Articles

Life Paths and Educational and Employment Outcomes of Disadvantaged Aboriginal Learners*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the linkages between education and training and labour market outcomes. It is based on a study that sought to improve our understanding of the longer-term relationship between disadvantage and educational/economic achievements. The population used in this study, as well as in two previous studies (Cooke, Wallace, Sloane-Seale, & Levin, 2000; McClure, Wallace, Sloane-Seale, Lavallee, & Levin, 1999) comprised Manitoba adults with backgrounds of low educational achievement. The study investigated factors that help adults over-

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine les liens qui existent entre l'éducation et la formation et les résultats sur le marché du travail. Il est basé sur une étude qui cherchait à améliorer notre compréhension des rapports à long terme entre les désavantages et les réalisations éducatives et économiques. La population utilisée dans cette étude, comme dans les deux études précédentes (celle de Cooke, Wallace, Sloane-Seale & Levin en l'an 2000 et celle de McClure, Wallace, Sloane-Seale, Lavallee, & Levin en 1999), se composait d'adultes du Manitoba ayant des antécédents de faibles réalisa-

come disadvantage to become successful post-secondary learners. Specifically, the impact of agency (decisions and choices that adults make) and biography (negative and positive personal experiences) on labour force participation, income, and skill acquisition was investigated.

tions en éducation. Cette étude a examiné les facteurs qui aidaient les adultes à surmonter les désavantages de devenir des apprenants postsecondaires couronnés de succès. Plus particulièrement, l'impact de l'agence (les décisions et les choix pris par les adultes) et la biographie (les expériences personnelles négatives et positives) sur la participation au marché du travail, sur le revenu et l'acquisition des compétences ont été examinés.

INTRODUCTION

Completion of a university degree has long been associated with improved labour market outcomes, yet persons facing socioeconomic, geographic, gender, or ethnic barriers are less likely to attend and succeed at universities (Unruh & Levin, 1990). Thus, accessibility to university education for these populations is a critical policy issue in Canada (Cooke, Wallace, Sloane-Seale, & Levin, 2000).

Over the past 25 years in Manitoba, several programs, known collectively as the Access Programs, have been developed and have been successful in providing post-secondary education to those previously excluded from such education (e.g., Aboriginal students and those living in remote communities). These programs follow the principle of *equality of condition*, that is, access must be accompanied by academic, social, personal, and financial supports that provide motivated but poorly prepared students a real opportunity to succeed at the same levels as non-excluded members of society.

The University of Manitoba Access Programs operate in a variety of fields of study, with different program formats (see Alcorn & Levin, 2000, for a full discussion). However, each of these formats embodies some common principles:

- provide access to the same degrees and diplomas that are available to other students;
- conduct extensive recruitment;
- select students who have a reasonable chance to succeed with the supports of the programs;

- provide an integrated set of academic, personal, and financial supports;
- redesign curriculum and teaching where appropriate; and
- ensure that students are supported in attaining the same high standards as all other students.

Overall, these various programs have been very successful (Hikel, 1994) in graduating students, including professionals in high-demand areas.

Although the Access Programs are important elements in this study, it is critical to note that this project is not an evaluation of these programs. Rather, the interest in the programs expressed by potential students provided a way to identify a cohort of disadvantaged Manitoba adults whose long-term economic and educational outcomes would be of interest.

RELATED LITERATURE

Few longitudinal studies on the links between Aboriginal peoples' motivations, barriers for participation in post-secondary education and training, and labour market outcomes have been done. Some studies have used Statistics Canada data in analyses of the achievement and prospects of Aboriginal students who have completed higher education (Armstrong, Kennedy, & Oberle, 1990; Drost, 1995; Sarkar & Stallard, 1997; Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology [SIAST], 1996; and Statistics Canada, 1985). The available literature, however, has little to say regarding the ways in which the lives of these students unfold over time. Moreover, much of the school-to-work transition literature tends to stop at around age 25 years, whereas this study looked primarily at adults, many of whom are well beyond this age. In addition, the conceptual literature on second-chance (Inbar, 1990) has failed to lead to a significant body of empirical work in Canada.

