

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: INDIGENOUS  
STUDENTS AND EDUCATION MODELS IN CANADA  
AND THE UNITED STATES

Alison Perkins  
Global Studies  
May, 2015

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Elizabeth Bruch

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,  
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Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states, “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions, providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning”. In developed nations such as the United States and Canada, education should be an inherent right because education is essential to the proper functioning of a republic. The failure of public school systems reflects back to the government under which they are ran. There should also be equity in quality and access to education, no matter the economic or ethnic origins, religious or spiritual beliefs, or gender of the students. Nonetheless, there are groups of people in North America that face difficulties in educational institutions for a variety of reasons. In particular, indigenous people<sup>12</sup> from both the United States and Canada have been historically marginalized and denied equity in their educational experiences. Both Canada and the United States currently lack equitable education models for indigenous students, but Canada has more advanced policies beneficial to indigenous students, while the United States lags behind.

The purpose of this paper is to conduct a comparative analysis of the education models in Canada and the United States and how those models affect indigenous students. First, in order to understand the current plight of these students in the United States and Canada, it is important to

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<sup>1</sup> According to the United States Census Bureau in 2010, there are 5.2 million indigenous people in the United States, who make up 1.7% of the population. In Canada, there are roughly 1.4 million people who identify as Aboriginal under three categories: First Nations, Metis, and Inuit, according to the National Household Survey conducted in 2011. Aboriginal people account for 4% of the total population. A person may identify as indigenous if they have tribal affiliation or if they keep close, established ties to their native communities (NCES, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported in their Condition of Education Report for the academic year 2010-2011, that there were approximately 378,000 Native American or Alaska Natives enrolled in the school system in the United States. This figure was cut in half compared to the academic school year of 2005-2006, when the federal government changed regulations for students reporting as Alaska Native or Native American (National Indian Education Association, 2015). It can be estimated that these students comprise up to 1% of the total population of students in the American school system. There are no nationwide numbers for how many aboriginal students are currently enrolled in elementary and secondary schools in Canada, due to the fact that the nation of Canada does not have a federal Education department; it is left entirely up to the provinces to provide and report on the education of their students (Government of Canada, 2015).

recognize the historical context to the education of indigenous peoples in both nations. It is then useful to study and analyze the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a contemporary statement of standards that frame policies for the United States and Canada. Contemporary federal and state policies and programs that make the education models effective or ineffective will also be analyzed and compared with one another. The comparative analysis of the two education models reveals an immense scope of problems, but the three overlapping problems of low graduation rates, achievement score gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous students, and the lack of parent and community engagement will be examined. Following this discussion, recommendations to fix the overlapping issues will be addressed along with an analysis and conclusion.

### **History of Indigenous Education in United States and Canada**

In order to understand the current successes and failures of education models for indigenous students in Canada and the United States, it is necessary to first understand the historical context of indigenous education in each nation, so that history does not repeat itself, and so that nations may learn from their mistakes. This is especially important since both nations have a shared history of detrimental educational practices towards their indigenous students. The shared practices involve the use of residential schools and the ideas and policies of forced assimilation.

#### **United States**

From 1819 until the early 1930's, the United States government was focused on forced assimilation by means of mission and residential schools. The Indian Civilization Act provided financial assistance to individuals belonging to religious organizations, who were willing to live among and teach the Native Americans (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). The Carlisle Indian School was

the first governmental boarding school created by the federal government's Indian Office and Captain Richard Pratt. It was government-run and mirrored a military academy. The rules, punishments, and treatment of the students were harsh and stripped them of their cultural autonomy.<sup>3</sup> The government schools were not on reservations or in indigenous communities, which meant the students were still spending time away from indigenous environments. In these schools, the goal was to civilize the students by total cultural assimilation. Pratt was quoted as saying, "Kill the Indian in him, save the man" (Reyhner & Eder, 2004).

