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Dynamics of Education Policy and Practice for Urban Aboriginal Early School Leavers

In this study I explore a lack of cohesion between two Alberta government policy documents that are intended to address the problem of early school leaving of disenfranchised urban Aboriginal youth. The research explores the question of whether this lack of cohesion is reflected in educational practice for this population of learners. This issue is further examined through exploration of an inner-city high school that is designed to meet the needs of a disenfranchised urban population generally while meeting the specific educational needs of Aboriginal students who constitute most of its student population. The need for this analysis is given context by the relatively few disenfranchised urban Aboriginal youth who complete high school in Alberta. Although this study focuses on an Alberta inner-city school, the low completion rates for this population are in evidence throughout Canada and elsewhere across the globe.

Cette étude porte sur le manque de cohésion entre deux documents de politique du gouvernement albertain dont l'objectif est d'aborder le problème de décrochage chez les jeunes Autochtones exclus et vivant dans un milieu urbain. Le projet cherche à savoir si ce manque de cohésion est reflété dans la pratique éducative vis-à-vis ce groupe d'apprenants. Cette question est approfondie par l'exploration d'une école secondaire du centre-ville conçue pour répondre aux besoins globaux d'une population urbaine et exclue, et les besoins pédagogiques plus précis des élèves autochtones qui constituent la majorité démographique chez la population estudiantine. Le fait que peu de jeunes Autochtones urbains qui se sentent exclus complètent l'école secondaire en Alberta vient fournir un contexte au besoin d'effectuer cette analyse. Bien que cette étude vise une école du centre-ville en Alberta, le taux élevé de décrochage chez les jeunes de cette population trouve son écho partout au Canada et ailleurs sur le globe.

Background

Canada's overall population is aging, whereas the Aboriginal population is dominated by children and youth (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2001). According to Alberta Learning (2002), Aboriginal people account for 3% of the population (6% in Alberta), whereas Aboriginal youth account for 4% of youth aged 15-24. In Alberta approximately half of Aboriginal people live in urban centers. A lower proportion of urban Aboriginal youth live with their parents compared with all urban youth. A higher proportion of urban Aboriginal youth live with a spouse or as a single parent. In Edmonton in 1996 a lone parent led 40%-50% of Aboriginal families with children under the age of 14 compared with 14%-17% for families who did not report Aboriginal ancestry. Aboriginal people also report significantly lower income levels.

The percentage of early school leavers in the Aboriginal population in Canada is unacceptably high in relation to completion rates for the non-

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Aboriginal population. The high school graduation rate for First Nation, Metis, and Inuit learners remains 15% less than those individuals who do not report Aboriginal ancestry (Alberta Learning, 2002). Makokis (2000) believes that this has a complex causation and is based on the interplay between historical, cultural, and interpersonal factors that militate against Aboriginal people staying in school. Racial prejudice, frustration, and isolation contribute to the lower academic performance of these students. In Edmonton's inner city, these factors are further complicated by adverse conditions of poverty. Many urban Aboriginal families lack the basic necessities of life, and 52% of all Aboriginal children in Canada are poor (Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, 2001). Some effects of this poverty are low self-esteem, depression, anger, self-doubt, intimidation, frustration, shame, and hopelessness.

Given the lack of published research on the education of Aboriginal students in Canada and elsewhere, the research reported here has the potential to contribute to the field's understanding of the need to better align policy and practice for this particular student population. White (2003) challenges social science researchers and government policymakers to come together in the creation of evidence-based policy directed at improving the social and economic conditions that face Aboriginal Canadians. These social problems are complex, yet policy is often developed independent of social researchers who may be viewed as failing to consider the confines of public action.