Higher education is often viewed as the best means of social mobility available to Aboriginal people. For both Aboriginal and and non-Aboriginal populations in Canada, increased levels of education are followed by increased levels of participation in the labour force and decreased levels of unemployment (see Cooke et al., 2000, for a full discussion of the literature). Compared to the achievement of a high school certificate or diploma, failure to complete elementary or junior high school has the consequence of increasing the likelihood of unemployment for Aboriginal people by 12 percent, versus 4 percent for non-Aboriginals (Canada, 1991; Drost, 1995; Statistics Canada, 1993). With increased educational attainment, economic well-being among Aboriginal people also increases, and differences in labour force activity between Aboriginal people and Canadians decrease (Armstrong et al., 1990; Drost, 1995; Sarkar & Stallard, 1997). Graduating

from university is associated with more stable patterns of employment and higher earnings (Sarkar, 1995; SIAST, 1995; Smith, 1997; Statistics Canada, 1993; Yau, et al., 1993). Aboriginal people, however, continue to be under-represented at all levels of the education and employment systems.

Given these findings, it is important to understand how and why people decide to re-enter formal education. Cross's (1981) framework of participation drew upon achievement and attribution theories of motivation to explain the decision of adults to participate in post-secondary education. A decision is seen not as a single act but as the result of a Chain-of-Response, where each action is based upon an evaluation by the individual in the context of his or her environment. Goals, values, and expectations are important, as are various barriers related to learners' dispositions, their economic situations, and institutional practices and policies. It is important to note that cultural expectations of family and community, as well as systemic racism and sexism, are expansions of Cross's framework.

Second-chance programs may play an important role in giving adults an opportunity to improve their education. Lavin and Hyllegard (1996) examined the long-term outcomes for participants in second-chance programs, and concluded that the policy was of great benefit to a large number of students who otherwise would have been excluded from higher education. Yet, the results of their study also suggested that initial disadvantage continues to affect many people's lives, despite their additional education. Similar patterns were expected among this study's cohort of disadvantaged Manitoba adults, many of whom come from Aboriginal backgrounds. Although additional education can improve life outcomes, the impacts of early and continued disadvantage cannot be overcome entirely by any one element of the social structure.

Theoretical Explanations of Discrepancies

Discrepancies in labour market outcomes may be explained using theories such as human capital, certification, and labour market segmentation. The human capital model suggests that human capital increases as students gain knowledge, skills, and abilities through education. The model suggests that university graduates are paid more money than high school graduates because they have the knowledge, skills, and abilities (i.e., human capital) that are sought by employers. In contrast, certification theory suggests that university graduates do not necessarily have more knowledge, skills, and abilities than non-graduates, but that a university education bestows upon graduates a positive status that is valued by employers, independent of any knowledge, skills, or abilities that graduates have achieved.

Labour market segmentation theory suggests that there is not one labour market in which everyone competes fairly on the basis of knowledge, skills, and abilities. Instead, there are several restrictive markets, which are defined by gender, class (annual parental/family income), and ethno-racial origin. As a result, independent of knowledge, skills, and abilities, groups such as women and non-whites, including Aboriginal people, may have difficulty finding jobs, and when they do, these jobs may be lower paying than those in other, more privileged markets (Grayson, 1997).

In sum, the literature suggests important links between barriers to participation in higher education and training and labour market outcomes. Education and training may remove some of the inequities in employment and income levels between the Aboriginal population and the population overall. Thus, the importance of longitudinal studies examining Aboriginal people's educational experiences, motivations, barriers, and economic indicators, such as employment and income figures, should not be underestimated.

THE STUDY

The objective of this study was to investigate the factors that help adults to overcome disadvantage. Specifically, the study investigated the impact of agency (decisions and choices made by adults) and biography (negative and positives experiences) on educational and labour force participation among those persons who applied to the Access Programs at the University of Manitoba. Information that may help educational institutions and government agencies understand how to act more effectively in developing opportunities for training and employment was also gathered. Finally, a better understanding of the events, factors, and difficulties that have an impact on the educational and economic outcomes of these students was developed.

