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Aboriginal Education: Current Crisis, Future Alternatives

Jerry P. White and Dan Beavon

Introduction

Every Aboriginal language in Canada has words for learning. In the Cree language *Kiskinohamāw* means being taught, learning, or going to school. There are words for study, words for student, and many words for needing to learn. Aboriginal cultures across this country hold the educational processes very dear, yet the First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples all face serious problems of underachievement.

We find that Aboriginal educational attainment lags significantly behind the Canadian population. While we can see overall improvement for Registered Indians between 1981 and 2006, improvement in educational attainment has not been continuous. In the 1981 to 1991 period there was a narrowing of the gap with the Canadian population in terms of the proportion with high school or higher, whereas in the 1991 to 2006 period the gap actually increased.

As we have noted before (White, Beavon, et al. 2007) younger cohorts of Aboriginal peoples have greater educational levels than older age groups. However, the gap between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal education is even greater at the younger age levels. In other words, the gains Aboriginal youth are making vis-à-vis their elders is being eclipsed by the rising education levels of Canadians in general.

Canadians generally agree that the development of human capital is very important in the self-actualization of a person. It allows one to choose when and how to integrate into the economic enterprise of the country, region or community in which one lives, and it also contributes to the production of citizenship.

There is a long scientific tradition in sociology and economics that has established that educational attainment, that is, the acquisition of human capital, is highly correlated with income, wealth, occupational diversity and a host of other positive outcomes (see Becker 1964, Coleman 1988). This relationship has been demonstrated to hold for Aboriginal people as well (Richards 2008, Spence et al. 2007, Spence 2007, White, et al. 2004, White, et al. 2005).

Given that Aboriginal peoples culturally prize education and there are these very positive associations with education concerning self-growth and prosperity, we might hope that Aboriginal attainment would be close to the national average. If we look closely at the situation for education we see a different trend. We can see in **Figure 1.1** that the Registered Indian population on reserve (measured in

Figure 1.1: Comparing the Proportion of Aboriginal Population with High School Completion to all Other Canadians

