

Backsliding on including First Nations Communities in Indigenous Students' Education in British Columbia?

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Hello relatives, it is an honour to meet you. My Nisga'a ancestral name is **Galksi-Gibaykwhl Sook'**, and for over forty- five years, I am a visitor on the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), sk^wxwú7mesh (Squamish), selílwitlh (Tsleil-Waututh), nations. My teaching career spans over twenty years and I currently work for the British Columbia Teachers' Federation as the Director of the Professional and Social Issues Division (PSID). This article focuses on the British Columbia (BC) Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (EA). EAs are accords between indigenous² communities and local

school districts to ensure that the needs of Aboriginal communities are reflected within public schools attended by their children.

Before I begin, it is important to provide context on public education systems in Canada and how those systems interact with indigenous students. Canada has no national public education system and no national education minister. Public education is the responsibility of the 10 provincial governments and each has its own

Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) self-identified Aboriginal public school students and families, for whom the Federal Government transfers Aboriginal funding to BC public K to 12 schools. a todos los estudiantes y familias que se auto identifican como indígenas en las escuelas públicas de Columbia Británica (Kinder-grado 12). El Gobierno Federal transfiere un financiamiento a las escuelas públicas (K-12) en la Columbia Británica.

1. Galksi-Gibaykwhl Sook

2. In this article I use a range of Aboriginal terms, including First Nations, Inuit, and Metis, to refer to all British Columbia (BC)

system and its own education minister. Each provincial education system is further divided into school districts governed by locally elected school boards. However, the provision of education for indigenous peoples remains the responsibility of the federal government. For more than a century - from the 1880s until the mid-1990s – the federal government operated “Indian” Residential Schools and “Indian” Day Schools, that favoured the suppression and assimilation of indigenous children over their education. In the second half of the 20th century, as the violence and abuse at these schools became more widely known, the federal government began to phase them out.

When the federal government started to close some Indian Residential Schools and Indian Day Schools³ in the 1950s and 1960s, First Nations in the province of British Columbia began to send their children to the local township school districts. In many cases, students would board with fundamentalist Christian white families to be able to study at the provincial schools. Canada and British Columbia then entered into a bilateral Master Tuition Agreement for the federal government to provide the province with funding for First Nations Students attending provincial public schools. The Master Tuition Agreement ensured that every child in the province could attend school for free. In 1986, following a five-year dialogue, the Master Agreement was cancelled and provisions were put into the BC School Act for local education agreements that directly funded local school districts for indigenous students. This generated concern over funding without service. School districts compiled lists of self-identified Aboriginal students and sent in their funding requests. These students often left school by October⁴, but the school division did not follow up on their absence.

3. In contrast to residential schools where indigenous children forcibly removed from their communities, the day schools took place within the communities and students returned home at the end of the day, but the focus on suppressing indigenous culture, language and values remained the same.

4. The Canadian school year runs from September to June.

The BC Ministry of Education collects data based on registration at the beginning of the school year and if indigenous students leave, the funding claimed by the school districts stays in the general revenue of the school district that submitted the claim.

Shortly after the BC Human Rights Commission (HRC) was established in 1997, several Aboriginal organizations brought forward concerns about the lack of success of Aboriginal students in BC public schools. Research and the complaints to the BC HRC demonstrated that Aboriginal children were being failed by the public system and this led to the creation of Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements.

In 1999, the BC Ministry of Education and BC educational partners created a framework for Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements. These Enhancement Agreements aim to improve indigenous students' educational success and contain provisions for accountability; Maintaining relationships with Aboriginal students, family, or guardians; and using various BC Ministry of Education standardized tests to assess how Aboriginal students are doing.

By spring 2002, six Enhancement Agreements were established, and more school districts and Aboriginal communities throughout the province expressed interest in developing their own. By 2016, 47 of the province's 60 regional school districts had signed enhancement agreements with local indigenous communities. The process was different in every school district. Some included the local teacher union, while others did not.

