

Youth Apprenticeship Programs for Aboriginal Youth in Canada: Smoothing the Path From School to Work?

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Introduction

Partly in response to Canada's shortage of skilled trades workers and the high rate of youth unemployment (around double the adult rate),¹ youth apprenticeship programs (YAP) and other school-to-work transition initiatives have been established across the country to create an interest in trades, encourage youth to complete high school, and facilitate young people's transition from school to the workplace. Although youth apprenticeship programs vary across the country because they are a provincial responsibility, they usually allow high school students to earn credits toward an apprenticeship program and a high school diploma at the same time. Like regular apprentices, the youth receive on-the-job training, work experience and technical training in a trade, and earn at least minimum wage.

This article maps the institutional field of a specific school-to-work transition program in a specific area in Alberta that attempts to address the needs of a specific population. The Aboriginal Youth Career Pathway Initiative (referred to throughout this article as the Aboriginal Youth Initiative) is a pilot project developed in 2001 by CAREERS the Next Generation in partnership with the Economic Development Discussion Group (EDDG).

This study relied on qualitative research methods. The primary data informing this article include interviews with eight of the 11 students currently participating in the Aboriginal Youth Initiative (5 males and 3 females), three students who dropped out (2 females and 1 male), and 25 community members. The community members include school administrators, a school counselor, Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) committee members, employers or supervisors, parents or guardians, an employment placement counselor from one of the bands, a college teacher, a college administrator, a representative from CAREERS, corporate funders of this Aboriginal Youth Initiative, policymakers, and representatives from the ministry of education. Data also include government and private-sector documents.

This study addressed the following research questions.

- What are some of the challenges faced by Aboriginal youth in specific northern areas of Alberta, and how does the Aboriginal Youth Initiative attempt to address these?
- How successful has this Initiative been as measured against the goals of the Initiative? (These measures are based on the data, perceptions, and attitudes of a cross-sampling of stakeholders.)

The CAREERS Aboriginal Youth Initiative

CAREERS the Next Generation is an industry-driven foundation that was established with government and private-sector funding in 1997. Its mandate is to facilitate partnerships between employers and schools aimed at enhancing school-to-work transition for students in communities across the province.

On March 1, 2001, *CAREERS* started the Aboriginal Youth Initiative. The key goals of the project are to encourage Aboriginal youth to complete high school, promote a school-to-work transition model, increase career awareness, develop employability skills, make linkages with local industry, and facilitate community support for youth to succeed in these efforts.

The Aboriginal Youth Initiative targets youth between the ages of 12 and 17 in northern Alberta communities. The initiative includes opportunities for youth to enter the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) or alternative professional or technical career pathways, such as the Health Services Summer Internships (HSSI).² Both pathways allow students to gain work experience and at the same time to earn money and high school credits. 2003 was the third year of the project, and since its inception 30 youth have registered in the project in the three project areas. In 2003 11 youth were enrolled.

The Schools

The geographic area where this research took place, like much of the rest of Canada, was served first by church-operated residential schools until those schools were taken over by the federal government in the 1960s. There was a transition during the 1960s and 1970s, first to provincial day schools and in First Nations communities to schools controlled by First Nations governments.³ In the movement since the 1970s to local accountability and more appropriate curricula, programs have been prepared to provide better Aboriginal language and culturally relevant learning, cross-cultural training, and teacher education programs that are designed to increase the number of teachers of Aboriginal descent along with other types of programs to increase Aboriginal students' success in schools (Canadian Labour Congress [CLC], 2002). Although major educational gains have been made, racism, institutional barriers, and cultural divisions still faced by the Aboriginal population make the education system an

undesirable and hostile place for Aboriginal children and impede schooling progress resulting in a lack of preparedness for the labor force (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; CLC, 2002).

Aboriginal Youth in the Economy

Canada has experienced considerable economic and social change over the past few decades. These changes include:

a shift from goods-producing to service sector work, a steady increase in female labor force participation, growth in the proportion of non-standard work forms, an increase in use of computer based technologies in the workplace, the gradual upskilling of work, and increasing polarization between "good" and "bad" jobs in terms of security, work conditions and pay. (Heinz & Taylor, 2004, p. 2)

For Canadian youth (aged 15-24 years), this economic and social backdrop has presented specific challenges such as increased unemployment. With a lack of real opportunities in a hypercompetitive labor market, young people are motivated to remain longer in education. Hence young people are working less and gaining more education (Lowe, 2000).

