

# Educational performance of aboriginal students at the university level

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The educational institution have provided opportunities for the Aboriginal people to come into contact with the larger Canadian society. Enrollment within the non-Aboriginal educational institutions have increased dramatically since the early seventies. University enrollment, for example, has increased from 400 in 1970 to 5800 in 1985. A number of Aboriginal students have graduated from the institutions of higher learning but the fact remains Aboriginal students have generally exhibited poor academic performance and high dropout rates from the educational institutions of Canadian society. This situation is a reflection of the colonized states occupied by Aboriginal people within Canada. The education system adopted by the dominant group is not geared to allow the colonized or subordinate aboriginal peoples to succeed within that system. In short, one cannot explain the Aboriginal student's lack of success in these non-Aboriginal institutions in terms of cultural deficiencies, abilities and aptitudes as a few educators, politicians and bureaucrats have done in recent years.

A report by the Department of Indian Affairs titled "University Education and Economic Well-Being: Indian Achievement and Prospects" (1990) made the following key observations regarding university education for Aboriginal peoples:

1. almost three times the proportion of non-Aboriginals no Aboriginals have attended university at some time.
2. non-Aboriginal students are about 7.4 times more likely to successfully complete a degree program than Aboriginal students.
3. the poor success of Aboriginal students earning a high school diploma means that relatively fewer Aboriginal people are eligible to attend university/only 25 percent of the Aboriginal population has at least a high school diploma or equivalent level of education compared with more than 50 percent of non-Aboriginals)

The above report does not identify the reasons for poor success rates among Aboriginal students in high school and at university. This paper will discuss a number of factors which explain the poor academic performance and high dropout rates.

Various researchers have examined the educational problems experienced by Aboriginal students. Unfortunately, the theories advanced in these studies tended to focus the problem on the Aboriginal cultures while ignoring the education system. However, the paper utilizes a unique approach in the analysis of Aboriginal education in Canadian society. The conceptual framework is based on the internal colonial model and therefore views Aboriginal education as colonial education. This approach contextualizes Aboriginal education by including into the analysis the education system established by the dominant groups.

Researchers have examined education under classical, internal and neocolonial situations. They have found that in all cases education for the colonized was planned and controlled by the colonizers. This situation is a reflection of the power of the colonizers. The political and economic dominant group of the internal colonial situation makes the educational decision for the colonized. The colonizers determine who shall go to school, how long the children of the colonized shall attend school, what shall be learned in school and the language in which they shall learn. Under this system, schools are established and designed to save the needs of the colonizer, not the colonized.

Additional features of colonial education include (1) geographic separation of schools and communities from which students came, (2) the colonized are not consulted in the planning process regarding their education, (3) parents perform as role in the determination of educational content, (4) content has little to do with the society and culture of the colonized, (5) language utilized in schools is that of the colonizer, (6) language of the colonized is devalued and discouraged, (7) culture of the colonized is negatively evaluated, and (8) the history of the colonized, if given at all, tends to focus on tribal conflicts, problems and "barbarism" which provides a contrast to the "peace and orderly progress"

under colonial domination.

Analysis of colonial education requires one to examine the reactions of the colonized to colonial educational institutions. Apathy is the most frequent response in which educational institutions are considered as being unequal to the needs of the colonized. Hostility to colonial schools is also frequent whereby most parents recall experiencing discrimination and prejudice while they were attending public schools. Furthermore, colonial education is perceived by the colonized as a threat to the Aboriginal society's continuing existence. Finally, colonial education contributes to the lack of integration of Aboriginal students into the academic and social systems of the educational system. This writer's study (1980) of dropouts of Aboriginal students from a New Brunswick university found that the students were not integrated into either the academic or the social system of the university. It was concluded that dropout occurred because of insufficient interactions with others in the university and insufficient congruency with the prevailing value patterns of the university collectively. An additional problem arises for the Aboriginal student in that they are Aboriginal, a term which has a connotation of racial status to the non-Aboriginal students and staff of the university.

Academic integration was defined as the absolute or wide ranging congruence with the prevailing value patterns of the university. This type of integration occurs primarily through meeting certain standards of the academic system (grade performance) and the extent to which the individuals identify with the norms and values of the academic system. Analysis of data revealed the aboriginal dropouts were not fully integrated into the academic system of the university. It was further established that their lack of integration into the academic system was related to the dropout's decision to leave the institution.

Social integration refer to the consistent, intimate social interaction with others in the university. Social integration occurs primarily through informal peer group associations, extra curricular social activities and interaction with the faculty of the university. It was therefore expected that consistent, intimate social interactions with others in the university would generate varying degrees of social communication, friendship support, faculty support and collective affiliation.

It was established that the Aboriginal dropouts interacted with other members of the social system. Not surprisingly, the dropouts exhibited a tendency to interact more with other Aboriginal students of the university. In fact, the system of interactions that developed between the dropouts and other students suggested the emergency of an "Aboriginal peer group association" or "subsystem" within the larger university social system.

