



First Nation and Métis youth in Northern Alberta: Toward a more expansive view of transitions

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine issues related to transitions to further education and work for First Nation and Métis youth in a municipality in northern Alberta. Our case study supports the need, from a theoretical and practical perspective, for a broader view of youth transitions that attends to historical and institutional contexts, adopts an expanded view of learning-to-work, and includes the voices of First Nation and Métis youth. We argue that past and present government policies are implicated in the non-linear and extended transitions experienced by many Aboriginal youth, from high school to further education and work, resulting in a persistent opportunity gap. Effective education and training approaches, desired by First Nation and Métis people themselves, would seek to broaden horizons of action for Aboriginal youth, attend to the knowledge they already possess, and validate alternative ways of knowing. An expansive and critical approach to youth transitions moves the discussion from individual risk factors to the social, political, and economic tensions that impact Aboriginal youths' lives today.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
I. ABORIGINAL YOUTH IN CANADA, ALBERTA, AND WOOD BUFFALO	1
II. THE DISCOURSE OF YOUTH PATHWAYS	4
III. YOUTH TRANSITIONS IN WOOD BUFFALO: A CASE STUDY	6
A. BACKGROUND: INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT IN WOOD BUFFALO	6
B. METHODOLOGY	8
C. YOUTH TRANSITIONS IN CONTEXT	9
D. UNDERSTANDING YOUTH “CHOICES”	13
E. BOUNDED AGENCY	15
IV. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE	17
BIBLIOGRAPHY	20

Introduction

Transitional pathways that include post-secondary education are increasingly the norm for Canadian youth. An analysis of a longitudinal study suggests that the majority of youth in Canada who were initially surveyed at age 18 had pursued post-secondary education by age 24.¹ Similarly, an Alberta study of high school graduates found that more than three-quarters had enrolled in a post-secondary education program seven years after graduating from high school.² However, these studies also suggest that First Nation, Métis and Inuit youth are likely to leave the education system with much lower levels of educational attainment than non-Aboriginal youth. Aboriginal³ youth in Canada aged 15 to 24 are also likely to experience much higher levels of unemployment.⁴ The purpose of this paper is to look more closely at the pathways to further education and work for First Nation and Métis youth in a large municipality in north-eastern Alberta, including youth living off-reserve, and in so doing, to challenge common assumptions about youth transitions.

The next section (I) presents census data about Aboriginal youth in Canada. The section that follows (II) presents critiques of perspectives on youth transitions that appear to be influencing policy and proposes some alternative understandings. This literature then guides our analysis of data from our case study of pathways for youth in the municipality of Wood Buffalo in Alberta (III). The region has experienced rapid industrial development in recent years and is a key economic driver in the province. It is therefore an important context in which to explore education and training possibilities for Aboriginal youth. The paper concludes with a consideration of the policy and practical implications of our findings (IV).

I. Aboriginal Youth in Canada, Alberta, and Wood Buffalo

In recent years, there has been increased focus on Aboriginal work and learning matters by federal and provincial policy makers. The reasons for this vary and include the fact that the Aboriginal identity population in Canada⁵ is growing steadily and is much younger than the non-

¹ Darcy Hango and Patrice de Broucker, “*Education to Labour Market Pathways of Canadian Youth: Findings from the Youth in Transitions Survey.*” Prepared for Canadian Policy Research Networks (Ottawa: CPRN, 2007).

² Harvey Krahn & Julie Hudson, *Pathways of Alberta Youth Through the Post-secondary System into the Labour Market, 1996-2003.* Prepared for Canadian Policy Research Networks, (Ottawa: CPRN, 2006).

³ The term “Aboriginal” refers to First Nations, Métis and/or Inuit as defined in the *Canadian Constitution Act 1982*. There are very few Inuit in the municipality of Wood Buffalo, the site of our study, and therefore we refer only to First Nations and Métis in this paper.

⁴ For example, information presented by Ali Abdelrahman at a Statistics Canada conference in Edmonton called “Strength in Numbers” in March 2008 suggested that 23% of male Aboriginal youth in Canada were unemployed in 2006 compared to around 13% of non-Aboriginal males, and 20% of female Aboriginal youth were unemployed compared to 12% of non-Aboriginal females in 2006.

⁵ Four 2006 Census questions referred to Aboriginal status including questions about: Ethnic origin (including Aboriginal ancestries); Aboriginal identity; Registered or Treaty Indian; and Member of an Indian Band or First Nation (see: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/12-592-x/12-592-x2007001-eng.htm#a2>). Statistics Canada notes: “There is no single or ‘correct’ definition of Aboriginal populations. The choice of a definition depends on the purpose for which the information is to be used. Different definitions are used depending on the focus and requirements of the user. Each question will yield Aboriginal populations with different counts and characteristics.” The question of whether respondents are Treaty or Registered Indians as defined by the Indian Act is important because the Indian Act governs status and membership rights; for example, Indian “status” can be lost through marriage. On the other hand, part of the growth in the Métis population in recent years can be attributed to “ethnic mobility,” an increase in



Aboriginal population—in 2001, half of the former was under the age of 25 compared to just over one-third of the latter.⁶ Educational attainment for Aboriginal groups as identified by the census is lower than for the overall population; but it is important to break this down by group and location.

For example, when we consider individuals aged 25 to 34 with a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree (including trade certification), the percentage of First Nation members living on reserve with post-secondary certification was around 28%, followed by First Nation members living off- reserve (44%), Métis (50%) and the non-Aboriginal population (67%).⁷ Census data from 2006 for 20 to 24 year olds also suggest that 40.3% of the Aboriginal identity population in Canada, as compared to 12.5% of the non-Aboriginal identity population, had no certificate, diploma or degree. Hango and de Broucker⁸ add that Aboriginal youth aged 22 to 24 living off reserve were almost twice as likely as non-Aboriginal youth to have dropped out of high school and were twice as likely to be “second chancers” (those who had dropped out and returned for high school or post-secondary education before entering the labour force).⁹ Further, while the unemployment rate for the non-Aboriginal population in Alberta in 2006 was 3.1%, the rate for those who identify as First Nation was 17.5%, for Inuit 8% and for Métis, 5.9%.¹⁰ Thus, in Canada overall, educational attainment rates are lower for Aboriginal people and unemployment rates are higher.

In Alberta, the Aboriginal identity population grew 20% between 2001 and 2006.¹¹ The proportion of Aboriginal people aged 25 to 34 years with a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree was 41.6% compared to 63.3% for the non-Aboriginal identity population. But again, education varies by group and location (see Table 1). The unemployment rate for the non-Aboriginal identity population aged 20 to 24 years in Alberta in 2006 was 7.1% while the rate for those who identify as First Nation was 15.5%, 10.9% for Métis, and 9.4% for Inuit.¹² As in Canada overall, educational attainment for Aboriginal peoples lags behind their non-Aboriginal counterparts and unemployment rates are higher.

the number of people self-identifying as Métis. It is important to note, therefore, that Aboriginal “identity” is not fixed and that there has been inconsistent reporting over time regarding Aboriginal identity.