In addition, social attitudes toward education have changed. More jobs require postsecondary education, and this has raised the expectations for educational credentials. The social polarization between young people who acquire the necessary educational qualifications and those who do not has widened, with the former more likely to become gainfully employed in more secure jobs and less likely to be laid off (compare Brown, 1995; Brown & Scase, 1994). Young people in Canada, Ireland, and the United States with poor academic qualifications are twice as likely to be unemployed as their educated peers (OECD, 2000).⁴ Young Canadians who do get jobs, like their counterparts in all OECD nations (with the exception of Sweden), are earning wages that have been falling significantly compared with adult wages (OECD, 1999).

Youth who experience barriers to employment and smooth school-to-work transition based on such characteristics as race-ethnicity, disability, regional location, and poverty face additional challenges. Many Aboriginal youth experience multiple barriers simultaneously. The average unemployment rate for Aboriginal people (aged 15 and older) is double that of non-Aboriginal people (20% and 10% respectively, First Nations and Northern Statistics Corporate Information Management Directorate [FNSCIMD], 2001). In Alberta the unemployment rate is lower than the national average, but the employment rate gap between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginals is wider. The rate of youth unemployment is higher for Aboriginals, particularly for registered Indians in the 15-24-year-old-age group, which is the highest at 41% compared with non-Aboriginal and others with Aboriginal identity in this same age group (Hull, 2000). According to the Canadian Council for Human Resources in the Environment Industry and Aboriginal Human Resource Development Council of Canada (CCHREI & AHRDCC, 2002), Aboriginal

people under the age of 25 account for nearly half the Aboriginal population. It is predicted that by 2016 over 400,000 Aboriginal youth will be entering the labor market.

Several factors prevent increasing participation rates by Aboriginal youth in the labor market. One is a relatively lower level of educational attainment and higher dropout levels of Aboriginal people compared with their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Based on the 2001 census, 48% of Aboriginal people 15 years and older have less than a high school diploma compared with approximately 38% of non-Aboriginal peoples in the same age category (Lamontagne, 2004).⁵ With regard to postsecondary educational attainment, Aboriginal peoples are most underrepresented in the highest educational level. A mere 4% of Aboriginal people have university degrees compared with approximately 15% of non-Aboriginal (Lamontagne, 2004; Mendelson, 2004). However, in trades certificates and diplomas Aboriginal people are achieving better than the rate of course completion among the total population: 12.1% of the Aboriginal population have a trades certificate or diploma compared with 10.8% of the non-Aboriginal population (Lamontagne).

According to Loizides and Zieminiski (1998), other factors that prevent increasing participation rates by Aboriginal youth in the labor market include:

- a mismatch in the geographical distribution of jobs and Aboriginal people;
- the low number of Aboriginal applicants even when jobs are available due to information gaps as to what jobs are open and what skills they require;
- the lack of role models in certain careers; and
- educational institutions that do not provide Aboriginal students with the skills and knowledge required to compete in the labor market;

In addition,

- Recruitment and retention of Aboriginal people are also difficult for employers because of communication differences and cultural differences (CCHREI, 1997).

Response to Economic Problems/Youth Unemployment by Policymakers

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges (1990) reflects the concerns of Canadian policymakers in general with regard to changes in the economy:

The Canadian economy is plagued by a shortage of skilled workers in a number of high technology and new or knowledge-based economy sectors.... Paradoxically Canada is also suffering from a persistent unemployment problem.... With international competition driving us into the knowledge-based economy of the 21st Century, Canada will need to invest wisely in post-secondary education and human resource development. (pp. 5-7)

A government report a decade later (Government of Canada, 2000) called *Stepping up: Skills and Opportunities in the Knowledge Economy* recommends that in order to succeed in the knowledge-based economy, formal and informal learning systems have to “step up” as follows.

