

Aboriginal Support Worker: to Enhance our Agreements
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Abstract

Meeting the needs of Aboriginal students and their families' calls for meaningful connections. The history of schooling for Aboriginal people is an issue that many Aboriginal families are dealing with. Policies to assimilate the 'Indian' leading up to residential schooling are two of the leading issues. My experience working in private band operated schools and public schools helped me understand various issues in school that can be connected to ways that Aboriginal people were treated in residential schools. Looking at the data collected on Aboriginal people and funding for both types, band operated and public, of schools help shed some light on issues. The new, over ten years ago, efforts to reconcile with Aboriginal groups through enhancement agreements are showing some positive connections. More people are starting to self-identify as Aboriginal which is one of the first signs that efforts are paying off and starting to work.

Introduction

The study that I have been working on throughout my two and a half years at the University of British Columbia is about meaningful connections with Aboriginal students and their families. I made use of the opportunity to research about some of the issues that are connected to Aboriginal education in public schools. First I will reflect on the history of Aboriginal education and point out some legislation and residential schooling. From there I will discuss how the funding formula works for on-reserve schools, band schools, and public school funding. I will then move on to the transition of both the provincial governments efforts to reconcile with Aboriginal people to improve education. I will conclude with the introduction of enhancement agreements and how these agreements are being used to help Aboriginal students succeed in public schools.

A Brief History

The Indian Act came to be developed over time through separate pieces of colonial legislation regarding Aboriginal peoples across Canada such as the *Gradual Civilization Act* of 1857 and the *Gradual Enfranchisement Act* of 1869. In 1876, these acts were consolidated as *the Indian Act*.

"The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit to change.
- John A Macdonald, 1887¹

¹ Program, F. N. (2009, september 10). *Indigenous Foundations*. Retrieved November 28, 2011, from Government Policy: www.indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca

The Indian act was created to assimilate all Aboriginal people into the European society. The residential school was the key to that success. The federal government was responsible for the education of Aboriginal people, and the church ran the schools.

The first and the last of the Residential schools to close is St. Mary's Residential school in Mission, BC. The doors opened in 1861 and in 1986 my friends left St. Mary's and joined me at our own Band operated school in Mt. Currie, B.C. The records that I could find say that St. Mary's was closed in 1984, but they were still taking children there from my reserve until 1986. Which is over one year longer than any records that I can find. There are thousands of testimonies that point out the brutal treatment of the people that attended Residential schools.

Duncan Campbell Scott was the head of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Canadian Federal Government from 1913 to 1932. Below is a quote that shows Scott's point of view.

"I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think as a matter of fact, that the country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone... Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill."

—Duncan Campbell Scott, ²

Coast to coast there was a very strong push to abolish Aboriginal identity. The Indian Act was created and used for several years. Several church groups wanted to help by opening up a residential school. The current Prime Minister of Canada stated:

Two primary objectives of the residential school system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes,

² <http://www.ccl-cca.ca> Thompson, T. (2007, February 08). *Keynote speaker presentation*. Retrieved November 21, 2011, from keynote speaker presentation: www.ccl-cca.ca

families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, “to kill the Indian in the child.” Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.³

The history of education for Aboriginal people in British Columbia, and Canada, has been tragic. The role that the Federal and provincial played at the beginning of Canada created an impact that is felt today. For over 100 years Aboriginal people were oppressed in educational settings. One only needs to complete a simple search on any book website and find several books related to Aboriginal education. Most are about residential schools.

In 1972 the National Indian Brotherhood, now called the Assembly of First Nations, presented a paper “Indian Control Of Indian Education” to the minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. The policy paper stated that Indians, Aboriginal, Should control the education of their own children. From this a new type of school emerged, the band operated school. First Nations groups applied to have their own schools on reserve. Many of the secondary Indian day schools, which were a model of the Residential schools, were transformed to Indian band operated schools. The same person that was running the Indian Day School remained as the principal of the school, like the one I attended. Many of the nuns stayed and taught in the band schools.

In July 2011 the Assembly of First Nations released a new document ‘First Nations control of First Nations education 2010’. The document was released after several years of First Nations bands struggling with the quality education in band schools and very little control over who teaches in a school and what is being taught. The federal government, unlike public schools that are funded by the provincial government, funds band schools. Below is a comparison of two schools. The funding is calculated using current, in the year 2000, funding formulas. For an

³ Prime Minister Stephen Harper, official apology, June 11, 2008

elementary school the band operated school needs a 40% increase to meet the standards of the same public school, and 70% increase in funding for the same public high school. The information is from the First Nations Education Steering Committee 'The cost of Quality First Nations Education'.⁴

Overall funding

The provincial funding allocation system supplies far higher levels of funding than DIAND provides. For each school the compared funding is as follows:

School	Provincial	Federal	Difference
Elementary - 35 FTE	\$350,348.10	\$247,290.76	\$103,057.34
Elementary/Secondary - 100 FTE	\$1,129,152.99	\$663,518.00	\$465,634.99

For the elementary school, the provincial formula would provide an additional \$103,057.34. Band operated school funding would have to be increased by more than 41% to match this funding. For the elementary/secondary school, provincial funding is \$465,634.99 greater, representing over 70% more funding than is currently provided to Band operated schools of the same size. A portion of this funding accommodates for economy of scale factors that will be discussed below in more detail.