Population and Sample

In the study, the population of disadvantaged adult students from the University of Manitoba was defined as former applicants to the University's Access Programs. The purpose of these programs is to help students disadvantaged by socioeconomic or geographic barriers achieve higher education goals. As such, the application criteria, that is, Aboriginal students, including those living in remote communities, who are motivated but lack academic preparation, and financial, social, and personal resources, serve to attract students who are disadvantaged. Participants for the study were drawn from applicants from the years 1983, 1987, and 1991 who had been part of earlier studies (Cooke et al., 2000; McClure et al., 1999). Twenty-four participants were purposefully selected (23 were eventually interviewed) from the

previous sample of 471 adults; an effort was made to ensure variation among the study participants on variables such as completion versus non-completion of advanced education, and employment patterns.

Method

The study employed qualitative methodology and the grounded theory perspective. The goals of the study were: to gain access to the personal meanings, understandings, and assumptions by which participants construct their world; to ensure that their experiences were understood from their perspectives and through their own words; and to capture, and gain insight into, the themes that emerged from their stories. Grounded theory facilitated the development of themes and patterns from responses (Creswell, 1998; Franklin, 1996; McCracken, 1988; Tutty, Rothery, & Grinnell, 1996).

In order to facilitate the cooperation of participants, a letter explaining the purpose of the study was mailed to persons in the sample. Those who participated in the 1999 and 2000 studies were asked whether or not they would be willing to participate in a face-to-face or telephone interview. A confirmation letter was subsequently sent to willing participants. Data were collected over a three-month period.

Each of the approximately 90-minute-long interviews was audiotaped and later transcribed. Before the data were analyzed, the interview transcripts were mailed to participants for further input on accuracy and completeness.

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews allowed for probing, redirecting, and summarizing information, in addition to the collection of rich, thick data. Data collection and analysis were interwoven and ongoing throughout the research process. Transcripts were analyzed individually and collectively, using a horizontal and vertical content analysis that allowed for the confirmation or refutation of categories and for the development of themes and patterns.

The data were initially colour coded, and preliminary labels were placed on categories formed from responses to the interview questions. Preliminary interpretations and provisional categories were then developed by matching related concepts. As concepts were repeated, their relevance to a category was strengthened. Categories were then confirmed, refuted, or expanded in subsequent interviews. Validity was achieved through triangulation of data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS

The data will be discussed in three related sections: a) demographic, education, and employment data; b) educational experiences, including motivation, barriers encountered, supports required, and strategies used to overcome obstacles; and c) education and work, including knowledge, skills, and abilities, long-term career goals, and success. The confidentiality of information and the anonymity of participants have been protected by the removal of names and any information that might reveal the identity of the participants.

Demographics, Education, and Employment

Demographics:

Of the 23 participants, 14 were women. Eight of these women and four of the nine men had been accepted into one of the Access Programs at the University of Manitoba. Seventeen participants lived in northern and rural communities in Manitoba at the time of their application to the program. At the time of the interviews, however, the number was reversed: 13 now lived and worked in Winnipeg, 5 lived and worked in their small northern and rural communities, and 5 lived outside of Manitoba.

Education:

Of the 12 persons who were accepted into the Access Programs, over half (7) had completed undergraduate degrees: B.A (2), B.Sc. (3), L.LB. (1), and B.EC. (1).

A number of these participants subsequently enrolled in graduate or other professional degree programs, and some had completed their programs at the time of the interviews (e.g., M.B.A., M.D., M.Sc., M.H.S., and Ph.D.).

Of the 11 persons who were not accepted into one of the Access Programs, almost half (5) completed undergraduate degrees: B.A. (2) and B.Ed. (3). Several of them subsequently enrolled in graduate or other professional degree programs: B.PE., M.Ed., and B.N. All of the non-accepted applicants, as well as those who were accepted but did not complete their programs at the University of Manitoba, eventually went on to take some form of post-secondary education at another Manitoba university or community college.

