

Racism in Education: First Nations Education in Canada

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Abstract

Canada has quietly developed two quite different education systems. The first one, the provincial/territorial school systems, is well known. These jurisdictions have developed a three-tiered administrative educational structure: provincial/territorial ministries/departments of education; school divisions/boards; and schools. These thirteen jurisdictions have developed education laws, policies, and regulations. They have qualified educational professionals ensuring that the children in their schools have a good education. Adequate education funding is provided to schools and school boards. These schools also participate in international assessments, i.e., Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme of International Student Assessment [(PISA). The other system is not as well known.

This is the federal government of Canada's system of First Nations education. These schools and students do not have an education law. They operate under 'a single school model'. Their funding is inadequate. These schools and students are hidden from the world community as they are excluded from participation in international assessments, i.e., PISA. The federal government expects First Nations schools to provide provincial levels of programs and services yet refuses to provide provincial levels of funding. This funding inequity is similar to the 'separate but equal' stance regarding Black and White schools in the American south. First Nations schools in Canada are very separate and not equal. The federal government of Canada's education policies and actions are racist.

Note:

The federal department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs, Canada (INAC) has changed its name several times in recent years. It has been known as Indian and Northern Affairs, Canada (INAC) and Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, Canada (AANDC). I have used the title found on and in the federal document at the time the document was published.

Keywords: Indigenous education; Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada; education in Canada

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Introduction

\$7,200.00 versus \$10,500.00 – if anyone doubts that institutional or systemic racism exists in Canada, please refer to these figures. These amounts are what the federal government of Canada would pay for the education of a First Nations student attending the school on Manitoba's Waywayseecappo First Nation.

The first amount, \$7,200.00 was the per student amount that the Waywayseecappo First Nation received from the federal government for their children to attend the First Nations school on their First Nation. This school was operated by the Waywayseecappo First Nation and funded by the federal government.

Sniderman (2012) described the continual frustration of the Waywayseecappo First Nation Chief and Council in their attempts to provide a good education for their children at their local school. They had approached the federal government's department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) for additional education funding for their school. The requested additional funding was refused.

First Nations schools receive their education funding on a formula called Band-Operated Funding Formula (BOFF). The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) has reported that BOFF does not "support the educational components of a 21st century school system. These include such basic services as: School libraries; Technology (computers, connectivity, data systems; Sports and recreation; Vocation training; First Nations languages; and, School board-like services" (AFN, undated, p. 1).

Similar findings were echoed by the First Nations Education Council (FNEC) in Quebec. In 2009, they reported despite plans to modify BOFF two years after its development in 1988 that "the formula still had not been modified to take account of the developments in education" (FNEC, 2009, p. 1). It was noted that BOFF does not "allocate amounts for the costs associated to new technologies, sports and recreation, operating libraries and the supplementary costs of vocational training in Quebec at the secondary level" (FNEC, 2009, p. 1). FNEC (2009) also highlighted that BOFF does not follow other provincial education policies such as "the socioeconomic disadvantage index of the communities" (p. 1)

More recently in 2011, the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples (2011) report on First Nation education found problems with INAC's funding formula. The report found that "Basic services such as school libraries, student assessments, athletic programs and facilities, technology, curriculum development and language programs, were simply not included in the funding formula" (p. 32). The report also noted that since 1996, INAC's funding formula had "a 2% cap on annual increases" (p. 31).

A result of the shortfalls in BOFF is that First Nations schools such as Waywayseecappo First Nation's face many obstacles. At Waywayseecappo, the school was described as having a wing of classrooms closed due to the lack of funding to hire additional teachers, this closure resulted in higher pupil-teacher ratios in the remaining classrooms, teachers were underpaid resulting in a high teacher turnover as many teachers left to teach in nearby higher paying provincial schools, an absence of on-going specialist/consultant support for teachers and students, and an absence of professional development activities for teachers and administrators.