For Aboriginal students, since the arrival of Western forms of education, schooling has been fraught with difficulties. In Canada we have a long history of assimilationist policies of education for Aboriginal children. As Graveline (1998) reminds us, "colonial forms of education, particularly residential schools, have contributed greatly to the efforts to eradicate Traditional forms of Aboriginal consciousness" (p. 27). Well-documented accounts of residential school experiences clearly point to environments where Aboriginal students did not feel accepted or validated. Dialogue is the foundation of a research policy nexus. This research contributes to that dialogue. The policy examined in this current research clearly aims to improve high school completion rates in Alberta, yet the best ways to do so are often unclear. The role of research in this process is crucial.

The School

The inner-city high school (ICHS) that is the focus of this study is located in an older, poorer fringe neighborhood bordering Edmonton's downtown business core. Most students at the school are between the ages of 16 and 24 and have had a wide range of difficulties in schools, including gaps in their education ranging from a few months to several years. Most have attended many schools due to the transient nature of their lives. Poverty is a primary concern for nearly all students, with most living independently or in group homes. Of those who continue to live with parents, most are living in single-parent homes. Many students report periods of homelessness. Students identify having had frequent experiences with racism and discrimination in public schools. Additional factors contributing to the difficulties of succeeding in schools include drug use and addictions, violence in their communities, and struggles with depression and suicide. Most of the students in this study reported Aboriginal heritage.

It is clear that the Aboriginal student population is not being well served in the public school system. High school completion rates among Aboriginal students attending mainstream secondary schools are significantly lower than for non-Aboriginal youth (Brady, 1996). Brady notes that dropout rates vary among Aboriginal youth depending on the economic circumstances of their families and the community in which they live. High school completion tends to be the norm for non-Aboriginal students, but is not for Aboriginal students unless their parents have a high socioeconomic status. Brady argues that the values promoted by public schools in Canada are those of the suburban middle class. Battiste and Henderson (2000) tell us, "little classroom research has been done on the effects of teaching students about their culture, history, and languages, as well as about oppression, racism, and differences in worldviews" (p. 206). Although cultural discontinuity does play a role in explaining the early school leaving of Aboriginal students, it needs the additional dimension of an analysis of common experiences shared by all youth who are marginalized by adverse social conditions. For example, the youth involved in this study, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, shared the common experience of lack of attention from teachers and social exclusion by their peers in public schools.

Theoretical Framework

A framework of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996; Giroux, 2001) is a necessary component of understanding the workings of the program at ICHS. Shor (1987) points to a need to situate formal learning in students' cultures. Critical pedagogy provides a way of seeing an unjust social order and revealing how this has caused problems in the lives of young people who live in impoverished conditions. It offers an approach to education, through dialogue and reflection, whereby the effects of power can be diminished and the needs of students met (Apple, 2004). Through the process of "unveiling.… reality and thereby coming to know it critically" (Freire, p. 51) youth in ICHS begin to explore their own social reality, draw their own conclusions, and work toward appropriate responses. Critical theory informs an understanding of the practice of ICHS and in particular how the school constructs educational opportunities for student experience to inform critical discussions and understandings of the daily lives of youth. A critical theory understanding of ICHS is informed by theories of Aboriginal education (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Brokern, 2002; Corenblum, 1996; Kehoe, 1994). Development and validation of individual identities is a crucial component of self-esteem and success in schools.

Critical theory in education policy places requirements on the researcher to pursue ethical research principles and social justice concerns (Ozga, 2000). The critical pedagogy orientation of the research site makes it an appropriate location for examining practice in relation to education policy. Educational practice at ICHS challenges dominant assumptions that inform policy and highlights the effects of that policy in practice. Critical theory offers a vision of what is desirable for education systems to achieve, as well as the potential for change. In this article, a specific policy problem is illuminated along with potential ways of interacting with and responding to that policy.

