

ABORIGINAL PEOPLES AND TERTIARY EDUCATION IN CANADA: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

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Abstract

Aboriginal Peoples have been historically under-represented in the ranks of college and university graduates in Canada. From an institutional perspective, the problem has been typically defined in terms of low achievement, high attrition, poor retention, weak persistence, etc., thus placing the onus for adjustment on the student. From the perspective of the Aboriginal student, however, the institution is viewed as a hostile environment which does not respect them for who they are, is not relevant to their outlook of the world, and is rigid and resistant to accommodation Aboriginal Peoples, thus limiting their access and participation in institutions of higher learning. The implications of these differences will be discussed, along with the identification of ways in which initiatives within tertiary institutions can change the hostile environment to user-friendly environments for Aboriginal Peoples.

Universities and colleges generally have adopted the political rhetoric of "equal opportunity for all". This would suggest that all peoples regardless of colour, social status or place of residence would be fairly and proportionately represented in these institutions of higher learning. We all know that this is not the case. In fact, in the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Report entitled *Universities Under Scrutiny* (1987). Canada is quoted as stating that "in general, despite government policies and programs designed to make tertiary education accessible to the whole spectrum of society, the children of upper-middle and middle class parents are overrepresented at university. The report further states that "universities in general do not consider the social class origins of their students as a relevant factor in their admission and internal policies".

This will explain, in part, why Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, who are said to be the lowest on the socio-economic scale, have historically been under-represented in the ranks of the graduates in colleges and universities in Canada. Twenty years ago (1975-76), less than one per cent (.88%) of the Aboriginal status population was enrolled in colleges and universities (INAC, 1989). In 1988-89, the enrolment had risen to just over three per

cent (MacPherson, 1991) which is still far below the national average.

To understand this phenomenon, two things must be considered. One is the legacy of Aboriginal education in Canada and the other is the problem of the Ivory Tower syndrome perpetuated by higher education institutions.

What follows is a brief overview outlining the chronology of the Aboriginal experience which has been described as a national tragedy. For this paper, I will confine my remarks to those Aboriginal Peoples who are recognized by the Government of Canada as "Indians". (The Indian Act defines an Indian as "a person who pursuant to this Act is registered as an Indian or entitled to be registered as an Indian".)

It is possible to find many accounts of Aboriginal education in Canada, most of which begin with contact with Europeans. It is important to acknowledge that long before Europeans arrived in North America, Indians as we were known at the time, had evolved their own form of education. It was an education in which the community and the natural environment were the classroom, and the land was seen as the mother of the people. Members of the community were the teachers, and each adult was responsible for ensuring that each child learned to live a good life (Kirkness & Bowman, 1992).

Traditionally, education was largely, an informal process that provided the young with the specific skills, attitudes, knowledge and values required to function in everyday life. The development of the whole person was emphasized through teachings that were often shared in storytelling using "tricksters of learning" (Archibald, 1990) through which children learned such values as humility, honesty, courage, kindness and respect.

Boys and girls were taught at an early age to observe and to utilize, to cope with and respect, their environment. Through observation and practice, young children learned child rearing practices and the art of hunting, trapping, fishing, farming, food gathering and preparation, building shelters. Central to the teachings was the belief in the sacred, the Great Spirit, which guided the way the people thought, felt and perceived their world (Kirkness & Bowman, 1992). It was "a natural process occurring during everyday activities....ensuring cultural continuity and survival of the mental, spiritual, emotional and physical well-being of the cultural unit and of its environment." (Armstrong 1987).

This approach to education was drastically changed over the centuries in which education was provided by missionaries and the federal and provincial governments. Beginning at the early part of the 17th

Century, missionaries were brought over from Europe to establish schools for Indians. This was believed to be the best method of bringing Christian civilization to the heathen "Natives". Day schools were the first to be established but were soon abandoned in favour of boarding schools. The period from around 1870 to the early 1980's in which boarding/residential schools operated in Canada is considered the time of greatest oppression for our people, a period of cultural disruption marked by efforts of assimilation which today are viewed more as tactics of extermination. Chrisjohn (1993) describes the residential school experience as draconian. He states:

Even for their time, the normative operations of residential schools were draconian. Discipline could involve physical abuse, withholding food, or exposure to the elements; children were beaten for speaking their own language, for associating with children of the opposite sex, or for minor infractions of school protocol; school facilities and educational materials were often substandard, with inadequate health and living facilities and with standards of nutrition ignored; and on and on. All of these features must be set against the backdrop of a world where the children were removed (sometimes at incredible distances) from home and family for extended periods of time; placed under penalty of law, in the hands of people ill-disposed toward them and their way of life; maintained often at minimal levels of sustenance, with no avenue of complaint or possibility of redress.

