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Social Determinants of Educational Outcomes in Indigenous Learners

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Two Easy Pieces

For the better part of two decades, my research colleagues and I have been engaged in a broad program of research aimed at identifying certain of the “social determinants of health and wellbeing” common to Canadian First Nation, Métis, and Inuit youth. The present account samples from these ongoing research efforts by recapping two sets of findings that set various markers of educational success in relation to both: a) the troubled matter of “ethnic-identification” among Aboriginal youth; and b) the presence or absence of various community-level markers of “cultural continuity” in B.C.’s First Nations bands.

A High Altitude Snapshot of a Research Enterprise in Progress

For some time my research collaborators and I have worked to identify various supplementary costs commonly levied against young Indigenous persons as they attempt to negotiate otherwise familiar tasks of development. One of these linchpin tasks involves successfully finding some culturally-sanctioned way of standing sufficiently apart from the ravages of time that both self-hood and cultural identity are possible. Notwithstanding the facts that time is a whirligig, and that our lives are streams in which one can never put the same foot twice, individual or collective identities require, as constitutive conditions of their coming into being, some justificatory framework that allows each of us to consider ourselves enduring individuals and persistent peoples. Without some such negotiated identity-conferring practices, all talk of culture “this” and culture “that” would prove nonsensical, and the notion of personhood would automatically fall into incoherence. In short, it is constitutively the case that having any sort of workable sense of personal or cultural identity necessarily turns upon acquiring some form of self-understanding that allows us to both own our personal and collective past and to have an abiding stake in our own as yet unrealized future.
EN BREF Les données recueillies sur de jeunes personnes autochtones, individuellement, en Colombie-Britannique et sur l’ensemble des collectivités autochtones révèlent des liens intéressants entre l’identité culturelle, le sentiment de continuité culturelle et la réussite scolaire. Bien que les statistiques provinciales regroupent toutes les collectivités des Premières nations et toutes les personnes ayant affirmé leur origine autochtone, cette recherche indique qu’en fait, leurs contextes actuels et leurs perspectives d’avenir diffèrent grandement. Les personnes et collectivités dotées d’un solide sens de leur identité, de la volonté de préserver leur passé culturel et d’un sentiment de maîtrise civique de leur bien-être futur connaissent moins de problèmes sociaux et de santé et des taux plus élevés d’obtention du diplôme du secondaire que les autres. La recherche indique aussi que les élèves autochtones dont l’identification de soi passe de « non Autochtone » à « Autochtone » pendant leurs années du secondaire sont beaucoup plus susceptibles de terminer leurs études secondaires que ceux qui évoluent dans l’autre sens, donnant à comprendre que leur identification culturelle pourrait avoir une incidence favorable sur leur avenir éducatif.

However demanding the usual developmental task of hammering out such a sense of personal and collective identity may ordinarily prove to be, it is inevitably made exponentially more difficult when, in the wake colonialist and associated post-colonialist practices, one’s heritage culture is repeatedly written off as somehow “stone-age”, or turned into a laughing-stock, or otherwise criminalized and legislated out of existence. In short, if you are not only young and growing, but also a member of some such culturally endangered group, then woe be upon you and your future prospects. All this is, of course, just the troubled circumstance in which Canada’s more than 600 Indigenous communities continue to find themselves.

Even under such trying circumstance, however, few would anticipate that every Indigenous youth, or every Indigenous community, would prove equally bereft of some enduring sense of personal or cultural persistence, or suffer the same resulting consequences. Rather, the program of research reported on here has proceeded under the following expectations: a) that individual youth (Indigenous or otherwise), and whole Indigenous communities, will differ, one from another, in ways that mark their relative success in achieving ownership of their past and a commitment to their future; and b) that those that are most successful at sustaining a sense of personal or cultural continuity will, as a result, manifest fewer social and health problems, including elevated rates of youth suicide, intended and unintended injuries, obesity and diabetes, HIV infection, and – more to the present point – will experience fewer school failures and a lower incidence of early school leaving.

A WORD ABOUT METHODOLOGY

Before discussing possible relations between personal or cultural persistence and well-being, some words are perhaps in order about how such continuities in the lives of individual youth and whole communities can be measured. Of these two, the relative success with which individual young persons achieve a sense of ownership of their own past and future is, perhaps, the least mysterious. Much as you might have done, my research colleagues and I have proceeded by developing structured interview protocols that first draw attention to all of the dramatic changes that have taken place in the course of participants’ own rapid growth and development before pressing them for details about how – in the face of such often dramatic changes – they, nevertheless, manage to maintain a persistent sense of self through thick and thin.