Policy Context

Questions about educational practices best suited to increasing high school completion rates have been prevalent in policy discussions in recent years in Alberta. There is also evidence of concern for meeting the formal learning needs of Aboriginal youth in both urban and reserve settings. Educational policy in Alberta addresses this question through policy documents and a variety of practice initiatives. Alberta Learning's (2001) *Removing Barriers to High School Completion* and *First Nations, Metis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2002) are two such documents that frame the analysis of schooling practice in this article. These documents are representative of a larger public discourse about youth whose needs are currently not being met by public schooling. The discourse is indicative of a philosophical approach to public schooling that includes the need to remove barriers to high school completion for all students.

The policy documents that frame this analysis are those most applicable to guidance of schooling for early school leavers in Alberta. *Removing Barriers to High School Completion (Barriers Report)*, generated by Alberta Learning (2001) in response to its 2000-2003 Business Plan, targeted the improvement of high school completion rates. A study of barriers to high school completion was done, including gathering the input of 22 focus groups held across the province and identifying critical outcomes. The *Barriers Report* states that Alberta Learning is "committed to ensuring Albertans have the knowledge and skills they need to be successful and to learn quickly and flexibly throughout their lives" (p. i). Based on a review of recent literature, the report acknowledges that the causes of early leaving are complex, leading to a need for a new, comprehensive, and holistic view of early school leaving.

First Nations, Metis and Inuit Education Policy Framework (FN Report) was the result of the Native Education Policy Review, part of Alberta Learning's "commitment to enhance educational opportunities for Aboriginal learners" (2002, p. 1). In 1987 the Minister of Education introduced a *Policy Statement on Native Education in Alberta*. Although successes were achieved through this policy such as the creation of curriculum resources and support for Aboriginal teacher education programs, Alberta Learning wished to ensure policy directions remained relevant to the educational needs of Aboriginal learners. The review recognized that First Nations, Metis, and Inuit people are not special interest groups in Canada, but have special status with specific rights that were attained through treaties. Increased parental involvement is a long-term goal, as is strengthening relationships among First Nations, Metis, and Inuit people, school jurisdictions, postsecondary institutions, vocational schools, apprenticeship providers, industry, other key education stakeholders, and government.

Research Methods

The question of tensions apparent in policy and practice for schooling related to disenfranchised urban Aboriginal youth arose from a case study of ICHS. The formal data collection of this research project took place over three months from April to June 2004. Data collection involved individual interviews and focus group discussions with students, youth workers, early service teachers, and experienced teachers. The research was also informed by my teaching

practice over a broader period before and after formal data collection. Results of the study led to a need for further research into educational policy for youth who leave high school before completion, the focus of this current phase of the research.

The educational program at ICHS was developed and continues to evolve in a policy framework designed to meet the needs of disenfranchised urban youth. However, given that most students at the school report Aboriginal heritage, the program seems to lack orientation toward educational policy designed to meet the needs of Aboriginal youth. There is a disconnect in the policy documents that is reflected in practice for these learners. In addition, most of these youth have been disconnected from families. The *Barriers Report* clearly identifies a student population that has experienced negative family influences of rejection by a parent, family conflict, marital discord and little parental guidance, parental substance abuse, a reported history of family crisis intervention, transience, homelessness, and early independence. This document identifies family involvement as important without accounting for the fact that many students are disconnected from families. This policy does not offer workable strategies for supporting the very population it aims to support. The *FN Report* also identifies family involvement as important, but fails to recognize the disenfranchised urban portion of the population. As a result, strategies for support of disenfranchised urban youth are not addressed in this policy document either.

Burger, Smale, and da Costa (2002) observe that bridging cultural differences and defining enlightened policy approaches in support of Aboriginal learners continues to be a priority for Alberta Learning. These authors note that the *Barriers Report* complements outcomes for increasing high school completion by Aboriginal students that emerge from the *FN Report*. However, this connection is superficial and only addressed in the "Success for Aboriginal students" strategic initiative. The needs of disenfranchised Aboriginal learners require integration into all key strategic areas of the *Barriers Report*. This report identifies a holistic model of policy/program support, yet fails to integrate this thought into the policy for Aboriginal learners. These learners' specialized needs are addressed in a separate category rather than integrated into all discussions.

