

WHAT IS AN EDUCATED PERSON? DEFINITIONS OF AND MOTIVATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT AMONG MEMBERS OF THE PII'KANI NATION¹

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Abstract / Résumé

This article examines the framing and definition of "education" by members of the Pii'kani Nation interviewed for a study on motivations for pursuing educational opportunities. The research team found itself led to step back from the research process proper to allow definitions more indicative of a community's sense of itself to emerge. Such definitions, and their supporting narratives, may prove important in developing appropriate criteria for educational achievement and continuing education programs in First Nations communities.

Cette article étudie la structure et la définition de l'éducation par les membres de la Nation Pii'kani qui ont été interviewé pour une étude sur les motivations à utiliser les opportunités d'éducation. L' équipe de recherche s'est trouvé elle même confronter de la procesus de recherche propre pour procurer des définitions plus indicatifs du 'sense de lui même' du communauté d'apparaître. De tel définitions, et leurs supports narratifs, peuvent être important dans le développement de critères appropriés pour la réussite de l' éducation et la continuité des programmes d'éducation destiné aux Communautés Autochtones.

Introduction

The Pii'kani Nation (known officially until 2002 as the Peigan Nation) is a part of the Blackfoot Confederacy; a group of allied First Nations whose extensive traditional lands straddle the U.S./Canadian border in the western Prairies and eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The geographical base of the Nation in Canada is a reserve community of about 2280 (out of a total Band Population of about 3300) in southwestern Alberta, centred on the village of Brocket. The reserve operates under an elected Band government which oversees a Board of Education as well as several social services.

The Pii'kani Nation has a history similar to that of many reserve communities in Western Canada. In its early years, under pressure from an expanding cattle industry, the land area of the reserve was cut significantly. Early (and at times quite successful) attempts by the Pii'kani to undertake farming and ranching were encouraged, but then ultimately undercut by Federal authorities. In 1981, the (then named) Peigan band concluded an agreement with the Alberta government concerning the headworks of the Lethbridge Northern Irrigation District. In the following years, a major dam (the Oldman River Dam) was constructed and water-intensive agricultural activities, including intensive livestock operations, irrigation agriculture and food processing, were encouraged in the region. The Oldman River Dam construction sparked protest and division in the Pii'kani community. In 1986, the band filed a water rights claim which, according to one of the 1981 negotiators, led both the Federal and Alberta governments to refuse to honour financial commitments in the 1981 agreement. According to one of the 1981 negotiators, this refusal devastated the Band's economy and turned the reserve into a "ghetto in the middle of Southern Alberta" (Helmer, 2000b: A1).

During the time we were conducting research among Pii'kani band members, an offer was made to the Band to settle the 1986 claim, which had been in dispute for 14 years (Helmer, 2000a: A1, A6). The offer, which was ultimately put to a referendum on the reserve, became the subject of bitter controversy, with many band members arguing that control of resources had been bargained away for too little, that inadequate compensation for environmental, economic and cultural damage was offered, and that a cash payout to individual band members, a highlight of the offer, was inappropriate. This controversy extended into a wider questioning of all aspects of Band politics and reserve life. In particular, education, or the lack of it, became an explicit theme in the public debate over the settlement in three different ways. First, some band members (e.g. Bastien, 2000: A6) argued that lack of education among the Band's leadership crippled the Band's ability to negotiate successfully with pro-

vincial and federal governments, or to plan and implement successful economic development strategies. Others argued that educated Band negotiators and administrators had become too familiar with the ways of the governments and bureaucracies with which they were negotiating had thereby lost their connection to the community and its values. At the same time, education was being promoted by the Peigan Board of Education and many Band members as a way to enhance both individual futures and community pride and development.² However, solid information concerning Indigenous perspectives on educational opportunities and motivation, especially relating to completion (as opposed to initiation) of educational programs, was lacking, both in general, and specifically for the Pii'kani.

In response to this need, the (then named) Peigan Occupational Skills & Training (OST) Committee developed a research project entitled *Motivation for Education Among Peigan Youth and Adults*. The project was implemented in 2000 by the Peigan Board of Education (PBOE) in conjunction with the University of Lethbridge. The OST Committee was responsible for delivering education and training programs to the Pii'kani Nation, and one of its specific responsibilities was to help increase the number of band members graduating from high school and eligible for college and university entrance. There were concerns that the number of dropouts from these programs had been greater than the number of graduates. In order to develop effective educational programs on-reserve, Pii'kani educational needs and perceptions had to be identified. This meant discovering band members' ideas about 'staying in school,' 'going back to school,' and furthering their education from the secondary (grades 10-12) level to post-secondary (college and university) levels.

Identifying contributing factors that led Pii'kani community members to drop out of school at secondary and post-secondary levels was one priority of this research,³ but our main intent was to get a sense of how people themselves made sense of their educational choices, and the concerns that they themselves identified as central to their decision-making. In other words, the researchers wanted to get a sense of the subjective life-worlds in terms of which band members identified priorities, made value judgements, and made decisions. We wanted to get an indication of how the Pii'kani people made sense of the educational options available to them. Thus, this study did not seek to isolate and examine objectively ascertained 'factors' in educational decision-making through correlation and examination of statistical or other data. Such studies would indeed be useful and complementary to the research undertaken for this article. But the researchers were concerned that the use made by the Pii'kani people of the educational opportunities avail-

able to them, and their likely use of other facilities proposed but presently unavailable, would relate not just to what was objectively possible, but also to what alternatives they *perceived* to be possible, viable, desirable or ethical in terms of their lived experience and the "taken-for-granted theoretic frames" (Bonner, 1977, p. 65) that they developed from this experience and applied to the opportunities presented to them.

