

ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

“Aboriginal identities are shaped by many factors,” Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache remind, “but two of the most potent forces are the relationship with one’s ancestral language and with one’s self-concept as formed through the stories and images disseminated by media.”¹ The “pivotal” role of Aboriginal languages was well understood by “government administrators and church officials,” Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache continue, as they imposed “English or French upon even the youngest children entering the doors of their schools,” even punishing children in residential schools “for speaking their language precisely because language and communication processes lie at the heart of transmitting cultural values and unique worldviews from one generation to the next.”² As “inseparable” from “Aboriginal identity,” Aboriginal peoples continue to commit to “language revitalization,” as “Aboriginal languages encode unique ways of interpreting the world.”³

The challenge is daunting, however; required are the “documentation of oral languages, standardization of dialects and writing systems, and expansion of vocabularies in order to incorporate concepts that are new to the original language,” undertakings that are “expensive, time-consuming, and potentially divisive for language speakers.”⁴ Additionally, language curricula and resource materials must be developed; language teachers must be trained; each, Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache suggests, require “intensive efforts by technical experts together with fluent speakers of a language.”⁵

Fettes and Norton discuss the inconsistent and inadequate responses of federal, provincial, and territorial governments to issues of Aboriginal languages, to securing “linguistic justice.”⁶ Two provinces - Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland – had (by the time of writing) adopted no policy measures whatsoever on Aboriginal languages; seven have established guidelines for the “limited instruction of Aboriginal languages as ‘second’ or ‘heritage’ languages, without any broader policy objectives.”⁷ Quebec was the one province promising a “certain degree of protection for Aboriginal languages in both legislation and policy,” although “there is little evidence to suggest that this has a significant impact on programming, funding, or other forms of practical support.”⁸

The Yukon and Northwest Territories (NT: soon to be Nunavut) have made efforts to develop an effective political and legislative framework for Aboriginal languages, with the NT “the only jurisdiction to have legislated official status for Aboriginal languages.”⁹ Manitoba offered Aboriginal language programs where twenty-three or more students request it; only fifteen are required in Ontario.¹⁰ “Most provinces” provide financial assistance to those school boards “engaged in developing curricula and resource materials that meet approved curricular standards.”¹¹ (The Canadian School Boards Association has provided, Fettes and Norton conclude, “one

of the best concise overviews of Aboriginal language education in provincial schools.”¹²) No province provides regular instruction in an Aboriginal language.¹³ They conclude that without “strong, balanced bilingual programs, the overall effect of schools on Aboriginal language use and transmission is likely to remain negative.”¹⁴

Hébert studied sixty-nine “exemplars” of curriculum materials dealing with Aboriginal literacy and language education, in which she detected a shift in “curriculum and teaching models” from “structuralist behaviourist” to “experiential process” models.¹⁵ After noting that Aboriginal languages constitute “the foundation for self-identity – an essential element in a meaningful education that prepares students to assume social responsibility and to maintain cultural continuity.”¹⁶ Hébert laments that “many Aboriginal language teachers and literacy workers work “in isolation,” and that curriculum development, implementation and evaluation “cannot be done adequately in isolation.”¹⁷ She suggests that those who develop curriculum ought to “be in a position to influence the preparation of the teachers who will be implementing the materials.”¹⁸ In addition to liaisons with teacher educators, “Aboriginal language and literacy curriculum developers need to be in touch with each other; with the field of curriculum inquiry, ... with the field of literacy and language education ... and with other interested parties,” as isolation (ensuring a “limited distribution of materials”) leads to “frustration, discouragement, territoriality, and duplication.”¹⁹