After Grade 8, the students at Waywayseecappo School travelled down the highway to a provincial school in Rossburn for Grades 9-12. The teachers at the Rossburn school noted that the incoming students were behind academically.

Finally, the Chief and Council had had enough. The \$7,200.00 per student they received from BOFF was simply not enough. They grew weary of seeing their school and students fall further behind.

Their frustration at not being able to provide an adequate education for their children, as well as their future hopes and dreams for these children led them to do something that on the surface appears to run counter to the main principles of the Assembly of First Nations' (AFN) Indian Control of Indian Education.

This document (AFN, 1973) advocated for 'local control' or Indian control of schools on First Nations across Canada. First Nations people were tired of being denied the opportunity to be involved in making education decisions for their children. Other people were involved, as "decisions on the education of Indian children have been made by anyone and everyone, except Indian parents. This must stop." (p. 27)

The Waywayseecappo First Nation Chief and Council decided against First Nations control of their First Nations school. Essentially, their hope of a better education with the resulting brighter future for their children trumped the principle of Indian/First Nations control of their school.

What did the Waywayseecappo First Nation do? The First Nation made an agreement with the nearby provincial school division to take over the operation of the school on the First Nation. The First Nations students did not move to the provincial school in Rossburn. Nor did the school move off the First Nation. The students remained at the same school as before.

You would think that the provincial school division would encounter similar funding challenges as the Waywayseecappo First Nation encountered. Same students, same school, and same funding source (i.e., INAC) would remain the same. However, this is not the case.

Sniderman (2012) described as magical or 'poof' what happened next as the First Nations school became a provincial school. Suddenly, the \$7,200.00 became \$10,500.00.

The result of the increased funding was immediate. The closed wing of classrooms was opened as new teachers were hired, teachers received raises, specialist/consultant support became available, and professional development opportunities became available for teachers and administrators.

Recently, in April 2016, Sniderman (2016) went back to the community to examine the consequences of the increased funding on the school, teachers, and students. The changes were remarkable. For instance, in 2010 no Grade 1, 2, or 3 student was reading at a Grade 1, 2, or 3 level. Only one student in Grade 4 (3%) was at Grade level. In 2016, the percentage of students at Grade level was Grade 1 (44%), Grade 2 (33%), Grade 3 (54%), and Grade 4 (26%).

Teacher turnover has been reduced. The number of teachers has increased. Teachers received wage increases of \$15,000 - \$20,000. Classroom sizes have been reduced to below 20. Behavioural incident reports have been reduced by 65%. It was noted that a provincial teacher had transferred to the school on the First Nation. Such transfers had never happened before.

Joining the provincial school division has allowed Waywayseecappo School to become part of a larger system – Park West School Division. The school could now access programs, services, and specialist from the school division, as well as the provincial department of education.

There were other benefits of a local nature to such an arrangement. Chief Murray Clearsky noted that previously “For so long our children stayed in our community and never really mingled with off-reserve kids,...” (Sniderman, 2016, p. 2). No longer, now the school participates and hosts sporting events with nearby provincial schools. Provincial students now use the Waywayseecappo’s woodworking and cosmetology classrooms. A Waywayseecappo First Nations student drumming group has performed at a provincial school.

The education funding inequities, i.e., provincial vs. federal funding encountered by Waywayseecappo First Nation are not isolated to Waywayseecappo or schools in Manitoba. Similar inequities may be found across Canada.

On June 1, 2010, Cindy Fisher, the former Director of Education of the Ojibways of the Pic River First Nation in northwestern Ontario spoke to the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples (Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2010a). Ms. Fisher compared the elementary per-student funding the First Nation received from the federal government (\$8,156.00) to that received by a nearby provincial school board (\$15,211.53). Provincial funding for secondary students was \$17,131.80.

