

Honouring Diversity: Challenges to Educational Practice

“The Goals of Education for Saskatchewan state the importance of understanding and relating to others. Students should interact and feel comfortable with others who are diverse in ethnicity, religion, status, or personal attributes” (*Directions*, 1984 & Sask Learning, 2006).

This opening quote was taken from a document entitled *Diverse Voices: Selecting Equitable Resources for First Nations, Métis Peoples and Inuit Education* (1995), which was provided to me by Sharon McCarthy, an Aboriginal Education Consultant with the Prairie Valley School Division, during my internship in Fort Qu’Appelle. This document will frame this discussion on the implications for educational practice, as it pertains to honouring diversity in the classroom, with special respect given to those students of Aboriginal ancestry.¹ In Saskatchewan, it has been forecasted that “by 2016, 47% of all students will be of Aboriginal ancestry” (class notes). This is a critical time in Saskatchewan’s development. Our provincial economy is booming, yet the high school dropout rates among Aboriginal students has been quoted as high as 70%, (class notes). History has revealed an ugly picture of assimilation, and (in some views)

¹ To clarify some terms related to First Peoples, *indigenous* is an umbrella term meaning “of the land” and is used when an international context is implied. Canada’s indigenous peoples are referred to as the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada and include the First Nations (Indian), Inuit and Métis peoples. “The more than 50 First Nations have much in common, but they are different from one another—and very different from Inuit, whose culture was shaped by the demanding northern environment. Different again are Métis people, who blended traditions from Aboriginal and European forbearers in a unique new culture” (RCAP, 1996). Much of the earlier literature used the umbrella term *native* to refer to First Peoples, but because the term can mean anyone who was born in a country, it is seldom used except in American literature where First Peoples are referred to as Native Americans, Native Alaskans, or Native Hawaiians.

cultural genocide on the part of our colonial government in order to take control over all Indigenous land and build what is now the country we call Canada.

Rather than spending time rehashing the dark history of all of the negative consequences of colonialism, I would like to acknowledge that great strides have been made in improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal youth, including the formation of partnerships between the Ministry of Education and First Nations communities to include and infuse Indigenous knowledge into the curricula (Don Pinay, personal communication, 2008). The majority of this paper however, will focus on some of the challenges we must face regarding the inclusion and infusion of Indigenous knowledge into the educational system. Some of these challenges include: 1) Addressing inequities; racism and stereotyping; 2) Incorporating Aboriginal content into the curriculum; 3) Defining Indigenous knowledge; and 4) Overcoming student disengagement. This paper will explore each of these challenges with respect to personal experiences I've had, as well as literature I've been presented with that has informed my thinking on this very complex topic of discussion.

Addressing Inequities, Racism and Stereotyping

Many anti-oppressive educators believe that it is crucial for teachers to address the inherent and systemic privileges that come from being of a certain race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. In my case, being white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male has afforded me with more privileges than I can fathom. When certain identities become normalized or privileged over others in society, people who are not of those identities become "othered". One of the challenges is getting people who are in privileged positions

to recognize how certain institutions, educational practices and curriculum are inherently biased in favour of those who are considered “normal”. For example, last semester, my cooperating teacher organized a workshop for the staff around Peggy McIntosh’s (2002) article addressing white privilege. In planning the workshop, she was considerably apprehensive about presenting it; she was unsure if some of the staff members were ready to face the systemic inequities that provide us with unearned privileges, simply because of our skin colour. When she did present the workshop, some staff members were resistant to acknowledging that these privileged realities were in effect within our school. Obviously, more work has to be done to make people aware of their inherent privileges.

Another challenge to honouring diversity is to confront the racism and stereotyping that exists among student groups who have been conditioned to think that they are superior or inferior because of any part of their social identity. This can be overcome by finding ways that the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of the community can interact socially and in meaningful, mutually beneficial ways. An example of this interaction took place in 1991 and 1992 when the whole community of Fort Qu’Appelle and nearby First Nations put on a community play that highlighted the history of Fort Qu’Appelle and area through the eyes of various groups in the region.

Incorporating Aboriginal Content into the Curriculum

Another way to reduce racism and stereotyping is to infuse Aboriginal content into the classroom without making it feel like tokenism. You can do this by becoming familiar with Aboriginal perspectives as part of your own life. Take in cultural events like powwows, sweats, and round dances, and become comfortable with the cultural

perspectives that they bring. Weave in literature, art, music and so on by Aboriginal people *along with* other curricular materials so they become normalized like other content. Show history through the eyes of Indigenous peoples. Have the students learn the names of political leaders of the various First Nations, Métis and Inuit organizations and find out what their issues are. When studying various heroes, include First Nations and Métis heroes. There are numerous opportunities for incorporating Aboriginal content and perspectives through literature, art, speakers and so on, which helps students to value Indigenous knowledge.