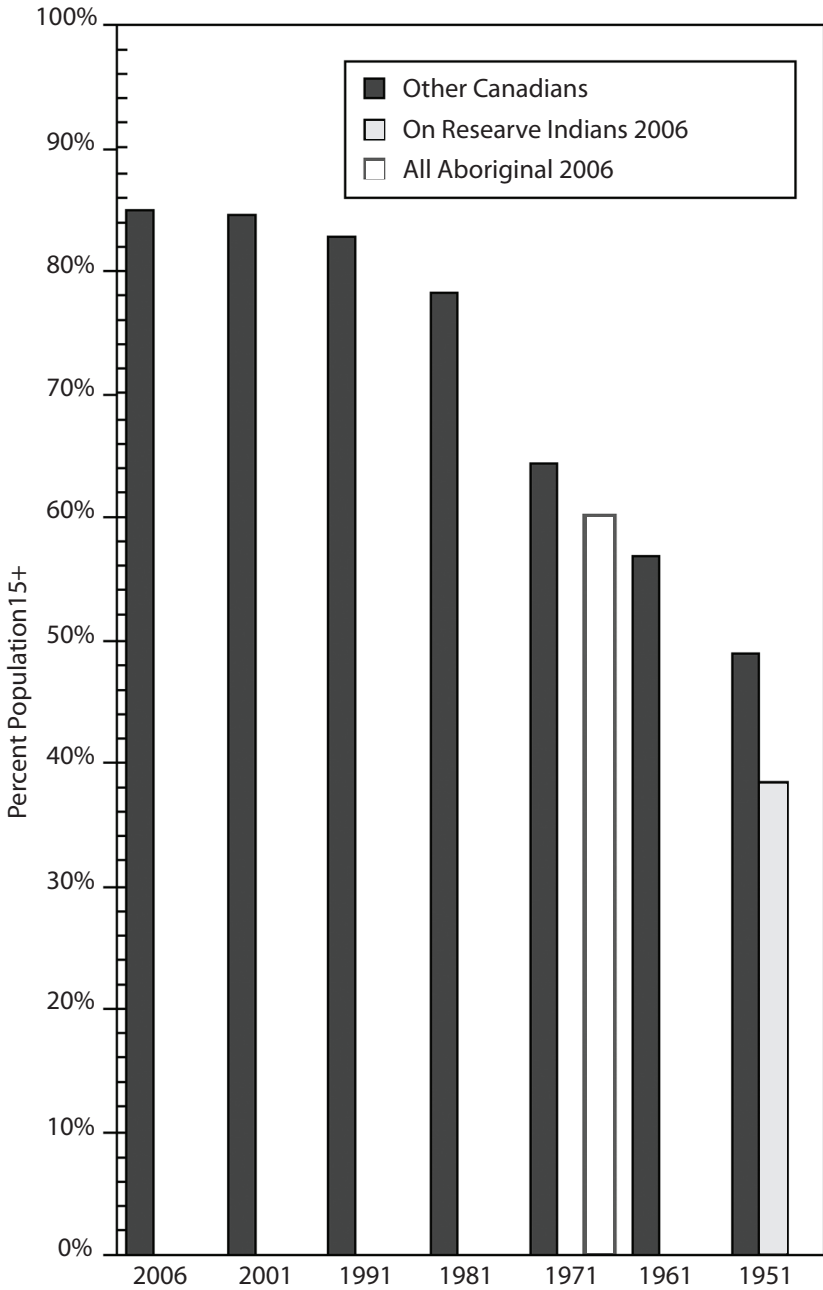
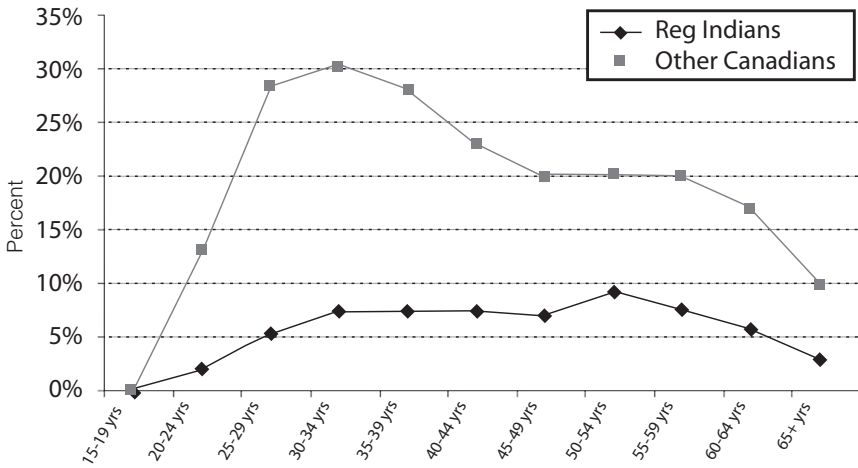


Figure 1.2: Proportion of Registered Indians and Other Canadians with a University Degree, 2006



2006) has a high-school completion rate roughly equal to the rate of non-Aboriginals in 1951; thus, the former are more than 50 years behind the latter. If we include the entire population identifying as Aboriginal, the rate is about the same as in 1971 representing, about a 35-year lag.

If we look at **Figure 1.2** we see that in 2006, the Registered Indian population had much lower overall university degree attainment rate (5%) than the “Other Canadian” population (18%). As John Clement notes in this volume (Chapter 5), for certain age groups, the proportion of the “Other Canadian” population with a university degree is almost six times that for the Registered Indian population (20–24 and 25–29 year olds).

There is a large gap in educational attainment and, as we said earlier, it is not narrowing.

The Arguments Made in this Book

Just how bad is the situation? What jumps out to anyone reading the discussions of our research teams is the following:

1. All Aboriginal groups share a problem of low educational attainment and a large gap with the non-Aboriginal population.
2. For all Aboriginal groups, the gap is widening.
3. There are differences between identity groups. Those peoples in the cities, and those who are closer to market centres and economic development have higher educational attainment. Those in the North or in First Nations communities (reserves) fare most poorly. This can be related to several factors not the least of which is the lack of opportunity to use one’s education where one

