

HOW FIRST NATIONS  
REACTED TO THE  
WHITE PAPER . . . .

## REVERSING THE SPIRIT OF DELEGITIMATION

**J. Tim Goddard**

Department of Education  
St. Francis Xavier University  
P.O. Box 5000  
Antigonish, Nova Scotia  
Canada, B2G 2W5

### **Abstract / Resume**

The period between the publication of the federal White Paper of 1969 and the acceptance of a new education policy by the government in 1973 was of great importance to First Nations educators. The concept of Indian control of Indian education and the establishment of Band-controlled schools developed at this time out of many public discussions and private negotiations. This paper provides an overview of this development, and explores the oxymoron of Band control. The author argues that Band-controlled schools are simply a means for the perpetuation of the federal policy of assimilation.

La période entre la publication de la White Paper fédérale en 1969 et l'acceptation d'une nouvelle politique d'éducation en 1973 était d'une importance capitale pour les enseignants des peuples indigènes. Pendant cette période, le concept du contrôle autochtone de l'éducation des autochtones a évolué de nombreuses discussions publiques et négociations privées. Cet article fait l'historique de cette évolution et l'auteur examine l'oxymoron du contrôle autochtone. L'auteur prétend que le concept du contrôle autochtone des écoles n'est qu'un moyen d'assurer la continuation de la politique fédérale d'assimilation.

We need...to break through cynicism and anomie and to reverse the spiral of delegitimation. The democratic social covenant rests on the presumption that one's fellow citizens are people of goodwill who yearn for the opportunity to work together rather than to continue glaring at one another across racial, class, and ideological divides, assuming ill will on the part of others (Elshtain, 1993:32-33).

The First Nations peoples of Canada can not be faulted for failing to accept this presumption. As long as First Nations are a marginalized and disadvantaged group in our society (Makokis, 1993), as long as statistics show that First Nations comprise 4% of the total population and 40% of the population of the prisons and penitentiaries in some provinces (Assembly of First Nations, 1988), as long as the suicide rate for First Nations peoples is six times the national rate and, for young Aboriginal people, the highest rate in the world (Dickason, 1992:418), as long as almost half of all Aboriginal peoples living on-Reserve have less than a grade nine education (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1989 [INAC]), as long as "the interpretation, administration, and enforcement of [Native land] claims continue to be plagued by difficulties... adhering to a strictly legal interpretation and ignoring the 'spirit' of the agreement" (Frideres, 1983:126), as long as economic and social harassment are the daily realities of First Nations life (Roberts, 1996), and as long as an Indian is the only type of Canadian defined by law (Government of Canada, 1989), then the glare which we perceive from across the divides of racism, classism, and ideology may well be simply a reflection from a mirror.

## Introduction

The period between the publication of the federal White Paper of 1969 and the acceptance of an education policy by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) in 1973 was of great importance to First Nations educators (INAC, 1982). Out of this maelstrom of public discussion and private negotiation came the concept of Indian Control of Indian Education (NIB, 1982). The hope was that the establishment of Band controlled schools would provide an opportunity for the development of contextually appropriate curricula which reflected community values, standards and norms and which was delivered with accountability to the community, not to the federal bureaucracy (Williams, 1982). However, as Long, Little Bear and Boldt noted, such policy changes may have been little more than an effort "to retain the historic legal relationship between the Canadian government and the Indian peoples" (1984:79). What is unclear is whether the dreams of educational autonomy have been

achieved. Elshtain argues that democracy is delegitimized when people glare "at one another across racial, class, and ideological divides" (1993:33), thus breaking the democratic social covenant. This covenant has been often broken insofar as relationships between Canada and the First Nations are concerned. In this article I address three issues related to the theme.

First, I provide a limited overview of the development of Band controlled education in Canada and trace the roots of this process to a Navajo educator in the immediate post-war (World War II) period. Second, I explore the oxymoron of Band control, for control implies the means to determine resources rather than simply to manage the resources allocated by others. Third, I present the hypothesis that Band controlled schools are simply a means by which the federal policy of assimilation has been and continues to be perpetuated. It is argued that the "ghettoization" of First Nations students results in marginalization and/or assimilation, not in emancipation.

