DETERMINING THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

IN FIRST NATIONS SCHOOLS:

A COMPARISON OF THE FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION ACT

WITH THE POLICY OF THE ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS[1]

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In this article, I explore the incongruence between the federal government's proposed First Nations Education Act and the approach of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) regarding language and culture education. I also examine research concerning potential outcomes of their approaches to determine what would be most beneficial to learners. Language and culture inclusion in schools has been shown to impact significantly on academic and social outcomes for Aboriginal youth, and there are substantial financial and practical differences involved in creating and maintaining different types of language and culture programs. Therefore, this incongruence is of great practical importance for policy makers and education practitioners.

Introduction

In this article, I examine the differences in the approaches of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and the federal government, as represented by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), with respect to language and culture education surrounding the 2013 proposed First Nations Education Act. Upon initial examination, the AFN and the federal government appear to be at least moderately congruous on their agreement that language and culture should be included in First Nations school programs. However, upon deeper evaluation and analysis of the semantics of their respective policy documentation, it is clear that the two are talking about vastly different approaches to language and culture education. This is extremely

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important, because it is the letter of the law that is interpreted in practice and that determines

funding and program execution. In this case, the letter of the proposed law differed significantly

from the intent of many First Nations and the overarching intent of the AFN.[2] Namely, the

proposed act and government documentation surrounding it states support for language and

culture study, while the AFN and many of its member First Nations are seeking support for

language and culture immersion. These approaches are fundamentally different in nature, require

different financial and human resources to accomplish, and have significantly different

educational outcomes. Therefore, it is vital to examine the documentation to identify how exactly

the approaches differ, and to examine current research in Aboriginal education to determine

which approach is most beneficial to the learners who are ultimately impacted.

Thus far in Canadian history, federal policy has not generally been supportive of

creating adequate educational experiences for First Nations children. A full discussion of the

history of policy development with respect to First Nations education would necessitate a paper

or dissertation in its own right, and several outstanding articles encapsulating this history have

been published previously (see in particular McCue, 2004; McCue, 2006; Senate Standing

Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2011; Fallon & Paquette, 2012). From the atrocious history of

the residential school system to the underfunding and neglect that exist today, federal approaches

to First Nations schools have and still do result in poor models of education. This is made worse

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[2] The National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations is an advocacy group, directed by the chiefs of First Nations from across Canada who have been elected as per the Indian Act. It is headed by a National Chief elected by the Chiefs-in-Assembly. In addition to the elected Chiefs-in-Assembly there is an executive of regional chiefs, as well as chairs from the three associate councils representing First Nations elders, women, and youth from across Canada. An executive of regional chiefs elected by First Nations chiefs at the band level form the executive of the national organization. The AFN holds assemblies at least twice per year and every three years holds an election for the National Chief. The role of the AFN "is to advocate on behalf of First Nations as directed by Chiefs-in-Assembly. This includes facilitation and coordination of national and regional discussions and dialogue, advocacy efforts and campaigns, legal and policy analysis, communicating with governments, including facilitating relationship building between First Nations and the Crown as well as public and private sectors and general public" (AFN, 2014).

by the fact that many First Nations communities are still struggling from the results of historical and current discriminatory government policies that impact education and other areas of life, including much of the Indian Act.

From the residential school era until today, underfunding has been an ongoing severe problem. On average, First Nations schools received only 67% of the funding per student of provincial schools in 2010–2011, $7,101 per student as compared to $10,578.[3] This amount does not account for the fact that First Nations elementary and secondary schools have two to three times as many special needs identifications as provincial schools (AFN, 2012a). This funding is distributed according to the Band Operated Funding Formula (BOFF), which was developed in 1987 and last updated in 1996. Since the 1996 reevaluation of the BOFF, funding growth has been capped at 2% per year, in spite of a growth in the First Nations population and a rate of inflation that would require funding increases of 6.3% per year to ensure funding and program stability (AFN, 2012a, 2012b).

