

Canada's First Nations People: Ethnicity and Leadership

Jacqueline Ottmann,

University of Calgary

jottmann@ucalgary.ca

The Premise

First Nations children of today must know their past, their true history in order to understand the present and plan for the future. First Nations cultures must once again be respected and the traditional values must again be held in high esteem. (Kirkness, 1992, p. 103)

I would propose that not only should First Nations children understand their past, but that all Canadians understand the historic and critical role that indigenous peoples of Canada played in developing this country. The silence, which has been pervasive in educational policy circles, to affirm and validate indigenous peoples in Canada has contributed to the perpetuation of marginalisation and discrimination. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1998), in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, passionately declared:

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outsider agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside [his/her country] can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds. (King, pp. 187-204)

In order to strengthen Canadian society, marginalisation of any people is not acceptable.

This paper is the result of a literature survey and the goal of the author is to provide insight into the history and current context of First Nations people in Canada from an indigenous perspective. In order for decision-makers to effectively "handle" the issue of ethnicity (in this case, ethnicity related to Canadian indigenous peoples) in educational policies (policies that ultimately may develop or hinder inter-ethnic relations and realisation of human rights), understanding, collaboration, and partnerships at a deep level should be sought. Societal learning and understanding at a deeper level involves active listening, substantive knowledge gathering from varying and authentic perspectives and relationships and partnerships that are genuine. Many leaders and policy makers are mindful of the human rights of all people and although they do not violate these rights, they may develop laws, policies, and rules that are on the fringe of violation and far from respect, acceptance and inclusion.

Understanding the Context – First Nations Perspective

Prior to European contact, there was an established way of life for First Nations people. This life included a political, economic and spiritual structure that promoted balance. Elder Peter Waskahat helps one to understand the First Nations world view and lifestyle from a dominantly historical perspective:

When you look at First Nations people on this land, in the past, even today, we are careful about what we are given to do. We were given the uses of everything on the land and Creation. We had ... our own teachings, our own education system, teaching children that way of life, and how children were taught how to view, to respect the land and

everything in Creation. Through that, the young people were [educated about] what were the Creator's laws, what were these natural laws. What were the First Nations laws. And talk revolved around a way of life based on these values. For example, to respect, to share, to care, to be respectful of people, how to help oneself. How to help others. How to work together ...

And when the other people came, all other First Nations know of these teachings of this traditional educational system. Everyone had a role. Hunters, the Elders, grandmothers. Even looking for food, there were teachings for the young, for the adults, for the grandparents. A livelihood that was taught, that was what they had...survival of a people. In a lot of this, livelihood was taught ... [to] many generations teaching from Creation. That is how they saw their world and understood their world. For example [we] Indians had our own doctors, our own medicine people.

[There are] a lot of teachings. Lifelong teachings that were passed on from generation to generation. They know sicknesses, they know the plants, and they knew how to treat our people of certain sicknesses. So we had our own system as well. We had our own leadership ... very highly respected for a chance to lead their people. So we had all those things.

We had our own First Nations governments; we had our own life teachings on education. Even when a person had made mistakes in life, there were people that would counsel them. There was a process of reconciliation. It was done through the oral language. It was done through the Elders. There they talked about that person getting back into a balanced life and were made aware of how [to] focus [on] what was important in life.

And if that person had listened and took the appropriate guidance from those kinds of people and they would get back into a balance and be able to help them, to learn from these things. To become a part of the family, part of their nations.

That is how we/they looked at life. That's the Indian way of life, and all First Nations people had understandings of different customs, different traditions ... that was their life. (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, pp. 15-16)

Ways of being and knowing were established and effective.

Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000) stress that because of the holistic perspective of life that First Nations people had and still have, it is difficult to look at any aspect of life in isolation – including leadership and decision making. It is important to note that Cardinal and Hildebrandt found the teachings and belief systems of the Saskatchewan Dene, Cree, Assiniboine, and Saulteaux “were similar and consistent with each other” (p. 9). Cardinal and Hildebrandt determined that “particularly among the Cree, Assiniboine, and Saulteaux Nations, the Elders pointed to the inter-nation aspect of their spiritual traditions, which enables individuals from their respective nations to actively participate in different traditional ceremonies conducted by the different treaty nations” (p. 9). Elder Peter Waskahat further explains “[w]e are all one voice” (p. 9). In working with Saskatchewan Elders, Cardinal and Hildebrandt discovered that “the Elders made it clear that, in their view, those who seek to understand Indian treaties [or Indian people] must become aware of the significance of First Nations spiritual traditions, beliefs, and

ceremonies” (p. 1). During the interview conducted by Cardinal and Hildebrandt, Elder Jimmy Myo commented: “You cannot begin to understand the treaties [or First Nations people] unless you understand our cultural and spiritual traditions and our Indian laws.” (p. 1) It is clear that progress, and perhaps unity, on any issue comes with seeking to understand.

