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Article abstract

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The Insufficiency of High School Completion Rates to Redress Educational Inequities among Indigenous Students

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A continued gap exists in student achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the British Columbia school system. This article analyzes the balance of success and failure of the Accountability Framework, a provincial program designed to increase graduation rates in the province. In order to understand the successes and failures of this initiative, we draw upon the principles of John Rawls to consider the implications of rising graduation rates of those occupying the lowest standard of living in society. One of the primary findings is the necessity of policy makers and educational leaders to refrain from considering data regarding Indigenous student success in isolation and instead consider the shifts in disparity compared to non-Indigenous learners. Shifting the level of analysis from the school system to the overall well-being of a population unearths serious concerns regarding indicators of success within school systems. We contend that the initiative to solely draw upon high school completion rates as an indicator of success is misleading and further exacerbates existing problems of marginalization of Indigenous people in education.

Introduction

A current educational directive in British Columbia emphasizes a need to prepare students for postsecondary school and to become productive members of the workforce (BC Ministry of Education, 2006b, pp. 9, 20, 48). In response to these two overarching priorities, the Accountability Framework was adopted as the primary provincial strategy to raise high school graduation rates (Jago, 2006). Priority is given within the framework to raise the graduation rates and reduce the disparity of those who have been identified as at risk, particularly in the Indigenous¹ community compared to non-Indigenous populations (BC Ministry of Education, 2002a). Notably, in British Columbia, at the inception of the Accountability Framework the on-reserve First Nation graduation rate was 52.6%, compared to 78.8% for non-Indigenous people (BC Statistics, 2001). Reducing the disparity between

¹ In this article we use the term “Indigenous” expansively when speaking about the educational experiences of all Indigenous people in Canada. However, we are required to use the term “First Nation” at times, which is a government designation, when we are specifically speaking about the experiences of First Nations people in the education system.

students from high-risk Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous students is a primary objective of the framework. Therefore, we must be diligent in critically analyzing emerging data through this lens. Specifically, we investigate a specific era of attempted change in British Columbia education. We draw upon the mid-2000s, when the provincial government identified a commitment to tracking the improvements of high school completion rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students as a means to redress inequitable education outcomes.

As scholars who adhere to decolonizing ideologies and who recognize the need to transform a system that harms Indigenous people, we also recognize the confluence of sustaining and disrupting innovations necessary to achieve equity. Simultaneously, we engage in the seemingly contradictory work of improving our current system by enhancing and improving our tools of education, while concurrently working to dismantle the same system and eliminate its colonial foundations. As it relates to this article, we contend that focusing singularly on graduation rates within a fundamentally colonial system may miss the foundational issues facing contemporary education. However, if we solely focus on complete transformation, which is likely generations away, we neglect the urgent needs of students who are lacking equity in education today. In this case, we are working for long-term shifts in colonial education, while also critically examining contemporary provincial strategies, such as the Accountability Framework. In essence, we are trying to improve tools and mandates like the Accountability Framework to increase equity for Indigenous learners, while simultaneously working to demolish them. For the purposes of this article, we will occasionally return to arguments that challenge colonial schooling; however, our primary argument is to enhance existing tools to achieve their stated aims. In other articles we contend directly with problems of colonial schooling (Poitras Pratt, et al., 2018), but in this article we engage with the system as it currently exists. We do not see the Accountability Framework as the most effective mechanism for creating equity, but rather engage in a critical analysis of its outcomes, since it was the primary provincial directive in this era.

Returning to examinations of graduation rates, we argue that drawing upon this metric in isolation of other factors poses a unique conundrum to educational philosophers and practitioners. While high school graduation rates demonstrate a palpable improvement, the broader inequitable and systemic barriers remain; too few Indigenous people have avenues available by which to escape poverty and socio-economic disadvantage. In this paper we argue that the Accountability Framework did not lead to a decrease in the discrepancy between the graduation rates of on-reserve First Nations students and non-Indigenous students, despite both groups seeing improvements. The outcome of the framework is in stark contrast to the primary aims that seek to reduce disparity. It is possible to spin the increases in graduation rates amongst on-reserve First Nations learners as a sign of programmatic success; however, it would be disingenuous to examine these improvements in isolation, rather than comparing them to the concurrent increases for non-Indigenous learners. An analysis of improvements in graduation rates for on-reserve First Nations learners (4.4%) compared to an even larger increase for non-Indigenous students (9.6%) suggests that the educational inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is widening, not lessening. We contend that drawing upon the Accountability Framework as an indicator of success for improved Indigenous students obscures the substantive barriers to improved quality of life for Indigenous students both during school and upon graduation.

