

Book Review

First Nations Education Policy in Canada: Progress or Gridlock?

Jerry Paquette and Gérald Fallon
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010

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In *First Nations Education Policy in Canada*, Paquette and Fallon seek to “contribute to a conceptual framework for Aboriginal education” (p. 52) in Canada. Paquette and Fallon synthesize scholarly work and reports published by Aboriginal people and organizations and their allies since the late 1960s with a heavy focus on the past 20 years. Implicit in their study is the conclusion that the only way forward in Aboriginal education is to arrive at a consensus, widely shared, on the purposes of Aboriginal education in philosophy, practice, and policy.

The point of departure for Paquette and Fallon’s study is the National Indian Brotherhood’s (NIB) 1972 policy statement: *Indian Control of Indian Education (ICIE)*, the counter to the 1969 *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy* known also as the White Paper. The later policy, accepted by the Canadian government in 1973 with a promise that “ICIE would form the future basis for federal policy on Indian education” (p. 79), enabled Indigenous peoples to reclaim their educational responsibilities, to set a philosophy of education, and to implement it in their schools. *ICIE* has been reaffirmed by the NIB’s successor organization, the Assembly of First Nations, in 1988 and 2010, because this breakthrough document enabled First Nations in Canada to restore education to its Indigenous roots. Support for *ICIE* in principle does not wane among First Nations. Paquette and Fallon find that in the past four decades, the model of *ICIE*, understood by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) as low cost devolution from its oversight over schools, has resulted in hundreds of small schools responsible for services that an entire school board provides. Paquette and Fallon demand a new way: one that builds on community strengths and one with community leaders committed to a national consensus on philosophies, policies, and practices in First Nations education, specifically, in the domains of foundations, leadership, special education, and curriculum.

Paquette and Fallon engage the literature in First Nations education, spanning educational administration and leadership, foundations, curriculum, and Indigenous knowledge paradigms. Their literature review leads them to the conclusion that teachers in contemporary school pedagogy and curricula continue to replace Indigenous students’ worldviews with lessons framed by English literacy, numeracy, and citizenship standards, seen as “rational-technological approaches to teaching and learning” (p. 36). This “status quo is immoral and . . . simply untenable” (p. xx) because of underinvestment by the Canadian government and standards that demand reserve school conformity to provincial and territorial curricula. Education still does not, for the most part, “build . . . on and strengthen . . . what makes Aboriginal people unique” (p. 17). To negotiate conflicts between modern and Indigenous systems of education requires

“word warriors” engaged in articulation of “what Aboriginal education can and should become . . . questions of social and political place and purpose” (p. xv) in any society.

Paquette and Fallon also discuss funding models for systems of First Nations education. The substantial underinvestment by AANDC makes this matter most pressing. Here, Paquette and Fallon make the case for integrated education, conceptualized as “*functional integration, resulting in school-board-like aggregations within regional First Nations education jurisdictions*” (p. 180, emphasis in original). They argue that leadership must be “connected both horizontally and vertically” (p. 183).

The call for national coordination of promising practices is necessary for readers to consider. For First Nations to reassume “control of the education of their children” requires communities to play “a key role as educators in that process” (p. 16). Paquette and Fallon say that as far as education goes, what “we choose . . . [to] teach and how [is] based upon what we believe about the sociocultural and political nature of society” (p. 24). When the NIB enumerated the purposes of education in *ICIE*, it defined “the norms and rules that determine educational reflection and action” and opened the door wide to research “praxis that promotes particular modalities regarding teaching methodologies” (p. 35).

Before First Nation governments move to remedy the deficiencies in First Nations education policy, there must be consideration of Indigenous perspectives of policy, control, devolution, community, school, etc. Paquette and Fallon begin this conversation with the argument that the “legacy of educational failure will endure as long as the central philosophical assumptions (or underlying sociocultural and educational paradigm) of Aboriginal education remain entrenched in mainstream cultural tradition” (p. 17). Paquette and Fallon want to understand the changes in Aboriginal education policy over the last 20 years, roughly from 1990 to 2010, but find that little changes, in part because the process of policy development and understandings of policy and educational priorities are not appreciated by the dominant and non-Aboriginal society.