Language and culture education has been impacted by this lack of funding. As of this writing, language immersion is not covered by the funding offered under the BOFF (Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2011; AFN, 2012b). Language and culture education is central to the self-governing educational goals of many First Nations; it is also core to the educational policy and advocacy of the AFN because of this lack of funding, and because historically the school system was used as a tool for assimilation, as children in residential schools were forced to abandon their own languages and cultures, learn English or French, and adapt to mainstream culture. In fact, "assimilation and integration were the main policy

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[3] In Canada, First Nations schools, or most schools on-reserve, are funded by the federal government. Schools off-reserve, which may still have First Nations students in attendance, are funded by the provincial government. Transfer funds from AANDC or First Nations with memoranda of understanding with school divisions contribute to provincial funding for First Nations students attending provincial schools.

objectives until the 90s. They were widely perceived by non-Aboriginals as the only way of

enabling First Nations to realize their potential as human beings within mainstream Canadian

Society. Education for First Nation communities, then, was designed to foster marginal

accommodation of First Nations conceptions of fundamental needs, interests, and capabilities

and to neutralized cultural differences by promoting more or less undifferentiated membership in

mainstream Canadian society" (Fallon & Paquette 2012, p. 5). This, in addition to the plethora

of other abuses many children suffered in residential schools, had disastrous effects on many

students and their communities.

In reality, all education is culture-based education, and all education imbues children

with not only factual understanding, but a linguistic and social lens for making sense of the

world and a set of beliefs and values to interpret it. An education that is devoid of, or actively

"others," Aboriginal language and culture, though not as aggressive as a residential school, still

removes First Nations children from an opportunity to construct a culturally congruous linguistic

and social lens. It takes these students away from an understanding of the beliefs and values of

their cultures and knowledge of the intellectual traditions of their nations. Because of this,

control over language and culture education is central to Aboriginal self-government and self-

determination. The AFN and individual First Nations, in addition to many others, have been

emphasizing this point for years, most notably since the development of the seminal policy

document *Indian Control of Indian Education* (National Indian Brotherhood [NIB]/AFN 1972).

Much more recently, federal governing bodies have come to recognize its importance as part of

an overall move toward equity in Canada; for example, in their 2011 report, the Senate Standing

Committee on Aboriginal peoples writes "to walk this path honourably we must act not only to

transform First Nations education in a way that reconnects First Nations children to their

languages, cultures, and communities, but we must also transform our fundamental relationship with the First Peoples of this country, from paternalism to partnership" (Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2011, p. 2). In this report, the committee recommends that language preservation and instruction must be covered by any revised funding formula given the threatened state of many of Canada's indigenous languages and the importance of language and culture for a well-founded education for First Nations youth (cf. Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples 2011, p. 63–4).[4]

A Comparison of Two Approaches to Language and Culture Education

In examining exactly how the current federal government and the AFN differ with respect to the role of language and culture in education, it is important to closely analyze how each talks about it in their policy documentation. On October 2013, the federal government, through AANDC, released *Working Together for First Nation Students: A Proposal for a Bill on First Nation Education*, given the short title First Nations Education Act; this act and the policy documentation surrounding it by both the federal government and the AFN offers an opportunity for this comparison. The proposed act was rejected by both individual First Nations and the AFN. In rejecting it, the AFN outlined three major concerns. The third of these was a disregard for the "essential role that language and culture must play in nurturing the success of our students" (Atleo, 2013b).[5] This is particularly interesting because the original proposed legislation does include reference to language and culture. Specifically, in its introduction the

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[4] It is interesting to note that unfortunately this particular recommendation was not acknowledged in the response to the report from the Government of Canada, sent by the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, John Duncan (2012).

[5] The other two major concerns expressed by the AFN regarding the proposed bill were (1) a lack of emphasis on First Nations control of First Nations education, with serious concerns over paternalistic content and a lack of consultation or inclusion of content resulting from consultation; (2) a lack of fair and stable funding. Atleo (2013a) also points out the need to move away from unilateral Federal oversight toward meaningful engagement and cooperation in his "Open Letter to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada."

proposed legislation cites the importance of language and culture in school curricula that has

been brought to the attention of the government through the consultation process. It also cites the

existence of language courses and native studies courses in provincial curricula as a means to

achieving relevance and strong academic rigour for students (AANDC 2013). Within the

proposed legislation, the act states that "the council of a First Nation must, in respect of each

school that it administers . . . establish the education program, which may include the

opportunity to study an Aboriginal language or culture" (11. (1)). It goes on to state in 15.(2) that

in creating and establishing such programming, the First Nation must consult with a community

education committee.

