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Access to Education in the First Nations Communities of British Columbia

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### General presentation of the issues related to First Nations in Canada

### Presence of Indigenous communities in the country

In the 2021 Census, it was reported that more than 1.8 million Indigenous people from various territories live in Canada, representing more than 5% of the total population. This percentage continues to grow, as the development of the Indigenous population has been exponential in the past few years. With is rich colonial past, Canada has impacted the Indigenous communities and territories at multiple levels, including their culture, language, and governance on its own territories. (Statistics Canada, 2022, par. 4). Colonization of these different territories, came with positive changes for the country, but also with long-lasting issue that are still at the center of the actuality today.

### First Nations issues in Canada

Even though the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was adopted after the events regarding the instauration of residential schools, causing the death of thousands of children from First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation, the issues in the country didn’t disappear completely. (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, par. 1,6) Today, the First Nations in Canada continue to face inequality with the non-Indigenous population. The events of the past have created a barrier of communication between the territories and government, that continues to increase the people affected by these issues yearly. The after-effects of the schools, as well as systemic racism and discrimination are only two of the main causes of the inequalities they must face daily.

In these ongoing issues, we can find housing insecurity, low access to appropriate health care, low rates of educational success, low access to work, insecurities regarding employment, as well as the issue of low income and lack of social protection. Additional problems are also present, as the substance abuse and mental health continues to increase rapidly, affecting more and more the lives of the communities (Durand-Moreau et al., 2022, par. 1, 6, 7). At all levels, numbers can help understanding the impact of these issues on the lives of First Nations. In 2021, its 10% of the Métis and First Nations communities that reported receiving poor medical treatment. As issues intertwine, systemic racism is at the source of the poor treatment received in many sectors. In the same year as the previous statistic, its 3% of the global population in communities that suffered from injustices in in front of the criminal justice system in Canada. In total, its 30% of the individuals living off-reserve that suffered at least one problem of these issues on the past three years (Statistics Canada, 2023, par. 1-5).

### Specific presentation of the access to education for the First Nations in Canada

### Current state of the level of education in communities

Additionally, to all the ongoing issues mentioned in the last section, access to a good quality education is still at the center of the issue related to the First Nations, as it concerns the next generation to grow in their territories and defines the life conditions for the future. Currently, the youth in the Indigenous population of Canada represents 25% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2022, par. 52). The history between the different governments and the indigenous communities still has a big impact on the trust allocated to the initiatives that the non-indigenous systems in power try to put in place. For example, the instauration of residential school, as mentioned earlier, contributed to the current lack of trust between the two party’s intergenerational trauma, and racism in schools. The struggle of recruiting qualified teachers for the communities, the crowded households, parents with lower education, and the lack of funding to build infrastructures in schools, like gyms and libraries, are all factors that reduce the access to an appropriate education for the youth (Indigenous Corporate Training, 2023). In the current education system in Canada, First Nations communities still suffer from the very low graduation rates, the long waiting list to access quality facilities, and discriminatory practices in classrooms (Assembly of First Nations, par. 1).

### Gaps in the education levels and diplomas

A major gap is present between the education that the First Nations benefits, and the non-indigenous population. Many disparities in the educational system are present, creating gaps in the possibilities of achieving a diploma in higher educational levels. In 2021, 6,6% of the First Nations communities report having a bachelor’s degree, compared to almost 18% for the non-indigenous population (Assembly of First Nations, 2023, p. 17). In contradiction to the rest of Canada, where the opportunities to seek higher levels of education is progressively climbing up, most of the indigenous communities did not conclude their secondary school degree. In terms of solutions, many short-term initiatives have been putted in place by the different governments thought the years, put they don’t always consider the real needs and values of the First Nations. Furthermore, the reforms happening in nigger cities of non-indigenous population often takes away the focus on them, as this population is often prioritized (Durand-Moreau et al., 2022, par. 17).