The Brookings Institution put out the Meriam Report in 1928, in which government-run schools were harshly criticized for their treatment of Native American students, and it was strongly advised to integrate Native American students into public school systems and to get rid of boarding schools. There was also criticism for the lack of indigenous cultural inclusion. The Meriam Report was the first statement regarding the need to improve educational experiences for Native American students (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002). During this time period, the notion of progressive education was at the forefront of education policies.<sup>4</sup> The president of the Progressive Education Association in 1930 stated that "the child rather than what he studies should be the center of all educational effort and that a scientific attitude toward new education ideas is the best guarantee of progress" (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). Under Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Indian Reorganization Act had great impacts on Native American education because it decreased federal control of Native American affairs and increased their rights to self-govern (Thypin-Bermeo, 2013). However, despite the statements made in the Meriam Report and under

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<sup>3</sup> Cultural Autonomy is the quality or state of being self-governing, being in control of your own cultural identity (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Rejects the rote recitation and strict discipline of traditional, single-classroom teaching, favoring instead more stimulation of the individual pupil as well as group discussion, more informality in the classroom, a broader curriculum, and use of laboratories, gymnasiums, kitchens, etc., in the school (Reyhner & Eder, 2004).

the direction of the Indian Reorganization Act, Native American students still faced difficulties in their educational experiences.

From the 1960's into the 1980's, the notion of self-determination was widely present among Native American peoples. The opening of the Rough Rock Demonstration School in Navajo Nation in Arizona was an example of this self-determination. It became the first Indian-controlled school in modern times. In 1968, the Navajo Community College was created due to the high dropout rates of Native American college students (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). The following year, a special U.S. Senate subcommittee released "Indian Education: A National Tragedy, A National Challenge." In this report the committee stated that federal efforts to provide Native Americans with quality education had been a "near total failure" (Congress of the U.S., 1969). After this, survival schools were created in which basic learning and survival skills were provided to Native American students. The survival schools strongly promoted the preservation of Native American culture (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). Policy changes and programs remained relatively stagnant thereafter until 1990 with the Language Revitalization Act. In this, the federal government declared its goal was to "preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedoms of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop" their languages (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). After this act, some language immersion schools began teaching children their tribal languages. Despite these policy reversals implemented by the federal government, the efforts fell short of success, as will be seen when discussing current programs and policies.

## **Canada**

Canada's educational history for indigenous students does not have as many policy changes and attempts to reform when compared to the United States. However, the effects of the educational model was detrimental and had irreversible damage to First Nations, Metis, and Inuit

(FNMI) students. Residential boarding schools began in the 1840's and the last one did not close until 1996. The government started by partnering with Anglican, Catholic, and Presbyterian churches to create and manage boarding and residential schools for FNMI children. The primary goal was to remove them from the influences of their tribal reservations and to assimilate them in a religious and culturally dismissive way (Kirkness, 1999). Similar to American boarding schools, the Canadian residential schools also had a strict regimen and strict rules; they were very oppressive to the aboriginal students. It has been estimated that at least half of the students at boarding schools did not benefit from the education they were receiving. There was also a high mortality rate because of smallpox and tuberculosis, diseases that they had no prior exposure to, and had no immunity to either. In addition to disease, the level of physical, sexual, and mental abuse to the children was extremely high (Kirkness, 1999). Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Canadian government mandated education, meaning FNMI students had no choice but to attend residential and boarding schools away from their families and communities. If parents did not send their children to school, it was only a matter of time before a white man showed up at their tribal community, coercing or bribing the children to come away with them, where they would be taken to residential schools (Devens, 1992).

Starting in the 1950's, a new Canadian policy of integration<sup>5</sup> was put into effect. The concept of integration was a new way for the government to continue controlling the lives of indigenous peoples. There was no consultation with parents or tribal communities regarding the day schools, and also no particular effort was made to adjust the curriculum in educational institutions to accommodate the FNMI students. Kirkness (1999) argues that this approach to education did not mirror true integration, where various student cultures are accepted, but rather

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<sup>5</sup> Integration can be described in simple terms as the act of having FNMI students attend public schools (Kirkness, 1999).

an assimilation process from the indigenous to the non-indigenous. Also around this time, native leaders began to react to the shameful condition of indigenous education. Eventually, the Indian Control of Indian Education policy was introduced and the two main components of it were parental responsibility and local control (Kirkness, 1999). This time period was dedicated to transferring control of schools and indigenous education to local authorities and tribes. It allowed them to preserve their right to self-govern, and to maintain their cultural autonomy. As the years progressed, the residual effects of the residential school systems began to show amongst educators and leaders. After the last residential school closed in 1996, several tribal leaders as well as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People called for an apology by the federal government and the Churches responsible for these poor educational and life experiences. It took almost a decade of negotiations, but the results of that request are being played out in modern times, as will be discussed further on.

