

Mokasige: Redeploying a Colonial Institution to Reaffirm and Revitalize Algonquin Culture

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Historically, Canada's educational policy for Indigenous populations has focused on assimilation, which has had a negative effect on Indigenous cultures and peoples. Today, high school graduation rates for Aboriginals are less than half of the Canadian average (Assembly of First Nations, 2011). Through an examination of existing literature and an ethnography of Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan, a modern Native school, I examine the possibilities for the future of Native education. The Indian Control of Indian Education (ICIE) document, released 40 years ago, argued that culturally sensitive education that connects Native students to their heritage can help build feelings of positive self-esteem and identity, giving them the confidence to succeed in life, both within and outside their communities. In turn, this helps combat issues of poverty and culture loss among Natives. This process is exemplified at Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan, which has graduation rates on par with Canadian averages. The process is a role model for other Native communities who wish to implement the education system set out by ICIE and redeploy this once-colonial institution to better serve their peoples.

Introduction

Over 40 years ago, the National Indian Brotherhood, later renamed the Assembly of First Nations, released a document entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972). It called for an end to assimilative education administered by the government to be replaced by education that would “develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honoured place in Indian tradition and culture” (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 2). What has been the outcome of this declaration? Can education be reclaimed to revitalize Indigenous culture while simultaneously allowing its students equal access to mainstream society? To address these questions, this paper presents the case of Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan¹.

The schooling of Indigenous populations in Canada has, historically, been problematic and there remains “a major gap between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals in every level of educational attainment” (Frideres & Gadacz, 2005, p. 118). The Canadian government's initial policy toward Aboriginal students was to force assimilation through the use of residential schools. This policy, along with other methods of colonization and assimilation, has left a legacy of social problems within the Aboriginal population, including poor health, low life expectancy, and inadequate housing, as well as high rates of poverty, unemployment, addiction, and

suicide (Steckley & Cummins, 2001). Education is largely touted as key to solving social issues such as these, but in the context of First Nations education, it paradoxically has created even more problems (Hookimaw-Witt, 1998). *Indian Control of Indian Education* and other publications, however, have suggested that by regaining control of education, First Nations may introduce Indigenous elements into various educational processes, thereby reaffirming and revitalizing their culture (Ball, 2004; Battiste, 2002; Leavitt, 1995; Steckley & Cummins, 2001). This paper explores one community's efforts to reposition an explicitly colonial institution to revitalize its culture under the constraint of provincial curriculum. After the paper is theoretically positioned and relevant terms are defined, the community and my research method will be briefly discussed. The past and present of Aboriginal education will then be reviewed, followed by a detailed description of the school in question. The reflections of community members will be shared, which span six main themes relating to the school. These themes are: (1) cultural education; (2) comparison with provincial schools; (3) racism and culture; (4) giving back to the community; (5) self-determination; and (6) expansion of activity. Finally, the paper will conclude by referring back to *Indian Control of Indian Education*.

It has been argued that for Native education to improve, one must consider the post-colonial context of Canada (Battiste, 2002). It is necessary to understand "the colonial and neo-colonial practices that continue to marginalize and racialize Aboriginal students" (Battiste, 2002, p. 9). Said (1994) defines colonization as "configurations of power" (p. 133) that work to control Indigenous lands, populations, and resources. This process was justified by "ideas about the biological basis of racial inequality" (Said, 1994, p. 144). Education was central to colonization, and indeed "the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and blackboard" (wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 9). In order to frame the context of this discussion, literature on the past and present of Native education in Canada will be reviewed. An ethnography of Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan will be discussed, including reflections from former students and community members.

For the purpose of this discussion, culture can be defined as "what people think, what they do, and the material products they produce. Thus, mental processes, beliefs, knowledge, and values are all part of culture" (Bodley, 1997, p. 10). The government of Canada defines *Aboriginal peoples* as "the descendants of the original inhabitants of North America. The Canadian *Constitution* recognizes three groups of Aboriginal people—Indians, Métis and Inuit. These are three separate peoples with unique heritages, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs" (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2012). The term *First Nation* is defined by the government of Canada as "a term that came into usage in

the 1970s to replace the word 'Indian', ... [and] refers to the Indian peoples in Canada, both Status and non-Status" (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2012). The terms *First Nations*, *Native*, *Aboriginal*, and *Indigenous* are used interchangeably throughout this discussion to describe these populations.

