

## **First Nation Elementary-Secondary Education: A National Dilemma**

During the past 18 months First Nations elementary-secondary education has been the focus of some necessary recommendations in two reports by the Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples and a National Panel on First Nations Elementary-Secondary Education. In response the federal government is currently engaged in a process to draft the first federal First Nations Education Act. Both reports identify much-needed reforms and one anticipates that the Education Act will accommodate them. But neither report zeroed in on the three key components that make up and inform any education program: Teachers, principals, and the curriculum. If these three elements remain unchallenged either in the federal act or in education policies, First Nations education outcomes will continue to be a national humiliation.

Teachers in First Nations education can be grouped into four categories: Those who teach on-reserve; those who teach First Nations students off-reserve; teachers who are Aboriginal, either Indian or Métis; and teachers who are not Aboriginal. Teachers in the last two categories, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, work in both on and off-reserve schools.

Regardless of where they teach, on or off-reserve, they share a commonality. Most if not all teachers of a First Nations student are graduates of a teacher-training program from a college or faculty of education somewhere in Canada. With few exceptions, all have received formal training qualifying them to teach. And yet they will tell you how ill-prepared they were to meet the demands of their jobs – teaching First Nation students.

Now, this situation is neither novel nor new. Eager but ill-prepared teachers have been descending onto Indian reserves since the mid-1950s. But some sixty almost seventy years later, why do today's teachers continue to experience profound challenges teaching these kids? The answer lies in the colleges and faculties of education across Canada responsible for the professional preparation and training of all teachers, including those who will teach First Nations students on or off-reserve. With one or two exceptions, the majority of these institutions have been guilty of ignoring the critical needs of teachers in both on and off-reserve schools for more than half a century.

A cursory review of the faculty of a majority of Canadian teacher training sites reveals the absence of master teachers with either teaching or research experience in First Nations education. Making matters worse is an absence of courses that will inform (educate) student teachers of the cultural and educational needs of First Nations students, in either on or off-reserve schools. Here I am making a critical distinction between courses that will help student teachers become effective teachers of First Nations students and courses that will inform them about the social and historical issues in First Nations communities, i.e., Native Studies courses. It is the former that are lacking and so desperately needed. And until colleges and faculties of education wake up to the reality that they are not professionally preparing their students to become effective teachers of First Nations children in either on reserve schools or off reserve classrooms, the successful First Nations education outcomes that everyone recognizes must occur will never happen.

And what might some of those courses be? Several are identified further in this article but one in particular concerns the residential school experience. Education faculty and courses need to help student teachers understand how this awful historical fact could affect both student behaviour and adult attitudes to education, in general, and to education authorities, i.e., teachers and principals, in particular. Teaching student teachers about residential schools strictly from a social-historical perspective ignores completely the reality that residential schools to this day affect First Nations attitudes to formal education in ways that require training and understanding to overcome.

Some colleges and faculties, but only a small handful, perhaps in recognition of these inadequacies, have for some time now ensured that their student teachers have access to placements in First Nations schools as part of their professional training. On the job training, as it were. But with few resources in either the professional curriculum or the instructional staff back in the college or faculty, the opportunities to maximize the benefits of their one or two placements in First Nations schools rarely emerge and a potentially rich learning experience is limited to what an individual student teacher can self-generate.

So even for a student teacher seeking employment in a First Nations school, their professional training is very thin. But what of the student who has no prior interest in teaching in a First Nations school but ends up sooner or later teaching First Nations students? With more than 50% of the status Indian student population attending off-reserve elementary and secondary schools, that possibility for many teachers is quite real. In fact, with the possible exception of the James Bay Cree youth in northern Quebec, most First Nations students resident on a reserve are required to attend an off-reserve high school to graduate.

The teachers these First Nations students encounter at either the elementary or secondary level are even more deficient in any training or professional development to respond to their educational needs than their peers who choose to teach in a reserve school. Lacking interest in teaching in a First Nations school during their teacher training, they are bereft of the limited benefits derived from training placements in a First Nations school. Over time, especially in schools in large urban areas with a large urban First

Nations population, teachers facing classes where the majority of students are native will with the occasional assistance of school board resources such as special counsellors develop some measures to deal with the challenges. But in reality they are often minimal and seldom the product of sound pedagogical research and analysis.

