

First Nations Education and Minnis' Rentier Mentality

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In 2006, the Canadian Journal of Education published an article by University College of the North professor John Minnis that explored the relationship between government transfers to Canadian First Nations and educational underachievement. In this discussion, the author suggested that poor academic performances by First Nations students were the result of government transfers that had led to the development of a rentier mentality. This article examines the appropriateness of the rentier theory as an explanation for educational underachievement in First Nations in Canada. Using relevant scholarly literature, an argument that advocates focus on the prevalence of postcolonialism is presented. The author asserts that the suggestion of fiscal transfers from government agencies as an explanation for educational underachievement in First Nations is an oversimplification of the problem and that a broader historical examination may be required.

Introduction

The Eurocentric preoccupation with inferring the existence of social phenomena based on pre-acquired knowledge gained from other sources has had profound effects on Canada's Aboriginal population (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Henderson, 2000a). Many social scientists who work in the Eurocentric tradition have used anthropological procedures to apply what they know from one society to try to understand what they do not know in another (Henderson, 2000a, 2000c). This process of filling the gaps in an effort to understand a social phenomenon may offer a superficially rational understanding of the phenomenon in question, but does little to recognize the unique manifestations of localized knowledge and experience that are prevalent in First Nations communities (Little Bear, 2000). What may be observed and learned in one part of the world may not be appropriately applied to another; the diversity of thought, value, experience, and sensibility that is prevalent in the modern world does not always suit such metanarratives (Duran & Duran, 2000).

Many First Nations in Canada are in crisis (Deer, 2008). The problems that have been plaguing First Nations communities have been illustrated and compared with the lifestyles of non-First Nations peoples in Canada, much to the detriment of contemporary understandings of the phenomenon (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). The publicizing of these problems has focused public attention on the problems themselves and the ethnic origin of those who are experiencing them: discourse on the causes of institutional marginalization is frequently overlooked in Canada's popular consciousness (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996). In attempting to

identify the causes of such problems, some scholars have attempted to use social phenomena prevalent in other societies to explain the crises that plague First Nations peoples in Canada.

Western society is replete with examples of minority groups that have struggled with socioeconomic and political issues that their respective governments have attempted to remedy through social programming and the enactment of policy that espouses inclusivity (Dauvergne, 2005). Canada's First Peoples, however, represent a diverse group who have a noteworthy relationship with their colonizers: one that is governed in part by treaties (Lerat & Ungar, 2005). These treaties, accords that are derogatory in their language and subjugating in their implications, represent agreements that promise restitution for the vast areas of land that were surrendered so that all Canadians could live in what is temporarily regarded as one of the best countries in which to live (United Nations Development Programme, 2007). Although the treaties established by Canada's First Peoples and their colonizers do provide for such restitution, they also represent the Canadian government's means of control through maintaining a status quo that supports oppression and provides marginal opportunity for social advancement (Tully, 2000). Canada's treaty arrangements with the First Peoples, whether perceived in a positive or negative light, are an inextricable part of Canada's First Peoples' identity. In spite of the establishment of treaties, Canada's First Peoples have struggled with the effects of colonialism and social dominance (Stidsen, 2006).

In some quarters, the reasons for the predicament in which many First Peoples struggle have been characterized otherwise. One sentiment that has prevailed in popular consciousness is similar to that put forth by Minnis (2006), who asserted that educational shortcomings among First Nations students could be attributed to fiscal transfers from the Canadian government to First Nations. The fiscal transfers that Minnis appears to focus on are those initiated by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development to support existing treaty agreements (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2007). Minnis' principal assertion is that such fiscal transfers represent unearned income and support a rentier mentality: the failure to develop an appreciation of the work-reward relationship (Yates, 1996). This work propagates a sentiment of Canada's First Peoples that is supported by a number of inaccuracies and problematic theoretical applications to the phenomenon in question. Furthermore, Minnis' work has failed to recognize the importance of the unique treaty agreements made between the First Peoples and their colonizers. To the extent that these histories, experiences, and accords are specific to a particular social context, Minnis' application of Arab states in the Gulf Region as a parallel is not appropriate. The negative sentiments echoed by Minnis' work are exacerbated by the fact that the work in question appears in one

