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Aboriginal Education: Current Crisis and Future Alternatives

Julie Peters and Jerry P. White

Current Policy Proposals

In this chapter, we present an overview of two seemingly contradictory proposals for moving forward on educational reform. For lack of a better nomenclature we have labeled the work of John Richards and the C.D. Howe Institute as a “free market” approach. We did this because at the core of the argument on how to improve educational performance in First Nations schools is the creation of choice for parents. Giving parents the opportunity to choose the school their children attend is considered key to forcing schools to improve student outcomes, or risk losing their students. On the other side of this contradiction is the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), whose position we have labeled as a “nationalist” approach. We chose this label because the AFN’s core argument is that First Nations should have control over the school system through an expanded self-government model. The AFN sees education as critical to the preservation of culture and well-being.

Free Market Approach

John Richards of the C.D. Howe Institute is one of the key proponents of a free market approach to schooling. In *Creating Choices: Rethinking Aboriginal Policy*, Richards lays out four policy alternatives for improving Aboriginal education off-reserve: 1) create separate schools controlled by Aboriginal peoples within a community; 2) enhance student mobility by relaxing school boundaries, allowing parents to choose where to enroll their children; 3) designate magnet schools that will concentrate on Aboriginal studies; and 4) enrich certain schools by providing them with extra resources to be used to aid Aboriginal students. Among the four alternatives, Richards clearly favours the second option: enhance student mobility, which is more commonly referred to as the “school choice model.” In this system funding follows pupils to whichever school they choose to attend. The other three options are also carefully considered and provided a degree of endorsement, but it is clear that these are seen as options that can enhance the school choice model and serve to appease those who argue for more culturally appropriate Aboriginal education.

To substantiate the assertion that enhanced student mobility can improve Aboriginal educational outcomes, Richards argues that for many Aboriginal families, their neighbourhood school often fares poorly in academics based on provincial standardized test scores (Richards 2006; Richards and Vining 2004). Therefore, requiring that Aboriginal parents send their children to their neighbourhood school means that many of these children will have to attend schools with poor academic standards. In support of this contention, Richards provides statistics from British Columbia's Foundation Skills Assessment¹ showing that Aboriginal students are overrepresented in schools that perform poorly and that there is a greater gap between the scores of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in low performing schools than in schools in the top ranks. By relaxing school boundaries, Richards argues that parents can decide to enroll their children in better performing schools in other neighbourhoods where it is assumed that they will receive a higher quality education and thus have improved educational outcomes.

Parents, from this perspective, are seen as informed consumers of education who choose from among a range of competing products. For parents to be informed consumers in the education marketplace, they must receive relevant performance data with which to compare various schools. Having publicly available school achievement results thus becomes central to a market-based approach to education. Accordingly, proponents of market-based reforms, such as the Fraser Institute, advocate for and actively work towards the publication of school-by-school performance indicators for Aboriginal students attending institutions both on- and off-reserve (Cowley and Easton 2004; Cowley and Easton 2006).

With regard to on-reserve schooling, Richards recently produced a policy piece on Aboriginal educational attainment in which he advocated for the creation of professionalized First Nations school authorities responsible for administering on-reserve educational institutions (Richards 2008). This idea was also briefly discussed in his book, *Creating Choices*, as a mechanism for improving on-reserve education and, based on the few details provided, it is consistent with the free market approach. While the proposal is not thoroughly discussed in either publication, it is clear that the aim of Richards' plan is not to give more control over education to First Nations communities, but rather to remove control from local bands and centralize authority. The need to develop bodies and organizations that can provide support services to First Nations schools has been well documented (Mendelson 2008; McCue 2006). However, it seems that the main function of a centralized school authority as Richards envisions it is to establish curriculum and testing that is in line with the provinces (Richards 2006). As with his plan for off-reserve schooling, increasing accountability through standardized tests that can be used to inform parental decisions regarding schooling is a main element of the on-reserve proposal.

One of the key assumptions underlying the free-market approach is that the combination of school accountability (based on the publication of school

assessment results) and parental choice will lead to overall school improvement by encouraging competition among schools. Drawing on economic theory, the argument is that when monopolies exist, as is the case when school board districts determine which school each student attends based on geographic area of residence, the quality of services provided will be lower. Educational institutions will have no incentive to provide information on their performance or to improve their performance, as underperforming schools will not be held accountable (Guillemette 2007). When parents are provided with school performance data and are able to choose from among schools, so the theory goes, they will tend to send their children to better performing institutions. Thus, schools that have weaker academic results will face declining enrolments and will be compelled to find ways to improve the education they provide, or risk closure.

However, if school performance is determined by ranking schools against one another, as is currently the case, there will always be low-performing schools, and these schools will very likely continue to be found in low-income neighbourhoods. This can have harmful implications for these schools. For example, school choice could lead to an even greater difficulty in attracting good teachers and administrators to low-income schools since this model assumes that low test scores are in large part a reflection of the quality of the teaching and administrative staff.

