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Native Education: In the Best Interest of the Children

by Adrienne Lamb

The next generation is the brain trust of Canada; children are our assurance, future and means of survival as a people. A revolution, however is occurring in Canada. Canadian First Nations People, weary of Canadian Government double-talk, have taken a self-government stance. One of the issues that Native self-government will affect is Native education. Of the four types of education institutions: federal day schools, provincial public schools, band schools on reserves, and separate schools, there has been a notable increase in band schools (see notes). Currently in Canada, "there are 326 band schools as compared to 52 federal schools" (INAC Education Report: 1991:8). In this paper I will examine the causes and consequences of the shift towards self-governed education. As well, I will explore the possibilities that could be counted as options to this new form of education with a historical perspective in mind.

Most main stream accounts of the education for First Nations people in Canada begin with the arrival of the Europeans. Canadian First Nations education system did not undergo a miraculous genesis the instant European flesh graced Canadian soil. Rather, long before Europeans arrived in North America Indians had adopted their own educational system (Kirkness: 1992: 1).

It is interesting to note that the military, the missionaries and both the federal and provincial governments have failed for over "three hundred years to administer an effective education program for First Nations people" (Kirkness: 1991:5). These institutions have abused First Nations people in the name of education and have disregarded a consistent philosophy of education; as well, meaningful programs based on First Nations cultures have been disregarded. A lack of qualified teaching staff has been a prevalent problem. This problem has only recently obtained recognition as one of the inadequate facilities to which First Nations people have grown accustomed (Fleras: 1992:17). The shift to self-governed education, although precipitated by many underlying causes, stems predominately from the oppressive, abusive environment that has plagued the education system of Native people for generations (Johnston; 1988:34). The shift towards a nurturing, stable, loving educational environment is seen in the involvement of the parents and the community in the education of their young people.

For generations, the community approach to education was effective, but when the colonial ideology was established in the area, family and community ties were viewed as a savage approach to education (Ministry of Education: 1991:12). What is necessary is an educational revolution and a back-to-basics approach to education similar to that in existence before European contact.

There was life before European colonization and the First Nations peoples had developed their own form of education. The community’s elders, parents and peers were teachers; it was each adult’s responsibility to ensure that each child learned how to live a good life. The Great Spirit played a major role in what many view as the most spiritual oriented society ever known to man (Kirkness: 1992:5). Spirituality was essential to “the relationship of one to another, in humility, in sharing, in cooperating, in relationships to nature—the land and the animals” (Barman: 1987:39). This Native ideology was looked upon as the most benevolent of concepts. An essential channel for the basic transfer of information was legendary stories. These oral histories or fables are the Native child’s gift, a gift of generations of experiences in an understandable, entertaining, memorable medium. Indian fables taught Native children traditional values of humility, honesty, courage, kindness and respect; qualities we as Canadians should promote in all our children (Kirkness: 1987:4). For example, the traditional concept of silence was regarded as the corner stone of character as such self-control displayed “true courage, patience, dignity, and reverences” (National Indian Brotherhood: 1972:3).

Economics was also essential to Native education, specifically the economics of real life, not that of colonial classrooms. “Learning was for living, for survival” and these life lessons were taught through observation and practice, the two main foci of traditional Native education (Barman: 1986:31). The art of fishing, food gathering and preparation, hunting, trapping and child rearing
were essential not merely for enriching the intellect, but for sustaining the physical self. Role playing from a very young age was encouraged in the belief that it would gradually lead to apprenticeship for a position in the community (Kirkness: 1992:7).

In summary, it is correct to assume that traditional education was an informal process endowing young people with specific skills, attitudes and knowledge needed to interact in every day life (Althouse: 1949:55). Traditional education for First Nations people appears almost too good to be true. This traditional educational system is the oasis in a desert of prejudice and abuse that stains the history of Native education. Keeping this analogy in mind, we will work our way though the desert of non-Native interference back to the paradise of self-governed education.

