

# Aboriginal Education in Canada as the Object of Systemic Study

[Marina Starodubtceva]

**Abstract**—The report shows the results of investigation on aboriginal education in Canada from the point of view of the system approach. Aboriginal education is presented as a historical system and pedagogical system. The author shows development and functionality of aboriginal education, determines the components of aboriginal education as historical system. Special attention is paid to aboriginal education as a pedagogical system. The author investigates its existence and structure, shows aboriginal educational content as an important component of the pedagogical system. In addition, the issue of the religious component in the aboriginal educational content takes a specific part in the author's reflections. (*Abstract*)

**Keywords**—aboriginal education, system approach, historical system, pedagogical system, pedagogical process, educational content (*key words*)

## I. Introduction

Over the last few decades, aboriginal education has been the subject matter of wide public discussions in Canada. It is connected, firstly, with a majority of federal government initiatives in order to regulate relations with aboriginal communities in the educational sphere with a view to respect the aboriginal right of education. Secondly, it is connected with a necessity to solve the problem of attitudes between the dominant society and Aboriginal people (Indians (commonly referred to as First Nations), Métis and Inuit) in order to achieve sustainable development of Canadian society. Thus, aboriginal education, especially from the historical point of view, is presented as the space of self-cognition and self-understanding of Canadian society, as historian John Milloy states, as “a site of self-knowledge from which we understand not only who we have been as Canadians but who we must become if we are to deal justly with the Aboriginal people of this land” [1].

At the same time, public discussions are characterized by a strongly negative attitude to historical heritage of aboriginal education, chiefly to its educational policy, which researches name as cultural genocide, violence, and etc. It is necessary to emphasize the overweighed character of this attitude, which elaborated a lot of stereotypes with regard to aboriginal education, for instance, “the grievous harms suffered by countless Aboriginal children, families and communities” [2],

in which a unique experience of Canadian aboriginal education, more successful than in the USA and Russia, is lost. From the author's point of view, the same stereotypes are a result of a one-sided approach to studying aboriginal education. Thus, Royal Commission on Aboriginal People has offered to use the public inquiry approach in order “to investigate and document the origins, purposes and effects of residential school policies and practices as they relate to all Aboriginal peoples, with particular attention to the manner and extent of their impact on individuals and families across several generations, on communities, and on Aboriginal society as a whole” [3]. It is evident that this approach directs the investigation of aboriginal education as a social phenomenon that is “a relatively independent system which is characterized by the function of teaching and upbringing of social members” [4]. But, in order to investigate aboriginal education as a system, this approach is insufficient because, as philosopher Igor Blauberg notes, description of the object as an integrated system needs “the whole and non-contradictional synthesis of all types of cohesions” [5]. According to this, it is necessary to organize systemic study, which is elaborated on the system approach providing an integrative study of phenomena. The description of the system approach will be done below.

## II. System Approach Description

System approach, presenting scientific methodology, shows a comprehensive cohesion and interaction of phenomena and environmental processes. It directs the researcher's position toward the holistic and systemic study of the object. As philosopher Igor Blauberg notes, the image of integrity of the research object sets the aim to investigate the interior regularities of the object which determine its qualitative originality. In other words, according to the system approach, the object as a whole is a systemic formation, which is specified by a well-developed components coherence and organization. With the attitude to the object as a system one reveals the object's features and components which provide the object's stability and preservation and determine the type and direction of the object's change [6].

Using the system approach, the author will present aboriginal education in its two aspects: historical and pedagogical. In the historical aspect, aboriginal education is presented as a historically developing and functioning system. In the pedagogical aspect, aboriginal education is showed as a pedagogical system.

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### III. Aboriginal Education as a Historically Developing System

To present aboriginal education as a historically developing and functioning system, it is required to determine its periods. The first stage is its formation (the beginning); the second one is the development of the school system; the third period is reconciliation.

#### A. *The Beginning*

To the 30s of the XIX aboriginal education was recognized as the “most potent force in the civilization of the Indian race” [7]. To the 60s of the XIX a broader policy of advancement had been evolved and it had been accepted by the Canadian authorities when in 1860 they assumed full control of the Indians. When the *British North America Act* by the ninety-first section gave the Canadian Dominion power to legislate for “Indians and lands reserved for the Indians”, the transition was easy.

Aboriginal education was the object of the government policy of complete absorption of the Indian race into general population. Sir John A. Macdonald, a Prime Minister of Canada, 1867-73, 1878-91, observed in 1887 “the great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit to change” [8].