In Saskatchewan, Kowalchuk (2013) compared the education funding received by the Northwest Education Council that provided services and programs to schools in nine First Nations communities with that received by provincial schools in the North Battleford area. It was estimated that provincial schools received \$9,000.00 per-student while the First Nations schools received \$7000.00. The tuition for First Nations students attending the provincial Living Sky School Division was \$11,894.00.

Murray Waboose, education manager, Matawa First Nations Management has described the federal government’s approach to First Nations education to buying a car. First Nations get the base-model. That’s it. No ‘extras’. Second level education services or ‘extras’ such as “speech language pathologists, psychologists, and special education services all cost more. We don’t get funding for these services” (Thom, 2010, p. 1).

Mr. Waboose also described how the federal government doesn’t differentiate between elementary and secondary education costs as he stated “There is not a distinction between elementary and high-school funding levels. It costs a lot more to operate a high school with specialized classes and classrooms” (Thom, 2010, p. 2). It

was estimated that provincial schools receive an additional 30% for high school students.

In Ontario, on January 22, 2015, Nipissing First Nation Chief Marianna Couchie (Nipissing University, 2015), spoke of the funding inequities on a panel on First Nations education at Nipissing University. She highlighted the unfairness of the federal government's funding at the school on her First Nation. The Chief questioned how the federal government could justify their actions as "The government will give us \$4,000.00 per student at our high school. Yet, they'll turn around and give us money to pay \$12 - \$17,000.00 per student to attend the provincial schools... There is something wrong with the funding."

In March 2016, Don Drummond, a former chief economist with a major Canadian bank estimated that "First Nations children living on reserve receive at least 30 per less funding for their education as children under provincial jurisdiction" (Porter, J., 2016, p. 1). Mr. Drummond was countering a federal government official's assertion that the provincial and federal education funding formulas could not be compared.

In summary, there can be no doubt that First Nations schools are at a distinct disadvantage when compared to provincial/territorial schools in their terms of their funding. First Nations schools receive their education funding based on outdated formula that doesn't take into account the actual costs, programs, and services of a modern education system. Provincial/territorial schools, on the other hand, are able to invoice or bill the federal government for the actual costs of providing these services to First Nations students..

Federal policy

Federal documents and reports are clear that First Nations schools are to follow the curricula, programs, and services offered by schools within their province. In other words, the provincial curricula act as the templates for First Nations schools to follow.

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Affairs Canada (2012) indicated in their Executive Summary that "The primary objective of elementary/secondary education programming is to provide eligible students living on reserve with education programs comparable to those that are required in provincial schools by statute, regulations or policies of the province in which the reserve is located" (p. 1). In 2015, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC] (2015) in a description of their Elementary and Secondary Education Program in First Nations education noted that the program "aims to help eligible students living on-reserve reach similar educational outcomes to other Canadian students in the same province." (p 1)

Other federal departments have expressed similar statements regarding the types of education programs and services to be offered in First Nations schools. For example, The Office of the Auditor General (2014) in an examination of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada policy found that "First Nations schools are required, at a minimum, to follow provincially recognized programs of study, hire provincially certified teachers, and follow education standards that allow students to transfer to an equivalent grade in another school within the province in which the reserve is located (p. 5).

In a report on 'Current and Emerging Issues' for the 41st Parliament (Library of Parliament, 2011), it was noted that the federal government is committed to providing First Nations with education programs and services that were "comparable to those required in provincial schools by the statutes, regulations or policies of the province in which the reserve is legislation governing First Nations education, ..." (p. 22)

The report also described the current state of education in First Nations. The report found that "The federal on-reserve First Nations education program does not offer many of the supports and structures provided by the provinces off-reserve." (p. 22).

The lack of educational supports and structures for First Nations schools was extensive. They included "...education departments, elected school boards, education acts, and legal requirements for parental involvement - the federal government's First Nations education system lacks many, if not most, of these features." (p. 22)

A possible reason for the federal government's reliance on provincial/territorial curricula, programs, and services for First Nations schools is the absence of a federal education law. Despite, having constitutional responsibility for the education of First Nations students living on reserves since 1867, the federal government of Canada has not enacted an education law for these students.