The AFN rejects this, and outlines a different approach to Aboriginal languages and

cultures in schools. As Atleo (2013a) writes:

> First Nations children must now be nurtured in an environment that affirms
> their dignity, rights, and their identity, including their languages and cultures.
> First Nations education systems must be enabled, supported and funded in a
> way that ensures they can design programming that achieves this imperative.
> Moreover, as a country, and as part of reconciliation, Canada must recognize
> the importance of First Nations languages and cultures as foundational to this
> land. (p. 3)

As an archetypical example of the need for localized, culture-based and language-

founded programming, then National Chief Atleo (2013b) discusses Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey

Agreement in Nova Scotia, which is has resulted in culture-based and strong language immersion

programs with an average graduation rate of 87.7%, which exceed the national average and

significantly surpasses the First Nations average of 36%. McCue (2004) discusses this and other

Self Government Agreements (SGAs), including agreements with Self-Governing Yukon First

Nations (1998), the Manitoba Framework Agreement (1994), the Nisga'a Treaty Negotiations

Agreement in Principle (1996), the James bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (1975), the

United Anishinaabeg Councils Government Agreement in Principle (1998), the Union of Ontario

Indians (ongoing[6]) and the United Anishinaabeg Councils (rejected in 2005). These SGAs have

seen various levels of success, and Atleo (2013b) overstates the degree of their autonomy. As

McCue (2004) points out, they are still very much subject to provincial educational policy as

"the affected communities must ultimately adhere to the provincial curriculum and provincial

standards to educate their children. In effect, what these SGAs are saying is that, yes, a First

Nation can have jurisdiction in education, but that jurisdiction must ensure that the status quo

regarding the curriculum and education program are maintained in First Nations schools" (p. 6).

However, these SGAs still grant these communities more autonomy than those directly

controlled by the federal government. In addition, clearly, not all First Nations in Canada today

have the size or local educational expertise to create and run an education system in the same

style as those involved in these SGAs. Still, in all communities it is possible, even within the

confines of provincial curriculum or federal control, to "identify and define the appropriate core

values of tribes and nations in the critical areas of: the family, languages, values, traditional

leadership and governance, communication, decision-making, child-rearing, dispute resolution,

to name a few . . . [and to] integrate those values into the content of the elementary-secondary

curriculum and the pedagogy. Integration of the cultural values into curriculum constructs is

critical and the process to accomplish that will not succeed if teaching students *about* their

traditional cultures is all that is done" (McCue 2006, p. 6; emphasis in the original).

The importance of an education system with language and culture at its core was

underlined in AFN Resolution 21/2013, "Outlining the Path Forward: Conditions for the Success

of First Nations Education," which was adopted by consensus at the December 2013 AFN

Special Chiefs Assembly, and which represents the AFN's official rejection of the proposed First

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[6] For further information, see http://www.anishinabek.ca/roj/education-agreement.asp

Nations Education Act. The resolution cites as a reason for rejecting the proposed legislation that "First Nations education systems must be enabled, supported and funded in a way that supports full immersion and grounding of all education in Indigenous languages and cultures" (p. 2). The Chiefs-in-Council also resolve by the adoption Resolution 21/2013 that they "are resolute and determined to achieve justice, fairness, and equity for First Nations children, through strong, culturally-grounded education" (p. 2). The resolution further points to the importance of culture-based education in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to which Canada is signatory, and which states in Article 14 (1.) that "Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their education systems and institutions providing education *in* their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning" (United Nations [UN], 2008, p. 7; emphasis added by author). Finally, the resolution affirms the AFN's commitment to its official education policy, outlined in the seminal document *First Nations Control of First Nations Education*, first written in 1972 and last updated in 2010 (National Indian Brotherhood [NIB]/AFN, 1972; AFN, 2010), which consistently underlines the importance of culture-based education with a preference for language immersion programs throughout the length of the document.