The Edge of the Desert: The Dawning of Residential Schools

Prior to Confederation, Native education had been in the hands of the military. In the early 17th century however, a system was established that would last approximately 150 years, three generations, that would educate the Native students in the subjects of mental, physical and sexual abuse. The age of the residential schools had dawned. “Missionary and government residential schools for Indian people emphasized religion, domestics and agricultural training with little attention to academics” (Assembly of First Nations: 1991:13).

The ideology behind residential schools was simple to isolate children from their communities, languages, traditions and parents who, incidentally had no recourse after the original kidnapping of their children, to appeal to have them returned (Barman: 1986:23). The children of ages 6 through 18, were kept for at least ten months of the year. At best, it can be said that residential schools provided a basic education design to prepare students for futures as farm workers, housemaids, or mechanics. At the worst, while these young Native people aspired to perform these menial tasks, white bureaucracy attempted to rob them of their cultures, languages, communities and families, not to mention their lives (Kirkness: 1992:10). Astonishingly, “the residential school was most notable for the incredibly high mortality rate among the students” (Kirkness: 1991:10). H.J. Vallery estimates that fifty per cent of the children who pass through these schools did not live to benefit from the education the church and government so generously provided (1942:140). These deaths are attributable to tuberculosis as well as the oppressive half day plan for the children were expected to spend as much time performing manual labour as in school. The students that did live through the ordeal to become parents themselves, obviously had a difficult time raising their own children as they had no experience to build on, and the all important family unit was a foreign concept to them (Samuda: 1987:152). Residential schools would have been insufferable as a mere “educational institution” moreover, statistics tell a tale of child labour and work camp conditions: young people would spend half their day doing laundry, sewing, cleaning the stables, working in the fields and even, apparently, butchering cattle (Kirkness: 1992:10). In 1933 it is said there were 80 residential schools in Canada with enrollment varying anywhere from 50 to 400 students, all said to have the same system of operations (McPherson: 1991:3). With the church managing the school, contributing part of the operating cost and the invaluable Christian guidance, one must question what the role was.

The government in fact, was responsible for the inspection, rule and regulation, and financial grants to the institutions (Kirkness: 1992:12). The residential schools were a joint venture between the church and the government. Realistically, what hope did the Native people have of dissolving this tag-team stronghold? “The residential school system was the worst interruption of culture the government and church could have inflicted upon the First Nations people as a whole” (Howe: 1985:47). The education provided by the residential school system created cultural conflict, poor self-concepts and alienation. Most importantly, the oppression endured in the residential school was in direct and purposeful contradiction with the ideologies establish by the First Nations societies as a whole. Out of the sandstorm of Native residential schools we enter into a period of government control over education formulated in the 1960’s, as stated 150 years after the non-Native educational tradition had commenced.

In the 1950’s and 1960’s a policy of integration was established in an attempt to control the Native people through their children. In the 1960’s and early 1970’s the federal government’s White paper (1969) called for the closure of Indian residential schools and a sigh of relief was echoed through Native Canada (MacPherson: 1991:3). The question then, of course, was what would replace the old system and would it, in fact, be better or worse than the residential school system? The answer to this question was the government’s proposal to assimilate the Indian people into the provincial school systems. This would mean that Native children would receive the same education, with the same teaching staff and equipment, as the non-Native Canadians (Archibald: 1987:12). The policy of integration introduced in 1948 included approximately 60% of First Nations Students (in integrated schools). The government maintained little communication with
First Nations children, parents and communities. Many refer to this shift from residential to government-run as a mere "change of buildings" (Samauda: 1987:153). The special educational needs of Native children was a concept that totally eluded the government Canada (Barman: 1987:30). Earlier in this system’s history, a special curriculum was designed for Native children with the understanding that, by treating them in the same way as the rest of the children, they would assimilate themselves into the educational and cultural systems of non-Natives (Hawkes: 1985:23). Native children were expected to leave their identity on the school steps and walk in a non-person, a vessel for knowledge to be filled by non-Natives of non-Native values with no real relationship to the Native world.

The mathematics of the crisis in Indian education stated that 97% of the 72,000 Native children enduring Canadian schools in the fall of 1967 would drop out before ever receiving a high school diploma (Hawthorn: 1972:8). Harry Hawthorn states that,

> The early (home) training of Indian children cannot be paralleled or equated with the process of training which non-Indian children are undergoing at the same time. As a result, when Indian and non-Indian children appear at school initially, their expectations are different, they perceive things differently, their behaviour is governed by a different set of rules (Hawthorn: 1972:16).