of Canada's most recognized scholarly journals for education. This article challenges the proposition that a rentier mentality among the First Nations of Canada has affected the educational performance of students on First Nations. For the purposes of this article, the terms *Aboriginal* and *First Peoples* are used interchangeably to refer to those status Indians living in First Nations communities in Canada. In writing this article, I affirm that educational underachievements, as well as social, political, and economic problems, are urgent matters for First Nations in Canada.

First Nations and the Rentier Mentality

A rentier mentality is one that is developed when a community or nation acquires financial gain from external sources in return for the land that that community or nation owns or occupies (Yates, 1996). Contemporary scholars, when discussing such communities or nations, frequently cite oil-rich Arab states of the Middle East as cogent examples of such states (Beblawi, 1990). Countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates lack economic diversification, and monies acquired through the oil trade are distributed to citizens and public-sector institutions (Gylfason, 2005). Thus a rentier mentality allegedly emerges when civil workers and citizens become dependent on rents and fail to develop an appreciation of the work-reward relationship. Yates described this mentality.

The rentier mentality is a psychological condition with profound consequences for productivity: contracts are given as an expression of gratitude rather than as a reflection of economic rationale; civil servants see their principal duty as being available in their offices during working hours; businessmen abandon industry and enter into real-estate speculation or other special situations associated with a booming oil sector; the best and brightest abandon business and seek out lucrative government employment; manual labor and other work considered demeaning by the rentier is farmed out to foreign workers ... in extreme cases income is derived simply from citizenship. (p. 22)

In asserting the prevalence of such mentality in First Nations in Canada, Minnis (2006) suggested that the receipt of fiscal transfers has affected educational achievement on reserves. In attempting to draw comparisons between First Nations in Canada and oil-rich Arab states in the Middle East, Minnis stated,

I focus on the links between the rentier nature of First Nations reserve economies, political decision-making, and education outcomes and the Gulf region. Of concern is the persistently high level of educational underachievement common to First Nations populations and how this might be linked to the dependence on external rents.... fiscal transfers ... constitute unearned income unrelated to domestic production. (p. 976)

The suggestion that educational underachievement in First Nations is the consequence of fiscal transfers from the federal government in the form of rents is bold. Unfortunately, Minnis' work contains little information related to educational psychology and does not cite any empirical studies

that infers that First Nations students have been underachieving as a result of their community having received rents from external agencies.

Contemporary and historical accounts of First Nations life in Canada may recognize and affirm the existence of a number of problems related specifically with First Nations in Canada, and particularly with the education of First Nations peoples. Educational achievement is problematic for First Peoples in Canada, as is the case with other aspects of First Nation life. These problematic aspects can include "suicide, conflict with the criminal justice system, child welfare apprehensions and intrusions, violence against women and children, [and] sexual abuse" (Monture-Angus, 1999, p. 11) as well as First Peoples being "more closely scrutinized, less likely to be promoted, more likely to be blamed for difficulties, and less likely to be recognized for successes" (Mills & McCreary, 2006, p. 41). Such social problems may have detrimental effects on educational achievement in such communities (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). The problems associated with educational achievement may be exacerbated by the projected increase of First Nations populations as well as anticipated funding issues for education (Carr-Stewart, 2006).

Educational problems on First Nations, and the broader social problems that often accompany them, may be better characterized as a result of colonialism and postcolonial oppression (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). To suggest that such problems are a result of a rentier mentality is grossly to simplify the phenomenon in question and focuses attention on social problems that were initiated and propagated by external agents. The rentier mentality theory put forth by Minnis (2006) is not presented such that it reflects the colonial roots that led to the establishment of the fiscal transfers that he discusses. Treaties may be characterized as agreements of restitution for those lands that were acquired by non-Aboriginals. *Rent* as described by Minnis is not an issue in this context; the fiscal transfers from the Canadian government may be better described as monetary transfers that account for Canada's treaty obligations.