And what of the classes in off-reserve schools where there are only a handful of First Nations students, perhaps fewer than six in a class numbering 30 or more? The continuous reality for these students is bleak. Their teachers overwhelmingly teach to the majority and either disregard or remain unaware of the educational needs of the few First Nations students who periodically crop up in their classes. They're keenly aware that First Nations students are different, i.e., they don't participate in discussions, they don't complete assignments, and their attendance is spotty. But lacking any professional training that might help them respond to the educational needs of First Nations students, they can't even understand that such needs exist. These kids sink or swim and with a high school graduation rate nationally somewhere between 30 and 40 percent, swimming for First Nations students is a daily upstream struggle and sinking is a merciful solution to a system that at best views them as problems and at worst ignores their needs.

A partial remedy is for education ministries to demand that all faculties and colleges of education nationally include at least one credit course on Indigenous education as a requirement for a B Ed. Ensuring that courses on Indigenous education concentrate on pedagogical and educational needs of First Nation students rather social issues will provide a much-needed base of information that teachers can fall back on when they encounter First Nation students during their professional careers.

Many years ago, beginning in the mid-1970s, several colleges and faculties of education created special programs to respond to these sorts of deficiencies in the training system and in their own programs. They would focus on producing First Nations teachers by limiting enrolment to First Nations students and by providing Native Studies-types of courses in addition to a selection of standard education training courses. The underlying assumption being that First Nations teachers, trained at a college or faculty of education, would succeed in First Nations classrooms unlike previous generations of teachers and by offering a program of studies rich in issues-oriented content, their graduates would be well-equipped to succeed in reserve schools where many others failed. Today every province and territory has at least one university or college-based native teacher education program, with some having three or more at different institutions.

For over four decades these specialty teacher education programs have been actively producing teachers principally for First Nations schools, and to a lesser extent for schools in Métis districts or communities. Although statistics don't exist to confirm it, the likelihood that they combined to produce at least 100 First Nations certified teachers annually during this period is not unreasonable. In other words, since the mid-70s, approximately 5,000 trained First Nations teachers at a minimum have been working at one time or another in a First Nations school somewhere among the 630 reserves across Canada. The continued persistence of unacceptably low high school graduation rates for First Nations students nationally should raise some serious concerns about what these special First Nations teacher education programs have contributed to the quality of First Nations elementary and secondary education since their inception.

On the surface it appears that their biggest achievement is the production of thousands of First Nations and Métis teachers who would not have acquired their certifications without them. The Saskatchewan University Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP) claims that it has graduated 1,500 native teachers since its inception in the 70s. That in itself is a good and supportable goal but if the purpose of these special programs is to strengthen the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students by producing certified First Nation and Métis teachers, then they all need to undergo either a rigorous self-examination or an external assessment because the drop out and failure rates of Aboriginal students nationally are shocking evidence that their fundamental purpose is not being met.

As with the general college and faculties of education nation-wide, the First Nations and Métis-based special teacher education programs fail to offer students courses and learning materials that range from educating and informing student teachers about the pedagogical techniques that have a greater chance of succeeding in a First Nations classroom than standard western pedagogies to how to communicate effectively with a First Nations class. They need to shift from providing issues-oriented courses to courses, for example, that help student teachers explore and research the cultural behaviour of First Nation students that impacts on their learning, their behaviour, even their attitudes to formal education. Do tribal attitudes to child-rearing need to be understood before any teacher can become an effective teacher of First Nation youth?

Many of these special programs have erroneously assumed that because the student teachers are Ojibway or Cree, or Stoney, for example, they "know" how to teach and communicate with native kids, so their curriculum is devoted to courses focusing on political, social and historical content one usually finds in Native-Indigenous studies programs alongside courses selected from the standard teacher training curriculum. But educators don't make the same assumptions about non-aboriginal student teachers – no one assumes that any student teacher knows intuitively how to teach a class or knows how to communicate effectively in a

classroom just because they were raised in the same culture as their youthful charges. No, as student teachers they are required to take a variety of courses to learn how to become effective teachers.

But there is little or no benefit to teach First Nations student teachers the same kind of pedagogical training as their non-native cohort, especially if they will be returning to a school on reserve. First Nations student teachers should be required to take courses in their special programs that instruct them in the pedagogies that will succeed in First Nations schools, as well as courses that help them understand the relevance of tribal child-rearing techniques and principles and how they apply to teaching in a First Nations school, and most importantly, how to communicate effectively in a First Nations classroom. How do you communicate with youth whose cultural environment minimizes or excludes the interrogative? Or, what if the students are unwilling or unable to participate in discussions because their culture considers youth too inexperienced to have anything important to say? In the absence of these special courses and other related course content, the First Nations teacher education programs will only continue to produce a cadre of professionally qualified teachers; they will not succeed in improving education outcomes of First Nations children.