The First Nations Community of Kitigan Zibi

Kitigan Zibi is an Algonquin First Nations reserve in the Gatineau region of Quebec. While the reserve is located in a rural setting, it is adjacent to a French settler town, Maniwaki. It is not particularly remote, located only 130 km north of Ottawa, the nation's capital. Kitigan Zibi is the largest Algonquin reserve in both size and population, with approximately 185 km² of land and a population of 1,568 (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013). The primary language spoken on the reserve is English, despite its location within francophone Canada. The school on the reserve serves both elementary and high school students, and has an associated kindergarten. This school, Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan, is controlled by the community, and its express aim is to incorporate both the local culture and language into its curriculum.

Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan has impressive rates of graduation. Across the country, Aboriginal graduation rates are roughly 36 per cent (Assembly of First Nations, 2011), considerably lower than the Canadian average of 78 per cent (Statistics Canada, 2013). Nevertheless, between 2000 and 2006, the graduation rate at this school was 79 per cent, slightly higher than the average for all students in the province of Quebec, which was 78.5 per cent (Stevenson, 2007).

To investigate this unusual trend, I decided to engage in participant observation in order to conduct an ethnography of the school and its associated educational aspects. Participant observation can be defined as "the process enabling researchers to learn about activities of the people under study in a natural setting through observing and participating in those activities" (Kawulich, 2005, p.2). This is the process used to create an ethnography, which is a "study of people ... by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data" (Brewer, 2000, p. 6).

To conduct this method of participant observation, I spoke with the educational coordinator at the school and outlined my research topic to her. She, along with the principal, were both interested in my work and eager to share the success the school has had, as well as discuss the challenges they continue to face. They suggested I volunteer in the school for the month of June 2011, to understand how it runs on a day-to-day basis. Volunteering at the school gave me the opportunity to meet with and interview many of the approximately 30 teachers and other staff.

Jenny², the school coordinator, also ran a cultural day camp in July, and asked if I would be interested in volunteering there as well. I agreed, as it would help me understand more about cultural education outside of the school environment.

For three months I lived and worked on the reserve, volunteering at the school and then the camp. I also interviewed 17 community members and participated in as many community activities as possible. During my time working at the school, I met a few former students (now young adults) who had summer jobs there. Despite my status as an outsider, I was welcomed into the community and got to know many former students. I was invited to many social gatherings, including family dinners and parties. Through the personal and professional relationships I made during my time living in the community, I was able to engage in true participant observation, thereby exploring the dimensions of the cultural education that was being administered. I was also able to hear reflections from community members I interviewed and interacted with, on the effects of cultural education.

Native Education in Canada

Traditionally, First Nations did not have institutionalized education. Learning was instead considered a lifelong process, one that taught responsibility; competency and respect; and “thus, knowledge [was] not a commodity [to be] possessed or controlled by educational institutions, but a living process to be absorbed and understood” (Battiste, 2002, p. 15). Children would learn by observing the members of their community, attempting things themselves, and asking questions. However, this system was not recognized by the Canadian government, which sought to solve the “Indian problem” through assimilation, by forcibly placing Indigenous children in residential schools (Lusztig, 2008, p. 100).

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), established in 1991 to address contemporary issues facing Aboriginal peoples and relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, summed up the ideological basis of these boarding schools:

[Native children] had to be taught to see and understand the world as a European place within which *only* [emphasis added] European values and beliefs had meaning A wedge had to be driven not only physically between parent and child, but also culturally and spiritually. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996)

Indeed this cultural and spiritual ‘wedge’ was driven deep, as the Indigenous language and cultural suppression educational policies of Residential Schools developed a language barrier between students and members of their own communities, and the students began to see their own people as “ugly” and “condemned” (Grant, 1996, p. 246). The mental, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as the oppression experienced in this school system served to “produce thousands of individuals incapable of leading healthy lives or contributing positively to their communities.” (Milloy, 1999, p. xvii)

The legacy of the residential school system has been profound. It seriously threatened First Nations cultures and languages, and emotionally scarred

many of its pupils. "My spiritual being was destroyed" claims one former student (Michel, as quoted in Grant, 1996, p. 247). Indeed, "nearly everyone had difficulties when they left [Residential] school finding an identity and place in the world" (Knockwood & Thomas, 1992, p. 156). Cycles of abuse and poverty persist on Native reserves as a legacy of this colonial project.

