



Aboriginal Education Branch

Additional Considerations Arising from the Report on the Over-Representation of Aboriginal Students Reported With Behaviour Disorders (November 2001)

Introduction

The Aboriginal Education Branch, in collaboration with the Special Programs Branch, Ministry of Education, commissioned this research project in 2000-2001. The study was designed to examine reasons for the over-representation of Aboriginal students reported with behaviour disorders in British Columbia's public school system. The study identifies effective practices and examines ways that Aboriginal and education communities might work together to provide effective interventions so that Aboriginal children identified in behaviour categories can be more successful in the school system.

Background

Incidence level data about the number of Aboriginal students identified in behaviour categories was collected in the Ministry's student-level data system; it was found that Aboriginal students were identified in the special education category severe behaviour disorders at a rate 3.5 times greater than the general population. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of why there is a large difference in the proportion of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students reported with "behavioural disorders" and the impact this identification has on learners. The information came from the following sources:

- A review of related literature (278 sources were reviewed);
- A review of 150 files of Aboriginal students reported to the Ministry in the severe behaviour disorders category;
- Interviews with senior district personnel in eight sample school districts;
- Focus groups of adults from Aboriginal communities in the same districts.

The final sample files consisted of 106 males and 43 females from Grades 1 to 12. The largest groups of students in the sample were in the junior secondary grades.

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Discussion

Aboriginal leaders and educators in Aboriginal education strongly advocate for systemic change to occur in order for Aboriginal children, and especially those identified with behaviour disorders, to succeed. The study clearly shows there is a need for school boards, districts, other educators, and Aboriginal communities to work as partners with Aboriginal students and families to improve special education practices in the public school system. These partnerships improve learning outcomes for Aboriginal students identified in behaviour categories and the likelihood that their needs are addressed.

The impacts of cultural disruption must be acknowledged by all education partners so that parents, teachers, educators and Aboriginal communities find solutions to improving the situation for students identified in behaviour categories (or experiencing behaviour difficulties). The role of the family needs to be strengthened within schools since a sense of community is an essential part of being Aboriginal. When the family role is strengthened, Aboriginal children feel welcomed and encouraged in the classroom, and Aboriginal parents and families have a meaningful and significant purpose in the process.

The following factors need to be taken into consideration when working with Aboriginal children, families, and communities in the education system:

- **Recognizing the gifts of the child**

When parents send their children to school, they have expectations that they will have opportunities to do well in the school setting. Aboriginal parents also recognize that their children have inherent gifts and strengths that will lead to success at school, particularly in the context of their own extended family and culture. Aboriginal families expect that their children's cultural attributes will not only be acknowledged by the education system but will also be applied successfully within the school setting.

Every child who enters the doors of a school brings his or her unique talents, gifts, and resilience. As Wang (1996) states, "children are remarkably resilient; they respond readily to caring adults and a supportive community". Youngsters have already developed a set of coping behaviours before they enter school. Their talents, gifts and resilience should be recognized, seen positively, and acknowledged. Teachers need to be aware that behaviours they consider to be problematical may actually be a demonstration of a child's strengths. Although these behaviours are often challenging to teachers, they represent the coping strategies of a child and reflect his or her potential for success.

- **Acknowledging the barriers**

There are barriers to the success of Aboriginal children identified with severe behaviour disorders and one of these barriers is mobility. In some cases, family mobility and instability can be problematic. However, instability in children's lives should not deter educators from doing all they can to help children succeed.

What the study does not mention is that mobility created by the school system can be equally as disruptive to a student. When students have behavioural problems, part of the problem is that they are sometimes removed from the regular class and placed in an alternate setting or special class. This move, intended to support the students, can add to their instability. Keeping the most vulnerable children in a safe and caring classroom environment can make a significant difference in their future success in school. Because the feeling of belonging to a community is integral for Aboriginal people, separating children from their classes and age groups, which feels to them like shunning, should be absolutely the last step. When Aboriginal students feel alienated by the school they may become discouraged and no longer try to learn or even want to attend school.

Problems of racism and intolerance on both sides are barriers that Aboriginal students, families and communities believe must be overcome. When a child enters school every educator needs to have high expectations in order for that child to succeed; working partnerships between school districts and local Aboriginal communities will help to break down stereotypes and provide a climate of mutual understanding, for "an education that builds bridges, that makes learning possible, that extends a young person's potential for independence is in today's terms, an empowering education that is a goal worth striving for" (Perrone 1991 in Castellano et al 2000).

Poor transition rates, or early school leaving (dropping out), are another serious barrier to the success of Aboriginal students in the public school setting. Data show that we lose many Aboriginal students in the transition from Grade 7 to 8 and from Grade 9 to 10. Many factors influence their decisions to leave school, and schools need to work with Aboriginal communities to find solutions to help Aboriginal children make choices that will help them to choose education and graduation as a way to move on to a career or post-secondary education.