making “work studies” and other experience-with-work programs more widely available at the elementary and secondary school levels; ... building stronger linkages between schools and the world of work; ... and attracting more young people to apprenticeship programs. (Part V, 3)

In postsecondary institutions recommendations include “building stronger links between post-secondary institutions and employers; ... and helping Aboriginal communities address their special learning and skills development” (Part V, 3). School-to-work transition programs, which integrate school-based learning with work-based learning by developing linkages between schools and workplaces, have become a focus of policymakers and educators as well as parents and students (OECD, 1999). A central focus of policy documents (such as Government of Canada, 2000; 2002) is on school-to-work transition programs that attract and retain youth in the trades. This appears to be a particular challenge as the career aspirations of most secondary school students in Canada are to work in middle-class white-collar jobs, not in the trades (Krahn, 1996). Although pathways to university and/or college are well signposted, other education and training pathways are not at all well demarcated (Schuetz, 2003). The vocational and technical training pathways are obstructed by biased attitudes in favor of “superior” academic education (Krahn) as well as a lack of social cooperation, for example, a lack of institutionalized links between schools, colleges, and training programs (Marquart, 1996 cited in Schuetz, 2003).

Recognizing the necessity of enhancing “educational opportunities for Aboriginal learners” and developing “an ongoing dialogue with Aboriginal communities and other educational shareholders” (Alberta Learning, 2002, p. 1), Alberta Learning published a document called “The First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework” (2002). The recommendations include:

- to “increase access and supports for bridging programs to enable smooth transitions between high school, college, and university” by increasing opportunities for Aboriginal learners in such areas as “pre-apprenticeship, pre-employment, and vocational training, ... enrolment in the Registered Apprenticeship Program” (Strategy 3.22), and in “cooperative placements, work experience, internship and practicum opportunities at the high school and post-secondary level” (Strategies 3.32 & 3.33); and
- to identify “local employment or entrepreneurial opportunities for post-secondary graduates” (Strategy 3.34).

The document identifies *CAREERS the Next Generation* as partly responsible for these employment transitions.

Aboriginal Youth and the Trades

Vocational programs appear to be one of the main school-to-work pathways for Aboriginal youth. This pathway is regarded as part of a solution to many Aboriginal youth concerns related to high school dropout rates, unemployment, the increasing numbers of Aboriginal youth who will soon be entering the workforce, and social problems such as Aboriginal drug and alcohol abuse and suicide (compare Canadian Labor Force Development Board [CLFDB], 1999). In addition, it is claimed that apprenticeship is a system of training that is “culturally appropriate” for Aboriginal peoples because it has historically been an important part of youth education in Aboriginal societies before the early settlers came (CLFDB, 1999). Moreover, it is suggested that it fits the preferred style of Aboriginal learners, as this program developer with Apprenticeship and Industry Training at Alberta Learning maintains:

Trades is a key area for us for the Aboriginal students.... Aboriginal people see the trades as more of an opportunity for their young people because they said it paralleled the Aboriginal culture which was the elder teaching the young the ways of their culture and they seen that the Apprenticeship system was very key to the lifestyles of the Aboriginal people.

It is anticipated that apprenticeship training will reduce the employment disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal people. Indeed it is forecast that apprenticeable trades and occupations could constitute up to 5% of all employment for Aboriginal people (CLFDB, 1999). Alberta’s strong industry base in and around Aboriginal communities requires skilled labor, particularly in the trades.

Perceptions of the Aboriginal Youth Initiative

The Aboriginal Youth Initiative seems a good solution all round. Aboriginal youth are being given new chances at employment with marketable skills, help in getting through high school (i.e., by earning high school credits), and at the same time the needs of local industries are being met. The pathway to the future looks clear and smooth. But are there potholes in the path? The following section examines both the benefits and challenges of the Aboriginal Youth Initiative.

Benefits of the Aboriginal Youth Initiative as Perceived by Student Interns

Findings in this study indicate that there are benefits of the program for many of the youth involved and for their communities. Three groups—student interns, employers, and parents—describe these benefits.