The result of all this is that generations to follow have been affected by this tragic interruption of culture resulting in the breakdown of our societies. Today, our people suffer from high rates of suicide, substance abuse, unemployment, family violence and breakdown, incarceration and educational failure.

While residential schools continued to exist into the 1980s, along with Indian Day Schools operated by the Department of Indian Affairs, the government took another tack in educating Aboriginal children in the latter 1950s into the 1960s. The approach was to "civilize and Christianize" the Indians through a policy of integration. Children were to attend public schools with non-Indian children. Canada at its highest point succeeded in making provision for approximately 60% (about 43% today) of Aboriginal students in public schools.

In discussing integration in the 1972 policy of Indian Control of Indian Education, it was noted that:

Integration in the past twenty years has simply meant the closing down of Indian

schools and transferring Indian students to schools away from the Reserves, often against the wishes of Indian parents. The acceleration with which this program has developed has not taken into account the fact that neither Indian parents and children, nor the white community: parents, children and schools, were prepared for integration, or able to cope with the many problems which were created.

The integration program began and continued with little or no consultation with Aboriginal parents, their Bands or organizations. No particular preparation of teachers or curriculum was made to accommodate the Aboriginal children.

The late Chief Dan George (n.d.) in one of his famous soliloquies, "A Talk to Teachers" commented on integration. He stated:

You talk big words of integration in the schools. Does it really exist? Can we talk of integration until there is social integration?...Unless there is integration of hearts and minds you have only a physical presence...and the walls are as high as the mountain range.

Integration has failed to provide a meaningful education for Aboriginal children. Studies on the effects of integration have shown that Aboriginal children reveal patterns that can be identified as alienation and identity conflict. The Aboriginal student is caught between two cultures and is, therefore, literally outside of and between, both.

Amid residential, federal Indian Day schools and integrated schooling, the Aboriginal leaders in 1972 presented to the federal government, a policy document entitled "Indian Control of Indian Education." This national landmark policy was based on two education principles recognized in Canadian society: parental responsibility and local control. It recognizes that Indian parents must enjoy the same fundamental decision-making rights about their children's education as other parents across Canada (Manuel, 1974).

The policy was prompted by the concern of parents for the continuing academic failure experiences by their children and by the need to improve the quality of Indian education. The need for an education relevant to the philosophy and values of Indian people was considered to be essential. Chief George Manuel, the President at the time, of the National Indian Brotherhood (now known as the Assembly of First Nations) responsible for the creation of the policy stated:

Instead of a one-sided view of history, First Nations want their children to learn a Canadian history that honours their customs, values, accomplishments and contributions. We want our children to learn science and technology so that they can promote the harmony of man with nature...not destroy it. We want our children to learn about other peoples in literature and social studies, and in the process to learn to respect the values and cultures of others. Our philosophy of learning and teaching are an integral part of living, both for the teacher and the child. It is not a five hour, five day a week exercise for a dozen years or so. It is a lifelong commitment (Manuel, 1974).

The policy of Indian Control of Indian Education has been in place for over two decades. While its implementation has been beset with many problems over the years, the effect of parental responsibility and local control has clearly brought about positive changes. These include an increase in the number of Aboriginal students completing high school and entering universities and colleges, an increasing number of Aboriginal teachers and increasingly more research is being done by Aboriginal scholars to identify effective pedagogy in Aboriginal education. As well, the problems and challenges associated with the implementation of ICIE are becoming clearer as attempts are being made to resolve them.