### Handling of the access to education for the First Nations by the Federal Government

### Federal Government’s role and challenges in education

In Canada, the Federal Government is responsible of providing the founding related to education on reserve. It’s the First Nations themselves that are responsible for managing their education programs on reserve. In the last five years, their goals were focused on closing the educational gap, throught founding and building new infrastructures in this syste. They adopt a point of view focused on progress and learning from their past mistakes, as well as increasing the founding in territories, and the importance of keeping their culture intact while helping them make sure that the education level for the youth is increasing. They also focus on collaboration between the government and the different leaders of communities, to ensure that they are listening to their true needs (Indigenous Services Canada, 2018, par. 9) However, in the last few years, a direct correlation was identified between the federal governments lack of action in front of the financial and geographical challenges faced by more than 60% of the reserves in the country, and the low level of education in Ingenious communities. Without financial support, the low-income household are always revealed to be the ones with the lower levels of educations (Statistics Canada, 2023, par. 11). Furthermore, in 2019, a proposal was made from the federal government, allowing First Nations too now have more autonomy over their local and regional educational programs and decisions (Statistics Canada, 2023, par. 25).

Even though the Federal governments actively try to find solutions for the lack of access to proper education in the communities, they are still frictions present while their propositions don’t always correspond to the true wants and need on the reserves.

### Truth and Reconciliation Commission

After the events regarding Residential Schools, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was putted in place in 2008. This commission allowed to dress many conclusions on the impact of the treatment on thousands of students in the schools. It was found that sexual assaults, mental illness linked to poor living conditions were the main consequences that they kept from the experience, and that the overall event could be defined as a genocide.

Completed in June 2019, Trudeau’s government established a report of 94 actions that must be taken to rebuild the relation with the territories affected. In May 2021, CBC News reveled that the federal government only completed 10 actions of their list, while 23 are in progress, and 22 have not started yet. In the completed actions, there are none that concern the access and quality of education provided to them (Roy, p. 35). However, after the findings made in the commission, the Federal government made an amendment to the Indian Act, forcing the attendance to school until the age of 18 (Wallin et al., 2021, par. 4).

### Handling of the access to education for the First Nations by the Quebec Government

### Quebec Government’s role in the First Nation’s education

As there is a total of 11 First Nations in the territory, together forming 41 communities in the province, Quebec’s government does not currently actively act on its own for the First Nations education (Government of Québec, 2023, par. 1). Initiatives that are took often comes from the federal government, who then include the provinces in them. Considering this aspect, and that the education of the first nation and budgeting is a federal responsibility, they are focused on proposing different solutions to increase the access to education for the students.

### The adjustment to the law 96

In 2023, the provincial government passed the law 96 on French language in Quebec, making it the official and common language in the province, meaning that knowing the language was mandatory to graduate. The Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador (AFNQL), as well as the First Nations Education Council (FNQC), claimed that this law was not respecting the ancestral rights of First Nations communities in the province. The provincial government then accepted that the indigenous students in cegep were not in the obligation to know French to have their diploma. They also could be exempted from passing the uniform French exam to obtain their cegep diploma (DEC). Conditions were putted forward in order to be taken into consideration in this exception, including receiving the classes in English or in a First Nation language, and live in a reserve or in an indigenous community (Radio Canada, 2023, par. 2-6). By putting in place this adjustment to the law, the government made sure to promote the French language, while also respecting First Nation’s culture.

### Signature of the historic regional education agreement

In July 2022, chiefs from the 22 communities of the First nations Education Council and Indigenous Services Canada signed an important agreement in Kahnawake. These nations came from the First Nations Education Council, an association made of eight First Nations of Quebec, including Wendat, Abenakis and Atikamekw communities, for example. This initiative was taken by the FNEC, the leaders of the different provinces and the federal government, allowing less barriers in education with initiatives including appropriate school programs that respect the culture, improve the access to these programs for students, increase the rate of graduation at every level, and finally, make the communities have ownership over their education funding (Indigenous Services Canada, 2023, par. 3-4). Funding, which was and is still in many cases a federal responsibility in the First Nation, can now be more independent and make it a provincial responsibility if the nations wish so.