Alleged parallels between fiscal transfers to First Nations and the rents that are acquired in oil-rich Arab states in the Middle East do not reflect the state of affairs in Canada for a number of reasons. First, the lifestyles of Arabs in the Middle East are in no way prevalent in Canada's First Nations; for most First Nations peoples on reserve, the standard of living is quite low (Gylfason, 2005; Lerat & Ungar, 2005). Collective outrage on the part of the First Peoples in Canada suggests that this state of marginalization is not desired, unlike those who enjoy the benefits of rents in the Middle East. Second, the government transfers to First Nations should not be regarded as unearned income. Money transferred to First Nations to satisfy treaty obligations are a result of transactions that took place many years ago through the struggles of negotiation that were burdened by the forefathers of Canada's First Peoples; the acquisition of money in return

for something as precious as the lands of Turtle Island can hardly be regarded as unearned income. Just because the money in question is not closely related to domestic production does not mean it is unearned. Third, on the topic of rents, Minnis (2006) wrote, "Fiscal transfers amount to unearned income for, and not profit from, ownership of natural resources or industrial production" (p. 979). This may be the case; however, one may find it difficult to accept that those providing the income view such natural resources as the property of First Nations. Formal ownership of the natural resources from which the government acquires money to transfer appears to lie with those other than the First Nations, making the application of rentier economics to this phenomenon problematic.

Perhaps the most suspect aspects of Minnis' (2006) discourse is the suggestion that the socioeconomic problems associated with First Nations in Canada can be remedied by allowing private ownership of existing land and resources in First Nations territories. As Minnis states, "economic productivity is significantly higher on reserves where a relatively large portion of land is privately owned as compared to land held in trust or land that is tribally owned" (p. 979). Making reserve land private, certainly in the mainstream sense, is risky business if one considers the possibility that individual owners of land can treat such property in any way they see fit, possibly leading to large-scale resource extraction or even outright sale of the property to others. The possible results of private ownership of First Nations land may remind one of the assimilation policies put forth by the White Paper of 1969, when government authorities attempted to encourage Canada's Aboriginal population to become a more active part of mainstream society. Although private land ownership may lead to temporary prosperity, the existence of such lands in Canada's mainstream economy may ultimately lead to their permanent disappearance from the First Nations' sphere of control and will serve to nullify existing treaty relationships. For these reasons, First Nations lands must be protected (Turner, 2006). Private land ownership by individuals is a Eurocentric reality that Minnis appears to accept as imperative for the First Nations peoples of Canada.

In presenting his argument about the rentier mentality, Minnis (2006) suggests that colonization and cultural discontinuity are not sufficient reasons for contemporary educational underachievement in First Nations in Canada. Minnis' sentiment about colonization and cultural discontinuity, arguably flawed by problematic applications of inappropriate concepts, are addressed separately in the following two sections.

Colonization

In regard to educational underachievement, Minnis (2006) writes, "The assumption that academic underachievement is caused by colonization is flawed from many perspectives" (p. 981). Minnis attempts to substantiate this claim by suggesting that (a) political actors on First Nations have

sufficient political and economic power to address the situation; and (b) First Nations people living off reserve have increased in number to the point that government transfers to First Nations should be the subject of policy development. These reasons for discounting the colonization argument as an explanation for educational underachievement in First Nations suffer from how Minnis employs the term *colonization*, which is defined as the act or instance of colonizing (Merriam-Webster, 2008). If one accepts that colonization refers to a series of events that lead to confederation and the signing of treaties (after which, European settlements could hardly be referred to as colonies), then one may also accept that *postcolonialism* is a better term to describe the phenomenon in question: this distinction is not made in Minnis' article and may cause confusion for readers.

