

CAPACITY-BUILDING: THE CRITICAL COMPONENT IN THE EXERCISE OF ABORIGINAL POWER

Until the 1960s, Jan Hare reminds, Aboriginal education policy was directed by non-Aboriginal actors, “intended to dispossess Aboriginal people of their lands, resources, and identities to accommodate the exploitation and expansion of Canada by newcomers.”¹ The British North America Act (1867) had given the government exclusive jurisdiction over Indians and over land reserved for Indians; subsequent legislation - such as the Act for the Gradual Enfranchisement of Indians (1869) – had “imposed a Canadian political ideal of elected local government on Indian bands,” discrediting Aboriginal customs of governance as “inferior.”² It was, Hare continues, the Indian Act (1876) which accorded federal control over “every aspect of Indian people’s lives, including education,” itself “one of the principal vehicles for the domination and assimilation of Aboriginal people in Canada, ensuring that the process of schooling would lead to the demise of First Nations’ cultures and languages.”³

With local control Aboriginal peoples grapple with how Aboriginal families, organizations, and communities ... [can] overcome the challenges of implementing their own vision of education.”⁴ Indeed, “capacity building for self-governance in areas such as education is the most pressing issue in Aboriginal communities today,” Hare suggests, as it is “the vehicle for achieving effective and sustainable social, economic, cultural, and educational self-determination,” repositioning “Aboriginal parents and communities from the periphery to the very heart of educational processes and decision-making.”⁵

Hare too emphasizes “relationship,” invoking the concept as almost causative: “The shifts in Aboriginal education policy over time have, to a great extent, been determined by the nature of the relationship between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people.⁶ That relationship became more authoritarian, she suggests, when “government officials” accepted that missionaries’ influence on Aboriginal children would be “limited.”⁷ She quotes John A. Macdonald, Canada’s first prime minister, as committing his government “to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the Dominion, as speedily as they are fit to change.”⁸ Such assimilation could be accelerated, officials surmised, “if children were removed from the influences of their family and community, so day schools and boarding schools were collapsed into a larger category known as residential schools,” what Hare terms “totalizing institutions,” in which “attendance was required.”¹⁰ Residential schools, she concludes, “proved to be the most destructive force on Aboriginal cultures, traditions, and languages,”¹¹ and “predominated in the lives of Aboriginal children and families until the 1950s.”¹²

Educational policy for Aboriginal peoples shifted from “assimilation toward integration” and, Hare suggests, in “response to pressure from Aboriginal parents,” and so in the late 1940s came the recommendation that “Indian children” be educated with “non-Indian children.”¹³ And so starting in the early 1950s, Hare reports, “residential schools were slowly phased out, and Aboriginal children began to attend schools within the provincial system alongside their non-Aboriginal counterparts or schools on reserves where provincial school curriculum was the norm,” a “policy of integration that did not prove to be educationally advantageous for many Aboriginal children,” as integrated schools made no “intellectual space for Aboriginal knowledge, culture, and languages, resulting in lags in age-grade placement, streaming for special education, high dropout rates, and the consequent lack of economic opportunities.”¹⁴ Moreover, “Aboriginal communities and families had little opportunity to participate in the education of their children,” as they were “underrepresented” on the school boards that administered education to their children, and were “not consulted in the terms of joint agreements between federal and provincial bodies.”¹⁵

Abolishing the Indian Act, the Hawthorn Report (1967) “recognized the challenges posed by integration policy, but recommended its continuation and, further, provided the federal government with a new agenda for dealing with Aboriginal peoples: total assimilation by removing any distinctions between Indian and non-Indian people in Canada,” in effect formalizing “total assimilation.”¹⁶ Resistance from Aboriginal peoples blocked the White Paper, which was followed by the adoption of the *Indian Control of Indian Education* (ICIE), endorsing “local control and parental involvement in Aboriginal education,” affirming, presumably, “Aboriginal identity” while preparing Aboriginal children for “making a living in modern society.”¹⁷

The Assembly of First Nations’s three-volume *Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of Our Future* addressed issues of “jurisdiction, quality, management, and resourcing of First Nations education,”¹⁸ followed by what Hare characterizes as a “significant turning point in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations, the 1996 *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP), focused on “the relationship between Aboriginal peoples, the federal government, and Canadian society, examining all issues relevant to Aboriginal people.”¹⁹ With 150 recommendations, the RCAP report “examined education in terms of two sets of relationships,” the first set involving the “connection between learning and the life cycle, reviewing education from early childhood through adult education,” and the second set examined education “holistically, connecting learning to spiritual, emotional, physical, and cognitive development,” this latter “conceptualization,” Hare points out, reflecting the “values of First Nations education, where learning is a lifelong process aimed at nurturing the whole individual.”²⁰