Each Enhancement Agreement is a living agreement between the school district and K to 12 Aboriginal students, their families, guardians and communities. According to BC's Education Ministry:

The EA establishes a collaborative partnership between Indigenous communities and school districts that involves shared decision-making and specific goal setting to meet the educational needs of Indigenous students. EAs highlight the importance of academic performance and more importantly, stress the integral nature of Indige-

nous traditional culture and languages to Indigenous student development and success. Fundamental to EAs is the requirement that school districts provide strong programs on the culture of local Indigenous peoples on whose traditional territories the districts are located.⁵

The EA supports cooperative and collaborative relationships between Aboriginal communities and School Districts and involves shared decision-making. Still, it is not meant to replace the Nation-to-Nation agreements between the federal government and First Nations.

The role of standardized testing in EAs

From 1997-98 the first iteration of the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) was implemented. The FSA are annual province-wide tests that assess students' basic skills. It is supposed to provide a snapshot of how well all BC students learn foundational skills in Reading Comprehension, Writing, and Numeracy. They are also used to provide a snapshot of what is happening in school districts for Aboriginal children. The assessment is administered every spring to students in Grade 4 and 7 at public and provincially funded independent⁶ schools. The primary objective of the evaluation is to help the province, school districts, schools, and school planning councils evaluate how well students are achieving basic skills and make plans to improve student achievement. FSA results are returned to districts and schools each fall to help develop school plans for redistribution of current school funds to enhance student learning and to share the results with individual parents and students. But the FSAs, like all standardized tests, are highly critiqued as inherently biased, and the results tend to reflect the socio-economic conditions of the communities in which the children and schools are

5. "Indigenous Education Enhancement Agreements", BC Ministry of Education and Training - <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/program-management/indigenous-education/enhancement-agreements/school-districts-with-an-enhancement-agreement>

6. Privately run schools that receive state subsidies.

located. The disparities in FSA results reflect the broader social inequalities experienced by students and emerge from complex colonial histories. The tests do nothing to address those inequalities.

Given the wide disparities in results between indigenous and non-indigenous students, the initial few years of the FSA gave all BC public schools a wake-up call. But we no longer need the FSAs to tell us our children need support. It is widely acknowledged that social inequalities impact educational outcomes. And children need to see themselves reflected in their teachers. The FSA provides no extra support for students and enables the government to reinforce low expectations for Aboriginal students. The comparison of results for Indigenous students against non-Aboriginal counterparts only reinforces settler⁷ bias, deficit perspectives and anti-Aboriginal racism.

Aboriginal student dropout rates tell the story of how the BC public education system is failing Aboriginal Children. While graduation rates have improved in the past 20 years, the rate for indigenous students continues to be well below those of the general population. BC high school graduation rates were 71.1% in 2020⁸, compared to 89.9% for the general population, according to BC's Ministry of Education and Training⁹.

Aboriginal parents, communities, and Nations want their children to be successful, productive, self-sufficient, and self-advocates. We want our children to keep their spirits strong and intact, strengthening their Aboriginal identity in school and not to be assimilated into white settler society.

In 2022, the BC Ministry of Education began to shift to an equity "framework" to show accountability for the

7. "Settler," as used in Canada, refers to structures, institutions and cultural practices that have been imposed by the colonizing countries of England and France, or to the descendants of immigrants from those countries.

8. Public school in BC is considered to cover kindergarten to grade 12.

9. "Education by the Numbers," BC Gov News, Victoria, BC, August 18, 2021. Retrieved from Internet, July 19, 2022 - <https://bit.ly/3GYVegu>

Education of Aboriginal students' kindergarten to 12. This form is a clinical checklist and has removed the community meetings, elders, family, and critical school district staff from the relationship. Those connections, so embedded in the Education Enhancement Agreements, are crucial for student success and community self-determination.