⁶ Jeanetter Steffler, “Aboriginal Peoples: A Young Population for Years to Come.” *Horizons*, 10(1)(2008), 13-20. (Ottawa: Public Works and Government Services Canada).

⁷ Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 97-560-XCB2006028 (Ottawa, 2006a). Accessed online: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca>.

⁸ Hango & de Broucker, *Education to Labour Market Pathways of Canadian Youth*.

⁹ Hango & de Broucker, *Education to Labour Market Pathways of Canadian Youth*.

¹⁰ This information was presented by Ali Abdelrahman at a Statistics Canada conference in Edmonton called “Strength in Numbers” in March 2008.

¹¹ This information was presented by Doug Norris at a Statistics Canada conference in Edmonton called “Strength in Numbers” in March 2008. Factors identified by Statistics Canada that account for the rapid increase in the Aboriginal identity population are varied and can include data limitations and reporting factors such as incomplete enumeration, demographic factors, and people changing their affiliation from non-Aboriginal to Aboriginal from one census to another. (See: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/12-592-x/12-592-x2007001-eng.htm>).

¹² Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 97-559-XCB2006008 (Ottawa, 2006b) Accessed online: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca>.

Table 1: 20 to 24 year olds without a high school diploma, 2006 Census, Alberta

First Nations living on reserve	67 %
First Nations living off-reserve	46 %
Métis	29 %
Non-Aboriginal	16 %

In the municipality of Wood Buffalo in northern Alberta, children and youth 24 years or under made up 44% of the Aboriginal population. The educational attainment of the Aboriginal identity population aged 25 to 34 is higher in Wood Buffalo than in Alberta overall — only 22.3% in Wood Buffalo, as compared with 33.3% in Alberta, had no certificate, diploma, or degree in 2006 (see Table 2).

However, the unemployment rate for Aboriginal people in 2006 was 7.8% compared to 2.5% for non-Aboriginal people. These figures suggest that Aboriginal youth in Wood Buffalo are doing better in terms of educational attainment and employment than in the rest of Alberta and Canada, but are not doing as well as the non-Aboriginal population.

Table 2: Educational Attainment, Aboriginal Identity Population Aged 25 to 34 in Wood Buffalo and Alberta, 2006

	Wood Buffalo			Alberta		
	% of Total	Male	Female	% of Total	Male	Female
No certificate, diploma, or degree	22.3	15.8	28.4	33.3	35.5	31.3
High school certificate or equivalent	32	32.7	31.6	25	25.8	24.3
Apprenticeship or trades certificate	17.8	22.8	11.6	12.4	16.5	8.4
College, CEGEP, or other non-university certificate or diploma	20.8	22.8	20	19.6	15	24
University certificate or diploma below bachelor level	1	2	0	2.9	2	3.8
University certificate or degree	6.1	4	8.4	6.7	5.1	8.2

Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada (2008).

Moreover, despite several decades of fast-paced industrial development in the region, a recent Community Well-Being (CWB) Index developed by the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) showed that the well-being of First Nation communities in Wood Buffalo in 2001¹³ was average.

¹³ First Nations Community Well-Being in Canada, The Community Well-Being Index (CWB), 2001. CWB in this case takes into account various indicators of socio-economic well-being, including education, income, housing, and labour force activity. Accessed November 16, 2009 at <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20071122102531/> http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/ra/cwb/index_e.html

II. The Discourse of Youth Pathways

The current context requires higher levels of human capital for youth to navigate the pathways to adulthood, a transition that already comes with varying degrees of uncertainty and risk. While this is true for all youth, the poor socio-economic conditions in which many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth live create substantial additional challenges.¹⁴

A metaphor of “linear youth pathways from school to work” originated in major OECD reports¹⁵ on youth policy published in the 1980s. These reports assumed that young adults follow a developmental process involving a linear and sequential movement toward their goals. The same perceptions are evident in Canada as policy-makers seek “ways to get more young people through the high school more quickly and efficiently.”¹⁶ However, recent empirical work has acknowledged that the normative path of finishing school, starting a full time job, marrying, and then starting a family has become far less common in recent decades.¹⁷ A study of over 1,000 Alberta high school students who graduated in 1996, and were contacted again in 2003, found that a large minority had deviated from a high school to university pathway.¹⁸ A quarter returned for a second year of grade 12, 19% of those going to post-secondary education (PSE) transferred between institutions, 20% changed their program of study, and 14% dropped out of a program. Some academics suggest that transition processes have become more uncertain, fragmented, and individualized.¹⁹

Others argue that the idea of a linear pathway was only ever applicable to a minority of young people (e.g., middle class white males in the 1950s) and therefore researchers need to explore the conditions under which different groups of young people are living and the meanings they attach to life events.²⁰ For example, Looker and Dwyer²¹ report findings from longitudinal studies of youth in Canada and Australia which suggest that the transition experiences of rural youth are quite different from those of urban youth and do not conform to the “linear pathway” metaphor. For these youth, the pursuit of higher education usually has a greater impact on family relationships and can carry financial and personal burdens that have an impact on their studies. Therefore, the educational decisions of rural youth are not made in isolation from other decisions about work, marriage, parenting, and geographical mobility.

Raffe²² summarizes three main criticisms of the pathways metaphor that has dominated educational policy discourse in several OECD countries in recent years: 1) the idea of linearity

¹⁴ Thomas Townsend & Michael Wernick, “Hope or Heartbreak: Aboriginal Youth and Canada’s Future.” *Horizons*, 10(1)(2008), 4.

¹⁵ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1983-84, cited in Looker and Dwyer, 1998.

¹⁶ Krahn & Hudson, Pathways of Alberta Youth Through the Post-secondary System into the Labour Market, 60.

¹⁷ Hango & de Broucker, Education to Labour Market Pathways of Canadian Youth.

¹⁸ Krahn & Hudson, *Pathways of Alberta Youth Through the Post-secondary System into the Labour Market*.

¹⁹ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. (Sage: London, 1992).

²⁰ Peter Dwyer & Johanna Wyn, *Youth, Education and Risk*. (London: Routledge/Falmer, 2001).

²¹ E. Dianne Looker & Peter Dwyer, Educational and Negotiated Reality: Complexities Facing Rural Youth in the 1990s. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1(1)(1998), 5-22.