Funding was a huge concern, and trying to keep quality teachers at band schools is still a concern. There is no union in a band school. Prior to 2005 many Band operated schools teacher salary were significantly lower than teachers' salaries in local public schools. I have worked in three different First Nations band schools located in three different school districts. Each district has a salary grid that teachers follow. I compared my salary at the time to what I would be getting if I worked in a public school. In each district I would be making up to ten thousand dollars more if I was working in the public school that is less than 3 kilometers away.

After 2005 there was a new funding policy for band schools. Targeted dollars were set aside for teacher salaries. For each band school I noticed a difference of \$5000.00 to \$10,000.00 difference is salary. In my research I could not find a source to back this up and regret not keeping a copy for myself. Around this

⁴ The cost of Quality First Nations Education, June 2000, FNEESC Matthew, M. (2000, June 21). *The Cost of Quality First nations Education*. Retrieved November 27, 2011, from First nations Education Steering Committee: www.fenesc.ca

time, in 2004, the funding formula was changed to match to provincial funding formula. I just kept teaching, not thinking that I should be upset about this, not to get more money, but that the federal government failed and a teacher is not worth as much if they taught in a band school. I have friends who told me that the reason they are going to work in the public school is simple: "I can work half time in a public school and get paid the same if I work full time in the band school". Anyone with a mortgage or any other bill would make the same choice. I, however, did not make that choice to enter public schools. It was a great surprise to me in 2005 to receive a \$5,400.00 raise in my pay. I thought there was a mistake. At our next staff meeting I asked about the difference in the salary. The principal said "it shouldn't feel like a pay raise, it should feel like we are being treated as an equal. All that we ask is that you treat us the same". After that I felt very glad that I stayed teaching in band schools and understood a little more about the history of First Nations education.

Although I have been working with Aboriginal students and their families for over a decade it was all on-reserve and in First Nations band-operated schools. The main issues are transferable from context to context. The issues in band schools are similar to those in public schools. All issues are linked to the treatment that Aboriginal people suffered in residential schools. My new position as an Aboriginal Support Teacher has helped open my eyes to a larger set of issues that are related to schools on reserve.

I feel that I now know more about Aboriginal education through my own experiences in band schools and public schools; I felt that I was an expert in Aboriginal Education. This new job proved me wrong. I do know lots, more than many, when it comes to general facts about Aboriginal families, but most of what I know is related to on-reserve families. My research and the courses that I have taken provided me with insights that I did not see before. What I learned is that many people in all aspects of public schools are unaware of the issues that are very real to Aboriginal families.

I was talking with an administrator in regards to a grant that he wanted me to sign to make it look like I wrote the proposal for Aboriginal targeted dollars to

buy a Smartboard© for a classroom. I explained to the administrator that I was not convinced that buying a Smartboard© fits into the Enhancement Agreement goals. He said, which goals? I am sure we can make it work some way. I said, well the Number one goal is creating a sense of belonging. He said, well all our Aboriginal kids are welcome every day in the classroom. They can use the smart board too. After this statement I walked away. If the administration of a school thinks that creating a sense of belonging is we give a desk to the Aboriginal students too, then we have a greater problem on our hands than most people know. Where to start when this is what you are working with?

In my first year teaching in public schools I was able to sing and drum with a student that most staff were terrified of. A few of the long term teachers cried when they saw him singing with me in front of the students in the gym. At our weekly 'clearing house' meeting that included the Learning assistance teacher, English as second Language/ English as a second dialect teacher, Aboriginal support Teacher, School Councilor, vice-principal and principal I proposed that we make one of our scheduled assemblies have an Aboriginal base. Meaning that whatever assembly there is, let's do it in the way the local First Nations group would hold a gathering. After a long discussion on what it meant to have an assembly with an Aboriginal focus, the team agreed this would be a good way to promote our Enhancement Agreement goals. I asked if I could take over the assembly we have for Remembrance Day. This Aboriginal student was labeled as severe behavioural. The classroom teachers did not want him in the classroom. All I did was talk about my culture and bring out my hand drum and sing. I didn't ask him to join me or make him drum or sing, he did this on his own. I was able to use my traditional teachings and my academic teachings to turn this student around and get him to start being a student. The two worlds, One being mainstream society and the other Aboriginal cultural society, are very much two different worlds.

I felt that it is important for me as a First Nations person to be at the school and to have the title as an Aboriginal Support Teacher. I did not know how important until parents started coming to me for help with their child. The administration and teaching staff ask me 'how are you able to talk with them? Why

do they go to you all the time? They want to know the strategy that I use to create this connection with families. I told the administration that it is the colour of my skin that helps connect with families. What I meant was that I can connect with parents because I am Aboriginal too. Many times when the teacher fails to connect, the administration fails to connect, I connect and every time so far, I am able to resolve any issues. Aboriginal families need Aboriginal support staff in the school because they know we experienced the same things they did when it comes to schooling. We share a common theme, Colonialism, in its' many shapes and themes, regardless of any differences.

For the past twenty plus years there have been various groups and individuals who have been writing about Aboriginal education. Most, if not all, have the same underlying issue which all lead back to residential schools and its impact on Aboriginal people. Over the years, more individuals and groups started to publish both success stories and continued concerns in regards to the success of Aboriginal learners.

The six-year graduation completion rate has gone up from the 2006 provincial government report on 'How We Are Doing' at 47% to 53.7% ⁵. Over the five years we are able to increase just a few percent.

