

**Engaging Aboriginal Access Learners in Higher Education:
Case studies in Linguistic Change, Transformative Learning and Self-
Determination**

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Pimachesowin and Aboriginal Access Programs in Higher Education

My proposed doctoral research focusses on Aboriginal access learners older than 21 years whose background or educational qualifications make them ineligible for university entrance. My research dovetails from previous studies of access programs and studies of Aboriginal students' experiences in higher education (Antone, 2003; Baptiste, 1994; Brown, 2003; Darling, 1985; Frost, 1991; Kurszewski, 2000; 2002; MacKenzie, 2004; Maslany, 1978; Miller, 2001; Ting, 1997; Tinto, 1987, Weenie, 2002; White, 1986; Willett, 2002). It is relevant to current work that is being done in second language and literacy acquisition in Indigenous populations (Attleo & Fitznor, 2010; Ball & Barnhardt, 2010; Fadden & LaFrance, 2010; Hornberger, 2009). My research question is: "*What is the relationship among linguistic change, transformative learning and self-determination of Aboriginal adult learners in select Canadian university access programs?*" I assume that access learners undergo training to learn academic English and that the acquisition of this language and the expansion of ideas and understanding of the world will challenge their previously held beliefs about their orientation to the university community and world at large. I hypothesize that the conditions wherein the students' social dialect of

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Aboriginal-English is employed in bilingual education, will contribute to transformative learning, individual and community capacity-building, and the promotion of Aboriginal self-determination. My proposed doctoral research will be a phenomenological study of Aboriginal access program learners' reflections on the experience of linguistic change and its potential to impact their self-identity and how they situate themselves in the world.

I believe an Indigenous theoretical orientation should be used to interpret Indigenous students' reflections, so with the direction of Dr. Bonita Beatty I looked to *mitho-pimachesowin* (Wood Cree 'th' dialect) to provide a framework of analysis. My exploration of this concept is guided by my experience of studying my heritage language, Anishinaabe, and Plains Cree "y" dialect. Anishinaabe and Cree are sister languages belonging to the Algonquian language family and have similarities in linguistic features of grammar, syntax, and morphology. Following my explanation of the surface, fundamental and philosophical levels of meaning of *mitho-pimachesowin*, I relate this concept to Aboriginal students' experiences of learning academic English in access programs.

Cree dictionaries yield understanding of the surface meaning of *pimachesowin* variously spelled *pimacewin*, *pimacihowin*, and *pimachihowin* following dialectic pronunciation ("Nehiyaw Masinahikan Online Cree Dictionary", 2010; Okimasis, 2004).

I assume that Wood Cree *mitho-pimachesowin* and Plains Cree *miyo-pimacihowin* are linguistic references to the same concept. Also I assume that the Plains Cree *miyo-pimatisiwin* corresponds with Fisher River Cree term *mino-pimatisiwin* which Hart translates as the "good life" (2002, p. 44), Muskcowekun Saulteaux term *pimadizewin*

translated by Akan as “a worthwhile life” (Akan, 1999, p. 19), and the eastern Anishinaabe term *bimaadiziwin* which Gross and Rheault translate as the “good life” (Gross, 2002, Rheault, 1999).

Using Okimasis’ Plains Cree textbook to examine fundamental meaning of the word *miyo-pimatisowin* we find that the phonemes yield a meaning deeper than surface meaning of the “good life”. The word is formed by a verb, a suffix, and a prefix. It begins with an action, an animate intransitive verb *pimatisi*, meaning “to be alive” (Okimasis, 2004, p. 194). An Indigenous worldview is contained in this most fundamental unit of meaning wherein actions and things are classified by animate and inanimate gender² (Okimasis, 2004, p. 6, 34). Intransitive verbs are those actions that are not transferred to another noun (Okimasis, 2004, p. 29). The suffix *win* forms the abstract noun from the verb. The prefix *miyo* is translated as “good/nice/well” (Okimasis, 2004, p. 170). The subtleties of meaning are perceived in the various translations of “good life,” “being alive well,” “good living.” A philosophical meaning of the word is relayed by Hart, Gross and Rheault.

