

Seeking Solutions with a New Lens Focused on First Nations Children in Canada

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Abstract

There will be many celebrations with the 150-year birthday that Canada will be celebrating this year. For First Nations Peoples, the celebration continues with the ability to take control of their own education. The Residential School legacy has left generational effects. Leaders across Canada are working together to infuse Aboriginal perspectives into curriculum and to maintain an inviting inclusive school atmosphere. Programs have been implemented for years to help preschool children and their parents benefit from culturally sensitive programming. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015b) Call to Action is a national wake up call to help Canadians become aware of history with the First Peoples of Canada.

Canada will celebrate its 150th birthday on July 1, 2017. The celebrations include a focus on reconciliation with Indigenous peoples,¹ which fosters an inclusive environment. To be effective, ongoing reconciliation efforts must bring awareness to the broader need for Aboriginal perspectives within education curriculum as well as to how the education system has failed Aboriginal people (Fee, 2012, p. 1). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015b) Call to Action included a call for education for reconciliation that seeks age-appropriate curriculum on the history of Aboriginal peoples (p. 7). Prior to European contact, the entire Aboriginal community raised the child because knowledge transfer was necessary for the survival of the community. Various government policies, such as the Residential School system, eroded the parent-child relationship through lack of identity, loss of language, and erosion of traditional practices. As a result, Aboriginal students have failed to strive equally with their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Today, First Nations communities have expressed a need to take control over their own education by seeking solutions with a new lens focused on their children. An exploration of the Residential School system and the Aboriginal Head Start program, as well as the failure of Aboriginal students to strive and the resultant call for action, illustrate the developments in Aboriginal education over time.

Residential Schools

The Treaties were signed in good faith by both the First Nation people and the Crown. As such, it was a shock when government officials decided that it was in the First Nations' best interest to take their children from their communities and send them to boarding schools. First Nation families believed that teachings should be woven into daily life and be connected with their spiritual beliefs, which made them reluctant to hand over their children to strangers (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2012, p. 10). Government policy stated that Residential Schools would civilize Aboriginal children and assimilate them into Canadian society. There was no indication of a curriculum-based educational system at this time because the intent was "to kill the Indian in the child."

It was an unfortunate event for the children when they were taken away from their parents as young as four years old. They were placed in the Residential School environment where they did not speak nor understand the English language; Western civilization itself was foreign to them. These children knew only what their parents had taught them through love and commitment back in their homelands. Through the 168 years of Residential Schools

¹ In this paper, the terms Aboriginal, First Nation, and Indigenous are used interchangeably. These terms are not to blur any differences between groups of people.

(Sutherland, 2011, p. 1), students failed to thrive equally with the normal Canadian student.² This is understandable because curriculum teaching focused on the three R's – reading, writing, and arithmetic. Due to funding shortage in the Depression years, student class time was cut down to half a day in class to accommodate hours of manual labor needed for survival of the schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2012, p. 34). Basic needs, rather than furthering their education, took precedence.

Throughout these years, the federal government did not share information with First Nation parents. Increasing pressures for transparency pushed the federal government to consider giving education over to the provincial government. Discussions between both levels of government were to integrate students in the provincial system and to assimilate them into Western society. However, with the closure of Residential Schools, the government handed over education to the local control of First Nation communities. Parents were finally able to voice their opinions and have input into their children's education.

Aboriginal Head Start

The Aboriginal Head Start program recently celebrated its 20th year of successful operations. It was in 1995 that First Nation and Inuit Health Branch, along with Public Health Canada, initiated Head Start programs in and across Canada with a primary focus on early childhood education that was culturally sensitive to Aboriginal children. Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve (AHSOR) focused on parental involvement with infant, toddlers, and preschool children. Aboriginal Head Start in urban and northern communities focused on preschool children aged 3-5 years. Creating self-identification and self-worth, and giving Aboriginal communities the power to focus their attention on the younger generation, resulted in success for Aboriginal youth because more students have attained a higher education (Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier, & Pearce, 2012, p. 5). In addition, parents are provided with the opportunity to be directly engaged in their child's educational development.

Enhancing the success of the Aboriginal Head Start centers was the partnership with other agencies that ensured that all areas of the programs six components were covered: culture and language, education, health promotion, nutrition, parental and family involvement, and social support. Agencies included dental technicians, public health, and school divisions for easy transition, as well as local Friendship Centers such as the Manitoba Metis Federation. With the involvement of community supports both on and off reserve, Head Start programs have assisted young students in the four realms of life: spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical development. This approach, although it may not have been a curriculum-based intervention, incorporated cultural compatibility theory into its design and evaluation (Barnes, Josefowitz, & Cole, 2006, p. 6). The inclusion of Aboriginal students' cultural values and beliefs into their education experience fostered an inclusive environment. Head Start programs have proven successful because students who attended were school ready for their formal school years.

Early education through preventative strategies embedded in Aboriginal Head Start programs has assisted communities in restoring cultural identity in parents, elders, and community workers. Nguyen (2011) stated that a holistic approach toward introducing values, attitudes, and beliefs within a community-based program has improved the children's appreciation of who they are (p. 14). Within this program design, the parents are also recognized as the first teachers in a child's life. This approach has created an atmosphere wherein social economics preserve self-worth; parents themselves gain knowledge and strive for success for themselves and their children. Only time will reveal how beneficial it has been to have an inclusive Aboriginal program for the education of preschool children on and off reserve.

