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ABSTRACT

This discussion paper explores interactions among formal learning, informal learning, and life conditions and opportunities experienced by aboriginal people in Canada. The contradictory importance of education for aboriginal people is examined with respect to three related aspects of these relationships. First, the paper summarizes students' accounts of their experiences in conventional and alternative school settings in three Saskatchewan communities, exploring how these relate to the students' broader cultural and home environments. Second, it examines the formal and informal educational experiences of a small group of adults surveyed in an urban Indian and Metis Friendship Center. Finally, the paper explores issues that arise around the emergence of entrepreneurial training and entrepreneurship, areas posed by many commentators as a possible way of bridging formal and informal learning and overcoming the longstanding marginalization of aboriginal people from labor market and economic participation. The paper concludes that gaps remain in the attainment of educational success by aboriginal people, relative to the general population, when viewed in terms of conventional educational indicators. However, the aboriginal youth and adults involved in the study place a high value in formal schooling, mainstream economic activities, and entrepreneurial opportunities to provide routes for individual and community advancement. The study suggests that the aboriginal peoples could benefit more if the educational system better integrated their skills and culture and acknowledged the strengths that the aboriginal people bring to learning. (The paper lists 40 references.) (KC)

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Informal Learning: Cultural Experiences and Entrepreneurship Among Aboriginal People

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Introduction

This discussion paper is concerned with interactions among formal learning, informal learning, and life conditions and opportunities experienced by Aboriginal people in Canada. The contradictory importance of education for Aboriginal people is examined with respect to three related aspects of these relationships. First, we summarize students' accounts of their experiences in conventional and alternative school settings in three Saskatchewan communities, exploring how these relate to the students' broader cultural and home environments. Second, we examine the formal and informal educational experiences of a small group of adults surveyed in an urban Indian and Métis Friendship Centre. Third, we explore a number of issues that arise around the emergence of entrepreneurial training and entrepreneurship, areas posed by many commentators as a possible way of bridging formal and informal learning and overcoming the longstanding marginalization of Aboriginal people from labour market and economic participation.

The "Education Gap" for Aboriginal People

Considerable attention has been given in recent years to what is commonly described as an education gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. According to 1996 census data, about one-third (35 percent) of Canadians aged fifteen and over, compared to more than half (54 percent) of the comparable Aboriginal population, have less than high school education, while 16 percent of the national adult population, and only 4.5 percent of the Aboriginal population, have a university degree (Statistics Canada, 1998). Dropout rates among Aboriginal youth are reported to be double those for the general population, and Aboriginal school leavers are about half as likely to return to school later (Gilbert et al. 1993: 23).

Many observers associate these restricted levels of school retention and formal educational attainment with inadequate labour market integration and relatively low socioeconomic status among people of Aboriginal ancestry (see especially Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996a, b, c, d; Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 1997: 87). Educational problems are also intertwined with poverty, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, discrimination, and other difficulties that many Aboriginal people encounter in their day to day lives. These concerns are especially pressing insofar as the Aboriginal population is younger, and growing faster, than the general Canadian population (Four Directions

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Consulting Group, 1997). In Saskatchewan, for instance, over eleven percent of the province's total population and about twenty percent of its school-age population were of Aboriginal ancestry in 1996. It is projected that Aboriginal youth will constitute nearly one-third of the province's school-age population in ten years, and thus substantial proportions of future labour market entrants will be of Aboriginal ancestry early in the next century (Four Directions Consulting Group, 1997; Saskatchewan Education, 1991: 5).

Education plays a central role in fostering the attainment by Aboriginal people of diverse objectives for self-determination and equitable participation in Canadian society. Educational issues have broader significance, as well, in the context of growing policy attentiveness to questions about how an aging but diverse society can benefit from the incorporation of historically marginalized groups into meaningful social and economic positions. Consequently, the Aboriginal education gap has been the focus of a diverse and increasing range of policy and program initiatives by numerous public and private sector bodies, especially over the past three decades (National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations, 1988; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996b, 1996c)

Some optimism arises from the increasing numbers of Aboriginal learners who are enrolling in programs and attaining credentials in conventional and First Nations-administered educational institutions at various levels. Elementary and secondary schools in many jurisdictions have begun to incorporate Aboriginal teachers, cultural programming, and services that are oriented to the needs of Aboriginal learners. Higher than average numbers of Aboriginal adults, especially women, in age groups above usual post-secondary entrance levels, are returning to schools and universities to upgrade their credentials. Nonetheless, as Canadians' overall rates of participation and attainment levels in formal education are reaching unprecedented heights, comparable educational achievements among Aboriginal people remain well below national averages (Kirkness and Bowman, 1992; Sub-Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1992; Working Margins Consulting Group, 1992).