Historically, leadership, as was everything; it was intertwined with spirituality. From a First Nations perspective, it appears that everything stems from the Creator and one’s spiritual being. Sakorarewate (Tom Porter) explains:

Everything is together – spiritual and political – because when the Creator ... made this world, he touched the world all together, and it automatically became spiritual and everything that came from the world is spiritual and so that is what the leaders are, they are both spiritual mentors and the political mentors of the people. (Porter, 1988, p. 12)

One can surmise that traditional First Nations leadership depended upon the spiritual connection to the Creator and all creation. In essence, spirituality embraces leadership, not the other way around.

The First Nations leaders that the early Europeans encountered and on whom they initially depended for survival and with whom they eventually made treaties in exchange for the land, were bold, respected, and accountable to the people and the Creator. They were chosen by the people and the Creator for the skills, knowledge, and wisdom they possessed and exhibited. In most situations, First Nations leadership was earned. In contrast, and in most situations, the First Nations leaders that were appointed after the Indian Act of 1876 were more accountable to the Department of Indian Affairs in Canada than to the people that elected them. This was a drastic change. No longer did First Nations people have direct power to determine their destiny; let alone their day-to-day decisions, without outside intervention. First Nations people were expected to assimilate or disappear.

However, First Nations people have adapted. In a collective sense, First Nations leadership, in its many forms, is re-emerging from a dark place, as a bold force with which to be reckoned. Perhaps it is because the spiritual connection to the Creator and His creation, and all the knowledge and wisdom that come with this connection and relationship, have never been completely extinguished. It appears that the spiritual dimension of First Nations people has given them the strength to endure challenging times and is now giving them the motivation to heal.

The Indian Act: A Defining Moment

As for each individual, there is for every culture and for every people a series of defining moments that change destiny for the better or for the worse. For the First Nations people in Canada, the unilateral implementation of the Indian Act in 1876 was one such moment – and for the worse. From this time to the current day, First Nations people have been living with the negative symptoms and challenging the severe limitations prescribed by the federal government. The Indian Act of 1876 (Government of Canada, 2003), which was legislated by the federal government of Canada, changed the lives of First Nations people because all-encompassing limitations and regulations were imposed. The British North America Act of 1867 stated that “Indians and lands reserved for Indians” (Isaac, 1995, p. 170) were the responsibility of the federal government. This broad statute led to the jurisdictional “administrative mechanism”

(Carr-Stewart, 2003) called the Indian Act. The Indian Act begins with defining the federal government's responsibilities. For example, it defines "band" as a "body of Indians: a) for whose use and benefit in common, lands, the legal title to which is vested in Her Majesty, have been set apart before, on or after September 4, 1951; b) for whose use and benefit in common, moneys are held by Her Majesty, or; c) declared by the Governor in Council to be a band for the purposes of this Act" (Government of Canada, 2003). An Indian is simply "a person who pursuant to this Act is registered as an Indian or is entitled to be registered as and Indian" (Government of Canada, 2003). With the implementation of the Indian Act, Canada's federal government literally became the guardians of the affairs of "Indians" in their entirety.

Historically, First Nations governance and leadership was changed as a result of the Indian Act. In the beginning of the document, the "elector" is defined as a person who is "registered on a Band List, is of the full age of eighteen years, and is not disqualified from voting at band elections" (Government of Canada, 2003). Later, in Section 74 (1), the Act declares: "Whenever he deems it advisable for the good government of a band, the Minister may declare by order that after a day to be named therein the council of the band, consisting of a chief and councillors, shall be selected by elections to be held in accordance with this." Subsection (2) states: "Unless otherwise ordered by the Minister, the council of a band in respect of which an order has been made under the subsection (1) shall consist of one chief, and one councillor for every one hundred members of the band, but the number of councillors shall not be less than two nor more than twelve and nor band shall have more that one chief." Subsection 78 (1) limits chief and council terms to two years. The Indian Act also prescribes in detail the election process and the powers of the chief and council in office. The Indian Act (Government of Canada, 2003) was created without the involvement or consultation of First Nations people, hence the foreign nature of the document for First Nations people. The Act did also not support the distinctiveness of First Nations people and did not recognise the diversity within the First Nations population.

Alongside the Indian Act came "reserves" (plots of land where First Nations people were limited to), the permit system (a system where Indians were allowed to leave the reserve for specific purposes), and Indian Agents that represent the federal government. The role of Indian Agent was to monitor and document the activity of the "Indians" within each reserve, and, in many cases, sell agriculture, livestock and other products for individuals in the community. In essence, responsibility and dignity (for some) were slowly being stripped away.

It is clear that historical First Nations governance or leadership was not taken into consideration when The Indian Act was devised. The elections that were suddenly held every two years in close-knit communities would have been a drastic change in First Nations communities that had hereditary chiefs. The implementation of a foreign election system described in the Indian Act of 1876 would have contributed to the confusion and division that communities and families were experiencing because of the overwhelming changes of the time. The Indian Act continues to influence and regulate the life of First Nations people 133 years later, but change is in "the air" as First Nations people are increasingly insisting on participating in decisions that determine their destiny.

Residential Schooling

Another defining moment that had a resounding negative impact came with a Government of Canada legislation. The Indian Act gave the federal government the legal authority to control the education of Indian children; and in 1911, school attendance for First Nations children between the ages of seven and 15 years old was made mandatory after revisions were made to the Act. For many First Nations communities, children are considered a “sacred gift” from the Creator. This amendment introduced yet another dramatic change to First Nations people.