Although it lies outside the focus of this paper, we would be remiss in failing to attend to the problematic nature of contemporary schooling. Scholars contend that current education systems maintain a colonial agenda that is reminiscent of residential schooling and that requires Indigenous students to learn and become indoctrinated in systems that privilege Western knowledge; oppress Indigenous students through racist assumptions; provide little or no space for Indigenous content, pedagogy, and assessment; and often lack Indigenous educators and administration (Poitras Pratt, et al., 2018). Despite an earnest pursuit for improvements in graduation rates in Indigenous communities, serious concerns remain regarding the current education system, which has the potential of doing more harm than good for Indigenous learners (Battiste, 2013). We challenge the overarching claims of success in improving Indigenous students quality of learning in a system that still has strong colonial

foundations – foundations that exist throughout our Canadian education systems. However, the focus of this paper will remain on the success of the Accountability Framework to reduce the disparity of graduation rates for on-reserve First Nations students, despite lingering questions about the quality of education received by Indigenous students.

In applying the concepts of fair equality of opportunity (Rawls, 1999), education as a positional good (Brighouse & Swift, 2006), and the difference principle (Rawls, 2001), our aim is to consider the extent to which the Accountability Framework is an effective mechanism to address educational inequities for Indigenous peoples, who, on average, are arguably the most disadvantaged demographic in Canada. While we acknowledge that the Accountability Framework will inevitably be used to evaluate the numbers of Indigenous students completing high school, we contend that this framework must be considered within a complex array of intertwined factors. We argue that solely drawing upon an increase in First Nations graduation rates glosses over the relationship of this data with the proportional success of the rest of the population. Given this, we challenge generalized claims that point to increased graduation rates as a measure of success, while failing to recognize the increased disparity created by the program. As such, we begin by considering the strategic initiatives that purport to increase the number of students who graduate from high school in the province of British Columbia. We then take a step back to provide an overview of Rawls' notion of fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle, in examining whether the Accountability Framework has substantively addressed educational inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Following this, we highlight the financial resources dedicated to this strategy as part of a federal mandate to redress the injustices of Indigenous peoples in Canada, specifically referring to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (2015). We conclude with some recommendations on how to redistribute financial resources based on the difference principle in order to ameliorate structural and systemic inequalities specifically related to the education and opportunities of Indigenous youth.

First, we provide an overview of the discrepancy in completion rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students prior to, and following, the Accountability Framework designed by the provincial government in 2001.

Graduation Rates between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Students

On-reserve First Nation students are identified as an “at-risk population” due to their marginalization within the school system and within society generally. The academic performance of this demographic group has consistently been well below the provincial average (Richards, 2008, p. 3), including in comparison with off-reserve Indigenous populations, which has exposed a growing divergence in achievement (BC Statistics, 2001, p. 6; BC Statistics, 2006, p. 6). A lack of academic success is in no way an indication of, or statement about, the character or intelligence of Indigenous peoples. Rather, it is a marker of the colonial systems that have been designed to oppress Indigenous peoples. In other words, we view disparities in educational success not as a deficiency of Indigenous learners, but instead as a deficiency in the education system. Individual success for Indigenous peoples in education is a sign of resiliency and is in defiance of the system that was conceived to destroy cultures, assimilate, and marginalize (Battiste, 2013; Poitras Pratt, et al., 2018). While some Indigenous peoples reject Western forms of education, the vast majority see the value in participation in mainstream schooling. However, this participation must be met with greater efforts to compromise, with more ethical spaces that would honour knowledge traditions, ways of knowing, and abilities of Indigenous learners, and that would ultimately lead to greater success in education (Louie, 2019). Inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are evident across all major indicators: on-reserve Indigenous people are experiencing the lowest levels of health, education, and economic resources (BC Statistics, 2006, pp. 6, 14; Reading & Wien, 2009; Mendelson, 2006).

Federal and Provincial Mandates

We deem it necessary to engage with conversations about the TRC (2015), since commitments made to reconciliation at the federal and provincial levels are the lens through which we view many educational debates. We are examining the Accountability Framework despite it being implemented prior to the release of the TRC reports, under the contention that, since the framework's fundamental aim was to reduce disparity in graduation rates, reconciliation was at the heart of the initiative. Moreover, if we consider the implications of our analysis in this paper within contemporary discourses, we would be remiss in not including a lens of reconciliation.

The TRC has established an emphasis on the relationship between Indigenous peoples in Canada and non-Indigenous Canadians. The momentum from the TRC has transferred to both government and private systems that have revitalized discussions of Indigenous representation and participation. School systems have taken up the calls to action through internal challenges to meet the unique needs of Indigenous students who have been marginalized for generations. The TRC is a moment of confluence that was made possible by generations of survivors who have fought to be heard and recognized for the trauma they endured at the hands of educators (Battiste, 2013; Goulet & Goulet, 2014). Uncovering the truths of the oppressive nature of schooling for Indigenous people has led to an emphasis on the federal, provincial, and local levels to eliminate systemic barriers created by generations of inequality. Reconciliation is often taken up in schools in a nebulous fashion (Louie, forthcoming), without clear direction of what we mean by reconciliation and what we are reconciling for. However, we follow Judge Murray Sinclair's lead in viewing reconciliation as creating a relationship of mutual respect. By adhering to this conceptualization, we move beyond simply apologizing for the most egregious elements of colonial schooling, to instead attempt to identify and disrupt current iterations of colonization in contemporary schooling. Furthermore, we see reconciliation as eliminating the aspects of our society that serve as barriers to a relationship of mutual respect, which are the continued colonial agenda and oppression of Indigenous peoples. In this article we rely on our personal definition, since the first author is First Nation and works extensively in scholarship of reconciliation, decolonization, and indigenization.