As research and policy attention has come to focus on the educational deficits among Aboriginal people with respect to formal schooling, there has been limited consideration of the importance and potential of informal educational activities. Informal learning, constituting deliberate learning situations that exist outside of formally credentialed education, is a widespread but often "hidden" form of education that plays a critical role in expanding people's knowledge and capabilities in several spheres of contemporary social life (Garrick, 1996: 22-23; (Livingstone, 1997: 10; Livingstone, 1998). Many Aboriginal people, regardless of their formal education levels, may possess applied skills or be involved, for instance, in cultural programs or self-help ventures that are not acknowledged in formal assessments of their credentials. Similarly, socially-useful knowledge and skills learned through traditional means may be forgotten, undermined or marginalized in the course of individual or community efforts to meet the demands of formal schooling or training programs. It is important, then, to take into account the nature and extent of informal learning among Aboriginal people in order to enhance our overall understanding of education and promote effective strategies to realize the capacities of Aboriginal people.

Formal and Informal Learning in Aboriginal Societies

Most, if not all, cultures engage in both formal and informal forms of learning. In Canada, with the ascendance of mass schooling and official credentialing systems since the nineteenth century, educational relations have been characterized by the efforts of diverse groups to codify knowledge and regulate the conditions by which it can be validated, transmitted and assessed (Wotherspoon, 1998: 91; 47ff.). One consequence (at least until the recent advancement by various groups of challenges to state-centered education systems, primarily under the guise of lifelong learning) has been a powerful tendency to equate education with formal learning and to ignore or discount the educational value of

informal learning activities.

The history of Aboriginal education in Canada reveals how struggles over the ability to define and deliver legitimate forms of education are critical to the shaping of a society and its people. In these regards, it is important to recognize how both formal and informal learning are educational in a dual sense. Education is important in productive or technical terms insofar as it is directed to the acquisition of technical knowledge, skills, competencies, and, in formal schooling, credentials recognized for labour market and institutional participation. Education also has a moral or subjective purpose, concerned to develop particular kinds of human beings with personal attributes, identities, characters, and behaviours deemed socially acceptable in particular cultural frameworks (Apple, 1986: 72; Wotherspoon, 1998: 119-120). Various groups or communities therefore look to education as an important tool with which forms of individuals and activities that serve their long-term interests are given shape.

Sensitivity to the productive and subjective dimensions of education, as they are formally and informally arranged, is important to an understanding of education among Aboriginal people. Traditionally, First Nations societies practiced both formal and informal learning, although the two learning forms were more organically linked than they would become in advanced industrial societies. Learning was integrated into everyday activity as part of a holistic orientation to the natural, social and spiritual worlds. Henderson (1995: 247) describes how education was structured as through regular community interactions:

> Traditionally our elders and parents taught children our way of managing and prospering in harmony with the environment. Our communities were our classrooms, our families and our sacred order provided the methodology. Customary teaching and learning existed beyond the reach of the European schools imposed by either the provinces or federal government. The linguistic world-view and values were passed from generation to generation; they continue to shape Indian educational aspirations.

Elders and family members, with variations among indigenous societies, played the most central roles in the educational process (McKay and McKay, 1987: 66). Battiste (1986: 25) and Ermine (1995: 104-105) argue that, contrary to the myth that literacy was introduced only after European contact, Aboriginal societies had distinct forms of literacy that emerged through the interaction of tribal epistemologies, texts, and oral histories. Elders' stories, cultural ceremonies, and rituals were critical to the preservation of histories and the transmission of systems of rights, values and morality between generations (Medicine, 1987: 142-143; Hampton, 1995: 8; Treaty 7 Elders and Tribal Council, 1997: 91-92). The most highly structured learning situations were reserved for special positions such as healers, spiritual guides, and political leaders or chiefs, as well as apprenticeships for elder (Couture, 1996; Miller, 1996: 15ff.; Kirkness and Bowman, 1992: 5-7). However, all learners were expected to encounter both formal and informal educational situations.

By contrast, European-based formal education appeared in the form of schooling as an imposition, utilized as a way to replace indigenous traditions with externally-developed forms of knowledge, moral discipline, and cultural attributes (Satzewich and Wotherspoon, 1993). Auger (1997: 350) contrasts these kinds of formal schooling with the Cree philosophy in which humans are understood as spirit as well as body and mind:

> The structure of Canadian schooling tells us that spirit is separate from teaching and learning. Even knowledge is considered separate, something out there to be poured into the minds of the children by the all-knowing classroom teacher.

Formal education from before confederation into at least the early 1970s was guided by an official

objective to make Indians and other Aboriginal people into persons who could assimilate into the mainstream. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the residential school system signified efforts to prepare Indian youth to assimilate through segregation. Subsequent integration of Indian children into provincial school systems, through off-reserve migration and eventual closing of residential schools, was marked by high rates of visible failure with a majority of First Nations youth leaving school well before high school completion.