In 2006, the Hon. Jim Prentice, a former Minister of INAC, spoke of the lack of a First Nations education law. He believed that First Nations children were alone in Canada in regards to the lack of protection that an education law would provide as he stated

"The only children deprived of this security are First Nations children on reserves" (First Nations Education Council, 2009, p. 29).

The Standing Senates Committee on Aboriginal Peoples (2011) report does not mince words in their description of the actions of INAC. The report found that while INAC "requires First Nations to educate their children at levels comparable to provincial and territorial jurisdiction, and yet provides them no meaningful supports by which to do so" (p. 56). The Committee found that First Nations were "Lacking critical educational supports" (p. 56) with the result that "First Nations are the only segment of Canadian society who, today, do not benefit from a modern system of education" (p. 56)

The lack of an education law or system for First Nations has several consequences for First Nations students, parents, and communities. First, is the reliance on federal policies and regulations to operate the education system. Policies and regulations do not have the force of law behind them. Secondly, the federal government has not invested in the required education infrastructure (e.g., programs, personnel, and operating procedures). Thirdly, the federal government has been forced to use provincial/territorial programs and services as the templates for First Nations and federal schools to follow.

These consequences may appear at first glance to be superficial. Education laws, policies, procedures, regulations, infrastructure, and systems are broad terms. Their impact may be difficult to measure or observe, especially in the case of First Nations education.

However, the lack of an education law has real consequences for First Nations students. Primarily, it's the lack of a system. As the Hon. Jim Prentice stated in 2006 - "There is, in fact no education system for the First Nations ... there are no national norms, no determined courses, no teaching certification required" (First Nations Education Council, 2006, p. 29). As mentioned earlier, First Nations schools were often without libraries, science labs, technology, student assessments, curriculum develop, language programs, recreational and playground equipment and facilities.

Funding inequity

In 2010, the Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples (2010b) began a series of Proceedings across Canada on First Nations education. The Committee was "concerned about the educational attainment of First Nations learners in primary and secondary education" (p. 1). The Committee's stated goal was to "examine possible strategies for primary and secondary education so that it can better support and improve the educational outcomes of First Nations learners" (p. 1)

The Committee held Proceedings across Canada. Invited speakers included representatives from First Nations, academics, researchers, provincial governments, provincial schools boards, as well as representative from the federal government.

On April 13, 2010, Ms. Christine Cram, Assistant Deputy Minister, Education and Social Development Programs and Partnerships, INAC, spoke to the Committee. Ms. Cram spoke of the federal government's commitment to and hopes for First Nations students. She believed that "the Government of Canada is committed to ensuring that Aboriginal students have comparable educational outcomes and that they share fully in Canada's economic prosperity." (Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2010c, p. 4)

Ms. Cram described INAC's role as being "basically a funder. We provide funding to First Nations and other organizations that deliver the programs and provide the services" (p. 9). First Nations schools received education funding on "a single-house model". The result of this type of funding was that First Nations schools were without "a system of education." (p. 9)

This federal or First Nations 'non-system of education' of 'a single school model' was compared to provincial systems of education. Ms. Cram believed "most provinces have a ministry of education, school boards and schools. These ministries of education can be quite large, and have expertise." (p. 9).