At an initial glance, the approaches of the AFN and the federal government may not seem at odds. However, upon closer inspection, they are fundamentally different. The approach outlined in the proposed First Nations Education Act refers to the study of indigenous languages or cultures as a part of a larger curriculum in which these languages and cultures may not play an intrinsic part. This is similar to the manner in which the provincial curricula generally approach the study of French or English, or any foreign language, as a second language. To study a language or culture means to view it from an external vantage point as an object of education.

The learning objective is for the student to come away with a greater understanding of the culture and a degree of fluency in the language, without necessarily having that language or culture play a part in the everyday life of the learner external to the school, or even external to the period in which it is being studied.

The approach proposed by the AFN is, in fact, largely the opposite of that proposed by the federal government. Rather than including language and culture as the object of study, the AFN takes the stance that "education systems must . . . be grounded in First Nations cultures and languages" and that "every First Nation must be able to design their own standards, standards that meet or exceed provincial standards, but as uniquely designed to reflect language, culture, and their ways of learning and knowing" (Atleo, 2013b). In other words, the AFN is proposing culture-based education in which language plays an essential role. Culture-based education refers to the practice of grounding the school experience, including instruction, interaction, evaluation, and curriculum in cultural ways of being, knowing, learning, and doing. As previously discussed, in reality, all education is culture-based education, since all education includes the transmission of values, beliefs, knowledge, norms, and behaviours, as well as ways of contextualizing all of these, although in most contexts the culture reflected is the mainstream culture. In Aboriginal culture-based education, the school experience is re-evaluated to reflect local culture in place of mainstream culture. In essence, the approach of the federal government takes mainstream culture and language as the medium of instruction with an understanding of one or more Aboriginal language and culture as learning objectives within the larger curriculum. The approach of the AFN would see the Aboriginal language and culture as the medium of instruction and curriculum content as learning objectives, with children learning language and culture by being immersed in them.

In response to Atleo's open letter and following the rejection of the First Nations

Education Act by First Nations and the AFN, the Minister of AANDC, the Hon. Bernard

Valcourt, MP, responded with a December 13, 2013 "Open Letter to the National Chief of the

Assembly of First Nations." With respect to language and culture, he states:

> "Your letter addresses . . . the importance of language and culture for
> successful education models. We could not agree more. In fact, many First
> Nations have shown success in education through curriculum that responds to
> local needs and includes language and culture programs. If there are ways to
> improve the proposal with regard to language and culture, I welcome the
> opportunity to discuss your ideas" (Valcourt 2013).

In the wake of this, on February 7, 2014, an agreement was announced between the

Federal Government and the AFN to collaborate on the development of a new bill C-33: First

Nations Control of First Nations Education Act; the intended act was also included in the 2014

federal budget, released February 11, 2014. First reading of Bill C-33 commenced in the House

of Commons on April 10, 2014 (House of Commons of Canada, 2013) and attempted to address

the major concerns previously expressed regarding the First Nations Education Act, including

language and culture education (Valcourt, 2014). However, for a variety of reasons, it too was

rejected by much of the body of the AFN. While an analysis of this rejection is complex and

warrants a paper unto itself, Bill C-33 resulted in deep division within the AFN and First Nations

Communities, leading to the resignation of Shawn Atleo as National Chief on May 2, 2014.

Given the current power dynamics between First Nations and the federal government in Canada

today, this rejection does not necessarily mean that Bill C-33 will not become law; on May 5,

2014, second reading and referral to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern

Development occurred (Parliament of Canada, 2014). It has also been the object of study by the

Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, where the issue of language and culture

provision in Bill C-33 is a particular object of discussion and concern (Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2014a). Still, a mutually satisfactory approach to language and culture in First Nations schools has not been reached. At this point, it is necessary as much as possible to put politics aside and consider the impact on the learners who are ultimately most affected.

Weighing Benefits for Learners

Neither the AFN nor the federal government through the First Nations Education Act advocates overt assimilation of First Nations children through the school system. However, the federal government talks about Aboriginal languages and cultures as objects of study, while the AFN talks about Aboriginal languages and cultures as the media and environments of education. The first approach takes language and culture study as part of the wider existing curriculum through the general medium of mainstream language and culture. The other is culture-based education, where the medium of education is the Aboriginal culture; ideally, this is paired with language immersion programming to create an educational experience where language and culture are at the heart of all learning activities. In order to design policy that will best suit the needs of learners in First Nations schools, it is important to weigh the benefits of the two approaches.