Prime Minister Trudeau has stated that the Canadian government will “fully implement the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (Government of Canada, 2015, para. 6). Seven of the calls to action are educational initiatives that have emerged as a national priority. These seven calls to action include four that specifically address the funding gaps for Indigenous learners. The funding initiatives include the paltry budgets for on-reserve schools, accurate reporting of educational and employment statistics for Indigenous people, and the establishment of new educational legislation that includes the meaningful participation of Indigenous peoples. In addition to educational funding, the calls to action demand an elimination of the disparity in educational and employment success between Indigenous peoples in Canada and non-Indigenous Canadians (TRC, 2015). It is critical to recognize the language that addresses eliminating the disparity, not simply improving the graduation and employment rates of Indigenous people. Adhering to these commitments requires analyzing initiatives through the lens of disparity, rather than viewing statistics in isolation. Committing to these calls to action must not be a symbolic gesture, but must instead involve a comprehensive response to a dire issue. There is a marked difference between the stated aims of a government or school and those we can identify in practice. If Canada is truly going to live up to its commitment to the 94 calls to action, it is imperative that there be transformation at the systemic, policy, programmatic, and pedagogical levels.

There are myriad studies that elucidate funding disparities between on-reserve schools, which are overseen federally, and mainstream schools, which are provincially controlled (Battiste, 2013; Bell, et al., 2004). In their study, Bell, et. al. (2004) found that on-reserve schools are funded at 75% the rate of their off-reserve counterparts. This disparity in funding is often explained by the separation of federal and provincial systems, blamed on Indigenous peoples, or completely overlooked. Despite our

understanding of the colonial education system as creating substantial barriers to educational success for Indigenous people, on-reserve schools are still drastically underfunded, which maintains a continued chasm in educational success. Reducing the disparity of funding was the primary focus of Bill C-33 (the federal government's First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act, implemented in 2014), but included in the funding alignment were burdensome addendums that reduced First Nations' autonomy and participation in their own education system (Louie, 2019). Eliminating the substantial funding disparity should be viewed as a national emergency and not a government negotiation tool to further strip Indigenous communities of their self-determination. Moreover, closing the funding gap is predicated on the re-election in the upcoming federal election of the Liberal Party, which has relegated Indigenous human rights to an issue of political morality.

Disparity in resources goes beyond funding to on-reserve schools. Resources for developing robust pedagogy, policy, and curriculum are currently lacking in provincial approaches to education. While there are successful programs in British Columbia that attend to the needs of Indigenous learners, most notably the First Nations Education Steering Committee, sufficient funding and compliance requirements, such as targeted teacher and leadership standards, are still elusive (McIntosh, et al., 2014). Several Canadian universities have established Indigenous teacher education. However, such programs are often unfairly viewed as being less rigorous and below the standards of mainstream teacher education programs. Consequently, graduates of these programs sometimes have difficulty finding a position or being viewed as equal to their colleagues who received degrees from mainstream teacher education programs (Archibald & La Rochelle, 2018). Racism and a continued colonial mentality at the foundation of Canadian society is the cause of continued marginalization and low expectations for graduates of Indigenous teacher education programs.

An additional direct response to the TRC is the inclusion of official standards relating to Indigenous education in provincial teacher associations. In 2012, British Columbia released the *Standards for the Education, Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators in British Columbia*. These new educational standards came out three years before the TRC report and unfortunately before an emphasis was placed on schools' lack of attention to Indigenous learners. The BC Teachers' Council standards (2019) include the phrases "educators must respect the diversity in their classrooms" (p. 2) and "educators teach students to understand relevant curricula in a Canadian, Aboriginal, and global context" (p. 2). While we would expect the language to be stronger in future teacher standards in British Columbia, the language in the 2012 standards does indicate a growing emphasis on Indigenous learners.

Provincial Graduation Programs

The increase of graduation rates between 2001 and 2006 was attributed largely to strategic priorities implemented at the provincial and federal levels. It is difficult to precisely cite the causes of this rise given the confluence of programs, economic and social variances, and the evolution of an array of policies. While considering the various possible reasons for changing graduation rates, we will look specifically to the Accountability Framework (BC Ministry of Education, 2002b), which was devised to address this particular initiative and intended to have the greatest impact. Jago describes the Accountability Framework as the "foundations for the development of intervention strategies to improve classroom performance" (2006, p. iii). While across the board, increases seem positive at first glance, they do nothing to ameliorate the inequality at the heart of our education system.