A further significant issue raised in the course of this study concerned appropriate methodologies and the interpretation of responses to questions about the meaning of education in Indigenous contexts generally and the Pii'kani community specifically. In particular, we found we had to address two basic questions which cropped up often in both interviews and questionnaire data; namely, the definition and characteristics of an 'educated person,' and the meaning and importance of education itself. Aside from the practical benefits of education (income, job security, status), members of the Pii'kani Nation were particularly concerned with both the personal and the communal image of an educated person, and the ability of such a person to take part effectively in community life. Further, it became evident that perceptions of what constituted an 'educated person' were often intimately related to perceptions of the nature of Pii'kani identity, of membership in the reserve community, and of participation in Band politics and administration. It should be remembered that, at the time this research was underway, the reserve was undergoing a number of unsettling political debates relating to land-claims and water rights negotiations. In consequence, we felt a need to "step back" from our research process to take stock of some basic definitional issues, to attempt to grapple with these issues as they arose in the research process, and to understand how they might affect both our interpretation of the research results and the development of educational programming. This article is a result of that process of reflection.

Methodology and Research Process

Our research took place in three stages. In stage 1, eleven band members, chosen to represent a range of situations,⁴ were interviewed at length, using a large number of open interview questions to identify key concerns and ways of framing them. In stage 2, standard questionnaires were developed from these interviews and administered by the research team to 300 members of the Pii'kani Nation.⁵ A non-random, convenience sample of participants was identified and recruited through a combination of local advertising and door-to-door solicitation, and each participant was given the opportunity to talk to a team member about the survey and filling in the form.⁶

Preliminary analysis of the responses to these questionnaires indicated several issues of definition, which were then addressed in three follow-up focus groups (again organized by age and educational attainment) and two follow-up individual interviews.⁷ In these, the emphasis was on understanding how respondents defined and valued education, family and community, on what they perceived as obstacles to education, on their desires and recommendations for educational programming, and on their perceptions of the value (positive and negative) of having an education and living in a reserve community.

Material used in this article comes from all of these sources. However, the discussion that follows is not a comprehensive statement of research results, but a response to a specific set of concerns that arose in the course of our research. During the process of administering the survey questionnaires and analyzing the results, discussion among research team members increasingly focused on a sense that "the people are trying to tell us something." Despite a series of initial interviews used to formulate appropriate questions, the responses we were getting to the questionnaires seemed to indicate that our respondents wished to steer us toward certain broad concerns not always directly addressed in the questionnaires. This sense did not derive from a feeling that the questionnaire used was inadequate in some specific way, or that we were missing something in particular, but rather that the way in which questions were being *answered*, especially in written comments, was revealing a certain tendency; a way of posing issues and of being concerned, that we needed to be open to. For example, responses dealing with the value of education were contextualized by reference to self-development and to family and community in a manner that seemed familiar, yet to some extent, counter-intuitive when compared to mainstream (non-Indigenous) discourses using the same terms. The team members, all but one of whom were First Nations persons, used terms that emphasized oral communication to describe this sense ("what are they telling us"; "what are we being told"). However, the "telling" at work was not immediately self-evident, nor even consistent. In discussions as to what it might involve, the process of understanding what we were being "told" was characterized not as a result of more exact questioning, but of a need to "listen" or to "hear" carefully what was already there. In short, the sense was less that we were being presented with information than that we were being called to pay attention to voices and to ways of voicing.⁸

Thus, for this article, we decided to focus on what was said in interviews and focus group discussions, as well as on discursive written comments from the questionnaires. While we were aware that these ma-

terials came from different stages of the research process and thus reflected different degrees of thematic focus, we treated them all—for the purposes of this discussion—as potentially equal in status, to compensate for the possibility that our own process of refining our questions and research focus might in fact have missed something our respondents wanted to say. In this process of “attending” to what we were being “told,” methodology served a negative, or critical role. We used specific methodological tools not as devices to *discover* information but as checks to determine whether what we thought we were hearing was in fact represented in, and reasonably representative of, the material we had collected. We began with topical coding to identify surface themes emerging from interview and focus group transcripts and from comments on survey questionnaires. These were then examined again for evidence of recurring themes and concerns common to particular age/education groups, or across groups. We concluded with close readings of these texts to identify rhetorical style (for example, the use of particular terms to describe political conflict or mainstream educational norms) and characteristic ways of constructing meaning (for example, the use of particular words or phrases to define or contextualize terms such as “self-fulfillment,” or “success”). We looked also at the ways in which different topics were raised in relation to each other, to the extent that participants had the freedom to do so in the context of the particular instrument (interview, focus group, open or closed question) being used. Care was taken not just to enumerate how many times something was noted or said, but *how* issues were articulated, in terms of what kind of language, and in response to what kinds of phrasing in questions.⁹

Both the overall project, and this particular step back from it, are exploratory in nature. The reasons for undertaking both were the lack of information available that addressed educational needs and desires as defined from a specifically Indigenous perspective, and taking into account specific local circumstances. The work we have completed in no way exhausts the topic, and is meant primarily to open it to further discussion.