- is far from any development. Without the pull of jobs and productive work, youth are not as likely to stay in school.
4. Those who are uprooted or choose to migrate often—those moving from neighbourhood to neighbourhood or community to community—fare much worse than those who are rooted in one place. This may be related to the levels of social capital that families can call on. Networks and supports do not get developed, or once developed they get broken, as families move.
 5. Women are outperforming men in all Aboriginal groups. Therefore, we see a reduced gap between Aboriginal females and the rest of the Canadian population. For males, we see a larger gap that is widening more quickly than for women.
 6. The families where educational attainment norms are low tend to reproduce the low attainment in their children. This may also be related to social capital. Low norms in strong networks can be a negative thing. This may account in part for the situation in First Nation communities where residential schools had the effect of reducing educational attainment and creating a negative attitude to schooling.
 7. The current structure of education, with federal and provincial jurisdictions out of synchronicity, negatively effects educational attainment. If we add the Aboriginal administrations of education into the mix, we face multiplying problems in delivering an appropriate education that captures the needs to train and skill-up people while respecting cultures and ethnic particularities.
 8. Movements to transfer control of education to Aboriginal communities may be simply downloading the right to fail. Many communities have no revenue base, or population base to run schools or school systems. So while leaving schooling out of Aboriginal hands is wrong, so too it may be wrong to transfer control given economies of scale and capacity. We know there are wide ranging differences in capacities between communities (see White, Beavon, et al. 2003).
 9. The low levels of economic development, whether we look at entrepreneurship or externally driven investments, are clearly related to low educational attainment. This could be because there is no future that young people can see in terms of work, occupation, or career. Therefore there is no draw to higher education. At the same time the low levels of educational attainment discourage investments because there is a perceived lack of skilled labour available in that region. Likely these trends reinforce each other.
 10. There is a “brain drain” from the North and from Aboriginal communities generally. This is because there is a very clear benefit to those who seek higher education. They get better salaries through better jobs. Given these opportunities are not located in the North or on the reserves (for the most part) the brightest migrate south or to the cities. It also seems that when the youth leave to seek college or university, they never return.

11. Everyone is losing from low Aboriginal educational attainment. We see lower incomes for the Aboriginal peoples and the resulting poverty for too many. We see a loss of tax revenue for the provinces and Canada. We also see increased expenditures to deal with the social and health consequences associated with lower income and unemployment.

So if that is the current situation, and some of the causes, what can be done? Some of the chapters have proposed solutions. Our teams of researchers have tried to present an evidence-based assessment of the situation and have introduced a range of ideas, even ones we do not necessarily agree with. We do urge everyone to consider them all.

Some arguments support creating less-balkanized, less-inefficient collectivities of communities (and peoples). They argue this will permit real control over education with the resources to be successful. The amalgamation into larger units could allow real self-governing and hence educational reform.

We see arguments for more market driven approaches, where parents get report cards on the success of the school and can move their children out. This, it is argued, leads to schools improving or dying; getting rid of the worst and encouraging the others to improve. Peters and White have labeled this proposal from Richards (2008) the “free market approach,” as it best approximates a range of proposals that are geared to allowing market forces and freedom of choice to force change.

Peters and White also introduce the Assembly of First Nations’ proposals for more self-governmental-style control by Aboriginal communities and collectivities of communities. This might include regional Aboriginal school boards and other innovative structures.

Funding issues and quality issues are of utmost importance. We see proposals for stabilized funding through appropriate incentive systems based on standardized testing regimes that work to build the schools, improve teacher effectiveness, and put the students first.

Policy is called for that targets economic development. Authors argue that transfer payment systems, and the dependency associated with those systems, do not encourage educational attainment. Quite the opposite, they discourage education and reinforce the low norms created in the residential schools period.

Conclusion: Which Way Forward?

A great scientist once said that true ignorance is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. It is obvious that despite the enormous resources and thought we have put into improving our educational systems, we have not succeeded in solving the problems linked to Aboriginal educational attainment. It should be obvious that we can not simply push forward on the same path and expect things to get better. We argue that there is a need to confront this

current situation, based on the evidence, and not turn away from the difficult decisions. Thinking outside the box will mean raising issues that some people do not want raised, such as the viability of certain communities and certain social, economic, and bureaucratic structures.

We are facing a crisis. Not only because there is such a large gap between Registered Indians and the rest of Canada. It is not only because *all* Aboriginal identity populations are achieving much lower attainment. It is all this and more. The crisis comes from the fact we are not improving the situation despite the enormous resources we throw at the problem. The gap is getting worse! Those who think we might have “got it right“ in the 1981–91 period because we saw the gap reduce slightly are wrong. During that time we simply saw several processes working themselves out that changed the population we were measuring. There was an influx of higher educated people who regained their status through Bill C-31 in 1985 (See White et al. 2003, White et al. 2007). They were joined by an ethnic drift of people who chose to declare themselves as having an Aboriginal identity where before they had not (see Guimond 2003). This group also had higher general educational attainment. This resulted in an increase in average educational attainment that appeared to narrow the gap. We see that since 1991 the gap has increased again.