Candidate ways of measuring the degree of cultural continuity present in whole Indigenous communities may spring less easily to mind. Our own working solution to this problem has been to glean through existing sets of community-level descriptors in search of possible marker-variables that could serve as proxies for a community’s collective commitments to undertakings intended to preserve its cultural past, and to achieving some civic control over its own future well-being. Variables of the first sort have included evidence as to whether individual First Nations bands are working to preserve their own Indigenous language, are litigating for Aboriginal title to traditional lands, have restored women to traditional leadership roles, or have constructed community facilities meant to help ensure the preservation of cultural artifacts and practices. Additional variables meant to better ensure local control over one’s own cultural future have included various bids for self-government and Band-level efforts to gain community control over some or all aspects of health delivery, education, welfare and judicial matters. In our work to date, we have identified a total of nine such community-level “cultural continuity markers”.

Over a period that now spans some 14 years, we have so far collected such information for each of B.C.’s more than 200 First Nations Bands. To pick out only one notable set of findings that has emerged from this extended analysis, it is now apparent that youth suicide is not, as ordinarily supposed, a common problem across all of B.C.’s First Nations communities. In fact, every community characterized by all nine community-level “cultural continuity markers” has experienced no youth suicides in over a decade, whereas those Bands with none of these markers suffer youth suicide rates as much as 800 times the national average.

Given all of the above, the balance of this brief report boils down to a sampler of findings drawn from our larger program of research – examples chosen primarily because they pertain to matters of educational relevance. The first of these takes up the much-disputed matter of who does and does not count as “Aboriginal”.}

ETHNIC-IDENTIFICATION AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Although the readership of Education Canada hardly needs to be reminded of the intolerably large gap that continues to separate the educational opportunities and accomplishments of Canada’s Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth, here is one more such painful reminder for good measure. One (one of potentially many) commonly employed markers intended to dramatize such differences is school dropout rates, or their inverse, rates of secondary school completion. Overall, data about such matters demonstrate that Canada’s Aboriginal dropout rates are extraordinarily high. For example, the B.C. Ministry of Education recently reported an Aboriginal dropout rate of close to 60 percent. The comparable rate for non-Aboriginals hovers around a third of this alarming figure (i.e., 20.8 percent). The consequences of this tragedy naturally spill beyond classroom walls; for example, Aboriginal adolescents who drop out of school are also known to experience higher rates of depression, suicide, and emotional difficulties; are more likely to be involved in risky behaviours such as substance abuse, violence, and sexual promiscuity; and are more prone to eventually being incarcerated than their non-Indigenous peers.

High on the list of suspects responsible for this roundhouse of educational failures is anything and everything to do with identity development gone wrong. That is, it is easy (and likely correct) to imagine that – because they are often at a loss to know who they are, or where they are going –
Indigenous youth often neglect to apply themselves to their studies, hate school, and work to escape it. There are at least two problems with such an easy conclusion. First, the usual Ministry of Education figures on which we typically rely tend to obscure a deeper truth by conveniently aggregating across whole Indigenous populations, thereby obscuring important differences between different cultural groups. Second, we are almost as bad at knowing what we really intend by talk of “identity” as we are at keeping clear about what it means to talk of “aboriginality”.

Notwithstanding its broad national commitment to “multiculturalism”, Canada’s history of the colonization of Aboriginal peoples has made even Aboriginal self-identification an especially contentious and politicized matter. For most educational purposes, however, the phrase is ordinarily meant to apply (in ways that risk circularity) only to those who simply declare themselves as having, within their ancestry, members who are First Nations, Inuit, or Métis. For some decades, the B.C. government has required all public school students to make annual declarations about their “Aboriginal states”, and has assumed that even one such declaration is sufficient to raise what has awkwardly come to be called the “ever Aboriginal flag”. As such, the ethnic category to which persons assign themselves on any such official occasion is administratively assumed to be a stable personal characteristic, constant from one possible measurement occasion to the next.

The longitudinal evidence summarized here – population data involving all public school students in B.C. who entered Grade 7 in 1995 and who ever claimed to be of “Aboriginal ancestry” (a total of 4,307 students) – works to challenge such easy assumptions. It does so by having bothered to keep track of what each student said in response to the “Are you of Aboriginal ancestry?” question each and every time it was asked over the full ten-year period between 1993 and 2002.

While possible changes in ethnic self-identification are perhaps interesting in their own right, their importance would multiply if any such patterns of change proved to have serious implications for other important aspects of development. As it is, we are unaware of any research – other than our own – that relates ethnic self-identification to social outcomes, principally because the very possibility of ethnic self-identification switching has rarely been entertained. The study to be summarized here breaks with this tradition by searching out possible relations between changes in ethnic self-identification and school dropout rates. For the more than 4,000 students assembled in the present study cohort, data were also obtained as to which of them had successfully reached Grade 12 in 2000, and how many graduated in June of 2001.