²² David Raffe, “Pathways Linking Education & Work: A Review of Concepts, Research, and Policy Debates.” *Journal of Youth Studies*, 6(1)(2004), 3-19.



ignores the complexity of transitions (e.g., many students combine work and study, many cycle between living on their own and in their parental home), 2) in privileging the transition to paid work, pathways discourse ignores other important transitions experienced by young people, and 3) the individualism of pathways discourse ignores social structures and mistakenly assumes that pathways are equally accessible to all young people. Instead, structural factors such as class and gender as well as individual reflexive decision-making play a role in the school-to-work transition process.²³

We suggest that these critiques are applicable to discussions about First Nation and Métis youth pathways in the municipality of Wood Buffalo. We therefore argue for a more expansive view of transitions that attends to:

- the historical and institutional context;
- a broader view of transitions; and
- an analysis of agency and structures that includes the voices of youth.

Placing youth transitions in an historical context means not only looking at differences across generational cohorts but also exploring how historical relations have affected different groups. Pathways for First Nation, Métis and Inuit youth in Canada have been shaped by a long history of colonization and, related to this, racialization.²⁴ Further, economic and institutional differences between and within countries affect youth transitions.²⁵ For example, Germany's dual system of vocational education and training involves about two-thirds of each school-leaving cohort while Canada's high school apprenticeship programs involve only a fraction of that.²⁶ At the same time, one third of employed 25 to 29 year olds with a PSE diploma or degree in Canada and the U.S. have low-skill jobs, the highest among OECD countries.²⁷

A broader view of transitions is also needed. For example, Dwyer and Wyn²⁸ write that a "narrow preoccupation with just the two dimensions of study and work in the lives of young people leaves out so much of what really counts in their lives and gives a false picture of the choices they are making and the reasons underlying them." Similarly, Shildrick and

²³ Phillip Brown, "The Opportunity Trap." In Hugh Lauder, Phillip Brown, Jo-Anne Dillabough, and A. H. Halsey (eds.), *Education, Globalization and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 381-397; Wolfgang Lehmann, 'For Some Reason, I get a Little Scared': Structure, Agency, and Risk in School-work Transitions. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 7(4)(2004), 379-396; Peter Rudd & Karen Evans, "Structure and Agency in Youth Transitions: Student Experiences of Vocational Further Education." *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1(1)(1998), 39-62.

²⁴ Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, "Blood Borders: Being Indian and Belonging." In Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, & Angela McRobbie (eds.), *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall* (London: Verso, 2000), 388-394.

²⁵ Richard Breen, "Explaining Cross-National Variation in Youth Unemployment: Market and Institutional Factors." *European Sociological Review*, 21(2)(2005) 125-134; Walter Heinz & Alison Taylor, "Learning and Work Transition Policies in a Comparative Perspective: Canada and Germany." In Kenneth Leithwood, David Livingstone, Alistair Cumming, Nina Bascia, & Amanda Datnow (eds.), *International Handbook of Educational Policy, Volume 2* (New York: Kluwer, 2005), 847-864; Christian Brzinsky-Fay, "Lost in Transition? Labour Market Entry Sequences of School Leavers in Europe." *European Sociological Review*, 23(4)(2007), 409-422.

²⁶ Heinz & Taylor, "Learning and Work Transition Policies in a Comparative Perspective."

²⁷ Ron Saunders, *Pathways for Youth to the Labour Market: A Synthesis Report*. Prepared for Canadian Policy Research Networks, (Ottawa:CPRN, 2008).

²⁸ Dwyer & Wyn, *Youth, Education and Risk*, 31.

MacDonald²⁹ argue for a “long and broad” view of transitions, situated within a panorama of socio-economic change.

Most writers acknowledge the importance of structures and agency in youth transitions. Academics have described this interrelationship in terms of “bounded agency”³⁰ or “structured individualization.”³¹ These perspectives see youth trajectories as determined by the intersection of individual and institutional actions.³² Outcomes are seen as influenced by individual biography, interests and attributes, and family relationships as they intersect with organizational settings, labour markets, and national policies.³³

In our view, it is important for researchers to understand how youth transitions are affected by history, biography, social differences, local labour markets, and institutional arrangements.

III. Youth Transitions in Wood Buffalo: A Case Study

These points arising from the critical literature also emerged in the results of our case study of the transitions of First Nations and Métis youth in the municipality of Wood Buffalo in Northern Alberta.

A. Background: Industrial Development in Wood Buffalo

In the early 1970s, two large corporations were active in oil sands development in Wood Buffalo—Syncrude and Suncor.³⁴ By 2006, more than a dozen multinational corporations³⁵ were involved and numerous joint ventures had been established. The provincial government notes that expansion of the oil sands industry has been a major driver of economic activity in Alberta—in 2006, these projects accounted for 62% of the value of all major projects and oil sands development budgets for the energy sector totalled \$8.8 billion (CDN).³⁶

First Nation and Métis groups make up 6,465 or 12.3% of the population in Wood Buffalo (compared to 5.8% in Alberta overall) according to the 2006 Census.³⁷ This is the highest proportion of Aboriginal people in any Census Metropolitan Area/Census Area in the province,

²⁹ Tracy Shildrick & Robert MacDonald, “Biographies of Exclusion: Poor Work and Poor Transitions.” *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 25(5)(2007), 589-604.

³⁰ Karen Evans, “Taking Control of Their Lives? Agency in Young Adult Transitions in England and the New Germany.” *Journal of Youth Studies*, 5(3)(2002), 245-269.

³¹ Peter Rudd & Karen Evans, “Structure and Agency in Youth Transitions,” 39-62.

³² Alan Kerckhoff, “Building Conceptual and Empirical Bridges Between Studies of Educational and Labor Force Careers.” In Alan C. Kerckhoff (ed.), *Generating Social Stratification: Towards a New Research Agenda*. (Boulder: Westview, 1996), 37. See also, Du Bois-Reymond, Manuela. “‘I Don’t Want to Commit Myself Yet’: Young People’s Life Concepts.” *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1, no 1 (1998): 63-78.

³³ Sarah Vickerstaff, “Apprenticeship in the ‘Golden Age’: Were Youth Transitions Really Smooth and Unproblematic Back Then?” *Work, Employment and Society*, 17(2)(2003), 269-287.

³⁴ Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry. *Oil Sands Industry Update* (Edmonton, December 2006).

³⁵ Besides Syncrude and Suncor, key players include Shell, Imperial Oil, Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Encana, Chevron, Synenco Energy, OPTI, and Nexen.

³⁶ Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry. *Oil Sands Industry Update*, 1.

