

# Editorial

## First Nations' Education at a Critical Juncture

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The 2006 Canadian Census is now out, and the prognosis for on-reserve Aboriginal education is not good. It shows an ever-widening gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal education success (Richards, 2008).

When First Nations assumed “control” of their education processes, it was somehow expected that positive change would occur, bringing success with fewer dropouts, more fulfillment, higher completion rates, and an education that would meet modern-day demands. In very few situations has this happened, more by accident than by systematic, administrative reform. In more locations than not, First Nations students have become pawns in a complex and troublesome transfer of control. The system has not changed and nor has the curriculum that supported this system. Control has simply meant a delegation of some authority to First Nations and their locally elected or appointed school boards. The very system that failed to deliver relevant and satisfying education off-reserve has now moved on-reserve. But even more significant, the budget and funding that supported First Nations students in off-reserve schools did not transfer with them. First Nations are expected to deliver the same education with a fraction of the funds designated to Aboriginal students who attend provincial schools. This discrepancy has been pointed out in numerous doctoral dissertations (Steinhauer, 2008), in a variety of scholarly journals (Wilson, 2007), in national newspaper editorials, and in funded research publications (Mendelson, 2008).

If funding can be identified as a major symptom of a larger systemic problem in First Nations education, so too can the issue of locally appointed school boards. Often local school board members attempt to maintain power by ensuring employment for family and friends and by micro-managing the teachers, the school administration, the curriculum, and the success of their school. In this gatekeeping role, they simulate the model used in the past by the Department of Indian Affairs and by residential school employees. They are doing what they believe to be “what is best for the people,” and they are doing it in the best way that they know how.

What rich fodder for educational researchers! In their attempt to understand if whitestream, western school curricula can work or fit successfully

into First Nations settings, researchers for nearly three decades have looked at various phenomena that either demonstrate success or illustrate failure for First Nations education. They have written about the preparation of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers who work in First Nations communities. Some have documented racist practices or ingrained bias as key factors in the lack of success for education on First Nations. Still others have looked at ways to insert Aboriginal culture, customs, and practices into the current curriculum or to include recreation, nutrition, and spirituality in an attempt to supplement what now exists. Many of these isolated piecemeal individual programs have brought pockets of success to First Nations schools, but with little understanding of the underlying philosophy that allowed the success and with no great change to the overall First Nations educational dilemma.

Overall First Nations education is failing. In the few schools that are carefully monitoring progress, it is apparent that standards are falling. Many schools do not hold annual general meetings, and communities and parents are left to guess at the success rate of their school. First Nations' schools, although following provincial curricula, for the most part are not giving provincial exams. There is no systematic way of recording progress other than by noting the number of dropouts and the number of grade 12 graduates compared with the number of students who entered grade 12 years before. In response, Aboriginal parents are again sending their children to mainstream schools adjacent to their First Nations. Some First Nations education authorities in fact report that they now have more children attending off-reserve schools than attending the home school. For the most part, these children have higher success rates than their on-reserve cousins.

As we suggested in our editorial to Volume 23, No. 2 of *CJNE* in 1999,

Responsible First Nations educators know that band-controlled education should not simply mean a change of location. It must mean a change of philosophy, a change of curriculum, a change of teaching methodologies, a change of content. If these basic premises are not dealt with openly and strategically, how can the attrition rate or the rate of satisfaction be any different from what it was before First Nations assumed management responsibilities? (Wilson & Wilson, p. 138)

Those who are charged with overseeing First Nations education must be more than gatekeepers. The onerous responsibility for creating and articulating an ancient, cyclical knowledge system must be shared between Aboriginal scholars and educators, with Aboriginal knowledge-keepers, and with community parents and leaders. This is not a short and simple process. But it must begin if we want to control our own destiny and if we want our youngsters to be educated in a proactive, culturally appropriate knowledge transfer. This is not about building self-esteem as much as it is about delivering a stringent, measurable, meaningful curriculum in ways

that our forefathers mastered. Once this Aboriginal system is in place, it will not only be the answer to our own First Nations educational issues, but will offer new approaches to solving problems throughout the world.

The Western curriculum that we are unsuccessfully attempting to deliver in our First Nations schools took hundreds of years to develop. We are now 30 years into the local control process, and we are beginning to take some responsibility for our failures. Let us now move forward with a vision for success, a First Nations Education Act, and a carefully charted path through our own Indigenous framework, using what we have learned and allowing for assistance from others who care.

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