The Issue is Real

Below is a story of an Elder that spoke to a group of Educators and administrators that attended a professional development event to honour the teachers in a school district. The Elder started his speech with residential schools and how he and his brother were treated. This issue is the basis for all issues in Aboriginal education. Every issue that comes up can be connected to the treatment that Aboriginal people experienced once the Europeans arrived:

⁵ <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reports/pdfs/graduation/prov.pdf>

“These problems are deeply rooted in the story of Aboriginal people since the European arrival in Canada. Treaties were ignored. Communities were moved to inhospitable "reservations" where neither their traditional life nor a modern economy could operate. People were stripped of any control over their own lives; children were placed in residential schools that were often cruel places; Aboriginal people were described in school books and elsewhere as "savages"; and so on. Under these conditions, it's no wonder that Aboriginal people have had difficulty finding their way in Canada.” Levin 2009

Today we are still dealing with issues that took place several years ago. Generations of Aboriginal people still have the same feelings towards education that their grandparents and great grandparents had. An Elder in the Fraser Valley talked about this in his keynote address to over a hundred teachers and administrators this year. The Elder made the statement “Why should I care?” after telling the story of him and his brother attending residential school. His brother, who was in his teens, was killed at the school. The Elder went on and challenged the teachers and administrators asking: “Why should I care to send my children to that school or any school, why should I care to send my grandchildren?” The Longhouse was silent. I started to wonder where he was going with this theme. It seemed to me that he was on a rant that was held in his heart for a very long time, much like a person facing his bully for the first time and making a stand. I scanned the audience of public school educators and based on their expression seemed to be coming to similar conclusion that I did. The Elder was upset and the feelings towards education are as real today as they were over fifty years ago.

There was a point that the Elder was making, and after every member in the Longhouse where the Elder was talking he said he was very pleased and honoured to be at this event, to honour teachers making a difference for Aboriginal students. He is very proud of the teachers and went on to claim the teachers that are “looking after his grandchildren in the schools”. The Elder walked in front of the honourees and said, “I love each and every one of you” you are now part of my family. Standing

you up in this place, the Longhouse, means that we claim you as ours now. Not very many people get to stand where you stand. The Elder also went on to thank the Aboriginal department for their hard work and dedication. The one thing that the Aboriginal department did was create a space for an Elder to speak, a space where they feel at home, that they had the sense of belonging. The Elder ended making the statement "I love each and every one of you, I am so proud of you for making time for our children". At the end of his address all participants were in tears. I felt tears of sadness as well as tears of joy and thankfulness.

Most, if not all, of the public school teachers and administrators had never entered the Coast Salish Longhouse before. It seemed to me that many of the non-Aboriginal visitors were very unsettled about simple things like having a wood stove in the Longhouse. I heard some visitors saying things like, Are we allowed to stand by the fire? Is it ok for us to sit here? I saw that they had the newcomer feel and they did not seem to want to have that feeling for very long. All the people that were there at this event were there because they signed up for it. They wanted to see a traditional Aboriginal ceremony. The whole experience was awesome, and most of the visitors left the Longhouse with a deep respect for Sto:lo people and the Aboriginal department that hosted this event.

From Master Tuition to Enhancement Agreement

In 1876 the Federal government released a new policy entitled The Indian Act. In this Act the Federal government is responsible for, among other things, the education of the Indian people. The Federal government took care of the Indians by creating residential schools. The Federal Government was still responsible for the education of Indian people. In 1950, the process of closing down residential schools began. Each year more and more Indians enrolled into public schools. In 1969, the Federal government introduced the Master Tuition Agreement that would transfer funds from the Federal government to the Provincial government for each Indian who was registered in a public school. This process was much the same from 1969 until approximately 1973. In the early 1970's the Master Tuition agreements

changed somewhat in that First Nations bands could request the funds be transferred to the band first, then to the public schools. The main issue was that there was never a seat at the table for any Aboriginal group or organization to *discuss* the use of the funds once it reached the public schools. This process stayed the same until the early 1990's when the Federal government agreed that Aboriginal groups or organizations should have a seat at the table to discuss the funds and how they will be used to increase success for Aboriginal students in public schools. By 1999 the first Education Enhancement Agreement was introduced and a few school districts signed up. The Agreements formalized a seat for Aboriginal people to have a voice and included a way to track the targeted funds transferred from the federal government. The '1701' funds were introduced, and were included in the section of provincial funds along with special education. The 1701 funds are used to track funds, at the school level, all funds for Aboriginal education. At the school level there is more detail in regards to what the funds are being used for. "The Ministry of Education provides enhanced funding to school age students of Aboriginal ancestry. Enhanced funding provides culturally appropriate educational programs and services to support the success of Aboriginal students."⁶

There has been a growing change in the education world. It started in the late 90's and has gained momentum to a point that all aspects of the education system are asking the same question. What are we doing for our Aboriginal students? How are we meeting the needs of our Aboriginal students? Accountability to Aboriginal students has come from documents called enhancement agreements (EA). The enhancement agreement is a document created by the Federal government, provincial government and local First Nations groups within a school district, and each school district in British Columbia. Each department as well as others connected to education signed a document stating that they are all not meeting the needs of Aboriginal students.