The suggestion that political actors in First Nations possess sufficient political and economic power to address the crises in question is remarkably misguided. In the last four decades, developments in the area of First Nations governance have been encouraging, but are still considerably insufficient (Bird, 2002). Traditional forms of First Nations community leadership still need to be made commensurate with mainstream democracy (Otis, 2006). Minnis' suggestion that First Nations people living off reserve have increased in number to the point that government transfers to First Nations should be the subject of policy development does not adequately support an argument for reexamining how money is transferred to First Nations. As Minnis (2006) writes, "70 per cent of all Aboriginals now live in towns or urban centres. And yet only \$7 million is spent annually servicing off-reserve populations compared to \$320 million for on-reserve populations" (p. 981). Regardless of how much money is used to service off-reserve Aboriginals, Canada's treaty obligations were established in reference to First Nations reserves; the monies used to address those obligations should not be the subject of policy development that adversely affects existing treaty obligations.

Minnis' (2006) failure to regard postcolonial phenomena as genuine reasons for Aboriginal underachievement is exacerbated by one of his more problematic statements:

Neither can internal colonialism explain why off-reserve students perform better than on-reserve students in the trades and at the secondary and post-secondary level.... many on-reserve schools are now staffed with Aboriginal teachers and personnel who are brought up in the same culture as their students. Does this imply that First Nations teachers are colonizing First Nations students? (p. 982)

A reasonable answer to Minnis' query is *Yes*; neo-colonialism (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2000) is prevalent in such situations, because although the teachers in question may come from the same community as the students they teach, the pedagogical practices, curricular materials, and broad educational imperatives employed in First Nations schools can have an adverse effect on Aboriginal students (Battiste & Semaganis, 2002).

Cultural Discontinuity

Cultural discontinuity is a reason for educational underachievement among Aboriginals that Minnis (2006) regards as “dubious” (p. 982). Minnis’ strongest evidence for this reason being inadequate appears to be that changes have been made in First Nations schools that have made them culturally appropriate. As he writes,

A concerted effort has been made to make schools and teachers culturally sensitive. Universities and colleges have made great efforts to help First Nations students adjust to city living and the culture of the university. More First Nations Administrators and teachers are employed in reserve schools. Professional and cultural counselling and support services are available at most post-secondary institutions. Community-based teacher education degree programs have sprung up over the country in an attempt to reduce the cultural divide. (p. 983)

As encouraging as these developments have been over the last few decades, First Nations schools have not yet realized a form of education that is congruent with traditional ideals of learning and is respectful of spiritual, environmental, and cultural aspects of First Nations communities; such an education would need to be localized and unique to the specific community in which it is employed (Abel, Dittburner, & Graham, 2000). To assert that sufficient changes have been made in the area of First Nations education in respect to cultural appropriateness is misguided. Cultural discontinuity is perhaps the most plausible reason for these difficulties, and such discontinuities may merit further research. The plausibility may be better appreciated by considering the following: bearing in mind that language is an important element of ethnic culture (Fettes & Norton, 2000), if the specific cultural discontinuity in First Nations classrooms were language (English instruction of students who converse only in a traditional language), would one really doubt the cultural discontinuity argument for educational underachievement in First Nations? Other aspects of culture such as history, oral traditions, spirituality, and connections to traditional lands may be every bit as essential to First Nations heritage as language.

Discussion: First Nations’ Struggles in Postcolonial Canada

First Nations people have a treaty right to education (Friesen & Friesen, 2002). Treaty obligations are currently usually honored through the transfer of money from government departments to First Nations (Frideres & Gadacz, 2008); these monies fund education in First Nations. This financial relationship between government and First Nations in Canada may be characterized as a treaty relationship, but it would be remiss to overlook the notion that such relationships have their roots in the colonial activities of European settlers during their conquest of present-day Canada (Dickson, 2006). Although the colonial activities of European arrival, settlement, and eventual confederation took place centuries ago, the effects of those activities are still present today and have had an extremely

detrimental effect on the First peoples of Canada (Lerat & Ungar, 2005). Rather than maintaining their ways of life on the traditional lands of their ancestors, Canada's First Peoples have been forced into small enclaves with little in the way of resources to live as they wish (Ray, 2005). These effects, the results of colonial activities of the past, can be referred to as postcolonialism.