The Barriers Policy and ICHS

Categories identified in the *Barriers Report* as important factors in meeting the needs of a disenfranchised urban student population can be seen reflected in ICHS practice. The *Barriers Report* identifies "listening to and supporting students" who are at risk of leaving school early as an important component of increasing completion rates. The report suggests the following outcomes: greater involvement in school decision-making; greater opportunities for extra-curricular activities, mentoring programs, and recognition of students' success; and school programs and curriculum with more opportunities for students to identify issues and develop skills in managing peer conflict, anger management, family conflict, parenting skills, health, sexuality, and drug awareness.

Listening to Students

Listening to students and involvement in decision-making are evidenced in the circle, an activity that brings the entire ICHS community together. Circles are held three times each day to provide ongoing opportunity for dialogue. Students clearly appreciate, at least with time, the relationships they have with staff members at the school. They point to these relationships as an important component of the program. They also point to daily sharing circles as an opportunity to "build community, make decisions, and heal wrongdoing" (Young, 2006, p. F9).

> I like the fact that the students have a say in the school rules and what goes on and what kinds of things they'll be doing, stuff like that. And that the courses are mostly based on what the majority of the students need to know to graduate. (ICHS Student)

Course work is considered by students to be focused on meeting graduation requirements; however, students do have voice in daily circles.

Mentoring is reflected in the school's critical pedagogy, as is the opportunity for students to identify issues that are relevant to their lives. Through popular media, students can challenge power blocs while creating alternative visions of the world. At ICHS this challenge is often approached through

> digital media and also basic photography … gives somebody a purpose to go out into the community and look at it. I mean literally looking at it through a lens that you also have something between you and the community and you have a stake there that not everyone else has … once they're given that prop they would go out and really look at the community with a different purpose … they have a role that's valid within the community … suddenly they have a place within the community … and at the same time they're not a part of it. They're separate so they can really look at it from the other side … it gives them a power they haven't had before. (ICHS Teacher)

Students use this medium to critique the messages in the world around them and consider alternative representations of the images they see. Photography provides not only opportunities to view the world critically, but also allows students to name and talk about the community of which they are a part.

The *Barriers Report* points to the importance of recognizing students' success; ICHS would agree, but also challenges the definition of success to apply to a disenfranchised urban student population. The attitudes and behaviors needed for school success are in direct contrast to the knowledge valued on the street. In addition, success is defined in a variety of academic and non-academic ways, as reflected in these comments by teachers and youth workers at the school.

> For some students just coming to school on a regular basis is success. And we let them know that as well. Coming to school on time is success. Not fighting in school … success. You know even if they just come here for one or two terms and then have a different way of looking at the world, are able to cooperate with each other, that's success. And then they move onto other programs and that's just fine. And that happens as well. (ICHS Teacher)

ICHS practice clearly supports the importance of the complex and multi-faceted needs of disenfranchised learners and a holistic approach to education in this context.

Student Alienation

The *Barriers Report* recognizes that disenfranchised youth are highly alienated in schools. The policy recommends managing student alienation through routine assessments of students' affective experiences at school. Through this process students will come to feel cared for and safe in schools. ICHS addresses student alienation by providing a safe school environment and through pedagogical approaches that begin with students' experiences in and out of school. A youth worker explains how they support students through many difficult situations in their personal lives.

> A friendlier, warmer environment … designed to make everybody feel like they're safe. Once they come through the doors they shouldn't have to worry about anything else, violence or drugs or anything like that. (ICHS Youth Worker)

Students need this safe haven, a place to go where they are accepted and protected from the violence and difficult circumstances of their lives outside the school. Children living in poor, tough neighborhoods in Edmonton have been shown to experience stress leading to increased and ongoing fear (Mah, 2001). Given that exposure to violence is linked with various problems including depression, substance use, and academic problems, a safe school is an essential element of learning (Luthar, 1999). A safe haven such as this school presents can be used as a platform for discussions about issues of violence in the community, leading to empowering young people to act to change their social realities.