For over a decade there have been changes made to try and meet the needs of the Aboriginal students. Each school district has targeted 1701 dollars that must

⁶ http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/policy/policies/funding_abed.htm

be used to directly support the Aboriginal students. The new trend in the past 10 years has been to hire a district vice-principal or principal along with district Aboriginal support teachers, several Education Assistants (aka Teacher Assistants, TAs) and literacy support staff. At the beginning of the targeted 1701 funding, most, what I discovered in conversations, administration and support teachers were non-Aboriginal. The funds are above and beyond the nominal roll funds that districts receive. This is not a new thing in the decade. The targeted 1701 dollars has always been there but the funds were not always used to directly support the Aboriginal students.

Below is a brief definition of what an enhancement agreement is. This was taken from the Nanaimo School district web site:

What are the intentions of an Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement? To implement strategies to support full effort by district staff, schools and Aboriginal communities:

- To improve the academic achievement of First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners.
- To enhance all students' and all adults' understanding of Aboriginal history and culture including the contemporary context.
- To enhance Aboriginal learners' sense of belonging within schools and their belief that they can be successful in the public education system while at the same time enhancing the belief of the system that Aboriginal students can be more successful.
- To enhance the participation of Aboriginal communities, parents and Elders as equal partners in the attainment of the Enhancement Agreement goal.⁷

The EA's were created as a memorandum of understanding between the Federal and Provincial government with local school districts and various Aboriginal groups, that Aboriginal students are not meeting success in British Columbia public schools. Each school district has, or will have, an EA. The themes that re-occur in regards to Aboriginal success and failure are: funding, graduation rates, school completion, and meaningful connections through language and culture.

⁷ http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/agreements/sd68_2011.pdf

These themes are the main points that groups and people are asking questions about the success rate of Aboriginal learners.

Since 1999, when the EA were formed along with the memorandum of understanding, more data has come to light. Not only has more data been collected, there are more people starting to self-identify as Aboriginal. This year in my school there have been 4 parents come in and ask to change their registration papers to include that they are Aboriginal. All 4 parents have come and asked me to please take time to be with their child. All want more culture for their children. All have stories as to why they chose not to identify as Aboriginal. Some parents say they think that their child will receive lower grades because they are Aboriginal. Others thought that Aboriginal students are pulled out of class more and they did not want their child to miss anything in class. Some parents also said they thought it would not make a difference so they just left it, their child is the same as others so why should we have to check a box that most do not check. Parents just want their child to have success in school.

The successes of the EA's are evident. The percentage of Aboriginal students graduating is slowly increasing; some school districts more than others, are above the fifty percent mark of Aboriginal students graduating within the six-year period of entering grade 7.

Role of the support worker

There are two types of support workers. Aboriginal Support Teacher and Aboriginal Education Assistant. Both positions are created from the Enhancement Agreement funds received from the Federal Government. Each position's main goal is to increase success of Aboriginal students. The Assistant and Teacher both work with classroom teachers to find ways to help in the classroom. Working one-on-one and small groups are often used to meet the needs of the students. We are also encouraged to provide some cultural activities. In our enhancement agreement goal number three is "To increase respect and understanding of language, culture,

governance and history of Sto:lo culture and Aboriginal people for all students in order to create a better sense of school and community.”⁸

The Teacher also supports classroom teachers by helping make connections to Aboriginal content in various subjects. The Aboriginal Support Teacher also can teach a unit or a lesson in a class.

NITEP and Transformation

Over the past 20 years I have been working with Aboriginal students in schools in a variety of roles. First I was assigned as a band member, by my own First Nations band, as someone who is upstanding and of good nature and someone who can be trusted by the Chief and council to take care of students in the school. I was able to sign up as a Teacher on Call. Later the school hired me as a Special Education Assistant. After working one-on-one for 3 years I was accepted into the Native Indian Teacher Education Program (NITEP) at the University of British Columbia in 1995. I graduated six years later with a B.Ed. It took me an extra year because I only received a First Nation Graduation certificate at the high school level. I did not have my Dogwood. I completed grade 11 and grade 12 my first year of NITEP, along with taking the required courses in NITEP. My first teaching assignment was back home where I attended the local band school. I taught there for one year. The next year I accepted a principal position at another First Nations band school, I was there for one year. I then accepted another position at another band school and taught there for 7 years teaching grades 4-12. The last two years I have been working in a public school as an Aboriginal Support Teacher.

The title of my position now makes an important statement about strategies being used to help the success of Aboriginal students in public schools. If Aboriginal students were doing as good as non-Aboriginal students there would not be a support teacher just for Aboriginal students. We are not doing what is needed to

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<http://aboriginaled.sd33.bc.ca/sites/default/files/EA%20Agreement%20Short%20form.pdf>

support the Aboriginal students to get to that point of graduation. This is only one way to measure the success of Aboriginal people. The new goal that everyone is adopting is to get the Aboriginal students to graduate then things will get better for Aboriginal people. I believe it will take more than that for Aboriginal people to feel success. A sense of belonging is the key to checking the success. To check this one only needs to see who are the local leaders in your community. The mayor, and council, the school district trustees. Are anyone of them Aboriginal? In the schools, who is on student council, are any of them Aboriginal? Creating a sense of belonging is a very difficult task. The only way is to see more Aboriginal people taking action and caring about their community. Last year I was able to get a parent to join a committee to help host family gatherings at the school. After a few meetings in the hall after school she decided she would sit in a meeting. After the first family gathering she was 100% on the committee and wanted to start organizing more gatherings and doing more things. We did have more meetings and more gatherings. I asked if she was on the "PAC?" She said "The what?" I said "The parent advisory council". The parent said, "No, is that for everyone, I mean all parents?" I said yes, the only thing they ask is that you have a child attending the school. The parent said, "Oh, I didn't know it was for everyone." This parent seemed to believe that Aboriginal parents could not be part of this council. She felt that it was too big of a council to be part of.