In the 1967, Dr. Harry B. Hawthorn published a report commissioned by the Canadian government on indigenous peoples' conditions in Canada. The report, "A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada Economic, Political, Educational Needs and Policies," was highly critical of the federal government's "Indian" residential school system and its impact on indigenous peoples. Hawthorn recommended that the residential school system be dismantled. But Hawthorn identified several goals and conditions to be met prior to Aboriginal students being enrolled in local public schools. The report recommends joint collaboration between indigenous communities and local school districts – exactly the type that the Enhancement Agreements provide. School Districts find it very time consuming, yet it needs to be recognized as crucial. 55 years later, there are still key elements of the Hawthorn Report that would go along way in healing and could interrupt the attempted assimilation of Aboriginal children in BC public schools. Some of the Hawthorn Report's most important recommendations are the following:

(19) Public school facilities be used for the education of Indian children wherever the arrangements appear reasonable and beneficial.

(20) Agreements should not be made where Provincial schools are inferior or where community attitudes are unfavourable for Indian students.

(21) Agreements should not be signed prior to full and, if necessary, lengthy consultation of parents of Indian students and prior to ensuring their full cooperation as well as that of non-Indian parents. Some contact between parents of all school children should occur before final negotiations are undertaken.

(22) Agreements should include formal Indian re-

presentation on a Board where Provincial law allows. In other cases, a Board should agree to accept informal representation. In order to ensure that Indian children are not handicapped by their status, provision should be made for group payments by the Indian Affairs Branch to the Board for required fees and expenditures for such items as textbooks, lunches, lockers and sports.

(24) Provincial Departments of Education should recognize that special facilities and personnel will be required for remedial programs; these should be provided under joint auspices and financing.

(25) The continuation of any joint agreement should be conditional on the school's continuing to provide the Indian child with an improved education

(27) Integration should occur only after the criteria outlined earlier are met.

(39) It is recommended that the Indian Affairs Branch remove all group psychological tests such as IQ and aptitude tests from its schools and that public schools be urged to do likewise. The Indian Affairs Branch is in the best position to alert all school authorities to the finding that such tests are neither valid nor reliable for Indian students.

(40) A liaison officer be appointed by Provincial Departments of Education with the function of coordinating the activities of various agencies and individuals concerned with Indian educational problems at the local level.

(41) That the role of school committees be enlarged in the interest of enlisting the special knowledge possessed by the adults of the reserve.¹⁰

Today, School Districts continue to provide an annual report on how the Aboriginal students are doing, but they mostly use the FSA results to show how they are accountable to the learning outcomes and gradua-

Hawthorn, H.B, Ed. A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada Economic, Political, Educational Needs and Policies, Indian Affairs Branch, Government of Canada, Queen's Printers, Ottawa. Retrieved from the internet July 18, 2022 - https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-ISC-SAC/DAM-CORP/STAGING/texte-text/ai-arp-ls-pubs-sci3_1326997109567_eng.pdf

Durante más de un siglo —desde la década de 1880 hasta mediados de la década de 1990— el gobierno federal dirigió los colegios residenciales y escuelas diurnas "indias", que favorecían la sumisión y la asimilación de los niños indígenas por encima de su educación. En la segunda mitad del siglo xx, al conocerse la violencia y los abusos que se cometían en estas escuelas, el gobierno federal empezó a eliminarlas gradualmente.

tion rates. The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) Aboriginal Advisory Committee (AEAC) have repeatedly expressed deep concern with the FSA fundamentalist fury to document how Aboriginal children are learning. The AEAC has documented the pressure on Aboriginal teachers to support administering the test, generating deep shame and humiliation expressed by both students and teachers affected by the results. The BCTF has asked annually for the FSAs to be removed from the accountability agenda. We know that the First Nation Education Steering Committee (FNESC)¹¹ uses the results for their reports to the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. We can agree on many things, but the standardized testing is one where indigenous teachers and FNESC have had to agree to disagree.

After reviewing the 1967 Hawthorn report and reviewing the Enhancement Agreement in the school district where my children attended, it appears at ti-

11. The First Nations Education Steering Committee works on behalf of First Nations in British Columbia to support First Nations students and advance indigenous education in BC.

mes that we are facing full-on assimilation, permitted to practice culture and language on in tiny space, and learning from the land and water. My grandparents wanted us all to get an education, and maintain our traditions, language and culture, but the pressure to assimilate into the settler system is all consuming.

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