Students felt that they had benefited from the program in many ways. Benefits included (in order of most commonly mentioned) gaining new knowledge and skills, helping them to make career choices, helping them

financially, helping to complete high school by gaining high school credits, helping them pass time, developing networks for future employment opportunities, and helping to increase self-esteem or self-worth. For example,

RAP, it's great, cause especially if you're young and if you can stick to it for the years it takes you to finish [RAP], you'll still be young by the time you're out [with your journeyman certificate] and the money you'll be making is good.

[RAP] has been helpful because it started me at a young age to make a plan. I didn't have a plan. [Now] I definitely want to go into welding and get my journeyman certificate.

All the students who had not dropped out of the Aboriginal Youth Initiative reported learning important skills when working on the tasks they perceived as being related to their chosen career path. Being provided with direction, demonstrations, opportunities to try out more complex and challenging tasks over time, and being given more independence over time were aspects most valued by the students in their learning process. Below is a sample of what the students said about this.

When [the main mechanic] is in I'll help him. Like ... if he's changing brake pads or something I mostly observe, but, like, if I know how he does it on one side I can start the other side of the vehicle.

At first I did some easy stuff, like I just took apart pipes and then after a while they started letting me do stuff on my own. So I learned lots.

A student in the health internship similarly commented:

I answer phones, make appointments. I make new files when new patients come in. I prepare the doctor's room and take patients in there. I do urine tests, pregnancy tests.... They show and demonstrate [new tasks] for me. When I first started compared to today [I have] a lot more responsibilities and I'm doing a lot more difficult tasks.

Developing networks is important as this young man enrolled in the RAP states,

Employers get a lot of guys from town that just show up and try and look for work. But ... [through RAP] the bosses know that you're from the school, and you've talked to the bosses and they know you. Better than some of the other guys that don't know the bosses.

Osterman (1980) notes that youth move through channels already traveled by people they know. Employers are more likely to use friends as the most frequent source of referral in secondary jobs and parents as a reliable means of referral for primary jobs (Osterman, 1988). For Aboriginal youth in the project areas, the Aboriginal Youth Initiative may help to compensate for the lack of informal job networks (although it will not eliminate the importance of friends and family in finding employment).

Benefits of the Aboriginal Youth Initiative as Perceived by Employers

Employers described what they believed were the many needs students have to have met in order to be successful in life. They felt that these needs

were being met in their workplaces. The main needs of the youth identified by employers were to help youth understand the reasons for staying in school and graduating from high school, to see the value in having a career, to observe and interact with role models who would inspire them, to receive more guidance in daily life, and to be provided opportunities to become responsible, independent, and successful.

Contributing to the Workplace

Employers participating in the Aboriginal Youth Initiative felt that the program helped to meet their own company or institution's needs for labor both in the short and long term. Employers, therefore, see the Aboriginal Youth Initiative as a win-win situation for themselves and the students. For example,

It's good for the possible future for our company. We don't have to bring out-of-town guys to come in and do the same work as a local guy will do. It costs us less for paying people for housing them.

We need trades people. It would be great if these trades people could come from [this area] and it would even be better if you developed the relationship with this person when they're young and going through high school, and they go through university [or] the trade schools and then come back home, come back to the company that supported them.

Four employers admitted that the students had been productive and had contributed to their profits. For example,

When she cleans the vehicles [we save money] because instead of us paying a guy \$20 an hour to clean a vehicle she does it [for \$10]. She does a lot of cleaning for us.

The work is not always as steady as we'd like it to be ... so these kids, well we do kind of abuse them. They go pick garbage now and then, stuff like that, but they should be working in their trade. They should be working with [a journeyman] but I don't keep that many journeymen on staff.

It's not big money we pay RAP students but it's enough money to [encourage them] to stay and they earn it. And we do get a chance once in a while to make some money off them.

Meeting Community Needs

Employers indicated that this program helped to address the community's needs. These needs include keeping local talent in the community, inspiring that youth to stay in or return to the community, and ensuring local labor is available for community businesses. Some comments reveal positive evaluation of the effects of the program and at the same time illustrate the social context in which the program operates, where there is broad license for the perpetuation of negative stereotypes

The younger ones in the community have a better attitude toward working than the ones who are older. They've been exposed to role models like older brothers.