Knowledge of Self

Students involved in discussions during the development of the *Barriers Report* identified labeling in schools as damaging to their self-confidence. These students were not taught how to compensate for weaknesses or how to build on their strengths. Outcomes include new approaches to special education that deemphasize labels and emphasize diagnosis, counseling, and program solutions to learning challenges. Students at ICHS are greatly affected by this labeling process as they have been variously labeled throughout their school years. Many youth at this school are coded with mild to moderate emotional or behavioral disabilities due to maladaptive behaviors that interfere with learning. Teachers and youth workers at ICHS have a solid understanding of how young people's subjectivities are informed by labels. Senior teachers and youth workers reject the pathological picture of students as painted by these coding requirements, yet countering the effects of labels takes much more than awareness. Staff members find themselves engaged in coding and developing Individual Program Plans (IPPs), which then contribute to the objectification of youth, as a youth worker indicates:

> [The] problem with the IPPs [is] where a lot of suggestions being made [by new teachers] are contrary to the way things are done here. So we're constantly struggling with this language, well it's more than a language problem.… I tend to see the language of these suggestions as sort of referring to the student as

almost an "it." And I think that we've tried hard to treat them as an "I," somebody who's to be valued. (ICHS Youth Worker)

The coding requirements, however, are *making* teachers see students as *its*. Valuing what someone is saying while also noting the number of times he or she behaves inappropriately leads to incoherence between theory and practice. Senior teachers and youth workers are caught in the contradictions that are inherent in a coding process that constructs students as deviant. The *Barriers Report* identifies an issue that is clearly relevant in practice, but is shown to be problematical in this inner-city context.

Program Flexibility
Program flexibility was a major issue for participants involved in the *Barriers Report*. Rather than making the student fit the existing high school program, outcomes suggest that high schools need to fit the student. More relevant program options would better meet needs and lead to greater likelihood of high school completion. Participants in the study at ICHS concur in earlier work that suggests that flexibility is an essential consideration in creating the conditions for pedagogy. Early service teachers struggle to find a balance between flexibility, fairness, and meeting the requirements of the Alberta curriculum and student financing. In this teaching environment, many chances need to be given when young people have so many struggles in their day-to-day lives. Attending school is often difficult for reasons ranging from lack of bus fare to involvement in the justice system. Without stable home lives, these youth are not able to focus on or complete homework.

At the same time, staff work toward ensuring that youth are ready to move forward with their lives by the time they complete their high school program. This includes an understanding that further schooling and jobs require regular attendance and completing work in a timely manner. This ongoing tension in the program is apparent in daily teaching practice as teachers and youth workers try to weigh individual needs with larger group concerns. Learning to live with uncertainty, informed by self-examination of one's own values about classroom practice, seems to be essential in this environment. Here again we see coherence with the *Barriers* policy, but with a more complex understanding of how these issues play out in practice.

First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Education Policy and ICHS
Recognizing that approximately two thirds of the students at ICHS report Aboriginal heritage leads to an examination of the *FN Report* and ICHS practice. Analysis of this policy reveals much less coherence between theory and practice than in the *Barriers Report*. Teachers and youth workers acknowledge that most of their students are Aboriginal. Some practices specific to this segment of the student body such as having an Elder in the school are apparent. Generally, however, the attention to creating the conditions for pedagogy and critical practices are focused on meeting the needs of all students in general. The *FN Report* notes that there are 46 First Nations in Alberta, with many diverse cultures and languages. Further complexity results from a fragmentation of responsibility and coordination among Native communities, the provincial government, and the federal government. The *FN Report* seeks to ensure that policy directions remain relevant to Aboriginal learners.