Clearly, both approaches are preferable to the exclusion of Aboriginal language and culture from the First Nations classroom. The after-effects of the residential school system stand testament to the damage done by educational models designed for aggressive assimilation. Even in a classroom that is not designed for aggressive assimilation but where there is no Aboriginal content, language, or culture, Aboriginal students are far less likely to succeed than those in a classroom where relevant culture and language are meaningfully represented. This is likely due

to issues of relevance and marginalization; when Aboriginal students do not see their culture's knowledge and societal contribution recognized in the classroom, the content carries far less meaning for them, and they are led to assume that this knowledge is less important and sophisticated than Western knowledge. When indigenous content and language is constantly and consistently brought into a classroom as the object of study, as per the approach of the Federal Government, Aboriginal student outcomes are improved (Wright & Taylor, 1995; Agbo, 2001; Demmert, 2001; Huffman, 2001; Bougie, Wright, & Taylor, 2003; McIvor, 2005; Kanu, 2006; O'Connor, Hill, & Robinson, 2009; Usborne, Qumaaluk, & Taylor, 2009; Ball, 2012; Preston, Cottrell, & Pelletier, 2012; Battiste, 2013; Singh & Reyhner, 2013).

It must be noted, however, that there are risks and challenges with taking language and culture as objects of study. Poor teacher education may lead to reticence to bringing Aboriginal knowledge into the classroom. Furthermore, if it is not done consistently, the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into the curriculum may become tokenistic or indicate that Aboriginal culture is historical and static, and the knowledge may be changed and subdued in a mainstream classroom to suit the cultural and linguistic media of instruction (Hermes, 2000; Richardson, 2011). Finally, even though an increase in self-esteem and pride is observed when language and culture are taught in schools, Aboriginal children still have significantly lower self-esteem and cultural pride than non-Aboriginal children, and this continues to be the case even when language and culture are taught as objects of study. This significantly impacts on school outcomes (Wright & Taylor, 1995). Currently, 88% of First Nations schools offer some language programming but only 17% offer immersion, 92% offer some periodic cultural activities but only 57% have ongoing cultural programs, and 92% offer partially integrated cultural programming in their curricula but only 26% have fully integrated cultural programs, so the approach of the

federal government to language and culture study is essentially what is happening already. Given that only 35% of First Nations youth graduate from high school (Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2011; AFN, 2012b), the status quo is clearly insufficient. Obviously, language and culture inclusion are not the only reasons for lower academic success among Aboriginal students, but if including language and culture in the school can improve academic outcomes, there is certainly a responsibility to do so.

Although inclusion of culture and language as objects of study in an otherwise mainstream school improves outcomes somewhat for First Nations students, culture-based education, where the school environment is founded upon the local culture, improves outcomes even more significantly (Agbo, 2001; Kanu, 2006, 2007; Preston, Cottrell, & Pelletier, 2012; Ball, 2012; Singh & Reyhner, 2013). Two important factors in creating positive outcomes are cultural continuity and representation. Cultural continuity occurs when the learning environment of the school is similar to the learning environment of the home and community, children are able to learn more effectively, making use of learning strategies they have already developed, interacting appropriately with teachers and peers, reacting in an expected way to tasks and assessments, and building more successfully on previous knowledge (Agbo, 2001; Kanu, 2006, 2007; Preston, Cottrell, & Pelletier, 2012; Ball, 2012; Singh & Reyhner, 2013). This is done effectively by rooting education in Aboriginal pedagogy, "such as storytelling, group discussions, cooperative learning, demonstrations, role modeling, personal reflection, peer tutoring, learning circles, talking circles, and hands-on experiences" (Preston, Cottrell, & Pelletier, 2012, p. 8). Other strategies include bringing in a holistic approach to content, rather than teaching disconnected subjects, including both ancient and modern Aboriginal knowledge, and bringing in elders and community members to honor intergenerational knowledge