Hart provides detailed analysis of the depth of meaning and the applicability of the concept of *mino-pimatisiwin* in Cree as do Gross and Rheault in their examinations of *mino-bimaadiziwin* in Anishinaabe. The complexity of the term is hinted at by Hart’s explanation that *mino-pimatisiwin* is an overall goal of healing, learning and life in general. To understand the concept requires an understanding of the Cree concepts of wholeness, balance, relationships, harmony, growth, the values of sharing, respect, and

² Animate gender, explained by Helen Roy, my Anishinaabe teacher, is a category of things that are alive, can change and or move. Verbs associated with animate nouns are also animate.

spirituality that support the goal of a “good life” (Hart, 2002, pp. 39-46). In addition, an understanding of the factors that influence persons’ functioning are history, their unconscious and spiritual dimensions, their states of being-in-becoming, their relationships with people and the land, as well as their volition, autonomy and power (Hart, 2002, 49-59). This understanding of life as a condition of well-being or health corresponds to the James Bay Cree’s *miyupimaatisiun*, which Adelson translates as “being alive well” and explains as social, political, and personal well-being altogether (Adelson, 2000)

Pimachesowin, “making a living,” is a concept that belongs to the larger philosophy of *pimatisiwin/bimaadiziwin*, “living a good life” that governs human life and social, physical and spiritual relationships ” (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000). It may seem surprising at first to see that Okimasis translates *pimacihowin* as “culture,” which is quite different than the translation of *pimachihowin* as a noun meaning “survival or making a living” that is offered by Maskwacis Dictionary (Okimasis, 2004, p. 172; (“Nehiyaw Masinahikan Online Cree Dictionary”, 2010). I believe these translations are not so divergent in Cree as they are in English, and I will illustrate this with the help of the Treaty Elders’ explanation. Looking at the verb stem provides initial insight. Okimasis translates the animate transitive verb *pimacih* “to save him,” and the Maskwacis Dictionary defines “*pimacihew*” as an animate transitive verb that translates to English as “s/he saved her/him; s/he supports him/”(Okimasis, 2004, p. 194; “Nehiyaw Masinahikan Online Cree Dictionary,” 2010). Again the word is formed by a verb stem “*pimacih*” or “*pimacihew*”, a suffix “*win*” that forms the noun, and a prefix *miyo* that modifies the noun as “good, nice or well”.

This difference of transitive and intransitive gives a clue to the difference in fundamental meaning between the two words. Whereas the verb stem of *pimatisiwin* is intransitive and does not transfer the action to another noun, *pimacihowin* is transitive. The implication I interpret is that survival; the ability to make a living involves relationships with others that entail action transfer. It calls to mind the relationship between prey and hunter; between medicine plants and the afflicted; between the elements of air, water, and earth and persons. Similarly people's social relationships between each other, and their spiritual relationships with God, Creator or Great Mystery are involved in people's ability to survive/make a living. For someone to make a living or survive from the land those relationships must be respectfully honoured or dire consequences of hardship may ensue.

A philosophical understanding of the term is available from Cardinal and Hildebrandt's book that reported the treaty elders' assertion that connection to land was fundamental to the Indigenous people's *pimatisiwin* or "life," a concept that contains among others the concept *pimacihowin* or "survival/ the ability to make a living" (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000). The elders' use of the concept *pimacihowin* helps us to understand it as

a holistic concept that includes a spiritual as well as a physical dimension. It is an integral component of traditional First Nations doctrines, laws, principles, values, and teachings regarding sources of life, the responsibilities associated with them, including those elements seen as necessary for enhancing the spiritual components of life and those associated with making a living (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 43).

The elders' précis adds complexity of understanding that *pimachesowin* "survival/making a living" encompasses a Cree description of culture as Okimasis translated it. From this understanding we can appreciate why the Elders lament that people are losing their connection to the land and their understanding of the Indigenous language. Indeed if we

lose our relationships, and the understanding of life and our responsibilities, we lose our way of being, our culture and by not passing it on to the next generation, we invite a consequence of exponential hardship. *Pimachesowin* is in the mind of the people. It is instilled through training and experience and practice.

Before education was institutionalized, Cree and Anishinaabe youth and young adults were trained to gain self knowledge, particularly an understanding of their life purpose, and their spiritual power, and subsequently learning and executing those skills. Anishinaabe elder Basil Johnston explains the stages of life teachings in Anishinaabe cultural heritage. He describes the preparation and training youth underwent to acquire understanding and competence to fulfill their responsibilities as adult persons in relation to the spiritual, social and physical realms. He describes youth's stage of life as the second hill of life when "the young begin to learn the arts, the skills that will enable them to conduct the life struggle alone...Only through enduring effort are these skills acquired" (Johnston, 1994, p. 114). The work of adulthood in the next stage of life he describes thus.