Initially, much of the blame for this failure was placed on the Aboriginal people and their culture. By the mid-1970s, educators and educational analysts began to emphasize a "cultural discontinuity thesis" that suggested schools were at least partly to blame for their failure to acknowledge and incorporate the different cultural standards and expectations that Aboriginal youth brought with them into Eurocentric school systems. More recent analysis, sensitive to the prospects of self-determination and First Nations controlled schooling, has suggested that the conventional education system remains ill-equipped to overcome high rates of Aboriginal failure and dropout due to the lack of Aboriginal content, cultural curricula, and personnel. Substantial attention, therefore, has turned to the importance of incorporating Aboriginal culture and personnel into the school system (see, e.g., Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996a, c; Ryan, 1996).

Institutional responses to the "education gap," overall, then, have been governed by emphasis on individual adaptations to mainstream schooling or possible responses by school systems to Aboriginal clientele in a manner that continues to privilege existing education systems and structures. These views are underlined by assumptions about salient cultural factors that differentiate Aboriginal students from the general population. Just as formal and informal learning are seen to exist as separate realms, so too are school and culture. Consequently, there is a danger that Aboriginal cultural programming or elders' participation, when they do appear in schools, may tend simply to be dropped into the curriculum as "add-ons" or novel features with little integration between schooling and cultures (viewed traditionally as well as living entities).

However, Aboriginal culture, like education, is dynamic and changing. Battiste (1998) emphasizes that indigenous knowledge cannot be understood without reference to a total way of life or cultural framework in which it is produced. Analysis offered by indigenous writers emphasizes repeatedly the need for education systems to integrate traditional Aboriginal knowledge with more conventional understandings of contemporary cultures (Alfred, 1999: 133; Couture, 1996: 43). Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Regnier, and Archibald (1997), for example, highlight how positive outcomes can be achieved in alternative school settings that adopt holistic orientations to learning and living.

Our thinking about effective educational practices, in other words, must be open to sensitivity to educational practices that reach beyond the kinds of knowledge and structured activities that are incorporated into the curriculum. Learning and life directions take shape through complex interactions among diverse social and educational sites that include personal and community relations outside of, as well as within, formal schooling. Understandings of educational success and failure for any social group, then, must take into consideration how schooling environments variously may ignore or encompass elements of these wider cultural practices. These intersections among culture, formal education and informal education are explored, in the discussion that follows, with respect to the perspectives of Aboriginal youth in schools, Aboriginal adults in the community, and the relationship between Aboriginal culture and entrepreneurial development possibilities.

The Perspectives of Aboriginal Youth in Saskatchewan Schools

The first part of our research involved students who identified themselves as Aboriginal and attended schools in three communities in central Saskatchewan in 1998. Interviews were conducted with 65

elementary school students (in grades three and six) and 25 high school students (in grades nine and twelve), and talking circles with 32 students in an alternative high school, under the guidance of two Aboriginal research assistants. In each setting, students were asked to comment on their educational experiences and aspirations, their home and community experiences, and issues related to Aboriginal cultures (see Schissel and Wotherspoon, 1998, for further details).

The research findings reveal that students placed a high value on conventional indicators of educational success. They offered mostly positive assessments of their schools, and their high educational aspirations reveal that they valued formal schooling on a long-term basis. Only about fifteen percent of the high school students, and fewer than ten percent of the elementary students, indicated that they had no plans to pursue education beyond high school; conversely, nearly seventy percent of those in high school, and sixty percent of those in elementary school, wished to attend university. Parallel with their educational aspirations, students expressed a strong desire to pursue careers in professions or community service occupations, especially law, health care, teaching, and business, all of which typically require extended training or advanced credentials. With respect to their educational experiences, students offered a wide range of both positive and negative assessments, similar to those commonly related by non-Aboriginal students. Specific classes or subjects, teachers, students, and situational factors figured prominently in students' accounts of what they liked and what they disliked or found difficult in school.

The students also placed a high value on traditional cultural elements. Particularly at the high school level, they expressed a strong desire to explore their roots through knowledge and activities relevant to indigenous cultures, languages, and spirituality. Although most students indicated that they had some contact with Aboriginal teachers in their schools, and most had at least some cultural activities in their schools, they felt that schools should be doing more to incorporate Aboriginal content and personnel. Other than those in the alternative high school, which was devoted to the integration of Aboriginal teachers and cultural activities into its educational program, most students were concerned that there were few Aboriginal teachers, elders, or programs, with Aboriginal content mostly consigned to restricted periods, subject areas or cultural days. They sought much more integration of these factors into schools, desiring considerably more opportunities than they currently had to engage elder participation, spirituality, and stronger knowledge of their cultural heritage.