Generally speaking it's giving some of the local students the opportunity to find out what it's like to stay in the community and have a credible job.... There are lots of really good jobs here and they're starting to discover that.

We have employees [professionals from outside the community] who come to work here and stay a short time. And if you're only here three months [to] a year you really don't care about what happens two [to] 20 years down the road to the clients. Now if we had people who came from within the community and whose homes were here, there would be more commitment. So things like the RAP program are critical.

To a kid, all he knows is what does his dad do? "I don't know—he comes home, he pounds my mom. They go drink and play bingo." And the fact that there's someone out there that's actually doing something else and achieving something will go a long way [for the whole community].

Benefits of the Aboriginal Youth Initiative as Perceived by Parents

All four parents interviewed stated that it was their children who initiated the idea of enrolling in the program. In all cases the parents were supportive of their children's choices, attended the required parents' information meeting at the school, and signed the application forms. With the exception of one, all the children have continued in, or graduated from, high school. All parents felt that their children had benefited from the program: they learned a lot; their career choices were confirmed; they were encouraged to reach their potential; and their strengths such as their determination, self-direction, and other positive attitudes and values were reinforced. In addition, all parents declared that they hoped the children would go on to college or university. None of the parents said they would be disappointed if their children did not return to the community after they completed their education providing they were doing what they enjoyed wherever they lived.

Challenges of the Program

Although the data indicate many positive aspects of the program, there is also evidence of challenges and concerns. To begin this discussion, it is helpful to critique the social construction of Aboriginal youth.

Griffin (1993) argues that the discourse on education and training, "constructs working class young people and/or young people of color as 'deficient' in various ways which are assumed to affect their academic performance or their orientation to school" (p. 200). She claims,

The solution to this situation is presumed to lie in education programmes which aim to rehabilitate these "problem youth" through the eradication of their assumed deficiencies, often paying minimal attention to the economic and social conditions in which they live. (p. 153)

Moreover, public discourse (e.g., media attention and public concern) reinforces negative images of youth, frequently portraying Aboriginal youth not only as deficient, but as deviant, "marginalised and unfocused" (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 134). Schissel and Wotherspoon assert that this discourse detracts from analysis of the roots of these serious problems and in fact compounds the problems through ineffective interventions, services, and solutions.

Evident in the comments of the employers (10 out of 11 of whom were non-Aboriginal) and school personnel is a perception that Aboriginal youth, when compared with non-Aboriginal people, are in need of guidance, are socially inept, and require cultural training to make them fit into the predominantly white, non-Aboriginal-managed trades workplaces. Although some young people may lack focus and social skills, these perceptions also reflect assumptions and stereotypes that when held by employers may result in the opposite of the Pygmalion and Galatea effects⁶ for these young people in the workplace. When asked what their expectations were for their student interns, four employers indicated no or low expectations, but over time they have started to raise their expectations. For example,

We had low expectations. We never had a goal. Our biggest goal was for the students to show diligence, show interest, be on time. Just by evaluating the kids over time our expectations changed.

I didn't have any particularly expectations for [student]. She really fit in well though. My expectations are rising a bit.

Although developing social skills is an important part of work experience programs, this is, or should be, only one aspect of learning. Besides, it appears that certain social skills perceived as being from non-Aboriginal cultures are valued more than those associated with Aboriginal cultures. In addition, discrimination based on race appears to be a concern in the workplace, as the Field Director explains:

The biggest challenge is still racism, 'cause you got these ignorant white outside consultants that come up and they're racist. The kids face, when they shouldn't, racism in their own communities mostly from outsiders that come in and work in and around the communities. The word *redneck* is a real word and these kids face that all the time.

A Preoccupation With Socialization Skills and Attitudes

Lehman and Taylor (2003), in their analysis of initiatives developed in Alberta in the 1990s, note that *attitude* was the key employability skill desired by employers. Surveyed students also listed attitudinal skills as the most important thing they had learned in their work experience. Kantor (1995) also notes that although the goals of school-to-work programs are to improve their prospects in the labor market through job skills, raising their levels of human capital will probably not improve their job prospects because the main focus of these types of programs is actually "on building socialization skills not skill building" (p. 220).