³⁷ Statistics Canada, Wood Buffalo, Alberta (Table). 2006 Community Profiles. 2006 Census. Statistics Canada. Catalogue no. 92-591-XWE. (Ottawa, 2007). Released March 13, 2007. Accessed online:

<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/profiles/community/Index.cfm>? Accessed October 8, 2008.

and includes those living in the city of Fort McMurray, in five First Nation communities represented by the Athabasca Tribal Council, and in several Métis communities many of which are located near First Nation reserves. Owing to the massive expansion of the oil sands, the population in Fort McMurray doubled between 1999 and 2007.³⁸ This includes a “shadow population” of temporary residents employed in surrounding construction camps—project accommodations grew from 3,568 in 1999 to 18,572 in 2007.³⁹

Employment by occupation in the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo is noticeably different from Alberta overall.⁴⁰ The top three occupational categories based on the number of workers involved were the same for both the municipality and province—that is, “trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations,” “sales and service,” and “business, finance and administration.” But while the highest proportion of workers in Wood Buffalo is involved in trades (32.8%), the highest proportion in Alberta was in “sales and service” jobs (22.7%). The proportion of the Aboriginal labour force employed in the trades-related occupational category in Wood Buffalo was close to 40% compared to just over one-quarter in Alberta overall. Trades-related occupations are therefore predominant in Wood Buffalo, especially for those who identify as Aboriginal. These occupations are also very gendered—of those involved in trades-related occupations in Wood Buffalo, 90% were male; in Alberta overall, 92% were male.

The occupational categories in Wood Buffalo that ranked second and third in terms of proportions of the Aboriginal labour force involved were “sales and service occupations” (22.6%) and “business, finance and administrative occupations” (11.2%) - occupations that tend to be female-dominated.⁴¹ In Wood Buffalo, two-thirds of “sales and service” workers and close to 80% of business, finance and administrative workers were female.

Rapid industrial growth has resulted in social, cultural, economic and environmental stressors that affect all people living in Wood Buffalo. There is a shortage of affordable housing, a lack of day care facilities, an increasing rate of homelessness, reduced access to medical care, and an increase in illicit drug use.⁴² There is also high employee turnover in the public sector because salaries are not commensurate with the high cost of living. The average rent was double that for the rest of Alberta in 2006, while the median family income was approximately 66% higher.⁴³ Gender differences in earnings are also more pronounced in Wood Buffalo with women earning about one-third of what men earned in 2005 (compared to 57% in the rest of Alberta) (ibid.).

³⁸ Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Municipal Census, 2007 (Wood Buffalo, 2007). Accessed November 5, 2008 at: http://woodbuffalo.ab.ca/business/demographics/pdf/2007_Census_RMWB.pdf

³⁹ A boundary change noted in the 2006 census makes it difficult to determine the precise population growth.

⁴⁰ Statistics Canada, Community Profiles, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. (Ottawa, 2006c). Accessed online: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca>.

⁴¹ Statistics Canada, Community Profiles, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. (Ottawa, 2006c). Accessed online: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca>.

⁴² Alberta Government, *Investing in Our Future: Responding to the Rapid Growth of Oil Sands Development*. (Edmonton: Queen’s Printer, 2006); Gerald Archibald, Fort McMurray Quality of Life and Social Indicator Review. Submission in support of intervention of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. Application number: 1398411. Shell (Albian Sands)-Muskeg River Mine Expansion Project, 2006.

⁴³ Statistics Canada, Wood Buffalo, Alberta (Table). 2006 Community Profiles. 2006 Census. Statistics Canada. Catalogue no. 92-591-XWE. (Ottawa, Released March 13, 2007. Accessed online: <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/profiles/community/Index.cfm>? Accessed October 8, 2008.

B. Methodology

We began this case study by talking with representatives of the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC) and Métis Local 1935 in Fort McMurray about our research interests.⁴⁴ These discussions informed our data collection activities, which involved visits to several communities in the municipality of Wood Buffalo, including the city of Fort McMurray, each of the five First Nations, and several Métis communities in the municipality.⁴⁵ Recruitment of participants was based primarily on ensuring: geographical representation (the City of Fort McMurray and each of the surrounding communities); inclusion of First Nations and Métis youth enrolled in different levels and kinds of education (including e-learning); and representation of a variety of education and training providers.

Sixty-five semi-structured interviews and focus groups involving 91 individuals were conducted between March and October of 2008. 47 participants were recruited because of their organizational affiliations, including high school and college educators; representatives of government, First Nation and Métis organizations; individuals working in community groups and agencies; and staff from large corporations. Table 3 provides a breakdown of these participants by organizational affiliation. Another 48 interview participants were First Nation and Métis youth aged 15 to 30 years, 28 of whom were living off-reserve.⁴⁶ Table 4 provides a breakdown of these participants by educational status. Most interviews were audio-taped and transcribed and pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Table 3: Non-youth interview participants by organization

Organizational affiliation	Number of participants
College staff	7
High school staff (provincial schools)	6
High school staff (band-operated education)	2
First Nation and Métis organization staff	14
Government	4
Business	4
Community	6
Total	43

⁴⁴ We also communicated with the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC) at various times throughout the research. In December 2008, we met with both ATC and the Métis local to discuss our findings.

⁴⁵ The five First Nations that comprise the ATC are: Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Chipewyan Prairie First Nation, Fort McKay First Nation, Fort McMurray 468 First Nation, and Mikisew Cree First Nation. There are also long established Métis communities in Fort McKay, Fort Chipewyan, Anzac and Conklin.

⁴⁶ We include a wide age range in the category of youth partly because, during the fieldwork, it was apparent that a number of older students were enrolling in upgrading that would lead to a high school diploma. While we tried to adhere to this age range, we also interviewed one student who was 32 years old and enrolled in upgrading. The notion of linear transitions from a stage called “youth” to a stage called “adulthood” has been challenged by academic writers and warrants closer scrutiny in this context also.

Table 4: First Nation and Métis youth interview participants by educational status

Educational status	Number of participants
College student – learning centres	10
College student – City of Fort McMurray	1
High school student – City of Fort McMurray	18
High school student – other provincial school	6
High school student – band operated school	9
Youth not in school	3
College graduate	1
Total	48

A limitation of the data relates to the lack of representation of youth in the sample who are neither in school nor employed. However, many of the older youth we interviewed had dropped out of high school and then returned to college for upgrading and they did speak about reasons for early school leaving. We also had an underrepresentation of youth currently involved in government-sponsored training programs; therefore, we make reference to this group in reference to what was shared about them by service providers.

Data analysis was iterative (occurring as data was collected), influencing the sort of information we sought from study participants.⁴⁷ For example, early on we realized that upgrading was a common experience among First Nation and Métis youth in Wood Buffalo so we asked not only youth but also college instructors about this phenomenon. With respect to analysis of interviews overall, this involved two of the authors reading over the transcripts in order to select keywords and themes (coding), reflecting on these themes in relation to current theorizing, and assembling lists of quotes from participants that corresponded to the different themes. For the most part, themes were related to the possibilities and constraints involved in different stages of youth pathways—elementary and secondary education, college upgrading, post-secondary education and training, and employment.