Paradigms that shape education in society, utilitarianism, rationality, technology, humanism, and inventiveness, must be discussed concurrently with the policy. Investigation of these paradigms helps to explain education’s bottom line: proficiency in English literacy, numeracy, and citizenship standards. Next is honoring Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and learning in pedagogy, curriculum, and practice. The next step, perhaps most crucial to breaking the gridlock, is for Indigenous peoples to find a voice among the theories. There is now open space to find common ground between ideas in Western and Indigenous thought on foundations, practices, and policies, notably, the symbiosynergetic paradigm the authors cite from Bertrand and Valois. It is a way of thinking and being that recognizes the interdependency of all life and the involvement of community in learning.

One of the book’s most illuminating parts is in its section on leadership. The authors’ analysis of servant and selfish leadership styles as they take shape in Aboriginal organizations makes an important contribution to the educational administration and leadership field. This investigation is probably the most original part of the book and has the most practical and immediate relevance in the education policy context. It demonstrates the shortcoming of *ICIE*: the conflict over interpretation of what control means. The Canadian government and its provincial and territorial counterparts, if aware, operate in the space of liberal democratic theory, where students seek education to produce for the state as workers and professionals. They are units separate from communities. Indigenous communities tend to understand education as part of a continuum of learning influenced not only by nurturers such as teachers but also by elders, families, guides, and so on. Paquette and Fallon see styles of teaching and

learning grounded in Indigenous contexts as close to “the inventive-paradigm and its ideas of the nature and process of education” (p. 66). Education is a collective good and community members measure your worth as a learner through your service to the community. Paquette and Fallon see this philosophy as close to “relational pluralism . . . the socio-political theory nucleus around which issues of identity and the place of culture within it should be understood” (p. 66) in Aboriginal education.

The cross purposes of education are not just a debate over philosophy. There are serious implications in the domain of leadership. Taking back authority for education still means acceptance of rules as defined by the state. The result is a bureaucracy of administrators who manage always-scarce resources from the public purse. For Paquette and Fallon, *ICIE* perpetuates Canadian government control over the form and content of education in Aboriginal communities. It will continue to do so because the structure is built from the foundation of liberalism in a modern era.

As a result, mentors like teachers and principals become part of community and “regional elite[s] . . . empowered to participate in shaping the evolving identity of their community and culture” (pp. 66-67) in the post-*ICIE* era. *ICIE* created a need for trained professionals, and faculties of education all over Canada responded with Indian, Aboriginal, northern, and urban teacher education programs. Students received funding support to pay tuition and living expenses through initiatives like the Canadian government’s Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP).

However, space did not open as quickly to critique the system in which they were now training and from which they were asking for help. In reality, the graduates more often became local elites. They were part of the working to middle classes in communities but they were less often the “word warriors” envisioned by Paquette and Fallon; graduates “were denied the opportunity to participate in their own development on their own terms” (pp. 73-74).

ICIE became a “one-size-fits-all solution . . . to questions about Aboriginal governance . . . in education” (p. 65) even though *ICIE* posed only a mandate for its Indigenous supporters, which was to restore traditional frameworks for teaching and learning in relation with non-Natives in a modern world. *ICIE* asks entire communities to deliberate on “what was required for a healthy and sustainable Aboriginal education system that would enable their communities to improve their collective well-being” (p. 73). Nowhere did *ICIE* call on the Canadian government to simply devolve responsibility for education to First Nation reserves so that teachers could perpetuate in class the same value bases held by mainstream society (see Monture-Angus, 1995). The administrative systems did not make space to discuss leadership style. Paquette and Fallon contend that, “effective, efficient, and appropriate Aboriginal education requires moral leadership” (p. 285). Moral leadership involves selfless leaders who do not look at First Nations education solely as a chance to help “oneself and those close to oneself” (p. 286).

One of the most vexed topics to plague First Nation education authorities became student performance at school and the never-ending rhetoric of the need to “close the education gap.” Here, this reviewer finds Paquette and Fallon to fall short. They ask many of the questions asked throughout the last 20 years, mainly in response to scathing reports from the Auditor General of Canada on the need to close the achievement gap between First Nation and non-First Nation students. The synthesis is instructive and helpful, making this section of the book important for use in graduate courses in educational administration and leadership. However, more analysis of the philosophies underpinning achievement questions, equity, parity, and so on is necessary. The Indigenous perspective is lost here.