Quality Learning Opportunities

The *FN Report* seeks provision of quality learning opportunities that are responsive, flexible, accessible, and affordable. Outcomes include identifying and reducing barriers that prevent access and success for Aboriginal learners. ICHS exists because these and other disenfranchised urban youth have experienced barriers to participation in school. As noted above, success comes in various forms at ICHS, but do these definitions of success include the needs of Aboriginal learners per se? How does practice challenge definitions of success specifically related to Aboriginal students? An ICHS teacher reflects on how their program seems to promote positive self-images for young people.

> Teacher: It's fostered here … I think that people with Native background feel better about it here than they would maybe somewhere else [public schools].
> Question: Any thoughts on how it is fostered here?
> Teacher: General acceptance of who you are.

ICHS staff are saying that what works for Aboriginal students who are disenfranchised is what works for disenfranchised youth generally. Treating people with respect, understanding the material and social conditions of their lives, and acceptance of who they are as individuals are important components of schooling. Battiste and Henderson (2000) tell us that little classroom research has been done on the effects of teaching students about their culture, history, and languages, as well as about oppression, racism, and differences in world views. Consciousness-raising courses at all levels of formal education "have brought to the surface new hopes and dreams and have raised the aspirations and educational successes of Aboriginal students" (p. 206). It would seem difficult to dispute the idea of new hopes and dreams deriving from "coming to understand that poverty and oppression are not their fault and are not the result of their faulty language, consciousness, or culture" (p. 206). Consciousness also includes understanding "that poverty and oppression are tools created by modern society to maintain the status quo and to foster and legitimize racism and class divisions" (p. 206), leading some ICHS students to feel uncomfortable with how they are positioned in the discourse.

Seeking provision of quality learning opportunities that are responsive, flexible, accessible, and affordable is an important goal, but does not offer concrete strategies for implementation. Certainly ICHS provides access for Aboriginal students and strives to ensure their educational success broadly defined. An examination of practice at ICHS reveals the difficulties in defining success for this disenfranchised portion of the urban Aboriginal youth population. First, research is lacking on what defines success for Aboriginal students generally, and the policy does not address the needs of disenfranchised urban Aboriginal youth who are disconnected from families and communities. ICHS has strived to understand the needs of these youth and has developed a critical practice that they believe provides opportunities to explore difficult historical relations and contemporary inner-city lives that are relevant to these youth. The questions of cultural practices embedded in schooling and of incorporating Indigenous languages remains unaddressed, possibly in recognition of a group of students who are currently disconnected from these cultural prac-

tices. At some point, however, these elements need to be introduced to these youth.

Excellence in Learner Achievement

Outcomes of this goal include recognizing excellence in learner achievement based on high expectations and providing opportunities for parental involvement and support. There is evidence of an appreciation of the need for high expectations for learners in the ICHS program. The goals of a critical pedagogy are to relate personal growth to public life through the development of skills, knowledge, and students' high expectations of themselves. However, the program is designed to be flexible enough to meet the needs of its students while still meeting the demands of the Alberta curriculum. In my own teaching practice at ICHS, I struggled to find balance between flexibility and expectations for meeting academic standards.

Teaching a Social Studies 20 class, I recall a student who struggled with drug abuse. He had been attending ICHS for quite some time and had generally done well academically. He had completed a number of academic courses, but had also learned how to manipulate in the flexible school approach. He rarely attended my class. I encouraged him to complete the work he had missed. I was encouraged at staff meetings to give him many chances. He did not complete much of the work, but managed to pass the course. His manipulation skills won out in the end. A flexible approach might have served to encourage him to continue manipulating the system. Flexibility that is necessary in some cases does not necessarily encourage the promotion of academic excellence, highlighting another tension between policy and practice. The *FN Report* points to the need to maintain high achievement expectations with little recognition of daily struggles for youth who are street involved. ICHS practice recognizes the importance of an understanding of street-involved lives, but does not consider how Aboriginal learners may have different needs informing teachers' struggles to find balance between flexibility and expectations. A recognition of the above-noted student's individual needs might have helped him overcome difficulties outside school, resulting in an ability to engage academically.