The burdens and duties of parenthood must be discharged. The weight and uncertainties of leadership must be born by men and women. There are battles to be fought, disputes to be resolved; and provisions to be obtained. Men and women must tend the ailing and look after the infants, youth and the aged as they must care for themselves. In form and scope and variety, the third hill is the most formidable of all (Johnston, 1994, p. 115).

Truly to survive, to make a living, to make one's own way, required a spirited autonomy with observance of the natural and social laws.

John Tootoosis' biography described how the 20th century Canadian residential school education subverted this *pimachesowin* though the word does not appear in the

work (Sluman & Goodwill, 1982). His views are expressed in the description of the students who returned home after years at the residential school.

Eventually the hair of the students grew long again and they wore braids like the other Crees and their language came back to them but most of them were never able to emerge from the docility, the apathy or the dependency so rigidly imposed upon them in their most impressionable years. They lived on rations instead of working or hunting. They were content to obey the whiteman who sought to run their lives. They were regarded as “good Indians.” . . . the good Indians increased year by year while the Indians of old, the tough minded, high-spirited, independent, contentious Crees became fewer. How ironic it is that the ‘good’ Indian, created by the system for the sake of soul-saving and ease of administration are the same Indians perceived disparagingly as ‘typical’ – that is shiftless, lazy, valueless and self-destructive. (Sluman & Goodwill, 1982, p. 107).

For some, the training of residential school wore down their confidence and their sense of self in a physical and spiritual realm. It jeopardized their relationship to their elders and their children and alienated them from themselves.

Pimachesowin is in the mind of the people. Inherent in the term is the notion of self-direction, autonomous application of one’s energy, of surviving, competence and reciprocal relationships. Beatty translates *pimachesowin* as “making a living, livelihood” (Beatty, Berdahl, & Poelzer, 2010) and “to make your own way” (Beatty, 2006). The concept continues to animate the lives of those tough-minded, high-spirited, independent people, who Beatty identifies as “the Builders” in northern Saskatchewan communities and economy. She notes that as economy and social structures and living arrangements changed in northern Saskatchewan, so too did the manner of *pimachesowin*, until the present time when secondary and post-secondary education is required to do jobs that give access to political power, and/or pay well enough to provide a decent living (Beatty, Berdahl, & Poelzer, 2010). Whereas in the past, residential school subverted the Indigenous students’ autonomy, self-knowledge, and “*pimachesowin*,” higher education

is a potential site to provide the skills, training, and opportunity to counter the negative impact on the culture.

I expect that access programs in higher education that follow a decolonizing agenda promote *pimachesowin* by guiding the deliberate assisted recovery of one's individual autonomy, and channelling the instinct and inherent ways of being that drive persons to restore themselves to their true nature as tough-minded, high-spirited, independent individuals.

Higher education's role in revitalizing *pimachesowin* begins with the notion that in each individual there is an instinct to test one's physical power and stature, to be autonomous in the exploration of one's inner space and finding and fulfilling one's purpose in life. The role of the educational institution is to be a leader, to teach skills and connect people with knowledge that supports Indigenous people's survivance³. Coupled with mentorship and the opportunity to apply their creative and spirited energy, young adults can apply skills to fulfill their cultural role.

My proposed research on the Aboriginal access program will look at the experiences of Indigenous learners in the programs. It may generate information about how to support and expand programs to nurture *pimachesowin* in future graduates. This may be constructed through programs and curriculum. Programs could be assessed to ensure they observe the concept of *miyo-pimatisiwin*, or the corresponding concept to the region and cultural traditions of the students. Curriculum could be systematized that

2. Survivance is a word popularized by Gerald Vizenor to mean rhetorical survival and Indigenous people's rhetorical survival and resistance to outsiders cultural representation of them "The postindian warriors encounter their enemies with the same courage in literature as their ancestors once evinced on horses, and they create their stories with a new sense of survivance (p. 4).

respects the students, their language and their culture, and incorporates Indigenous knowledge, law, and philosophy while providing training and skills. This has potential to develop capacity within individuals and community to build self-determination. Thus whereas institutional education of the past educated the *pimachesowin* out of people, now is the time for us to use the educational institution to contribute to the restoration of *pimachesowin*.

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