Another vexed issue is PSSSP funding of students in pursuit of postsecondary education. “[D]emand outstrips resources provided,” which means that “First Nations funders . . . exercise their ‘Indian control’” (p. 136) as they struggle to fund their students’ higher learning. A competitive model exists and is meant to always exist in this current state of affairs. Although First Nation leaders may wish to resist the competitive model that frames achievement in modern education, the rhetoric of scarcity of resources means inevitably that communities have to follow this model to determine who is worthy of support.

The hope of *ICIE* is dashed by the Canadian and provincial and territorial education systems that have educated and continue to school First Nation students for inequality (Barman, 2012; Miller, 1996). The Canadian government uses jurisdictional disputes and conflicts over interpretations of Treaties to justify continued unequal treatment of First Nation communities in the education field. It seems impossible to close the achievement gaps that the Auditor General of Canada identifies without attention first to the belief of non-Aboriginal Canadians of inherent inferiority in Aboriginal communities; a belief system entrenched from the time of the 1763 *Royal Proclamation’s* identification of Indians as the Queen’s children who required care and control (Miller, 2000).

Since then, there has been no concerted effort on the part of the British government and its Canadian successor to ever consider “‘spirit and intent’” behind Treaties, policy statements, and the like (Pelly, as cited in Paquette & Fallon, 2010, p. 142). Even the prospect to train in access programs in teacher education, nursing, social work, and engineering is declining as

PSSSP funding has stagnated as living costs and tuition have risen substantially over the last two decades, with the result that at least 10 per cent of eligible First Nations post-secondary applicants are denied funding solely because funding was not available to support them. (p. 163)

The reason why “not a great deal is changing in First Nations education as a whole” is because the dominant society has not yet awakened to opportunities for improvement of “Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal education systems” that could “become both scientific . . . and spiritual” (pp. 273-274). The dominant society still looks at Aboriginal peoples and their knowledges as inferior. Despite *ICIE*, the system still belongs to non-Aboriginal others and “[a]s long as the resources of ‘the other’ support education, education will remain the property of ‘the other’ and will pursue ‘the other’s’ agenda” (p. 359).

There is need for dialogue on how “Aboriginal cultures—and hence languages—can be a legitimate and integral part of an educated, indeed erudite person” (p. 339). These conversations on appropriate paradigms for curriculum, teaching, learning, and education policy development begin in communities. However, Paquette and Fallon probe only the scholarly work and draw on their own experiences. To clear the gridlock requires consultation with community members in dialogue. And then, to theorize after the conversations occur. Paquette and Fallon seem to think that the struggle to define visions of Indigenous learning is only beginning. However, a deeper search and close reading of the writing and research of leading Indigenous scholars in Canada and internationally show that philosophies and practices are developing, that space is being made in the conventional system of education to overthrow the dominant ideologies.

This reviewer would have appreciated an assessment of what scholarly work and reports on the facilitation of “education for the next generation that is culturally, linguistically, and philosophically relevant and empowering” (p. 103) could tell policymakers, policy analysts, economists, and their colleagues about what sorts of investments, accountability standards, and

output models are needed. Within this conversation mentioned above, though, space must be dedicated to understanding Indigenous concepts of policy. Along similar lines, dialogue on results, efficiency, effectiveness, and outputs are necessary.

One concept that requires critique is community. Paquette and Fallon presume correctly that AANDC and the provincial and territorial governments see communities as defined by their corporate limits, a “municipal model’ of governance” (p. 227). Therefore, within this dialogue, there is a need to clarify understandings between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals in the education domain on what community means.

First Nations Education Policy in Canada is a timely investigation on the progress of Aboriginal education since 1972 and particularly, since 1990. Paquette and Fallon conceptualize the gridlock as a parsimonious Canadian government and its stubborn adherence to provincial and territorial education legislation. This reviewer sees the way out through dialogue on Indigenous standards in the education policy domain. In 1972, *ICIE* opened the door to revitalization of concepts of education and learning. To clear the gridlock involves pausing to consider Indigenous perspectives as they affect policy development. Paquette and Fallon leave readers with hope and a sound directive for action in the education field. Their plans for action demonstrate implicitly the continued relevance of *ICIE*. Readers are left to contemplate the gridlock and navigate it with a means to clear it.

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