

Educational Success and First Nations Children

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Issue and Significance

The importance of educational success among Canadian First Nations people affects not only the economic future of First Nations people, but that of the whole of Canada. First Nations populations in Canada are growing (Statistics Canada, 2006), however, First Nations youth are less likely to be enrolled in school, compared to non-First Nations (Statistics Canada, 2006), and are less likely to complete secondary or post-secondary education (Gunn, Pomahac, Good Striker, & Tailfeathers, 2011; Menzies, Archibald, & Smith, 2004; Nguyen, 2011).

The long-term effects of reduced secondary and post-secondary graduation rates have direct employment and economic consequences. Employment rates for First Nations adults without a high school diploma are lower than for those who hold one (Statistics Canada, 2006) and, in some areas of Canada, less than two-thirds of First Nations young adults have completed high school (Gunn et al. 2011). The number of unemployed, under-educated First Nations adults in Canada may be viewed as a social crisis.

Definitions of First Nations educational success must incorporate the culture and cultural values of First Nations people (see Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). The connection between First Nations education achievement and culturally appropriate curriculum must be foundational to education programs designed for First Nations children (e.g., Barnhardt, 1990; Barnhardt & Kirkness, 1991; Ewing & Ferrick, 2012; Lipka, 2002).

Summary

History

First Nations peoples in Canada have a strained, even traumatic, relationship with Canada's public education system (Gunn et al., 2011). Federally funded church-run schools removed over 150,000 First Nations children from their families and cultural communities to receive government-mandated education in nearly 150 residential schools across Canada. In the residential schools, the children were forbidden from speaking in their First Nations' languages and from participating in any of their cultural practices. They were expected to acculturate into white/Western culture. This practice existed from the 1870's to as recently as 1996 when the last remaining residential school was closed (Truth and Reconciliation Council, n.d). The lasting impact of colonialism and these (re)education efforts underscore any and all current education practices involving First Nations peoples in Canada.

In 2008, the Government of Canada issued a statement of apology to "former students of Indian residential schools" (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2008) and followed a few years later with the First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act in 2014. The act funds and legislates First Nations' control over on-reserve education and aims to ensure a culturally appropriate curriculum involving families and communities. The effects of the act will not likely be known for several years; however, recognition of the importance of

community and cultural appropriateness in First Nations education in Canada seems clear.

Family and Community

Family and community hold a place of prominence in First Nations children's education (Ball, 2012; Cook & White/Xelimuxw, 2001; Gunn et al., 2011; Nguyen, 2011). The purpose of early learning in First Nations cultures is to build relationships with family and community through parental examples. This education approach can be seen in successful Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) programs, which involve community and family members in their design and administration (Nguyen, 2011). Effective AHS programs are characterized by:

- 1) Improving the academic potential of First Nations students,
- 2) Increasing the involvement of and communication with parents and guardians,
- 3) Creating an inclusive sense of belonging for First Nations students,
- 4) Enhancing cultural awareness within the school and school district (Gunn et al., 2011).

Collaboratively created curricula help to build bridges between home and school environments (Ball, 2012). Parent or guardian involvement benefits students, teachers, and administrators in fostering a sense of belonging – a critically important element to the success of the First Nations educational programs.

Culture in the Classroom

First Nations education programs that incorporate First Nations cultures and cultural awareness are advantageous to both students and their instructors. The students are supported through a sense of belonging and feelings of pride towards First Nations culture (Cook & White/Xelimuxw, 2001; Gunn et al., 2011; Hare & Anderson, 2010) and instructors gain valuable insight into First Nations students' cultural ways of learning. Knowledge sharing practices inherent in First Nations cultures are often at odds with some expected classroom behaviours. For example, at home, a First Nations child learns that an overt demonstration of knowledge for the sake of

demonstration is not valued and this behaviour is discouraged. First Nations children are also not accustomed to the practice of knowledge exposition. For instance, asking a question such as *What colour is the sky today?* may puzzle a First Nations child because the adult posing the question is presumed to already know the answer (Ball, 2012). Western rhetorical norms also differ from First Nations storytelling practices where the structure (often ending at the climax), purpose (sharing cultural beliefs), and style (collaborative) of stories or narratives have caused non-First Nations teachers to perceive First Nations students as lacking knowledge or attentiveness (Crago, Eriks-Brophy, Pesco, & McAlpine, 1997).

Implications

Disconnects between educator expectations and First Nations children's classroom behaviours reach beyond classroom practices. Misinterpretations of culturally-based communicative differences, often perceived as deficiencies (Crago et al., 1997), have been associated with higher ratios of Aboriginal children identified with learning disabilities (Ball, 2012), a further marginalization of an already marginalized population.

Teachers have acknowledged a lack of sufficient training and education on First Nations education issues (Cherubini, 2011; Nardozi, Restoule, Broad, Steele, & James, 2014) and a poor understanding of First Nations culture. Yet, and importantly, those teachers who are equipped with an understanding of First Nations culture and learning styles have been found to positively influence the educational success of First Nations children (Gunn et al., 2011). Public education for First Nations children in Canada continues to travel a difficult road. However, collaboration between educators and First Nations community stakeholders is an important step on the road to creating culturally-sensitive curricula and improving long-term educational success for First Nations children.

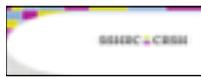
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