### **International Framework**

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007 (United Nations, 2007). A General Assembly Declaration is not a legally binding agreement. However, states who sign the declaration have indicated agreement with the consensus expressed in the declaration, and these documents establish international legal norms that are supposed to show nations moving in one solid direction regarding various issues. Initially, there were four nations who refused to sign the Declaration: New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Canada finally signed the declaration on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010, three years after the initial General Assembly adoption. The United States was the last of the four countries to sign, having signed on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010. This marked a turning point for the indigenous people in the United States and Canada, because

the federal government signed a major international document that would help protect indigenous peoples. It is relevant as a framing policy for Canada and the United States because it represents a contemporary “international” standard that highlights how far policies have come from the ideas of assimilation and integration to modern times. It serves as a framework for what nations can pay attention to when forming policies and enacting new laws, in order to serve the needs of all people, not just select groups. Globalization has provided a means for indigenous peoples to “seek rights in new and creative ways” (Smith, 2008, pp. 25). After conducting a research study on two indigenous groups in North America, Smith suggested that the rights of indigenous peoples are generally better protected by international doctrine, rather than relying entirely on state or federal laws.

The UN Declaration covers all the rights of indigenous peoples, but the part that will be focused on for this paper are the Articles that address education for indigenous people, and also the Articles that address the right to not be forcibly assimilated. Article 8 of the resolution states, “Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture”. It also goes further in detail asserting that states should provide proper procedures for the prevention of and redress for behaviors that have dispossessed them of their integrity as diverse peoples, or of their cultural morals or identities. This section pertains to the residential and boarding schools that indigenous students were coerced and forced to attend for many years in both Canada and the United States. Article 14 declares the importance of allowing indigenous peoples to establish their own educational practices. This Article goes further to address the need for indigenous people, above all - children, to have the right to access all levels and form of education without being discriminated against. It also highlights the need for states, when possible, to make sure that individuals and children have access to an education

that is taught in their own language and which supports their culture (United Nations, 2007).

After establishing the international framework that can be used to shape educational policies, it is important to compare the contemporary policies and programs that the United States and Canada have in place for their indigenous students.

### **Contemporary Educational Policies and Programs**

Comparing the contemporary educational policies and programs is necessary to determine what kind of problems these education models perpetuate for indigenous students and where there are areas of promise or success. Canada has offered its national apology for past injustices, and it has created various policies and programs in the provinces to better the educational experiences of FNMI students. The United States trails behind in the quality of education models and lacks policies at the state level to further equity for Native American students.

#### **United States**

After signing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the U.S Department of State (2010) released their “Initiatives to Promote the Government-to-Government Relationship & Improve the Lives of Indigenous Peoples” report. A section of this document expresses several activities that the federal government wanted to pursue, in order to improve tribal self-determination in several key areas. The initiatives focused on for this paper will be the commitment to improving education. The report states that the U.S. is dedicated to improving the success in K-12 education for Native American students. The initiative included several key areas where money was going to be invested into Native American Education<sup>67</sup>. The

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<sup>6</sup> The Recovery Act, which was passed by President Obama in 2009, invested \$170.5 million in Native American education at the Department of Education and \$277 million in Indian school construction at the Department of the Interior. The report also states that the President’s FY 2011 Budget Request provided 5% more funding for Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities compared to the year 2010 (U.S. Department of State, 2010).

goal of the investment was to restart, develop, and restructure the programming available for indigenous students in order to help them reach their full capability. The Administration believed that this investment fulfilled the statements made in the declaration and would also satisfy the concerns of Native American leaders. After signing the declaration, the approach that the United States seemed to take was just to give more money to the funding for Native American education rather than implement policies that would improve educational experiences and equity.

In the United States, the federal role in education is limited. The Tenth Amendment limits the role that the federal government is allowed to play in state affairs. Most educational policies are decided at the state and local levels. However, there is one major federal educational policy that applies to all of the states, and that is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. It is the most recent policy in response to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. The NCLB Act is a major federal law that authorizes spending on various programs that support K-12 education. It is the largest source of federal funding for schooling (Department of Education, 2015). The Act requires states to develop assessments involved with basic skills like reading, writing, and arithmetic. In order to receive funding, the states must develop tests and administer them yearly to students for select grades. There is no national achievement standard, however, states are responsible for setting a standard for their students. This Act in particular expanded the federal role in public education through testing, teacher evaluations, progress reports, and funding changes (Department of Education, 2015). The funding changes greatly affect Native American students because many of them attend the poorest school districts where quality resources are not available, or districts near reservations, which also tend to receive less

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<sup>7</sup> In addition, the initiative stated that The Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act increased the maximum Pell Grant award by the Consumer Price Index, which is projected to raise the award from \$5,550 to \$5,975. Also, the law provides \$300 million for Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities, \$50 million for Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions, and \$150 million for Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions over the next ten years (U.S. Department of State, 2010).

funding. The problems with funding that the NCLB Act creates have a direct impact on the gaps in achievement scores, which will be discussed further on.

