



**Presentation to the Regina Public School Board
Regarding Racism towards Aboriginal Peoples (First Nations)
and Antiracism in Education**

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April 27, 2010

In 2006, the median income for Aboriginal peoples was \$18,962 — thirty per cent (30%) lower than the median income for the rest of Canadians. These data are slightly improved from 2001, when the annual income of Aboriginals over fifteen years old in Saskatchewan was fifty-nine (59.4) per cent of non-Aboriginals in this province. At least some of this difference might reasonably be expected to be due to the operations of racist selection and hiring practices. A recent survey conducted by the Environics Institute found that most urban Aboriginal people hold a widespread belief that they are consistently viewed in negative ways by non-Aboriginal people. If there is a single urban Aboriginal experience, the survey revealed, it is the shared perception among First Nations peoples and “they have personally experienced negative behaviour or unfair treatment.”

We hold that the data we have highlighted here are not unrelated to the school experience of many Aboriginal learners. We hold that schooling is not a “black box”, that is, that formal education occurs within a social context and that the concerns we have about society in general have relevance to what takes place within schools on a daily basis. We also hold that challenging racism in schools is not merely something we need to do for its victims, but rather is something from which we all stand to benefit. The outcomes of racism as it functions on a systemic and institutional, as well as a personal and attitudinal, basis cannot contribute to a healthy, productive, and safe environment for any of us.

Aboriginal novelist, playwright and academic Thomas King refers racism as one of “the sounds and smells of empire.” In 1996, the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) found that “the schooling experience typically erodes identity and self-worth” and reported “regular encounters with racism” in formal education. These experiences ranged from “interpersonal exchanges” to the exclusion of Aboriginal peoples in the curriculum to “the life of the institution.”

Six years after the RCAP report the Minister of Indian Affairs established a body of sixteen respected Aboriginal educators to review Aboriginal education in Canada and recommend reforms. The Ministers’ National Working Group on Education concluded its work in

December, 2002 with the presentation to the Minister of Our Children - Keepers of the Sacred Knowledge. The report listed twenty-seven recommendations, three of which called for concrete measures to confront racism in education.

The Working Group commissioned a number of research literature reviews from Canada's leading Indigenous education scholars. Verna St. Denis' and Eber Hampton's review on racism concluded that racism was present and active at all levels of public and post-secondary education, including the Aboriginal teaching workforce. The racism experienced on an everyday basis took multiple forms, including verbal and psychological abuse, low expectations of teachers and administrators, marginalization and isolation within the school community, a denial of professional support and attention, the unfair and discriminatory application of rules and procedures, and the denial of Aboriginal experience, human rights, and history. The several ways in which racism is denied in itself constituted racist practice because the issue could not then be considered for its contribution(s) to lack of academic success. The exclusion of racism as an issue left the alternative, blaming the victim, St. Denis and Hampton argued. It remains "a vicious irony that racial superiority was once used as an argument for dispossessing Indigenous peoples and now equality is argued for the same effect," they asserted.

Education policymakers like to claim their decisions are "evidence-based." Evidence that St. Denis' and Hampton's concerns remain current is ample. In Manitoba references to "Aboriginal perspectives," "human diversity" and antiracist/antibias" education are cited as priorities in all curriculum documents, especially in the social studies and the Aboriginal Education Directorate has developed resource materials and professional development services to help integrate "Aboriginal perspectives" at each grade level and in multiple subject areas. We know that Saskatchewan has incorporated similar expectations since the mid-1990's. Yet University of Manitoba Dr. Yatta Kanu's work with ten empathetic Winnipeg social studies teachers showed that the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives occurred only when convenient and that the curriculum remained largely Eurocentric. On average, each of the ten teachers integrated Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum only six times over the academic year. Reasons given by these sympathetic teachers for non-inclusion were several: Teachers' lack of knowledge, the absence of classroom appropriate resources, the racist attitudes of non-Aboriginal staff and students, lukewarm support from school administrators, and incompatibility between school structures and some Aboriginal cultural values.

Susan Brigham and Alison Taylor's 2006 examination of a school-to-work transition program for Aboriginal youth in Alberta found that White social skills were valued more than those associated with Aboriginal cultures, and that supervisors' assessment of students' success in the program was largely based on the acquisition and demonstration of these non-Aboriginal social skills rather than, for example, the acquisition of manual skills needed to perform relevant tasks. In a subsequent study set in the Athabasca Tar Sands region, Taylor et. al's 2009 extensive exploration of Aboriginal "pathways" to employment and higher education agreed with the St. Denis & Hampton findings and called for both recognition of and action upon individual, systemic, and institutional racism.