Employment:

Of the 23 participants, 7 are currently employed in the health care field, 5 are in the field of education and training, 5 are employed as support staff, and 2 are students enrolled in graduate programs. A bank manager, a tradesperson, a scientist, and a lawyer comprised the remaining four partici-

pants. When employment was broken down by gender, some traditional stereotypes were reflected. Males outnumbered females by 30 percent in professional occupations, that is, five males (a physician, two teachers, a lawyer, and a bank manager) versus three females (a nurse, a teacher, and a scientist). There were twice as many females (five) in support staff positions (vs. two males). Two women were graduate students (vs. no men), and three were health care workers (vs. two men). One contrast is reflected: the only tradesperson is a woman—in drafting.

Educational Experiences

Interview excerpts from participants employed in a variety of jobs are used in the following section to represent the themes that emerged from the data.

Motivation for Participating in Post-secondary Education:

Participants' reasons for pursuing post-secondary education can be attributed to a wide range of factors. These factors include a high need to achieve personal goals, positive family values towards education, and the influences of friends, teachers, and peers. For almost all of the participants, the most compelling motivations for participating in post-secondary education were the desire to escape the impoverishment and lack of opportunity on reserves and the desire to contribute to their community. The following excerpts demonstrate the most commonly cited goals.

- *I feel that if I had not made the effort to leave the community [in the North] I would have ended up like my friends … who were having children, into alcohol, and not going anywhere. I did not want that kind of life.*

- *In my family, education [for the children] was very important to my father and mother. My parents had grade six or seven. They got us off to school. They talked about wanting a better life for us. As a child, I watched my father work hard. He had to get up at five in the morning to do his stuff [trapping] outside in the cold weather. I did not want this life for myself.*

- *My parents … were both alcoholics and I grew up in spite of them, not with their help … I loved teaching and helping kids … There were some teachers in my career as a student that helped me to avoid the fate of a lot of my friends … I do not have one friend left from when I was growing up (and that included high school) who is not indigent, in prison, or alcoholic ….*

- *When you have completed your journey in life, hopefully you would have made improvements on the road itself. Helping others is important because someone has helped you.*

Barriers and Obstacles to Academic Study:

Participants reported that they faced dispositional, situational, and systemic obstacles in their pursuit of post-secondary education. Lack of self-esteem,

child care, and social supports, as well as racism and sexism, were common problems of participants. Another frequent problem was the dislocation that resulted from the move to a large city from a small, isolated community.

> *I felt alienated from everyone because when you come from a reserve it is a culture shock. The relocation was a terrifying experience because it was hard to leave family and friends. I lacked self-esteem … I had to learn the [dominant] culture and get accustomed to what is acceptable.*

Many respondents spoke of the lack of educational and employment opportunities, as well as the lack of role models, in their home communities.

- *Coming to university was never my plan in life. It was just too far away for me. It was pie in the sky. Nobody I knew or heard of had a university degree. The University of Manitoba was some place that rich kids went to, and we were far from rich.*

- *My parents … did not want me to leave because I was babysitting my cousins and three children. They said, "You have a job—you do not have to go."*

Issues of sexism and racism were also reported by a number of participants.

- *The instructor was sexist. I did not feel comfortable approaching him or the other instructors … We [the women students] felt that we were not taken seriously. We were called "girls" countless number of times. I finally told the instructor that I was a grown woman with children and if he had trouble calling me a woman he could call me "lady." He did not call the guys "boys"— if he had, maybe I would have accepted it….*

- *They do not do a good job teaching cross-cultural issues … whether that would change the racism, I do not know. Racism is systemic. That is an issue that has to be addressed … In health care, a big portion of the clientele is Aboriginal. There is no understanding of the traditional component … I was a little dismayed that one of the professors had no clue as to the issues and needs for First Nations people.*

These difficulties tested participants' motivation and created a need for supports. As discussed in the following section, although the Access Programs provided some of these supports, others were created by the participants.