In terms of tertiary education, the 1972 policy of ICIE was very clear. It stated: "Considering the great need there is for professional people in Indian communities, every effort should be made to encourage and assist Indian students to succeed in post-secondary studies". The policy spoke to the need for universities to examine their entrance requirements, instituting pre-university programs, providing counselling and tutoring and recognizing Indian languages. It called upon universities to ensure that Native studies had a respected place in the curriculum.

Since 1972, the need for a university education for Aboriginal Peoples has intensified as the goal for Aboriginal self-government and the settling of land claims have become a high priority.

While the numbers of Aboriginal students in universities and colleges in Canada has increased markedly, the situation is far from ideal. Earlier in this paper, I mentioned that one reason for low enrolment had to do with Aboriginal Peoples' experience with formal education provided by missionaries and governments over a period of three hundred years. The other reason was the "Ivory Tower" syndrome perpetuated, most particularly by universities.

Universities are by nature elitist. While espousing multicultural

education and such rhetoric as "equal opportunity for all" or "It's Yours", they are designed for the upper and middle class Caucasian population. Dr. Kogila A. Moodley (1992) of the University of British Columbia, in addressing university education makes this observation. "As long as education continues in this vein, de-emphasizing access, multicultural education will continue to arouse an interminable debate. To be meaningful, the practice of multiculturalism must focus on the special needs of specific minorities, as opposed to overall cultural programming which often only reproduces the cultural hierarchy".

Therefore, from the vantage point of the university, students are generally viewed as coming to partake of what the university has to offer.¹ From this perspective, it is presumed that the university is an established institution with its own long-standing, deeply rooted policies, practices, programs and standards intended to serve the needs of the society in which it is embedded. Students who come to the university are expected to adapt to its modus operandi if they wish to obtain the benefits (usually translated to mean better, higher paying jobs) of the knowledge and skills it has to offer, the desirability and value of which are presumed to be self-evident.

When particular clusters of students, such as those from Aboriginal backgrounds do not readily adapt to conventional institutional norms and expectations and do not achieve levels of "success" comparable to other students, the typical response is to focus on the aberrant students and to intensify efforts at socializing them into the institutional milieu. The lack-of performance issues in such circumstances tend to be defined by the university in terms such as "low achievement," "high attrition," "poor retention," "weak persistence", etc, thus placing the onus for accommodation on the students and fortifying the entrenched nature of the university as an institution.

The institutional response has typically been to intensify the pressure on the Aboriginal students to adapt and become integrated into the institutions social fabric, with the ultimate goal that they will be "retained" until they graduate. Special advising and counselling, bridging and developmental programs and an array of student services have been introduced. While these kinds of initiatives have assisted Aboriginal students to some degree, to make the transition to the institution, it has fallen far short of acknowledging the home culture of the students. As in the case of elementary and high school education, the university must recognize, respect, and build upon the cultural integrity of the student.

The university must be able to present itself in ways that have

instrumental value to Aboriginal students; that is, the programs and services that are offered must connect with the students' own aspirations and cultural dispositions sufficiently to achieve a comfort level that will make the experience worth enduring. If it cannot create an environment in which Aboriginal students begin to "feel at home" in the university, all the special programs and support services offered will be of little value in attracting and holding them in significant numbers. Attending the university is not an all-or-nothing proposition, and many students will move in and out of the university over a period of many years, depending on how well it suits their purposes.

While job opportunities alone may be sufficient motivation to keep some students interested, in the case of many Aboriginal students, these "jobs" are often linked to aspirations with much broader collective/tribal considerations, such as exercising self-government or bringing Aboriginal perspectives to bear in professional and policy-making arenas.

In an effort to sustain their own cultural integrity, there is an urgent need for Aboriginal People to assume roles as teachers, doctors, lawyers, administrators, comptrollers, architects, historians, etc. This need is reflected in an observation made by Chief Simon Baker and elder from the Squamish Nation in British Columbia who has often pointed out that, "Having White lawyers running your band government is not Aboriginal self-government".

The question that Aboriginal Peoples and tertiary education institutions must address with urgency is, "How can the monolithic Ivory Tower be reoriented to make its vast resources more accessible to Aboriginal peoples and their communities?" This is the question that challenges us today as we try to domesticate the Ivory Tower so that Aboriginal peoples can access the university in significant numbers to meet our needs.