Defining Indigenous Knowledge

This poses yet another problem; how can we define Indigenous knowledge without over-generalizing or making it seem like we're assuming there is a pan-Aboriginal identity? Although there are common themes and common experiences that Indigenous groups have faced over the last 150 years, there are still major differences and belief systems amongst different communities. The key to meeting this challenge is to get to know the people in your community and find out what the beliefs are around certain customs or values of traditional and contemporary life.

Overcoming Student Disengagement

The last challenge that I would like to address, which I found particularly prevalent among the Aboriginal student population, was trying to overcome student disengagement in the regular school system. Attendance figures tended to drop off 2 months into the semester. In most of the classes I was teaching, I was left with about only

half of the students that I started with. I believe that an over emphasis on classroom seat-work focused on reading and writing skills is part of the problem.

In the Prairie Valley School Division, one of the main goals in the Continuous Improvement Framework is to see higher literacy rates among students, and so their SMART goals are understandably geared around reading levels. The goal states to have “85% of students reading at or above grade appropriate levels” (class notes). Although reading skills are important to develop, perhaps we need to reconsider the meaning of the word “literacy” from an Aboriginal perspective.

In a (2002) article entitled “The Rainbow/Holistic Approach to Aboriginal Literacy,” Dr. Priscilla George, from the National Aboriginal Design Committee discusses the need to explore a holistic approach to literacy, which encompasses much more than reading and writing skills. She includes Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences Theory along with the teachings of the medicine wheel. She asserts that literacy practitioners need to honour the multiple intelligences our students have as well as the four dimensions of self: Heart, Body, Mind and Spirit. Where as “institutional education systems have tended to focus on Mind – through cognitive outcomes, and possibly Body – through physical education; [means that] 50% of us is not being recognized and nurtured in that system” (2002). I take these teachings to heart. In my experiences within this educational system, I feel that an over emphasis on reading and writing papers only represents a fraction of what I can do and what I am inspired towards achieving. When I was teaching Native Studies 10, I often didn’t feel confident or credible enough to teach the content of the curriculum and so I relied heavily on the assigned reading and questions within the curriculum package. I can tell you that the students found an

overemphasis on reading and writing the content of the course to be boring and disengaging. No wonder why so many of students stop coming to class.

I think what I've come to realize is that in the regular institutional setting, we are rarely evaluating students on what they know or what they've come to learn. Instead, we are evaluating them on how much effort they've put into spelling it out for us within the format, (usually writing) that we require them to produce for us. According to Dr. George, "Aboriginal literacy is about recognizing the symbols that come to us through Spirit, Heart, Mind, and Body, interpreting them and acting upon them for the improvement of the quality of our lives" (ibid). With that being said, the word literacy takes on a whole new meaning that attempts to bring balance and healing into students' lives, while the formal education system has traditionally and still does emphasize cognitive (reading/writing) outcomes for our students. If there is undo care and attention placed on the other dimensions of our students' lives, then it is no wonder why some students would become disengaged from the learning process.

What I see happening this province is a tremendous shift that is just beginning to occur; school administrators are making sincere efforts to infuse Aboriginal perspectives into the classes. Teachers as well need to step up and work towards adopting some of these values in their teachings as well, but that can only happen when they begin to feel comfortable with adopting Aboriginal perspectives and experiences into their own lives. There is no better way to do this than through cross-cultural experiences. I have been fortunate to have had the opportunities to attend Powwows, Sweats, Round dances, and even a Sun Dance Ceremony in the summer of 2005. With the cross cultural experience that I have received, I am highly motivated to continue down the path of building cultural

bridges to exploring the richness that comes through honouring and respecting diverse views from Aboriginal perspectives.

When Don Pinay, Director of the Education for the Yorkton Tribal Council came to our class recently, my eyes and ears were wide open as I considered the possibilities of teaching in a community such as Kahkewistahaw First Nation. I am beginning to sense that there is a movement happening in this province to regain the strength and wisdom of the Indigenous teachings by infusing them into our schools. When this happens, the challenges that I have highlighted that are so often experienced in Saskatchewan schools will become less challenging. No doubt, there is still a ways to go, but at least we are moving in the right direction.

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