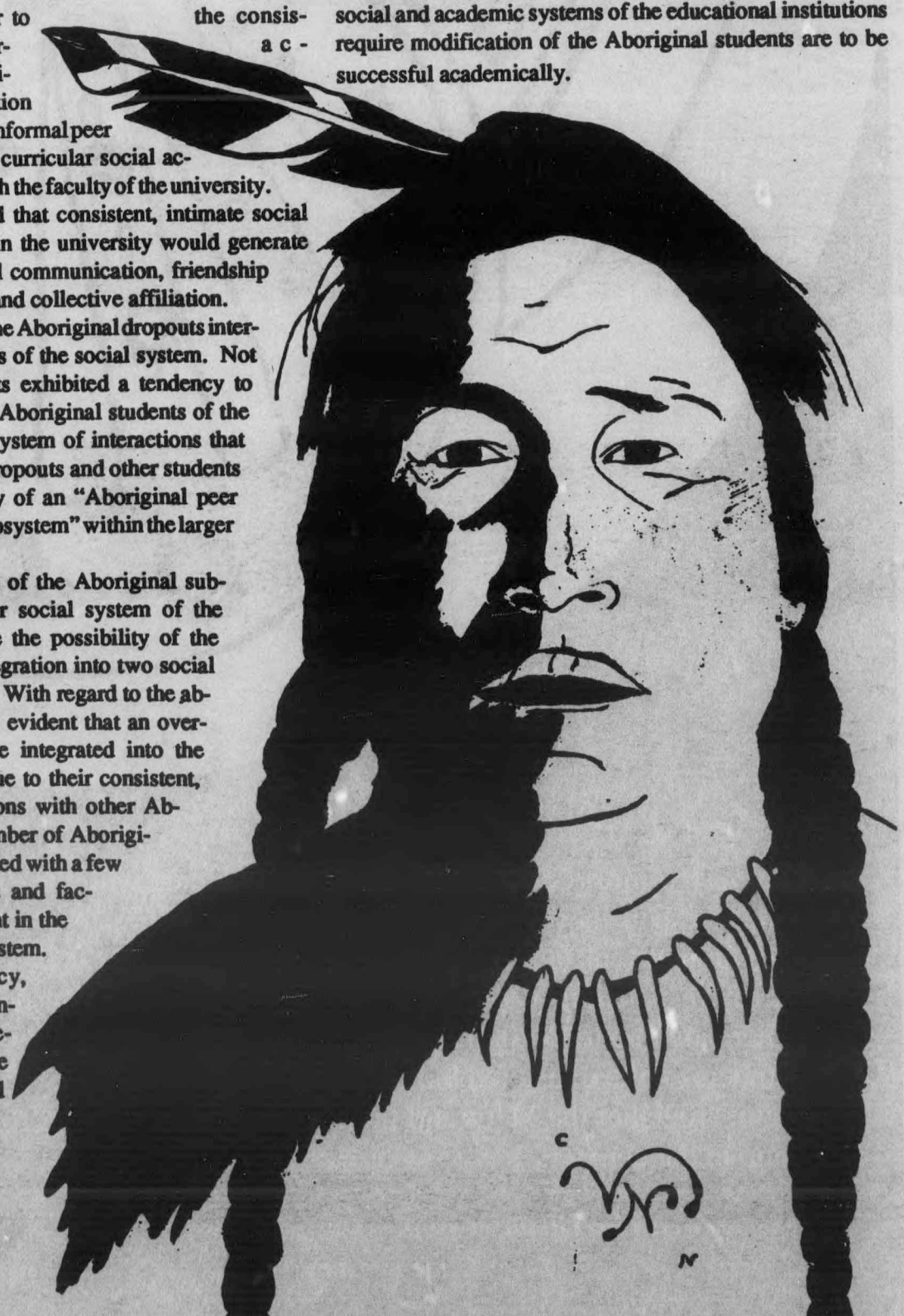
Due to the emergency of the Aboriginal subsystem within the larger social system of the university, one can see the possibility of the Aboriginal students' integration into two social system at the university. With regard to the aboriginal dropouts, it was evident that an overwhelming majority were integrated into the Aboriginal subsystem due to their consistent, intimate social interactions with other Aboriginal students. A number of Aboriginal dropouts also interacted with a few non-Aboriginal students and faculty who were participant in the larger university social system. However, the frequency, extensiveness and contention of interactions between the members of the Aboriginal subsystem and the larger university social system were insufficient to consider integration of the Aborigi-

nal dropouts into the larger university social system. It was also found that the dropouts' lack of integration into the larger university social system was related to their decision to leave university.

While the Aboriginal dropouts experienced problems of integration, the Aboriginal students encounter an additional obstacle in that they are Aboriginal, a term which has a connotation of social status to non-Aboriginal students and staff. The Aboriginal students were apparently judged socially inferior and occupied the lowest status position in the status system of the university. The word "Indian" or "Aboriginal" meant "savage" or "bad" or "uncivilized" to most of the non-Aboriginal students and faculty.

The concepts "Indianness" and "Aboriginal" obviously had an effect on the Aboriginal students' integration into the larger social system of the university. It fostered and promoted the emergence of an "Aboriginal subsystem" within the larger social system of the university. However, the Aboriginal subsystem was not integrated into the larger social system. The Aboriginal subsystem was assigned a low status position and any attempt by the subsystem to integrate into the larger social system was apparently discouraged by the non-Aboriginal student population.

The findings of this study clearly indicate that the major sources of the dropout problem among Aboriginal students is not found within the Aboriginal cultures. This writer sees the problem as a representation of a profound shortcoming in the Canadian educational institution. These institutions have not been successful in fully integrating the Aboriginal students into their social and academic systems. In fact, these institutions do not allow integration because of the existing social structures within the institutions. These structures hinder integration and any attempts by the Aboriginal students to integrate are discouraged by the dominant group within the institutions. Thus, it is evident that the social and academic systems of the educational institutions require modification of the Aboriginal students are to be successful academically.



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