### Handling of the access to education for the First Nations by the province of British Columbia

### British Columbia’s Government’s role in the First Nation’s education

As education in the First Nations land is a federal responsibility, in 2006, the federal government allowed the First Nations in B.C. and the provincial government to take over their education, throught a legislation (Marlow, 2022, par. 2). As the province of British Columbia represent the 6th province showing the most attendance to schools for Indigenous students from age 5-18, (Wallin et al., 2021, par. 19), the government of the province is focusing on the implementation of efficient and insuring the progress of educational rights for the youth of the province. Furthermore, they are approximately 200 000 Indigenous people currently living in British Columbia, forming more than 200 nations in the province, and more then 30 different languages (B. C. First Nations and Indigenous People, 2023, par. 2). They are one of the country’s provinces that shows the most positive initiatives towards First Nations education and give territories amongst their province the right to have full control over their education.

### First Nations control over education on their lands

It’s essential to highlight that many nations of the province, who struggled in the past with founding and keeping their students in the schools, can now be almost 100% independent from the government, make decisions and pass laws in the best interest of their territories. As discussions have been going on for more than 20 years with the provincial government and minister of education, Rachna Singh, instead of being dependent of the federal and provincial policies, they can now exercise a control over their education systems. This major change is an initiative that the provincial government of the province took and represents a big step the right of first nations communities of British Columbia and will allow them to offer an education that recognize their rights and take into consideration the revenue of each family to give them realistic opportunities to stay in school, to hopefully make the dropout rate lower (Island, 2022, par. 1-15).

In 2022, thirteen First Nations communities of the province gained control over their education and can now develop their own curriculum. The provincial government also passed a legislation in October 2022, to give the nations the right to certify and regulate their own teachers, encouraging them to be from First Nations directly (Marlow, 2022, par. 9). Furthermore, in September 2023, the Squamish Nation, the Ditidaht First nation, and the Camin Lake Band concluded agreements with the B. C. provincial government and the federal government to have full control on the education in their lands. These changes allow them to express their identity when making their course plans and to share their language and culture in schools (Miljure, 2023, par. 1-9).

### The new Indigenous Course Requirements

The ministry of Education of British Columbia and the First Nations Education Steering Committee passed a course requirement in 2023, requiring that the grade 12 students of the province take an Indigenous-focused course in order to have their diploma. These courses need to be approved by the province, and currently offer the opportunity to learn more then 20 native languages. Furthermore, the local region can elaborate courses themselves, and the province’s government chose to prioritize qualified teachers from the communities to teach the courses. With this mandatory course, the province hopes to put forward the need to respect and build awareness towards the First Nations culture and understanding their perspective (Marlow, 2023, par. 1-10).

### First Nations Perspective and Comparison Between Governments Initiatives

All initiatives that were just presented have their strength and weaknesses. However, if we consider the First Nation’s point of view, some of them offer solutions that consider they’re point of view and interest, while others don’t and don’t take enough action.

### Perception of the provincial Government of Quebec

In the First Nation’s point of view, Legault’s provincial government is the worst of the tree in terms of positive outcomes for education, but also for his overall relationship with the communities around the province at all levels. With is 41 communities in the province, Quebec’s government does not currently act enough for all the nations of the province (Government of Québec, 2023, par. 1). The CAQ party adopts an orientation that puts forward the need to recognize the rights of indigenous peoples, throught the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Right of Indigenous Peoples, for example, a promise that took more than 10 years to realize. They also prioritize inclusion and diversity in their electoral promises. Currently, ad considering recent events of systemic discrimination happening with Joyce Echaquan (Cabrera, 2022, par. 1-14). In the First Nations point of view, no action is made to recognize those rights an honor their campaign promises. All that the government does is apologizing for mistakes they make, that could be evitable if they took the time to listen to the true needs and measures to put in place.