Postcolonialism, the theory that "centralizes the issues emerging from colonial relations" (Cashmore, 1996, p. 285), has been manifest in the aftermath of European incursion onto Turtle Island and the marginalizing and oppressive social systems and institutions that continue to subjugate those who have been colonized. If one considers the notion that colonial activity in Canada came to an end with the establishment of treaties, the Indian Act, and Confederation, establishments that are still in force today, then the effect of those developments may merit discourse in the realm Indigenous studies and other similar forums. The postcolonial mentality, one that perpetuates the appalling social status quo of Canada's First Peoples (Ashcroft et al., 2000), can be inferred by the state in which people exist in First Nations communities compared with how they existed when the postcolonial era began. With few exceptions, opportunities for personal and social development are still rare, economic opportunity is still dependent on government assistance, educational performance by First Nations students is still wanting, and non-Aboriginal perspectives on these problems continue to be characterized by a blame-the-victim mentality.

Education for First Nations people has suffered from the effects of postcolonialism (Alfred, 1999). Many have suggested, much as Minnis has, that underachievement in education is the result of a mentality of indolence, inferring that a sedentary lifestyle has developed among First Nations Peoples in Canada that is associated with economic dependence on government transfers. To reiterate a point made above, the transfers discussed by Minnis are presented in a way that fails to communicate the reasons why such transfers exist in the first place. European conquest of present-day Canada involved the initiation on the part of European colonizers of a process of political, economic, and social domination of the First Peoples that reached a significant stage after two crucial events: confederation (the formalization of the colonizers ownership of Canada) and the signing of the Treaties (events that took place over many years and solidified the colonizers' domination over First Nations of Canada). After this stage, government officials assumed the freedom to subjugate the First Peoples of Canada with little resistance (Adams, 2000; Henderson, 2000b). Fiscal transfers may be viewed as compensation for surrendered lands (Mainville, 2001), but such transfers may be viewed as tools of control as well (Cox, 2002). First Nations that have been forced to exist on small, remote, and resource-poor lands where genuine opportunities for social

and economic development are rare must make use of these transfers to maintain community programming and ensure the health of their people as best they can (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996). Focusing on the mentality that emerges from this process of postcolonialism as Minnis does is to convey a minute portion of a larger story.

At present, educational underachievement in First Nations is being addressed through processes of decolonization related to curricular content and pedagogical practices. Armstrong, Corenblum, and Gfellner (2008) employed the use of traditional forms of art in First Nations schools in order to help students affirm and practice traditional cultural mores and improve academic achievement. Greenwood and de Leeuw (2007) espoused a form of education that incorporates connections to the traditional lands and teachings that are relevant to the students in question. Saunders and Hill (2007) called for the inclusion of traditional pedagogies and culturally sensitive curriculum as a remedy for educational underachievement on reserves. These examples speak to a movement in the field of First Nations education that emphasizes adaptation of contemporary educational processes to render them congruent with the cultural uniqueness of the students and communities in question. The unique manifestations of Indigenous knowledge, heritage, and consciousness that are prevalent in a particular community should be reflected in how educational programming is developed and delivered to Aboriginal children; the inclusion of such components of culture can have important benefits to academic achievement (Armstrong et al.; Friesen & Friesen, 2003) as well as language retention (Jonk, 2008). Transforming the Eurocentric school curricula and pedagogical practices employed in most schools in postcolonial Canada into culturally appropriate programming for First Nations students may be a more appropriate means of addressing educational underachievement than focusing on inappropriate economic theories.

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