Meaning in Context: Defining Education in Troubled Times

It quickly became apparent to the researchers that members of the Pii'kani Nation had strong, and sometimes conflicting, views on subjects related to the research, and that at the core of their views were fundamental issues of definition. Thus, we found that before we could address specific questions concerning educational programs that might

be appropriate to the members of the Pii'kani Nation, we had first to examine issues of meaning which were both philosophical and political. We found that our respondents were for the most part quite familiar with the language of educational achievement common to mainstream North American society, with its emphasis on individual success, career, self-sufficiency and avoidance of social hazards such as drugs and crime. At the same time, respondents also evaluated and defined education, and the nature of an "educated person" in unique, different, and sometimes contradictory ways that spoke to their own specific backgrounds and concerns. Strong feelings were often attached to these definitions and evaluations. Members of the research team became concerned that a study of Band members' educational wants and motivations would be incomplete without a sense of how these were embedded in specific ways of thinking and webs of meaning.

In short, just as researchers have become increasingly sensitive to the social and cultural determinants of health, and to the need to define "health" in terms appropriate to local communities (see e.g. Ramp, Kulig, Townshend, McGowan, 1999), so we found that "education" could not be simply taken for granted as a constant that "individuals" would have differing opinions about and motivations toward. Rather, the definition of education was bound up with that of the "educated persons," their economic and political place in the local community, and their actions in relation to that community. A number of issues were in play here: individual and collective memories of residential and other school experiences,¹⁰ perceived and experienced difficulties in accessing continuing education opportunities, cultural definitions of what constitutes valid knowledge, the community status (or lack of it) conferred by formal or informal education, and the economic and social benefits (or lack of benefits) conferred by continuing education. But colouring all of these was the specific political and economic situation of the reserve, especially the frustration and conflict engendered by the dispute with the provincial and federal governments over water rights and the limited ability of the reserve community to effectively develop, sustain and govern its own economy.

Pii'kani attitudes toward education, as expressed in responses to our questions, were complex and reflected a variety of concerns. Individual responses varied depending on the personal circumstances of the respondents: their age, gender, family circumstances, educational experience, employment status, position within or in relation to the Band government or its agencies, and their on- or off-reserve life experience. Responses also reflected cultural values, though these were expressed and interpreted in different ways. The political dimensions of life on- or

off-reserve, especially as they affected educational, funding and employment opportunities likewise figured significantly in responses. Nonetheless, certain basic continuities in perception emerged. What follows is, thus, a snapshot of Pii'kani attitudes toward education in a very particular political context at a time of great controversy and change, but it also indicates a basic set of attitudes, orientations and constraints that might be instructive for other First Nations in both similar and different circumstances.

What Does It Mean To Be 'Educated?'

In mainstream, "White" society, to be an 'educated person' connotes a certain level of what Bourdieu and Passeron (1977)¹¹ called 'cultural capital'; that is, the exhibition of personal refinement, literacy and verbal skills, knowledge of manners and cultural conventions, and personal autonomy. All of these help place the educated person, in western society, in a particular social class. Such criteria were known to most of our respondents. Parents of young children, along with young high-school graduates appeared familiar with the language of educational attainment current in mainstream North American culture. Respondents' comments also indicted three, much more specific models of an 'educated person,' however, with particular meanings in their own social setting.

The first of these related to the importance that parents attributed to certification. Parents tended to see the attainment of degrees and diplomas as goals that transformed their holders into role models. The language used here was interesting: it did not indicate that higher education was something children "had to have" as a necessity for subsequent economic or social achievement. Rather, the important thing seemed to be the provision of something tangible to which young people might aspire and which could be the focus of communal praise. One respondent with university experience mentioned graduation as something on which ambitions could be focused; something to "look up to" and something on which to focus one's competitive nature. These aspirations were not couched solely in individualistic and competitive terms, however, but in terms of a more general sense of betterment (versus stagnation) and the avoidance of pitfalls such as alcohol and other drugs. It was important to see education as a way to self-sufficiency, happiness *and* enhanced connections to family; a way of becoming more able to provide for family.¹² One interview respondent specifically mentioned that the "wrong attitude" was to "go to school and invest in self and create resentment." This was seen as following the "White man's way," accumulating capital against the interests of others and causing a nega-

tive reaction in the community. An adult with grown children and a positive view of education as a matter of self-development, echoed several respondents who spoke of education in terms of self-respect, self-development and self-motivation, all terms familiar from mainstream educational literature. But she made clear that developing one's "self" was tied to larger goal, "to help Native people find themselves...to be happy and to know what they are doing." The same person defined a "successful person" as "somebody who everybody looks up to...and being happy and being kind to people...[a] role model for other people to follow." The following suggestion in response to the questionnaire administered to the 40-49 age group sums up the exemplary and community role of education:

[T]o encourage our people to further their education, a group could be formed that would consist of all Peigan people who have graduated from college or university. This alumni association would have meetings to provide insight into ways to keep people in school, as well as other community development events. As a graduate, I feel we owe the people the knowledge that we have gained, if we are to use the old ways, then we must share with the tribe to help our people survive into the future, or we will be assimilated into the White society.