Ms. Cram then viewed INAC's Ottawa headquarters' role in First Nations education as being somewhat limited due to their lack of education expertise. She indicated that INAC staff did "did not claim to have huge expertise in post-secondary or kindergarten-to-Grade-12 education" (p. 9) and that INAC "could not have the level of expertise provided by the provinces." (p. 9)

For First Nations students living on reserve but attending a provincial school the funding arrangements are different. Provincial school boards/divisions are able to invoice INAC for First Nations students for their costs as "INAC pays a tuition rate charged by the province." (p. 3)

Another INAC official, Ms. Claudette Russell, Director, Strategic Policy and Planning Directorate, INAC, also spoke to the Committee on First Nations education funding and responsibilities. She described these funding arrangements required First Nations to “use comparable provincial curriculums” (p. 14) and that they are “required to follow a provincial standard of education.” (p. 14)

In 2011, the Committee issued a report (Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2011). They reported that the federal government was responsible for approximately 120,000 First Nations students across Canada. These students attended one of three types of schools: 518 First Nations schools; provincial/territorial schools; and, 7 federal government schools. The Committee estimated that First Nations student enrollment to be 60% First Nations schools, 40% provincial/territorial, and, approximately 2% federal government schools.

Hidden information

Canada is a member of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Every three years the OECD conducts an assessment of 15 year-old students in countries around the world. This assessment is called the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA assesses students in Mathematics, Science, and Reading.

Canada has performed quite well in the 2012 PISA results. Canadian results were described with statements such as “Results from PISA 2012 confirm the success of our education systems from a global perspective. Indeed, Canada remains in a small group of top-performing countries, ...” (Statistics Canada, 2013a, p. 48).

However, the Canadian PISA results do not include students who attend First Nations schools. Statistics Canada (2013b) in a description of PISA indicated that “The survey population was comprised of students who were 15 years of age and were attending any form of schooling in the ten provinces of Canada. Schools on Indian reserves were excluded” (p. 1). Similar statements may be found in earlier reports on PISA results. For example in 2007, “No data were collected in the three territories and on First Nations schools” (Statistics Canada, 2007, p. 12)

The result is that the only national education system in Canada, i.e., the federal or First Nations education system, is excluded from PISA. Such an exclusion should raise questions regarding the validity and reliability of the PISA results.

The exclusion of First Nations schools and their students from PISA also results in their essential non-existence in the world of education. Since education data is not collected on these schools, educators in the world community are not aware of the many shortcomings in Canada’s educational policies, e.g., libraries, science labs, technology, and playground/recreational equipment.

Discussion

Governments usually look to the past to highlight practices and policies that in hindsight are deemed to be repulsive or racist in nature. In Canada, we use the examples of the Chinese head tax, refusal to take in South Asian immigrants or

German Jewish refugees, the Canadian internment camps during WWII and the Indian Residential schools as examples of poorly conceived ideas and policies. Looking back, we often wonder - "What were they thinking!" "How could they justify such actions?" And finally, "Things like that couldn't happen today."

However, similar practices and policies continue today in Canadian education. The federal government of Canada has developed a system of education in Canada that is racist and substandard.

The federal education system for First Nations students has been carefully constructed. Federal bureaucrats and politicians would have carefully developed education policies, and regulations to establish the current unfair education system. There would have been many meetings, discussions, and reports to establish and justify the current system.

Rather than doing the right thing, i.e., construct a modern education system, these officials and politicians constructed and approved an education system that was built on the 'cheap'. The result is not so much a 'system' of education with its three tiers (i.e., school, school division/board, and department of education) of programs, service, personnel, and operating procedures. Rather the system of education for First Nations students consisted of a school. A single school is not an educational system.

First Nations students attending a First Nations school on a First Nation are without of an education law. Federal schools are poorly equipped and funded. Teachers in these schools are often very transient as their salaries, benefits, and conditions are not comparable to their provincial/territorial counterparts.

The question remains. How could this situation happen in Canada?

Simple, it's only Indians or First Nations students. They really don't matter. The federal government has decided that the education of First Nations students is not a priority. It's all about the funding. The federal government and its department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs (INAC) would prefer to take the inexpensive route (i.e., containment of costs) rather than the right thing (i.e., provide equitable education programs and services) for First Nations students.