Some of the most compelling problems have to do with the institutions lack of respect for our people not just as individuals but more fundamentally as a people, the lack of relevance in the curriculum, the insensitivity toward developing reciprocal relationships between professors and students and finally, the failure to acknowledge the desire of Aboriginal peoples to claim responsibility through participation within the university structure.

According to many Aboriginal students, respect is an issue in the content presented, the issues advanced and how research about Aboriginal peoples is conducted. Little of what they bring in a way of cultural

knowledge, traditions and core values is recognized, much less respected.

One of the greatest frustrations of Aboriginal students occurs in anthropology where often they experience the denigration of their people and when they attempt to present their point of view of question the accuracy of the information, they are often ignored or belittled. An example of an extreme case of disrespect was documented in a Masters thesis by Sheila Te Hennepe (CJNE, 1993) entitled "Issues of Respect: Reflections of First Nations Students' Experiences in Postsecondary Anthropology Classrooms." One of the students participating in the study reported that an anthropology professor of hers dressed up as a shaman. She reported, "My prof dressed up like a shaman and then the class was supposed to ask him questions. He had a paper head band with a paper feather in it and a green shawl over his shoulders. " She explained that her reaction to this violation was..."to pretend it wasn't happening. I told myself that it wasn't really. He is just doing something but it isn't real. There was another Native woman in the class and she just kept looking at me. We went for coffee and she couldn't stop crying".

Another way in which respect is in question in the university is in its view of what constitutes the literate world and whose knowledge is considered valid and worthy of citation as references. The university is a literate world in which only decontextualized literate knowledge counts. The fact that Aboriginal peoples value oral knowledge is of little consequence to the university. Students' who cite oral knowledge in their research are often told that it is not valid knowledge and that they should search the libraries for other sources. If universities are to respect the cultural integrity of Aboriginal students and their communities, they must adopt a posture that goes beyond the usual generation and conveyance of literate knowledge and include the institutional legitimization of indigenous knowledge and skills not derived from books. Such a responsibility requires an institutional respect for indigenous knowledge, as well as an ability to help students to appreciate and build upon their customary forms of consciousness and representation as they expand their understanding of the world in which they live.

The complexity of the task of incorporating oral knowledge in the everyday functioning of the (literate) university is now receiving assistance from an emerging group of Aboriginal scholars. Among them is Jo-ann Archibald, a member of the Stailo Nation in British Columbia who is attempting to reconcile differences in the way knowledge is understood and conveyed in a contrastive study of orality and literacy. She observes:

With the technological advances of video, television and film our world has become a combined oral/literate/visual one. This combination has exciting possibilities for First Nations because it is nearing the traditional holistic learning approach to teaching and learning which is needed to heal our people who have been adversely affected by history. (1990).

Dr Eber Hampton (1988), a Chickasaw originally from Oklahoma and now President of the Saskatchewan Indian Federal College has made an effort to identify some of the qualities that he considers important in the move to construct an "Indian theory of education." He lists the following as "twelve" standards on which to judge any such effort.

- Spirituality - an appreciation for spiritual relationships.
- Service - the purpose of education is to contribute to the people.
- Diversity - Indian education must meet the standards of diverse tribes and communities.
- Culture - the importance of culturally determined ways of thinking, communicating and living.
- Tradition - continuity with tradition.
- Respect - the relationship between the individual and the group recognized as mutually empowering.
- History - appreciation of the facts of Indian history, including the loss of the continent and continuing racial and political oppression.
- Relentlessness - commitment to the struggle for good schools for Indian children.
- Vitality - recognition of the strength of Indian people and culture.
- Conflict - understanding the dynamics and consequences of oppression.
- Place - the importance of sense of place, land and territory.
- Transformation - commitment to personal and societal change.

Such a list of qualities begins to offer universities (and schools) a set of standard against which to examine their policies and practices to see how respectful and relevant they really are to Aboriginal considerations. While Hampton's set of standards may differ from those against which the university is accustomed to being judged, it is in fact a more inclusive list of criteria whereby all students can find something with which to identify. To the extent that universities are able to construct themselves to be more

relevant to and accepting of Aboriginal students' perspectives and experiences, they will be much more relevant and responsive to the needs of all students.