Turning now to principals, the principals in First Nations education work in two different environments: Schools on reserve and schools off reserve. Principals in the latter category rarely see a large cohort of First Nations students unless their schools are designated receivers for students from northern and remote communities or their schools are in or near urban areas with a large native resident population. But every year principals in off reserve schools that do not fit in either category are encountering First Nations students as more and more families either choose or are forced to live off reserve end up in small towns or small cities apart from the metropolitan cities with large First Nations populations. So, increasingly principals nationally are finding First Nations students in their schools regardless of their location. But be it in an on reserve school or one off reserve, the reality that the majority of principals in First Nations education like the majority of their teachers lack an appropriate professional training relevant to the educational needs of First Nations students is a critical factor that contributes to unacceptably low First Nations education outcomes nationally.

What could the appropriate professional training for principals address? Because too many principals in on or off reserve schools today are unaware of what works and what doesn't work pedagogically with First Nations youth, a sound understanding of the variety of pedagogical skills that have proven successful in different First Nations schools is an important training content.

Principals also need to learn how to deal positively with the resistance by both families and students to regular attendance. Nationally the absenteeism rates of First Nations students in both on and off reserve schools are off the chart. Principals wherever they are simply do not know how to remedy this issue, one that severely impacts the ability of First Nations students to succeed academically. Beyond conducting daily or weekly telephone calls or suspending students whose absenteeism rates skyrocket, they are at a loss for solutions. In the recent past and today, too many principals accept chronic absenteeism as a fact of First Nations education and instead of introducing measures to mitigate severe student absenteeism many choose to see it as either a cultural issue, i.e., formal classroom education is alien to most First Nations cultures, or a community social issue best resolved by local authorities not the school.

Principals also need training in the cultural makeup of the community and by extension of the students in their classrooms. Understanding and recognizing the prevailing social, economic and spiritual values of the community in which the school is situated or of the various cultures of the First Nations students attending their school off reserve would enable principals to communicate effectively with parents and leaders and would contribute to sensitizing their teaching staff to potential cultural conflicts that if unaddressed increases the likelihood students will fall further behind in their education.

Although some observers may suggest that any tenure in a First Nations school will afford a principal opportunities to acquire insight into the prevailing tribal culture of the community, tribal cultures like most cultures are often too subtle to comprehend easily save for dominant values and behaviour that are easily visible daily. Further reducing those opportunities is the preference of many First Nation communities to "act white" in the presence of outsiders, e.g., principals.

In any school that reflects a positive learning environment the working relationship between principals and teachers is key to its success. The challenge for all principals working in a reserve school is knowing how to work effectively with a multi-cultural staff. Some are able to learn on the job; others never quite figure out how. Many First Nation schools have a preponderance of teachers who are either from the local community or are members of the community's tribal culture. Unless a principal is trained to work in a cross-cultural environment or has some formal understanding of the cultural factors of either the community or the indigenous staff, difficulties are inevitable.

How severe are the difficulties one can only guess but the reality is that this situation has been present for as long as principals from outside the community have been engaged in First Nation schools and despite the evidence that a number of principals do learn to adapt to the culture of the host tribe, many do not, and that reality impacts the schools' learning environment, the relationship with parents and students, and ultimately whatever it is that took the principal to a First Nations school in the first place.

If teachers working in First Nations schools need specially designed courses to learn for example how and why residential schools affect First Nation students, so too do principals. Principals not only represent authority, they are authority figures in the community and if the adults and youth in a First Nations community perceive authority through the lens of the residential school experience, principals need to understand how that history and experience colour attitudes towards authority, and most importantly, education authority, and come to some understanding on how to deal effectively with this challenge. In addition to understanding how residential schools continue to impact attitudes towards education and schools, there is a plethora of other socio-political issues that if studied and discussed will inform principals about strategies to improve education outcomes for First Nation youth. Some examples include the role of Indian Agents, the Indian Act, and treaties.