Another federal act that was enacted in 2006 was the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act. The purpose of it is to provide funding for programs that work to “preserve Native American languages”. In 2012, members of the New Mexico congressional delegation requested legislation to lengthen the program for another five years (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014). Many Native American communities have praised this Act for the funding it has provided for immersion programs, curricula development, and teacher training. McCarty and Nicholas (2014) argue that language education policies can go one of two ways: eliminating indigenous languages by requiring that educational instruction be taught in the socially dominant language or by “maintaining linguistically encoded languages and cultural identifications” for indigenous students. In the case of this Act, the latter seems to be getting at least a small amount of focus. In addition to federal policies and laws, there are departments of education at the state levels which are responsible for implementing their own specific policies and programs for students, aside from the federal standards. There have been reports and suggestions by committees and groups that represent Native American students for states to implement policies that will help Native students achieve equity in their educational experiences. However, upon conducting research, it is apparent that many states do not have specific or established policies for Native American students.

For instance, the state of Oklahoma has one of the largest Native American populations, yet upon thoroughly searching the Oklahoma State Department of Education (2015) website, it was clear that they had established a Native American branch of education in their department but lacked policies and programs in place for Native American students. The board has an

Oklahoma Advisory Council on Indian Education, which was in place from 2010 to 2014. Aside from stating this council exists and briefly providing its purpose, there is no supporting evidence to show that what is discussed in the meetings and suggested by tribal communities is actually being implemented. Also, there is an Oklahoma Indian Education Resource for educators that provides information on various tribe and also provides lesson plans that are intended to incorporate Native perspectives and culturally relevant material in the classroom. However, there are no publications or reports that address whether educators are actually incorporating these lesson plans into their teaching, nor are there any policies in place that require incorporating Native American perspectives in the classroom. When comparing Oklahoma to other states, similar results were found where there was a lack of an educational model for Native American students and also a lack of resources for teaching.

Meyer (2013) states that there is partial and erroneous information about Native Americans taught in many of today's curriculum centers. Although Native American and Alaska Natives are a minority within school systems, it is still important to have accurate information regarding this group, in order for both indigenous and other students to have a more clear understanding of our contemporary society and history. Washington and Indiana were some of the only states that had incorporated a policy that required school districts to implement an accurate and unbiased account of Native American history and cultural perspectives into the classroom (Washington State Board of Education & Indian Department of Education, 2015). This signifies that in both of these states, there is a dedication to improving equity in education for Native American students. It would be beneficial if other states followed suit in this aspect. Ultimately there is a lack of connection between the federal and state governments in regards to the education of Native American students and implementing policies and programs that will be

beneficial. This missed connection has unfavorable effects on students, and creates the issues that will be discussed in later sections.

## **Canada**

Unlike the United States, the Canadian government does not have a department of education or a national method to education. Also, after signing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Canadian government did not issue a statement or report regarding their initiatives or new policies to meet the statements made in the declaration. In Canada, it is the parents who are responsible for the education of their children, and in order to support them, each province or territorial government administers and regulates an education system (Government of Canada, 2015). Each province has its own system, however, some similarities among education models are seen throughout Canada.

One of the most crucial and important aspects to Aboriginal educational policies currently in Canada is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Assembly of First Nations and Inuit organizations assisted former residential school students in taking the federal government and the churches responsible for residential schools to court. This led to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, which became the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history (Moran, 2014). The main purpose of the agreement was to begin mending the harm that was done in residential schools. There was a multi-billion dollar compensation package that was dispersed to residential school survivors. Also, with this agreement, the TRC was enacted and given a budget of \$60 million over the course of five years. The directive of the TRC is to learn the truth about what happened in residential schools and to document the narratives heard from school officials, students, parents, communities, and anyone who may have been directly involved or impacted by the residential school system (TRC Canada, 2015). The

TRC also states that it aims to “guide and inspire FNMI peoples and Canadians in a process of truth and healing leading toward reconciliation and renewed relationships based on mutual understanding and respect”. This statement is indicative of the government realizing that in order to fix the education problem of FNMI students, they must first mend the relationship and establish a level of trust that has never been there before.