Out of this imbalance in levels and types of education came the stereotype of the Indian student as the “retarded student without ambition and the child is consequently constrained to fill the role” (Hawthorn: 1972:8). Ironically it was not the honourable members of the House of Commons that were teased and taunted at recess by their peers; it was not the school officials that were accused of stupidity while they were not grasping the traditional non-Native concepts of numbers or the non-Native alphabet; but rather it was the children. Native children, like all other children, are the next generation, yet instead of hope, oppression and shame follows them. So much so that they wish “to be no one at all” (Culleton: 1992:150). The question of whether or not the integration was only a physical presence in the public school system or rather a shift in non-Native mindset remains to be seen. The answer comes with the concept of absorption. The First Nations students were expected to be absorbed into the dominant culture (Kirkness: 1992:14).

Robert McCormick, a Status Indian (Ojibwe Nation), has some definite views on Native self-governed education. When asked to remark on the aforementioned physical-mental shift Rob explained that this change was “just something in writing it was not something that they (government bureaucracy) did in practice. The assimilation process is something they practice and now we have got to reverse that but they are not willing to change the mindset” (McCormick Personal Conversation: 1993). The overwhelming frustration that must accompany the distrust and resentment of non-Natives for allowing this to occur even in this day, not to mention the past, is something that no group of people, especially Canadian First Nations people, should have to deal with.

### Indian Control Of Indian Education: The Oasis Of The Native Child

In the 1970s, the Native people of Canada decided they had enough of the deplorable conditions in the education of their children. A Standing Committee on Indian Affairs on June 22, 1971 unfolded a report in the House of Commons that clearly explained the problems facing Indian First Nations students (Report of the Standing Committee on Indian Affairs: 1972). First the majority of Indian parents were uninformed about the implications of decisions made to transfer children from reserve schools to provincial schools. Secondly, an age-grade retardation rooted in understandable language conflicts and early disadvantages caused problems with progression for Native students. The drop out rate, related directly to the subsequent unemployment rate aforementioned, averaged 50% and as high as 90% in some communities, for adult males.

In the actual educational curriculum process, inaccuracies and omissions were present relative to the Indian contribution to Canadian history in texts used in federal and provincial schools. Also, the unforgivable statistic that 15% of the teachers had specialized training in cross-cultural education and 10% had any knowledge of an Indian language (S.C.I.A. 1972). Clearly something had to be done. Government was in the process of eliminating the First Nations people through the exploitation of their greatest natural resource their children. This explosion of awareness was generated in 1969 by the federal government’s White Paper whose goals were to eliminate the special status of Indians” (Manuel: 1974:15). The Assembly of First Nations (then the National Indian Brotherhood) brought together a community to reflect a national position on education. The Indian Control of Indian Education (I.C.I.E.) document, proposed by this committee, established a policy following the two educational principles recognized in Canadian society: that of parental and local control.

First, the fact that Indian parents should have the right to the same fundamental decision
making about their children's education as other parents across Canada is obvious. Native people believed education should prepare students for total living, allowing students a free choice of where to live and work; give students a "means of enabling us (Native people) to participate fully in our own social, economic, political and educational advancement" (National Indian Brotherhood 1972:3). Native people "want education to give our children a strong sense of identity, with confidence in their personal worth and ability." (National Indian Brotherhood 1972:2). This policy demands that the Indian parents participate as partners with the government in the education of their children, something that native people were eager to do from the very beginning. The community, as far as Native people are concerned, must participate in and determine program changes (Hawkes 1985:23).

The type of Indian control primarily centres around jurisdiction and authority for Indian education. For example, with Native self-governed education in place, Native people would determine program needs, deploy personnel, set curriculum guidelines and decide on utilization of physical resources (Kirkness 1992:15). While it remains hazy as to the meaning of Indian control over education, five types of control have been laid out to clarify the boundaries of Native education: "these five types of control can be identified and characterized; political, administrative, financial, personnel and curricular" (Barman 1987:9).