transmission and community connection (Hermes, 2000; Ball, 2012; Singh & Reyhner, 2013). This increases students' understanding of the content and also helps self-esteem development, which is extremely important in creating a positive view of themselves as learners (Wright & Taylor, 1995; Agbo, 2001; Demmert, 2001; Huffman, 2001; Bougie, Wright, & Taylor, 2003; McIvor, 2005; Kanu, 2006; O'Connor, Hill, & Robinson, 2009; Usborne, Qumaaluk, & Taylor, 2009; Ball, 2012; Preston, Cottrell, & Pelletier, 2012; Battiste, 2013; Singh & Reyhner, 2013).

Representation occurs when the local Aboriginal culture is the culture of the classroom; this contributes to cultural pride as students are able to see themselves and their community reflected in the classroom in a positive way. Students also come to understand their culture's knowledge systems as important and valuable because they are foregrounded in the powerful institution of the school which forms the basis of their educational experience. This removes the boundary between "culture" and "academics," and helps to ensure that students do not associate academic success with mainstream culture only. It increases students' understanding of the sophistication and dignity of their culture's intellectual tradition and its equality with the Western intellectual tradition. It also helps to avoid tokenistic or inconsistent incorporation of culture (Hermes, 2000). Finally, it encourages culturally appropriate assessment, which is a key part of culture-based education: for example, "many First Nations people do not value overt demonstrations of what one knows without any practical purpose for such a performance . . . As well, a rationally raised First Nations child would typically learn not to demonstrate knowledge of something she or he expects an older person to already know" (Ball, 2012, p. 289). Creating an environment that replaces mainstream ideas of assessment with culturally appropriate ones will understandably produce and identify better academic results.

Language immersion programs are generally considered to be an extension of culture-based education; this is because language and culture are inextricably connected and language influences the way in which one sees the world. As McIvor (2005) writes, "language is the main link to identity, both personal and collective. Although it is not always a person's first language, there is an inherent emotional and spiritual connection between the mind, body, and soul of a person and the person's ancestral tongue" (p. 7). Because culture is inseparable from language, it is extremely difficult to imagine a language immersion program that does not inherently include culture. There are two types of immersion programs. Strong immersion programs are aimed at second language (L2) speakers who arrive at school with little to no knowledge of the target (in this case, Aboriginal) language. Students learn only in the second language at first until they attain basic fluency, and then their first language (L1) is gradually reintroduced for language-heavy subjects with the goal of achieving bilingualism. Canadian French immersion programs are an excellent example of strong immersion programming. In a First Nations context, students are normally English or French L1 speakers who are immersed in an Aboriginal language at school. The second type of immersion programming is weak immersion programming. In a Canadian Aboriginal context, this is aimed at students who arrive at school fluent in an Aboriginal L1. They are taught first in their L1, with a gradual introduction of the mainstream language, English or French. The intent is to ease students into mainstream language programming with the goal of creating fluent mainstream language speakers. Both types of immersion exhibit benefits for learners. Speaking an Aboriginal language is associated with positive school outcomes for First Nations children living on reserve, regardless of whether the language is learned at school. Also, if the language is used at school, children are more likely to look forward to going to school, whereas children who speak an Aboriginal language and live on

reserve were less likely to look forward to going to school if the language was not used there (Guèvremont & Kohen, 2012).

Concerns have been expressed in many communities that Aboriginal language immersion will impact on children's mainstream language proficiency and literacy (Raham, 2004; Usborne et al., 2011). This does not appear to be the case, however; immersion, when done properly, results in additive bilingualism in which skill transfer occurs across languages. As Wright and Taylor (1995) state, "the common assumption that the use of the heritage language will negatively affect the acquisition of English skills is clearly false. In fact, there is evidence that heritage language instruction may result in better performance in English in the long run" (p. 241). This is particularly the case if children are exposed to the mainstream language outside of the classroom, which is true for the vast majority of First Nations children in Canada (McIvor, 2005). In addition, like culture-based education, both types of immersion have positive outcomes for children's self-esteem and cultural pride (Wright & Taylor, 1995; Bougie, Wright, & Taylor, 2003; DeKorne, 2010; Battiste, 2013). There are a variety of reasons for this. As Bougie, Wright, and Taylor (2003) write,