Second, as the above responses already indicate, 'educated persons' were seen as those who had positive self-esteem *and* a respect for elders and for traditional ways. These qualities were spoken of as both causes of and consequences of the pursuit of education, especially by young people and younger parents. Positive self-esteem, described as being happy with "who you are," was seen in both personal terms, and in terms of a collective cultural identity, at the same time. In both instances, it involved a sense that higher education might endow people with a higher degree of effective agency. An interviewee in his thirties said that the right kind of education (one which gave a contextual awareness of the present circumstances of First Nations people—in particular, their own history) was intimately bound up with "healing, identity and culture," and that the knowledge gained in such an education was essential to the attainment of self-government. A number of parents called for the inclusion of traditional culture as a part of the school curriculum; however, some younger people thought it was more appropriately learned outside the classroom setting, from elders, and as a matter of personal preference. This difference may reflect a wariness, on the part of younger people, of having something imposed on them as part of a mandatory curriculum, and perhaps also a sense

that such an imposition might subvert the meaning of traditional culture. It may also reflect a more individualized approach to ways of exercising and developing identity (though the identity itself might retain an important collective aspect).

On the other hand, as one interviewee put it, educated persons were not necessarily always role models—or more accurately, they could be negative role models. This respondent pointed out that ‘professionals’ can come to live in a “plastic world created by government resources.” Smart and articulate, such persons develop strong connections to government and First Nations organizations, but their ties to the local community are thereby weakened. A questionnaire respondent in the 40-49 age group wrote:

I have received my formal education [the] mainstream and have worked in the community for years. This has been of benefit to me as I feel that it has helped my career. Yet much of my learning has been life experience (invaluable). I have learned the Blackfoot culture, ceremonies later in life.... All this learning has contributed to my development. It is equally important that individuals have personal development as this shapes the impact that you can have as an individual on your family or community. Power is knowledge. This power if used properly can really benefit our community. Yet, I have seen very well-educated people use this ‘power’ very destructively too. So I make my comments in this context.

Overall, respondents strongly affirmed the personal benefits of education, but placed them in a larger context. Several mentioned that education could provide the ability to be autonomous or “self-sufficient,” but then immediately linked this ability to an ability to provide for family, relatives and the community. Personal educational ambition, in its positive sense, was always seen as something that had to be “connected.” The loss of a connection to family or community was seen as symptomatic of what was wrong in “White” society and as a threat to their own community and culture.

Perceived Benefits and Drawbacks of Education

For several respondents, education was something that both necessitated self-esteem at attain and conferred self-esteem upon attainment. Opinions varied on how education accomplished this, however. Some respondents, especially those in their thirties with a university education, stressed the importance of learning their own collective history. One in particular spoke of how his vision of Blackfoot culture was transformed by finding out how his ancestors had formed an “open”

society, adapting cultural practices from other First Nations. He spoke also of the importance of knowing about his own society's responses to the arrival of Europeans, including the conclusion of a major treaty between the Cree, Assiniboines and Blackfoot just prior to the arrival of settlers.

Respondents also spoke more pragmatically of education as a "tool" which could be used, on one hand for cultural survival and in self-government and land claims negotiations, and on the other, in personal fulfillment, self-sufficiency and providing for family.

In contrast, a written comment by a questionnaire respondent in the 30-39 age-group detailed at length some of the perceived drawbacks of formal education:

It is my own feeling that western forms of education possess pros and cons for Indigenous people and their communities. Education in the White world is based on existing and functioning in that system. It enables individuals to acquire the skills and tools that will enable them to survive in that world. For us, as Peigans, we need these tools and skills as well, but it takes us further away from ourselves, our identity and our environment. When an Indigenous person returns from a college or university they become less connected to their community and themselves. This is caused by the conditioning that they had just received from a post-secondary education. These individuals will either work for band governments, natural resource sector companies or government. If not this route, graduates will be shunned by the community administrative capacity for various reasons. They will usually end up doing small writing contracts in order to get by. I feel that education is important but young Peigans must find their identity before they leave for a Whiteman's education. Through true spirituality these young Peigans will not discriminate against their own people. They will learn to understand the role of Pikunii¹³ in this modern era. It will take sacrifice and healing but I believe that this will happen someday and that we will be the beneficiaries to this process.

An interviewee with university experience spoke of education as a continuing feature of colonization; a form of "brainwashing" that "blocks the way you think." This made higher education "like jail, or residential school."¹⁴ University and college students often experienced clashing values in their university careers; for example, a lack of understanding around things like lateness, transportation difficulties, and difficulties

with self-esteem and interaction with students from mainstream culture (for example, in study groups). The above respondent valued education as a tool for survival and awareness, however, arguing pragmatically that "our thinking is already messed up" and that it was important to understand the historical, family and personal processes by which this had happened. He distinguished between "education as a tool" and "knowledge that doesn't apply" (the latter creating a "plastic" environment that disconnected individuals from community).

The benefits of education, in short, were seen as in education's role in enhancing 'internal' self-esteem ("success is from the inside out") and in its pragmatic benefit. In discussing the latter, respondents began to develop different visions of the social context in which they wanted to exercise the knowledge they had gained, or wished to gain. One spoke of self-employment and self-sufficiency as a way to provide for his family; the same respondent also suggested that self-employment and the privatization of some services offered by the Band government might be the "way to go." Another tied education strongly to the need to reclaim land and resources for the community in order to develop a collective economic basis. It is tempting to read into these two responses the common distinction made in mainstream North American culture between socialist and neo-liberal models of policy and economic development. However, such models depend on definitions of economic actors that do not apply in this instance. The respondent who valued self-sufficiency and privatization did so in the context of an ethical model that placed provision for family above individual gain—and it is to be noted that the definition of "family" among the Pii'kani, as among many First Nations people, is more fluid and expansive than the nuclear family model still favoured by many mainstream economists.