When you have a sense of belonging one would feel that they own it, and that they are part of it. Creating a sense of belonging is not easy. What I believe it means, is that Aboriginal students will act the same as every other student in a school. At a workshop I attended Dr. Martin Brokenleg was talking about creating a sense of belonging and one statement that Dr. Brokenleg made was "When you are immersed in your culture you feel you are acting normal". Most Canadian students get to school and they know what to do the first day they arrive. They know the teacher is at the front of the class, they have their seat, and so on. All of the simple things that people would take for granted. Aboriginal students, most Aboriginal students, do not have this teaching.

When you are part of something and want to help by wanting to sit on committees and councils to help keep it the same or make it better so that more people can feel the same way as you do. The sense of belonging is not only with the student it is with the school community including students, staff and parents.

First Nations people in British Columbia are still struggling to succeed in Provincial public schools. Overall only 49% of First Nations students are graduating with a Dogwood diploma. Based on the provincial document 'How Are We Doing'; which takes a look at Aboriginal students, who are First Nations, Métis, or Inuit; there are just over sixty thousand Aboriginal students in public schools. Of those less than thirty thousand do not complete high school with a Dogwood diploma within a six-year period.

Aboriginal students in school, either public or private band operated school, are still at risk of not graduating with a dogwood diploma, despite the funds that are targeted towards Aboriginal student success. In 1999 the provincial government implemented the Enhancement Agreement (EA) to public school districts. " An EA is a working agreement between a school district, all local Aboriginal communities, and the Ministry of Education designed to enhance the educational achievement of Aboriginal students." ⁹The goal was to make better use of the federal funds that are targeted dollars for Aboriginal students in public schools. Each school district in British Columbia worked with the provincial government, local First Nations groups, and other groups that are connected to Inuit and Métis groups or associations. Each agreement has set goals, most have three goals and the number one goal on most agreements is, to create a sense of belonging for the Aboriginal learners. From my experience it seems that it is the parents and grandparents that are not feeling connected to their public school. The residential schooling is the reason that most Aboriginal families do not feel connected to the school.

"Table 1 below shows the ratio of First Nations students resident on-reserve enrolled in Grade 12 (since they are high school students, the schools they attend

are likely not on reserve) compared to the number of students who actually graduated.” (Mendelson, 2008)

Table 1
On-reserve First Nations students enrolled
and graduating from Grade 12

Year	Enrolment in graduating year	Graduates	Percent graduating of those enrolled in Grade 12
1996-97	5,485	1,785	35.5
1997-98	5,931	1,975	33.3
1998-99	6,013	1,939	32.2
1999-00	6,460	2,072	32.1
2000-01	7,057	2,112	29.9
2001-02	6,698	1,953	29.2
2002-03	6,711	1,945	29.0

Source: Indian Affairs and Northern Development. (2005a). *Basic Departmental Data: 2004*. More recent data have not been published.

Table 1¹⁰ (Mendelson, 2008) above notes that just over 35% in 1996 graduate from a high school in Canada. In the report, Canada census 2001, it only states that these students live on reserve, it does not state which school they are attending: public or band school. I found these data very alarming. The EA’s were implemented into public schools in 1999, and the number of students that graduate start to drop after that year. The overall numbers continue to drop in this table.

Today there was a press release from Education Minister George Abbott in regards to the new school completion rate – “The completion rate for Aboriginal students reached 53.7 per cent in 2010-11, up from 50.4 per cent in 2009-10...It is encouraging to see these numbers trending upwards for all student populations and I am especially pleased to see increases in completion rates among Aboriginal students. While there is still a great deal of work to be done, this is a step in the right direction and shows that districts are more effectively engaging Aboriginal students and helping to support their success.”¹¹

¹⁰ Improving Education on Reserves: A First Nations Education Authority Act
by Michael Mendelson July 2008

¹¹http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/news/docs/2011/fs_CompletionRates_111110.pdf

Ten years later we are just now reaching the half way mark for Aboriginal students in public schools to graduate. Is this cause for celebration? Or reflection? There are many reports and documents that are being published show all our numbers from grade 4 tests to grade 12 completion rates. The report, 2010-11 completion rate, that was released shows that more rural districts are doing better than urban districts. Vancouver school district being the lowest at 32.1 per cent compared to non-Aboriginal population rate of 82.5 school completion rate. Where I work, Chilliwack, we are a tiny bit closer to being on par with non-Aboriginal students: Aboriginal school completion rate is at 55.6 per cent and the non-Aboriginal is at 71.6 per cent. The difference is 16 per cent.

For the most part the cultural focus is on local Sto:lo culture. Most Aboriginal students in Chilliwack are First Nations. Métis make up the rest of the Aboriginal population, and none are Inuit. Most of the cultural awareness that I have been involved in is the local Sto:lo culture. I taught a mini unit on Métis awareness and after I was done there were another ten students and their parents came into the school to self-identify as being Aboriginal.

Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 - Initial findings: Well-being of the non-reserve Aboriginal population living off reserve:

“According to the census, just over one-half (52%) of non-reserve Aboriginal people aged 20 to 24 in 1996 had incomplete secondary school as their highest level of schooling. By 2001, this figure had declined to 48%. The comparable figure for the total Canadian non-reserve population in this age group in 2001 was 26%. Youth in all three main Aboriginal groups made gains during this five-year period, although the situation improved more substantially for some groups than for others. For Inuit aged 20 to 24, the percentage with less than high school dropped from 66% in 1996 to 59% in 2001. Among Métis in the same age group, the figure declined from 47% to 42%. However, the situation for non-reserve North American Indian youth remained unchanged at 52%.”¹²

¹² <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-589-x/pdf/4228565-eng.pdf>

The targeted 1701 funding is used to hire staff that work with the Aboriginal students and help them above and beyond any programs and/or services that any student can access. By definition it is supplementary. From 2001 we have an increase of a couple of percent according to the new press release mentioned above. From the statistics it seems that the rural school districts are increasing in success of Aboriginal students at a faster rate than in urban areas. One reason I believe this is happening is the connectedness that takes place. In a rural area it is often the same person over a longer period of time that has been working with the Aboriginal students.

In smaller towns people tend to stay, and if they do move they tend to go back. 'Everybody knows everybody' is a common statement one would hear in smaller towns. This could be a reason that those Aboriginal students are staying in school. Targeted 1701 dollars are used to hire Aboriginal people to fill the positions. In smaller towns the Aboriginal staff are related to the students that are attending the school. Also there are only one or two schools in smaller towns so the Aboriginal students are attending school with their friends and family.

When I was teaching in all three of the band schools I found that I was related to many students. Once this connection was made those students came to visit me a lot more and their parents came in to talk to me about my hometown. Often it was their parents that lived on the same reserve where I grew up and they never did go there. One of the parents at the public school where I currently work is from the reserve that my community travels to in the summer for fishing. This is where we go to our fish camp. That was all I needed for her to join my committee for the family gatherings that we have. Also her children would come into my office to visit me every day. Making one connection that the parent can relate to, made the difference for her children to connect to school.

Aboriginal families in the Fraser Valley differ from one place to another. There are 26 reserve lands within the valley. Below is the number of Aboriginal students

attending public school living on and off-reserve.¹³

NUMBER OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS, ON OR OFF-RESERVE

School	On-Reserve				Off-Reserve		
	Aboriginal Students	Aboriginal Females	Aboriginal Males	Total Aboriginal	Aboriginal Females	Aboriginal Males	Total Aboriginal
Year	#	#	#	#	#	#	#
05/06	65,960	5,871	6,113	11,984	26,768	27,208	53,976
06/07	64,787	5,870	6,096	11,966	26,169	26,652	52,821
07/08	64,346	5,864	6,124	11,988	26,020	26,338	52,358
08/09	63,143	5,087	5,323	10,410	26,123	26,610	52,733
09/10	61,828	4,964	5,169	10,133	25,496	26,199	51,695

In Chilliwack 78%¹⁴ of the Aboriginal, First Nations and Métis, students live off reserve lands. Most of that 78% either report a reserve that is not in the Fraser valley or they choose not to provide which reserve land they are from. For a student to receive Aboriginal support the parent/guardian must check a box saying that their child is Aboriginal, with a choice of status/ non-status/ Métis/ living on or off-reserve. There are no requests for proof of ancestry.

Below is a statement from the Aboriginal Service Branch Alberta Education Department:

Understanding the history and the cultures of the Aboriginal peoples in the local community creates a better understanding of Aboriginal students. Becoming more familiar with Aboriginal worldviews helps teachers build cultural continuity into both the content and instructional approaches of all subject areas. Part of effectively learning about other cultures is developing a deeper understanding of your own culture. Becoming more aware of how cultural beliefs and practices affect teaching practices will help individual teachers make better and more culturally responsive choices throughout the teaching day.¹⁵

The housing for Aboriginal families is very small. There are 20 units that are for Aboriginal families in need in Chilliwack. The rest of the Aboriginal families rent

¹³ Aboriginal report- How are we doing? Province of BC.

¹⁴ <http://aboriginaled.sd33.bc.ca/reports/district-data>

¹⁵ Our Words, Our Ways: teaching First Nations Inuit and Métis. Alberta Aboriginal Services.

various kinds of homes. At the school where I work, in the downtown area, most families rent some type of apartment. The downtown area, much like every other city, consists of low-income families. Most families are on social assistance. Many families are also in low-paying jobs, making them part of the 'working poor', having a full time job, but still having trouble making ends meet, to pay the bills and buy food.

Sto:lo Nation and Sto:lo Tribal Council are two of the main organizations that represent the various local First Nations bands. They are the central offices for all services related to Aboriginals. Sto:lo Nation is located in the South side of Chilliwack in Vedder, Approximately 8 kilometers from the downtown area. Sto:lo Tribal Council is located east of Agassiz, BC, which is approximately 18 kilometers from the down town area.