Through Treaty negotiation and unilateral implementation of the Indian Act, the “Indian” people of Canada became confined to reserves, they were “managed” by an Indian Agent and their movement was regulated by the permit system. Then the “final straw”, the “final blow” to the family and the community structure, one that greatly affected the essence (language, traditions and culture) of the people occurred – the children, the most sacred gift, were legally taken from the family and community. Children were systematically removed by legal authorities (Indian Agents, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and Church representatives) (Miller, 1996). The goal was to “Christianise and civilise”, to assimilate the children. Policy makers from the government and the church did not consult First Nations leadership in making decisions that directly affected First Nations people.

The first residential school was set up in British Columbia in 1861 by the Canadian government and run by the church (Indian Residential School Survivors Society, 2009). In 1931, at the height of the residential school era, 82 residential schools were established across the country (Assembly of First Nations, 2008). When the last residential school closed in 1996, around 150 000 Indigenous children had been through the system (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2008). The experiences for many children in residential and industrial schools did not involve quality learning. Sadly, many children were brutally physically, sexually and emotionally abused: Department of Indian Affairs’ policy that aboriginal children must not be educated “above the possibilities of their station”, were upheld. As such, the schools’ curriculum included moral training (through physical labour), academic training (although many teachers were insufficiently educated) and industrial training (for farming and menial jobs). Engaged in the classroom for only half a day, the children were responsible for the complete maintenance (cooking, cleaning, laundry, grounds keeping, farming, etc.) of the school for the remainder of their day. Grade three was the acceptable standard of education. Psychological and emotional abuses were constant: shaming by public beatings of naked children, vilification of native culture, constant racism, public strip and genital searches, withholding presents and letters from family, locking children in closets and cages, segregation of sexes, separation of brothers and sisters, proscription of native languages and spirituality. In addition, the schools were places of profound physical and sexual violence: sexual assaults, forced abortions of staff-impregnated girls, needles inserted into tongues for speaking a native language, burning, scalding, beating until unconscious and/or inflicting permanent injury. They also endured electrical shock, force-feeding of their own vomit when sick, exposure to freezing outside temperatures, withholding of medical attention, shaved heads (a cultural and social violation), starvation (as punishment), forced labour in unsafe work situations, intentional contamination with diseased blankets, insufficient food for basic nutrition and/or spoiled food. Estimates suggest that as many as 60% of the students died (due to illness, beatings, attempts to escape, or suicide) while in the schools. (Indian Residential School Survivors Society, 2009)

The authors of the Canadian Council on Learning “State of Learning in Canada: No Time for Complacency” Report on Learning in Canada report that “In 2002, approximately one in three First Nations youth (aged 12 to 17) and one in six First Nations children (aged 11 and under) had one or more parents who attended a residential school (2007, p. 67). Residential and industrial schooling experiences for First Nations people have been challenging and, in many cases, traumatic. For children who are now parents, negative experiences in residential schools have lead to avoidance of schools and feelings of anger and intimidation of authority. Educational leadership and decision-makers should be aware of the personal and collective histories of people if policies are to be effective and meaningful.

Current Experiences of First Nations People

A common concern of parents is when schooling becomes a threat to their developing child's identity, primarily when the values and world view that prevail at school contradict or ignore the existence of a different perspective the child lives with at home. Elsie Wuttunee (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 3, Gathering Strength, Chapter 5, Education, 2004)

In January 2008, Statistics Canada released a statement that indicated: “In 2006, Aboriginal people in Canada – First Nations, Métis and Inuit – surpassed the one-million mark, reaching 1,172,790. Between 1996 and 2006, the Aboriginal population grew by 45%, compared with 8% for the non-Aboriginal population.” (Statistics Canada, 2008) This rapid growth in population has had authorities seriously revisit Aboriginal peoples. But, what does the environment look like for many Aboriginal people and their families? It is with caution that generalisations are made about the “home-world” of Aboriginal people, particularly Aboriginal students, because Aboriginal people are diverse in language, culture, and traditions; however, there are common threads that bind all Aboriginal people.

Since the British North America Act (1867), the First Nations have been cited in Canadian legislation as one group, and as a result have shared the dire consequences of legislation that was unilateral and prescriptive. This history bound all Aboriginal people to a common reality and future, and because everything is connected it has an impact on learning and teaching in today's classroom. The Indian Act (1876) and Residential school system have had resounding effects on the lives of many, if not all, First Nations people in Canada. Because of systematic events and federal legislation, issues of poverty, abuses, and societal marginalisation, in its many forms, emerged in higher concentrations within the Aboriginal populations.

Hope of change in education for First Nations students came with a federal government policy. In 1972, the *Indian Control of Education* was implemented (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 2002). The policy paper replaced the residential school system with locally controlled band schools. *Indian Control of Indian Education* was a policy that came into existence as a result of insistence by First Nations leadership, specifically the National Indian Brotherhood of Canada, and their outrage at the *White Paper* that was presented in 1969 by the federal government without First Nations consultation. The *White Paper* outlined a plan to transfer the services of First Nations people, including education, to the provinces and to strip away the “special status” of the Indian people. The White Paper was seen as another attempt at assimilation

and a shift away from recognising the founding role that First Nations people have had in establishing the country of Canada. The 1972 draft of *Indian Control of Indian Education* by the National Indian Brotherhood stated what First Nations leadership wanted for their children:

- to reinforce their Indian identity; and
- to provide the training necessary for making a good living in the modern society.