Native education has since moved to a heterogeneous system, where students attend federal schools on reserves or are integrated into mainstream provincial schools. In many cases, this system is still problematic. Federal schools are often underfunded, leaving them without the capacity to deliver quality education. Provincial schools, while not explicitly assimilative, continue to devalue and ignore Native culture, language, and epistemology (Frideres & Gadacz, 2005). Ball (2004) explains that Indigenous students are subject to:

an education that is conceptualized, vetted and delivered predominantly by academics and professionals of European descent. This kind of training can shatter Indigenous students' sense of cultural pride and seriously challenge their confidence in the validity of their cultural knowledge. (p. 457)

Grant (1996) suggests that "more harmful than the lingering fear and insecurity was the feeling that education was of no use; in fact, many believed that education was meant to assimilate, and therefore was harmful" (p. 265). Furthermore, although racism is no longer institutionalized the way it was during the residential school era, Native students in provincial schools still experience bullying and intolerance from their non-Native peers (Frideres & Gadacz, 2005). This contributes to Native populations' higher than average dropout rates.

It has been well established that past educational policies explicitly sought to destroy Native culture. The current education system, however, continues to pose a threat to the cultures, languages, and pedagogies of these people. *Indian Control of Indian Education* addressed this issue 40 years ago, calling for an education that would "give ... children a strong sense of identity, with confidence in their personal worth and ability" (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 3). Education, which for a century was used to assimilate, degrade and destroy Aboriginal culture, can be deployed for its reaffirmation, and this process has already begun. Battiste (2002) describes the roots of this shift: "The traditional Eurocentric view of Indigenous people and their heritage as exotic objects ... now competes with a developing intellectual nexus of postcolonial and poststructural theories that underscores the importance of Indigenous knowledge" (pp. 6-7). She argues that Indigenous knowledge has come to be regarded as both valuable and important. This knowledge can now be integrated into a new system of education that seeks to reaffirm Native culture and worldview, while at the same time preparing its students to navigate in and benefit from the realities of contemporary Canadian society.

It has been suggested that the creation of an education system that blends First Nations traditional epistemologies and pedagogies with those of a more dominant western tradition allows for a discourse and practice that can be both constructive and encouraging. Cultural education is increasingly understood as essential to the formation of identity and self-esteem, and is thus central to the development of a new form of First Nations education.

Knowledge of individual and community identity is essential to the development of self-esteem and self-worth (Barnard & Spencer, 2002). Osborne & Taylor (2010) conducted a study on various cultural groups across Canada, including Aboriginal Dene, and concluded:

Without a clear cultural identity, there might be no clear, available reference group and thus no comparative mechanism by which an individual can even construct a coherent sense of personal identity and by extension experience positive self-esteem and well-being. (p. 885)

Education for Native students must develop a clear sense of cultural identity, in turn helping to build feelings of self-esteem and self-worth. The challenge is to “find a respectful way to compare Eurocentric and Indigenous ways of knowing and include both into contemporary modern education to create a blended educational context” (Battiste, 2002, p. 3).

Battiste (2002) argues for the use of Indigenous knowledge within education. She highlights the importance of pedagogies such as traditions, ceremonies, and even simple aspects of Indigenous daily life, which are “spirit-connecting processes that enable the gifts, visions, and spirits to emerge in each person” (pp. 14-15). A central tenet of Native education is to ensure that each student “know their own gifts and capabilities, strengths and weaknesses, interests and limits to be able to develop their self-esteem and concept of self” (Battiste, 2002, p. 15). This is important not only to the process of lifelong learning, but also for the educational success of Aboriginals in Canada.

