

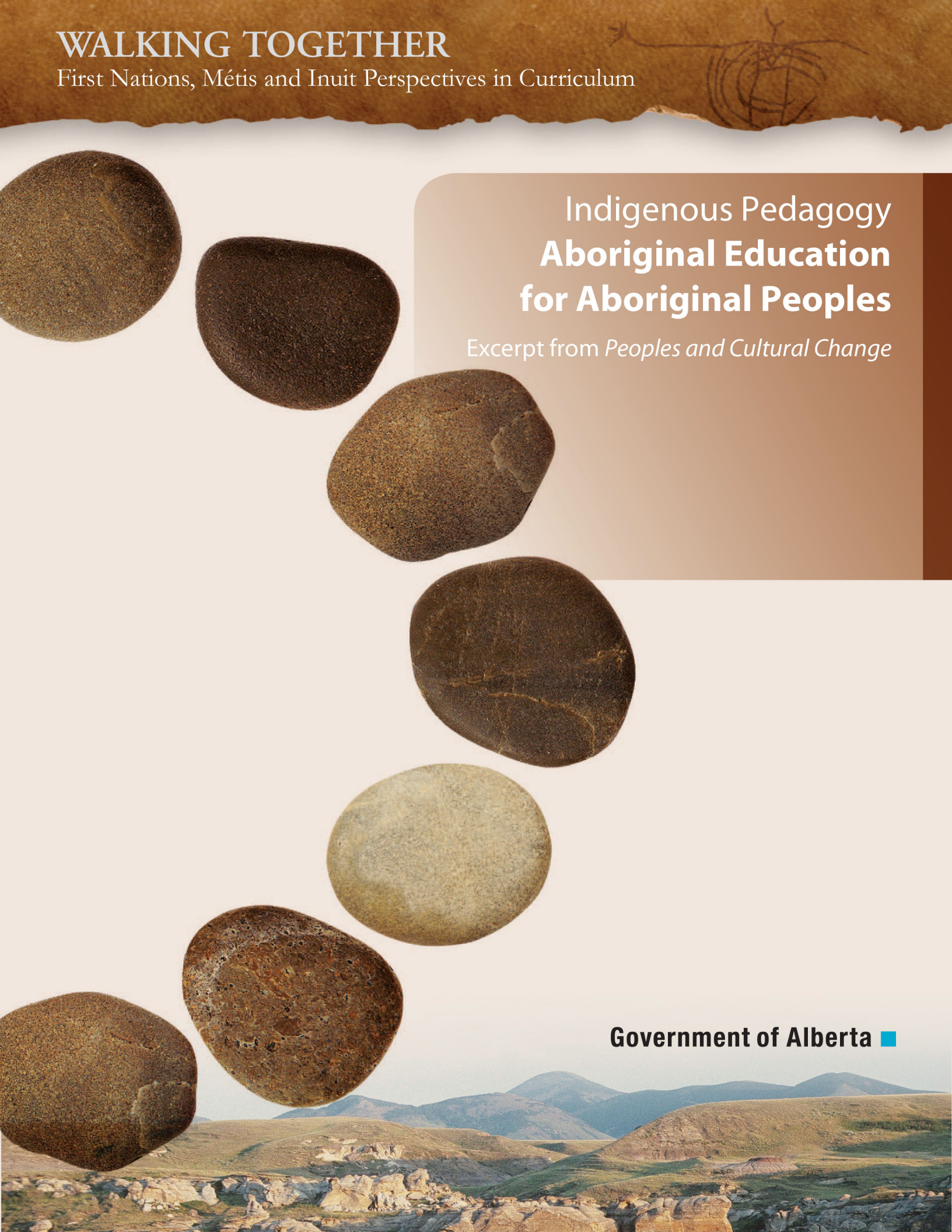
WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Indigenous Pedagogy Aboriginal Education for Aboriginal Peoples

Excerpt from *Peoples and Cultural Change*

Government of Alberta ■





ABORIGINAL EDUCATION FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

Excerpt from *Peoples and Cultural Change*

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

The 1969 White Paper, and the outcry that followed it, focused attention on the need to strengthen and preserve First Nations cultures. More than ever, First Nations peoples felt that their cultural identities were being threatened, and that they would need to take forceful, decisive action to protect them.

In the summer of 1970, just as the controversy over the White Paper was at its height, a crisis was emerging in a small Alberta First Nations community. The people of Saddle Lake, near St. Paul, had been informed that the Blue Quills Indian Residential School was slated for closure. The school had been established by Oblate missionaries in 1899 and had operated at its current location since 1930.

Some of the residents of Saddle Lake and other nearby reserves harboured painful memories of psychological hardship and physical abuse suffered at the school. However, over the years the atmosphere had shifted, and the Blue Quills school had become much more like a mainstream school.

Local parents and leaders did not want to lose the school, and were outraged that the government had made the decision without consulting them. They asked the Department of Indian Affairs for permission to take over the school and run it themselves. Indian Affairs turned them down.

On July 14, 1970, the people of Saddle Lake decided to take the matter into their own hands by staging a peaceful sit-in. They set up camp in the Blue Quills schoolyard and physically occupied the school building. They vowed to stay put until the government changed its mind.

The demonstration captured the imaginations of people from across the country. The ranks of the protesters swelled as outsiders arrived to add their support. The story made headlines in Canada and around the world. Within a few short days, the sit-in had come to symbolize not just the struggle of one community, but of First Nations people in Canada as a group. Harold Cardinal, the twenty five-year-old president of the Indian Association of Alberta (and primary author of the Red Paper) emerged as a spokesperson at the sit-in.