The National Indian Brotherhood (1972, p. 3) declared that “We want education to give our children a strong sense of identity with confidence in their personal worth and ability.”

In a joint announcement, the minister of Indian Affairs and leaders from the National Indian Brotherhood, formally accepted the principles of *Indian Control of Indian Education* in the following year. This was a defining and positive moment for First Nations peoples, because it recognised their right to take control of their children’s education, and in so doing, their destiny. However, the challenges remained as the symptoms of residential schooling still had a grip on the lives of many Aboriginal peoples.

Today, Aboriginal people in Canada experience poverty to a greater extent than the general Canadian population. Factors of poverty contribute to social and economic distress, educational and health challenges. In *Urban Poverty in Canada: A Statistical Profile* (Lee, 2000), results from 1996 Census data indicated that Aboriginal peoples in urban areas were more than twice as likely to live in poverty as non-Aboriginal people. The profile continues: “On average, 55.6 percent of Aboriginal people in cities were living in poverty in 1995, compared to 24 percent of non-Aboriginal people. The incidence of poverty among urban Aboriginal people was the highest of any population examined.” (Lee, 2000, p. 38) The primary source of income for many Aboriginal people continues to be government transfer payments, because many Aboriginal people still struggle to find employment. Consequently, this would affect the yearly income of Aboriginal adults. Howe (2004) explained: “An Aboriginal dropout lives an economically marginalized life in which the male earns only a little more than a third of a million dollars, and the female earns less than ninety thousand dollars. That is over an entire lifetime.” (cited in

White, *et al.*, p. 187) A marginal yearly income has the potential to negatively affect other areas of life, including education.

The situation for Aboriginal children resonates with general statistics on poverty in the Aboriginal population. The National Council of Welfare communicated:

In 1995, three out of five (60 percent) Aboriginal children under six years old lived in poor families. The rate for all Canadian children was much lower at one in four (25 percent). Among Aboriginal children six to 14 years old, the poverty rate was lower at 48 percent, but was still more than double the rate of 22 percent for all children. (March, 2006, http://www.ncwcwbes.net/htmldocument/principales/childpovertysummary_e.htm)

The Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) found that Aboriginal children had the highest rate of poverty in the three equity groups that include visible minority and children with disabilities. As a result, CCSD also discovered that Aboriginal children were four times more likely to be hungry and, in general, they had more health problems (CCSD, 2003).

In response to the dismal statistics on Aboriginal child poverty, the report done by the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIF, 2000) declared: “The distinct nature of Aboriginal child and family poverty is rooted in cultural fragmentation, multi-generational effects of residential schools, wardship through the child welfare system, and socio-economic marginalization” (n.p.). Because poverty rates are generally increasing, and as the OFIF organisation is striving to do, it is important to understand the systematic issues of poverty for Aboriginal families in order to effectively create sustainable change.

It is important for educators to understand that people who live in poverty experience a higher incidence of inadequate housing conditions and increased health problems. Allard, Wilkins and Berthelot (2004) explained:

Aboriginal populations worldwide have undergone major social, economic and cultural changes in the past several decades, some of which may have negatively affected their health status. In Canada, as in other countries, Aboriginal peoples bear a disproportionate burden of disease and die younger and at higher rates than do members of the non-Aboriginal population. (p. 52.)

Furthermore, O'Donnell and Tait (2004) report that “non-Reserve Aboriginal people are more likely to live in crowded conditions and be concerned about water quality” (p. 22) and that “crowded living conditions can lead to transmission of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and hepatitis A, and can increase risk for injuries, mental health problems, family tensions and violence” (p. 22). Over-crowded living conditions, health issues, and overall well-being of Aboriginal students outside the school certainly affect learning and comfort inside the school.

Payne (2003) asserts that, among other things, socio-economic conditions directly influence and determine one's values and beliefs system. Generally, people who live in “poverty”, “middle class” and “wealth” have different value and belief systems and they perceive the world differently. According to Payne, education is “valued and revered as an abstract but not as a reality” for those who experience poverty, whereas it is “critical for climbing the success ladder and making money” for those in middle class, and “necessary tradition for making and maintaining connections” for wealthy people (p. 92). This information has school and classroom implications, especially if a major portion of the teaching population comes from the middle class and is non-Aboriginal, with perhaps limited experience and understanding of Aboriginal peoples, culture, traditions, and daily realities. Rendon (1994) suggested that “poor” and ethnic minority students are underserved and perhaps misunderstood. Pre-service and in-service teachers need to become aware of the many outside factors that affect their students' learning.