² All non-cited information in this paper is from the author's own experience.

Failure to Thrive

Addressing the issues that impact the success or failure of Aboriginal students is a delicate and complex matter. There have been many attempts to improve grade scores across the curricula to support Aboriginal students' efforts to succeed in school and beyond. Unfortunately, statistics demonstrate less success because many Aboriginal students do not remain in school long enough to graduate. Educators often ask why this is happening or what can be done to keep Aboriginal students in school. To significantly lower the probability of early departure from school, research has shown that curricula should be taught by an Aboriginal teacher and include lessons on Aboriginal people and their history (Lamb, 2014, p. 2). Whether it is in a northern, rural, or urban setting, educators are compelled to find ways to encourage First Nation students to strive and graduate from school.

Many non-profit organizations are willing to assist First Nation students, including an organization called Outside Looking In that to incorporate methods of learning into mainstream education that incorporates the pursuits of youth (Rovito & Giles, 2016, p. 7). Youth have created their own outdoor games; knowledge transfer from teachers and elders helps students with all Native games, hip hop dance, art, and cultural creativity. Students are then given credit in school for the activities that they enjoy. It is noted that the landscape of schools is very Eurocentric. When Aboriginal students walk into school, they are greeted with the picture of Queen Elizabeth. Van Inglen and Haleas (2006) stated that Aboriginal students want to see themselves reflected in the fabric of the school (p. 390). An inclusive environment would include items such as student-made art work in the hallways.

Over time, trends in provincial schools have a tendency to recycle (Friedel, 2011, p. 538). One such trend capitalizes on resiliency and keeping the oral traditions alive as valuable lessons. Years earlier, it was recommended to keep the failure-to-strive students in remedial classes and teach them trades to prepare them for the work force. This was in response to the belief that Aboriginal students could not manage mainstream programs. Students were often labelled as learning disabled if they had trouble in the daily Eurocentric school day. Assumptions were thus made around the students' learning capabilities. Modern schools have adapted to worldly views, including that of the Maori framework and how it has revitalized the Maori language and customs while keeping pace with the 20th century educational practices (Rico, 2013, p. 382). A teacher's responsibility is to instill self-confidence and motivation into students to keep them striving for success, but this does not happen with Aboriginal students when they do not feel valued in Western society.

Call for Action

All children deserve a familial relationship with their family that should have been their birthright. This birthright in Canada was infringed upon for First Nation children during the Residential School era. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015b) has issued 94 *Calls to Action* to inform Canadians about the legacy of Residential Schools (p. 1). The average Canadian has not been taught about the historical relationship between Canada and its First Nation people, and thus is ignorant about the Treaties, Residential Schools, and positive contributions that the First Nation people have made over time (Truth & Reconciliation Commission, 2015b, p. 291). The long-lasting implications of that lack of knowledge and understanding are what challenge Aboriginal people today in their everyday lives. Canadians witness those effects in substandard Aboriginal education statistics, higher rates of incarceration within law enforcement, and an increased probability of addictions, mental health and other compounding health issues within the Aboriginal population.

Educational institutions have a direct role in improving the historical views and working toward reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. Education is an avenue to close the gap in historical knowledge that sustains ignorance and racism (Truth &

Reconciliation Commission, 2015a, p. 23). Implementing Jordan's Principle to settle jurisdictional disputes would go a long way to improve the Aboriginal child's welfare. Equality in the treatment of Aboriginal children and all others, including the new immigration programming, would benefit all.

Understanding Indigenous challenges today are directly linked to appreciating the long history between Canada and the First Nation people. It is the *Calls to Action* that will shape how we handle those very topics in the future. Years of silence are broken and stories are emerging from the Elders. The bondage of past wrongs under overwhelming church and government control will be destroyed and liberate First Nation people to a brighter future (Widdowson & Howard, 2013, p. 18). It is important that the Calls for Action improve historical views.

Conclusion

The review of historical perspectives regarding First Nation education clearly shows that the developments over time have not kept pace with mainstream society. The Residential School era has negatively impacted seven generations of children; it may take another seven generations to undo the harms that were implicated upon this nation of people. This level of intergenerational trauma is a historical wrong that has now been studied, documented, and witnessed through Truth and Reconciliation events across Canada wherein survivors share their stories and the burden that they kept hidden for so long. The 94 *Calls to Action* are a national wake-up call, seeking reconciling with Canada to restore – or right – the relationship with the First Peoples of Canada. Small steps have begun with programs such as Aboriginal Headstart and efforts to incorporate cultural programming that will assist failure-to-strive students to succeed. It is through education that Reconciliation efforts will rise to the challenge. All curricula must include rewritten history books that share an Aboriginal perspective and look at First Nations people as positive contributors to society. Then First Nation People will heal and relearn to be proud of their rich history, to celebrate their unique cultures and values, and differences. Educational institutions will be places of healing that will lead the way to a better future, seeking solutions with a new lens focused on First Nations children in Canada.

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