Getting an Education: Barriers, Strategies and Motivations

Respondents of all ages and situations were quick to name a number of barriers, internal and external, to educational attainment. Only one focus group, of young high school graduates, was at all hesitant to name several. Young adults and younger parents spoke of the distractions of reserve life, with one commenting that she would be "more comfortable" in a learning situation in which she didn't "know anyone." Several spoke of parenting issues reaching back to residential school as a factor inhibiting educational motivation in children and young people, and suggested programs not only to support students but to help and guide parents in becoming involved in and supporting their children's education.¹⁵ The presence of alcohol and other drugs, perceptions of

Native people based on urban street life, along with a lack of role models, were cited also. Older respondents noted how their own early educational experience affected their later encounters with the educational system, both as students and as parents. For example, interactions with teachers often reinforced feelings of inferiority:

[I]t wasn't that I was[n't] willing to learn, it was like I was afraid to do something. I was afraid to speak up. I was afraid. And all those things were never brought out to the forefront so we could express ourselves. I never was able to express with my own teachers and therefore there were times when I thought I was stupid because there were times when those teachers would ask the brighter students all the time instead of giving us a chance to answer.

Respondents in their late 20's and 30's also spoke of the prevalence of "jealousy" in the community, of problems with "personalities" and "politics," and of an emphasis on what "couldn't be done." One said that support within the family was important, but that a negative consciousness of barriers was fed by community jealousy and political infighting as well as lack of work, especially permanent work, overcrowding and lack of funding. In this situation, the loss of traditional culture and the lingering effects of residential school, in which students were taught to obey, to repress initiative outside of established institutional norms, and even to turn on one another, had led to a situation in which "[w]e repress one another" through judgmentalism and jealousy. A written response to a questionnaire (age group 20-29) noted "so much animosity, jealousy, backstabbing and gossip." Another written comment (age 40-49) voiced a similar complaint and suggested the way out was through revitalization of traditional culture and community:

No one is working for the people. They are just working for the government and for themselves. Pride, jealousy, hate, etc. must all be left out of school at all levels and our public administration, we must remember the ways of our old people, we must work and learn together.

Two respondents said that they thought that educated applicants were sometimes placed at a disadvantage in competing for job openings on the reserve. One also claimed that overly-strict interpretation of rules for post-secondary funding, combined with a "can't do" attitude, had inhibited his ability both to finish his education and to obtain employment thereafter. He had quit work to go to school, but then found old employment opportunities closed off after finishing. Another also spoke of limited funding, penalties, and the prevalence of a culture of suspicion ("can't," "not supposed to") instead of positive incentives and

scholarships. Such dissatisfaction was especially prevalent among respondents aged 20-50; both older and younger respondents were more optimistic in their judgements of community life in this regard.

Regardless of the validity of these specific allegations, respondents' comments made a larger picture very clear. The Pii'kani Nation has a small reserve land base and, at the time of this research, its control of water resources, as well as its land claims, were in dispute. Thus, the economic base of the community is restricted and heavily reliant on inadequate government funding. As one respondent put it, the local "political capacities" are funded by Federal government dollars and are "externally created." This situation led to a system "designed for failure" and vulnerable to political infighting, as well as to the creation of a small number of professional positions for an educated group whose business is to deal with government organizations, but who thereby risk disconnection from the community. Another spoke of a "dependency cycle" generated by the gradual loss of manual work. For many years, beginning early in the past century if not before, Pii'kani people had relied on the availability of manual work, especially in construction and agriculture or ranching. Indeed, such work and its seasonal rhythms had become a traditional source of income and a lifestyle. Mechanization has transformed or eliminated many of these jobs, however, and increasing competition for those remaining has been experienced; for example, from migrant farm workers from other ethnic and national backgrounds. This, according to one respondent, has had two consequences. One has been an increasing reliance on welfare for income. The other has been fear and resentment directed at community members who seek education; specifically, fear that they will undermine the ability of the less-educated to get and keep the few jobs available. This respondent went so far as to say that the old religious rivalries on the reserve between Catholics and Anglicans had been replaced by a new one: between educated and non-educated. Again, whether or not the specific allegations are valid, the outline (or perception?) of a larger social and economic dilemma feeding perceived fears and resentments is clear.

Respondents also indicated a number of practical problems with which they struggled in seeking post-secondary or continuing education. Family issues were a major concern, as was transportation and overcrowded housing. Finding a quiet place for uninterrupted study was often a major problem. Driving approximately 100 kilometres one way to the nearest university or college was another. A family crisis (again, keeping in mind that the category "family" can go well beyond the immediate nuclear family, both in terms of perceived family responsibilities and also housing) often necessitated taking time off from school, or generated

transportation problems with the same result. Universities and community colleges tied to the semester system and to strict criteria for grading and completion of course work, can appear to First Nations students as insensitive to problems of family instability or familial priorities. A number of Pii'kani adults thus end up with educational histories significantly different from those of students in mainstream culture. Many complete high school through upgrading courses, going on the University and College at later stages in life. Many complete University or College degrees over a longer span of time, dropping a number of courses as circumstances dictate, and picking them up later. Many also take short-term training seminars in preference to a longer-term commitment to a degree or certificate program.

