pathways of this population.

The Local Labour Markets and Educational Disengagement

A limited number of studies have examined the role local labour market conditions play in student's decision to leave school and the evidence is mixed. Raffe and Willms (1989) introduced the 'discouraged worker' theory, which says that if opportunities in the labour market are poor, students may be inclined to drop-out of school because educational attainment is not likely to bring them significant return. An alternative theory is that in situations where high unemployment rates exist, students may be more inclined to stay in school to build their skills and potential employability. The authors tested their theory by looking at early school leaving rates across Scotland. Results indicated that pupils were more likely to drop-out of school where employment opportunities were abundant. They also found that early school-leaving was greater among boys, and that the relationship between school leaving by gender was related to the employment opportunities available by gender.

Rice (1987) found evidence that indicates that poor labour market conditions positively affects school retention among students. Dolton et al. (1999) examined the role of labour market conditions on school leaving and the results support the 'discouraged worker' hypothesis. Conversely, Audas (1994) and Micklewright et al. (1990) did not find a significant relationship between the probability of dropping out of school and unemployment rates in the UK and Canada. Rumberger (1983) looked specifically at ethnic minority students and found that lower unemployment rates were associated with an increased propensity to drop-out of school.

Audas and Willms (2001) note that the problem with incorporating labour market factors into educational disengagement research is the difficulty in defining and measuring labour market factors at regional levels. In the past, adult unemployment rates, participation rates, market and minimum wage rates, youth unemployment rates, quality and status of occupations and job openings have been used. These authors indicate a need for more research into the relative importance of these factors in a young person's decision to leave school.

Garmezly (1991) states that when examining the issue of early school leavers, the study of success is every bit as important as the study of failure. Aboriginal students are often identified

as 'at-risk' populations because of the presence of factors proven to be correlated with adverse circumstances (i.e. poverty, minority status, substance abuse) in their lives (Hains, 2001). What enables those 'at-risk' to, as stated above, 'beat the odds' and succeed despite a situation that usually implies failure? In a study of educational disengagement among Aboriginal students, it is prudent to examine patterns of both disengagement and resiliency, particularly if we are to question the deficit framing of the "Aboriginal school drop-out problem" and the role employment or other factors may play in the ultimate 'success' of Aboriginal people.

Aim and Objectives

The overall aim of this study is to understand more about factors that impact the health and well-being of Aboriginal people in northern Canada, so that together we can find ways to make improvements. In order to work towards this aim the following objectives have been set:

- 1 To gain an understanding of the meaning of schooling and education to Aboriginal youth in a resource-rich area of Canada's north.
- 2 To gain an understanding of the role school plays in the lives of northern Aboriginal youth.
- 3 To build capacity by involving Aboriginal youth and people from local communities in the research process.
- 4 To widely disseminate the knowledge gained from this study, in order to assist in the development of effective future research, practice guidelines, interventions and/or public policy.

Research Questions

The project aims to answer the following research question with corresponding sub-questions:

What is the meaning of schooling and education for Aboriginal youth in a resource-rich area of Canada's north?

Sub-questions:

- 1 According to local youth, what is the purpose of schooling and education?
- 2 Are current educational opportunities relevant to local youth?
- 3 What are the educational and occupational pathways of local youth?

- 4 What factors might be affecting these pathways?
- 5 Does high school graduation afford opportunity?
- 6 What is the role of school in the lives of northern Aboriginal youth?
- 7 How might resource development in the region impact schooling and education for local youth?

Proposed Methods

The study is still in the development stages, however it is predicted that the project will be aligned with ethnographic methodology. Ethnography has been identified as a possible methodology because it is a research approach that allows holistic and contextualised explorations of settings. Of particular interest is the meaning of school and education to Aboriginal youth, their beliefs about the relevance of education and high school graduation in the north, and the behaviours associated with educational disengagement. In addition, the study will also look at the education and occupational pathways of northern Aboriginal youth more comprehensively. The study will be informed by theory relating to the social determinants of health, as well as participatory approaches to community-based research. In this regard, the researcher will aim to engage local people in the research endeavour at all stages. It is deemed particularly important to engage youth.

Ethical Concerns

Participants in the project, from community, industry and government, will be considered co-researchers. Young people in particular will be given a voice and their meaningful involvement is pivotal to the success of the project.

The Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies (ACUNS) has established *Ethical Principles for the Conduct of Research in the North*. This document highlights the importance of key ethical principles like community consultation and participation, building mutual respect, providing accountability and ensuring informed consent. These principles will be strictly adhered to throughout this research project.

Contribution of this Study

Fred McDonald is a First Nation artist who grew up in Fort McKay, north-eastern Alberta. This young man did not finish high school; by the time he was 31, Fred had been working as a labourer with Suncor Oil and Gas Company for over ten years, he was an alcoholic, had lost a brother in a tragic accident and was generally disenchanted with his life. Fred, now sober and living in Calgary, recently published his autobiography, Ancestral Portraits where he comments:

“There is a fundamental reality that the First Nations people in this country are not understood. They are not taken seriously enough to have their stories or their voices heard...” (McDonald, 2002, p.9).

This study give Aboriginal youth an opportunity to voice their issues and ideas. It will help question the deficit framing of the ‘Aboriginal school drop-out problem’ and will examine the role employment and other factors may play in the lives and decisions of Aboriginal people. By building understanding and capacity surrounding these health and educational issues we hope to affect positive social change where it is required. A participatory ethnography, based in northern Canada, which focuses on the values, beliefs and behaviours of Aboriginal youth in relation to school, is a necessary innovation that will contribute significantly to the existing literature. Specifically, this study can make an important contribution to the theoretical understanding of educational disengagement by examining how existing models or frameworks might relate to Aboriginal youth in a resource rich area of Canada’s north. Previous research has had three general limitations that the proposed study aims to address. As Audas and Willms (2001) point out, research on educational disengagement does not generally consider:

Individuals that return to school after dropping out.

Potential biases in schools, resulting in part from a curriculum that is less relevant for certain minority groups, that make high school completion less likely for these young people in these groups.

The social or economical returns to, or value of, a secondary education.

There has also been limited attention on the influence ‘community’ factors, such as the status of the labour market, have on

educational disengagement. This study is unique because it will address these areas and will do so by working *with* Aboriginal young people in an exploratory process of emergent design. It is hoped that through empowerment of local communities, capacity-building and the promotion of cross-cultural understanding this study may lead to changes in practice, the reformation of policy and provide important insight into how the health and educational needs of Aboriginal people in Canada might be met more comprehensively.

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