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January 23, 2003

Aboriginal Education for Winnipeg's Future

As expected, the 2001 Census reveals that Winnipeg has the largest urban Aboriginal population in Canada. It is expected that a decade from now, at least one in five and perhaps as many as one in three people reaching working age in Manitoba will be Aboriginal. Given this, Aboriginal education is central to Winnipeg's future.

We wanted to investigate the educational circumstances of Aboriginal students in Winnipeg inner city high schools. We interviewed and held focus groups with more than 130 Aboriginal people—high school students, school-leavers, adults and some teachers. Almost all of the interviews were conducted by Aboriginal people, so that the study represents the views of Aboriginal people, in conversation with other Aboriginal people, about their experiences in Winnipeg inner city high schools.

Aboriginal students are less likely than non-Aboriginal students to graduate from high school. The issue is usually understood, especially by non-Aboriginal people, to be a problem of Aboriginal students failing in school, of their having a dropout rate double that of non-Aboriginal students. But framing the issue this way leads to 'deficit' thinking— i.e., that Aboriginal students have a deficit, that they are the problem. Once it is assumed that the problem is the Aboriginal students, then it follows that it is they who need to change. This inevitably leads back to the thinking that drove the residential schools— the belief that Aboriginal students need to become more like white people. This assimilation strategy has never worked. Aboriginal people do not accept these racist assumptions. In fact, many *resist* them, and thus resist schools.

Our interviews lead us to conclude that the problem is

not so much Aboriginal students failing in school, as it is schools failing Aboriginal students. It is not that Aboriginal students need to change, it is that the schools need to change. Aboriginal students said to us very clearly that they want to get an education. But they do not want to give up what it is to be Aboriginal to do so.

What has to change? Here are three of the things that we found in our interviews. These findings are confirmed by the growing body of literature on Aboriginal education in Canada that we reviewed.

Aboriginal Teachers

First, almost everybody we interviewed wanted more Aboriginal teachers, and told us that more Aboriginal teachers would make a difference. One in three students said they had *never* had an Aboriginal teacher. This is astonishing, given that Winnipeg's inner city has the largest concentration of urban Aboriginal people in Canada.

Most Winnipeg teachers are graduating from the large UM or UW faculties of education, so if the shortfall

in Aboriginal teachers is going to be made up, it will have to be there. But at these two faculties of education there are almost no Aboriginal students, and no plan has been in place to recruit Aboriginal students to train to be teachers. We believe that there are no permanent full-time Aboriginal faculty members in either program, and there are almost no courses with an Aboriginal focus. Even at the U of W, which has an inner-city mandate, there are no required courses with an Aboriginal focus, and no courses on racism or anti-racism or the impact of colonization.

Winnipeg needs its two universities to develop a plan to

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take advantage of the bulge of retirements expected over the next five to 10 years, and produce enough Aboriginal teachers so that within a decade the proportion of Aboriginal teachers in all Winnipeg and all Manitoba school divisions will be at least equivalent to the proportion of Aboriginal students.

What would such a plan include? There are a number of basic steps on which to build. The universities should allocate spaces to Aboriginal students in each year's incoming classes in the faculties of Education, as is already done successfully in the UM's Faculty of Social Work. They should implement an aggressive recruitment strategy, with Aboriginal graduates visiting elementary and high schools. And they should devise a program to enable the many Aboriginal people who already work as teaching assistants to earn a significant number of credits toward a Bachelor of Education degree based on their work.

Aboriginal Curriculum

Almost everybody interviewed said they want more Aboriginal content in the curriculum, and that this would make a big difference. We know from our interviews that there is a deep yearning on the part of many Aboriginal students to learn more about their history and culture, and to attend schools which reflect and validate their history and culture.

A striking finding was the number of Aboriginal adults who said that when they learned about Aboriginal history and culture, often in university, it was "as if a light went on". It changed their lives. Why not make this possible in high school?

Aboriginal perspectives should be integrated in all currently existing areas of the curriculum, as well as through the addition of courses with specifically Aboriginal content, such as Aboriginal History.

Teachers, of course, need to be able to use such materials. The curriculum in the Faculties of Education in Manitoba should be changed so that all prospective teachers trained in Manitoba become familiar with the colonization of Aboriginal peoples and its effects. We urge adoption of the recommendation by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples that all prospective teachers seeking certification to teach in Manitoba be *required* to take at least one course with specifically Aboriginal content. And many more professional development opportunities should be made available for *existing* teachers to give them the opportunity to become more aware of Aboriginal issues.

Racism

There is lots of racism in the schools. This will not come as a surprise to Aboriginal people, but the extent and the form of the racism would likely be a surprise to many non-Aboriginal people in Winnipeg. Just under 1/3 of the students we interviewed, almost 2/3 of the school-leavers we interviewed,

and all of the adults we interviewed, said yes to questions about the presence and the importance of racism in the schools. Some of the name-calling and stereotyping in high schools is truly appalling.

How can these recommendations be turned into action? In our report we recommend the establishment of a Centre for Urban Aboriginal Education, which would be an independent body governed by the Aboriginal community and provided with a secure financial base. Its purpose would be to create the organizational capacity to enable the Aboriginal community to work to ensure the implementation of these recommendations.

There are costs attached to these reforms. Some may balk at additional public spending. But even a cursory examination of the demographic and socioeconomic realities of this city should make it clear that the costs of *not* reforming our educational system will be a great deal higher. We have an opportunity to make of Winnipeg a city unique in the world by virtue of the strong Aboriginal character of our multiculturalism. We should seize that opportunity by tapping the skills and creativity of the Aboriginal community. The place to start is in the schools. The time to start is now.

— *Jim Silver and Kathy Mallett*

Jim Silver is a Professor of Politics at the University of Winnipeg, and past-Chair of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba. Kathy Mallett is a longtime activist in the Aboriginal community, a former Winnipeg School Division Trustee, and a Board member of CCPA-MB. Their study, Aboriginal Education in Winnipeg Inner City High Schools, is available online at www.policyalternatives.ca/mb.

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