> at the collective level, heritage-language instruction spares the minority-language children the vision that their heritage culture is associated with lower status, and that the majority group is inherently superior to their own group . . . The use of the heritage language as the medium of instruction . . . is a clear affirmation of the value and status of the heritage language and of those who speak it. Moreover, when heritage-language instruction involves co-ethnic teachers, these individuals act as role models affirming that ingroup members can hold high-status positions. (p. 353)

In a strong immersion setting, where most children arrive at school speaking the mainstream language and are immersed in an Aboriginal language with the goal of becoming fluent, immersion is predictive of school success. Rather than showing lower mainstream

language skills, children in strong immersion programming show increased proficiency in the

Aboriginal language with solid literacy skills that transfer to the mainstream language. The same

benefit is not seen when the language is taught in an otherwise mainstream program (McCarty,

2003; Usborne et al., 2011; Battiste, 2013). Given that in Canada today, all but four (Ojibwe,

Mi'kmaq, Inuktitut, and Cree) of the country's approximately 60 living indigenous language are

endangered (UNESCO, 2014), "for Aboriginal communities in Canada who want to revitalize

and/or preserve their language, while at the same time prepare their students for success in

mainstream society, having the Aboriginal language as the principal language of instruction

appears to be a very promising course of action" (Usborne et al., 2011, p. 212). For example, as

mentioned previously, Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey oversees the implementation of locally

appropriate, culture-based education including strong immersion schools, and as cited previously

students from these schools have a secondary school graduation rate of 87.7%, higher than the

mainstream national average for non-Aboriginal students of 82% (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Children in these schools show increased language fluency in both Mi'kmaq and English, more

positive attitudes toward schooling, improved literacy skills and academic achievement, and

better community cohesion as they could better communicate with elders and knowledge keepers

in their community; indeed, "with results such as these, one wonders why English-language

programming for students who still have their Indigenous language used in the community

would be used at all as the only language of instruction" (Battiste, 2013, p. 93). It must be noted

that some strong immersion programs do not necessarily produce fluent Aboriginal language

speakers, particularly in communities where the language is not widely used, although some

degree of proficiency does result. However, because of their positive impact on general attitudes

toward school, academic performance, and self-esteem they are still the most promising option for many First Nations communities (Demmert, 2010).

In a weak immersion setting, it has been found that, although less proficient in the mainstream language at first, children educated in their heritage Aboriginal language for at least the first few years show success in both heritage and mainstream language proficiency, with phonological, syntactic, and functional awareness correlated across languages. The same is not true of Aboriginal first-language children educated in the mainstream language (Ball, 2007; Usborne et al., 2009). Both weak and strong immersion programs have benefits for the community, as they impact positively on students' cultural pride, ability to interact intergenerationally, and ability to participate in traditional cultural practices, particularly when the community and family are involved in the school (McIvor, 2005; DeKorne, 2010). Again, this increases personal self-confidence and cultural pride in students, an effect not seen in mainstream programming, even when the Aboriginal language is taught as part of the curriculum (Wright & Taylor, 1995; Bougie, Wright, & Taylor, 2003; Ball, 2007; Usborne et al., 2009).

There are risks in cases of poor immersion programming, which may result in both languages being learned poorly, although these cases are normally symptomatic of larger educational challenges within a community (McIvor, 2005; Guèvremont & Kohen, 2012). Factors identified in failing immersion programs include under-qualified teachers, a sudden transition from Aboriginal to mainstream language programming, poor classroom facilities, a lack of substitute teachers, inadequate instructional materials, and high teacher and student absenteeism (Guèvremont & Kohen, 2012). In addition, speaking an Aboriginal language is associated with lower high school graduation rates for adults living on-reserve, regardless of whether the language was learned in immersion schooling or not. This is likely because, due to a

lack of resources and teachers, most high schools attended by today's adults did not feature

immersion or culture-based programs, and as such some students experienced a sudden shift in

instructional strategy and language of instruction when entering mainstream programming