Some students felt that schools needed to offer cultural teachings in order to restore the identity and sense of heritage lost through previous generations. One grade 12 student in an inner-city school commented on the need for schools to integrate cultural values and Aboriginal culture in the primary grades, at the level at which identities are formed, since by high school, "basically you see all these white students around, you see the mainstream parts without really having an identity and if it's not at home, here do you get it?" Another student, in the same school, agreed, commenting that schools should provide traditional cultural teaching,

> because we've lost so much over the years; it's slowly coming back but I think there needs to be some things like in schools all the time for those types of things because we all live in the city and we don't get to go hunting and stuff like tan a hide and we need things like that else we are going to lose them. I think it would also give kids something more to do, because pretty much the only option you have in a city is go drinking, go to a bar, do some crime, there's a lot of kid aren't into sports, like me I'm in it for my child but not for myself, I like to do things with my hands more, like produce things, crafts.

Several students pointed to differences in what schools and elders or parents taught in the areas of languages, ceremonies, and traditional knowledge. Sometimes, these could be complementary. One grade 12 student observed that, in school,

> they teach you history and about the way things were, they give you the why's and the logic on how to keep up with the world, whereas elders and certain people I respect give me the wisdom I need to go on.

But other students saw discontinuity or even inconsistency in the gaps between school and community-based knowledge:

> There is quite a contrast [between school and what my people tell me], like the Crazyhorse; the old people know, like my grandpa used to talk about them a lot, and then when you learn about them in school, there's just – it's kind of different – and I was saying, okay, somebody is lying to me" (Grade 12 student).

> ...the way I was being taught in school about sweats [sweat lodge ceremonies] was kind of different, different procedures [from what my grandparents have taught] (Grade 9 student).

Most students revealed that they had some contact with elements of their indigenous heritage, especially languages, at home or in the community. About fifteen percent of high school students, and forty percent of elementary school students, indicated that they spoke an Aboriginal language, and an additional forty percent of high school students and thirty percent of elementary students said that they could speak "a little bit" of Aboriginal language. Moreover, nearly all the students said that someone in their homes spoke an Aboriginal language. However, the students felt strongly that there was insufficient language instruction in their schools, and a majority expressed a desire to be given some formal recognition of indigenous languages and, to a lesser extent, other traditional cultural activities and traditions that they engaged in outside of school. Even without credit, many students sought involvement in such activities on a voluntary basis, expressing a need to have formal contact with past, to help regain a sense of identity and connection with elders, and simply to keep them busy. However, a small number of students felt that cultural activities, in or out of school, should remain voluntary, or were not wanted, stating, "I'm not really into that."

Students, regardless of their views on traditional heritage, were keenly aware of the impact of contemporary cultural manifestations on their lives and identities. Virtually all of the students expressed high degrees of sensitivity to pressing family and community concerns, especially with respect to racism, poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, poverty, housing conditions, the desire for a safe environment, and, often among high school students, parenting. Many students revealed their own direct encounters with such experiences:

> there was a time in my life when I was kind of ashamed to be Aboriginal because of the experience, the racism (Grade 12 student);

> [Problems for Aboriginal people for me are] when they are drunk and they go to stores and they scare us. They scare me. When someone tries to break into our house (Grade 3 student);

> I know this girl, she was 11 years old and pregnant, and one of my friends was 13 years old and got pregnant, and they are still babies. I think about it now, I had my first kid at 15 and that was too young; that's why my parents have him, I was too screwed up to be raising a child. I think they should make birth control free. You should be able to go to your school nurse and get birth control (Grade 12 student).

However, even students who indicated that they had not experienced racism and other serious social concerns themselves commented frequently on the impact of these phenomena on family members, people they knew, or more generally in their communities. In these regards, it is important to recognize

that Aboriginal students live in a variety of circumstances, and most would likely indicate they had what might generally be considered relatively "problem-free" lives by conventional standards. At the same time, many of them struggle with fundamental personal, social and situational problems that school authorities and other public officials must take into account in order to ensure that students have access to meaningful educational experiences.

Contained within students' accounts of their schooling and social lives is a high degree of awareness of their socio-cultural circumstances expressed in the form of both traditional heritage and contemporary conditions. They value formal education and maintain high aspirations for success by conventional standards, despite indications that continuing barriers to their social and educational advancement are likely to mean that many of them will not achieve their objectives. They view their education positively, but feel that schools are falling short in many areas. They express a dual need for their identities and knowledge to have some traditional grounding at the same time that official acknowledgment must be given to contemporary community realities that enter into the lives of Aboriginal people. It is instructive that, in all of these regards, students who were most confident and positive were those in the alternative school settings in which formal and informal learning, and traditional and contemporary cultures, were most highly integrated. Students' lives, in these settings, were validated and nurtured through a meaningful amalgamation of past, present and future orientations.