In addition to the TRC, one other thing that the Canadian government has established to help aid in improving the education system is the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC) in which they have a department dedicated to the education of Aboriginal people. In 2011, CMEC hosted an Educators Forum on Indigenous Peoples, where educators, academics, government officials, and members of the indigenous community were able to meet and share ideas regarding programs and policies that would be beneficial to Aboriginal students. They also analyzed previous policies and programs to determine what worked and what did not (CMEC, 2015). This forum proved to be successful because it provided a platform where people involved in Aboriginal education could engage in face-to-face dialogue, sharing ideas, and building networks. The main issues found in Aboriginal education at this forum were decrease in graduation rates, achievement gaps in test scores, and a lack of community engagement/student involvement in the education process. These issues will be discussed more in depth in a later section.

Nearly every province has developed a specific FNMI Education Policy Framework in which they express dedication to improving Aboriginal education. In Alberta for instance, the FNMI Education Policy Framework is analyzed and updated frequently in order to keep up with the changing needs and issues that may arise in the education of FNMI students (Alberta Education, 2015). Since the Educators Forum in 2011, several provinces have stepped up to the

plate to implement new policies and programs that are beneficial for indigenous students. For example, in Saskatchewan there is a First Nations and Metis Education Achievement Fund. The goal of this fund is to “ensure equitable outcomes for First Nations and Metis students”. One way that this fund is doing that is by investing resources into specific programs and initiatives that have an explicit impact on education results for indigenous students. The funds are available to school divisions to develop and execute initiatives that are meant for improving achievement and increasing high school completion rates for First Nations and Metis students. There is also a three year implementation plan that runs from 2013-2016, where for each academic year there is a specific funding focus (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). The difference between this approach to funding in comparison to the United States is that the funding is provided at the federal level in the United States and tends to not have a precise purpose, whereas in Canada it comes from the provincial level and tends to be more specific in scope.

Furthermore, in Ontario, there is a program dedicated to promoting Native Studies and Native Languages in the education curricula. It offers indigenous students the chance to study their own language and culture, and also enables all students indigenous or not, with the resources to expand their knowledge on indigenous peoples and their heritage. The Native Studies courses are intended to help students understand Aboriginal issues of public interest, and also the courses are designed to increase students understanding on culture, history, and world views of indigenous people in Canada. Native Studies classes are offered at the high school level. In addition to the Native Studies courses, there are also Native language programs available as well. The Ontario curriculum offers seven different Native languages to study. The Ministry of Education (2015) states, “Language carries with it the spirit, culture, history, and philosophy of a people, and is the principal means by which culture is preserved and

transmitted”. The curriculum is offered to all students, not just Aboriginal learners. This curriculum is offered at the elementary and secondary levels of education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). In addition to specific Native Languages and Studies programs such as seen in Ontario, many of the provinces such as Alberta, Manitoba, British Columbia, and the Northwest Territories have also recognized the importance of integrating indigenous perspectives in the classroom. These specific policies and programs suggest that Canadian provinces are actively committed to improving the educational experiences and equity for Aboriginal students.

### **Education Reports**

For both the United States and Canada, but more so in the U.S., national and state assessments are important components to the education model. These reports provide educators and policymakers with data that allows them to see how students are scoring in various subjects, and also allows them to examine more specifically the differences among racial groups, gender, and economic factors. This data should encourage them to implement policies or programs that will increase equity among their students.

#### **United States**

The National Center for Education Statistics conducted its most recent National Indian Education Study in 2011. The study was also done in 2005, 2007, and 2009. The results of the assessment were compared with previous years. It was designed to illustrate the condition of education for Native American and Alaska Native students. The report provides educators, policymakers, and the public with information about the academic performance in reading and mathematics for these students. The fourth and eighth grade students were tested on these subjects, and also surveyed on their exposure to Native American culture. The Technical Review Panel for this assessment included Native American and Alaska Native educators and researchers

from various parts of the country. The results reflect those of students enrolled in public, Bureau of Indian Education, Department of Defense, and private schools.