Ball (2004) provides an example of these goals in action in her study of the First Nations Partnership Programs. This program offers university-accredited early childhood education degrees on reserves, and strives to incorporate local Indigenous knowledge pertaining to child-rearing and other related topics. The programs incorporate an “open-architecture” curriculum that values input from local Elders, knowledge keepers, and students themselves. As the programs are taught on the reserves, students “do not experience the family disruptions and culture shock that often deters First Nations students from seeking or completing post-secondary education” (Ball, 2004, p. 463).

Like other theorists, Ball (2004) identifies a strong correlation between cultural education and positive self-esteem and identity, noting:

For most students, true engagement in learning requires a curriculum that is relevant and personally meaningful and that affirms the student’s own identity and experiences ... [This] approach is essential within an anticolonial agenda. (p. 472)

Historically, education has not served the interests of First Nations in Canada. It sought to assimilate and destroy their culture. The resulting negative effects on their culture, community, and peoples persist today, as the current educational system has made few attempts to serve First Nations' interests. In light of this, educational theorists and policy makers are suggesting a new form of education for First Nations that incorporates both Indigenous and Western aspects. This type of education has the possibility to revitalize and reaffirm local culture and traditions, thereby encouraging positive self-esteem among its students. Furthermore, this system can allow its students equal access to mainstream Canadian society.

Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan: Setting the School's Community Context

To set the scene of this ethnography, the school, some of its traditions, and its related language immersion program will be described and reflected upon. Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan, or KZ School as it is colloquially known, appears at first glance to be very similar to any regular provincial school, in both form and function. An area the school has named the Agora (a word used in Ancient Greece meaning a gathering place) connects the high school and elementary school. This is an open space where school-wide assemblies are held. One wall in a main hallway displays photos of all the previous graduating classes. Native art and artefacts are



Figure 1. Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan School³

prominently displayed throughout the school, including inspirational posters, a painted map of the traditional Algonquin territories, and birch bark canoes.

The school opened in 1980 and was “the first ‘on reserve’ school in Canada to be constructed and controlled by the community with key administrative positions such as the Director of Education and Principal held by qualified First Nation community members” (Stevenson, 2007, p. 152). Almost all of the staff and faculty at the school are from the community, and a number of them attended the school themselves. All of the teachers have their Bachelor of Education degrees, while others have gone on to obtain their Master of Education. Celine, a teacher, spoke to me about returning to teach at the school she attended, noting: “I feel that I’m giving back to a school system that gave so much to me.” She said she finds working with community members important, as “... everyone is on the same page of wanting to provide the very best for the kids. Being from the community, you know that these are going to be community members later, so it’s a vested interest”(personal communication, 2011).

The curricular content is largely similar to that taught in regular provincial schools, and thus the school is qualified to grant equivalent diplomas. Students are also taught the Algonquin language and a Native Studies class. This class focuses on Native history, but also offers traditional teachings on the environment, spirituality, craftwork, cooking, and related topics.

In addition to what is taught inside the classroom, each year the school holds either a “Culture Week” or several “Culture Days.” Elders come to the school to help teach traditional activities, such as hunting, cooking, craftwork, and building pikagons⁴ (see Figure 2), temporary shelters that have been used for camping in the bush. The principal noted that “the kids really want [Culture Week] and the staff really get on board”(personal communication, 2011). However, the school is facing cuts in government funding and is under pressure to adhere more closely to the provincial curriculum and therefore Culture Week may be discontinued. This cutback would limit the school’s ability to blend local knowledge with the generic curriculum they are obliged to teach.

Furthermore, a Grade 6 graduation I attended incorporated many cultural aspects. Graduation sashes were fastened with a beaded medicine wheel medallion, and students were given an eagle feather to hold while having their graduation photo taken. The ceremony began with a song played by the girls’ drum group, followed by a prayer of thanks to the Creator led by an Elder in both English and Algonquin. The individual attention that the students receive became very evident as each was given an award from their teacher appropriate to their specific gifts and talents. This reflected the Chief’s vision of the school’s program to recognize each student’s unique gifts and to unlock each student’s



Figure 2. A Pikogan Made by Campers during Culture Camp⁵

potential, and echoes previously discussed theories of Aboriginal education. The ceremony closed with another honour song performed by the boys' drum group.