## **The Development of Band Controlled Education in Canada: An Overview**

The history of Band controlled education in Canada begins, perversely enough, on a Navajo Reservation in northern Arizona. During the Second World War (1939-1945) it was the practice of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the American equivalent of the Canadian Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, to replace teachers who enlisted in the military with para-professionals drawn from local communities. In one example, a teachers' aide was appointed to the Rough Rock Elementary School. Her name was Chabah Davis Watson.

### **Navajo Beginnings**

Watson was a popular and effective teacher. A speaker of Navajo and a follower of the Beauty Way, the spiritual philosophy of the Dine people, she attempted to address some of the problems which she felt had not been addressed by BIA teachers and administrators. One of these was the high absentee rate among students. Previous teachers had considered the Navajo students to be simply apathetic towards school. Watson recognized that the scattered and isolated nature of Navajo communities had resulted in some students being required to walk up to 2 hours, each way, to school, in hot and difficult conditions across the Arizona desert. Attempts to move children into boarding schools had failed for many of the same reasons experienced by First Nations in Canada: home languages were discouraged or even banned; Eurocentric traditions and worldviews were imposed;

and children were isolated from their families and communities for months at a time.

To address these issues, Watson arranged for traditional Navajo homes, or hogans, to be built on the school grounds. She then hired a married couple to act as houseparents. The children were encouraged to walk to school on Monday morning, stay in the hogans all week, and then return to their homes on Friday. The timetable was altered so as to reflect this reality, with a late start on Monday and an early finish on Friday. The Navajo language was encouraged, and one of the selection criteria for the houseparents was that they modeled traditional Navajo beliefs. Watson involved the parents in her decision making, often traveling to the many small hamlets for community meetings where she discussed her ideas and invited parental participation in the decision making process. Attendance rates at the school soared, and parents were pleased to have their children home at the weekend.

When the BIA teachers returned to Rough Rock in 1946, they attempted to impose their authority by banning the speaking of Navajo on school grounds, returning Watson to the status of a teachers aide, and requiring children to be marked absent if they were not at school during the established and traditional hours of 9.00 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. Once again the attendance rates plummeted. Many of the parents demanded the reinstatement of Watson, a return of the Navajo language, and a continued role for the community in providing advice on the day-to-day operations and management of the school. This was noticed by BIA officials in Flagstaff, the main bureaucratic center for the region. Watson was sponsored through a brief teacher education program and returned to Rough Rock, as principal. The school became known as the Rough Rock Demonstration School and Watson was given the freedom to reinstate many of her reforms. She continued in this role for many years (Johnson, 1968).

### **Canadian Developments**

Meanwhile, in Canada, the education of First Nations had gone through a number of incarnations. Following the signing of the Treaties of the late 1800s (Morris, 1880/1991), many First Nations settled into static communities for the first time. Indian agents established trade schools, to teach a previously nomadic people how to grow crops, manage livestock, maintain permanent residences, and so forth. These trade schools were expensive to maintain. The federal government welcomed the offer of various church organizations to operate schools for Indian children. In the interests of efficiency, and because the church was concerned that the teachings provided during the day were being undermined by parents during the

evening, the Reserve schools were closed and residential schools opened in their place. Children were often taken away from their communities by force, were punished for speaking in their own language, and were only allowed home for one visit each year. In time these religious boarding schools of the early 1900s were closed and were replaced by federal day schools constructed on Reserves. These, in turn, were eventually discontinued in many communities and the children bused to provincial schools in local towns (e.g., Assembly of First Nations, 1988; Dickason, 1992; Maclean, 1973; Perley, 1993).

In the mid-1960s the Chief and Band Council of a Dene First Nation in the Northwest Territories decided that they wanted to move the community out from the European influences of Yellowknife. Once the move to Fort Rae-Edzo was completed, the Band decided that they would prefer to have their own school, in the community, rather than have their children bused to the city. This was approved by federal and territorial officials, and the Fort Rae-Edzo Band hired Father Andre Renaud to plan their school. Father Renaud was at that time with the Faculty of Education at the University of Saskatchewan. Together with two graduate students, Ernie Lawton and Jerry Hammersmith, he researched the organization and governance of the Rough Rock Demonstration School. This school then became the model used in planning the school at Fort Rae-Edzo, which opened in 1969 (Lawton, 1970).