The Aboriginal population is experiencing greater population growth than the general population. According to Statistics Canada 2001 Census, the median age of Canada's Aboriginal population was 24,7; this means that half of the Aboriginal population is under 25 years of age (Statistics Canada, 2005). The Census also revealed that children aged 14 and under were one-third of the Aboriginal population, compared to 19% in the non-Aboriginal population. Furthermore, 77% of all Aboriginal children under nine years of age lived off-reserve (cited by Canadian Council on Social Development, 2003). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) has forecasted Alberta to be tied with Ontario in having the largest Aboriginal population of any province or territory by the year 2016. Approximately half of the Aboriginal population resides in urban

centres. These statistical findings have significant implications for education and policy development; they provide a picture and an idea of the extent that organisations, in partnerships with Aboriginal people, will have to respond to societal and systemic issues.

School Experiences for Aboriginal Students

Investigations by Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC, 2003) and Statistics Canada Census (2001) found that school experiences for Aboriginal students vary in relation to the general population. According to both statistical sources, both the on- and off-reserve Aboriginal populations are increasing; subsequently, enrolment of Aboriginal students in First Nations and Provincial schools are steadily increasing. INAC (2003) recorded a decrease in both First Nations and Provincial school enrolment of First Nations students from kindergarten to grade 12 (INAC, 2003, Basic Departmental Data, p. 35). This decrease in enrolment has resulted in a 29,6 percent high school graduation rate among First Nations students for the 2001-2002 school year (INAC, 2003, p. 40). Overall, at least 54% of Aboriginal students failed to complete high school in 1996; but by 2001 the level of non-completion of high school reached 48% (Mendelson, p. 10). These statistics signify a need to examine and perhaps change schooling practices for Aboriginal students.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) Final Report (1996) in *Gathering Strength* (Volume 3) documented Aboriginal students' feelings related to schooling. The report summarised the situation as follows:

Aboriginal adolescents straddle two worlds – one where Aboriginal values and beliefs prevail, and another where television, popular culture and peer pressure offer competing values and priorities.

Aboriginal teenagers need a secure sense of self-worth to keep their balance in the storm of conflicting messages and demands. Many have not found that balance. Their confusion and distress are evident in high drop-out rates, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, defiance of the law and suicidal behaviour.

Aboriginal youth who spoke to the Commission said that they felt marginalized – unable to make their voices heard at school or in their home communities. (Government of Canada, 1997)

With the need to affect change for Aboriginal students, the RCAP (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples) Commissioners recommended “that all Aboriginal children, regardless of status or location, have access to dynamic, culture-based early childhood education” (Government of Canada, 1997, n.p.), and for elementary education they proposed following:

- all schools, whether or not they serve mainly Aboriginal students, adopt curriculums that reflect Aboriginal cultures and realities;
- governments allocate resources such that Aboriginal language instruction can be given high priority, where numbers warrant; and
- provincial and territorial schools make greater efforts to involve Aboriginal parents in decision making (Government of Canada, 1997).

On a provincial level, provinces like Alberta and Saskatchewan have prioritised Aboriginal education as one of the top five areas of focus. Educational divisions such as the First Nations,

Métis, and Inuit Education Branch by Alberta Education and organisations like the Office of the Treaty Commission in Saskatchewan have brought attention to Aboriginal students (issues and challenges), and resulted in concerted and intentional school- and division-wide effort to change the school experience of Aboriginal students with the goal of improving educational achievement and establishing the foundation for sustained school success.

Positive, sustainable, second-order change on issues of ethnicity, particularly those related to Aboriginal peoples has to occur from the inside-out (from within the community), alongside outside-in initiatives. In addition to leadership on every level, Begay stresses that it is the responsibility of First Nations leadership to confront the current issues facing First Nations people and their communities (pp. 1-2). The challenge of re-building nations is great and the residue of the oppressive history of First Nations peoples does not assist in the healing and strengthening of a people. Begay (1997) quotes Thorton and Standard to outline the history that precedes First Nations leaders and the history that greatly affects First Nations leader's ability to lead today:

As the twenty-first century approaches, Native America is looking back on the past 500 years of European and Euro-American contact with a mixture of ambivalence, bitterness, and strength. Native American history is replete with accounts of oppression similar to what has occurred in other countries and societies that have experience colonization. Atrocities of tremendous proportions, such as land piracy, forced political reorganization, cultural deprivation, and economic devastation have been documented extensively. (p. 1.)

The effects of colonisation did not only occur to First Nations people in North America, but to other indigenous peoples throughout the world. These indigenous groups have united, and are working together to find solutions. From this union, these indigenous groups are provided with strength and hope because of the shared history they bare.

The Possibilities

Educational leadership and legislative decision makers in Canada have to be active on many levels in order to create effective and meaningful policies. They should consider the history prior to European contact, the more recent history, and current experiences of First Nation peoples. Furthermore, the decision-making process should be inclusive and collaborative, involving Aboriginal peoples in the decision-making process from the beginning rather than at the end phases, when foundational elements of the decision have already been established. Working at a peer, collaborative level fosters positive working relationships and long-term partnerships. Increasingly, promising practices are being documented. In this respect, researching and becoming familiar with exemplary practices in cross-cultural relations are important for educational leadership.

Where does a leader begin in developing positive ethnic relations? On 11 June 2008, in the House of Commons and in the presence of National Aboriginal leadership and the media, Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered an apology "to former students of Indian residential schools". Prime Minister Harper acknowledged:

The treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history.