Accounts of Formal and Informal Learning by Inner-city Aboriginal Adults

A second, related component of the research concerns questions related to how adults, many of whom have had little conventional educational success, reflect on their educational experiences and learning needs and aspirations. To address these issues in a preliminary way, a small body of data was collected through interviews (using the New Approaches to Lifelong Learning National Survey questionnaire as a guide) with twelve Aboriginal adults in mid-1998. The respondents were individuals who volunteered to participate after they were approached at the Saskatoon Indian and Métis Friendship Centre, an inner-city drop-in centre that is open to all Aboriginal people to provide space, services and events as determined by community members.

In common with large segments of the Aboriginal population, the respondents had relatively low levels of formal education (only two had completed high school and two more had high school equivalency), and nearly all had parents who had little or no formal schooling. Nine of them were unemployed or out of the labour force, and three worked on a part-time basis. About half of them participated at the time of the interview in adult education or job training programs, and one was in a post-secondary program.

Surprisingly, given their limited educational attainments, about half reported positive experiences with their own schooling, but identified several barriers to their learning, including racism, alcohol and drug dependency, trouble with the law, pregnancy, and lack of support from parents or peers to continue their schooling. The respondents' participation in informal learning activities varied broadly, ranging between two and thirty-nine hours per week. Involvement in informal learning was distributed relatively evenly across several areas, including personal and life skills development, job and employment-related skills, personal interests, and cultural activities. They expressed a strong desire to seek and maintain connections with their cultural traditions, with nearly all of them specifying a wish for skill-development in areas like nature appreciation, tanning, dehydrating food, making moss bags, and beadwork. Several wished to have credit courses available to them in language, crafts, spirituality, or other cultural traditions. While many individuals expressed a preference to develop skills and talents that would allow them to participate in conventional labour markets, others cited needs that were much more fundamental, including expressed desires to gain language, communications, healing, and basic life skills through informal learning opportunities.

The adults, much more than the elementary and high school students, conveyed a strong interest in developing linkages and identities with indigenous heritage, but they felt that such linkages should happen in a self-directed way. Respondents pointed to the need to take charge of their own lives and futures. One male respondent, a high school dropout who had just begun a basic literacy program, saw that formal education was necessary "[for me] to get my feet back on the ground...put my mind to work instead of losing my mind." A Cree woman, who had completed high school equivalency and was parenting full-time, observed, though, that, "Learning should not be limited to the classroom. [There is a need to] encourage more learning on [their] own. Eliminate teachers and encourage people to learn on own." There was a deeply-expressed sentiment that formal and informal educational experiences should be more fully integrated in people's lives. Several respondents commented on the important role that parents, elders, and peers played in influencing their educational and life decisions. They believed that personal stability and educational success depended upon a strong base of family and community support.

The accounts of adult Aboriginal respondents reflect a powerful combination of early failure and frustration with motivation and hope for the future. The legacy of social and historical circumstances, represented partly by experiences in formal schooling, comes through in the respondents' histories of low educational attainment, unemployment, and various personal and emotional problems. At the same time, the respondents retained faith in formal education as a means by which individuals can achieve success in conventional terms. They augmented their orientations to schooling with a desire for individual and community resources that would promote self-directed learning and personal development.

The data as a whole reveal that there are considerable variations in the levels, needs and experiences associated with both formal and informal learning among Aboriginal people. The respondents' experiences also suggest that, while many of them identified a strong need to develop their own basic skills and capacities, they also constitute an important community resource insofar as their life stories and capabilities have much to offer others. In these regards, much stronger integration is required between formal schooling and Aboriginal people's informal learning and cultural realities. Conventional institutions and programs that ignore these varied needs and resources are likely to restrain the achievement of educational and community success by large segments of the Aboriginal population.

Prospects for Entrepreneurship Among Canada's Aboriginal People

The third element of this discussion examines issues related to entrepreneurship, which has received considerable recent attention as a possible integrative mechanism through which Aboriginal people may achieve the social and economic success that has eluded them in conventional transition processes between school and work. Aboriginal people, overall, have made rapid inroads into the world of business ownership. According to Industry Canada (1998b: 1), there are now over 20,000 North American Indians, Métis and Inuit in Canada who have their own businesses, half of which are located on reserves. In the context of these developments, it is important to explore the prospects that entrepreneurial training and development can offer as a potential means to bridge formal and informal learning and as an effective strategy to advance Aboriginal people's labour market and economic participation.