The Accountability Framework was the most notable attempt by the province to stimulate graduation rates between 2001 and 2006 (Jago, 2006, p. i). The stated motivations and strategies of the Accountability Framework are in line with the provincial philosophy and five strategies given in the

2002 Service Plan (BC Ministry of Education, 2002a) and can reasonably be inferred to be the practical response to the strategy listed in the Service Plan.² The program, which came into effect on 1 July 2002, is based on the following rationale: “The Accountability Framework formalizes Board of Education responsibility for improving student achievement” (ibid.). A foundational aspect of the framework is the acknowledgement of the unique circumstances of each school district and the desire of the Ministry of Education to give autonomy to each district to develop local solutions to promote academic achievement (ibid.). Parallel to this aim, the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils succinctly summed up the cyclical process of the Accountability Framework as follows:

The Accountability Framework creates an annual accountability cycle involving every school, district, and the Ministry of Education. The cycle involves (1) an annual school plan for improving student achievement, developed by the school planning council and approved by the school district; (2) an annual district accountability contract containing specific targets for improving student achievement in the district. The accountability contract is developed by district staff using all the school plans in the district. It is approved by the board and critically reviewed by the Ministry of Education; (3) a district review conducted periodically in each district by a Ministry-appointed District Review Team. (2004, p. 2)

Notably absent from these plans is consultation with First Nations communities regarding their perspectives on potential improvements and the accessibility of the system. Since we understand that on-reserve First Nations students have the lowest graduation rates, perhaps engaging with these communities on collaborative strategies through the Accountability Framework could drastically increase learners’ success in the education system and reduce pervasive disparity. For example, the increases in the graduation rates to near parity for Indigenous learners in the northern British Columbia school district previously referenced was built upon strong relationships and collaboration with First Nations (BC Ministry of Education, 2021).

Individual schools develop School Planning Councils that consist of “the principal, a teacher, three parents, and one student from Grade 10, 11 or 12 where applicable” (BC Ministry of Education, 2002a, p. 9). The planning councils are responsible for devising a plan that can address academic performance issues within the school and send the recommendations to the district superintendents. The Accountability Framework is designed to hold the schools accountable for student achievement; the contract is a written document attesting to that accountability.

The Accountability Framework gives districts autonomy to design responses to the distinctive needs of each area, with the aim to develop a response that will benefit the students in the district. In theory, the Accountability Framework should be as much of an Indigenous program as any designed specifically with Indigenous students in mind, since the objective of the program is to give individual districts the ability to respond to the unique needs of their students. Any area with an Indigenous population should see their needs reflected in the district’s Accountability Framework.

² In order to understand the foundation of the provincial strategy to stimulate growth in the graduation rate, the Ministry of Education provided overarching priorities to increase graduation rates. Specifically, the first goal stated in the 2002 Service Plan is “to improve student performance” (BC Ministry of Education, 2002a, p. 5). The following is a list of strategies that have been mapped out to achieve the first goal: “(1) Establish standards. (2) Collect information. (3) Monitor performance. (4) Identify and report areas of low performance. (5) Undertake initiatives intended to improve performance (e.g. encourage school boards to provide flexibility and choice to parents and students, deregulation, increase school board autonomy)” (p. 5). Goal 5 in the Service Plan is to establish “Parity of achievement for all students regardless of their ethnic origin, gender, geographic location, physical characteristics, or socio-economic status” (p. 9). The subsequent strategies for realizing parity of achievement nearly mirror those given for the first goal, suggesting that these strategies are the primary mechanism of the province’s achievement in education strategy.

Given the more expansive components of the Accountability Framework it would be reasonable to question if using graduation rates as the primary rubric for success is sufficient: additional indicators would provide a more comprehensive picture. However, since there was no intentional participation of First Nations people in the development plans outlined by the Ministry of Education, it is hard to believe that their needs would be significantly attended to. Instead, we see a continuation of the tradition of the state deciding what is best for Indigenous people, what improvement looks like, and how success is evaluated. In this case, First Nations or Indigenous people may contend that we need to shift the pedagogy, values, or content in the school system. However, the Accountability Framework does not include a requirement to consult First Nations people, therefore educational shifts have occurred without the benefit of First Nation insight. While it is possible that downstream benefits emerged from the strategies of district-specific plans, continued harm occurs through denying First Nations people a place in the construction of educational responses or identifying the persistent barriers to quality education for all.

In addition to the Accountability Framework, the Ministry of Education produced the *Aboriginal Report: How Are We Doing?*, a data-driven program looking at the success of Indigenous students in the province (BC Ministry of Education, 2006b, p. 40). This report is viewed as the first step in understanding why the disparity in success between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations exists and what strategies should be developed in order to address the inequitable educational outcomes between these students (BC Ministry of Education, 2006a, p. i). The program provides an excellent source of data for educational researchers, policy development, and individual communities, but the application of this knowledge is the important second step that must be taken. The *Aboriginal Report* should not be viewed as an alternate strategy to the Accountability Framework, but instead as a data source that can provide guidance to educators implementing and monitoring the frameworks.