Another frustrating aspect of the university experience for Aboriginal students is the role dichotomy between the producers and the consumers of knowledge in university settings. The conventional institutionalized roles of a university faculty member as the creator and dispenser of knowledge and expertise and the student as the passive recipient of that knowledge and expertise have a tendency to interfere with the establishment of the kinds of human relationships to which Aboriginal students are most likely to respond. Within the Aboriginal experience participation of each individual as both teacher and learner is practised alternately throughout their lifetime.

If faculty members were to have reciprocal relationships, they would be able to create a new kind of education, formulate new paradigms that would lead to greater equilibrium and congruence between the literate view of the world and the reality outside the Ivory Tower. After all, education is not only instilling knowledge but awakening the creative potential within each one of us, enabling us to develop to our fullest potential, and better contribute to the societies we live in (Delors, 1993).

In 1972, through the policy of Indian Control of Indian Education, Aboriginal Peoples clearly articulated their desire to be involved in a meaningful context with the advancement of their peoples' education. It was noted that the fundamental concept of local control (parental responsibility) was what "distinguished the free political system of democratic governments from those of a totalitarian nature." For tertiary institutions, this means being part of the decision-making body through representation on governing boards and advisory councils of universities as well as federal and provincial government boards, councils and commissions concerned with tertiary education in general and/or Aboriginal education in particular.

Aboriginal peoples recognize that access to tertiary institutions means more than gaining an education, it means gaining access to power, authority, and an opportunity to exercise control over the affairs of everyday life. This control is usually taken for granted by non-Aboriginal peoples.

Clearly, comprehensive reform has not spread like wildfire through campuses, since the policy of Indian Control of Indian Education was adopted, but neither has the status quo remained unaffected. The most

promising sign on the horizon of Aboriginal peoples exercising responsibility and increasing participation in the arena of higher education is the burgeoning number of Aboriginal post-secondary/adult education initiatives, both within and outside existing institutions across Canada. Examples range from independent institutions such as tribal colleges (Nicola Valley Institute of Technology, Yellowquill Tribal College, Red Crow Community College), affiliated relationships such as the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College with the University of Regina and the Gabriel Dumont Institute, with the Universities of Regina and Saskatchewan and integrated structures such as the First Nations House of Learning at the University of British Columbia, and various Native Studies departments and Native teacher education programs which are part of universities all across Canada (Barnhardt, 1991).

The structure and focus of each of these institutions vary greatly, with services aimed at clientele ranging from the local community to national levels and the program emphasis ranging from adult and vocational education to graduate level programs. Typical program offerings are in the areas of rural/community/economic development, Aboriginal law, self-government, land claims and resources management, teacher education, health and social services, Aboriginal language revitalization, adult literacy, performing and creative arts, and journalism. Underlying all of these programs and institutions, is an explicit commitment to culturally appropriate, readily accessible, quality education for Aboriginal peoples.

Our challenge to reconstruct and transform tertiary institutions into friendly environments to better serve Aboriginal peoples is, indeed, a daunting task. At the heart of Aboriginal participation in higher education, is the notion of empowerment, not just as individuals but more importantly, as nations and as a people.

What we will not continue to accept is a lesser education, nor do we seek an equal education, but rather a better education - an education that respects us for who we are, that is relevant to our view of the world, that offers reciprocity in their relationships to us and that helps us to exercise responsibility over our lives and those of our people.

It is not enough for colleges and universities to focus their attention on "attrition" and "retention" as an excuse to intensify efforts at cultural assimilation. Such approaches in themselves have not made a significant difference, and have often resulted in further alienation. Instead, the very nature and purpose of higher education must be reconsidered and major shifts in policy, posture and practices of actually working with

Aboriginal peoples must be made. When this happens, we will find that the entire institution, as well as society as a whole will be strengthened and everyone will benefit.

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Endnotes

¹The remainder of this paper draws heavily on a previously published paper entitled First Nations and Higher Education: The Four R's -- Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility written by my colleague Ray Barnhardt and myself. See references.