This preoccupation with socialization skills and attitudes is evident in how many employers or supervisors based success of their interns on the development of social skills and positive attitudes.

[A good] employee in general is, first off, somebody who's going to show up, show up on time, show up sober which sometimes is a greater skill than is let on. Somebody that is willing to learn and also is willing to do more than one type of task. It's attitude and social skills.

[The interns] show a willingness to work even on weekends. They develop people skills, social skills. They used to look down and be mumbling. Very shy.

[A successful intern] is someone who has tidiness [in] appearance, able to take care of themselves, listens while you're explaining something instead of interrupting and going on. Likes to learn [and] comes to work on time.

Quiet is fine. [Quiet students] listen a lot better, you talk to them, you know, you explain something to them they usually listen.

When asked about the transferability of the skills learned in this Aboriginal Youth Initiative, employers again indicated social skills. For example,

Yes these skills are transferable. Even if not in the same trade the work attitudes carry over and are useful to any workplace.

Maybe the [specific job] skills are not transferable to any company, but just the skill to show up for work, show up on time, the responsibility involved in keeping a job. Those might be even more valuable skills than learning how to put together a couple of pieces of pipe.

Lack of Commitment to Empowering Future Employees

Lehman and Taylor (2003) demonstrate that policy debates in Alberta about vocational high school education continue to be largely focused on employers' expectations and workplace socialization rather than on more progressive perspectives that would empower students or future employees with what Sedunary (1996) refers to as expanded notions of critical thinking skills, lifelong learning, or communication and a deeper exploration of the social relations of productions.

This lack of movement toward a progressive school-to-work program is also evident in the data. For example, most students stated that their main concerns with the Aboriginal Youth Initiative were related to their job responsibilities and feeling they were being taken advantage of. They described particular tasks as boring, unrelated to the job, unpleasant and physically uncomfortable, devoid of useful learning.

Examples include the following.

Sometimes I did shovelling sand because sometimes ... like you'll have to do something and you get just an odd job. [Did I do any work related to my trade?] Not really. [welder]

I did labor jobs like shovelling, clean up, painting, whatever odd jobs. I didn't really learn much. [pipefitter]

I did yard work pretty much if it was slow and [I went] to the field just to do some laboring work too. We mopped up oil spills like shovelling the dirt ... and we picked weeds. Not the greatest jobs. [mechanic]

When it was slow, just to give us work, [the employer] would take us out to the plant painting or something. Some days we did weed picking and that was pretty boring. Didn't learn nothing. [pipefitter]

Right from day one I was shovelling oil. I didn't like it. I did that for about two to three weeks. It was boring. [welder]

Sometimes the mechanic's out in the field so I just clean the shop like today. Sometimes it gets boring. Like the mechanic was gone for about a week and I had to clean the shelf. [mechanic]

What do I do most days? Most days mowing grass. [health intern]

Schools Are Not Fulfilling Their Responsibilities in the Aboriginal Youth Initiative

The data suggest that the schools are not fulfilling their responsibilities in the Aboriginal Youth Initiative. For example, in some cases we could find no confirmation that the workplace premises had been checked for safety by school personnel before the intern arrived as is required by Alberta Learning. Another example is the school's responsibility to participate with employers or supervisors to develop a basic learning plan for each student interning in the Aboriginal Youth Initiative as outlined in the *Alberta Learning Off-Campus Manual* (Alberta Learning, 2004). We could not confirm that learning plans had been developed for any of the interns.

According to an employee of Alberta Learning, the lack of a learning plan is a serious omission that is detrimental to the students' education. He compares it with Work Experience, which he feels "is totally unstructured" and "grossly abused by both schools and kids." He explains:

Too many students are allowed to go out on the Work Experience program and earn credits for doing so and they can earn over a high school career up to 30 credits in Work Experience.... So you're looking a maximum of 250 hours [each year for 3 years] ... unless the school ... customizes curriculum for the individual student's learning activities the student [is] doing exactly the same thing day in day out or whenever they're in the work place.

A representative at Alberta Learning points out that unless the Aboriginal Youth Initiative is delivered properly, the learning opportunity for the students is severely limited. He blames the schools for this failure, acknowledging that they have set priorities elsewhere.