The result is a very separate school system or a non-system, i.e., single school model, for First Nations students attending a First Nations school on a First Nation when compared to the three-tiered system of education (e.g., provincial department of education, school division, and school) of provincial and territorial governments. The federal government of Canada funds First Nations schools quite differently than provincial/territorial schools with First Nation students. First Nations schools receive their funds by a formula (BOFF) which doesn't include many necessary education programs. Provincial/territorial schools are able to invoice the federal government for their costs.

The differences in funding is striking. While expecting First Nations schools to follow provincial curricula and provide comparable programs and services, the federal government refuses to provide them with provincial levels of funding.

Summary

Canada has developed a two-tiered system of education. One for those attending provincial and territorial schools and those developed for First Nations student living on reserves. Each of the provincial/territorial education systems has developed education laws, policies, regulations, programs and services that Canadians take for granted. The federal government, the level of government that is constitutionally responsible for the education of First Nations students on First Nations/reserves has not.

In 1952, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown vs. Board of Education* noted the importance of education for success in life and that children should not be denied the opportunity for an education. If the state provided such an opportunity, that it “is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.” (p. 3 - 4).

The court struck down the idea of ‘separate but equal’ in the schooling of African American children. Up to this time, African American children attended inferior schools. These schools were separate and were supposed to be equal to those for White children. However, this was not the case. The guise that these schools were equal to those provided to White children was shattered by the court’s ruling.

While espousing terms such as ‘comparable or providing provincial-levels of ...’ for First Nations schools to follow, yet refusing to provide these schools with provide provincial levels of education funding, the federal government is just as racist as politicians and governments in the American south.

Requiring First Nations to use provincial/territorial education programs and services as templates but refusing to provide provincial/territorial levels of education funding and supports to First Nations schools is similar to the phrase ‘separate but equal’. The phrase gives lip service to equality. However, there can be no doubt which schools were better funded and supported.

What Canada needs now is a Supreme Court of Canada ruling on the federal government of Canada’s unequal treatment of First Nations children attending First Nations-managed schools and those attending provincial/territorial schools. The ruling must question how the federal government can expect First Nations schools to follow provincial education curricula, programs, and services without the necessary provincial levels of funding.

The Supreme Court of Canada must find that such federal government actions are similar to the actions of the governments of the American south in the 50s and 60s. The result is the same. Namely, the federal government provides adequate funding to one type of schools (i.e., provincial/territorial). First Nations schools are denied similar amounts. These schools are also without a system of education.

The result is that First Nations students are being denied a proper or modern education. Schools are without libraries, computers, recreation and playground equipment, and science labs. First Nations schools are not funded at provincial school levels. First Nations schools cannot offer comparable provincial curricula without these essential education programs and services.

How such actions are allowed to continue in a country such as Canada is difficult to fathom. First Nations schools will remain 'separate and comparable' until the federal government is required to provide them with adequate funding and supports.

Recommendations

Hopefully, Canada will not lose another generation of First Nations students. It is time for the federal government of Canada to live up to its constitutional obligations for the education of First Nations children. It is recommended that:

1. A First Nations education law must be enacted. Such legislation must be developed in real consultation with First Nations people
2. The Supreme Court of Canada should rule that the federal government of Canada's actions for First Nations schools to provide 'comparable provincial/territorial education programs and services' yet refusing to provide provincial/territorial levels of funding is similar to the 'separate but equal' actions of southern American states in the 1950's and 1960's.
3. The federal government must provide equitable funding to First Nations schools to allow them to provide at a minimum, the provincial/territorial programs and services.
4. The federal government must fund First Nations schools on the same basis as they do with provincial/territorial schools. First Nations schools must be able to invoice the federal government for the actual costs of educating First Nations students.
5. First Nations and federal schools must participate in the OECD's Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA). Such participation would provide Canadians and the world community with a true picture of education in Canada. It may also ensure that the federal government continues to provide equitable funding.

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