In 1972 the people of the James Smith Reserve, a Cree First Nation in central Saskatchewan, reacted to another in a long line of perceived insults and institutionalized racism. The children from the Reserve had traditionally been bused to schools within the local provincial school district of Kinistino. Over the years the Cree had complained about racist teachers, school yard bullies, and so forth, but to no avail. In 1972 there was an outbreak of head lice at the school. The teachers looked through the hair of every child. When nits were found on the head of one of the White children, he or she was given a bottle of medicinal shampoo and told to make sure that all the family used this to wash their hair, and that their parents carefully washed all clothes, towels, and bed sheets. When nits were found on the head of one of the Cree children, he or she was sent from the room and told to collect all siblings from the school. They were then bused home and told not to return until the lice had gone. For Chief Sol Sanderson and the Band Council, this was the last straw. Following an emotional community meeting, all the Cree children were pulled out of the Kinistino schools. An old house on the Reserve was set aside for classes and a teacher was hired to run the school. This teacher was Jerry Hammersmith, who as a graduate student had worked with Father Renaud on the Fort Rae-Edzo school. The

first Band-controlled school in Canada was established on the James Smith Reserve (Hammersmith, 1973).

Later that year the second Band-controlled school was established. The Lac la Ronge Indian Band, also a Cree First Nation in Saskatchewan, had long complained that children from their seven Reserves were not receiving an adequate education from the provincial system. In one particular case, children were being bused for an hour each way and were not being allowed to participate in extra-curricula activities. Under the direction of their Director of Education, who had been hired away from the provincial system, the Band decided to establish their own school in the community of Sucker River. The Director of Education was Emie Lawton, the second of Father Renaud's graduate students (Lac la Ronge Indian Band, 1988).

Under the terms of the Treaties signed with the Crown, the education of First Nations is considered to be a federal responsibility (Morris, 1880). The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), which later became known as Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), has moved over the past 25 years to divest itself of direct responsibility for Indian education. The two schools at James Smith and Sucker River became the model for other Band-controlled systems in western Canada.

### **The Oxymoron of Band Control**

To talk of Band control, however, is inaccurate, for control implies the means to determine resources rather than simply to manage the resources allocated by others. This is patently not the case. In order to acquire operating funds the First Nations are required to petition the federal government, through INAC, on an annual basis. The funds are determined by a "reverse process" formula. That is, rather than establishing a base per capita funding rate and multiplying this by the number of students enrolled, as is the case with most provincial funding arrangements, INAC divides the amount of funding available by the number of students to determine the per capita rate. This results in significant variations from province to province, although INAC claims that these reflect equally significant variations in provincial funding levels. In the provincial systems, however, schools can determine with some accuracy the amounts of money with which they will be able to operate in subsequent years. For First Nations schools such projections are difficult; in many instances the amount of funding available for a fiscal year, which begins on April 1, is not known until mid or late May. This has obvious implications for staffing, capital development, purchasing of supplies, and other educational operations.

Further, First Nations are considered to be "wards" of the federal government, with all funding being channelled through INAC. This results

in situations such as one recently experienced in a northern Dene community. Although the First Nation was ostensibly receiving royalty payments from a number of mining companies, these payments were forwarded directly to Ottawa. The community wanted to build a new school, but had to wait over 12 years before INAC decided to approve construction. In the interim, the school building was leaking and there were no playground facilities. An INAC sponsored heat loss survey noted that the walls were in such poor repair that more heat was being lost through the walls than through the windows.

In a more general sense, First Nations are not allowed to designate funding in order to address priorities identified at the community level. Funding agreements with INAC are usually for specified purposes, in that \$X may be spent on health, \$Y on housing, and \$Z on education. If, for example, a First Nation was to review recent research and determine that one predictor of educational success is a healthy home environment, it would not be able to redirect money from the education budget to the housing budget without protracted negotiations with INAC personnel. Even then, in many cases such a transfer of funds would not be permitted. Such paternalism is rife within INAC and requires urgent redress.

From the point of view of raising funds, again First Nations are subject to the whims of Ottawa. As personal ownership of land and houses on Reserve is not allowed, so these assets may not be put forward as collateral for business and personal loans. First Nations are not allowed to collect the provincial and federal income taxes levied on non-Band members who are employed on Reserve, even though those employees may live on the Reserve and should therefore contribute to the development and maintenance of the community infrastructure.