Accountability Framework

While the strategy of the Accountability Framework was intended to improve high school completion, the success of this initiative has shown marginal results for on-reserve Indigenous students.³ An expected critique of our analysis is that provincial education has no jurisdiction over on-reserve education, and therefore is powerless with regard to the success of on-reserve students. However, research has found that on-reserve First Nation students attend off-reserve schools between grades 4 to 7 at a rate of 92% (Friesen & Krauth, 2010, p. 1,274; Heslop, 2009, p. 12). This rate only increases as students reach high school. So, despite being an on-reserve population, these students are attending provincial schools at an overwhelming rate. The following table highlights the shifts in the three selected indicators:

³ We acknowledge the existence of other specific Indigenous programs to bolster student achievement and completion in the province. However, these initiatives have been on-going and were implemented prior to the specific initiative set within the Accountability Framework, and the continuity of the programs would have already shown its impact prior to the particular initiative in the Accountability Framework.

	2001 High school graduation rates	2006 High school graduation rates	2001 Employed previous year	2006 Employed previous year	2001 University completion	2006 University completion
On-reserve Indigenous	52.6%	57%	64.1%	61.1%	4.5%	3.7%
Non- Indigenous	78.8%	88.4%	78.6%	80.2%	24.6%	24.9%

During the five-year period between the censuses, there were significant shifts in the primary indicator of graduation rates. The rate of high school completion for non-Indigenous British Columbians rose from 78.8% to 88.4%, a gain of 9.6 percentage points. In comparison, the rate for the on-reserve Indigenous population grew from 52.6% to 57%, a 4.4 percentage point gain. Again, an argument can be made that both demographics saw an increase in graduation rates, which means the Accountability Framework was proven successful. However, as previously mentioned, these statistics cannot be analyzed in isolation. An increase of 4.4% is positive; however, questions must be asked regarding why the Accountability Framework was less successful in increasing graduation rates for First Nations learners. Despite the increase, the implementation of the program led to an increased disparity in success for First Nations and non-Indigenous learners, which stands in contrast to the stated goals of the province. Can we claim success when citing programs that established an increase in disparity, further marginalizing First Nations peoples in the education system? Moreover, beyond further marginalization in the education system, First Nations people were marginalized in the Accountability Framework itself. The central argument of this paper emerges from the increased disparity that resulted from the Accountability Framework, which occurred concurrent to an increase in the graduation rates of First Nations people.

Beyond simply looking at graduation rates, we can examine other indicators of well-being influenced by graduation rates. The percentage of non-Indigenous British Columbians getting a university degree increased slightly from 24.6% to 24.9%, a growth of 0.3 percentage points. In contrast, the percentage for the on-reserve Indigenous population dropped from 4.5% to 3.7%, a decrease of 0.8 percentage points. The percentage of non-Indigenous British Columbians who worked in the previous year went up from 78.6% to 80.2%, a gain of 1.6 percentage points, while the percentage of On-reserve Indigenous British Columbians dropped from 64.1% to 61.1%, a decrease of 3 percentage points (BC Statistics, 2001, pp. 6, 11; BC Statistics, 2006, pp. 6, 11).

The non-Indigenous population saw significant growth in high school graduates and slight gains in both university graduates and those working in the previous year. The on-reserve Indigenous population saw slight growth in graduating rates and a slight decline in those obtaining a university degree and those working the previous year. The numbers alone unearth the disconnects in simply drawing upon high school graduation rates to suggest the improved well-being of Indigenous students in British Columbia. In order to gain a greater understanding of the societal responsibility for the

diverging patterns of academic and employment success, we will now apply Rawls' difference principle to the data we have presented.

Fair Equality of Opportunity and the Difference Principle

Distributive theories of justice may seem at first glance at odds with Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing. We want to acknowledge that Indigenous methodologies honour the ways in which to value Indigenous ways of being. These methodologies perpetuate a retelling and reclaiming of Indigeneity and its rightful place in research. While we are highly attentive to this tension, for the purposes of this article, liberal theories of distributive justice provide an important ethical foundation for legal accountability of educational institutions in Canada. As such they provide important ethical tools for addressing real educational injustices against Indigenous Canadians within colonial legal, political, and educational institutions. Drawing upon distributive justice may provide mechanisms for the reallocation of resources, particularly for Indigenous peoples who are among the least advantaged members of Canadian society. The limitation of liberal theories of distributive justice, however, is that it does not attend to the practices and norms that marginalize Indigenous ways of knowing and being, particularly when we consider what occurs inside schools. This is particularly apparent given the gross injustices of residential schooling in Canada for over a century and a half. Acknowledging this, we have purposefully drawn upon some of the key tenets of liberal theory in particular, using distributive justice arguments as a lens through which to understand how financial resources are allocated. At a fundamental level, distributive justice attends to the just or fair distribution of income and wealth. In this view, "a society has an ongoing duty to fairly distribute income and wealth among people engaged in social and economic cooperation, without regard to whether they are poor or not" (Freeman, 2007, p. 87). Distributive theories may offer principles for how the distribution of resources ought to be allocated in order to partially attend to an unequal distribution of resources, while recognizing that broader historical inequities and injustices will require a different philosophical lens to address reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