The Mokasige⁶: A Place and Program of Learning

KZ School, for the most part, looked and performed like any provincial school; however, there were some very distinct differences. In particular, the Algonquin immersion program showed a way of teaching, learning, and incorporating Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies into a traditionally Western school environment. This program is optional and is offered every afternoon, as an alternative to the regular classes offered a few times weekly. The program and its associated area of the school are referred to as *the Mokasige*. The classroom had a kitchen area with a stove, oven, and fridge. Each of the four walls in the room was marked as one of the four directions, with their associated colour, season, animal, and medicine posted as well. In one corner were three small tipis made from sticks, animal skins, birch bark, and adorned with fur; props for the end-of-year play, *The Three Little Pigs* or *Niswe Kokoshenagan*.

When Joan, the teacher, introduced me to the students, they greeted me in unison, saying "Kwey⁷!" I was asked to join their circle and the students sang for me in Algonquin. After the initial introduction, Joan spoke

only in Algonquin. The students made drinking cups out of softened birch bark and poplar sticks, following Joan's demonstration. Later, the whole class played a game of bingo, referred to as *Ni Bakinawagen*, meaning *I win*. Each card had an array of cartoons depicting people doing or feeling certain things. One student would call these out in Algonquin as they were randomly picked from a bag. One of the younger Grade 2 girls sat next to me and translated each word as it was called. Her ability to translate at such a young age was not unusual in the Mokasige.

The Mokasige was a unique learning environment in a number of ways. This program featured a strong focus on learning together as a class through crafts, preparing food, sitting in a circle, telling myths, and playing games in the Algonquin language. Elders often visit to teach certain crafts or myths. Joan claims that she doesn't consider herself to be a teacher, but rather "a person who gives our language to those who wish to learn it" (personal communication, 2011). She told me that she considers each student individually and meets with each of them when they first begin the Mokasige program. This individual attention is important, as she simultaneously teaches different grade levels, and thus must use a variety of methods, claiming:

For me, it has to be fun. Our language is very difficult to learn and it's very difficult to teach, but I'm constantly trying to make it interesting. Games, dancing, beadwork in the language; we cook because we have a kitchen, that's where I show them the traditional foods, different recipes. (personal communication, 2011)

Many parents with children in the program feel very positively about it, and Joan spoke of the support she receives from them:

There was one student I was so proud of. You sat beside him, and he translated—see? I'm getting goose bumps, that's what I love—he translated word for word what I was saying, and I did not tell him to do that, he took it upon himself and I said there is no exam that I could give him. For me, it's a moment I will cherish for the rest of my life. Then I went to tell his mom and we both shed a few tears. (personal communication, 2011)

A parent named Sue spoke about her experience when one of her children showed signs of learning difficulties. It was suggested by the school that she withdraw him from the immersion program so he could receive extra help in the regular classroom. Sue was already quite familiar with the program, as her older children had benefitted from it. She made the decision to keep her son in the Mokasige because it provided him with an alternative learning environment and teaching methods. She found that the program gave him the confidence to learn both in the Mokasige and in the regular classroom. One of her older sons also reflected on his experience, explaining: "when you're in Mokasige, they don't just teach you Algonquin, they teach you morals. You learn respect, you learn to respect what the teacher's teaching, and then you learn *everything* faster" (personal communication, 2011).

Learning the Meaning of Mokasige and a Reflection on Kikinamadinan

The Mokasige is situated within the framework of the school, which is very much a Western institution, but in many ways it incorporates pedagogies and epistemologies that reflect traditional First Nations education. It is a classroom, yet it mimics the home as stories are told, and children of different ages learn together and teach each other. They build, craft, sing, play, cook and eat. At the centre of all this is Joan, who is at once a teacher, a maternal figure, and a community Elder.