Indian Agents dominated every facet of First Nation life on reserves for more than four generations. Although they were phased out in the 1970s their impact on First Nation attitudes and behaviour in this century is not well understood, if at all. Is it reasonable to consider that a system of agents who controlled life in every First Nation community and whose authority was unchallengeable, absolute, and continuous for over a hundred years coloured their victims' attitudes to imposed institutions such as the school? Both on and off reserve principals, but especially those who work on reserve, need to learn about these issues and be afforded the means to discuss and research how they relate to student behaviour and attitudes towards getting an education.

As critical as the lack of relevant training for principals may be in understanding why formal education fails First Nations students, the lack of education accountability for principals is arguably more critical. To whom is the principal accountable in a reserve schools? In most cases it's either a school committee made up of interested parents, the chief and council, or a local Director of Education hired from the community or a combination of all three. Regardless of which entity has the responsibility, few have the professional expertise, educational background or access to resources on which to evaluate meaningfully a principal. In too many community schools, as long as the principal keeps his or her nose reasonably clean, they remain as long as they choose.

In an off reserve school with a small or large First Nation student population, principals are accountable to boards of education that may have one seat reserved for an First Nation representative. On what basis does the board evaluate their principals regarding First Nation students in the absence of any meaningful community representation? To be blunt, for either group of principals, their accountability for their Indigenous students' academic success or failure is minimal at best, and non-existent, at worst. Accountability measures relating to First Nations students for both groups of principals are desperately needed and until they are developed and implemented improvements in First Nations education outcomes will be slow to materialize.

Missing from the First Nation education arena is a national association for principals who work with First Nations students on or off reserve. In the short term it could mitigate the lack of principals' training in First Nations education issues by enabling them to share Best Practices and information relevant to host of topics such as student absenteeism, working in a tribal culture, and effective pedagogical innovations. A national association could serve to increase the level of awareness of principals, particularly those with off reserve First Nation students, towards the numerous factors unique to First Nations education that impact, often negatively, on the academic performance of so many First Nation students. Too many principals in urban schools with a small or large First Nation student body remain uninformed about these kids and therefore lack the means to deal with the challenges they present.

As a final comment on principals, the high number of First Nation students from reserve schools who dropped out or failed to graduate from high school during the past three decades suggests that most principals in on reserve schools have adopted an unwritten policy of promoting students regardless of their academic skills and abilities. These kids drop out or fail to graduate because they enter off reserve high schools anywhere from one to three years behind their provincial cohorts academically. Not only does this practice ensure that First Nation students from reserve schools wind up in remedial classes where their academic success is severely reduced but it transfers the culpability for their lack of success from the reserve schools to the off reserve high schools. The costs of simply moving on reserve students through the system without regard for their intellectual and academic development are bankrupting First Nation communities in every way imaginable and the practice cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely.

The need for fundamental reforms in the curricula used in First Nation schools is long overdue. All reserve schools, elementary and secondary, use the provincial or territorial curricula. This wholesale application of the provincial-territorial curricula has been in effect since the mid-fifties when the federal government officially adopted them as part of their nationally policy to integrate First Nations schools into the Canadian education system. Previously, most reserve schools nationally operated as mission-run day schools where neither teachers nor curricula were certified or accredited. Federal officials in response to criticism from parents and leaders about the inadequacies of reserve schools believed that introducing provincial curricula would go a long way to alleviate the justifiable concerns and ensure that reserve schools would gradually become integrated into the provincial education systems across Canada.

As bereft as the training of teachers and principals for reserve schools has been, the curricula has been and is equally lacking for students and parents. The provincial curricula simply doesn't work for First Nations schools. From the get-go, i.e., the 1950s, it never occurred to anyone to challenge the assumption that the provincial curricula was the appropriate learning vehicle for First

Nation children. If it was good for provincial schools, it had to be good for reserve schools, right? At the time this sentiment may have had some relevance. Education curricula in schools for First Nation children before 1960 alternated between the manual and religious training in the infamous residential schools and the largely religious training with a modicum of literacy and numeracy content in the mission-run day schools before the 1850s. So anything including the provincial curricula had to be an improvement. But not any longer and it can be argued that the provincial curricula was never appropriate for use in First Nations schools, even as a substitute for what passed as curricula in the mission and residential schools.

Here's why. Not one provincial curricula has learning content that sequentially over several grades addresses the historical, socio-economic, and political environment of First Nations either locally, regionally or nationally. First Nation students are and have been completely shut out from learning about their tribal histories, their past and current economies, their social successes and challenges, and their political institutions, past and present. And this exclusion takes place in the institution where youth go to learn about themselves, their nation and the world.