It is worth noting that, despite a common perception in non-Native society that First Nations people "have it easy" when it comes to education because of Federal funding for schools, supplies, tuition, living expenses, etc., many respondents indicated that they found funding insufficient or difficult to obtain. Funding is not necessarily automatic or consistent,¹⁶ and a myriad of family and administrative circumstances can interfere with applications. And again, despite popular perceptions in mainstream society, Band governments run up against similar funding limitations and inconsistencies that limit their ability to mount continuing education programs on-reserve. Nor can funding alone offset the many other difficulties that a First Nations person seeking further education may face.

Those respondents who continued education off-reserve were often aware of racism in the larger society, though some felt it more than others. It was noted that the image of the 'street person' often appeared to be one applied more generally to 'Indians.' One respondent noted that he had not been particularly aware of racism in Canadian society until returning from a stay in Europe. Aside from specific instances in which race may have been a barrier to employment or an occasion for harassment, respondents tended to see racism as something which weighed on their spirit; an atmosphere of suspicion or an unwillingness to understand which dragged down self-esteem, openness and motivation.

Some respondents mentioned that education was not couched in terms of "Native thinking" and that, as a result, they found class discussion, as well as the discourse of lectures and textbooks, alien. "Native thinking" was never defined or described in any detail, but it was obviously of importance to a number of respondents and constitutes a topic worthy of further examination. It is probably wrong to tie it too closely to language and traditional culture, though these are likely important com-

ponents.¹⁷ But just as likely, "Native thinking" also refers to ways of making sense of the physical and social world, as well as communicating that sense, that are appropriate to the *contemporary* life situations of Native people; in other words, a personal, community and cultural identity and a survival mechanism. Those community members who were successful in their pursuit of post-secondary education appear to have done so by becoming aware of the difference between "Native" and non-Native thinking, and by treating the alien world of mainstream western academic culture as something foreign: a tool with limited, yet necessary usefulness to be mastered. Thus, for example, one respondent reflected that "a lot of us think in Native thinking but without perspective, history, etc." To the extent that formal education allowed the acquisition of such a 'perspective,' which could then be used in dealing with the worlds of politics, economics and employment, it was to be seen as a good. Something of the same ambiguity may colour the responses of a group of young high school graduates who suggested that learning traditional culture was best done outside the formal classroom curriculum. This same group had trouble with the manner in which researchers formulated questions about the value of education in relation to community, finding the terminology too abstract.

In discussing things that motivated them to seek further education, respondents spoke of the importance of encouragement from elders and family and, in particular, of family members who had sought education and served accordingly as role models. Relatively few spoke in terms of specific, concrete career goals, though a number did have such goals. One, using language similar to several others, spoke of the importance of 'ambition,' defining it as ambition for self, family, relatives and community, without distinguishing these in terms of priority or hierarchy.

Conclusion: Designing Programs, Debating Meanings

What we heard from the Pii'kani people who participated in this study made it clear that the very meaning of education, let alone educational and career aspirations, cannot be defined in isolation from the cultural, social, political and economic contexts in which people live and the ideas about personhood, family and community that they hold. Many of our interviewees were able to talk in abstract terms about the meaning of education, but even in the most general of these discussions, the significance of education was constructed in specific relation to cultural loss, familial circumstances and responsibilities, economic and employment opportunities and community politics. The Pii'kani participants took into account all of these circumstances when evaluating educational opportunities, and did not think simply in terms of a semester and a

grade at the end of it. Moreover, they neither treated education as an abstract good, nor learning as an individual possession. Learning and the educational process, they stressed again and again, is about connections: community support or lack of it and the ability to contribute to family or community well-being.

At the same time, different respondents approached the topic of educational opportunity differently, in line with their particular position within the community. Thus, for example, one respondent preferred an educational setting away from people she knew to avoid 'distraction.' Many others also indicated a preference for off-reserve educational opportunities. In light of the tensions described by many respondents, going outside the community to pursue education was possibly also a means to avoid discouragement and resentment; it might also have signaled skepticism about the possibility of a wider range of on-reserve offerings. Conversely, however, a significant number called for more educational opportunities to be offered on the reserve, in a community setting, given the difficulties of access and understanding faced by reserve residents in off-reserve settings.

Boards of Education and related bodies are charged with the task of developing specific educational policies and opportunities to meet the needs of their constituents. In the case of the Pii'kani Nation, this work is restricted by jurisdictional limitations. Universities and colleges, for example—with the exception of institutions as Red Crow Community College—are out of the control of Indigenous communities, and for the most part have not had a good track record in encouraging and accommodating First Nations students and their communities.¹⁸ Such work also clearly has to be done in the context of different and perhaps even conflicting needs. In such a setting, it may be important to develop programs with the same ends but different means. For example, some community members may benefit from the provision of programs and courses offered in a local community setting, both in-school and after school. Others may benefit more from programs which prepare them explicitly for the experience of taking education in the 'foreign' environment of a mainstream University or College. In the latter case, differences between modes of thinking, teaching and communicating between First Nations and western cultures would need to be explicitly recognized and flagged rather than papered over.¹⁹ In all cases, there is a need to take into account the different pathways by which learners gain education (upgrading; dropping out and returning when able; building up a roster of training seminars), and the familial and other circumstances which affect those pathways.