(Bougie, Wright, and Taylor, 2003; Guèvremont & Kohen, 2012). It must be noted that when

children arrive at mainstream school today speaking an Aboriginal language as a first language,

they experience the same drop in self-esteem at that point, and it is accompanied by a drop in

cultural pride not seen if they are educated in heritage language immersion at all, even if only for

a few years (Bougie, Wright, and Taylor, 2003) For students who speak an Aboriginal L1 but

are educated in a mainstream language, it is a longer walk to school from home as they must

often leave one culture and language entirely and adopt new ones in order to succeed. The

correlation between speaking an Aboriginal language and lack of high school success for today's

adults may also be because individuals from remote communities are more likely to be language

speakers, and are also more likely to have to leave their home communities to attend high school

(Guèvremont & Kohen, 2012).

Conclusion

As the federal government and the AFN move forward in creating policy for First

Nations education, it is clear that their stances on the inclusion of language and culture are

markedly different. While the federal government views language and culture as learning

objectives to be included in the wider mainstream curriculum, the approach of the AFN has

generally been to encourage the use of Aboriginal languages and cultures as the medium of

instruction through which the curriculum is delivered. This can be compared to looking through

a pair of glasses; while the government sees Aboriginal language and culture as the object being

viewed, the AFN sees Aboriginal language and culture as the lens. While all of these approaches are more beneficial to First Nations learners than a classroom devoid of Aboriginal content, existing research shows that culture-based education offers more positive outcomes than the study of language and culture, and language immersion programming is generally the most effective of all.

The primary reason that it is important to clarify which approach is most beneficial before new legislation is passed is that there are significant resource differences between the two approaches. Culture-based education and language immersion programs are generally more expensive than mainstream programming or programming that involves language and culture study as a class. Culture-based and immersion programs are more expensive because resources must be developed, often from the ground up, to create a culture-based or immersion program that is locally relevant. Furthermore, the creation of widespread culture-based and language immersion education requires secondary funding of additional programs. For example, in Canada today, on average only 36% of First Nations people graduate from high school (Atleo 2013b), and only 61% of First Nations people on reserve speak an Aboriginal language, which means that it is likely that less than 25% of First Nations people who speak an Aboriginal language are eligible to become teachers. Because there are so few fluent teachers, it is extremely challenging to create kindergarten to Grade 12 immersion programs. This is particularly true since it is beneficial to have more than one adult speaker in an immersion classroom to expose learners to a full range of speech forms, and because immersion teachers should ideally have training on language acquisition in addition to general accreditation (Demmert, 2001). Additional teachers are also needed because there are few resources available for many Aboriginal languages, so the

time spent in lesson planning and resource creation for many schools would far exceed what one teacher could accomplish.

Given the lack of First Nations teachers available, even those who are not Aboriginal language speakers, even culture-based education programs are difficult to create. This means that to create more such programs in the future, it will be necessary to fund other programs to increase high school graduation rates for current students, increase access to post-secondary education, and in particular fund programs to train Aboriginal teachers. In Canada today, every province and territory now has at least one university that offers an Aboriginal Teacher Education Program or equivalent, but not all of these are able to offer training for immersion teaching or even training for post-secondary education. Therefore, to create education programs for First Nations learners that will be truly stable and beneficial, appropriate and stable funding is vital, as is appropriate and stable funding for the development of culturally aware, well-trained Aboriginal teachers. Although more funding is needed for culture-based and Aboriginal language immersion education than for language and culture study, existing research clearly shows that culture-based and immersion programs offer more substantial benefits to learners. To achieve these benefits, it will be necessary to have cooperation between federal and First Nations governance and the forethought as a country to acknowledge the widespread advantages of ensuring academic success for Aboriginal students. While it is often difficult for governing parties to see past the next election, given that a lack educational achievement is predictive of future poverty, with its associated social costs including poor health outcomes, social assistance, and involvement with the penal system, it is clearly in the best interests of all Canadians to invest in the most effective educational strategies for First Nations children, who are already most at risk to be living in poverty (AFN, 2012b). Only once First Nations children are able to thrive in

education in stably funded programs appropriate to and designed by their communities will

Canada really have First Nations control of First Nations education, and only then can we move

forward together in a spirit of partnership and equity.

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