

An Analysis of Program Delivery Services in First Nations, Federal, and Provincial Schools in Northwestern Ontario

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This study compares federal, provincial and First Nations schools' delivery of educational services to native students in Northwestern Ontario. Areas of comparison include curriculum and standards, staffing, staff support and supervision, and student support services. The results of the study indicated that all three educational systems have programs in place to provide the above educational services to the Native students enrolled in their schools. There are, however, significant differences among the systems in the manner in which these services are implemented.

Although many educators are concerned with the quality of Canadian education in general, this concern over quality is especially critical to Native education due to the fact that Native students often demonstrate lower levels of educational achievement than their non-Native counterparts. As More (1984) writes:

One major difference between the debates about the quality of schools systems in general and the quality of Indian education in particular is that academic achievement levels of Indian students are not declining but they continue to be disastrously low." (p.3)

More (1984) also illustrates the importance of improving the quality of Native education by stating that "massive improvements in the quality of education of Indian students is absolutely essential to the success of the current drive for Indian self-determination and self-government" (p. 4).

Assessing the quality of education provided to Native students in northwestern Ontario is particularly important given the fact that recent figures indicate that Native student retention rates in some areas of the region are as low as 9% (Government of Ontario, 1989). Any such assessment, however, is complicated by the fact that Native students in the region attend any one of three separate educational systems operating in the region.

Currently Native students in northwestern Ontario attend elementary and secondary schools in any of the three educational jurisdictions operating in Canada. With the federal government's acceptance of the principle of Indian control of Indian education, there has been a marked increase in the number of students being educated in First Nations schools. This trend is reflected in the enrollment statistics detailed in Table 1.

This paper describes a study that explored how each of these jurisdictions provided educational services to the Native students attending schools in their respective educational systems.

Table 1. *Native Enrollment in Federal, Provincial, and First Nations Schools*

| Jurisdiction | 1988-89 | 1983-84 | 1980-81 |
|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Federal | 15,000 (18%) | 21,893 (28%) | 26,600 (35%) |
| Provincial | 40,000 (47%) | 39,466 (49%) | 40,500 (54%) |
| First Nations | 30,000 (35%) | 16,715 (23%) | 7,900 (11%) |
| Totals | 85,000 | 78,074 | 75,000 |

The *Indian Education Paper Phase One* (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], 1982) identified the provision of four educational services as being "specific components of Indian education services which, it is agreed are determinants of program quality" (p. 20). These services are (a) curriculum and standards; (b) staffing; (c) staff support and supervision; and (d) student support services. The document provides a model that compares "program delivery factors in federal and provincial schools associated with education quality" (p. 19). The use of this model provides a means by which it is possible to compare and assess each school system's ability to provide these critical educational services to their Native students. A brief examination of this model and the rationale for its component parts is as follows.

Curriculum

The INAC (1982) paper recognized that "the fundamental problems with Indian education is the irrelevance of curriculum and curriculum materials for Native learners" (p. 20). Furthermore it stated that this problem can only be corrected by "Indianizing the curriculum ... which will hopefully turn around the dismal results in student achievement" (p. 20). Central to such curriculum reform would be the recognition of "Indian culture, values, customs, languages, and the Indian contribution to Canadian development" (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 9). The present study examined the following aspects of curricula in each of the educational systems operating the region: (a) the source of the curricula and curricular materials used in each system; and (b) the degree to which each educational system has modified their respective curricula to incorporate a Native cultural component.

Staffing

The INAC (1982) paper also examined the number of staffing issues in each educational system. The paper found that staffing in federal schools "was characterized by high turnover rates...and inadequate training for transcultural education" (p. 23). First Nations schools, while providing good teacher orientation, offered little in the way of professional development and provided teachers with inferior employment benefits packages. Provincial schools, on the other hand, provided good opportunities for professional development and offered better working conditions than federal or First Nations schools. The paper did

note, however, that teachers in provincial schools were often unfamiliar with Native culture. Given the probability of increased competition among federal, provincial, and First Nations schools for teaching staff, the issues of staff retention and employment benefits will become increasingly important.

Staff Support and Supervision

Studies conducted by Denis (1985) and Agbo (1990) have indicated that the degree of professional isolation and dissatisfaction experienced by teachers in isolated communities is directly related to the opportunities available for professional development. Many of the federal, First Nations, and to a lesser extent, provincial schools in northwestern Ontario are located in isolated communities where mechanisms for staff support may be limited. In addition, due to the fact that each school system operates within its own legal and administrative framework, there exists the possibility that the nature of supervisory relations may vary from system to system.