(For over a century the residential schools separated over 150,000 native children from their families and communities).

In the 1870's, the federal government, partly in order to meet its obligation to educate aboriginal children, began to play a role in the development and administration of these schools.

Two primary objectives of the residential schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture.

These objectives were based on the assumption aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal.

Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child."

Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country. (Government of Canada, 2008)

In the apology, the federal government recognised the devastating role that their policies and indifference played in the lives of many, many Aboriginal people. Prime Minister Harper declared:

The government recognizes that the absence of an apology has been an impediment to healing and reconciliation ... The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long. The burden is properly ours as a government, and as a country ... You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey.

The government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly.

We are sorry.

Many Aboriginal people believed that an apology would not come in their lifetime. An apology from the churches and the government for the creation of a school system that violated human rights was actively sought by National Aboriginal leadership for years; therefore, it was a very emotional and momentous occasion for the survivors and the descendants of residential school children.

There is a saying that "you can't change what you don't acknowledge". By publicly acknowledging government violation toward a specific people, the Prime Minister has initiated a deeper change process, a step toward the healing and reconciliation process between forces, and a movement toward positive ethnic cross-cultural relations between Canada's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Second-order change also requires a commitment to learning, openness to different perspectives, and strategic, deliberate implementation of respectful cross-cultural practices; particularly as they relate to the decision-making process. On this note, educational leaders and policymakers have to be aware of their own personal biases toward people of difference, and of how these biases positively or negatively influence decision-making.

Educational leaders can look to literature on cross-cultural relationships and pedagogy to guide their leadership. From an organisational point of view, Banks (1994, cited in Dimmock & Walker, 2005, p.183) outlines four levels of multicultural education:

- Level 1 – The Contributions approach: Focuses on heroes, holidays and discrete cultural elements.
- Level 2 – The Additive approach: Content, concepts, themes and perspectives are added but no changes are made to the curriculum and foundational beliefs and values.
- Level 3 – The Transformation approach: The curriculum is enhanced to promote the viewing of concepts from diverse perspectives.
- Level 4 – The Social Action approach: Social issues are investigated and questioned; knowledge of injustice moves to social action.

In this instance, the commitment to knowledge, consciousness and relationship increases as one progresses from level one to level four. Predominately, multicultural educational curriculum reform remains at level one or level two.

Leiding (2007) also offers the following suggestions for the integration of culturally diverse content and practice:

- Be alert to racism in learning materials and in behaviours.
- Choose materials mindfully and steer away from material that promotes stereotypes.
- In order to better teach about the experiences of culturally diverse groups, leaders/teachers need to be prepared with the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills.
- Identify, acknowledge and challenge personal racial attitudes and behaviour.
- Be knowledgeable about one's own cultural heritage, and be willing to share it.
- Ensure that the environment conveys positive images of all groups.
- To promote inclusion, use cooperative learning techniques and group work.

Villegas and Lucas (2007) also suggest that not only ineffective, out-dated practices be changed but they encourage “a new way of looking at teaching [and leading]” (p. 29). Villegas and Lucas encourage educational leaders (including teachers) to go beyond structural/superficial change, and to examine the underlying philosophies (values and beliefs systems) that influence decisions, practices and behaviour. They identify six qualities that contribute to a culturally responsive approach:

- Understanding of the construction of knowledge from different perspectives;
- commitment to learning about the history and the lives of diverse groups;
- socio-culturally consciousness;
- affirming of diversity and inclusion;
- appropriate use of instructional and leadership strategies; and
- student advocacy.

Lastly, Chou (2007) promotes the following for educators and leaders working in diverse cultures:

- Extensive knowledge about the cultural values, learning styles, historical legacies, and contribution of different ethnic groups.
- A shift of perception; from “blaming the victims of school failure” to examining the faults in existing educational systems.
- The conviction to challenge prevailing educational practices and philosophies that inhibit relationships with diverse people; to move from traditional assumptions of cultural indifference and neutrality to considering the possibilities.

- To transfer knowledge and sensitivity about cultural diversity into effective pedagogical practices (p. 25).

It becomes very apparent that an educational leader's ability to foster positive ethnic relations involves multi-level awareness and transformation, including personal awareness and transformation (Valentin, 2006).

Transformative multicultural, multi-ethnic collaboration requires an environment that is inclusive of diverse perspectives. According to Younger and Warrington (2007), relationship-building and an appreciation of diversity should "emerge through consultation, discussion and negotiation" (p. 232). What are the precursors of meaningful consultation and negotiation? Cadwallader (2004) posits that "the relationships of trust and honesty, friendship and collaboration" (p. 100) should be the foundation of cross-cultural dialogue and partnerships. In addition to trust, respect and awareness, Howard (2007) describes a transformative process of cross-cultural relations that includes confronting issues of social dominance and social justice. Cross-cultural partnerships based on trust take time, commitment, respect and a willingness to be open to the possibilities offered by another person with a different perspective.