An overview of how Aboriginal people's participation in entrepreneurship has changed over the past two decades provides a context within which to understand these issues. Between 1981 and 1996, the number of Aboriginal people who were self-employed grew more than two and a half times faster than the national increase in self-employment, with an increase of 170 percent for Aboriginal people compared to a 65 percent increase for the general population. Although Aboriginal business growth has been rapid, only 3.9 percent of Aboriginal people owned businesses in 1996, well below the national

average of 7.9 percent. Gender and age difference are important factors in Aboriginal business ownership. In 1996, 2.7 of Aboriginal women, compared to 5.0 percent of women in the national population, were business owners, while among men, 5.2 percent of Aboriginal people compared to 11.1 percent of the national population owned businesses. However, Aboriginal youth (aged fifteen to twenty-four) were two and a half times more likely to carry out entrepreneurship than Canadian youth in general, with 1.2 percent of Aboriginal youth owning businesses compared to only 0.5 percent of the national youth population (Industry Canada, 1998b: 12). Entrepreneurs under thirty years of age made up almost nineteen percent of all self-employed Aboriginal people, nearly double the comparable figure of ten percent for Canadians in general.

Over sixty percent of Aboriginal businesses can be found in the three main areas of primary industry (natural resources), recreation and personal services (such as amusement, recreation, personal, and household services), and transportation and construction (Industry Canada, 1998b: 19). Substantial numbers of Aboriginal entrepreneurs also operate businesses in retail and wholesale trade, health and social services, business services, hotels and restaurants, manufacturing, insurance and real estate, education services and communications. In the business services, finance, insurance and real estate industries – sectors that Industry Canada (1998b: 20, 35) identifies as focal points for growth – Aboriginal ownership remains noticeably under-represented, although tourism is cited as one of "the promising industries" for Aboriginal people.

Since 1981, the areas of Aboriginal business that have seen the most increase have been health and social services, with an increase of 16.4 percent, and recreation/ personal services, with an increase of 11.3 percent. The "traditional" pursuits of fishing, trapping, and farming, and contracting trades like excavating and plumbing, also continue to remain prevalent among Aboriginal entrepreneurs. However, according to Industry Canada (1998b: 20), these sectors are not emerging as strategic growth areas. If this is true, then Aboriginal businesses are not in the best position to succeed over the long term.

Geography is also important to the distribution of Aboriginal businesses. About two out of every three Aboriginal-owned firms exist west of Ontario, and more than half are located in urban areas. One province, Saskatchewan, is unique in that about 55 percent of the province's Aboriginal-owned businesses are in rural areas. This may be due to the fact that entrepreneurship training and development is part of a growing initiative to encourage rural community development. In 1996, Saskatchewan was home to 1,835 self-employed Aboriginal people – classified as 62 percent male, 32 percent female, and six percent youth – and the numbers are increasing (Industry Canada, 1998b: 48).

Across Canada, female entrepreneurs are showing the most growth (an increase of 406 percent from 1981 to 1996). In 1996, there were 7,265 self-employed Aboriginal women in Canada. Despite many barriers to Aboriginal female entrepreneurship (access to resources being a major one), they are still managing to find the means to start their own businesses (Whiteduck and Blanchard, 1995; Chiste, 1996). These trends suggest that Aboriginal women may have potentially new avenues for success outside of conventional labour market entry processes that have often failed them in the past.

As noted earlier, young people constitute an especially important group within the Aboriginal population. Over half of First Nations people in Canada are below the age of twenty-five. The employment rate for on-reserve youth is only seventeen percent, compared to 57 percent for the general Canadian population. According to the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (1997: 3), this gap, at least in Saskatchewan, is forecast to increase. In response, federal and provincial government agencies and the Federation have chosen to focus upon entrepreneurship training and small business development as a key strategy to reduce the chronic youth unemployment rate and the rate of young adult out-migration from their communities, thereby stimulating local economic development (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 1997; Ministerial Task Force on Youth Employment Issues, 1996). Under

the Canadian Jobs and Growth Agenda, the federal government highlights the importance of small business as "the primary job creators in Canada," and commits itself to:

> work in partnership with industry, academic institutions, special interest groups and other levels of government...developing an active, export-capable business community; establishing a modem technological infrastructure, and ensuring that the country's youth develop the skills and experience to succeed in tomorrow's job market. As the primary job creators in Canada, small businesses are an integral part of the government's plan (Ministerial Task Force on Youth Employment Issues, 1996: 1).

It appears that young Aboriginal people may have been listening, as their participation in business ownership increased by 149 percent from 1981 to 1996. In 1996, there were 1,655 self-employed Aboriginal youths in Canada (Industry Canada, 1998b: 6). Given the recent growth and emphasis on entrepreneurial training and development, what are the prospects to remedy concerns raised previously in this paper with respect to Aboriginal people's labour market and economic participation and the relations between formal and informal learning?