Such a diversity of programs, however, would take complex plan-

ning and would cost money. And the mere provision of programs and pathways is only part of the battle. Several other issues need also to be addressed. One is the basic meaning of appropriate education in the context of First Nations concepts of personhood, autonomy, family and community. Here, wrestling with the epistemological and ontological meanings of education cannot be avoided. But they are best wrestled with, not in the abstract, but in concrete, local First Nations community settings. In other words, First Nations people themselves need to be empowered to define their own educational priorities. Bluntly, then, what the Pii'kani need is secure and consistent funding on the basis of which adequate program planning can take place, and they also need the jurisdictional and practical authority to develop appropriate educational programs as they would define the. This has been said before, by the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* in 1996, and again by the Treaty Seven First Nations in their contribution to Alberta Learning's Native Education Policy Review; for example, as follows:

Related to this at a macro level is the recognition of our tribal institutions by governments, mainstream institutions, agencies and businesses. For too long outside entities are funded to develop programs that would address our tribal needs while our own institutions struggle to obtain resources to design and implement their programs. Our First Nations institutions should be contracted to design and develop materials and programs. Mainstream institutions could then broker modules, courses and programs from our institutions. (Treaty 7 First Nations Educational Systems, 2002: 42)

Here, First Nations educational programming faces a dilemma. Educational organizations must provide policies and programs that work in given and imperfect situations. Yet these imperfections must be recognized for what they are: a set of *political* issues with specific histories. The difficulties of educational planning are themselves instructive, as are funding issues. Funding is not perceived by First Nations in isolation from treaty rights, and neither are abstract issues for them. Political and economic isolation, conflict, discouragement and scarce resources—as well as the determination to understand and overcome such obstacles on the part of community members and leaders—point to a legacy of struggle which must be recognized for what it is, even as the practical effort to meet the needs of the community and its learners here and now continues.

It is clear from this exploratory study that an 'educated person' is a social, cultural, and political construct that reflects the colonial history and contemporary reality of the Pii'kani people. Moreover, this construct

is exceedingly complex and challenging to examine, and it raises questions for which there are no easy answers. An 'educated person,' as conceptualized by the study respondents, references emerging, and often conflicting concepts of self, relationships, needs, and obligations in contemporary Indigenous communities. This study presents a limited, yet provocative, glimpse into the meanings given to education by members of the Pii'kani Nation. Future research is certainly required, but the epistemological, ontological, and methodological issues uncovered in this present study must be addressed practically as well. Paramount is the need to understand how basic terms ("education," "person," "community," "self-sufficiency," "successful") are being defined in their specific cultural and practical contexts. What also needs to be addressed is appropriate ways to "hear" these definitions and concerns in their settings. The Pii'kani community does not speak as one: it is still, in many respects, a divided community. But a community is, and it has a voice. The issue is to understand that voice without short-circuiting the process either by taking one set of statements as definitive, or taking the diversity of statements as evidence that "lack of consensus" means absence of a community voice. Epistemological, ontological and methodological issues come together around basic questions of definition, for here, in the way in which key terms are contextualized and used, the voice of the community is at work; in the discursive shaping of the issues the Nation faces today. Here also—by way of focus groups, surveys and interviews, but also in community meetings and in paying attention to documents *already produced and disseminated by First Nations organizations*—the process of hearing must continue in the form of a critical dialogue.²⁰ More research must not be a substitute for the process by which the Pii'kani Nation gains cultural, economic and jurisdictional recognition. It must accompany that process.

Notes

1. This article is based on research funded by a grant from the Multi-disciplinary Aboriginal Project (MAP), University of Lethbridge, and the Peigan Board of Education, which also provided facilities and other support. The research was undertaken by a team under the supervision of Kirby Smith. The ideas in this article benefit immeasurably from the authors' discussions with members of the research team, which included Michelle Provost, Thelma Crowshoe, Barney Provost, Joslin Smith and Kerry Scott. Michelle Provost undertook an extensive initial data analysis, and a number of her perceptive

observations are incorporated into this article. However, the authors take full responsibility for any inaccuracies, omissions or misperceptions which may remain in this article. Thanks also to Virginia McGowan for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this article, and to Tobias for a wise insight, and to Don Fast and Tammy Driscoll for efficient last-minute research assistance.

2. Here, it appears clear that social, political and economic circumstances are interpreted, in part, through discussions of education and social issues. The reverse process also may occur: such circumstances themselves may affect perceptions of education: see, e.g., Seyfrit and Hamilton (1997).
3. As was comparing such factors to those identified in previous research on attitudes toward education and school-community relations; e.g., Mackay and Myles (1995).
4. Interviewees were chosen to represent two broad age groups: Adolescents (age 15-19) and adults (age 20 and above). The age dividing line was determined by policies and guidelines of Alberta Learning concerning eligibility to attend provincial high schools. The 'adolescent' group was further subdivided into two groups: (A) those who had graduated from high school or who were pursuing a high school diploma, and (B) those who were presently withdrawn from secondary school. The 'adult' group was subdivided into (C) those who were secondary school graduates and pursuing post-secondary education, (D) those who had completed an adult education program (university, college, high school upgrading, healing and training programs), (E) those who had withdrawn from an adult education program and had not re-enrolled, and (F), those who had not participated in any adult education program. At least one interview was sought from each category. Interviews were conducted in terms of a list of 48 questions divided into 10 sections. Interviewees were asked for basic personal information, including sex, age, marital status, gross yearly household income, occupation, household location (on/off reserve), number of people in household, and educational background. The remainder of the interview questions were open-ended and sought responses concerning perceived effects of education, educational experiences and challenges, personal circumstances, attitudes and goals, relations to and perceptions of family, friends and community, cultural identity, and desires or recommendations for educational programs. Respondents were also asked to indicate concerns and topics that they thought were important and that were not addressed by interviewers. For convenience, interviews were conducted in English, as not all Band members, nor members of the

research team, were fluent in Blackfoot. Interestingly, survey respondents (the survey was also conducted in English) strongly valued the retention of the Blackfoot language but did not see it as essential to Blackfoot identity. This may be a self-selecting result, but given the number of non-Blackfoot speakers on the reserve, it is nonetheless significant.

