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TEACHING FOR EQUITY?

WHAT TEACHERS SAY ABOUT THEIR WORK IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

POLICIES TO ENSURE EDUCATION EQUITY AND PROGRAMS to foster educational advancement among Aboriginal people have been in place for several years in most Canadian jurisdictions. These measures have contributed to innovative programming and enhanced levels of educational participation and outcomes in many communities. They have also played an important symbolic role in focusing attention and action around the diverse educational needs, experiences and capacities of Aboriginal learners. Despite these successes, questions about just how much has been accomplished, and how best to secure desired results, remain matters of extensive debate and much skepticism on the part of many groups, including major Aboriginal organizations. Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis and Louise Lahache summarize the ensuing “educational landscape” as a complex one “in which hope and possibility live side by side with constraint and frustration.”¹

Teachers occupy a pivotal role in this scenario. Their roles are framed in both specific terms and broader pedagogical expectations within curricular mandates, while their professional associations have also embraced Aboriginal action plans and initiatives. Nonetheless, teachers’ perspectives and voices are often absent from, or have a low profile within, general discourses on educational improvement for Aboriginal people. What do teachers have to say, and what can they tell us, about their experiences in working with Aboriginal communities? How do they see their role in the advancement of equity objectives for Aboriginal people?

The short answer is that they have a lot to say, some of it encouraging, some of it disturbing, but all of it pointing to the need to integrate open and constructive dialogue among all participants with an environment that ensures supportive institutional practices, administrative support, and adequate resources. Teachers’ observations draw attention, in particular, to three overlapping themes:

- Gaps commonly exist between commitment to education equity and actions to achieve equity objectives;
- Aboriginal educational programming initiatives are likely to become unstable and imperiled when they give way to wider workload concerns; and
- Open, mutually supportive social relationships within schools and between schools and communities are critically important to the achievement of objectives to advance education within Aboriginal communities.

THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

As part of a project to investigate teachers’ work in Aboriginal communities, we surveyed teachers in twenty-seven jurisdictions (17 provincial districts and 10 First Nations) in Manitoba and Saskatchewan to gain insight into their perspectives on experiences and current teaching circumstances, background preparation and training, Aboriginal education programming initiatives, teaching conditions, and school and community climates.



Teachers' responses reinforce the notion that progress in fostering schools that are more inclusive and respectful for Aboriginal learners and community members has been highly uneven, often revealing tremendous variations from school to school and teacher to teacher. In some communities, educators point to substantial success in working cooperatively with administrators, community agencies, and parents as they strive to achieve linkages among supportive learning environments, healthy communities, and innovative forms of social and economic development. Most teaching situations have not advanced so fully; in a few worst case situations, teachers depict a near-crisis scenario characterized by serious divisions between school staff and parents and an absence of trust and mutual engagement to such an extent that the physical and emotional security of students, teachers, and other community members is imperilled. "Survey man," one rural teacher stresses, "You've totally missed questions about political influences in an Aboriginal community....[as well as] Crime: B+E, rape, theft, damaged vehicles, beatings, shunning, etc.," echoing others who recount being "physically assaulted numerous times (slapped, kicked, elbowed, punched once)" and reporting "a lot of break and enters committed against teachers' housing and their vehicles." These accounts, though relatively rare, illustrate the extensive work that remains to be accomplished in constructing school environments that are welcoming, relevant places for Aboriginal community members in conjunction with the cultivation of a community ethos in which educational values can flourish and hope to be realized.

Encouraging developments are evident in teachers' reports of satisfaction with their working experiences, strong endorsement for education equity objectives and principles, and willingness to modify their orientations to teaching in the process of developing approaches appropriate to their teaching circumstances. Teachers frequently describe their encounters with new programs and initiatives oriented to work with Aboriginal students in terms such as, "My teaching has been more complete" and "my view has been broadened and I know all children, not just First Nations children need Aboriginal programming." For teachers of Aboriginal ancestry (about ten percent of the total sample and nearly one-quarter of respondents working in First Nations schools), there is often an added benefit of education that is culturally affirming, contributing to a process whereby students and teachers alike experience a situation in which "one's culture is alive and real when it exists as a way of life and not a footnote in a text." The observation by a teacher in a First Nations school – that innovative Aboriginal education initiatives have "made my job easier because I have support from the band and its members....[those] programs are very helpful and necessary for the students to move forward and learn and grow" – is echoed by her counterparts in a variety of rural and urban contexts who recognize the mutual reinforcement derived from adopting more holistic teaching orientations and the process of coming to "feel connected with the community and its people."

Not all teachers endorse proactive measures to address Aboriginal educational concerns, but most acknowledge that they are partly responsible for ensuring that transformations occur in schooling orientations and practices.