Entrepreneurship and the Advancement of Aboriginal People's Labour Market and Economic Participation

The federal government places considerable emphasis on Aboriginal people's participation in entrepreneurship as a useful means to overcome their marginalization from the labour market. Industry Canada (1998b: 1) states that Aboriginal people, by participating in small business, "are leading their own way to a brighter economic future." However, if entrepreneurs are deemed to be the primary job creators in Canada, as the federal government has maintained, it is important to consider how Aboriginal businesses have fared in this regard. In 1996, thirty-eight percent of Aboriginal businesses had between one and four full-time, permanent employees, seven percent had between five and nineteen full-time employees, and only one percent had twenty or more full-time employees, while 54% had no full-time employees (Industry Canada, 1998b: 15) This is, perhaps, not surprising when one considers the advice that small business experts like Jack James (1992) provide to those interested in doing entrepreneurship. He advises that, in order to keep costs down, owners should hire as few employees as possible. Clearly, until small businesses are firmly established, job creation (especially full-time) seems difficult if not impossible.

With respect to the benefits that entrepreneurship had brought to the individual owners, compared to the national average, fewer Aboriginal businesses were profitable, and they tended to bring in less net profit. According to Industry Canada (1998b: 18), 62 percent of firms owned by Aboriginal people, compared to 71 percent of all Canadian businesses, were profitable (these businesses included firms with gross revenues of anywhere between $25,000 and $5 million). Earnings of self-employed Aboriginal people were also lower than average; whereas self-employed Canadians earned an average of $29,897 in 1996, self-employed Aboriginal people earned an average of only $18,947 (Industry Canada, 1998b: 18).

Critics of entrepreneurship assert that, while self-employment is widely touted as desirable, it is, to a large extent, an unchecked myth that serves the corporate passion for downsizing and outsourcing. Joseph F. Coates (1996), for example, argues that self-employment is extremely risky. Most individuals simply do not have the entrepreneurial characteristics needed to start a business. Such skills would include the drive and incentive to continually grow, expand and to become dominant in a particular field of business. Most self-employed people, Coates (1996: 163) argues, are not even small business people in the sense of the dry cleaner or the restauranteur, but are self-employed largely as a way of creating jobs for themselves; "The economic reality is that, in a period of recession, depression, or labour surplus, self-employment becomes merely one step short of the bread line."

Despite all of this, Industry Canada (1998a; 1998b: 13) asserts that the future prosperity of Aboriginal people requires the creation of viable business opportunities, which will be essential to improve the employment prospects for the large number of young people who will soon be entering the job market. The federal government makes several suggestions on how to improve the prospects for success. A recent government survey of over 1000 Aboriginal business owners identified five 'top priorities' that were essential factors to improve success among businesses: management skills (89 percent); improved productivity (88 percent); innovation (76 percent); financing (74 percent); employee training (67 percent); and expansion of markets (67 percent) (see Industry Canada, 1998b: 24).

Advocates of entrepreneurial development also cite the importance of increased levels of educational attainment (particularly in areas associated with the "new knowledge economy," such as engineering, science, and mathematics) to Aboriginal people's entrepreneurial and economic success (Industry Canada, 1998b: 41). In these respects, the relatively low educational attainments and uncertain prospects for improved educational achievement among Aboriginal people become critical. Aboriginal people are more highly under-represented in the so-called strategic knowledge fields than in other areas. Consideration must be given to the broader relevance of formal and informal learning to the prospects of success for the increasing numbers of Aboriginal people (particularly women and youths) who have invested time, energy and resources to start their own businesses. On the one hand, as revealed in the accounts by adults interviewed in the Friendship Centre, reported earlier, many individuals have capabilities and support networks that may allow them to develop successful initiatives outside of conventional labour market streams. On the other hand, an absence of fundamental training, resources, and community support may leave those who do establish a business highly vulnerable under certain conditions.

The fact that many Aboriginal people live in rural and remote communities is another factor that can inhibit their entrepreneurial efforts. Their geographic distance from markets and services may pose special problems. Promoters of knowledge-based economic and social development point suggest that Aboriginal business owners in diverse locales will be able to develop support linkages through the internet and other information-based technologies that can serve as tools to overcome distance barriers (Industry Canada, 1998a: 40). As in many other areas, though, successful development and utilization of technological applications presuppose the availability of personnel, training, infrastructures, basic skills, and other resources that vary widely across regions and segments of the population (see Moll, 1997).

The Potential for Aboriginal Entrepreneurship to Bridge Formal and Informal Learning

The relevance of conventional approaches to Aboriginal entrepreneurial development is challenged by debates over the relationship between traditional approaches to Aboriginal economies and contemporary economic systems. Industry Canada (1998b: 46) asserts that, "the keys to success for Aboriginal entrepreneurs will be **largely the same** as for small businesses in Canada. Successful firms will be those that innovate, search out broader markets, and generally adopt more forward-looking business practices." In other words, Aboriginal businesses are expected to follow the same business practices and, consequently, possess the same goals as other small businesses in Canada, in order to succeed. By contrast, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996b) observes that Aboriginal cultures have very different views about economics. These views are based on a belief that the needs of the collective take precedence, particularly with regard to the distribution of wealth.