So, we need to think about the problem in a different way: seek new ways of thinking about the causes and develop new potential solutions.

First, we don't think it is the schools and their curriculum that are the key problems. We do agree the schools need secure funding so they can attract and retain good teachers and administrators while marshalling resources for quality programs. We have developed some innovative proposals on ways to do that in this book. White, Peters, and Beavon call for stabilized funding through appropriate incentive systems based on standardized testing regimes that work to build the schools, improve teacher effectiveness, and put the students first. We think that the regularization of funding through a mechanism that empowers the teachers to adjust the delivery of education to help students facing particular issues and roadblocks is crucial. A case study of a pioneering Aboriginal school is included in Chapter 7 and seems to support our contention.

We argue that communities and families are one very important key to rectifying the crisis. The external influences outside the schools are most important in lowering educational attainment. First, communities that have no economic development, either externally driven or through intra-community entrepreneurialism have relatively little chance of improving educational attainment over the medium or long term. There are compelling reasons for this:

1. Youth need to be encouraged to stay in school through the potential of jobs, careers, and improved lifestyle. No development means no jobs and no encouragement.
2. Where communities offer no opportunities for educated youth (other than the

service jobs that come with the transfer payments), those young people leave. They may leave to get an education and never return, or if they do come home, they do not stay. Simply put, there will be a continued “brain drain.”

This raises very difficult questions that relate to whether all communities are viable. This may seem like heresy, but we need to confront the question, discuss it, and consider the implications. It may be that some communities with rich histories and culture have no long-term future outside of being propped up by transfer payments. Paquette, et al. argue that true self-government is necessary to rectify the educational attainment crisis but that true self-government can only come about when there is a community (or group of communities) that is of a size to be self-sufficient and sustainable. While their argument is developed on slightly different lines, in a way this is supportive of our general conclusion that we need to confront the issue of sustainability.

Non-sustainable or semi-dysfunctional communities can also create particular problems. They create conditions where some of their members migrate. When people migrate to cities for housing or jobs or health care, they uproot from family and clan networks that provide social supports. When people are in the cities, these urban communities can also create the conditions that forces movement. Unemployment, inadequate housing, lack of family support services and lack of health care can force intra-urban migration. These movements depress educational attainment. So we argue that support services and better housing will improve educational attainment. This applies in the cities and in other communities.

This bridges us to a third issue we wish to raise. Part of the reason that youth, whose families move a lot, have lower educational attainment is because they have less bonding, bridging, and linking social capital to call on. We outline how these processes work in a chapter that looks at several countries, including Canada, but suffice it to say in simple terms, the families don't have the networks to rely on and use for support. Networks can support through in a myriad of ways, whether it is a family member that can look after kids while one works, or clan neighbours that can go to the store for food when you are sick. White and Spence go further and point out that social capital operates in many ways, even those with strong family networks can be divorced from the schools and the educational processes of Aboriginal communities. They point out that getting families and clans involved in the schools and in education is crucial. Recruiting mothers and elders into the school and developing educational officers of Aboriginal origin to promote education in the communities can be very important in overcoming the low educational norms in many families.

Lastly, we want to draw attention to the obvious. Putting resources into education, either directly to the schools or through economic development, is investment. We will get returns. As several of the authors argue, such as Clatworthy, there is a real cost to low educational attainment and inversely there will be a great gain as we solve this crisis.

The complex relationships that exist between the constitutional provincial educational responsibilities and the treaty-based federal educational responsibilities creates real problems. We feel they need to be made seamless and transparent to allow improvements to Aboriginal educational attainment. We know this is another very difficult question, but one that we must grapple with if this crisis is going to come to an end.

We will be successful in dealing with this crisis because we have to; failure will mean that the current difference in the status and standard of living between populations that share Canada will deepen. This relative deprivation experienced by Aboriginal peoples living in cities or living out in home communities, will lead to serious social unrest and will most certainly increasingly undermine the fabric of Canadian society. We either solve the problem or the tremendous wealth and social stability Canada enjoys will be eroded at an ever increasing rate.

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