

What is the Enhancement Agreement Enhancing?: Analysis of the Aboriginal Education  
Enhancement Agreement in Sea to Sky School District

Brianne Aldcroft

EDST 554: Educational Policy

Dr. Marilynne Waithman

University of British Columbia

August 14, 2011

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The voices of the Canadian Aboriginal population are finally being heard by Canadians. These voices are telling of territorial appropriation, genocide, colonialism, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and loss of culture among other atrocities; all these at the hands of the Canadian government and people. While there is still a long ways to go, the healing for Aboriginal peoples in Canada has begun as the general population becomes more understanding and as the government begins to take responsibility for errors of the past. This paper will focus specifically on how British Columbia's education system has failed to meet the needs of Aboriginal students and the new policy in place that is meant to start addressing the weaknesses of the current system.

### The Policy

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The Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement (EA) is a top-down policy initiated by the British Columbia Ministry of Education (the Ministry) that requires school districts to create an agreement between the district, the Ministry, and the Aboriginal peoples who are served by the district in an attempt to address the lack of academic success that plagues Aboriginal learners in BC. With regards to the creation of the EA within a particular district, the Ministry requires that Aboriginal representatives take part in all stages of the policy process, and be equal partners in the ongoing process of executing and assessing the success of the EA.

Specifically, the policy requires:

1. The Aboriginal communities must be represented by a unified body whose authority to speak for the Aboriginal communities is accepted by the Aboriginal communities.

2. Shared decision making by the Aboriginal communities and the school district must be an established practice.
3. Both the Aboriginal communities and the school district must support participation in the Enhancement Agreement.
4. Joint consultation and collaboration between the Aboriginal communities and the school districts will enable vision and goal setting in all areas of education for all Aboriginal learners.
5. The Aboriginal communities and the school district track key performance indicators at the student level.
6. The Aboriginal communities and the school district must be committed to regular reporting of results. This would include an evaluation and reporting process on the outcomes of the Enhancement Agreements.
7. The scope of the Aboriginal Education program must include a focus on continuous improvement in the academic performance of all Aboriginal students.
8. Meeting the cultural needs of Aboriginal students in all aspects of learning. This includes resources, strategies and assessment.
9. Focus on increasing knowledge of and respect for Aboriginal culture, language and history, which enables a greater understanding for everyone about Aboriginal people.

(Elements of an Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement, 2011)

In Sea to Sky School District, #48 (SD 48), the EA is an agreement between the district, the Ministry, N'Quatqua Band (of D'Arcy), Lil'wat Nation (of Mount Currie), Skwxwu7mesh Uxwumixw (of Squamish), Samahquam Ucwalmicw (of south Lillooet Lake), Skatin Nations (of Lower Lillooet River), Xa'xtsa (of north Harrison Lake), Metis, Inuit and Off Reserve First Nations. The EA in SD 48 was one of the first EAs in the province to be ratified by all partners on March 10, 2007. It expires in June of 2012. Included in the SD 48 EA are:

- Territorial map of the region
- Preamble explaining how the EA was developed locally
- Guiding principles and purpose of the local EA advisory committee and the EA
- The implementation plan which includes a time line
- Goals with specific performance indicators and targets, and commitments to various actions or activities that are predicted to aid in the accomplishment of the goal
- Structures that will improve the relationship between local Aboriginal communities and the district

(Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement, SD 48, 2007)

The goals for the SD 48 EA are to improve the high school completion rate of Aboriginal students, improve the performance of students on Individualized Education Plans, improve the

performance of “at risk” Aboriginal students, and improve the literacy for all Aboriginal students. Each of these goals has performance indicators and specific performance targets that inform academic success; a one percent increase in the graduation rate of Aboriginal students would not be considered a success, for example, especially if the completion rate for non-Aboriginal students went up by three per cent. Baseline data was collected in the years leading up to the ratification of the EA so that performance of students and the EA could be monitored. Also attached to the specific goals are commitments that the board, the Ministry, and Aboriginal partners will establish in order to afford the academic success of Aboriginal students and the EA. An example is a commitment to providing access to a trades apprenticeship program and guaranteed seats for Aboriginal students to help meet the goal of increasing the graduation rate.