What these data show is that, for the 2,937 B.C. students who, at some point, declared themselves to be “Aboriginal”, and who are not currently living on a reserve, almost two-thirds changed their ethnic self-declarations (sometimes more than once) within our ten-year study window. Several distinct patterns of such changes emerged, and, of special interest – at least for present purposes – these different patterns proved to be importantly related to academic success and the likelihood of dropping out of school. Of pointed concern here were those almost 800 students who demonstrated an “abiding” shift in their ethnic self-identification, either a) by later abandoning a previous series of declarations of Aboriginal status or b) by eventually coming to declare themselves as Aboriginal, despite years of having not previously done so.

Most notably, those 627 students who did not initially describe themselves as Aboriginal, but later came to do so, proved to have (by far) the lowest school dropout rate. Only 24 percent of these students ultimately failed to complete Grade 12 – a rate not significantly different from that of their non-Indigenous counterparts (21 percent). By contrast, the
much smaller group of 153 students who did the reverse – by later abandoning their earlier claims to Aboriginal status – were almost three times as likely to be early school leavers.

What this evidence strongly suggests is that it is a serious mistake to wrongly imagine, as is commonly done, that simply being Aboriginal is enough, in and of itself, to dramatically compromise one’s prospect of ever finishing high school. As it is, despite their different outcomes, everyone in the present study sample managed to raise the province’s ‘ever Aboriginal flag’ on at least one occasion, and so would have been automatically “batch-processed” along with others of presumptive Aboriginal ancestry. Rather, as this present data-set suggests, it would have been altogether better if such “flag bearers” within our sample had been more accurately described as either a) rejecting an Aboriginal status once repeatedly claimed to be their own or, alternatively, b) demonstrating possible second thoughts, by belatedly – maybe even proudly – claiming a status that had been formerly discounted or obscured.

If there is a “take-home” message here, it is to suggest that it is altogether better to forego imagining that Aboriginal status is, on its own, a useful predictor of school success, and, instead, to focus on other matters of demonstrated educational significance.

CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

The second set of research findings to be recapped here promises to go more quickly because most of what is required for making clear the meaning and measurement of “cultural continuity” has already been outlined. What remains to be done, in order to successfully telegraph key findings from this second study, is to lay out the particulars of who, exactly, served as research subjects on this project, along with whatever these data reveal about the relation between cultural continuity and school success.

Before turning to the specific data set on which I now mean to report, it is worth a reminder that, notwithstanding all of the actuarial data ordinarily pointed to in support of the conclusion that, on the average, Aboriginal youth under-perform academically, there is no defensible reason to imagine that such low levels of academic success are everywhere present. In B.C., such summary data are ordinarily collected by collapsing across the almost 200 Aboriginal “bands” that make up the province’s widely scattered First Nations population. Such actuarial artefacts naturally ride rough-shod over the real cultural, geographic, linguistic, and spiritual diversity that distinguish these communities, and so likely fail to accurately describe any real band or Aboriginal community.

In B.C., where the evidence to be reported here was collected, Ministry of Education data indicate, for example, that district-level Grade 12 completion rates routinely vary from 0 to 100 percent. Although such claims hint at the variability of Aboriginal success rates, school districts are, of course, simply administrative conveniences, the boundaries of which are entirely arbitrary, relative to any culturally meaningful way of parsing the province’s heterogeneous Aboriginal population. In the hope of proceeding less haphazardly, my research colleagues and I chose to look instead at how academic success rates vary across the almost 200 Aboriginal bands in B.C. – bands that constitute...
real communities that have a shared language, geography, historical ties, and governance systems.

Our data on educational success were again obtained from the provincial Ministry of Education, and again consisted of the same cohort of all Aboriginal students in the province who entered Grade 7 in 1995. Using this database, a rough approximation of each community’s level of academic success was calculated by determining the proportion of youth in each band that reached Grade 12 in a timely fashion.

In light of earlier results linking community-level rates of youth suicide with our several markers of cultural persistence, the new data reported here were also cross-tabulated with the first six of our nine band-level markers of cultural continuity. The overall results are quite striking. While two thirds of our total First Nations sample failed to reach Grade 12 in a timely way, in those bands demonstrating all six continuity markers, roughly half (48.3 percent) were Grade 12 achievers, while, in those bands that had none of these factors, only a quarter (24.3 percent) successfully reached Grade 12. In the Ministry of Education’s world, where a change of 2 or 3 percent is often a cause for celebration, 48 percent school completion — while still a tragedy — is a rather long way off from the usually reported Aboriginal dropout rate of two-thirds, and beats, hands down, the tragic circumstance of those First Nations children who, lacking any semblance of cultural continuity, fail three times out of every four.

CONCLUSION

These few out-takes from our larger program of research hopefully serve to help make the points that a) any effort to simply sum across the radical differences that divide one Aboriginal community from the next will likely result in some misleading banner headline — some claim that is, at best, an “actuarial fiction”; and b) those First Nations communities that have met with greater success in linking to and celebrating their cultural past, and in re-establishing community control of their own cultural future, also provide their children with the gift of substantially greater levels of academic success.

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Notes

2 Ibid.
4 Ibid.