Politically, Native education has been shifted back and forth from federal to provincial, department to department, in a pass-the-buck approach to the dilemma facing Native people (Howe 1985:15). The clarification of political control would involve the transfer of power from the federal government to local band education authorities (Barman 1987:10). The band would be a party to all aspects of Native education including dealing with provincial and territorial jurisdictions and the Federal Government (Barman 1987:15).

With political control would follow the administrative control of the school and programs serving Indian children: for example, British Columbia's 14 school districts that effected the establishment of an operational unit within the main offices of the board and centralizes the administration of services. District-level administration in dealing with Native education are for the most part publicity services. The administration may even serve as a catalyst to mobilize the involvement of Native persons in the public education of Native students (Barman 1987:16).

Administrative control may coexist with financial control. Typical of many band educational authorities, local control of both the financial and administrative dimensions of education with community vision of development has yielded positive results. For example, the Peguis Reserve before local control in 1977 had ten persons complete postsecondary programs, in 1985-1986, 168 students were sponsored in post-secondary programs. "Noticeable improvements in school climate, in communication among teaching staff, parents and boards, in student responsibility, as well as improved attendance and greater interest in reading and other school subjects' have also been reported (Fleras 1992:42).

The first three steps, political, administrative and financial control, are in theory, the hardest to bring about and maintain. The fourth aspect, that of personnel control, usually falls into place after the financial aspect. It is not uncommon to have band teaching staff go through two selection processes, the first selection by the school administration, and the second selection by board and community members. One can clearly see that in this way the parents on behalf of their children, have a direct say in the education they desire (Archibald 1987:18).

Hand in hand with the personnel selection is the control over teaching material. Curricular control is perhaps the most important type of control since it is "central to the socialization of the child and to the survival of Indian culture" (Barman 1987:13). It is clear that in the past decade a growing effort has been made to include a focus on Indian language, history, symbols and culture. A definite effort has been made to inform the general public as well as educate the non-Native students about the Native people of Canada. A perfect example of the attempt being made to unite the rift is the Curriculum Guidelines for the primary, junior, intermediate and senior divisions created by the Ministry of Education, January 1987 in which the Ontario Ministry of Education recognizes that language learning contributes to an understanding of peoples and cultures within Canadian society. Learning a Native language will develop an appreciation of the positive value of Native cultures and identities. (Ministry of Education 1987:1).

The Native as a Second Language (NSL) program is designed to "enhance the students cultural awareness and communication skills" (Ministry of Education 1987:2). The NSL program should provide opportunity for all students in all streams the chance to experience and gain knowledge of some of the significant aspects of the contemporary and historical target of Native culture. By educating the rest of the population about the unique, interesting Native people, we can stop the racism and humiliating bigotry of the children towards their peers creating "a new generation of trust and
unity” (Ministry of Education 1988:3). Education is the key, and at the same time Native students will see that superfluous shame is not the answer. The Native language is unique and the study of NSL will allow Native students, who are given the opportunity to study a Native language, to gain a more positive sense of their identity. They will be motivated to attend school and if the material is interesting, the likelihood of them attending is that much greater (Kirkness 1992). The NSL guidelines state that “Native languages will include programs for Cree, Ojibwa, Delaware, Mohawk, Cayuga, and Onondaga” (Ministry of Education 1988:2). The most prevalent reason for introducing NSL is the historical implications of the Native languages. After all, the history of Canada begins with Native people.

All students need to learn about the contribution that Native Societies have made to the development of Canada. NSL can help students to develop the values, skills and attitudes that they will need to function effectively in the twenty first century (Ministry of Education 1988:2). In the Ontario school system as of September 1992, it is possible for students to earn up to eight credits towards their Ontario Secondary School Diploma in Native language and Native studies course. In Ontario 32.8% of the students participate in NSL compared to the National average of 23.7% (Kirkness: 1992:38). When asked in a survey conducted by Kirkness what the distribution of actual courses should be, the answers from the more than 346 schools surveyed read as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A First Nation Language</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Nations culture</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Nations arts</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English as second language</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Nations crafts</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Studies</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor education</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Others category included science and mathematics.