If any form of self-government or self-determination is to be made available to First Nations, there must first be the right to raise and spend funds as the Chief and Band Council see fit. As with any elected government at the local, municipal, provincial, or federal level, community dissatisfaction with such expenditures should be expressed at the next election. As Berger (1991:159) observed, the political institutions of Canada were established using European practices as the model. These were "calculated to oppress and impoverish the indigenous inhabitants.... [Native peoples] must enjoy institutions of self-government that enable them to defend their land." Control of the raising of funds, as well as of the expenditure of those funds, is a key weapon in the defence of the community.

## Assimilation by Any Other Name

One practical result of these policies of paternalism is that many First Nations communities are declining in spirit and in purpose. The efforts of educators have met with a certain degree of success in that more Aboriginal students are experiencing higher levels of academic success. However, in a broader sense these efforts are failing. As children graduate from high school with grade 12 certificates, so their expectations for their future lives are higher than had been those of their parents. The economic development of many Reserve communities, however, remains unchanged from the days when their parents left school. That is, there isn't any. Those students who wish to go on to post secondary education, or who wish to enter the workforce in a meaningful manner, must therefore leave their communities. Left behind are those without ambition, the ill, and the aged. This demographic mix contributes to the lack of individual and community self esteem which is manifested through unemployment, alcoholism, family abuse, poverty, and despair.

Many of the federal policies on Reserve government indicate that only those who live on Reserve may run for elected office or vote in such elections. Such a policy effectively removes from the pool those individuals who have experienced success in the off-Reserve world and who, it appears, are apparently perceived as posing a serious threat to INAC personnel. As the conditions on the Reserves worsen, so many First Nations peoples are relocating to urban centers. This perpetuates the cycle, a veritable "brain drain" of the best and brightest from the Reserve communities. Once established in the off-Reserve milieu, it is very difficult for families to return to the Reserve on a permanent basis. This is understandable; there are very few Canadians who would voluntarily replace their lives in an urban or rural environment with a move to an isolated community where they would have to live in a small, overcrowded house with no running water, an outside latrine, variable power supply and unsafe wiring, no economic prospects, little recreational opportunity, no community infrastructure, and problematic delivery of health care and educational services.

It would therefore appear that Band-controlled schools are simply a means by which the federal policy of assimilation has been and continues to be perpetuated. This policy has existed from the beginning of first the British, and then the Canadian, government to government relationships with the various First Nations (Tittley, 1986). In order to receive effective educational experiences which are rich in their interaction with other, non-Aboriginal students, First Nations families are being required to leave the Reserve. As has been argued elsewhere (Goddard, 1993), it appears



that the "ghettoization" of First Nations students results in marginalization and/or assimilation, not in emancipation.

Emancipation for First Nations peoples will only result from a concerted effort by all Canadians. Many of those who work with and for First Nations become cynical of their abilities to change the bureaucratic morass of INAC and other federal departments. Many of those who have only limited exposure to First Nations concerns are bored and disinterested by what they perceive as irrelevant discourse. As Elshtain (1993:32) argues, there is a need for all Canadians to "break through cynicism and anomie and to reverse the spiral of delegitimation." As human beings it is common for us to think the worst of others, of their motives and personal agendas. Such beliefs are contributing to the breakdown of democracy within our society generally, not simply with respect to the relationships between First Nations and other Canadians. We must encourage all members of our society to remember that "the democratic social covenant rests on the presumption that one's fellow citizens are people of goodwill who yearn for the opportunity to work together rather than to continue glaring at one another across racial, class, and ideological divides, assuming ill will on the part of others" (1993:32-33). It is time for us to bridge those divides, chasmatic as they are, and to establish opportunities for all Canadians, including First Nations, to participate in their own emancipatory learning.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have addressed three issues related to Canada's relationship with First Nations. First, I traced the history of Band control of education, recognizing the influence of certain individuals on this process. Second, I explored the realities of Band control, and indicated that this ideal state does not exist. Rather, the norm is Band management of limited resources allocated paternalistically by the federal government. Third, I suggested that one result of the Band-controlled education system, as presently structured, is the continuation of an unofficial federal policy of assimilation.

One is left to conclude that the goals of Indian control of Indian education have not been met through the development of Band controlled schools. Rather than leading to real control, the process has resulted in the continued marginalization of Native peoples. The enthusiasm and initial successes of the early 1970s have given way to the cynicism and despair of the late 1990s. If First Nations are to become true partners in a democratic social covenant with Canada, then Band control of education must become an applied, as well as a philosophical, concept.

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