The summary of the national results are as follows: At both grades four and eight, the mathematics score gap between indigenous and non-indigenous students was larger than the gap in 2005.<sup>8</sup> Average reading scores for indigenous students had no significant change compared to previous years, meaning reading progress had remained stagnant.<sup>9</sup> The study also focused on differences between student racial groups (White, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, and Native American/Alaska Native). This portion of the study found that indigenous students are behind in math at both grades four and eight when compared to other racial groups. Also, when looking at the reading scores for indigenous students, it was found that they also are behind the other students in this subject as well.

The report also compared gender and noted that female Native American/Alaska Native students consistently score higher than males in reading. The largest score gap was found in fourth grade, with a difference of 12 points; this is the highest gap since the start of the studies in 2005, which indicates a backwards trend in reading curriculum. Another aspect of the study explored the effect of family income on test scores. It was found that Native American/Alaska Native students who came from families with a higher income level scored higher in reading compared to previous years. The study compared students eligible for the free National School Lunch Program compared to those who did not. The difference in reading scores was 23 points for fourth graders, and 20 points for eighth graders. This signifies that family income has a detrimental impact on the success of students. What can be determined from this study is that Native American and Alaska Native students are at the bottom of the achievement list in

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<sup>8</sup> The largest gap was found among eighth grade students, with a difference of 19 points, and 16 for fourth graders.

<sup>9</sup> The largest gap was found among fourth grade students, with a difference of 19 points, and 13 for eighth grade students. The scores of indigenous students in reading showed no significant changes from 2005 to 2011.

mathematics and reading, given the large test score gaps seen between the various groups. Something also interesting to note is that this study has not been conducted since 2011, when achievement gaps were at their highest.

## **Canada**

Since Canada does not have a national system of education, there is no national assessment of educational achievement or satisfaction. It is up to the provinces to provide assessments for their students. The provincial assessments vary in scope. For example, British Columbia puts out a yearly report on aboriginal students and their assessment scores in a variety of subjects like math, sciences, English, civic studies, history, and even First Nations studies. Similar to the National Indian Education Study in the U.S, the test scores of aboriginal students when compared to other students were lower in every category, even in the First Nations studies category. Also, results from 2009 to 2014 showed a consistent decline in percent of students who were passing the exams with a C- or better (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015).

In Alberta, their approach is different than that of British Columbia. Alberta has an *Education Satisfaction Survey* in which various surveys are taken in order to determine students, parents, and school employee's satisfaction with key features of the educational system. The survey does not include achievement scores for students on various subjects, but simply asks them about their satisfaction with things such as the quality of education in their school, and the quality of teaching. The report also gets input from parents on their opinions of their children's education, and whether parents feel their input on their student's education is utilized by educational leaders. One thing to note about this survey is that it is only offered to high school seniors. It also differentiates between First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (FNMI) opinions compared to those of non-Aboriginal students. The results of the satisfaction survey reveal that a large

majority of FNMI students (98%) feel satisfied with the quality of their education. For the other provinces, it was difficult to find data regarding educational assessments or satisfaction surveys at the provincial level. Some of the educational institutions had developed their own assessments for the purpose of collecting performance gaps or satisfaction opinions, but for the most part there was no major focus on collecting assessment information that was available to the public.

### **Major Issues in Canada and the United States**

As mentioned earlier, there were many problems that education models perpetuated for indigenous students, but for the purpose of this paper, the three problems that will be discussed were seen in both the U.S. and Canada and have been persistent problems for many decades. The first of those issues is the low graduation rates among indigenous students in both the United States and Canada. Cerecer (2013) states that high school persistence and graduation rates for Native American youth continues to be an upsetting issue for educators. She states that Native American students are the least likely to graduate from high school in the United States. This fact indicates that Native youth face serious challenges in high school environments. Stetser and Stillwell (2014) state that Native American students in the school year of 2011-2012 had a 65% graduation rate, as compared to 84% for white students. This is telling of a deeper problem within the educational institutions and the educational experiences had by Native American students. In Canada, the CMEC Educator's Forum on Aboriginal Education found that improving retention and graduation rates was necessary due to the low graduation rates found among FNMI students. The National Household survey in 2011 got percentages from people between the ages of 25 and 64 who had received a high school diploma, and the results were as follows: 44% for First Nations people, 54% for Metis, and 35% for Inuit (Statistics Canada,

2015). Although the age range explored in this study is wide, the low percentages still indicate that there has been a historical and recent issue in graduation rates for indigenous students.