Supports Required During Academic Study:

A constellation of supports, including counselling, academic, financial, and social, were provided by the Access Programs. However, even with these supports, some participants, including those who were solid academically, experienced emotional difficulties that led to failure. Virtually all participants reported that, in retrospect, most of the program supports were needed, but that emotional supports and a sense of community, including extended families, were also critical.

- *I needed financial, academic, emotional, and home supports. I needed a "wife" … a live-in or homemaker to help with the children, and not having support at home was difficult. I received financial and academic support.*

- *In retrospect, some emotional support was needed … I ran into a bit of an identity crisis … Being native was very different … If there was anything that I needed, probably some peer support … Friends and extended family were very important to me ….*

Strategies Used to Overcome Obstacles:

The help-seeking strategies of participants were important elements in their achievements. Some formed their own network or community of peer support with fellow students, others used their traditional spirituality, and still others drew upon their internal resources. Believing in personal control and a larger purpose in life, however, appeared to be central to their success.

- *I started participating in some spiritual things that helped me to see life in a different light … and allowed me to get back my focus … Life is busy with commitment to job and my family; it is a balance. I had to make a decision at some point as to what I was going to do with my life. I decided I was here for a reason, a purpose, and that I have to carry on.*

- *[My family were] very supportive and they encouraged me. [My grandfather] was a major person in my life. He was always there even financially; he was supportive and non-judgmental. You cannot succeed on your own … [you need] someone to help, encourage, and support you ….*

- *I received encouragement and understanding from the counselors. Students in the program were also … mentors and would give you encouragement. They were role models … Some strategies were taking pride in myself, acceptance of myself, self-talk … telling yourself that you can do it.*

Education and Work

Data from the interviews sorted into three themes relating to education and work: knowledge, skills, and abilities; career goals; and definitions of success.

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities:

Participants reported that their formal education greatly enhanced their career and employment prospects. As well, they believed it assisted them in developing knowledge and skills in areas such as interpersonal relations, technical and procedural knowledge, organization, research, self-reliance and self-confidence, and in taking a broader perspective. For example, one participant indicated that he had gained a range of technical and interpersonal skills and a broader perspective on the impact of social and economic problems on Aboriginal health.

- *I have the clinical skills and academic background … I have a good understanding of not only the individual but also the public health issues within the First Nations communities … [including] some of the social and economic issues ….*

Career Goals:

In almost all cases, participants indicated that their long-term career plans involved continuing their education in order to fulfill their dreams of becoming role models, enhancing their abilities, and improving the lives of their families or members of their communities. Participants seemed to be both successful problem-solvers and self-directed learners. Many respondents planned to continue their education so that they could achieve their broader goal of service to their communities.

Success:

Initial disadvantages such as poorly educated parents, lower incomes, difficult family circumstances, or lack of academic preparation affected participants' lives. Many required remedial help or took an extra year on average to complete their programs, and many needed financial, emotional, and social supports.

Despite this, their employment and education levels improved significantly. At the time of the interviews, most were employed in positions that required them to use the knowledge and skills they gained in their education programs, and a substantial number had received promotions or increments. Most were continuing their education, in order to work towards leadership positions, and were seeking a balanced lifestyle. The majority of the participants were gainfully employed, contributing members of society, who were willing to help others, their people, and their communities. For these participants, success was not measured only by salary, job title, and status, but also by quality of life and commitment to giving back to their community.

Through her education, one participant escaped the cycle of poverty, pregnancy, and alcohol in which her peers were mired. "Of the 34 students in my grade nine class only five, including myself, graduated from high school." She overcame enormous challenges to complete her degree: in addition to her financial and emotional challenges, she also fulfilled childcare responsibilities. "You learn to deal with them if you want to be successful … I wanted to, so I persevered." In her own eyes, this participant is a success. She beat heavy odds to leave behind a situation that was destroying her community.