Discussion

Tensions between policy and educational practice for disenfranchised urban Aboriginal youth are reflective of and instructive to schools and policymakers who currently strive to meet the needs of this population. Although educators and policymakers alike would agree that academic success is an important goal, more discussion is needed to define what is meant by success and how schools are to achieve success for all students. Wotherspoon (2002) points out that thus far, little attention "has been paid by educators, policy-makers and researchers to the hidden reserves of knowledge and capabilities that children and youth possess" (p. 11), particularly those who are at risk of early school leaving. Critical practices and pedagogical approaches that incorporate students' lived experiences both in and out of school lead to important insights about how students define their own success. Such successes need to build on a "broader, rather than narrower, range of competencies and expectations" (p. 11). Schools frequently ignore pressing concerns such as substance abuse, teen

pregnancy, racism, violence, and street involvement due to the controversial nature of the issues. Sometimes these discussions are presented in general terms in public schools, yet problems that youth are experiencing need direct intervention through resources and program initiatives in schools, as well as being integrated directly into classroom practice. ICHS incorporates resources such as regularly scheduled visits by a public health nurse, assistance with housing concerns, and facilitating addiction counseling. A critical pedagogy approach to classroom teaching can encourage examination of these issues in the classroom.

Safety is an important issue for all schools, with heightened significance for those who live in neighborhoods or homes where they do not feel safe. Equally important are those who have been verbally or physically bullied at school or excluded through silencing. Many Aboriginal youth and many youth who are poor are excluded through labeling of at-risk students or excluded through choice programs and advance placement options. Silencing in schools is countered through programs that provide voice to students in decision-making. Disenfranchised youth not only miss out on opportunities for choice of school programs, but also often have decisions made for them by social service agencies who are responsible for their care. These students' interests have gone unrepresented in schools, a situation that silences and legitimizes their marginalized status in schools.

Many schools have recognized the importance of, and have implemented, flexible timetables or assignment schedules and accessibility for students who arrive at various times throughout the school year. These practices are an important beginning to creating positive school experiences for youth who face difficult social circumstances in their lives. These practices need to be juxtaposed with the need for high academic expectations. This article points to the difficulties of finding balance between flexibility and academic rigor. Many schools in Alberta and throughout Canada are addressing questions related to meeting the needs of Aboriginal youth as evidenced in both public school and separate, segregated program initiatives. Successful practices for Aboriginal students are characterized by the provision of quality academic programming and represent places that demonstrate characteristics of warmth, caring, openness, belonging, and opportunities for students to have a voice in the school (Wotherspoon, 2002). These elements are crucial for Aboriginal youth who are disenfranchised and disconnected from families. Disenfranchisement may also offer an argument in favor of cultural embeddedness in schools, such as having Elders involved in school programs, as these youths' life experiences do not include supportive social contexts that ground their cultural identities.

Recommendation for Policy

This article highlights a lack of cohesion between Alberta government policies that are designed to address the problem of early school leaving, particularly where it relates to disenfranchised urban Aboriginal youth. Also demonstrated is a lack of unity between policy and practice as evidenced by the example of an alternative high school program designed to meet the educational needs of this population of students. The dynamics apparent in policy and practice are reflective of a larger discourse surrounding early school leaving in Alberta and throughout Canada. As reflected in academic literature, there is no magic

solution to address the varied needs of this population. Although these students experience similar social situations related to disenfranchisement, they are also unique individuals, which renders one-size-fits-all treatments unlikely to succeed. However, initiatives undertaken in practice can contribute to overall knowledge-building related to what works and what does not work. Knowledge grounded in practice needs to be shared, informing evidenced-based policymaking. For example, ICHS has developed unique critical literacy approaches developed out of understanding the needs of a disenfranchised student population. Research into programs that display experience working with disenfranchised urban youth leads to the crafting of policy that addresses social problems and builds on the social successes of Aboriginal people (White, 2003).