C. Youth transitions in context

The legacy of colonial relations

[At the time of initial contact] Aboriginal peoples were partners in the colonialists' economic endeavours, trading fish, furs and material goods, and reaping trade benefits from pursuing their traditional way of life However... government policy reflected an increasing trend towards assimilation, disempowerment and enfranchisement of Aboriginal peoples from approximately the mid 1700s through to 1970.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Alan Bryman, James Teevan & Edward Bell, *Social Research Methods*. Second Canadian Edition. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴⁸ Michelle Mann, Capitalism and the Dis-empowerment of Canadian Aboriginal peoples. In Robert Anderson and Robert Bone (eds), *Natural Resources and Aboriginal People in Canada: Readings, Cases and Commentary* (Concord: Captus Press, 2003), 18.

A legacy of colonization and government oppression – for example, through a policy of residential schooling – continues to influence the lives of First Nation, Métis and Inuit peoples in Canada today. Data from the Aboriginal Peoples Survey found that for First Nations children living off-reserve, having parents who attended residential schools was associated with lower success at school.⁴⁹ An interview participant, resident in Fort Chipewyan, refers to the impact of residential schooling in his community as follows:

From 1920 to 1969 the church operated [a residential school] here under federal policy.... Fast forward to 1973 when the mission was closed and people were forced to raise their own children then for the first time in fifty years... there were no family models to build on. Kids had grown up in dormitories, bullied by the older kids and mistreated and underfed and everything. ... Then in the late 60s, they started sending kids to Edmonton and places like that... people now in their late 50s were so disillusioned by that experience—to spend 10 years here in the school and then be shipped off to the city to find that you're five grades behind. (June, 2008)

Other participants pointed to the intergenerational impact of residential schooling on parenting practices and as a contributor to health and wellness issues, such as addiction, in communities. This history is an important context for thinking about contemporary issues concerning First Nation (and also to some extent, Métis) work and learning realities in the twenty-first century.

Changes in way of life

Over the last few decades, a shift in government-Aboriginal relations has brought new changes to the lives of First Nation and Métis people in northern Alberta communities, as an economic development agenda increasingly takes the place of what government sees as “welfare colonialism.” It is interesting to note that this view of contemporary relations is very one-sided since First Nation groups, for instance, understand their relationship with government as nation-to-nation, premised upon the existence of historic treaties and other legislative agreements, including the Proclamation Act of 1763.

A Métis participant in the study recounts the impact of increasing industrial development over her lifetime:

The road came in [to Conklin], I think it was in the late 80s. When we first lived here, we didn't have electricity or heating, ...we had to use wood for heating....a lot of our traditional ways are not there anymore. Harder to go, even to pick berries, to go find a spot for berry picking. Where we used to pick, there's either a big pile of gravel or a cut line, you know? ... I remember when I was growing up, my grandfather was a real trapper; he'd go out and for a month he'd stay out on his trap line and he'd come back with lots of fur. Then he'd go sell his fur and bring back loads of groceries. Now, I don't think a person can survive on trapping. The land is too disturbed. The animals are not around as much as they used to be....We're surrounded by industry ... [One company's] development is on my husband's trap line. (Conklin Métis, May 2008)

This excerpt points to the tensions felt by many Aboriginal people about the impact of economic development on the environment, between dependence on a boom and bust resource economy and the desire for a more sustainable way of life. As a result of industrial development in their traditional homelands, many First Nation and Métis families (including this participant's own

⁴⁹ Evelyne Bougie, *Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2006: School experiences of off-reserve First Nations Children Aged 6 to 14*. (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, 2009).

children) have left the community to pursue opportunities for education and work. While work is an important activity with respect to material well-being, what is often ignored is the level of social and cultural disruption that occurs as result of trying to access employment opportunities. Even in the context of thinking about how First Nation and Métis individuals are prepared to take up industry-related jobs in the region, our research suggests that education and training are not meeting the needs of communities. Despite a discourse of Aboriginal self-government in Canada, there is only one band-operated school in the municipality—Dene High School in Janvier—with a very small enrolment. The vast majority of First Nation and Métis youth living outside of the City of Fort McMurray attend provincial schools operated by Northlands School Division. Three of five First Nation and Métis communities do not have access to high schools⁵⁰ in their immediate vicinity.

Generally, interview participants expressed concern about the quality of education available in rural areas. For example, a parent from Chipewyan Prairie First Nation felt compelled to send her 15 year old daughter to live in Fort McMurray for high school because of the poor reputation of the band-operated school. However, she explains that the move has been very difficult:

[My daughter] has struggled because of the culture shock, going to town, big city, and staying with someone else, and not the support. And like even with me, she phones me for help at night. I help her but it's not the same as mum being there. (June 2008)

Although this mother ensured that her daughter was enrolled in academic stream courses, she notes that “the math was difficult for her” and little help was provided.

Challenging transitions from rural to urban schools

The transition from small rural schools (very often with enrolments of less than 120 students) to large high schools in Fort McMurray (where enrolments can exceed 1,000 students) proves very difficult for many First Nation and Métis students. Coupled with the change in size of school is the change in student make-up. Students go from being among an Aboriginal majority in the home community to being a minority in a largely non-Aboriginal student population. In many cases, the move creates a loss (or absence) of family and other community and/or support networks.

⁵⁰ In Anzac (52 km southeast of Fort McMurray), Métis and Fort McMurray First Nation students attend Anzac Community School until grade 6 (enrolment of 108) and then get bused to Fort McMurray for junior high and high school. In Janvier (102 km southeast of Fort McMurray), students from Chipewyan Prairie First Nation attend Father R. Perin Catholic school (enrolment of 80) and then go to either the Dene High School or are boarded at homes in Fort McMurray while they attend high school. In Conklin (166 km southeast of Fort McMurray) Métis students attend Conklin Community School until grade 9 (enrolment of 31) and then are boarded in Fort McMurray while they attend high school. In Fort McKay (34 km north of Fort McMurray), Métis and First Nation students attend Fort McKay School (enrolment of 81) up to grade 8 and then either enrol in an e-learning program for high school students (located on reserve) or are bused to Fort McMurray to attend one of the city's high schools. Finally, in Fort Chipewyan (271 km north of Fort McMurray), Métis students and those from the two First Nations (Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and Mikisew Cree First Nation) usually attend Athabasca Delta Community School from grades 1 to 12 (enrolment of 227). However, because of perceptions about the quality of education and limited offerings possible in this K to 12 school (enrolment of approximately 225), many students stay with family or are boarded at homes in Fort McMurray to attend high school.