Furthermore, critics have argued that school choice models lead to academically successful schools becoming more selective of students based on academic and social characteristics. When operating in a competitive system, schools will choose those students that provide the greatest return on investment and increase the prestige of their school. This is especially detrimental to special needs students, whose education tends to be more costly and who may be perceived as lowering a school's performance results (Whitty 1997).

Contrary to the suggestion that school choice would lead to greater First Nations cultural programming and more diverse forms of educational delivery, Whitty (1997) suggests that school choice actually reinforces existing school hierarchies based on social class and academic performance. That is, the schools that are privileged in this system are those that conform most closely to the traditional education model, rather than those that attempt to innovate and provide culturally relevant education.

The economic theory that underlies this model is based on assumptions that simply do not have universal applicability. First, the model expects students have unimpaired mobility. This is clearly not the case in either rural or urban communities. In cities school choice could not be supported by school bus service, therefore the students with restricted ability to travel (low family income, for example) would be "stuck" in their neighbourhoods, while those with more mobility would leave the local school and further disadvantage it. Furthermore, for many First Nations communities, geographic remoteness precludes the possibility of real school choice.

The second flaw in this argument relates to the form of the advertising or information that allows rational choice to be made. Simply stated, provincial standardized test scores are not a good public measure for school evaluation (see White and Peters, Chapter 7). Finally, rational choice models work under certain limited assumptions: when the information is accessible to all making the choice and the choice is possible to make. That means those making decisions need to know their options and must be able to exercise the option. These assumptions do not hold up in the case of many Aboriginal peoples.

Nationalist Approach

First Nations have been demanding greater control over education for decades. Noting the destruction and harm wrought by federally run educational institutions as well as fundamental differences in the cultural values and educational philosophy of First Nations peoples, it is argued that First Nations should have full sovereignty over the education of their children. Furthermore, from the nationalist perspective, control over education is considered a key element of Aboriginal self-government

While there are many proponents of this approach, the AFN has played an important role in bringing it into the public arena. As outlined in Chapter 2, in 1972 the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB), the predecessor of the AFN, produced a paper titled *Indian Control of Indian Education*, which was a comprehensive philosophical and policy statement on the need for greater involvement of First Nations in education. After abandoning the 1969 White Paper on abolishing the *Indian Act*, the federal government accepted *Indian Control of Indian Education* in principle as its national policy statement on Aboriginal education. Centered on the concepts of parental responsibility and community control, *Indian Control of Indian Education* clearly stated that while the federal government remained financially responsible for providing the resources needed for Aboriginal education, authority over the delivery of education should be devolved to band councils. While *Indian Control of Indian Education* was not explicitly nationalist, it laid the groundwork for future work by the AFN.

In the decade following the adoption of *Indian Control of Indian Education* a number of band councils began to either partly or completely operate their own schools. However, it also became clear there were considerable disagreements over the meaning and scope of “Indian control” (Abele, Dittburner, and Graham 2000). Frustrated with the lack of progress being made, in 1988 the AFN produced *Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of Our Future* in 1988, which advanced the main ideas expressed in *Indian Control of Indian Education*. While maintaining the call for Aboriginal control over education, it is here that we see the AFN’s first clear articulation of a nationalist perspective on education, marking a turning point in how control was defined and understood.

The AFN's latest proposal for education, 2005's *First Nations Education Action Plan*, emphasizes jurisdiction and sustainability as the two central concepts necessary for transformative change in education (AFN 2005). Jurisdiction reflects the continued call for the acknowledgement of First Nations jurisdiction over all levels of education and for relations between First Nations and federal and provincial authorities to be on a government to government basis. The second key concept, sustainability, is central due to the recognition that First Nations jurisdiction cannot become a reality without secure, stable, and adequate long-term funding.

From these reports, we can glean the key elements of the nationalist proposal for Aboriginal education. First and foremost, it is argued that First Nations must have full and total control over education based on their inherent right to self-government. This is to include the power to develop education policies, control finances, create curriculum, and administer education services, as well as the jurisdiction to negotiate tuition agreements and culturally appropriate programs with provincial school boards where desired. Thus, it is argued that the education of First Nations students both on- and off-reserve at all levels should fall under the jurisdiction of First Nations themselves.

A second key element of the nationalist approach is the conceptualization of education as a transmitter of culture. From the nationalist perspective, education is not merely about attaining credentials or skills to be used in the marketplace. Rather, education is seen as part of a holistic learning experience that should affirm students' Aboriginal identity and give them the opportunity to learn their language and history.

Finally, nationalist approaches to education call for funding arrangements that can support the transition to First Nations-controlled education as well as the continued administration and development of education once the transfer has taken place. Burns (2001) points out that the devolution of education from the federal government to First Nations has been accompanied by a loss of the education infrastructure that was previously provided by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (DIAND), without the provision of adequate resources to develop this infrastructure for themselves. According to the AFN,

First Nations must have the opportunity to design and develop appropriate institutions to deliver essential professional and administrative support to their schools and communities in areas such as curriculum development, specialized services, assessment, and other second- and third-level education services. (2005)

Thus, it is argued that for First Nations to successfully run their own education systems, the government must provide ample resources and support. However, it is also firmly maintained that while the federal government is obliged to fulfill its financial obligations to First Nations, this does not give the federal government the right to control or interfere in First Nations education.