First Nations' Voice

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) is a national organisation that represents the over 630 First Nations communities across Canada. The AFN Secretariat presents First Nations people in areas that include, but are not limited to: Aboriginal and Treaty rights, economic development, education, languages and literacy, health, housing, social development, justice, taxation, land claims, and the environment (www.afn.ca). AFN Chief, Phil Fontaine, presents an approach to education based on "the 3 R's of First Nations Education: Respect, Recognition and Responsibility". Chief Fontaine describes the 3R's in the following way:

Respect means that First Nations must be equal partners at the table whenever we are talking about education. We have been administering education for the last 35 years [since Indian Control of Indian Education policy was passed in 1972] and we have tremendous expertise and success ... Our involvement will help all of us succeed.

The 2nd R is Recognition. This means acknowledging that First Nations have a right to be at the table as equal partners and that we have a right to receive an education that reflects our cultures, languages and worldviews in a safe and healthy school environment.

The 3rd R is Responsibility. We must all take full responsibility in establishing solid policy directives and action plans which support increased First Nation student success. First Nations are taking responsibility and we strongly feel that the provinces also have a significant role and responsibility to support First Nation student success. Of course, the Federal Government has the highest level of responsibility as the representative of the Crown, but we all have a role.

We must work together to ensure that each partner is doing their job and is not off-loading or refusing to provide necessary resources and programs. (Assembly of First Nations, 2009)

In emphasising respect, recognition and responsibility, the First Nations leadership of Canada are asking to be a part of the decision-making process from the beginning on issues that relate to their

people and their destiny. It is a call to be given back what was taken with the implementation of the Indian Act in 1876.

Conclusion

In February 2009, Chief Fontaine stated the following at the Summit on Aboriginal Education: “When I look at the achievements of this movement I am continuously impressed by the creativity and resiliency of our parents, teachers, students and community members. Although we face many challenges, we are still moving forward.” (Assembly of First Nations, 2009) In spite of the challenges, in the past 37 years, since Indian Control of Indian Education was implemented, Aboriginal peoples have made significant gains. At this Summit, Chief Fontaine shared the successes:

- Moving from zero schools in 1972 to over 500 schools in 2008;
- approximately 33 000 First Nations students enrolled in post-secondary institutions yearly and more than 4 000 First Nations post-secondary graduate each year;
- thousands of First Nation teachers and administrators working in our schools today;
- over 80% of First Nations youth who say they value speaking their language;
- and the emergence of on-reserve Early Childcare Centres, and many more signs of success.

Educational leadership and decision makers have a lot to consider before, during and after policies are made for a group of people. They have to understand the past and the history of a people, understand the present from various perspectives, and anticipate the implications of the policies that are being developed. As literature in cross-cultural relationships indicates, educational leaders also have to understand their personal position about a specific group of people because these beliefs and values (negative or positive) directly influence perspective and decisions, policy and practice, and behaviour and actions. It should be asked whether historic or current policies or beliefs have to be challenged, and perhaps, as the Prime Minister of Canada demonstrated, whether moving forward means acknowledging a wrong. Ultimately, for ethnicity related to Aboriginal peoples, educational leaders and policy makers have to engage and meaningfully involve Aboriginal peoples in the decision-making process from the outset. Chief Fontaine closes his speech to the Council of the Ministers of Education by setting the context and extending the following invitation:

This is no longer just about First Nations. This is about Canada, and our shared future together. And we must keep that reality foremost in mind when we set out our new direction towards a better future. We look forward to working with you as constructive, productive partners, guided by the wisdom of our Elders and the voices of our children. (Assembly of First Nations, 2009)

The quality and degree of communication, collaboration, understanding, relationship and genuine respect between diverse ethnic groups means the difference between survival and thriving together as peoples.

References

- ALLARD Y, WILKINS R, BERTHELOT J-M. (2004). *Premature mortality in health regions with high Aboriginal populations*. Statistics Canada Health Reports, 15(1): 51-60. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca:8096/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=82-003-X20030016765>
- ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS (2009). *National Chief Phil Fontaine speaking notes for council of the Ministers of education, Canada (CMEC): Summit on Aboriginal education: Strengthening Aboriginal success, moving toward learn Canada 2020*. Retrieved March 2009 from <http://www.afn.ca/article.asp?id=4418>
- ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS (2008). Fact Sheet: Residential Schools – History and Demographics. Retrieved November, 2008 from <http://www.afn.ca/article.asp?id=766>
- BEGAY, M. (1997). *Leading by choice, not chance: Leadership education for native executives of American Indian nations*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Boston.
- CADWALLADER, T. (2004). Hwunitum and hwulmuhw or my experiences in an organizational change project. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 28, 92-101.
- CANADIAN COUNCIL ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT. (2006). Retrieved March 2006 from <http://www.ccsd.ca/pr/2003/aboriginal.htm>
- CANADIAN COUNCIL ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT. (2003). *Presentation Notes – Aboriginal Children in Poverty in Urban Communities: Social exclusion and the growing racialization of poverty in Canada*. Retrieved September 2009 from <http://www.ccsd.ca/pr/2003/aboriginal.htm>
- CANADIAN COUNCIL ON LEARNING. (2007). *State of learning in Canada: No time for complacency. Report on learning in Canada, Chapter 5*. Ottawa: CCL.
- CANADIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION. (2008). *A timeline of residential schools*. *CBC News*. Retrieved February 2, 2009 from <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/05/16/f-timeline-residential-schools.html>
- CARDINAL, H. & HILDEBRANDT W. (2000). *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan*. Calgary: University of Calgary.
- CARR-STEWART, S. (2003). *Unit 2: Aboriginal education*. In P. Renihan, K. Walker, & S. Carr-Stewart. (Eds.) *Organization of Public Education: Readings on the Legal and Institutional Contexts*. Saskatoon, SK: University of Saskatchewan.
- CHOU, H. (2007). Teachers' beliefs about teaching urban indigenous students in Taiwan Online Submission. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED495652&site=ehost-live>
- DIMMOCK, C. & WALKER, A. (2005). *Educational Leadership: Culture and Diversity*. Los Angeles, California: Sage Publications.
- FEDERATION OF SASKATCHEWAN INDIAN NATIONS. (2002). *FSIN 2002 annual report*. Saskatoon, SK: 4 Directions Printing Inc.