- **Improving special education**

Strong assessment, planning, monitoring and reporting on student progress, and documentation are critical to effective special education support services. In order for Aboriginal children with behaviour needs to progress and receive the best possible

support services, Individual Education Plans developed to guide services must address both behavioural and learning needs together. Parents have a right to be consulted in the planning and have valuable contributions to make to their child's educational plan. Aboriginal parents need to be informed about their rights to be consulted and their responsibility to be involved. Engaging parents is critical to the success of a special education plan and the child's future educational success.

In many cases, special education planning has not adequately addressed how students will exit behaviour programs or support services and make a smooth transition to a regular education program. When educators and families work together for the well being of the Aboriginal student, this opens the door to effective assessment, intervention, and exit planning. Sound practice and consistent follow-up are necessary for Aboriginal children to feel successful at school.

- **Involving parents and Aboriginal communities**

Aboriginal children have someone in their extended family that deeply cares about them, and this person will likely be their advocate in matters related to schooling. With many Aboriginal children the family support structure goes beyond parents to include grandparents and other extended family members. Grandparents have sometimes taken on the role of caretaker and have become advocates for student success.

When teachers and other educators work in partnership with Aboriginal children and their families this contact helps to improve relationships between the school and the Aboriginal community. As teachers and other educators grow in their knowledge of cultural values and understanding of Aboriginal communities, their appreciation and respect will increase. This will help to ensure that any barriers between home and school can be overcome through communication and cross-cultural strategies, as a mutual partnership on behalf of the child will begin to directly benefit the child.

Relationship building between all parties will help to bring Aboriginal families into the school system where their presence will help their children to succeed. Castellano et al (2000) suggest, "the challenge is to develop respectful, collaborative and cooperative partnerships between educators and Aboriginal communities". Where there have been Improvement Agreements signed in partnership with school districts and Aboriginal communities, we are beginning to see a change in the ways Aboriginal children are educated. The 1996 report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples states that "Where Aboriginal people have assumed control of the education of their children, youth and adults, the results with regard to program completion, personal satisfaction and successful preparation for employment or continuing education are much improved."

Schools need to recognize and acknowledge that greater effort is needed to engage Aboriginal parents to become actively involved in their children's education. Just as Aboriginal parents are committed to being good parents they are also aware that their parenting is culturally different from other families in the school. Sometimes these ways are not understood by the education system. Such cultural differences between the western worldview and the Aboriginal worldview are excellent opportunities for cross-cultural learning between parents and the education system.

Another strategy to effectively engage Aboriginal parents is through using language that is understood. Special education is full of educational terminology. When educators discuss the needs of students with their families and the plans they are developing to address those needs, it is important to use language that is understandable. It should be clear, concise, and culturally sensitive so that families fully understand the assessment and planning processes and the implications for their child. Aboriginal parents need to feel encouraged about their children's education, and given some hope that their child can succeed and become fully engaged in their classrooms.

Using culturally appropriate interventions to support Aboriginal students is another way to increase their effectiveness. Traditionally, there are unique ways that Aboriginal communities deal with behaviours that are disrespectful. When addressing disciplinary problems, consultation with the Aboriginal community is imperative. The Aboriginal community can have valuable input into developing alternative solutions, especially alternatives to out-of-school suspension. Teaching children to talk about appropriate behaviours in the school setting, modeling appropriate behaviours and using restorative justice strategies can help children to learn in their classroom communities. Elders can be a valuable source of information to help bring Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing to improve a child's behaviours.

- The study *Over-Representation of Aboriginal Students Reported with Behaviour Disorders* by McBride Management Ltd. explores the issue of quality education for Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students, families and communities feel that there is a need for classroom environments where children feel cared for and have a sense of belonging. Aboriginal children's gifts need to be recognized with a focus on their capacity to achieve academic success. Retaining Aboriginal students in a regular classroom setting and helping them to succeed must be priorities when behaviour problems are encountered. Focusing on Aboriginal children and their strengths and not solely on the behaviour will help to ensure that they will feel success in the school setting.

We recognize that “at-risk” factors play a part in behaviour disorders, but when schools, staff and teachers work with Aboriginal families and communities, this type of collaboration and consultation helps to alleviate negative outcomes. When working with Aboriginal children, schools need to incorporate the holistic aspects of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and perspectives of family, community and the world. In addition, the public school system benefits from Aboriginal communities’ involvement in school activities. Aboriginal community members act as role models for Aboriginal students and as partners in learning with students, educators, and families.

We hope that this research encourages school boards and educators to explore practices that show promise, develop appropriate, effective assessment tools, consult with Aboriginal families, and involve Aboriginal communities. We also encourage education communities to have high expectations that every Aboriginal child can learn in an atmosphere where growth and learning are paramount goals.

Works Cited

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