Sto:lo nation:

The Stó:lō Nation provides services to First Nations communities residing throughout the Lower Mainland. Our focus is to ensure social and economic development within the Stó:lō community through facilities and programs in the areas of education, human resource development, early childhood and youth services, health, elderly care, and social development.¹⁶

Sto:lo Tribal Council:

About Stó:lō Tribal Council

The Stó:lō Tribal Council was incorporated on July 21, 2004 by the 8 First Nations. The Council's mandate, like that of the Stó:lō Nation Society, is to provide representation and governance for its member First Nations in such areas as education, social development, community development, child and family services, employment, economic development, health, advisory services, fisheries, Aboriginal rights and title, treaty negotiations and Halq'emeylem. Efforts are now underway to ensure that all eligible funding is transferred from the Stó:lō Nation Society to the Council to enable the Council to deliver services directly to its member First Nations.

To fulfill its mandate, the Council has adopted a governance structure that is more open, transparent, accountable and inclusive. All registered members of participating First Nations who are 18 or

¹⁶ <http://www.stolonation.bc.ca/>

older may become voting members of the Council, and all voting members are eligible to be directors.

A directorship is reserved for an elder and a youth representative. Youth aged 7 to 17 may participate as non-voting members. The membership will meet up to 4 times a year to provide input and direction and to receive reports on ongoing activity of the Council.¹⁷

The main difference is that the Sto:lo Tribal Council's mandate is to the members of the 8 First Nations bands that are in the Fraser Valley. Sto:lo Nation, in contrast, provides services to all First Nations in the valley. Some services are open to non-status and Métis Aboriginal families. Although most services are open to Aboriginal families the location of the offices are not helpful to families that live in the down town area. I took a bus to see if I can make an appointment at Sto:lo Nation and then make it back home to pick up my child, if I lived in the downtown area. I would not make it back on time to pick up my child if I lived in the downtown area and needed public transit to get to Sto:lo Nation and back. I can make it to a meeting, but would not be back before the end of the bell.

Some concerns from parents include: little or no information as to what services they can access, change over in staff makes it difficult, because you have to re-explain your situation, not knowing what you need at the appointment, takes another whole day to get back there if you need proof of residence or something. These are just a few that I have heard when parents come and talk to me at the school. I helped on Elder that was taking care of her grandson, age 7. She was unemployed, and had no transportation. I drove them to Sto:lo Nation three times and we still didn't complete what she wanted done. One office will help pay for public transit if you are on social assistance. Another dental will provide free cleaning. The grandmother wanted to try and take care of both things while she had a ride, with me. I felt first hand the frustration that she was going through. And this is only *one* student's family out of 90 I need to support in Chilliwack's inner city elementary school, of which I work 2 ½ days a week. The needs clearly, to me, outweigh the supports.

¹⁷ <http://www.stolotribalcouncil.ca/>

I spoke with a person from the Sto:lo Tribal Council, and once I told them which school I was working at, they told me that they do not have any of their members at that school. They were not willing to support the parents or the school in any way.

There are a few strategies that I have used to help the Aboriginal students at my school. First, I stayed connected to the First Nations band school. I had presented to the Chief of the reserve, a proposal to have a sweatlodge¹⁸ set up at that Band school that students can learn about and use. In my new public school, we travel there and take part in the sweatlodge, a whole class from the public school. Not just the Aboriginal students. All the students learn a bit more about Aboriginal culture. Another strategy that I have used, and I have had three of them now, is what I call a Family Gathering. In partnership with the Aboriginal department of Fraser Health, we organize an evening for students and their families they live with to come to the school in the evening and enjoy being at school. There are no school related activities at the event. I have parents and students sit at meetings to organize each event. Along with the contacts at Fraser Health we contact a variety of service providers and ask that they set up an information table for the families at the school. At each of the three gatherings that we had there were different service providers. The first one last year and the first one this year there was about 20 different service providers. Along with the information table we organize some sort of Aboriginal focus activity or show. We invited a local First Nations hand drum group to come and perform, a mini pow wow, and at our last event we did a workshop style sign-up for families to choose an activity. The choices were traditional story-telling, native art design and hand drumming.

The first time we had approximately a 15% turnout of families. The second time we increased our numbers to approximately a 30% turnout. Many parents said they did not know about the event. There was a notice in two of the school newspapers prior to the event. The last gathering that we held there was approximately a 50-60% turnout rate from Aboriginal families, as well as several

¹⁸ Seweatlodge is a dome shaped lodge for ceremonial use by many First nations.

non-Aboriginal families that came out to the event. Overall there were about 150 people in the gym. The event is open to all students, parents and staff. Many non-Aboriginal parents and staff continued to state they did not know it was for everyone. The posters that I created and posted throughout the school promoted the event for all parents, students and staff.

The bigger activity that I organize, during school hours, and continues to grow, is my hand drum group. Many students want to be in the group, some to get out of class, but many are there because they want to learn how to drum and sing. Last year none of the students would join my after-school hand drum group, now in my second year I have two drum groups after school. My girls drum group did their first performance at the family gathering singing the table song, which is a song we sing before we eat dinner. The parents were very proud of their children, but the teachers were shocked to see the students perform in front of everyone. When I teach hand drumming I incorporate the traditional teachings that I was taught when I was growing up. This includes showing respect, and staying focused on drumming and singing. Students are encouraged to drum with the drum leader and stay in tune with the leader. Students are also taught to sing twice as loud as they drum. The teachers came up to me and told me how happy they were and if we could perform in front of their class. The students were standing with me when they asked and they were showing pride and happiness when their classroom teacher was talking about them in a positive way.