In our interview she explained that when she was a student she was not allowed to speak her Native language. She expressed how she feels hopeful for the future, as it is now not only permissible but also encouraged to teach the language and the culture within the school. She explained the meaning of the word Mokasige, which showed how appropriate this choice of name was for such a transformative project:

'Mokasige' means 'that the sun is coming out of the clouds'. Finally, as Anishnabe⁸ people the sun is coming out of the cloud, and the sun is shining. Because now, we can teach our language, we can teach our culture. So the cloud was covering the sun, but guess what came out? Our people. Our language. Our culture. So 'that' is what Mokasige means. The sun coming out of the cloud. (personal communication, 2011)

It is clear that various educational programs at the school incorporate local cultural aspects, but what is their effect? Is it possible that these programs are simply decorative add-ons to a system that is fundamentally the same as any other provincial school in Canada, thus continuing to marginalize and assimilate First Nations students?

This *kikinamadinan* is still a school, an institution that is explicitly European and central to the colonial project. The Agora, the central gathering place of the school, takes its name from Ancient Greece. The play done in the Mokasige was not a traditional myth, but rather the Three Little Pigs translated into Algonquin. The graduation ceremony integrated traditional elements, yet the notion of graduating seems to be incongruous with the Indigenous belief of learning as a lifelong process. Outdoor activities are important to cultural education in this context, but Culture Week and Culture Days have been threatened by funding cuts. Based on its funding structure from the government, the essential function of this school is to provide an education equivalent to that of a provincial school. In light of this, are the cultural elements visible in the school simply superficial and tokenistic attempts to dress up a provincial school to appear as one that is, by and for, the Algonquin peoples and culture?

In order to address this question, the importance and effects of traditional elements within this blended educational system must be understood. What is the contemporary value of being able to hunt moose, build a pikogan, or tell an Algonquin myth? It has been suggested by many theorists (Ball, 2004; Battiste, 2002; Leavitt, 1995; Osborne & Taylor, 2010) that the most significant benefit of this type of knowledge is its ability to foster positive self-esteem and identity, thus psychologically equipping

students for success. The following section examines the reflections of community members. These insights shed light on the effects of these educational programs on students as they move forward in life, as well as effects on the community as a whole.

Sharing the Words of the Community Members

Over the course of my fieldwork, I interviewed 17 former students and other community members to hear how they reflect on KZ School. Many former students identified cultural activities as a highlight of their education. One former student, Tim, when asked about his favourite memories, responded:

We had some privileges that say, an outside school, wouldn't have. We would have Elders come in and teach different things about our old culture, like the hunting side, the medicine side, just exploring and knowing, learning the trees. (personal communication, 2011)

It's interesting to note that he referred to these activities as privileges and, therefore, as something that was not only different, but also better than what the provincial school system could provide.

Dylan, another former student, was originally from the reserve. However, he had attended a provincial elementary school in the city, where he lived with his family. He made the decision to move back to the reserve to attend high school because he felt as though he was missing out on learning about his culture and his people. In our interview he described his favourite qualities of the school: "It's my people, learning my language, learning about my culture and being around relatives" (personal communication, 2011). These are all aspects that are specific to KZ School, many of which would not have been available to him had he remained at provincial school. As I spoke to different members of the community, six main themes emerged regarding the impact of the school on the community.

Theme 1: Cultural Education

Cultural education has been argued to be very important in forestalling some types of mental conditions and issues, such as depression and low self-esteem (Ball, 2004; Battiste, 2002; Leavitt, 1995; Osborne & Taylor, 2010). This was a recurring theme in my interviews. There was a clear belief that the cultural education provided by the school was instrumental in helping to build self-esteem and a clear sense of identity for its students. When I asked Chief Gilbert Whiteduck how he felt about cultural education, he replied, "For me, it's key. It's key to how you feel about yourself as Anishnabe, what you know of your history, what you know of your language. A sense of security comes from knowing yourself, and it makes you feel good" (personal communication, 2011). This seemed to be a sentiment shared by the teachers, as Valerie claimed:

We can determine what we want here, we can bring the strengths of the cultural activities and the language and build on strengthening that for each child, however they want to. Students succeed in higher education and in life in general if they have a strong sense of their identity. (personal communication, 2011)

Theme 2: Kikinamadinan and Other Schools

A few interviewees were in a position to compare KZ School to other schools, and striking differences were noted. Chief Whiteduck attended a provincial school where his aspirations for further education were devalued and disregarded: "I was told at my school 'never even think that you can go on to college or university' and in the back of my mind I thought 'who are you to tell me that?'" So it was my stubbornness saying 'no, you're not going to stop me!'" (personal communication, 2011).