With locally developed courses [such as the Aboriginal Youth Initiative] the schools are expected to designate a teacher to be the monitor, supervisor, mentor of students engaged in these programs, and part of that supervision mentoring role is to consult with the employers that the student will be placed with, and through the consultation process identify what it is the student will be expected to know, be able to do and appreciate and value at the end of 125 hours, 75 hours, [or] 25 hours. So it's a lot of work if it's done properly. Unfortunately, teachers are not often given enough time to do this.

Having students earn high school credits through many hours engaged in such activities as mowing lawns, picking up garbage, and picking weeds does not benefit the learners. This kind of "training" is reminiscent of the historical industrial and residential schools for Aboriginal youth, who received fewer hours per day on academic subjects and more on daily chores. Although these types of tasks may be typical for new apprentices, schools and other agencies must ensure that the learning that they are sanctioning is meaningful.

Further, although the young people in this Aboriginal Youth Initiative are supposed to gain experience in résumé-writing, job search, and interview skills, we found that they are rarely given these important learning opportunities. In many ways schools have relinquished their role to CAREERS and appear to play a small part in students' learning in this program.

Lack of Invigoration of School Curriculum

Although the Aboriginal Youth Initiative promises to make learning more relevant and practical to most students who are not university-bound, the high school curriculum has not been adequately invigorated to accommodate the youths' economic needs nor their diverse interest and learning styles (Kantor, 1995), nor has much been done to bridge the gap between practical and academic knowledge or to narrow the social gap between students tracked for academic careers and those tracked for vocational careers (Young, 1998). In addition, high schools in these project areas do not offer regular (e.g., face-to-face) matriculation courses required for college and university entrance, an omission that further narrows students' opportunities to acquire general intellectual skills and to move into nonvocational career pathways.

The largest school catering to Aboriginal students in the project areas has set a goal to increase the vocational options available to students. Another pilot program has begun in the area that aims to develop career awareness of the trades and agriculture in Aboriginal youth beginning in grade 7 (ALPS, 2002; personal communication with Alberta Learning representatives). These are indications that the push for vocational type programs is still seen as an important means of addressing Aboriginal youth problems.

Conclusions

Although the program has several advantages and benefits, it also has weaknesses that we highlight here.

The schooling of Aboriginal peoples in Canada has historically been for the purpose of colonizing, assimilating, and acculturating Aboriginal peoples. The dominant framework that guided European colonialists' efforts in schooling Canada's First Peoples was based on racism, paternalism, and antagonistic control of Aboriginal peoples. Although the schooling of Aboriginal peoples could be seen as well-meaning, the result was a second-class education that has left scars on the past generations, scars still visible on the present generation. Is the Aboriginal Youth Initiative a well-meaning project imposed by mainly white policymakers that contributes to a different quality of education? The answers are complex because some of the concerns with this initiative reflect concerns about youth apprenticeship and work experience programs more generally. Recognizing this, our analysis of the initiative indicates that certain as-

sumptions and processes may contribute to the fostering of a differentiated system of schooling for this group of youth. It raises questions about the vulnerability of the youth involved in the program and their ability to assert their rights in the workplace or to have these rights protected by teachers and other adults.

Our research suggests that there are positive effects on the various stakeholders. The Aboriginal Youth Initiative appears to be a relevant program for making the transition from school to work. For the youth it allows for the development of skills and knowledge and provides opportunities to earn money while also acquiring high school credits. It enables local companies and interns to realize their own and each other's potential, and it provides additional benefits for communities such as providing role models to younger students. It contributes to the development of local talent and provides local employers with potential workers who have a vested interest in their communities.

We believe that more monitoring of the quality of participation and opportunities for personal development should be done. For example, we suggest that students be provided with opportunities to meet with other student interns when possible before, during, and after their internships to discuss and share knowledge and experiences. Students who have not yet completed an internship in the program may benefit from hearing experienced students speak about their internships. Similarly, students who have started in the Registered Apprenticeship Program may benefit from hearing about the experiences of students who have continued their apprenticeship after high school.