5. The same categories were used to subdivide the survey sample as for the pre-interviews (see Note 4 above). Fifty responses were sought for each category. Given the mandate of the Peigan Board of Education, and for the sake of simplicity, it was decided to restrict the survey to reserve residents. While gender was not used as a criterion in constructing categories, an attempt was made to have a rough parity of males and females. Demographic information, including sex, age (in decile categories), marital status, number of dependents, occupation, and educational level completed, was also recorded, for comparative purposes during data analysis. A particular effort was made to generate adequate data to avoid over-representing the drop-out rate from educational programs, as has happened in the past when students who left one institution or program but entered another were nonetheless classified as "drop outs" by the institution or program they left.
6. Survey questions were a combination of multiple-choice (respondents were encouraged to tick off as many choices as they felt were valid) and fill-in-the-blank. Several had additional space for written comments. Participants were first asked about their own ideas, their circumstances and their attitudes toward further education, their motivations for education, and their knowledge of the level of educational attainment on the reserve. The second section of the form asked for attitudes toward and perceptions of the local community and its administration. The third asked specifically for views concerning educational programs and curriculum, learning outcomes, and the value of education. At the end, respondents were encouraged to append their own comments about any issue raised on the form. In all, the form was divided into 29 subsections, each containing anywhere from 1 to 10 questions.
7. This follow-up process is still incomplete. The two individual interviewees were adults chosen for their involvement in reserve community life and their knowledge of the community. The focus groups were composed as follows: (1) seven post-secondary students (4 males, 2 females) working in the community on summer employment programs, (2) a self-selected group of four young adults (2 males, 2 females) aged 18-29 in a youth initiatives program, and (3)

six young people (4 females, 2 males) just graduated from high school and not involved in any type of program. This initial focus on youth and young adults was in part the result of an interest in the fact that younger respondents to the survey indicated more optimism about education and reserve life than did those in middle age. All focus groups and follow-up interviews were conducted in English.

8. At a 1993 forum on parental involvement in education, Cree elder Rev. Stan Cuthand described his response to a teacher's question about how to get parents to speak:

To be a part of the community, you have to, without asking any questions, become part of that community. No questions asked: why is this? why do they sit in a circle? what are they eating? Too many questions are asked. By sitting and saying nothing while being part of the community, you will find more and more participation by the parents. (Quoted in Saskatchewan School Trustees Association, Research Report #93-10, 1993)

9. Two concerns in particular informed this latter attention to the discursive organization of questions and answers. First, all members of the research team save one were First Nations members; most were members of the community in question. Their sensitivity to the culture and politics of reserve life was a benefit to the research, but insider knowledge is also a potential hazard as interviewer and respondent engage in unspoken and often undocumented negotiation regarding how to approach or phrase particular issues. Second, research team members and many respondents were very familiar with the standard language of educational achievement as used in mainstream and academic culture. The possibility arose that this familiarity could mean that nuances in meaning relating to particular cultural and political circumstances could easily be missed. An analysis of the discursive organization of both questions and responses is no guarantee against these possibilities, but does provide more of an opportunity to identify interpretive biases at work. The point of doing so is not to "eliminate" such biases but to recognize the commitments from which they spring and to bring them into critical engagement through dialogue (Bonner, 1997; see also Giroux, 1987).
10. On the history of "Indian education" in the Canadian west, see Gresko (1979), Titley (1993) and Milloy (1999).
11. See also Moore, 2002.
12. Compare to parental attitudes toward childrens' education as reported by Kleinfeld (1971) in an Aleut community.
13. The terms "Peigan," Pii'kani" and "Pii'kuni" reflect differing ways of

transliterating the name of this people from spoken Blackfoot. "Peigan" is an older and inaccurate transliteration. The Band administration has recently adopted "Pii'kani" as more accurately reflecting their name in Blackfoot, but other variations reflecting different pronunciations and usages also exist.

14. On this, see also Perley (1993), Antone (1997) and Bailey (2000).
15. This issue has received wider attention: see Saskatchewan School Trustees Association, Research Centre Report #93-10 (1993).
16. See also *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996), 5.6.1, "Getting In the Door."
17. Note also the discussion of a possible right-hemispheric dominance in Native American Indian students by Stellern, Collins, Gutierrez and Patterson (1986), and in particular the skeptical assessment of arguments in favour of the "right-brain Indian" or a "right brain" curriculum, by Chrisjohn and Peters (1986).
18. Some initiatives are now in place or are being developed. See, for example, The University of Alberta Faculty of Education's Indigenous People's Education Program, and also The University of Lethbridge First Nations Transition Pilot Program, which is to be implemented beginning in 2004.
19. Note in this context the discussion of the University of Alberta's Access Program and similar programs in the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996), 5.6.1, "Getting In the Door."
20. And dialectic: see Bonner (1997: 142-150, 191-200, 207-209).

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