After two weeks, the protesters showed no signs of losing their resolve. Finally, at the end of July, the government agreed to fly Cardinal and fifteen other protesters to Ottawa to discuss a solution. After three days of meetings, Indian Affairs Minister Jean Chrétien announced that Blue Quills would become Canada's first school operated by First Nations. All eleven reserves in the area contributed members to the first Blue Quills School Board. Mike Steinhauer, the board's first executive director, said, "The first thing I did was take down all the crucifixes and all the traces of white religious domination in our education."

This excerpt on Alberta schools ©Nelson Education Ltd. *Peoples and Cultural Change*, Toronto, ON, 2005, pp. 196–201.

FIRST NATIONS CONTROL OF FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION

After the Red Paper and the Blue Quills sit-in, the push for First Nations to have input into the education system designed for them continued. The National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) recognized that controlling education was an essential first step in controlling other areas of their lives. By teaching children well and instilling in them an appreciation and knowledge of their own culture, First Nations-run schools would lay the groundwork for a new generation of First Nations leaders.

In 1972, the NIB (which later became the Assembly of First Nations) produced a sweeping policy statement: *Indian Control of Indian Education*.

In the NIB's view, it was time to take a hard look at Canada's twenty-year experiment in school integration. Reserve schools had been shut down without consultation, and children had been sent away to provincial schools against their parents' wishes. Neither the First Nations students nor the non-Aboriginal communities had been properly prepared to cope with the problems of integration.

The authors also pointed out "Integration viewed as a one-way process is not integration, and will fail." True integration, they argued, would blend together the best aspects of First Nations and non-Aboriginal traditions. Instead of being blended into provincial schools, First Nations students were simply assigned to classrooms and told to adapt. In such a system, First Nations students were set up to fail.

Indian Control of Indian Education recommended restructuring First Nations education around two basic educational principles: parental responsibility and local control. First Nations parents and communities — not government bureaucrats — should decide how to educate their children.

The report's key points included:

- **Local control:** Band councils should have authority for education on reserves, similar to that of a provincial school board.
- **School board representation:** First Nations people should be guaranteed full participation on school boards.
- **Transfer of jurisdiction:** With integration, the federal government had effectively given the provinces jurisdiction over First Nations education. In the future, First Nations people should be involved whenever change of government jurisdiction is being discussed.
- **First Nations control:** Over the past century, non-Aboriginal educators and administrators had tried and failed to provide effective First Nations education. It is time to give First Nations people the chance to do it themselves.
- **Programs:** First Nations education authorities should have the authority to design and implement a wide range of programs, from kindergarten to adult education.
- **Curriculum:** Instruction should be provided in the students' first languages, particularly in the early grades. First Nations culture and history should be reflected in federal and provincial school curricula.
- **Staffing:** More First Nations teachers, counsellors, and aides must be trained. All school staff, both First Nations and non-Aboriginal, should have the highest possible qualifications, including training in First Nations history and culture.

- **Facilities:** Parents should be able to choose among residential schools, reserve day schools, or integrated schools. The federal government should ensure that adequate facilities are provided.
- **Integration:** It “cannot be legislated or promoted without the full consent and participation of the Indians and non-Indians concerned.”

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) called *Indian Control of Indian Education* “a watershed in Aboriginal education.” It articulated its position so clearly and so forcefully that it changed the direction of an entire national discussion. From that point on, the federal government worked towards devolution — gradually transferring responsibility for education to First Nations.

By 1975, ten First Nations were operating their own schools. Kehewin First Nations–operated school was the first in Alberta. A decade later, two-thirds of Canada’s reserve schools were under First Nations control. The movement spread beyond Status Indians as well. In 1973, the northern Saskatchewan Métis community of Île a la Crosse organized its own school board after the local mission school burned down.

The changes to First Nations education were not smooth or swift. Many First Nations felt frustrated that they still did not have full control over matters such as funding and curriculum. In most cases, they were expected to conform to the provincial curriculum. Some parents whose children attended provincial schools still did not feel adequately involved in shaping their children’s education. And, although the number of First Nations students who finished high school rose slightly, too many still dropped out before graduating. Progress is still being made, however, even if it is not as rapid as it people wish. The number of First Nations–controlled schools in Canada continues to grow each year. Existing schools are finding new ways to coordinate their efforts and resources to ensure even greater success in the future.

INUIT EDUCATION

The formal education system instituted by the Canadian government for Inuit people was similar to that for First Nations people. However, for Inuit people, the timing was different. Inuit people were mostly ignored by the British and Canadian governments from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Although missionaries, or *angadjulikiri* in Inuktitut, began to establish mission schools in Labrador in the seventeenth century, most Inuit people were affected very little by European colonization until the twentieth century.

In the mid-1900s, Canada’s government began to institute residential schools throughout the Arctic. Inuit children were removed from their families and communities to attend residential schools in much the same way First Nations children were.

In the 1970s, Inuit people joined the protest lodged by First Nations against government control of their children’s education. The reforms to their education system included day schools and some Inuit control of Inuit education.

MÉTIS EDUCATION

In contrast, Métis people were never subjected to the system of residential schools. The only exception to this was the school built in St. Paul des Métis that you read about in Chapter Four.

For the most part, Métis people in the 1700s–1800s did not attend school of any kind. They practiced their own form of traditional education, passing on their unique culture through life experience. A few Métis people attended residential schools, day schools, and public schools. The government did not acknowledge any particular responsibility for education to Métis people as Aboriginal people.

In the 1900s, most Métis children attended public schools.