Valerie did not attend KZ School since she grew up on a different reserve, and she elaborated on her own experiences attending a provincial school:

[It wasn't] a positive experience, being one of the only Native kids in the class. Growing up in that environment I knew 'this doesn't celebrate me one bit'. It didn't feel good, and what it did was to keep people generally down. (personal communication, 2011)

Dustin, a former KZ School student, described the apathetic attitude he experienced when he attended school in Maniwaki for his first year of high school. He said he found it difficult to stay motivated to attend classes, as the teachers didn't seem to care or notice. He contrasted this to his experience at KZ School, saying, "Oh, man, at this school they'll call your mom, they'll call your sister, they'll call whoever! They'll show up with a frying pan!" and he said because of that experience, he came to really appreciate KZ School, claiming "You're with people from the rez so you don't have an identity crisis, unlike the kids who are from here but don't go to the school. Here you know who you are and you're really comfortable going to that school" (personal communication, 2011).

Theme 3: Racism and Culture

Many people described drawing on what they had learned about their culture to battle racism encountered outside of the community. Alison, a former student and now a teacher and guidance counsellor, noted:

Until I was in college, I didn't realise that it was important that I know all my history and everything because a lot of people on the outside got it wrong. I remember going to college and fighting that sense of First Nations that everybody else has, and it was heartbreaking. A few times I was brought to tears and I was thinking 'wow...they really think that about me?' (personal communication, 2011)

Theme 4: Giving Back

Much of what students learn about their culture at the school stays with them far beyond their first experiences at college, and former students often come back with the desire to give back to their community. For example, Dylan felt that his experience going to the school fostered a stronger desire to contribute to his community as he moves forward in life and with his career:

I love this reserve; it's my home... and I'm proud to be from here, proud to be Anishnabe. I want to start a business to help get kids off drugs and alcohol. My business that I intend to open will hopefully change their views, and give them something else to do. (personal communication, 2011)

Theme 5: Local Control of Education as a Pathway to Self-Determination

The school does provide a standardized high school diploma, but it simultaneously does something even more valuable. It connects people to their heritage which, as previously discussed, bolsters self-esteem and helps equip students to battle negative and often racist mainstream notions about First Nations. In doing so, it helps them to be successful in life off the reserve. Chief Whiteduck reflected on this, further explaining what he sees as part of the goals of the school:

People say, 'Oh, you should be pleased that so many students are graduating and then coming back to the community' and I say, 'The idea was not to prepare them to come back to the community, but if they did? Great, obviously! But no, anywhere! Why can't they enter mainstream society?' (personal communication, 2011)

The school provides the youth of Kitigan Zibi with an education comprised of their Native culture and knowledge as well as the mainstream curriculum, helping them to construct their identity and be successful as they move forward in life. However, the school has served other purposes as well. Speaking with people who had been involved with the creation of the school brought to light how it became an inspiration for the community's subsequent projects. Following the successful construction of the school, the community had the confidence to take many matters previously handled by the government into its own hands. It was generally regarded as the first time the community members had worked collectively for something that they wanted and needed, and many other community-run services followed suit. As Chief Whiteduck said:

Education was the first program we took control of. And the school itself was THE first school that was actually built by a community themselves. There was pride in saying 'I worked there', you know? So all of that pride that built around that to say 'Hey! We've taken on Grades 1 to 7 in 1980; we could do it for health! We could do it for policing!' There was kind of a momentum that had been created to gain control. (personal communication, 2011)

After the school had been constructed, the community decided to assume control of their health services and then built a health centre. They established their own police force and worked to create their own social service sector, including a women's crisis shelter and a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre. All of these projects were undertaken by the community, building on the momentum that the school had created.