The EA Advisory Committee consists of principals of schools with a significant Aboriginal population, education consultants from the Aboriginal communities that SD 48 serves, the director of instruction for SD 48, and the Aboriginal Education district principal. The advisory committee meets quarterly and discusses the ongoing programs that are meant to be achieving the goals of the EA (School District 48, “Aboriginal/ Advisory Committee,” 2011). The EA Steering Committee is a much larger committee and consists of at least one Elder from each of the Nations served by SD 48, Principals of school with a significant Aboriginal population, Aboriginal education support workers, alternate education teachers who teach mostly Aboriginal students, elementary school teachers who have considerable experience working with Aboriginal students, the Sea to Sky Teachers’ Association president, school board trustees, parent advisory committee members, and the Aboriginal Education district principal (School District 48, “Aboriginal/Steering Committee,” 2011). While Aboriginal students are not part of the Advisory or Steering Committees, they are viewed as stake holders in this policy, and their

voice and input on what is Aboriginal education and what is success for Aboriginal students was sought and considered during the policy formulation stage of the creation of the EA for SD 48 (School District 48, 2007).

### Significance of the Issue

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The residential schooling era for Aboriginal students in Canada is a shameful legacy for non-Aboriginal Canadians, and an emotionally and culturally scarring time for the Aboriginal communities of Canada. The last residential school in Canada closed in 1998 in Lebret, Saskatchewan, though it was signed over to the governance of a local First Nations school board in 1973 (McLennan, 2006). Graduation from residential school, the closing of the last residential schools, and even the apology by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2008 to residential school survivors, has not ended the emotional turmoil that survivors endure; the scars of residential school have been passed from one generation to the next and have caused what is likely irreparable damage to the collective psyche and culture of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

The removal of children from their parents and the isolation from their culture has caused many deep seated issues for Aboriginal communities. Taken from their parents for anywhere from 1 to 13 years, many Aboriginal parents and grandparents were not actually parented by loving parents, but institutionalized by teachers, priests and nuns, and now must try to figure out how to parent their own children; many of these survivors, suffering from personal and cultural losses attributed to time spent in residential schools, but never taught appropriate emotional coping strategies, many Aboriginal people have turned to self-medicating to help them cope with the regular and extenuating struggles we face as humans, and these maladaptive and culturally inappropriate methods of coping with emotional turmoil are passed on to younger generations.

Though residential schools are closed, and Aboriginal students now attend either federally funded band schools or provincially funded public schools, they are still being institutionalized by an education system that does not meld well with their traditional learning styles as individuals and communities. So many elements of the current model of education fail to address the unique learning style and needs of Aboriginal peoples as is clearly depicted in the statistics on school completion. The Aboriginal population is increasing in Canada faster than the general population (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2011), and yet the graduation rate for Aboriginal students, 47% (Heslop, 2009), is far below that of the general graduation rate, 82% (Heslop, 2009). With this past, and these startling statistics, something needs to be started in a meaningful and culturally sound way to enhance the academic success of Aboriginal peoples in BC.

#### Contextual Factors Contributing to Policy Development

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There are many strengths and surfacing weaknesses of the provincial EA policy. One strength of the policy is that it is both at the provincial and district level. Having the policy at the provincial level means that, finally, Aboriginal education is formally on the agenda of the provincial government and policies and procedures, albeit not perfect and in their infancy, are beginning to address a long-standing issue in BC's public education system. Also a strength of the EA policy at the provincial level is that it puts the onus for detail on the district. Many non-Aboriginal people in BC fail to understand, simply due to lack of exposure, the cultural diversity that exists among the Aboriginal communities in the province. Many policies and curricula lump all of Canada's Aboriginal peoples into one group, not realizing that there is arguably more cultural diversity among BC Aboriginal communities than between the nations that make up

Europe—let alone the rest of Canada. With this in mind, localized construction of EAs is necessary for the agreement to have relevance, authority, meaning and momentum for the future. Another strength of the provincial EA policy is that it requires an advisory committee be set up with the various partners who play a role in the education of Aboriginal students within the district. This allows for the collaboration of many educational and cultural experts to discuss the formulation, implementation and evaluation of the policy so that many aspects and perspectives are considered for optimal implementation of the local policy.

The implementation of the EAs has only completed its third year, so formal evaluation has not begun, but already there are some weaknesses becoming apparent in SD 48's local EA. The first weakness is that the goals are solely academic, likely because such goals are easily measured and give clear feedback for the evaluation stage of the policy process. Quantitative data requires statistical analysis (Hoepfl, 1997). The quantitative data used in SD 48s EA is that of standardized test scores of individual students, which would then be pooled to find an average, and this average would be compared to the baseline data established in the years prior to the ratification of the EA. This is problematic for educational research in general and Aboriginal students in particular because the individual is lost in the numbers.