Student Support Services

Finally, documentation provided by INAC (1982), the Assembly of First Nations (1988), and the Ontario Ministry of Education (1989) all recognize the relationship between the provision of such student support services as special education, and guidance and career counselling on the one hand, and student success rates on the other. While the Ontario government has mandated the provision of such services to students in provincial schools, neither federal nor First Nations schools are subject to provincial legislation. Therefore, their provision of such services may vary considerably from their provincial counterparts.

Methodology

This study concentrated on northwestern Ontario, a geographical region incorporated within the Indian and Northern Affairs administrative districts of James Bay, Sioux Lookout, and Western Districts. Located within this region are some 68 Native communities of which nine are classified as "urban" (located in or near a community with a population in excess of 5,000), 26 as "remote" (located in or near a community with a population of less than 5,000), and 33 as "special access" (accessible only by air). Educational services are provided to these communities by three distinct educational jurisdictions: (a) Federal schools operated by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, (b) Provincial schools operated by a public or separate board of education, and (c) First Nations schools operated by a First Nations Education Authority. Fifty-three Native communities were selected to form the basis of the sample population. These communities reflect a mixture of the urban, rural-remote and special access communities found in the region.

Most of the data were acquired by means of a questionnaire that was based on the evaluative model used in *Indian Education Paper Phase One* (INAC, 1982). Questionnaires were mailed to 37 school boards (public and separate) and

28 First Nations schools. In addition to the mailed questionnaires, the principals of seven federal schools were contacted at their orientation conference held in an urban centre in the region. Questionnaires were returned by 27 provincial school boards, 26 First Nations schools, and seven federal schools for an overall return rate of 83.3%. In addition to the survey questionnaire, structured interviews were conducted with the assistant district superintendent of education for an INAC administrative district and a superintendent of education for an urban school board in the region. Further documentary data were obtained through review of documents supplied by various organizations concerned with Native education. This supplemental data provided much valuable information that the questionnaire alone could not have provided.

Educational Services and Native Students in Northwestern Ontario Today

Curriculum and Standards

The results of the questionnaire revealed that the use of provincial curriculum documents and resource materials is widespread among all three educational systems in Northwestern Ontario. While the use of Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum documents and materials is to be expected in public and separate schools, it is interesting to note that fully 71.4% of the federal and 62.5% of the First Nations schools surveyed made use of these documents as the basis for at least part of their instructional programs. In addition, 84.6% of the First Nations schools surveyed and 85.7% of their federal counterparts indicated that they made use of provincial curriculum resource materials.

The questionnaire also examined the incorporation of a Native cultural component in the curricula of the educational systems surveyed. The survey results indicate, for example, that Native language instruction is universal in both the federal and First Nations schools in the region. The results from the provincial sector were not as encouraging. Only 53.8% of the provincial school boards participating in the survey indicated that they delivered such a program. An additional 26.9% indicated that they did not include any Native cultural component in their curricula at all.

The results of the survey raise two important questions: (a) How do Native communities make their educational programs relevant to their students if they are compelled to use curriculum materials that are designed to meet the needs of the wider provincial population? and (b) How are Native students' retention rates in provincial schools to be increased if a significant number of provincial school boards do not incorporate a Native cultural component in their curricula?

The answer to the first question will be a matter of considerable concern to First Nations educators for years to come. Because many Native communities in the region are relatively small and are geographically isolated, they are compelled to send their children to urban provincial secondary schools. This places pressure on their community schools to provide a standard of education that is on an academic par with their provincial counterparts. Meeting provincial standards, however, implies making use of provincial curriculum materials and places these schools in the position of having to make a trade-off between meeting provincial standards and providing culturally relevant education to their

students. As the Northern Nisnawbe Education Council (n.d.) writes, "northern schools have to clarify their priorities between teaching traditional skills and obtaining academic parity" (Vol. 10, p. 3).

In the case of the second question, the Ontario Ministry of Education has made provisions for the inclusion of a Native cultural component in the curricula of provincial schools. The Ministry has developed curriculum documents and materials Native language as second language instruction in provincial schools at the primary to senior division levels. However, the results of the survey indicate that such programming is not being implemented in all the provincial schools in the region. If Cummins' (1986) position that minority students' success rates are dependent on the degree to which their culture is recognized in the educational institutions they attend is accurate, then the prospects for reducing the high dropout rates among Native children in provincial schools in the region are not encouraging.

Staffing

A prime example of the variance among the three educational systems is in the provision of supplementary health care benefits to educational employees. INAC, for example, provides its teachers with an optional group supplemental medical insurance plan as well as with an employer-paid group dental care plan. Similarly, 84.6% of the provincial school boards surveyed indicated that they provided their teachers with some form of supplemental medical coverage and 92.3% provide a dental plan.