The second concern found in the United States and Canada, which is directly tied into low graduation rates is the gap in achievement scores between indigenous and non-indigenous students and the lack of indigenous perspectives in the classroom. As previously mentioned in the Education Reports section, the gaps in achievement for reading and mathematics for Native American students in the United States are significantly lower than that of students from other racial categories. McCarty and Fulton (2009) argue that the NCLB Act has actually increased the achievement gap between Native American students and their peers. Since schools receive funding only when their students have passing test scores, it seems necessary that closing the achievement gap would be important. The authors argue that schools that are labeled as “underperforming” are forced to “teach to the test” and to remove low-performing students from the testing pool. Data shows that Native American students are the lowest performers on standardized tests, which would indicate that the teaching to the test does not work effectively, because it does not create equality among student test scores. It can also be contended that the lack of incorporating Native perspectives and ideas in the classroom can have an effect on Native American student’s achievement levels because there is a lack of connection to the subject material being studied and their own personal identity and heritage. For Canada, Gallagher-Mackay, Kidder, and Methot (2013) state that Ontario’s Auditor General made a statement that the province was not on track to achieve the goals set out in the FNMI Education Policy Framework. He specifically pointed out the difference in achievement gaps between FNMI students and the others. Mentioned in the Education Reports section, the assessment scores found for Aboriginal students in British Columbia indicate that FNMI students are behind in all

subjects. The authors state that there is a lack of connection between the FNMI students and the things they are learning in schools. Although provinces have proven to incorporate policies and programs that incorporate indigenous perspectives, there are many schools which may feel that they only need to include indigenous perspectives in the classroom if they have a large number of Aboriginal students (Gallagher-Mackay, et. Al, 2013).

Finally, another overlapping issue between the two nations that directly relates to the first two problems is the lack of student involvement and community engagement. The biggest concerns parents had in Alberta with the Education Satisfaction Survey was that they wanted their children to demonstrate behaviors and attitudes that were indicative of potential success in employment after school. Only 56% of parents felt their children displayed these behaviors. Also, only 53% of parents with Aboriginal students were satisfied that their input into education of students was considered by Alberta Education (Alberta Education, 2014). The difference in satisfaction between parents and students is suggestive that there is a missing link between Aboriginal parents and Elders to their students in school. Based on the policies and programs discovered among various education departments for the provinces of Canada, it appears that this nation has done a more effective job at incorporating community and student involvement in education. However, there is definitely still room for improvement. Richards and Scott (2009) argue that widespread Aboriginal cultural alienation has limited the willingness and ability for tribal communities, parents, and students to be involved in formal education institutions. Similarly, for the United States, there is an even larger disconnect between the tribal communities and educational systems. Cerecer (2013) states that indigenous youth, their parents, and tribal communities have the power to create change and to come up with policies and programs that may be more beneficial to Native American students, without hindering the

success of other students. In order to fix the problems found in education models between the two nations, it is useful to analyze the education models and come up with recommendations to the problems.

### **Analysis and Recommendations**

After exploring the current policies, programs, and education models for indigenous students in Canada and the United States, it is important to analyze them. What was discovered was that Canada exceeds the United States when it comes to developing policies and programs at the provincial and local levels that work to improve equity in educational experiences for indigenous students. A large reason for this may be due to the TRC and national apology that was issued for the survivors of the residential school system. Canada has a much longer history of the residential school system, so it makes sense that educational leaders would be committed to healing and repairing trust between Aboriginal people and the government. Since the United States has a similar historical context, it would be beneficial if the federal government did something similar to the TRC, in order to establish a renewed level of trust between Native Americans and the federal government, as well as to show a commitment to reversing the policies and programs that have increased the inequality seen in educational experiences for Native American students. Furthermore, the United States, at the federal level, should conduct research on the various educational departments within states, to see that there are a lack of policies in place that benefit Native American students. By signing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous people, both Canada and the United States have made a commitment to improving the experiences of indigenous peoples. The United States can reflect this commitment by altering current federal policies such as the NCLB Act, to further benefit Native American students rather than disregarding the individual needs of the students.