More than one interview participant observed students from First Nation and Métis communities to be usually two or three years behind in academic learning at the time of transfer from their home community to a high school in Fort McMurray, and therefore are subsequently streamed into courses for non-college bound students. As a result of these various challenges, a large proportion of First Nation and/or Métis students drop out without completing high school.

The demand to upgrade

A high school diploma or equivalent has currency in northern Alberta because it is the minimum employment entry requirement established by the large oil companies, and is a requirement for many technical and trades programs. Providing upgrading for students to complete their high school diploma or equivalent, or to gain prerequisites for further education has therefore become an important activity for Keyano, the local college. After age eighteen, Albertans must pay for upgrading their education. In addition to programs at its main campus in the City of Fort McMurray, Keyano College offers upgrading programs at five “learning centres” located in First Nation and Métis communities. Interestingly, of the 1,324 Aboriginal students enrolled at Keyano College between 2005 and 2008, 40% were enrolled in upgrading programs. Almost two-thirds of them were female, perhaps because of the more limited work opportunities for young women without a high school diploma (Personal communication, Keyano College staff, April 2008). Just over one quarter of students were sponsored by a First Nation band and 42% paid for their own education.

Resources for education and training

Student funding access and levels are seen by interview participants as a challenge, particularly for those First Nation and Métis youth who are single parents and find it difficult to find affordable childcare. First Nation youth are eligible to apply to the federal government’s Post Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), although funding for upgrading is very limited from this source. Métis youth have even less access to student funding since they are not eligible for funding under the mandate of the PSSSP.

Because of concerns about labour shortage, industry in Wood Buffalo plays a significant role in education and training. For example, corporations sponsor two short-term college programs that target Aboriginal students—an Entrepreneurship Program and an Environmental Monitoring Program (both available through Keyano College). Corporations also hire Stakeholder Relations staff to work with First Nation and Métis communities to identify and administer training programs that meet their workforce needs.

Understanding this context is critical to understanding education and work outcomes for First Nation and Métis youth living in Wood Buffalo. For example, the desire to achieve a high school diploma often means trade-offs—leaving their community and support networks. Once in “town” schools, many find themselves behind their peers academically, marginalized socially, and struggling economically. Many features of this context are shared with other Aboriginal contexts in Alberta with respect to the challenges youth encounter in accessing quality K-12 and post-secondary education, training, and work in their communities. However, other features are unique to northern resource communities, for instance, the involvement of transnational corporations in education and training in the region.

D. Understanding youth “choices”

As noted, transitions to further education and work are privileged in policy research over other transitions experienced by youth into adulthood. For example, a number of writers have reported that teenage pregnancy is much more common amongst Aboriginal youth than non-Aboriginal youth with important implications for their “pathways.”⁵¹ However, sensitivity to the context in which these choices are made is critical to a more complete understanding.

Teenage parenthood

A significant number of the female youth we spoke to in Wood Buffalo had had children at a young age and we met many of them as they were later trying to complete high school through upgrading. While teenage motherhood has been associated with academic under-achievement, reduced employability, single parenthood and dependence on income assistance,⁵² the young mothers we spoke to make clear that social and economic barriers are key to thinking about the phenomena of young motherhood and its challenges. As noted above, for a number of youth (male and female), leaving their communities to attend school “in town” is a very difficult transition. One young woman from Conklin comments that she was two academic grades behind when she moved to a school in the city of Fort McMurray. Another adds that everybody that moved to attend school in the city “dropped out, everybody that I know. And some of them have kids.” Forming relationships and/or having children can thus be viewed as choices that are at least partially influenced by an intolerable school situation. Such decisions may also be seen as an assertion of adult identity and/or an alternative pathway to engage or re-engage family/community support networks.

Lack of support for young parents

Despite the reality of many young parents, formalized childcare supports in First Nation and Métis communities, as in the city of Fort McMurray, are lacking. For example, it is often very difficult for young mothers to access educational funding or affordable daycare required to return to school. Even if a mother was able to complete her high school diploma, equivalent, or higher level of post-secondary education, available employment with industry generally involves labour, shift work, long hours and travel to plant sites. Without family support or daycare arrangements that match work schedules, it is impossible to take this on. A focus on such institutional deficits (e.g., the lack of formalized daycare and failure of employers to accommodate family life) and on factors that may lead to early parenthood (e.g., being “pushed out” of school, lacking other meaningful options) helps us to better understand First Nation and Métis youth “choices” and outcomes.

Challenging policy assumptions

The assumption that success for youth requires completing formal education beyond high school also contrasts with the experiences of many male youth in these First Nation and Métis communities. For example, Brian, a Métis youth from Conklin, was getting along quite well without a high school education. He did not see school as important for what he wanted in life,

⁵¹ Kerry Benjoe. “Grim Findings in Children’s Survey.” *The Leader-Post* (Regina) (2008, October 30), A3; Eric Guimond & Norbert Robitaille, “When Teenage Girls Have Children: Trends and Consequences.” *Horizons*, 10(1)(2008), 49-51.

⁵² Guimond & Robitaille, “When Teenage Girls Have Children,” 49-51.

nor was it his preferred context for learning.⁵³ Brian dropped out of school in grade 10 and began working as a labourer. His father had “only a grade 3 or 4 education,” working “where he can” as a general labourer. At age 27, Brian lived with his grandmother, without dependents of his own. He had worked as a slasher⁵⁴ for over ten years for various contractors and had some experience as a welder’s helper and in pipe fitting. When asked if he was satisfied with his work, he replied:

Yes, because you’re out in the bush, you see the wildlife and it’s outdoors. I like the outdoors, no matter rain, shine, snow, it doesn’t matter. And it’s good money, like I was making 27 bucks an hour. And 16 and 18 hour days, and then you get time and a half. (June 2008)

Brian also likes the fact that he can work when he wants. He notes that he grew up learning to trap and still likes to hunt and fish. He says, “there’s still a few of us around that like to keep up our heritage, trapping and keep the language.” The meaning and priority Brian attached to paid work and ‘permanent’ employment was therefore quite different from that assumed by policy-makers.⁵⁵ Further, his decisions about work were clearly made in relation to other decisions about family (helping his grandmother) and lifestyle.⁵⁶

The credential gap

However, Brian is also aware that there are “guys with education who have better jobs out in the field.” He has thought about upgrading as a way to ensure that he has more stable work in the future. But he left school in the first place because he liked working outside rather than being in school and recognizes that paper work is still a “stumbling block” for him. At the same time, Brian referred to some of his “un-credentialed” knowledge as follows:

One of the things I was always into was mechanics, and I rebuilt engines before and transmissions, so I’ve got a bit of knowledge but I’d like to increase it, like take it further.

Similarly, he spoke about his experience in pipe fitting (without a trade certification):

We were doing wellheads, you just look at the wellhead and you just picture it in your mind, how it’s gonna go together, then you just measure out your pipes, cut them, thread them, get all our pieces, it’s pretty easy, straightforward.