> The fundamental difference in emphasis between the Aboriginal view of economics and the beliefs of liberal capitalism relates less to the means by which wealth is created than to the appropriate distribution of resources once these have been acquired. Aboriginal cultures share a deeply embedded belief that the welfare of the collective is a higher priority than the

acquisition of wealth by the individual (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996b: 885).

Ron Jamieson, a Mohawk from the Six Nations community and a vice-president of the Bank of Montreal, observes a common misperception in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities that Aboriginal people lack the skills and temperament to be effective entrepreneurs. He argues, to the contrary, that the personal skills and resources they bring to their business are the same ones that allowed his ancestors to survive in a traditional Aboriginal community (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996b: 885). Jamieson goes on to identify four qualities that he believes are essential for modern business. These qualities, he states, have long been practised by Aboriginal people: risk taking, discipline, clarity of vision, and meeting the needs of the community or the customer. First, entrepreneurship without risk taking does not exist. Traditional economies had high degrees of risk, and true risk means risking one's own resources. Second, discipline means paying attention to the details to ensure that a business survives and grows. Traditional economies required personal discipline, because survival and the success of the hunt required attentiveness to detail and the ability to make quick decisions under pressure. Third, vision and self-confidence are especially crucial to survive the first five years of business. Traditional entrepreneurs required a clear sense of results in order to feed, clothe and care for their families. Finally, entrepreneurship involves the essential element of meeting, and exceeding, the customers' expectations. This is very important in the Aboriginal community, where people often see themselves as being taken advantage of by untrustworthy entrepreneurs. The traditional entrepreneur derived feelings of self-esteem through the ability to provide the essentials for family, clan and community members (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996b: 885).

A discussion paper published by the Ministry of Small Business, Tourism and Culture and Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs of British Columbia in 1994, also suggests that culture plays an important part in developing Aboriginal economies. Many Aboriginal people emphasize that personal, social, community, and cultural healing constitute major parts of economic development. They also stress that long term economic development must reflect cultural values, attitudes and activities that vary between communities. This means that economic development needs to adapt to local economic and cultural needs. The use of culture as a guiding principle can provide standards for measuring the "goodness of fit" between economic goals and opportunities. In this way, non-economic goals, such as consensus-based decision-making, or the attachment to land, can influence economic goals (British Columbia, 1994: 5).

The indications so far suggest that both conventional channels to educational and labour market development and entrepreneurship have expanded, demonstrating some promise for the future success of Canada's Aboriginal people. However, faith in entrepreneurship as a central solution to past economic difficulties remains highly suspect, insofar as Aboriginal-owned businesses tend not to perform as well as the national average of Canadian-owned businesses, which themselves face considerable risk. It has also been shown that, to date, the federal government's efforts to study the factors which may contribute to, or inhibit, Aboriginal business success have failed to address the positive contribution that Aboriginal culture and traditional learning experiences may make toward such success. The extent to which Aboriginal entrepreneurship training and development can be viewed as a means of advancing both their labour market participation and economic position, through the integration of formal and informal learning, is not yet known and requires further study.

However, as was reported through interviews with Aboriginal youth and adults in and out of formal education systems, many Aboriginal people believe that any form of educational training – including entrepreneurship training – must be made more relevant by incorporating both Aboriginal traditions and contemporary life conditions. An integrated approach is valued for its ability to facilitate the production of educated individuals and entrepreneurs who can live, work, and develop businesses in settings that are

both relevant to the Aboriginal community and economically viable. Integrated educational programs are also likely to foster the improvement of what are often considered poor relations between Aboriginals and the general population, their organizations, institutions, and communities (British Columbia, 1994; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996a).

Conclusions

Our discussion has highlighted several elements involved in the relationships among formal and informal learning in the experiences of Canada's Aboriginal people. Gaps remain in the attainment of educational success by Aboriginal people, relative to the general population, viewed in terms of conventional educational indicators. While this has often led to considerable frustration and mistrust of formal schools, the Aboriginal youth and adults involved in our study place a high degree of value in formal schooling, mainstream economic activities, and entrepreneurial opportunities as mechanisms for individual and community advancement. However, we have also observed that strategies for educational and economic development have tended to ignore cultural elements and sensitivity to the needs of Aboriginal people, to define them in highly constrained ways, or to employ them in a restricted or partial manner. While Aboriginal people themselves have mixed views about the extent to which their cultural heritage should be integrated into mainstream activities, they express clear desires for affirmation of their identity and for programs and services that will enable them to have a fundamental grounding to participate on a full and equitable basis in Canadian society. In these regards, Aboriginal people possess several capacities, in the form of skills, knowledge, and experience, that are given little place or legitimacy in conventional educational and economic activities. Their educational experiences and desires suggest, more generally, that all Canadians could benefit from closer integration among community realities, formal learning, and informal learning capacities.

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