In 1875-76s, the federal government first recognized the assisting Indian School Fund (ISF), and the first grant for the purpose was \$2,000. By means of the ISF schools were established on various reserves in the Maritime Provinces. The treaties, which had been made with the Indians between 1871 and 1879, provided for the establishment of schools. In 1879, after Sir John A. Macdonald was returned to power, the school question almost immediately received the attention of his government for the purpose of preparing Indians “for a higher civilization by encouraging to assume the privileges and responsibilities of full citizenship” [9].

#### B. *The Development of the School System*

In 1879, the government commissioned Nicholas F. Davin, a lawyer, journalist, and politician to recommend a course of action for western aboriginal education. He produced the *Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds (1879)*, otherwise known as *The Davin Report*. Nicolas F. Davin presented the educational conception for aboriginal people. This conception became a project of large dimensions aiming to assimilate Indians into mainstream of Canadian society. Following generally the conception given by this report, the first industrial school was established at Battleford in 1883, and in the following year two schools were established, one at Qu'Appelle and the other at High River [10]. The west territories where the vast of Indian population settled were attached to the educational project. Later, the provinces of Ontario and Quebec were involved into the number of school territories.

The documents shows that the aboriginal educational system was permanently widened by the following classes: day schools and residential school. Day schools were erected almost in all Indian reservations with an average number of the schools up to six in the reserve. The advantage of such schools was the connection with children’s families. Day schools were supported by the Indian settlements and by the ISF. Residential schools were divided into two classes, boarding and industrial schools. From the beginning of the XX, a trend to establish boarding schools was incorporated into the performance of the educational system.

All schools were federally-operated. The federal government takes a general decision concerning the principal components of the school framework: legislation, educational content, and teachers. In accordance with this, the principal government capacities were the following: to form educational legislation; to organize educational context and to prescribe a programme of studies for Indian schools; and to appoint teachers. But, in fact, all schools were conducted under the Churches: Roman Catholic, Church of England, Methodist, and Presbyterian.

From 1920s, the system was expended rapidly, reaching a high point with 80 residential schools in 1931. After World War II the system was gradually abandoned. In 1948, the federal government initiated an extensive redesign of aboriginal education strategy that not only took the emphasis off residential schools but determined that the system should be shut down completely as soon as possible. Departmental efforts and resources were reallocated to a new policy, away from the residential system to creation of a day school system and most significantly, integration by transferring Indian children to provincial schools, and federal schools to provincial administrative schools units [11].

The system was growing again in the 1950s. It was maintained until mid-1980s. Schools were built in every province and territory except Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland. They registered children from every aboriginal culture – Indian, Inuit, and Metis children too – though the federal government assumed no constitutional responsibility for metis people [12]. The last federally-operated residential school in Canada closed in Saskatchewan in 1996 [13].

#### C. *Reconciliation*

In 2008, the Government of Canada, in its *Statement of Apology on June 11, 2008 to former students of Indian residential schools*, had hopes to create a system of residential schools. In this connection, since 2008, the government has signed six new tripartite education agreements with First Nation organizations and provinces. In 2009, the government signed the Inuit Education Accord committing governments to developing a strategy for moving forward on educational outcomes for Inuit students, which led to the establishment of the National Committee on Inuit Education (NCIE). In June 2011, the NCIE released its *National Strategy on Inuit Education*, which places strong emphasis on developing education systems based on Inuit worldview and culture, and on the importance of a bilingual education (Inuktitut and either English or French). It includes recommendations intended to

improve outcomes and access for Inuit learners along the life-long learning continuum and facilitate their readiness to enter the workforce.

In the previous two years, the federal government committed to

- Explore new mechanisms to ensure stable, predictable and sustainable funding for First Nation elementary and secondary education.
- Invest in the expansion of adult basic education through the new *Northern Adult Basic Education Program* to increase education and employment and address the unique challenges faced by Northerners, especially in remote communities.
- Support, through Canada's new *Strong Schools, Successful Students Initiative*, organizational capacity development, early literacy programming, services and partnerships with provincial school systems.
- Invest in the building and renovation of First Nations schools [14].

In April 2014, the Bill 33 *An Act to establish a framework to enable First Nations control of elementary and secondary education and to provide for related funding and to make related amendments to the Indian Act and consequential amendments to other Acts* was enacted which provided for the control by First Nations of their elementary and secondary education systems. Finally, the most important step will be made by introducing a *First Nation Education Act* that will have it in place for September 2014.