Alison elaborated on this, discussing the impact from both a cultural and economic viewpoint:

Having the school here has allowed us to take control and have the authority to be able to teach the way we want to teach. It's given us that power to keep our culture with us. If you look at it from an administrative point of view, how many people does this school employ? What's grown from it? We now have a day-care centre that's connected to the school, we have the kindergarten. It's impacted the community in many, many ways. (personal communication, 2011)

The school and its related programs, such as the Kindergarten and day-care centre, have created employment at every skill and pay level. In addition to the employment the school has directly created, the services that were created using the momentum that Chief Whiteduck described have also led to jobs at every level.

Theme 6: School as the Centre of Activity in the Community

A further impact the school has had on the community is in how it acts as a hub from which many other cultural, athletic, and community activities radiate. Celine, who is involved with a number of outside activities that are associated with the school, explained the school's importance: "A lot of activities stem from here, so you'll have things in the arts, culture, sports. The community would definitely be a different place if the school weren't here" (personal communication, 2011). Students are encouraged to participate in the Pow Wow, a traditional ceremonial meeting of many First Nations, which takes place on the school playing field.

The Pow Wow itself is very important to the cultural atmosphere at Kitigan Zibi. Many of the youth in the community are involved in the drumming and dancing groups that perform at Pow Wows across a number of First Nations communities. Sue sees this as extremely positive and, in particular, for her two teenage sons. She explained the value of drumming to them by saying, "The drum keeps them out of trouble. They really respect their bodies more, they respect people around them more, and they respect the environment more. They understand things more deeply than others" (personal communication, 2011).

It is clear that effects of the cultural education at KZ School are consistent with those suggested by the literature, and that these are not tokenistic or superficial. Education helps students to build a sense of both individual and community identity, which in turn helps them as they move forward in life. The school has had further impacts on the community by creating a momentum that has inspired them to take social services into their own hands, providing for their own community while simultaneously boosting the economy. It also acts as a hub from which other activities, such as the Pow Wow, radiate.

Conclusion

Education of First Nations through the use of residential schools threatened First Nations cultures, traditions, and people through institutionalized racism and forced assimilation. These schools have now been closed, but the current heterogeneous educational system remains problematic for First Nations students. Much literature has emerged that supports an education system for First Nations that incorporates local culture and traditional pedagogies into a mainstream curricular framework. The ethnographic snapshot of Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan and its related educational programs clearly

validates this viewpoint. Culture is incorporated into the system in a manner that is neither tokenistic nor superficial. Rather, its essential value and continuing importance was agreed upon by nearly all of my informants.

The youth at Kitigan Zibi learn how to hunt, fish, and build shelters; make traditional food, crafts, and medicine; speak Algonquin; and participate in ceremonies. The value of this is two-fold: first, the local culture and language is revitalized after a long colonial history of institutionalized disrespect and discouragement; and second, this culture is reaffirmed to its members, giving them the confidence and self-esteem required for them to be successful within and outside the community. This, in turn, helps to combat the many social issues facing First Nations today, and thus education can be redeployed to better serve their communities.

Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan has been exemplary in spearheading a movement toward a blended education that incorporates traditional elements into learning processes. It boasts graduation rates that are higher than the provincial average, and is both a model and an inspiration for a hopeful future of First Nations education as set out by the National Indian Brotherhood in *Indian Control of Indian Education*. While the school and its community still face a number of challenges and social problems, the standard of living is much higher than many Canadian reserves. There is still a long road that must be travelled by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginals alike in Canada before parity and equality is reached, but this reserve has made many steps on its journey.

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Notes

¹ Kikinamadinan (kee-kee-nah-mah-dee-nahn) is the Algonquin word for school

² All real names, used with permission

³ Photo courtesy of http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2046/2079566987_eabb0ba57a.jpg

⁴ Pikogan (pee-koh-gahn) is the Algonquin word for shelter

⁵ Author's own photo

⁶ Pronounced Moe-kah-si-gay, Algonquin word meaning sun coming out from behind a cloud

⁷ Kwey is the Algonquin word meaning hello

⁸ Anishnabe (Ah-nish-na-bay) is the Algonquin word meaning Native, or people of the land

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