The provision of such employment benefits are not as widespread among First Nations schools. Specifically, 61.5% of First Nations schools responded to the questionnaire by stating that they had a supplemental medical care plan in place, while 76.9% indicated that they had some form of dental plan. There are two possible explanations for this variation: (a) that the federal funding formulae for First Nations schools do not provide them with sufficient funds to provide their educational employees with comprehensive benefit packages; and (b) the fact that while professional (union) representation is universal in provincial and federal schools, only 7.7% of First Nations teachers belong to a collective bargaining unit. In either case, the ability of First Nations schools to attract and to retain staff could be seriously affected if they cannot offer pay and benefit packages that are competitive with other educational jurisdictions.

Staff Support and Supervision

The nature of supervisory relations also varies from system to system. While federal and provincial schools have clearly defined lines of authority, survey results indicate that this not always the case in First Nations schools. Of the First Nations schools responding to the questionnaire, 46.2% indicated that the responsibility for the supervision of the principal rested with the Director of Education, 46.2% named the Education Authority, 15.5% the Superintendent of Education, and 11.5% the Chief and Council. The fact that these percentages cumulatively exceed 100% indicates that, in at least some cases, the

responsibility for the supervision is shared by more than one group or individual. In addition, documentation provided by Native organizations indicate that in many communities the Education Authority is subordinate to the Chief and Council. This is analogous to a board of education being subordinate to the Mayor and City Council in the provincial system, a situation that does not exist in Ontario. This overlapping of authority can result in anxiety among teachers and principals in First Nations systems. As the Northern Nishnawbe Council (n.d.) writes:

Teachers (and principals) who have worked for INAC are used to working in a situation they know well and understand. At first under band control there is confusion. This causes stress for everyone, particularly for teachers (and by extension principals). (Vol. 9, p. 1)

Student Support Services

The questionnaire also indicated a major difference among federal, provincial and First Nations schools in the manner in which special education services are delivered to students in the respective systems.

The special education program is largely community based and makes extensive use of community resource people known as Tutor Escorts. This use of community resource people is evidenced by the fact that 42.9% of the federal schools surveyed utilize the services of special education teachers, while 84.6% of the provincial boards surveyed employ the services of such a specialist.

The data acquired through the survey also indicate that the delivery of special education services is less prevalent (in some specific services) in First Nations schools than in the other two educational systems. For example, 53.8% of the First Nations schools surveyed provided their students with diagnostic assessment services as compared with 100.0% of the federal and 80.8% of the provincial schools responding to the questionnaire. On the other hand, First Nations schools were more apt to deliver withdrawal services, remedial instruction, and the services of a special education teacher than their federal counterparts. This may be in part due to the fact that First Nations schools are still in the process of developing a delivery mechanism for the provision of special education services to their students. Additionally, Native teachers (Guay, 1986) have questioned "How special education could be effective when the present level of general education is below the par enjoyed by non-Native citizens of Ontario" (p. 19).

The Delivery of Educational Services to Native Students: A Summary

In the final analysis, federal, provincial, and First Nations schools in northwestern Ontario have developed mechanisms for the delivery of curriculum, staffing, staff support and supervision, and student support services. The nature and means of delivery of these services may vary from system to system.

The direct federal presence in Native education is rapidly declining in the face of the current trend toward local control of education in many Native communities. Federal schools, however, remain significant in that they provide the foundation for the emerging First Nations system. Thus it is important that INAC continue to upgrade these facilities in order to ensure that Native

communities inherit schools that provide viable education services to these students.

Provincial schools remain an important factor in the provision of educational services to native people. While the percentage of Native children enrolled in provincial schools has declined, the province continues to provide educational services to close to half of the Native students in the province. This is especially true at the secondary level. Although the Ontario Ministry of Education has established a number of curriculum, language instruction, and counselling initiatives designed to meet the needs of Native students, the results of this study indicate that the implementation of these initiatives is not universal across the region. Whether this is because Native parents have not requested these programs or are unable to do so because they lack representation on the region's school boards is difficult to assess. In either case the dropout rate among Native students in provincial schools remains unacceptably high.

First Nations schools are still in a developmental stage. Often lacking the human and fiscal resources of their provincial counterparts, they are often dependent on outside agencies for the resources they need for the delivery of their educational services. In spite of these problems, First Nations schools have the potential to correct many of the past deficiencies that have contributed to the low rates of educational achievement experienced by many Native children in the past. However, in order for First Nations schools to reach their full potential, they must have the resources that will enable them to reach this goal.

Student achievement and retention rates among Native students in northwestern Ontario remain well below those experienced by the non-Native population. Educators of Native children in all three educational systems need to reevaluate and reassess their current delivery of educational services if this trend is to be reversed.

Note

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