BC has a high school completion rate in 6 years of beginning high school of 82% (Heslop, 2009). This number includes all students in BC. This high school completion rate is on par with peer countries in the developed world (Conference Board of Canada, 2007), and would suggest that the system is working as efficiently as any other system. However, when one begins to break down the high school completion rate according to ethnicity, a startling realization occurs and it is evident that BC's Aboriginal students are not being served effectively by this system. Pooled with the rest of the students, this realization is lost, however, extracted from the

general population reveals the truth. While this is still quantitative research, qualitative research into the weaknesses of the system would allow for more specific analysis of the problems with the BC education system for Aboriginal students because it uses “a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings” (Hoepfl, 1997, p. 47). The policy formulation process of the EA is evidence in itself that educational reformers believe that a context-specific, and naturalistic approach needs to be used in the education of Aboriginal students, so it only goes to say that the evaluation of Aboriginal students and the EA should also embrace these concepts. The quantitative approach has not worked in the past for this group of students, and while it should not be abandoned all together, it needs to be accompanied by the richness of context that is provided by a qualitative analysis of the policy and students.

Including qualitative data into the assessment of the EA in SD 48 might entail interviews, focus groups or surveys of a random sampling (Hoepfl, 1997) of Aboriginal students and teachers of Aboriginal students. Rather than looking at test scores, these forms of qualitative analyses would look at other elements of the individual’s success including feelings of self-efficacy, confidence, and belonging in the school community. These self-reported measures, coupled with correlational studies of the quantitative data, would provide a more holistic view of the EA’s success and the success of the individual students that the EA is trying to support. This way, if academic gains are not as significant as educators, Elders and students were hoping for, the analysis can look to the psychological and sociological factors that contribute to academic success and see if there is a lack of support in those areas that can be addressed.

Another weakness is that the EA focuses mainly on the education of Aboriginal students and does not address the education of non-Aboriginal people on Aboriginal topics. The ignorance that plagues non-Aboriginal people with respect to Aboriginal culture has undeniably



caused most if not all of the issues that Aboriginal peoples are grappling with today. Education of non-Aboriginal people on Aboriginal topics could expedite the academic success experienced by Aboriginal people and lead to healing and better cultural relations. Aikenhead (2001), argues that enculturation of education, where the Western viewpoint is unknowingly infused into education, in particular science education, is harmful to the learning of Aboriginal students because it is in such stark contrast with their own world view much of the time. The only way for teachers and peers of Aboriginal students to see this enculturation of Western ideology is to learn about the local Aboriginal cultures, or the component cultures of ones' class. Only when one sees the culture of another can one be aware of one's own culture. This would help teachers to be more discerning during lessons, open to other forms of knowing and assessment, and hopefully foster success in the Aboriginal student.

The final and possibly most important criticism of the EA in SD 48 is that it is operating within the current educational structure and system, which has proved to be grossly inefficient at addressing the educational needs of Aboriginal students. While the EA will likely see some success in its current form, a plateau is likely to be achieved in the near future and further success will need to come from whole system reform either for the entire province, or just for Aboriginal students. An area that is particularly problematic is that of Special Education. Diagnostic checklists of special needs—disabilities, behavior disorders and giftedness—are assumed to be culturally neutral, but in fact are not. Cognitive impairments, socialization issues and intellectual gifts, are defined culturally, and what is a disability in one culture may be a gift in another and vice versa. There has been a lack of progress in the realm of creating culturally sensitive diagnostic strategies (Hurton, 2002; Morin, 2004), and this has likely led to an over representation of Aboriginal students in the categories of learning disabilities and behavioral

disorders, and underrepresentation in the category of gifted. This is just one piece of evidence suggesting that systematic change is needed rather than programs added to an existing system.

The Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement is a step in the right direction towards addressing the system failures that have hurt the education of Aboriginal students in BC. This said, work needs to be done with the SD 48 EA with regards to assessment and evaluation data, educating non-Aboriginal people on Aboriginal topics, and looking at whole system change. Adapting the system to the student, rather than asking the student to adapt to the system will likely result in increased achievement for Aboriginal students which will likely result in the strengthening of Aboriginal communities and the propulsion of the decolonization process that has already begun.

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