Such informal knowledge goes unrecognized in education and training contexts. Brian would need to take three or more years of upgrading to complete his high school diploma and then find an employer willing to apprentice him for another three or four years. Therefore, although he recognizes the disparity in earnings and benefits between the core and contract workforce, between the more highly educated and those with high school or less, between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal workers, the cost of the long road to credentials is too high. Brian’s story, echoed in stories of other community members and service providers, helps us to not only better

⁵³ Donna Dehyle, “Constructing Failure and Maintaining Cultural Identity: Navajo and Ute School Leavers.” *Journal of American Indian Education* (1992). Accessed online October 28 at: <http://jaie.asu.edu/v31/V31S2con.htm>.

⁵⁴ Slashing involves cutting trees and clearing the bush for industry during the construction phase of oil field operations.

⁵⁵ Dwyer & Wyn, *Youth, Education and Risk*.

⁵⁶ Looker & Dwyer, *Educational and Negotiated Reality*.

understand youth choices, but also to see where policies are failing. For example, experienced workers like Brian may be deemed to be under-qualified in terms of formal credentials for jobs they can perform adequately.⁵⁷ Such “un-credentialed” workers may have a wealth of knowledge that could be more effectively utilized if educational institutions and employers engaged in prior learning assessment recognition (PLAR) and other thinking that questions taken-for-granted assumptions about the relationships between workers’ knowledge, education and training programs, and job, employer or institutional requirements.

E. Bounded agency

Our interview data suggest that the worlds of First Nation and Métis youth in Wood Buffalo are circumscribed by their class, gender and race locations and by the parameters of institutions of which they are a part.⁵⁸ For example, youths’ career goals tended to reflect existing gender divisions in the labour market with more young women aspiring to work in “caring” professions while young men were interested in industrial trades-related work. Parents’ education and work experiences also impacted those of youth, as Brian’s story suggests. But institutions like schools also play an apparent role in shaping aspirations.

Streaming

For example, enrolments by course stream in Fort McMurray schools indicate that First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) high school students are significantly overrepresented in tracks that do not lead to post-secondary education. A First Nation educator comments:

With every Aboriginal student that goes into Fort McMurray [schools], I think the individual teachers and administration see them as a potential candidate for the K and E [Knowledge and Employability]⁵⁹ program ... they get put into that program because they don’t do well in Grade 9 so rather than repeat Grade 9 they put them into this K and E program. ... Grade 9 is a streaming year ... They’re in this program that has a huge stigma attached to it. It diminishes their self-esteem.

Enrolment in Knowledge and Employability courses precludes future enrolment in post-secondary education programs without significant upgrading. Further, few Aboriginal youth participate in high school programs leading to trades apprenticeships, according to a high school educator in Fort McMurray, because they do not meet the criteria based on attendance and grades. We might assume that as a result of low expectations and perceived barriers, many drop out.

And, despite the discourse of a high school diploma as the “ticket” to stable, high paying work in industry, it is no guarantee:

⁵⁷ David Livingstone & Ken Pankhurst, Prior Concepts and Theories of the Relationship Between Workers and Jobs. In D.W. Livingstone (ed), *Education and Jobs: Exploring the Gaps* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2009), 11-31.

⁵⁸ Beverley Skeggs, Gender Reproduction and Further Education: Domestic Apprenticeships.” *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 9(2)(1998), 131-149; Anoop Nayak, Displaced Masculinities: Chavs, Youth and Class in the Post-industrial City. *Sociology*, 40(5)(2006), 813-831.

⁵⁹ Although the proportion of FNMI high school students in the Fort McMurray public school district in 2007/08 was 14.9%, they represented 32.6% of students in K and E courses – a stream that leads to a certificate requiring 80 credits, rather than a diploma requiring 100 credits. (Personal communication, school district staff, November 2008). Statistics were similar for the Catholic school district.

[The recruitment officer from] Syncrude came to the school and I set up interviews. There were 10 interviews that were set up, not one of my students made it through. They had their grade 12, they had their diploma, they have to do a DAT [differential aptitude test for trades entry] ... And then they had to have a driver's license, so you see what I mean? Like there's one hoop after another and for some of them, just getting a grade 12 diploma is going to be huge. (May 2008)

Another participant comments, "My niece is a grade 12 graduate. She got hired on [by a corporation] to do some computer analysis or something and then later I heard that she was doing janitorial work." Several participants in First Nation and Métis communities felt that Aboriginal youth are disproportionately channelled into "unskilled" and semi-skilled work.

In addition to the lack of academic support for First Nation and Métis youth transitioning from outlying communities to high schools in the City Fort McMurray, several interview participants noted the racism that youth face:

I find our children when they do go to town, they're looked down on. ... They're put to this side, okay, you're Aboriginal, you go over there. ... [My daughter] even got into a fight. She's never gotten into a fight in her life and she almost got kicked out of school. Because this girl was saying all this stuff about Aboriginal people from out there, ... and my daughter said, "How do you know us? You don't know us." (Mother, Janvier)

A principal at a provincial school in a community that buses students to a Fort McMurray high school concurs:

[T]own school's hard on them. There's racism, it's hard for them to fit in. I really feel that they don't get the kind of education, I really think it gets watered down for them because people assume they can't do it. And it really bothers me. Very negative. (June 2008)

Support systems

However, we also heard the less common story of youth who had more positive experiences in provincial schools. For example, Susan, a young woman from Fort Chipewyan moved to Fort McMurray for high school with her parents and younger brother when she was 15 years old. Susan says that her parents moved to Fort McMurray specifically for their children's education and although, like others, she found the transition to be challenging academically, she notes that "my whole little support system" was intact. At the age of 25, she had completed a one-year college certificate in business and had worked for two large energy corporations for short periods. When we spoke to her, she was working on a certificate in Occupational Health and Safety while working full time for a band-operated business in Fort McMurray and raising a young son. While her trajectory was not linear, her horizon for action was broader than many of the other youth interviewed as part of this research. Susan spoke about wanting to get a university degree and her desire to move to another province. She also had consciously chosen to work in a band-operated rather than a multinational company:

I worked on the scale [at name of corporation], I weighed the trucks as they came in. ... The money was good definitely. I can't complain there... but the atmosphere... And after working there for a year, never again. I'm never working at another plant site again. ... It's just, I don't know how to put it, because I'm a girl, right, and it's mostly guys, it's like, I don't know how to put it nicely. [*Just sexism?*] Oh yeah. ... [*So what are the differences from working with a large corporation versus the band company?*] The support is just unbelievable [at the band company]. It's like a nice tight-knit family, you know what I mean? (June 2008)

Susan's story suggests that institutional as well as personal supports are important for youth in their transitions from high school to further education and training and work.