The “most recent stand on Aboriginal education,” Hare reports (in 2007), came from the Minister’s National Working Group on Education (Canada, DIAND, Minister’s Working Group 2002), commissioned by the Department of Indian Affairs

and Northern Development; it provided “strategies and measures to foster excellence in First Nations elementary and secondary education and to reduce the gap in academic achievement between First Nations students and other Canadians.”²¹ Hare ascribes to these shifts in Indian education policy credit for having “brought about some positive results in the last decade,” including an increase in the number of community-controlled schools,” enrolment in First Nations community-controlled schools increased 61 percent of Aboriginal children in 2000-01.²² As well, “exciting curriculum initiatives have been made, emphasizing “relevant programming” for Aboriginal children, restoring the “capacity” that has been lost due to efforts at “assimilation.”²³

Despite efforts to “transfer control” –Hare cites the *Indian Control of Indian Education* (ICIE) - the federal government “remains the ultimate authority.” She also implies that the efforts are often disingenuous, citing the shifting of financial management responsibilities while failing to provide relevant expertise, resulting in mismanagement for which Aboriginal communities are blamed.²⁴ “The key to the successful transfer of control, or First Nations ownership in education,” Hare concludes, “is building leadership and organizational capacity within Aboriginal communities and organizations,” and that capacity she defines as the “development of infrastructure, training of Aboriginal teachers, inclusion of parents and community members in education, or design of innovative curriculum.”²⁵ Building “capacity,” she summarizes, “needs to be seen as a critical component in the exercise of power, with the direction and responsibility for it falling to Aboriginal communities and organizations.”²⁶

One “significant site for capacity building,” Hare continues, has been the university, citing “several Native Indian teacher education programs [that] have taken the lead in bringing First Nations teachers to Aboriginal classrooms,” referencing also social work and law.²⁷ Common to such educational initiatives and in all areas of “capacity building,” Hare points out, are the “allocation of resources” as well as the “identification of specific strategies and processes to foster skills and knowledge among the Aboriginal population that would enable the development of self-determination in educational programming, the creation of culturally sensitive curricula, and the exercise of leadership in implementing these changes, as well as in evaluating them,” as “self-determination” must be reflected not only in the “governance of education” but also in the “structure of the curriculum,” as these will help “provide focus and strength in undertaking the work that will see us into *our* future.”²⁸

COMMENTARY

Providing a succinct history of post-contact Aboriginal experience – the Act for the Gradual Enfranchisement of Indians (1869), the Indian Act (1876), the Hawthorn Report (1967), the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996) as well as *Indian Control of Indian Education* and *Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of Our Future* – Jan Hare emphasizes (as does Dion – see research briefs #2 and #10 – Kuokkanen – see research brief #4 – Battiste – see research brief #6 – Donald – research brief #11 – and others) the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, chronicling it historically and implying its significance psycho-socially, namely its capacity for capacity building. Does capacity building also imply the subjective reconstruction required for Aboriginal life in post-contact postmodernity?

REFERENCES

- Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hare, Jan and Barman, Jean. 2006. *Good Intentions Gone Awry: Emma Crosby and the Methodist Mission on the Northwest Coast*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Hare, Jan. 2007. First Nations Education Policy in Canada: Building Capacity for Change and Control. In *Multicultural Education Policies in Canada and the United States*, edited by Reva Joshee and Lauri Johnson (51-68). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

ENDNOTES

¹ Hare 2007, 52.

² Hare 2007, 52.

³ Hare 2007, 52.

⁴ Hare 2007, 53.

⁵ Hare 2007, 53.

⁶ Hare 2007, 54.

⁷ Hare 2007, 55.

⁸ Quoted in Hare 2007, 55. For a “photographic blow-up” of missionary influence, see Hare and Barman 2006.

⁹ Hare's phrasing is reminiscent of Goffman's characterization of prisons as "total institutions" whose "encompassing or total character is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked door, high walls, barbed wires ... [and is] organize to protect he community against what are felt to be intentional dangers to it, with the welfare of the persons thus sequestered not the immediate issue" (1961, 4-5).

¹⁰ Hare 2007, 55.

¹¹ Hare 2007, 55.

¹² Hare 2007, 56.

¹³ Hare 2007, 57.

¹⁴ Hare 2007, 57.

¹⁵ Hare 2007, 57.

¹⁶ Hare 2007, 58.

¹⁷ Hare 2007, 58.

¹⁸ Hare 2007, 58.

¹⁹ Hare 2007, 59.

²⁰ Hare 2007, 59.

²¹ Hare 2007, 60.

²² Hare 2007, 61.

²³ Hare 2007, 61.

²⁴ Hare 2007, 62-63.

²⁵ Hare 2007, 63.

²⁶ Hare 2007, 64.

²⁷ Hare 2007, 65.

²⁸ Hare 2007, 66.