## IV. Aboriginal Education as a Pedagogical System

From the point of view of the pedagogical aspect of the system approach education is presented as a pedagogical system [15]. Its essence is formed by the pedagogical process. The structure of the pedagogical system includes the following invariant components: teachers, students, educational content, and educational means. These components are necessary and sufficient for any pedagogical system origin. Interactions between these components, as professor Vitaliy Slastenin emphasizes, arouse a real pedagogical process as a dynamic system. The role of the system-organizing factor is played by the educational goal. It is expedient to investigate the related issues of the pedagogical process and educational content in the present paper.

### A. Pedagogical Process

Pedagogical process is the essence of education as a pedagogical system [16]. In accordance with the system approach, pedagogical process may be presented as the system of the teachers-students relations, which are important components of any pedagogical system. Traditionally, the following two types of educational relations are distinguished: subject – object and subject – subject relations, which are expressed by the terms “pedagogical influence” and

“pedagogical interaction”. We claim that the subject – object relation is more typical for aboriginal education. In this case, pedagogical process is relevant to the teacher's actions – pedagogical activity, and student is the object of pedagogical influence, i.e. external actions aimed on him or her. This type of relations is based on management, which needs the subject who has influence the object, with the latter never active in the pedagogical process and in fact eliminated from the process. In this case, pedagogical process is simplified to mere pedagogical activity, which implies interior controversy resulting in a great number of problems in education as a pedagogical system.

### B. Aboriginal Educational Content

The necessary condition of implementing the pedagogical process is educational content, which is producing a real pedagogical process as a dynamic system [17]. Traditionally, aboriginal education content included classical natural science knowledge (general knowledge of the world, arithmetic, geography), humanitarian knowledge (ethics, history), and skills in English, writing, reading, recitation, vocal music, calisthenics. However, the priority was given to labour training and religious instructions.

The following tasks were included into the subject of labour training

- To form the positive attitude to labour.
- To develop a cognitive interest to knowledge and willingness to adopt knowledge in practice, to fulfill requirements to creative labour force.
- To cultivate love to labour, duty and responsibility, purposefulness, enterprise, efficiency, and honesty.
- To train different work skills and to form the foundations of the intellectual and physical labour culture.

In the majority of the schools all the pupils were employed, according to sex and ability, at various kinds of labour, such as sweeping, scrubbing, sawing, and splitting fire-wood, dairying, gardening, feeding stock, helping in the kitchen, and farming: the care of horses, cattle, pigs and poultry; baking, dairy work, laundry work, sewing, knitting, making and mending clothes, cooking and general housework; blacksmithing, carpentering, kalsomining, painting, glazing. As the Principal of the High River industrial school reported, “we regard farming as a most important industry, and particular attention is given to the care and management of stock. Throughout the year the senior boys work at least half a day on the farm, and during haying and harvesting the whole day is devoted to work. The smaller boys help in weeding the roots and gardens, feeding pigs and other light work. Every boy in the senior division is taught how to milk. All our hay, coal, lumber and other supplies are hauled by the farm teams in charge of the boys. The boys also handle the teams in ploughing, mowing and seeding, thus gaining a practical knowledge of all branches of farming” [18]. The girls received special training in cooking, baking, sewing, knitting, dressmaking, domestic, laundry, and housework.



Religious instructions were recognized as “most important part of education” [19]. As the Principal of the Battleford industrial school emphasized, “to this we give special care, as without this foundation it would not rise in the true characters which go to make good citizens” [20]. The purpose of religious instructions was, as the Principal of the Hay River boarding school reported, “to teach all the pupils to the best of our ability, obedience, diligence, straightforwardness, and frankness, and endeavor generally to develop in them the moral qualities based upon the religion of the Old and New Testaments” [21] and to make pupils “good, useful and law-abiding members of society” [22].

Educational means of religious teaching were the following: regular morning and evening prayers, with reading of the Holy Scriptures; the explanation of Christian doctrine; the regular church services; preaching services in the school; Sabbath and Sunday schools; regular weekly prayer meetings; daily special religious instructions, advice, exhortation to manifest in behavior the religious and moral principles, reproof, the supervision of the teaching staff, due correction of infractions of the rules of morality and good manners.

The circles of the special regular weekly prayer meetings took an important place at the religious training. For example, pupils from Battleford industrial school had a special prayer meeting each Wednesday evening, a circle of the “King’s Daughters”, amongst the girls; and of the “King’s Sons” amongst the boys; also a branch of the “Daily Scripture Reading Union” to which both boys and girls belonged. These were organized and carried on for several years. The meetings of these organizations were officered by the pupils, and conducted by them under staff supervision [23]. In addition, a weekly report on each pupil from all the officers of the institution was an effective means of maintaining good morals and order.