In addition, we suggest other ways to enhance the program. For example, the data indicate that schools could be more involved in the learning that occurs in such programs and should be held more accountable for monitoring students in the workplace. Moreover, a basic learning plan would go a long way toward ensuring that specific skills and training objectives are identified for both students and employers and that tasks unrelated to the trade that merely keep students busy would be reduced. This learning plan should be developed with the acknowledgment that rigid structures and timelines are rarely feasible in a workplace environment and that not all youth learn at the same pace or in the same way (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum and AHRDCC, 1998). A regular revisiting and discussion of this plan between teachers or school counselors, students, and employers should occur, and attempts should be made to help students integrate formal and informal learning.

If a lack of time for teachers to fulfill their supervisory, mentoring, and monitoring duties to interns is a problem, as was suggested by an Alberta Learning employee, then this must be addressed at the administrative or higher levels. Another concern to be addressed at these levels is the necessity of providing additional support for students in more remote areas

who are taking matriculation courses required for college and university entrance by distance education.

CAREERS' goal "to facilitate community support for youth to succeed in these efforts" requires further attention to ensure support from all participating groups. Developing strong relationships with all stakeholders requires regular and open communication and a clear understanding of the roles of all involved. One of the barriers to reaching the goal of "facilitat[ing] community support for youth to succeed in these efforts" is in a few cases the lack of awareness of Aboriginal cultures on the part of non-Aboriginal employers. As no formal cross-cultural awareness training or resources are provided to employers in preparation for receiving Aboriginal students, this might be a consideration for the future. Cross-cultural awareness tools should also be developed for students preparing to enter workplace cultures. In addition to the cross-cultural awareness training, a basic orientation to the value and past successes, as well as an opportunity to hear about the experiences of those involved in the program (e.g., employers, students, community members, etc.) should be provided to employers.

Finally, we believe that the high school curriculum must be further developed to be more relevant and practical to most students who are not university-bound, to further accommodate the youths' economic needs and their diverse interest and learning styles and to bridge practical and academic knowledge.

In conclusion, we suggest that more questions need to be asked in order to probe further into the macro and micro implications of programs like the Aboriginal Youth Initiative such as:

- In what (other) ways does the historical legacy of schooling and work practices imposed on the Aboriginal peoples of Canada affect schooling and work practices of Aboriginal peoples today?
- How can youth apprenticeships be made more accessible and effective for youth?
- This program is industry-driven. Would an Aboriginal-initiated vocational program look different? If so, how?
- What accountability measures are most important? For example, retention of young people is presumably as important as the initial registration in a career pathway. What supports are needed for Aboriginal youth as they proceed along these pathways?

Notes

¹The unemployment rate for youth in Canada (aged 15-24) is 12.6%, compared with the rate of 5.7% for adults (25 years and older, Statistics Canada, 2001).

²HSSI is one component of the Health Services Career Pathway. *CAREERS the Next Generation* began offering internships in health services in 2001. HSSI places high school students full time with a health service provider for six weeks or more, usually starting in July, to assist in health services career exploration and to develop employability skills. The interns make a two-year commitment to the summer internship. From grade 11 the health

services interns earn high school credits and an honorarium while experiencing what it would be like to work in the health sector.

³ In the 2000-2001 school year 492 band-controlled schools in Canada served 61.3% of the registered Indian children living on reserves (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2002).

⁴ For example, "Between 1990 and 1994, 957,000 jobs were created in the Canadian economy for those with postsecondary education while 830,000 jobs disappeared for those with lower levels of educational attainment" (Wilson, 2001, p. 243).

⁵ 65% of Aboriginal youth (15-24 years) had not completed high school in 2001 compared with just 35% of the Aboriginal peoples in the 25 to 44 year old category, which indicates that some of the differences between the Aboriginal people's educational attainment and the total population are due to age distribution (Mendelson, 2004).

⁶ The Pygmalion effect and the Galatea effect are two types of self-fulfilling prophecy. A Pygmalion effect is if an employer or supervisor thinks her employees or subordinates will succeed, they are more likely to succeed. The Galatea effect is if a person thinks he or she will succeed, he or she is more likely to succeed (Daido & Itoh, 2005).

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