It is not only changing the way that students feel about school we need to focus on: it is the way that the adults that are connected to the schools and that are in the schools feel towards Aboriginal students. Many times in various ways I have heard from teachers, in front of the student they are talking about, that they are totally surprised that the student is able to do something. Teachers' state that they cannot believe that he/she can drum, or sing, or dance. I also had one teacher say they could not believe that a student made a Microsoft Power Point presentation on their own. Adults seem to be surprised by students' abilities, especially Aboriginal students.

All of my strategies, are part of negotiating the needs of the students, families, teachers and the school. An important first step to all support workers is to make an effort to learn about the local culture, then to learn about your students and their family background. The students lead and you follow. I found that as I taught about the local First Nations culture along with my own First Nations culture other students from other cultures wanted to share some of their own culture. Students that are Métis, Nisga'a, and other Nations started to tell me about their culture and I created opportunities for them to 'show off' their culture. It was finally safe for students to openly identify as Aboriginal.

Conclusion

There is no big secret to reaching the goal to increase the graduation rates of Aboriginal learners. If that is the goal that we want we just have to commit to it. Each department in both the Federal and Provincial governments has Aboriginal departments. The mandate to reconciliation with Aboriginal people is growing. Once again education is the center of this new mandate. British Columbia's many Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements include this goal, to create a sense of belonging. The first and second round for many of these EA's across the province had very little impact., according to the data collected on Aboriginal students. Each EA is a five-year term. Now, many of the EA's are entering their second and third rounds and are asking that each school district adopt the goals and make them part of the district goals, which in turn will be part of the school goals. Terms and conditions that are being met seem to me somewhat the same as the Indian Control of Indian Education. First, it seems that we are moving forward but the EA's goals are separate from district goals, and band operated schools are run by Aboriginal people but the terms that they had to follow and what was being taught were not what Aboriginal people wanted. Hence the new First Nations control of First Nations education 2010 document that was released. Now the district EA's are being connected to each district goals.

The principal at the school where I work asked to sit with me and talk about what I want at the school. At first I thought, because she is new at the school that

she is just being nice, but then I received an e-mail about the new district goals and how they are part of the EA that the district has. In the e-mail, from the superintendant, there is a request for administration to work directly with Aboriginal support teachers' and Aboriginal Education assistants. The principal is having a discussion with me because she had to, she was only taking time to speak with me as part of her directive.

One area that is connected to Aboriginal culture that the public schools, and most band schools, do not take into account is the transitions that a First nations person goes through. From birth to age ten the baby is meant to observe, by age thirteen the child is ready for their puberty rights and some responsibility. By age fifteen they are considered an adult and must contribute to the group.

I have noticed with my own family, my daughter, now age 22, and my son age 9. My daughter started to skip school, smoke, and started to show disrespect to adults. I talked with my family and we decided to have a puberty right ceremony. The ceremony is a way for parents to give up some responsibility and pass them over to the child, also to honour the child. After this ceremony the disrespect stopped and her grades went back up to an A honour grade level. At the time of the ceremony she was fourteen years old. My son is nine years old. He wants to be a hunter like me. I am not waiting till he is fourteen, next year I will have a ceremony for him, much a like a puberty ceremony. This will give him the right to hunt. He will only hunt with family members, but each time we go out he will get to shoot first. I feel I have to do this to accommodate the fast paced life that society has.

Schools can use the traditional ways to honour their Aboriginal students by learning about the culture and working with local Aboriginal groups to adapt the ceremonies to meet both the requirements for teachers to teach them and the safety of all. I did this at the band school working with the chief and council to create a learning sweatlodge that that teachers can use with their students.

This is the importance of hiring Aboriginal people in roles that are connected to Aboriginal titles, like District Principal, vice-principal, and teacher. As well as school Aboriginal support teacher and Aboriginal education assistant. Aboriginal people should fill all of these positions. Many Aboriginal people are starting to self-

identify as being Aboriginal. In Abbotsford school district three teachers have come out and said that they are Aboriginal.

It seems odd to me that Professional people self-identify as being Aboriginal until I think about what we have gone through in Education. The federal government's effort of assimilation policies is this greatest battle that we are still coming to terms with. There is still a stigma attached to being Aboriginal. The slow process of closing down Residential schools did not help the master tuition agreements success. The wounds were still too new and the attitudes towards Aboriginal people are the same. Discrimination, in Canadian society, did not go away because the federal government removed the policies. For fifty years Aboriginal students and professionals were being treated with disrespect. I believe this is not [intent I'm not sure what you mean by using this word]. I believe non-Aboriginal people treat Aboriginal people the same way their parents and grandparents treated Aboriginal people. Discrimination towards Aboriginal people is part of Canadian culture. "When you are fully immersed in your culture you *feel* you are acting normal."¹⁹

The Enhancement Agreements are a positive step towards meeting the needs of Aboriginal students and their families. Aboriginal staff working with Aboriginal students will have greater success working with local Aboriginal groups. Each time I go out to talk about one of my events that I am hosting at the school I am asked where I am from and each time there is someone that is related to where I am from, or they know someone from there. This is an important connection that is needed to have meaningful Aboriginal content in the school.

¹⁹ Dr. Martin Brokenleg from various workshops that I have attended.

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Have you referenced all of the statistics you presented? Include all of the references from your footnotes, including Martin Brokenleg.

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