Beyond these key elements, there are numerous ideas regarding how to conceptualize and implement education systems founded on Aboriginal self-government. The AFN has envisioned taking a leading role in negotiating recognition of First Nations jurisdiction over education at a national level and securing adequate and sustainable funding (AFN 2005). The AFN also calls for the establishment of First Nations education assessment systems at the local, regional, and national level to assist First Nations in developing effective education programs. However, they argue that the use of funds and the actual form that education systems take within communities needs to be decided upon by the communities themselves.

Wilson (2007) argues that the AFN's proposals are inadequate for bringing about First Nations jurisdiction over education because they fail to include the accountability measures needed to move beyond mere administrative control of education. Lacking these accountability measures, it is said that educational practice is decided arbitrarily by the political order of the day rather than truly controlled by First Nations peoples. He calls for the establishment of First Nations education acts at band, regional, and provincial levels that are developed by the First Nations themselves.

Conclusion

On the surface, Richards' recommendations appear to be closely aligned with those of the AFN. Both advocate for the creation of First Nations education systems that are supported by regional and provincial organizations and both argue for the development of assessment systems to improve the effectiveness of First Nations educational institutions. However, Richards' proposal is very different in one important aspect: it is driven by a market-based model of school choice. That is, while the AFN proposes to develop culturally appropriate assessment systems that can be used to empower First Nations to improve their school systems, Richards argues that schools should use standardized provincial assessment systems that allow parents to choose an appropriate school for their children. In Richards' plan, implementing educational assessments and developing regional education organizations are part of market-driven reforms designed to increase the accountability of schools to individual parents. School improvement, in this model, will come about through market mechanisms in which schools compete for student enrolment. If there are no students, there can be no school; therefore, it is argued that if a school is not meeting the expectations of its consumers (parents and students) the school will be forced to demonstrate improvements to attract students and avoid closure. For the AFN, the purpose of implementing educational assessments and creating regional education organizations is to help First Nations take greater control of their educational institutions while also improving the quality and cultural relevance of schooling.

In the midst of these proposals for policy change, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) has recently unveiled their own plan, referred to

as the Reforming First Nation Education Initiative. This initiative consists of two new programs: the Education Partnerships Program (EPP) and the First Nation Student Success Program (FNSSP), details of which were released in December 2008 (INAC 2008a; INAC 2008b). The EPP is designed to encourage and support tripartite partnership agreements between regional First Nations organizations, provincial ministries of education, and INAC. The partnerships are to improve coordination between First Nations and provincial schools and promote the sharing of expertise and service provision among partners. The FNSSP provides First Nations regional organizations or band-operated schools with funding to develop school success plans, implement student learning assessments, and adopt a performance measurement system.

Examining the government's new policy initiative in light of the free market and nationalist proposals for education, it is clear that while the government does not strictly follow either approach, their current direction is more inline with the free market approach. This is evident in both the guidelines of the two INAC new programs, as well as in the discourse surrounding the initiative. In terms of the programs, elements of the free market approach are evident in the emphasis on implementing provincial standardized assessment systems and the push for greater alignment with provincial schools. Although INAC does not call for the publishing of results nor do they advocate using results to track schools so that parents can choose which school their children should attend. Furthermore, the program guidelines for the EPP state that only regional First Nations organizations are eligible recipients of funding and FNSSP program guidelines state that priority will be given to regional organizations over individual band councils, in effect pushing First Nations to professionalize the administration of their schools. The discourse surrounding the initiative is also somewhat more inline with the free market approach, with the impetus for the program being framed in terms of the need to increase accountability, get greater value for money, and improve First Nation students' human capital. Nowhere in the government's discussion of the initiative is there mention of First Nations' jurisdiction over education or the relationship between education and self-government, and there is very little reference to the role of education in strengthening and supporting First Nations' languages, cultures, and knowledge.

If we look at the trajectory of the federal government's education policy overtime, as outlined in Chapter 6, it seems that this current initiative is very much inline with the government's position since 1973, which has been to formally accept and support "Indian control of Indian education" in theory, but to interpret "control" as primarily administrative. The new policy initiative is a continuation of this path, and represents further moves to align the First Nations system more closely with the provincial system, in effect also off-loading more responsibility to the provinces.²

Endnotes

- 1 The Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) is a standardized achievement test in reading, writing, and numeracy that is administered province-wide in British Columbia. British Columbia is the only province that provides public data on the test results of the Aboriginal population.
- 2 It is also important to note that governments in Canada have also committed themselves to the nationalist approach in theory, negotiating a number of land claims and Self-Government Agreements with First Nations that either include or specifically refer to jurisdiction over education. Examples of these are the Nisga'a Final Agreement, the Mi'kmaq Education Act, and the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. While the terms and scope of the agreements vary, educational jurisdiction is consistently limited by "meet or beat" clauses that mandate that First Nations governments must meet or exceed current provincial standards in education. This is a clear departure from the AFN's conception of an inherent right to jurisdiction over education.

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