To understand this insight, we will first discuss Rawls' theory of justice. Rawls' seminal work, *A Theory of Justice*, is based on the premise that "justice is the first virtue of social institutions" and that justice attends to the "basic structures of society" (Rawls, 1999, p. 3). One of the fundamental structures of a society are school systems; Rawls argues that the "basic structure is the primary subject of justice because its effects are so profound and present from the start" (ibid., p. 7). Two main principles frame Rawls' theory of justice as it applies to fairness:

- (a) Each person has the same inalienable claim to a fully adequate scheme of basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all; and
- (b) Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle). (Rawls, 2001, pp. 42–43)

The first principle speaks to the basic liberty rights of each citizen within a democracy. The second principle speaks to the distribution of wealth, authority, and responsibility (Rawls, 1999, p. 53). Many academics argue that Rawls lays out three principles of justice, not two, since there are two fundamental concepts contained in the second principle (Choptiany, 1973, p. 146). The second half of the second principle – "they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society" – includes the notion of fair equality of opportunity, and the notion of the difference principle, which will be the particular focus used in this article to evaluate the graduation rates in British Columbia.

More broadly, distributive justice is based on a notion of fair equality of opportunity that seeks to rectify social disadvantage. Rawls provides a rationale for endorsing a notion of fair equality of opportunity. He states:

Those with similar abilities and skills should have similar life chances. More specifically, assuming that there is a distribution of natural assets, those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system. In all sectors of society there should be roughly equal prospects of culture and achievement for everyone similarly motivated and endowed. The expectations of those with the same abilities and aspirations should not be affected by their social class. (Rawls, 1999, p. 63)

To illustrate this point, certain people will, arguably, necessarily prosper more than others depending on the family and the life circumstances to which they are born. Children from upper- or middle-class families will be afforded more resources and opportunities than those from economically or socially disadvantaged families. Given this premise, education is commonly identified as a system that works to mitigate these inequities. Education systems have a positive duty to redress inequalities between the rich and poor by striving for equality of opportunity. For Rawls, equality of opportunity may require greater educational resources for some in order to lessen the current inequities between the advantaged and disadvantaged. At a fundamental level, this egalitarian lens rests on the premise that all citizens should have a social basis of self-respect.

The difference principle works in relation to the notion of fair equality of opportunity in that it is an egalitarian construct that distributes resources and wealth to the benefit of all. “To the benefit of all” does not necessarily mean an equal distribution, but a system to ensure the least advantaged in society attain the highest possible standard of living (Rawls, 1999, p. 66). In this system it is acceptable to have disparities in wealth and resources, as long as it is to the benefit of the least advantaged. For example, higher wages will be paid to innovators, since their innovations can be used to enrich the lives of everyone. If the higher wages were not available, innovation may never have occurred, and there would be a lower standard of life within society generally. A practical example of this could be paying an innovator for finding cheap and energy-efficient methods of desalinating water. It is justified for this person to have more resources available, since their innovation will improve many people’s lives. The difference principle is not a mechanism for giving all the resources to the poorest in a state; it is simply an attempt by a state to develop basic structures that will ensure the highest possible standards for the least well off in society (Rawls, 1999, p. 67).

Given that Indigenous populations are statistically the least well off in Canada, there is an urgency to address the current educational inequities and broader injustices faced by Indigenous populations in Canada. If one assumes that education is both an intrinsic and positional good (Brighouse & Swift, 2006), there is a compelling argument that “corrective measures should be taken to address the unfavorable circumstances of a social group that continues to be substantially burdened by a history of injustice” (McPherson, 2015, p. 115). We start from the premise that education is a positional good, specifically, “one’s relative place in the distribution of the good affects one’s absolute position with respect to its value” (Brighouse & Swift, 2006, p. 472). The quality and level of education someone receives matters greatly, as it affects their overall life prospects in comparison. While we strongly adhere to the notion that receiving an education is a good, we question the distribution of, and representation in, education as currently constructed. The quality of learning inside schools matters, arguably as much as the attainment of education. For instance, universities arguably increase “the income and life prospects of graduates,” but moreover, graduates “also get to enjoy the experience of being in college itself – a time that is widely regarded as one of self-exploration in which they can learn more about their own talents and inclinations and how these fit into the wider world” (Brighouse & McPherson, 2015, p. 1). We argue that increased high school graduation rates is a necessary but

incomplete step towards the betterment of the lives of Indigenous students. While obtaining a high school diploma is a significant achievement, its value is diminishing, as it has become an expectation that all students attain a high school diploma. Moreover, relating to the arguments of this paper, the persistent and growing gap in achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, notwithstanding an increase in Indigenous graduation rates, illustrates a continued failure of the education system and the Accountability Framework for Indigenous students.