EN BREF Dans la plupart des provinces et territoires canadiens, des politiques ont été instaurées depuis quelques années déjà pour assurer l'équité en éducation et des programmes favorisant l'avancement éducatif chez les Autochtones. Ces mesures ont contribué à une programmation innovatrice et à l'accroissement de la participation et des résultats éducatifs dans de nombreuses collectivités, mais des questions ont été soulevées quant à l'ampleur des réalisations. Malgré le rôle de premier plan des enseignants, leurs perspectives et leurs voix sont souvent absentes des discussions. Leurs observations attirent l'attention sur trois thèmes qui se chevauchent :

- Il existe couramment des écarts entre l'engagement à assurer l'équité en éducation et les mesures prises pour atteindre les objectifs d'équité.
- Les initiatives de programmation éducative pour les Autochtones peuvent devenir instables et menacées lorsqu'elles sont confrontées aux problèmes généraux liés à la charge de travail.
- Des relations d'ouverture et de soutien mutuel au sein des écoles ainsi qu'entre les écoles et leur milieu sont essentielles à la réalisation des objectifs visant à faire progresser l'éducation dans les collectivités autochtones.

Fewer than one in seven respondents disagree with the statement that schools should implement Education Equity measures to ensure success of Aboriginal students, and nearly all of them point to at least some initiatives in their schools and their own teaching oriented to advance equity objectives. With respect to practice, however, substantial discrepancies are evident across sites.

Table 1, which summarizes various areas in which mandated reforms have been introduced, reveals that the majority of teachers identify in their schools various specific activities, courses and content, programs, or consultative services devoted to Aboriginal issues, Native Studies, and cultural activities. More sustained and in-depth programs and services, such as Aboriginal language instruction and Elders programs, are less prevalent. Teachers' background and in-service training in areas related to Aboriginal programming reveal a similar pattern: teachers engage in several forms of training and professional development that may help them develop a better understanding of Aboriginal education, but very

TABLE 1: Teachers' involvement in selected areas of Aboriginal education initiatives

Percent of teachers who indicate that their schools have programs or services in areas of:

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|---|-----|
| Aboriginal crafts | .54 |
| Native Studies courses | .53 |
| Aboriginal language courses | .33 |
| Visits by Elders | .24 |
| Visits to Aboriginal heritage sites | .22 |
| Regular Elder program | .21 |
| Programs to meet Aboriginal student social needs | .54 |
| In-school access to Aboriginal consultant | .77 |
| Teaching techniques adopted for Aboriginal students | .46 |
| Content adopted for Aboriginal students | .52 |

Percent of teachers who indicate that they have at least some training or participation in:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Native Studies courses | .48 |
| Aboriginal language | .19 |
| In-service Native Studies | .69 |
| In-service Aboriginal social issues | .78 |



few have strong foundations in these regards. Close to four out of five respondents indicate that they have had at least some in-service training in Native Studies or areas relevant to Aboriginal communities, but about half of them have not had any formal training in Native Studies, and fewer than one in five (though more than half of teachers of Aboriginal heritage) have any Aboriginal language training.

Many teachers readily acknowledge these limitations, pointing to a desire to gain the kinds of background and sensitivity that will enable them to contribute more fully. This is not an easy task. As one city elementary school teacher stresses, "It takes incredible mental energy to continue to teach in a way that connects with these children and honours their cultural and social needs." Others reveal that, "Not many teachers feel comfortable or knowledgeable to teach any Aboriginal programming," sometimes to the point that, "I sometimes feel like I am bothering others when I need help. I am scared to insult others by doing something culturally unacceptable." Such comments are often followed by the admission that, "I need to do more," and, perhaps more significantly, "I wish I had time to do more."

WORKLOAD CHALLENGES

The latter statements take on special meaning when framed in the context of sustained concerns about workload issues by teachers and their associations throughout Canada and many other nations. Educational reforms, along with rising educational expectations and growing diversity in student populations, have imposed new demands and pressures for classroom teachers. Teachers

have responded to the numerous pressures and stresses that they experience as a consequence of these changes in a variety of ways, frequently adopting what is called a "defensive posture" in which they try to manage heavy workloads by focusing selectively on routine aspects of their jobs.²

The widely-shared sentiment among teachers who work in Aboriginal communities in Manitoba and Saskatchewan that equity initiatives are important and must be supported begins to break down when it is understood in the context of competing work-related demands. Some teachers see a high degree of complementarity between reforms to enhance Aboriginal education and broader curricula and teaching duties. However, a more prevalent view is that a trade-off is often required between what they consider to be "core subjects" or curriculum demands and Aboriginal programming. At least four out of ten respondents indicate they lack adequate time to prepare for classes, and others admit they have to make concessions over aspects of the curriculum and other activities on which they must focus their energies. For some, the pressing need to connect with students, their cultural heritage, and the difficult circumstances encountered by many students take precedence. One teacher, working in a low income inner city school, emphasizes the "many issues and needs resulting from poverty that I and other teachers have to work on daily" while a rural high school teacher observes that "students respond in a much more positive manner" when the school embraces local knowledge by ensuring "that traditional activities and values are maintained in the community."