As a whole, it is necessary to underline that aboriginal educational content can be referred to as a historical phenomenon determined by educational objectives and tasks at a certain stage of social development and thus is characterized by its historical type. This constituted the basic design of the schools and was maintained, with little variation, for most of the history of aboriginal education as a pedagogical system.

## v. Reflections and Conclusion

Studying aboriginal education as a historically developing and functioning system and as a pedagogical system gives an opportunity to explain the reasons of many problems in aboriginal education, which are widely discussed at present. Thus, the problem of Christian religious teaching is still one of the most discussed issues. As modern researchers state, Christianity teaching supported the federal government policy to christianize Indians and destroyed their cultures and religious traditions. For instance, Jonathan E. Vance shows “a corrosive effect” of Christianity on aboriginal communities [24]. Julia V. Emberley notes that “an operation” in order to christianize aboriginal children “eventuated in the loss of Native languages, the destruction of spiritual and cultural practices, and, with the dissolution of kinship relations, the

collapse of a network of emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical support” [25].

But, as Paul Bramadat and David Seljak note in their book *Christianity and ethnicity in Canada*, “while we are witnessing across Canada a kind of renaissance of traditional Aboriginal spirituality, it is still the case that the vast majority of aboriginals would say they are Christians of one denomination (or tradition) or another, even while some of them may also embrace traditional aboriginal spiritual beliefs, values, and practices. When we ask colleagues who specialize in Aboriginal religions and cultures to estimate the approximate percentage of aboriginals who would likely identify themselves as Christian, the estimates range from 70 to 85 per cent” [26]. This shows that Christianity was accepted by aboriginals in spite of strong controversies of beliefs, cultures, and traditions, which is revealed in the majority of pagans confronting Christianity.

In order to understand the place of the Christianity in aboriginal educational content, it will be necessary to show briefly the religious features of the Indians. Based on the religion classification suggested by the Russian researchers in the book *The History of Religions*, aboriginal religious faiths belong to the genus-tribe religions [27]. They originate from the conditions of social life of the genus or tribe, are connected with them and sacralize them. Indian religions may be described as a sort of animism or magic. As J. A. Teit states, they are based on the belief “that a certain mysterious power pervaded all nature, its manifestations varying in different objects as to kind and degree. It was the effort of the Indians to obtain as much as possible of this power from those animals and objects in nature that appeared to possess it in the greatest degree or that manifested the type of power considered the most valuable” [28]. These religions are characterized by the cult of the tribe leader. In spite of the variety of religions common amongst Indians, “religion does not seem to have exerted as strong an influence as in most other parts of America” [29]. It means that Christianization could not change their existence deeply because Christianity did not determine the lifestyle of the aboriginal people. Distraction of traditional employment and the crisis of household life in the state-monopolistic economy conditions, as Valeriy Tichkov says, became the first reason of the Indians distress [30]. The same idea is expressed by another Russian researcher Vadim Koleneko in his book *French Canada in the past and present. Historical studies of Quebec of XVII—XX*, who notes that the usual lifestyle of the Indians was destroyed as a result of their gradual leaving from household life, agricultural employments, hunting and fishing, and thrusting the artificial, not characteristic type of their economic life [31].

On the contrary, it is necessary to recognize religious teaching as an important component of the content of aboriginal education which provided stability for education as a pedagogical system. Using the religious component gave efforts to upbringing tasks at schools. Teaching and upbringing coherence (with upbringing primary) provided development and functionality of aboriginal education as a pedagogical system.

Thus, system approach, expressing a comprehensive cohesion and interaction of phenomena and environmental processes, directs the researcher's position to investigate life phenomena as systems, characterized by specific structure and functions. According to the system approach, Canadian aboriginal education is presented as a system, which is characterized by interior wholeness of invariant components. Interior cohesions and wholeness are distinguishing features of education as a system providing its stability.

Studying Canadian aboriginal education as a historically developing and functioning system directs to reveal its moving forces, factors, conditions providing the historical development of aboriginal education as a system and its social functions.

More benefits are found by investigation of aboriginal education as a pedagogical system. In connection with this, the system approach directs to discover the components and system-organizing coherences of the pedagogical process, to determine the basic factors, which influence the functions of the aboriginal educational system, to reveal the role and the place of aboriginal education in the system of the related phenomena. Finally, it helps to elaborate an improved functioning system and to instil the results into practice.

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