In comparison with the provincial government of British Columbia, the current government in power in the province of Quebec is taken almost no actions, when you put the two next to each other. British Columbia is a proactive province, where the needs of the communities are listened too and where political faces don’t always have to apologize. In the eyes of First Nations communities, Quebec’s government have a lot of efforts to make to be at the top and should have a better political orientation, putting actions before words.

### Perception of the federal Government

When we consider the perspective of first nations, the federal government is not doing everything they could considering that they are mostly in charge of the education for all nations of the country, but they are also not the worst in terms of caring about the education. As mentioned earlier, they offer initiatives centered around investments and the passing of laws to increase the inclusion of the indigenous community amongst the rest of the population and close the gap between those two groups different kinds of education. The current federal government, the liberal party led by Justin Trudeau, adopts an orientation focused on the celebration of traditions and culture, as well as the recognition of the resilience of first nations towards what they want throught with residential schools (Prime Minister of Canada, 2023, par. 2). On the First Nations point of view, this orientation, based on forgiveness for the events from the past ratter then a governmental approach based on actions and listening to the true need, can be quite frustrating (Statistics Canada, 2023, par. 11). In this lack of concrete actions, First Nations communities all over the country put forward the unclarity in terms of plan the lack of consultation before taking decisions. It’s also pointed out that the federal government should consider more the ancestral territories while putting in place modern ideas and consider the lands and water of the nations (Barrera, 2018, par. 1-13). This orientation is not well perceived amongst the communities, as the federal government are focused on forgiveness, but are not taking actions to balance their words. To conclude on the federal level, the First Nations perspective is not favorable, yet not completely unfavorable of the government’s action.

In comparison with Quebec’s government, the federal government is at the same state, where more words and said then actions are taken. However, the federal government makes more actions than the provincial governments of Quebec, which makes the First Nations communities have a better image of them overall.

### Perception of the provincial government of British Columbia

The provincial government of British Columbia is the government that has, by far, the best perception by the First Nations communities. Compared to the federal government of Canada and Quebec’s provincial government, the government of British Columbia does the action that comes with their political promises, and make sure to give the autonomy on education to the different territories of its province. This autonomy contributes to building a relation of trust with the government, that is absent in the two other governments that were presented. The government of British Columbia stands out of the two others, while their socio-democratic party shows a lot of respect for the different communities.

The provincial government of British Columbia have the New Democratic Party in power having as a leader, David Eby. They position themselves as a center-left party, with socio-democratic ideologies. Their values are centered around progress and prioritizing the poor class of the population, just as much as the middle-class (Fournier, 2020, par. 6-13). The same values are expressed for education, as the poorer communities that have less access to a good education are taken into consideration. This concern is greatly appreciated by the First Nations, who value a lot the decisions taken by the party in their favor and are emotional in front of the rights that are allocated to them.

### Overall comparison of the three governments

As mentioned earlier, the government of British Columbia are the most appreciated by the First Nations, throught the relation of trust they built with the Indigenous community. In the perspective of First Nations, they are greatly appreciated for the actions they put in place, ratter then only talk and apologize like the federal and the province of Quebec’s government. The second most appreciated in the eyes of the First Nations is the federal government, that made progress with the founding they allocated in the last few years to these communities and are allowing more and more communities to have autonomy over their education systems. However, many problems persist, as they are rarely taking concrqute actions like the government of British Columbia does, and their orientation and plans are often very unclear. Lastly, the government of Quebec is the least preferred in the eyes of the Indigenous communities. They rarely take actions and are committing more and more mistakes towards the rights of the communities. There actions don’t go in accordance to their political promises, like the federal and British Columbia’s government try to do. A lot of progress must be made by the government for Quebec so that the First Nations feel respected once and for all.

### Recommendations to governments to have the best outcome

### Actions for the Federal Government

The federal currently takes action to upgrade the quality and access to a good education for First Nations. However, as mentioned earlier, they only completed 10 actions, out of 94, of their list in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Roy, p. 35). A first action, essential to be putted in place is to complete these actions as fast as possible. Not only will they allow to make good education accessible for the communities, but also to show that the government is able to keep is promises. The creation of a committee, formed of leaders of communities and members of the federal government must be putted in place to make the actions happen and restore peace within the two parties. The lack of trust is at the source of many issues present today between the federal government and the different nations.