To a limited extent, ministries of education during the past couple of decades introduced Native Studies, and more recently some First Nation language courses, into the provincial curricula to offset the wholesale avoidance of First Nation content but these courses are feeble substitutes for what is required. Deprived of any learning content relevant to their cultures, communities, and their socio-economic and political institutions, First Nation students tune out, then drop out. Judging by absenteeism rates, the tuning out commences in earnest around grade four or five and persists until the inevitable conclusion.

Without delving into the reasons why the Canadian education system systematically excludes relevant learning content from First Nations youth throughout their elementary-secondary studies, the fact that it happens guarantees a disconnect between these students and the curricula from which they must learn beginning with kindergarten until they finally call it quits, be it grade 10, 11 or 12. The disconnect is substantial as reflected by the skyrocketing absenteeism rates nationally and worse, the disconnect extends beyond students to their parents. Lacking any or minimal connection to their children's education content, too many parents see little reason beyond the recognized importance of acquiring a modicum of literacy and numeracy to ensure their children are prepared daily to prosper in school. This disconnect between the educational content and students and parents needs to be addressed. This can be accomplished several ways - here are three.

First, a new elementary-secondary curriculum for First Nation schools, one that includes a core of the standard academic subjects such as mathematics, the arts, etc., along side subjects adapted for First Nations schools such as science and technology, language arts in addition to a subject or subjects on First Nation civics needs to be discussed, researched and developed by ministries of education either in tandem or alone and working with First Nation educators.

Second, a similar exercise should be undertaken to begin a five-year project to develop a First Nations Civics curriculum for grade 1-8. It should be treated in the same way as an elementary science or social science curriculum, for example, and its focus should be informing a child about his or her community, its history, its institutions, its traditions and culture, its economies and progressively its relationship to other communities, the province or territory in which the community is situated, to the nation as a whole and finally to the international community.

Third, the curriculum currently in First Nations schools needs to accommodate educational content that is more applied than academic. This is not a new or radical suggestion. Provincial curricula at both elementary and secondary levels from the 1930s to the 1960s included subjects that were practical and hands-on as opposed to book learning. Manual training and home economics were two such subjects. Adapting the school program to include one or two applied subjects, in First Nations schools would not only equip students with potentially valuable manual-practical skills useful in their communities they could also convince parents of the utility of education beyond the acquisition of passable literacy and numeracy rates. The list of potential courses is immense. To insure relevancy of this approach, the applied subjects should reflect either the economic or geographic interests (or both) of the particular region rather than imposing one or two applied subjects nationally.

Many First Nation parents do not have as strong a commitment to the value of a formal education as others. Education and by this I mean formal education is and has been perceived through the lens of the residential school experience by a majority of First Nations for over 100 years. By now everyone knows that that experience produced severe emotional and physical pain throughout First Nation communities nationally and it caused enduring suspicion and anger towards education ever since. One major reason why many parents react either defensively or aggressively towards teachers and principals is part of the legacy of residential schools.

Including subjects in First Nation schools that have an applied value will help to persuade parents and community leaders that formal education has benefits beyond basic literacy and numeracy. Furthermore, First Nation people are pragmatists. If something from outside their culture and traditions has value and relevance, it quickly becomes an integral part of their culture. The best and most recent examples are the snowmobile, ATV, chainsaw, and satellite telephones.

If the school curriculum can provide their youth with valuable applied skills as well as a basic level of literacy and numeracy, parental interest in their children's education will be enhanced considerably. What educators and legislators need to bear in mind is that improving education outcomes for First Nations depends on convincing parents that high school graduation and a post-secondary education are essential and valuable for their children's future not to mention the future of their communities.

But saying this repeatedly doesn't work. The message has been delivered consistently for decades with little or no response. Measurable proof in the form young adults possessing practical and applied skills in addition to literacy and numeracy is desperately required. Clearly, the wholesale application of the provincial education system on First Nation schools during the past six decades has failed to persuade even a minority of parents and students that a formal education is worth pursuing. It has been a miserable failure by any measure and several generations of First Nation youth are its victims.

Canada has failed to provide the appropriate and adequate means by which First Nation youth receive a formal education far too long. Many people now recognize that First Nation elementary-secondary education requires fundamental reforms to improve education outcomes for students on and off reserve. One hopes that the new education act will be one of several actions leading to positive outcomes. However, new federal legislation will suffer if authorities continue to ignore some basic changes in the training and preparation of teachers and principals and the curriculum in First Nations schools.

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