To attain equality, the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students must be addressed. Drawing upon graduation rates as the primary indicator of educational successes does not accurately assess whether the quality of life for Indigenous youth is improving. Currently, schools and provincial authorities have treated Indigenous graduation rates as the ultimate marker of educational success and improvement. For example, the Ministry of Education in British Columbia adopted this perspective in making educational achievement the top priority of their Service Plan (2002a, p. 5), and have used graduation rates as the indicator of success (p. 15). A secondary indicator of success is the transition to postsecondary education and the workforce (p. 15). At first glance, drawing upon the Accountability Framework may feel like an appropriate indicator to assess the improvement for Indigenous students more broadly; we argue that unless increased graduation rates correspond to increased opportunities such as quality of learning whilst in high school, postsecondary admissions, employment, and general well-being, it may result in a positive but ultimately insufficient step toward educational justice.

Internally, we contend that other principles may better attend to improving the agency, well-being, and quality of learning for Indigenous students, in a way that addresses the current unjust educational inequities prevalent in schools. One such example has emerged in a district in northern British Columbia, which has experienced a substantial reduction in disparity between non-Indigenous and Indigenous graduation rates. Between 2015 and 2020 the district saw an increase of Indigenous graduation rates from 64.6% to 72.6%. Over the same period, the graduation rates for non-Indigenous learners increased from 73.2% to 74.6% (BC Ministry of Education, 2021). Under the leadership of Dakelh district principal Leona Prince and superintendent Manu Madhok, the district has seen substantial increases in graduation rates. The district leadership believes the growth is attributed to a focus on equity, professional development, a shift in provincial curriculum, and relationships between the provincial government and First Nation communities that lead to personal and systemic accountability for student experience and success (personal communication, Leona Prince, 3 December 2021). Beyond graduation rates, the approach used in this district has led to students seeing themselves as active agents in their learning and as being reflected in their curriculum and school communities. An evaluation of the approach in this district will be further examined in a forthcoming article (Louie & Prince, forthcoming). Following from this example, we suggest that two key principles may provide more robust predictors of success and improvement for Indigenous students beyond the Accountability Framework – principles that attend to the current institutional deficits that contribute to educational inequities. First, curriculum and pedagogy ought to reflect and represent Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Second, the systemic racism and colonization that currently serve as barriers to Indigenous student participation and success in education must be addressed. These two principles give weight to the idea that improving the conditions within schools may be a better predictor of Indigenous agency and well-being rather than simply relying on graduation rates. In the short term, Indigenous youth who see themselves reflected in the curriculum are likely to gain sense of connection to their identity and their school, and a sense of belonging within it, which may better attend to issues of justice and inequity. Instead of simply pushing students through the system, we must ask whether we have transformed schools into places of value, healing, and flourishing for Indigenous learners.

Externally, we also believe that we can look at other indicators following high school completion. Using graduation rates as a way of examining the difference principle, let us look at how the census data might indicate or reflect the success of the Accountability Framework in British Columbia. The growth in graduation rates for non-Indigenous students was 78.8% to 88.4%, while the growth for on-reserve

Indigenous students was 52.6% to 57% (BC Statistics, 2001, p. 6; BC Statistics, 2006, p. 6). The difference principle argues that disparities in growth and resources are acceptable, as long as they are to the benefit of the least advantaged in society (Rawls, 1985, p. 227).

A policy that focuses entirely on graduation rates overemphasizes the educational outcomes and achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, with less emphasis being focused on historical and institutional injustices. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2007) suggests that rather than focusing on the achievement gaps, educators should shift to the educational debt that is required to redress the unjust systemic educational practices that have disadvantaged certain populations.

Indigenous students want to be represented and reflected in the curriculum. This provides a connection and identity to the curriculum and serves to rebuild the Indigenous community's trust with schools. Systemic racism must also be substantively and systemically addressed in all schools (Louie, forthcoming). While graduation rates may serve as one indicator of quality and equality of education for Indigenous students, a shift towards looking at current conditions of learning environments may provide both short- and long-term predictors of improved agency and well-being. In applying the fair equality of opportunity principles to non-ideal theory, we are able to go beyond the narrow metrics of educational attainments, to that of "actually valuable outcomes, and increases in their prospects for flourishing as adults" (Schouten, 2012, p. 480).

For Indigenous students, going beyond the Accountability Framework to consider the conditions for students in schools may be a more effective and authentic way in which to redress systemic barriers. Following from the Ministry's approach, we must also include such indicators as student success in attaining employment after graduation and success in postsecondary education. This means that the analysis currently being used is incomplete and inadequate in determining the success of the Accountability Framework. Instead of using graduation rates as the most important data or the focal point for the difference principle, we need to expand our reach to include participation in the workforce and success in postsecondary education, since graduation is expected to be a stepping-stone to these further accomplishments (Mendelson, 2006, p. 30).