The examples above suggest that geographic location, gender, racism, family support, and socio-economic status matter for youth. In other words, their agency is bounded.⁶⁰ The examples also highlight the challenges many young Aboriginal people face. As noted above, problems often begin in small community schools where students begin to fall behind and continue or are exacerbated in town schools where the academic and racialized marginalization experienced by many Aboriginal students takes a further toll. In this context, the "choices" are difficult—either leaves one's home community to pursue what are perceived as better opportunities for further education and work, or one stays and tries to make a living, a choice that is increasingly difficult with industrialization and credentialization.

IV. Implications of the Study for Policy and Practice

The preceding discussion suggests a need for more institutional supports for First Nations and Métis youth transitioning from smaller northern communities to attend school in larger centres, as well as a need for looking more closely at the knowledge and abilities learners bring with them as a way of addressing an underutilization of skills. Despite the emphasis on training to employment, it is also important to consider the interests of learners (particularly young women). For example, 21% of Aboriginal youth attending the local college between 2005 and 2008 were in programs related to health and family services. This challenges the narrow industry focus of many of the education and training initiatives in Wood Buffalo.

Further contextualized qualitative research studies are needed to complement quantitative studies that explore factors affecting the educational success of Aboriginal youth.⁶¹ Beginning from a selection of literature on youth transitions, we have argued for a research approach that attends to the broader institutional and socio-historical context and adopts more holistic definitions of transitions with a focus on the lived experiences of youth. More specifically, our analysis suggests that a legacy of colonization and contemporary oppression – for example, racializing practices – adversely affects First Nations and Métis families and communities in northeastern Alberta. In addition, institutional arrangements (e.g., lack of access to education and training in communities) present challenges. Finally, there is evidence of values conflict—for example, between the push for rapid industrial growth and community and environmental sustainability. Given these factors, the "choice" to complete high school and pursue further education or training to secure work in the oil sands economy appears to be unattainable for many and undesirable for some.

In challenging dominant ideas about youth pathways to the labour market, our findings are of import to current policy discussions. Many of the issues raised by this case study will be familiar

⁶⁰ Karen Evans, "Taking Control of Their Lives?"

⁶¹ Jerry White, Paul Maxim & Nicholas Spence, "An Examination of Educational Success," Jerry White, Paul Maxim & Dan Beavon (Eds.), *Aboriginal Policy Research: Setting the Agenda for Change* (Toronto: Thompson Educational Press, 2004), 143.

to First Nation and Métis youth in other parts of Alberta.⁶² For example, the transition from small rural schools populated mostly by First Nation and/or Métis students to large town schools where they are a minority is made even more challenging when students are behind academically, face racism, and are away from family and community support structures. In these cases, a rational response of students may be to drop out.

However, a high school diploma is seen as the “ticket” to permanent well-paying work with the large energy corporations and this reality means that many youth later enrol in high school upgrading and training programs. The challenges at this stage include: lack of access to funding or insufficient funding levels given the high costs of living in Wood Buffalo; very limited access to college programs in communities aside from short-term upgrading; and uncertainty about the labour market value of some Aboriginal-focused programs in the region. In a situation where large corporations place great value on credentials and testing to select employees, First Nation and Métis entrants are often screened out and end up working for contractors as labourers or in other unskilled or semi-skilled work. Our interviews suggest that those who are seen by mainstream society as “successful” in employment may feel tensions around the environmental impact of their work in the oil sands industry and experience other “costs” of employment such as the need to leave their home communities, the effects of long hours/shift work on families, and, for women, gender discrimination.

In addition to a close review of the effectiveness of education and training policies for First Nation and Métis youth in Wood Buffalo, we point to a recent report that identifies overall challenges to youth employment in the region.⁶³ Like these authors, we argue that policy attention is needed regarding the scarcity of affordable and available housing in the region, the lack of access to quality and affordable childcare services, transportation challenges, and the dearth of career-related services. In our view, policy responses must include actions that more holistically address the challenging transitions of First Nation and Métis youth as well as any tensions involved in their “successful” transitions. In terms of education policy, this includes addressing the academic gap between isolated northern and urban schools so that students moving to schools “in town” are better prepared. It also means ensuring that students enrol in high school courses that keep their post-secondary education options and potential as individuals open as much as possible. Further, it is evident that there is a need for school districts to provide additional supports to First Nation and Métis youth and their families when students have no choice but to leave their home communities for high school. Instead of seeking ways to move youth through the system more efficiently, policies could provide more opportunities for them to “move through the systems more slowly, to move out and then back into systems, and to reconsider their PSE decisions once they have been made.”⁶⁴

⁶² Alison Taylor & Evelyn Steinhauer, “Factors that Affect the Education and Work Transitions of First Nations Youth.” *Horizons*, 10(1)(2008), 45-48.

⁶³ R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., Wood Buffalo Map of Youth Employment Assets and Opportunities 2006-2008 – Executive Summary, 2006. Accessed November 17, 2009 at <http://www.woodbuffalo.net/PDFs/ES-WBYES06-08.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Krahn & Hudson, *Pathways of Alberta Youth Through the Post-secondary System into the Labour Market*, 60.

The Canadian Council on Learning⁶⁵ promotes a vision of Aboriginal learning as lifelong, experiential, rooted in language and culture, spiritually-oriented, communal, and involving the integration of Aboriginal and Western knowledge(s). CCL recommends that schools and post-secondary institutions develop more holistic models of learning as a way to facilitate transitions for Aboriginal youth. This is an important contribution to policy discussion given the increasingly instrumental content and form of education and training in regions such as Wood Buffalo. The CCL vision is consistent with our observation that more could be done to recognize and accredit informal learning, and to develop bridging programs as a way to recognize the barriers for some Aboriginal people presented by employment requirements for specific credentials. In addition, while there have been attempts by corporations to encourage and accommodate Aboriginal workers, more must be done to acknowledge that inter-cultural exchange is a two-way street.

In addition to the preceding suggestions, a report based on our research⁶⁶ emphasizes the need to frame work and learning issues within First Nation, Métis and Inuit histories and perspectives. We also need to re-think the impact of racism in the persistent gap in education and work experienced by First Nations and Métis people residing in north-eastern Alberta and elsewhere in Canada. In this, the contributions of Indigenous scholars should be seen as invaluable as is mutual engagement with First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities and community members at all stages of policy and research processes.

⁶⁵ Canadian Council on Learning, *Redefining How Success is Measured in First Nations, Inuit and Métis Learning*. (Ottawa: Authors, 2007).

⁶⁶ Alison Taylor, Tracy Friedel & Lois Edge, *Pathways for First Nation and Métis youth in the Oilsands*. Report prepared for Canadian Policy Research Networks (Ottawa: CPRN, 2009).

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