In Vancouver, Paul Orłowski interviewed ten of eighteen social studies department head teachers in the city's high schools. Orłowski's concern was to understand the perceptions of the head teachers regarding a seeming lack of academic success by Aboriginal youth in their schools. Orłowski concluded that the dominant racial discourse embraced by these senior and influential teachers was "the colorblind discourse," including references to cultural deficiencies to explain social inequalities. (Deficit thinking was also an explicit concern of Taylor's group). Orłowski also identified an absence of historical knowledge and adequate professional development time as contributing factors. Christine Stewart reported that even when professional development aimed at improving schooling for Aboriginal students in difficulty was conducted, the training was rarely utilized. Stewart also shares that funds designated for Aboriginal education in BC are often used for general school expenses, including to supplement the salaries of administrative staff.

Clearly, racism remains a persistent issue in public education for both Aboriginal peoples and Whites. What some deem "bad attitudes" is a meaningful factor reported in the collected literature. However, we are in keeping with George Sefa Dei of the University of Toronto that the priorities for those concerned with effectively addressing racism are institutional and systemic racism, the outcomes of the institutional policies and practices, as well as the everyday ways in which "racial" differences are structured, monitored, and rewarded. Whether or not inequalities between Aboriginal Canadians and non-Aboriginals are so "locked-in" that even removing all existing barriers will not create equal conditions, it seems to us, remains an unsettled question. But we can start.

The capacity of teacher education programs to send graduates into the field without a necessary background in critical knowledge, the lack of priority given to investment in appropriate educational resources and professional development, and the Eurocentric and industrial organization of time and space in schools, not to mention the refusal of administrative commitment to change, are only some of practices allowed by the denial of racism and what Gloria Ladson-Billings, former president of the American Educational Research Association labelled some time ago as dysconscious racism, but is today more commonly known simply as colour-blindness. This problem has actually been "a hallmark of the Canadian historical tradition," argued University of Ottawa Faculty of Law and Order of Canada member Constance Backhouse in 1999. Racism "is a deeply embedded, . . . defining characteristic of Canadian history . . . that has contributed in tenaciously rooted and fundamental ways to the current shape of Canadian society," she found.

Anti-racism education cannot be effectively addressed through a wrong-headed training model or through attention to cultural difference or knowledge of treaties alone. It must include not so much a study of racist intent as a study of racist effect. It must take the form of an action-oriented strategy for institutional, systemic change. Anti-racism is not restricted to outcomes related to skin colour or religious and cultural background, but also interlocking systems of social exclusion and marginalization.

We acknowledge, appreciate, and respect the fact that the Regina School Board staff includes not only staff dedicated to First Nations and Metis education, but also an Education Equity Consultant and an Elders Advisory Council. Your work here goes beyond that of many other school divisions. However, we continue to question the extent to which systemic and institutional racisms are being challenged systematically by the Division. Therefore, we:

1. Advance relevant recommendations of the National Working Group on Education:
 - (a) “(R)acism and discrimination directed at Aboriginal people. . .must be addressed immediately”;
 - (b) “ in cooperation with First Nations, must examine all departmental policies and practices to identify and eliminate those that are discriminatory or racist”.
 - (c) “Compulsory training and resources must be provided to all teachers, administrators, trustees and support staff to address racism”
 - (d) “Programs and resources, especially with regards to advocacy, aimed at assisting students and parents to deal with racism must be developed and implemented. “
 - (e) “Aboriginal people are integral to the social fabric of Canada. Curricula in all subjects and grades must be developed and implemented to respectfully reflect this.”

Regarding this latter point, we call on the Division to go beyond the customary practice of “mentioning”, where “contributions” are referenced on an occasional basis, to the development of what some call a multicentric approach to education. Recognizing that curriculum development responsibilities lie primarily within the sphere of the provincial Department, we refer here to the development of supplementary materials and also:

2. Call for the support and endorsement by the Regina Board for an approach analogous to that utilized in Ontario a number of years ago. There, an Anti-Racism Secretariat was established where cabinet-level committees were established on anti-racism and each school board was required to produce a report outlining how it would plan for and meet the expectations outlined in the Minister’s anti-racism policy.

3. To facilitate the measures we call for here, we, finally, recommend the creation of a Task Force on Antiracism Education. The mandate of the Task Force, which would include at least 50% of its representation from the Aboriginal community in Regina, include at least 50% representation non-Board personnel, and be chaired by a person of Aboriginal ancestry, would be to implement, supervise and review the implementation of recommendations #1 and #2 above, to develop binding recommendations for further action, and to facilitate advocacy for necessary changes.