DISCUSSION

Understanding the lived experience of disadvantaged and Aboriginal learners is a formidable task. Most university researchers, ourselves included, neither come from Aboriginal communities nor have experienced directly the impoverishment and abuse that are unfortunate characteristics of many economically depressed areas, including many First Nations communities. The experiences and insights shared by the participants in this study provided us with a humbling view of our own middle-class educational achievements and admiration for the determination of disadvantaged and Aboriginal learners to overcome the considerable obstacles to their pursuit of post-secondary education.

Most of the participants demonstrated what we would consider to be a high need for achievement and a low need to avoid failure. They viewed the Access Programs as an opportunity to achieve concrete goals, and persevered against, what in many cases, were tremendous odds. They demonstrated insight into their strengths and weaknesses, and they took personal responsibility not only for their hard work, effort, abilities, and successes, but also for their shortcomings. It is clear that motivation was the one compelling factor that contributed to their successes.

With respect to obstacles to success, these participants encountered many situational barriers, usually in the form of financial difficulties, poor academic preparation, relocation to a large city from a small, tightly knit community, backgrounds of abuse and poverty, and the conflicting demands of study and family. Although lack of confidence was a dispositional barrier for some participants, a number of others displayed considerable confidence in their ability to achieve their educational and career goals. Few mentioned institutional barriers; however, racism and sexism in the curriculum and in the classroom were identified as systemic barriers by several participants.

In terms of the participants' orientation to learning, it appears that, almost without exception, they were goal-oriented. They saw education as their opportunity to escape the problems of poverty and its associated ills. They enrolled in post-secondary education in order to increase their career and socioeconomic prospects and to help their communities—not to achieve social goals or for the joy of learning, in and of itself. It is important to note that these goals are consistent with Aboriginal cultural world views that place the primacy of community, society, and family over individualistic, Eurocentric values.

Having achieved a level of education and employment that is rare in their home communities, these participants saw themselves as role models who were in a position to assist their home communities. While this finding was consistent with the literature (Cooke et al., 2000; Poonwassie, 1993), it was

also ironic in that few participants had actually been able to return to work in those communities, their absence further impoverishing their communities. Nevertheless, fulfilling the goal of returning "home" to share their knowledge, skills, and experience remained important to many of the adults in this study.

For participants in this study, a measure of success that is based entirely upon salary, job title, and status was rarely appropriate. A more realistic and appropriate measure of success was likely to include the opportunity to have a balanced lifestyle and to contribute to their communities.

This study's findings were consistent with the literature with respect to the observation that education, particularly at the post-secondary level, can shrink the gap in employment and income levels and provide the best means for social mobility for Aboriginal people (Cooke et al., 2000; Gerardi, 1996; McClure et al., 1999; Sarkar, 1995; SIAST, 1995 and 1996; Smith, 1997; Statistics Canada, 1993; and Yau et al., 1993). With respect to the relationship between post-secondary education and job skills, participants reported that post-secondary education helped them to develop not only employment-related knowledge and skills but also self-direction, self-confidence, and the ability to critically assess information.

Low socioeconomic status is one of the strongest determinants of talent loss, particularly among Aboriginal people (Hanson, 1994; Plank & Jordan, 1997). In the current study, disadvantaged learners achieved considerable success in their careers—a finding that suggests many disadvantaged learners have unrealized potential. Although the impacts of early and continued disadvantage cannot be overcome entirely by any one element of the social structure, there is no doubt that additional education and support significantly improved the employment outcomes of those who participated in this study.

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Biographies

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Atlanta Sloane-Seale est professeure adjointe et directrice du programme de la division de l'éducation continue à l'université du Manitoba. Ses recherches sont axées sur l'accessibilité, les différences entre les sexes, la planification de programme (comme l'évaluation des besoins), l'évaluation du programme et le développement d'un programme d'études. Elle s'intéresse aussi au mentorat et au développement professionnel ainsi que l'avancement professionnel.

Lori Wallace has been a faculty member at the University of Manitoba since 1985. She has worked with the Access Program (in recruitment, academic counselling, and study skills instruction) and the Distance Education Program (in instructional design and administration) in the Continuing Education Division. She has also worked as an instructional designer and human resource development consultant in the private sector, and has considerable international experience in distance education and development.

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