When we include the additional data, we find a higher graduation rate for non-Indigenous British Columbians (78.8%–88.4%) occurring at the same time as slightly higher university graduation rates (24.6%–24.9%) and a higher rate for those who worked in a previous year (78.6%–80.2%). Conversely, growth in the on-reserve First Nations high school graduation rate (52.6%–57%) occurred alongside a drop in university graduation rates (4.5%–3.7%) and the rate of those who worked in the previous year (64.1%–61.1%). Indigenous people have been further marginalized within the Accountability Framework, despite claims of increasing success.

While the Ministry of Education might contend that that the Accountability Framework was a success, a more nuanced consideration might include whether Indigenous students see themselves reflected, represented, and included as fully engaged and participating members of the school community. The narrowly defined parameters of high school attainment may undermine the broader goal of substantively increasing the opportunities for these students.

Redistribution of Resources and Provision of Education for Indigenous Youth

By no means do we think that the redistribution of resources will be a panacea for redressing all the injustices of Indigenous peoples, but it is clear that if redressing injustices is indeed a national priority as part of the TRC, then an essential criterion must be the redistribution and reallocation of resources to support schools with high Indigenous populations both on and off reserves, as a precondition for addressing gross inequalities and past injustices. If school systems and provincial authorities are to make substantial positive changes, not only must the funding for Indigenous schools be comparable to other schools, but in fact these schools ought to receive a higher distribution of funds in order to create sufficient conditions to benefit the least advantaged members of Canadian society. The redistribution

of resources to Indigenous schools and students may help address the perennial challenge of high turnover of administrators and teachers. The redistribution of resources could also help in an array of areas that support the unique learning needs of students, from learning supports, to targeted programming, to substantive integration of Indigenous ways of knowing, and the improvement of physical school structures that are commonly dilapidated.

All of these initiatives require resources that are currently sparse. This said, one must not consider the difference principle simply as, “a duty to provide ‘welfare payments’ or public assistance to those straitened by unfortunate circumstance” (Freeman, 2007, p. 99). It is a more complex concept than simply giving out handouts; rather, it is the idea that fair equality of opportunity can help address an unjust economic and political system. The difference principle thus interrupts unjust political and economic institutions by naming and redressing legislation and policies that support the least advantaged. In the case of Indigenous youth and high school graduation rates, it requires the federal and provincial governments to acknowledge the historical gross inequitable disparity in educational provisions provided to Indigenous students in comparison to other schools, together with the political atrocities of residential schooling. The difference principle helps identify and define the principles by which to redistribute resources to our social institutions to remedy political and historical injustices.

The case can be made for applying the difference principle to directly support the broader TRC Calls for Action; it is not simply a case of making Indigenous peoples better off than some other group of people. Rather, the intent of redistributing resources to the least advantaged people is to “maximize the prospects of people occupying this social position while they are members of it” (ibid, p. 110). The aim is for Indigenous peoples to have access to the opportunities and life choices that have historically been closed off to them. In this view, Rawls draws upon an index of primary goods that considers not only “income and wealth, but opportunities for powers and positions of office, non-basic rights and liberties, and the institutional bases of self-respect” (ibid., p. 113). The indicators of improvement require the inclusion and recognition of broader factors of Indigenous people’s rightful place in society, their increased position and status as contributing and valued members in society, and substantive opportunities to lead a life of their choosing. In response, we contend that schools still have generations of work to do in order to heal the impacts of colonization and establish an environment in which each individual is viewed as a valuable member of society. We acknowledge that higher rates of high school graduation will have myriad benefits for Indigenous peoples not found in the statistics presented here, but this does not change the fact that disparity actually increased over the same period, further marginalizing Indigenous students.

Conclusion

The primary focus of this study is to evaluate if the success of high school graduation programs had an effect on the overall well-being of on-reserve Indigenous students in British Columbia. Drawing upon Rawls’ difference principle, we argue that the Accountability Framework increased graduation rates for on-reserve First Nations people while simultaneously further marginalizing this population. Moreover, the marginalization of Indigenous voices at the heart of the methodology of the framework resulted in an adherence to colonial traditions of schooling that removed Indigenous people from participating in decision making. Findings of this nature should prompt further examination of claims of success in future programming. It may be argued that the data used is several years old, but the paradox created by the Accountability Framework, not the immediacy of the statistics, is the important aspect of this paper. How should schools evaluate successes and failures within policy? The case of on-reserve First Nations students in British Columbia is only one example of the paradox created when an increase in positive indicators is compared with the level of disparity.

School systems are one of the basic foundations of society and play a leading role in providing the conditions for all students to have greater life prospects and to flourish in them. The Accountability

Framework has been designed to create regionalized programs that can respond to the unique needs of school districts in raising high school graduation rates for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Yet, we argue that this indicator alone was not representative of the overall well-being of Indigenous students, and in contrast, may signal a regression for those students, who occupy the lowest standard of living in the province. Instead, other factors must be used in addressing the myriad barriers inhibiting Indigenous students from enjoying the benefits of the Accountability Framework and countless other education programs.

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