- GOVERNMENT OF CANADA. (2008). Prime Minister Stephen Harper's statement of apology. Retrieved March 2009 from <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/06/11/pm-statement.html>
- GOVERNMENT OF CANADA (2003). *Indian Act of 1867*. Retrieved December 2003 from <http://www.solon.org/statutes/canada/english/I/1-5.html>
- GOVERNMENT OF CANADA. (1997). *For seven generations: An information legacy of the royal commission on Aboriginal peoples*. [CD-ROM]. Ottawa: Libraxus.
- HOWARD, G.R. (2007) As Diversity Grows, so must we. *Educational Leadership*, 64 (6), 16-22.
- ISAAC, T. (1995). *Aboriginal law: Cases, materials, and commentary*. Saskatoon, SK: Purich.
- INDIAN AND NORTHERN AFFAIRS CANADA (2004). *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 3, Gathering Strength, Chapter 5, Education*. Retrieved September, 7, 2009 from http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20060205104115/http://www.aainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/si43_e.html
- INDIAN AND NORTHERN AFFAIRS CANADA. (December 2003). *Education Programs Report*, Canada: author.
- INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SURVIVORS SOCIETY (2009). *Indian Residential School History*. Retrieved February 1, 2009 from <http://www.irsss.ca/history.html>
- KING JR., M. (1998). *Letter from Birmingham jail*. Atlanta, Georgia: The King Center.
- KIRKNESS, V. J. (1992). *First Nations and Schools: Triumphs and Struggles*. Toronto: Canadian Education Association.
- LEE, K. (2000). *Urban Poverty in Canada: A Statistical Profile*. Canadian Council on Social Development, Retrieved March 2009 from <http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2000/up/>
- LEIDING, D., (2007). Planning Multicultural Lessons. *Principal Leadership (High School Edition)*, 8 (1), 48-51.
- MENDELSON, M. (2006). *Aboriginal Peoples and postsecondary education in Canada*. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy.
- MILLER, J.R. (1996). *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- NATIONAL INDIAN BROTHERHOOD. (1972). *Indian Control of Indian Education: Statement of the Indian Philosophy of Education*. Ottawa: Indian Affairs and Northern Development.
- O'DONNELL, V. & TAIT, H. (2004, Spring). *Well-being of the non-reserve Aboriginal population*. *Canadian Social Trends*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
- ONTARIO FEDERATION OF INDIAN FRIENDSHIP CENTRES (2000). *Urban Aboriginal child poverty*. Retrieved March 2006 from <http://www.spcottawa.on.ca/EOCPRN/PDFs/FSAboriginal.pdf>
- PAYNE, R. (1998). *A framework for understanding poverty*. Baytown, TX: RFT Publishing.
- RENDON, L.I. (1994). *A systematic view of minority students in educational institutions*. Washington, DC: Clearinghouse on Higher Education.
- PORTER, T. (1988). Men Who are of the Good Mind, *Northeast Indian Quarterly*, 4 & 5(1), 8-12.
- STATISTICS CANADA. (2008). *The Daily, Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in 2006: Inuit, Métis and First Nations, 2006 Census*. Retrieved March 2009 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily->

- quotidien/080115/dq080115a-eng.htm
- STATISTICS CANADA. (2005). *The Daily, Canada's population in 2017*. Retrieved March 2009 from
<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/050628/dq050628d-eng.htm>
- THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WELFARE. (2006). Child Poverty. Retrieved March 2006, from
http://www.newcnbes.net/htmldocument/principales/childpovertysummary_e.htm
- VALENTIN, S. (2006). Addressing diversity in teacher education programs. *Education (Chula Vista, Calif.)*, 127(2), 196-202.
- VILLEGAS, A.M. & LUCAS, T. (2007). The Culturally Responsive Teacher. *Educational Leadership*. 64 (6), 28-33.
- WHITE, J., MAXIM, P., & BEAVON, D. (2004). *Aboriginal conditions: Research as a foundation for public policy*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- YOUNGER, M. & WARRINGTON, M. (2007). Closing the gender gap? Issue of gender equity in English secondary schools. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, 28(2), 219-242.