Additionally, where the United States excels in implementing national assessments in order to get a grasp of student achievements, Canada falls behind. Although national assessments do not indicate the quality or satisfaction of educational experiences among students, they do provide data for how well students are doing in various subjects compared to their peers. If assessments are given and large achievement gaps are noticed, it provides an avenue for states and governments to implement new policies or programs that will help eliminate these gaps. It would be beneficial for Canada to have a national assessment even though there is no federal department of education. A national assessment would provide educators and policymakers in the various provinces with a resource to determine how well indigenous students are doing within their education systems in comparison to their peers. It would also serve as a guide for the educational departments in the provinces to see how their students are stacking up compared to others across the region in order to ensure that nationwide there is equity. It is also my suggestion for the United States to continue the national assessment for data purposes, however, it does not seem beneficial to require funding for schools to be contingent upon test scores. Every student learns differently, and this may be particularly true for Native American students. Their cultural identity and traditional ways of learning are far different than most of their peers, so testing is not always an accurate measure of success. Also, limiting funding for schools who are considered “underperforming” simply makes the achievement gap further, because schools who are underperforming are the ones that *need* more funding to improve the curriculum and quality of education the students are receiving.

In order for both nations to fix the problems with low graduation rates, a large achievement gap in test scores, and to improve the student, parent, and community involvement it is necessary for teachers to communicate with their students about issues that may affect them

in their education. A small case study conducted by Cerecer (2013), found that Pueblo Nation students attending a public high school were upset with their principal and teachers for not consulting with them on decisions that affected their educational experiences. If educators and school leaders made a point to include all students in decision-making, it might encourage students to be more involved in other ways such as academically and with extra-curricular activities, which would also help increase equity among students. It is also vital for indigenous students to consult with their parents and tribal communities, in order to form a coalition of people that may articulate their disagreement with specific rules or policies implemented in their educational institutions. This would provide a stronger voice for students, and allow parents and students to establish a dialogue that involves educational aspects. It would also be beneficial for both nations to improve the engagement between parents, Elders, and tribal communities in regards to education, perhaps by forming local councils that are able to provide their opinions and suggestions on educational policies or problems that would benefit indigenous students. If parents and community members felt involved in their student's education, it would first and foremost support the notion of sovereignty and the right for indigenous peoples to be in control of their children's education as stated in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Engagement between students, parents, and the tribal community should also encourage students to establish a stronger connection to education and help increase graduation rates and decrease achievement gaps in test scores.

In addition, it is necessary for teachers to have a multicultural perspective, and to receive proper training for teaching indigenous students. Bird, Lee, and Lopez (2013) state that teachers, native or not, have great opinions about the education of their Native American students, but often feel that there is not much they can do in terms of changing policies that can help their

students. In addition, because of a lack of funding in both nations, but particularly in the United States, the authors noted that this severely limits the resources that teachers are able to incorporate into their classrooms regarding indigenous perspectives. It is necessary for teachers to work together to voice their opinions or ideas about indigenous education. The Aboriginal Education Forum that took place in Canada is an excellent example of the type of program that should be implemented in the United States. This would provide an opportunity for teachers, policymakers, and educators to further their knowledge about Native American students, as well as discuss current issues these students face, and what needs to be done to help them succeed. Furthermore, school officials need to continuously evaluate the purpose of their educational models in order to make sure that their educational institutions produce globally-minded citizens who have received the same equity in education. These recommendations should help create a connection to educational experiences for indigenous students and fix the overlapping problems found in both the U.S. and Canada.

### **Conclusion**

While both Canada and the United States currently lack equitable education models for indigenous students, Canada has more advanced policies beneficial to indigenous students while the United States lags behind. The abuses that indigenous students have experienced through the ethnocentric and assimilation goals of residential schools system in Canada and the United States has been damaging to their well-being, and has had great impacts on current models of education in both nations. Because of this historical context, it is pertinent that these nations do everything in their power to improve the educational experiences and increase equity in education for indigenous students. While the scope of problems found for indigenous students was immense, the three overlapping problems were low graduation rates, a gap in achievement scores, and a

lack of student, parent, and community engagement. It is recommended that these nations further research and study the contemporary problems of indigenous students in education and to improve and increase policies that will encourage equity. It is also necessary for teachers to be properly trained on multicultural perspectives, and for indigenous perspectives to be included in the classroom in order to fix the missing link that indigenous students feel with their education. Ultimately, Canada is doing a better job with their education models for indigenous students, thanks in large part to the TRC, and the United States falls behind. There is a strong need for improvement in equity in both nations, and this is a topic that deserves more focus, time and attention.

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