Furthermore, the federal government is currently focusing on closing the educational gap, between the student beneficing of an education on and off reserve. However, it’s hard to try and put these two realities at the same levels, since they don’t live in the same territories, have the same economic resources and value. A second action to put in place would be to stop seeking for the same level of education between the Indigenous and Non-Ingenious students. First Nations should not be compared and should be seen as one complete entity that lives with its own challenges. Throught more investments from the federal government into these communities, they must try to increase the numbers of communities in provinces that have full control over their education. Like we saw with British Columbia, a peaceful relationship is possible between the federal government and the communities, if the First Nations have the autonomy to choose were they which to put their resources and how to invest their founding in education.

A final action to put in place would be to give a bigger voice to First Nations in the parliament itself. Currently, the minister of Indigenous Relations at the federal level is Gary Anandasangaree is originary from Sri Lanka (Prime Minister of Canada, 2023, par. 1-6). Even though this minister has a background in law, he talks every day on behalf of the First Nations, without coming from there himself. It should be mandatory for all ministers that represent the First Nations, to be from these Indigenous communities, and have grown up there. It’s a big action, but that would have a massive impact on the representation and the decision making.

### Actions for the Provincial Government of Quebec

As the education of the First Nations is a federal responsibility, the provincial government have not taken many actions in the last five year to increase the access to a quality education. They should be more proactive on the matter, even though the current situation in Quebec with the teacher’s poor working conditions takes a lot of attention. As it was seen earlier, the provincial government passed the law 96 on French language in Quebec, without taking into consideration the languages of the students from the First Nations (Radio Canada, 2023, par. 2-6). A first action to put in place should be to be more flexible on the use of First Nations languages, not only for at the cegep level, but for all levels of education. Every mandatory exam from the government should not only be not mandatory for the First Nations, but accept that they do the exam, but in their language.

Another action that would make the access to education for the first nation better, would be for the provincial government to ensure that all the communities of each province have the rights to manage their own programs. They should collaborate more extensively with the federal government to make sure that it’s not the territories themselves who are fighting for their rights and autonomy over their education system, put the province themselves. The rights from the federal government to manage their education should be given to all the territories of the province, to be more efficient with their time and not make every single territory fight for the same rights.

### Actions for the Government of British Columbia

As the government of British Columbia is currently very active on the adoption of measure to make the education more accessible, they are on the right track so that the education in the province as the best outcome. However, the first action they could put in place to make the isutation even better would be to make sure that all nations of the province have the rights over the regulation of their teachers and educational program. A clear path or governmental procedure to gain control over their education should be putted in place, as the changes happening in the province happened because of repetitive public manifestation and public speeches by the communities. Even though the provincial government of this province is very open to give more autonomy to its Indigenous territories, its essential to consider putting in place an easier way for the regions to put their points forward and gain autonomy over education.

Another action that could be putted in place to make education more accessible for the youth would be to create committees with qualified individuals from each Indigenous nations that would go on the field on each territory to dress a portrait of the situation regarding children and adults that don’t have access to the education they wish to have. In British Columbia, even if many nations have access to a good quality education, many communities continue to live poorly, and their situation is not talked about. If the provincial government would go on field monthly, and collect data on their situation, they will be able to offer better solution to certain communities that are living in the silence for too long.

### Conclusion

To conclude, there is still a long way to go and a lot of efforts to make so that the First Nations finally have access to appropriate education. Even though the three governments that were presented offer a very different point of view on the initiatives taken and the necessity to take actions, none of them are perfect and its essential that the First Nations cause stay in the actuality. After all, education is not only the way the future generation is educated, but how it’s essential that our whole country knows what’s going on and the actions that must have been taken a long time ago.

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