Others, by contrast, acknowledge that they make no concessions to the Aboriginal cultures and students with whom they work, focusing their efforts instead on activities that they define to be more in keeping with the mandate of "teaching the curriculum." Such an orientation might be dismissed as highly insensitive and damaging to the interests of Aboriginal communities, but it is also important to understand this and other divergent approaches in terms of the complex matrix in which teachers' attitudes and orientations intersect with workload demands, administrative support, and community interactions.

Teachers are often sceptical of educational reforms, especially in cases in which directives to change their practices are imposed without sufficient consultation, planning, resources, or system support. The teachers surveyed feel they have relatively high degrees of administrative support and, in most communities, parental support, but they point to a number of deficiencies in programming, resources, preparation, personnel (including insufficient numbers of teachers and staff members of Aboriginal ancestry), and funding that undermine implementation of Aboriginal education initiatives. These issues can spill over into a series of tensions that can further damage the quest to provide education that is responsive to Aboriginal community needs.

THE UNEASY STATE OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Teachers' accounts point to both encouraging signs and disturbing dimensions within relationships between schools and Aboriginal communities. The findings suggest a high degree of uncertainty in many situations, potentially reinforcing the historical distance and lack of sensitivity by



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schools towards Aboriginal learners and their cultures that indigenous people have frequently identified as a major cause for concern. As school systems promote mandates to foster more collaborative arrangements between families and schools, just over one-third of teachers indicate that their schools invite visits by community members and three in four indicate that they consult with parents on curricular matters no more than "a little" if at all.

Many teachers attribute this gap to problems within the Aboriginal communities, pointing to a long list of factors such as inadequate nutrition, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic and street violence, frequent absenteeism, and attrition, that make their jobs more difficult and underscore what many of them see as disdain for schooling and educational values. We are doing all we can to help the community and ensure the value of education, they contend, but parents and community members are not cooperating. One urban high school teacher – in his observation that, "It is always a challenge for me to understand why so many native families do not give the education of their children the importance education deserves. So many of these students miss school simply because they want to or because their parents don't make them" – expresses a concern shared with many others about what they label as "irresponsible parents."

A sizeable minority of participants adopt an alternative, more constructive approach, stressing the need for major changes within and beyond schools. Some are deeply concerned about colleagues, other staff members, or practices that they see as contributing to educational disillusionment

and failure by not being sufficiently informed and committed to implement Aboriginal educational reform initiatives. An elementary teacher in a First Nations school admits that "the general classroom set-up does not seem to encourage success. The typical classroom structure does not seem to be very effective for many of these kids." Still others acknowledge the harmful realities of racism, both in and out of schools, as well as other serious issues such as poverty, domestic concerns, housing crises, and absence of meaningful employment and higher education pathways that prevail in many communities.

It is crucial that teachers be equipped and supported to address these challenges based on clear policies rooted in the understanding that schools must accommodate but cannot alleviate these matters on their own. In many cases, teachers point to successful action plans that have emerged as core participants have come to acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of their engagement with one another. The most promising initiatives are a result, in particular, of partnerships and integrated school models such as Community Schools and other collaborative efforts by band councils, police and justice agencies, social services, and community groups working proactively with school participants to cultivate mutually reinforcing networks, programs and activities.


THE BROADER CHALLENGE



Teachers' accounts do not necessarily add anything substantially new to our understanding of the complex educational realities for Canada's Aboriginal people, but they do offer an inside perspective on the challenges and potential promises inherent in the quest to create school environments that are fully inclusive spaces and places for Aboriginal learners and community members. Teachers have a tremendous responsibility as key agents in a public institution that carries the dual weight of a sometimes dubious historical legacy and heightened expectations to ensure that Aboriginal people have the capacities, opportunities, and recognition to participate meaningfully in all spheres of contemporary social and economic life. It is also a shared responsibility through which teachers must be informed, supported and empowered by governments and diverse publics as transformative workers who are able to balance needs and capacities within Aboriginal communities with broader educational mandates. |

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Notes


- 1 Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis and Louise Lahache, "Conclusion: Fulfilling the Promise," in *Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise* (UBC Press, 2000): 251.
- 2 Andrew Gitlin, "Bounding Teacher Decision-Making: The Threat of Intensification," *Educational Policy* 15, no. 2 (May, 2001): 27-257; Chris Easthope and Gary Easthope, "Intensification, Extension and Complexity of Teachers' Workload," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 21, no. 1 (2000): 43-58.



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