Although efforts such as the Native as a Second Language program, established by the Ontario Government, have been implemented, it is important to the First Nations people to look towards their own self-governed education. During the course of the Native Review of the First Nations education, many recommendations were made for improving the current system. Many individuals and organizations were eager to make suggestions and offer solutions to educational problems (Nation Indian Brotherhood: 1980:4). The Assembly of First Nations outlined the four categories of management, resources, quality and jurisdiction.

It is the right of First Nations peoples to assume jurisdiction over education affecting First Nations students. First Nations and public schools must be recognized by all levels of government. Education, which is an inherent and treaty right, must be under full First Nations jurisdiction. First Nations must develop their own national and local education policies which would reflect their philosophy, cultural beliefs and practices. This of course, does not mean that the quality of education will decrease.

First Nations students have a right to educational programs and services of the highest quality which incorporate culturally relevant content and academic skills. For example, First Nations require curriculum teaching cultural heritage and traditional First Nations skills with the same emphasis as academic learning. Parents desire a focus on language skills, particularly reading, math, science and computer skills. The management of Native education should be in the hands of the parents and the community as outlined previously.

The management of First Nations education systems requires at least the equivalent of the financial, human and material resources required in the public school system. It is important to understand that with the phrase 'require at least equivalent' Native people just want what is truly owed them: an education equal to that of the non-Native students. New policies must be established by First Nations to ensure they have control of the financial management of their education programs. Finally, tied directly to funding is the issue of resources.

The resources of First Nations education must be equivalent to that spent on the education of other Canadians in public schools, with additional funding for acknowledged special needs associated with First Nations education.

In the light of these criteria for Native self-governed education, it would be beneficial to examine the realm of post-secondary education as an uplifting conclusion, a testimony to how far Native people have traveled to obtain the fountain of knowledge and truth for their own people (Assembly of First Nations 1988:4).

The Spring Of Knowledge: An Examination Of Post-Secondary Native Education

As the previous statistics have indicated, with only three percent of the Native population receiving a high-school diploma, only a handful of Native people had any hope of receiving any kind of post-secondary education at all. Even if by some twist of fate Native people did obtain a high-school education, originally Native people suffered disenfranchisement (loss of Indian status and rights) if they received professional or post-
secondary education. As a result of this oppressive and assimilative approach to Indian education the majority of First Nations people, in all generations, have not received the education necessary for full and equal participation in Canadian society today (MacPherson 1991:3). Due to this rather dreary history of education, particularly the lack of access to post secondary education, there are fewer First Nations people in all generations with post secondary education at the college, bachelors, master, doctoral and professional levels as compared to the nations general average (Assembly of First Nations 1991). Robert McCormick, a full time Native student attending the University of Western Ontario understandably had some definite views on Native post-secondary education. “We know what we want; nobody is listening; and nobody is opening any doors.” One of the most prevalent issues hinging on Native post-secondary education is government funding. The current debate over government funding for First Nations post-secondary education must be considered in context. “Post-secondary education is an Aboriginal and Treaty right” and government financial responsibility. (Assembly of First Nations 1991:6)

The educational process of the First Nations was set back considerably with the imposition of a formal education system. As this paper has documented, the educational system has cut the Native people of Canada to the bare bone. The structure of family and community as well as traditional teachings and beliefs have been altered.

The challenge put forth today is to regain that respect for the traditional values and to again be able to walk as proud, educated Native people. Also our place in this land (Canada) must be understood by all Canadians so that we might work together- to create a brighter future for our young people (Kirkness 1992:103). The importance of educating not only the Native youth in Native traditions but also, the non-Native youth, is essential. Recapturing the traditional ways and reteaching Native children Native ideology is what is truly in the best interest of the children.

Notes

The four types of schools attended by first nations students. The enrollments in 1990 1991 were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Enrollments</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal school</td>
<td>8,055</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public and separate schools</td>
<td>43,545</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band schools</td>
<td>40,508</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>97,108</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: James C. Macpherson. Macpherson Report on Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of

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