Greater linkages between policy planning, implementation, and evaluation would reveal the type of gaps apparent in this analysis. Policy evaluation research is needed that can disclose how policies may be meeting the needs of the target population. This article shows how the *FN Report* fails to identify the disenfranchised urban portion of the Aboriginal youth population. A missing element in the *Barriers Report* is the need to pay closer attention to the significant proportion of Aboriginal youth who are early school leavers. In the implementation phase, we see how the *Barriers Report* is recognized as more significant educational policy than is the *FN Report* in the schooling practice of this study. Corson (cited in Wotherspoon, 2002) emphasizes policy evaluation needs to "reveal when policies are missing the mark" (p. 19) leading to improvement in implementation.

What we learn from this research site confirms earlier research and highlights the importance of incorporating greater complexity into earlier understandings. Specific policies evolving from these understandings need to include knowledge gained through programs that are engaged with the youth who are the target of policy initiatives. An important policy goal is an enhanced understanding of how success is defined for disenfranchised urban youth in general, as well as specific attention to the portion of this population who are Aboriginal. Although academic success is certainly an important policy goal, an enriched understanding of success stemming from a holistic approach has potential benefit for improving completion rates, as well as having an effect on academic success. Research is needed into what specifically defines success for Aboriginal students generally and how these definitions may be different for urban Aboriginal youth who are disenfranchised. In addition, research is needed that considers the educational needs of urban Aboriginal youth who are disconnected from families and communities.

Policy related to student alienation needs to go beyond routine assessments of affective experiences in school. Education policy that considers the importance of inclusion in a safe school environment will be most effective. Safety is not simply the avoidance of physical and emotional violence. It is also important to discuss these issues in a critical framework. Pedagogical approaches that include students' experiences allow for a deeper psychological safety and a richer engagement with school. Voice in decision-making and recognition that programs of choice do not offer the same advantages for disenfranchised youth are important policy considerations. The inclusion of opportunities and

resources to engage with cultural practices needs to be provided for disenfranchised urban Aboriginal students.

Addressing the issue of labeling of disenfranchised urban youth in schools reflects a complex problem that defies simple solutions. Deemphasizing labels and emphasizing diagnosis is clearly not enough. Underlying the complexity of this issue is a paradox. Labels are needed in schools in order to define a particular problem and develop policy, yet these labels create tensions for educators in practice. Labels construct disenfranchised urban youth as deviant or outside the norm of expected behaviors in schools. Teachers have difficulty seeing beyond the labels in order to know these students as individuals, a necessary requirement of effective pedagogy. A policy goal of greater flexibility is also shown to be appropriate in this research.

However, enhanced education policy would recognize that there is a struggle between flexibility, fairness, and meeting the requirements of the Alberta curriculum and Student Finance. Teachers need to learn to live with uncertainty as they strive to find a balance that works with students' lived realities, yet encourages them to work to their own capacities. A policy goal for Aboriginal students of high expectations and recognition of learner achievement continues to be important. However, recognition of daily struggles related to street involvement affects ability to achieve academically and needs to be incorporated into educational policy for this population.

Conclusion

Although much recognition has been given in recent years to meeting the educational needs of disenfranchised urban youth, particularly those who are Aboriginal, improving high school completion rates for this segment of the population has shown little gain. Coordination between schooling initiatives and education policy would focus efforts in a coherent direction. The policies related to a disenfranchised urban population and the school of this study all highlight important understandings of youth, yet need to be informed by the other pieces. Alberta Learning's *Removing Barriers to High School Completion* and *First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* both demonstrate understanding of important components of educational need for disenfranchised urban students. Schools that enact these policies illuminate the complexity of the policy directions. Greater integration of policies, and of policy with practice, would lead to increased academic successes for Aboriginal youth who form the majority of disenfranchised early school leavers in Alberta.

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