Isolation, Hébert continues, “also masks a struggle for curriculum, for who determines and creates it, for whom it is destined, and for what social and individual purposes,” as “many stakeholders” – she identifies “parents, cultural communities, governments, the press, professional educators, the corporate world, or the general public” – make “claims on school curriculum.”²⁰ Curriculum design was also influenced, she notes, the “strong influence of structuralism upon Aboriginal language and literacy education,” leading to “an overdependency on the field of linguistics,” resulting in the “emergence of numerous competing alphabets for previously unwritten languages – alphabets devised by individual linguists according to their understanding of the languages in question.”²¹ These “competing alphabets” - Hébert characterizes them as “alphabet wars” - blocked collaboration among literacy workers, “thus further isolating them.”²²

The development of dictionaries (as in “European intellectual traditions as authoritative sources on which to develop language education programs”) undermined the recognition of “Elders as the authoritative sources of Aboriginal languages.”²³ Hébert endorses moving “beyond the influence of linguistics and of technical approaches to language curriculum and to embrace more holistic, experiential, communicative, and multidimensional approaches,” as these more are “eminently more compatible with the holistic nature of Aboriginal cultures.”²⁴ Such a “path” is not only “grounded in an acknowledgment of a range of Aboriginal ways of learning,” it would also realize activist and responsible Aboriginal leadership in the co-construction of the future,” as “isolated efforts on the part of Aboriginal curriculum and literacy workers

cannot stem the tide of increasing majority language dominance.”²⁵

For Hébert, the “crux of the matter will lie in the ability to use varied sources to achieve pedagogical and curricular solutions that are unique to Aboriginal cultures.”²⁶ Language education policy in the future, she continues, must support the “articulation of pedagogies reflective of distinctive Aboriginal cultures, and the formulation of curriculum that supports expressive, interactive communication grounded in present reality,” drawing upon the “energy and spirit of Aboriginal Elders, parents, and educators.”²⁷

COMMENTARY

While Aboriginal identity is influenced by many factors, Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache focus on two: one’s “relationship with one’s ancestral language and with one’s self-concept as formed through the stories and images disseminated by media,” registering the pervasiveness of “dual consciousness”²⁸ among those marginalized by mainstream cultures. While no strategy of self-isolation from media is proposed, commitment to “language revitalization” is affirmed. Except, it seems, among provincial governments, at least when Fettes and Norton wrote; they judge provincial governments’ responses to issues of Aboriginal languages as “inconsistent and inadequate,” failing to secure “linguistic justice.” That abstract concept becomes concrete in the curriculum,²⁹ where Hébert found a range of “models,” the more recent ones reflecting “experiential process” over “structuralist behaviourist” ones. She reiterates that Aboriginal languages constitute “the foundation for self-identity ... and cultural continuity.” For Hébert, the “crux of the matter” is enacting curriculum consonant with the uniqueness of “Aboriginal cultures,” drawing upon the “energy and spirit of Aboriginal Elders, parents, and educators.”

REFERENCES

- Brant Castellano, Marlene, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache. 2000. Aboriginal Languages and Communications: Voicing the Promise. In *Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise*, edited by Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache (25-28). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Fettes, Mark and Norton, Ruth. 2000. Voices of Winter: Aboriginal Languages and Public Policy in Canada. In *Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise*, edited by Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache (29-54). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Hébert, Yvonne. 2000. The State of Aboriginal Literacy in Language Education. In *Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise*, edited by Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache (55-74). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Pinar, William F. 1981. The Abstract and Concrete in Curriculum Theorizing. In *Curriculum and Instruction: Alternatives in Education*, edited by Henry Giroux, Anthony Penna, and William Pinar (431-454). Berkeley, CA: McCutchan.

Pinar, William F. 2019. *Moving Images of Eternity: George Grant's Critique of Time, Teaching, and Technology*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.

ENDNOTES

¹ Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 25.

² Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 25-26.

³ Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 26.

⁴ Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 26.

⁵ Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000, 26.

⁶ Fettes and Norton 2000, 30.

⁷ Fettes and Norton 2000, 37.

⁸ Fettes and Norton 2000, 37.

⁹ Fettes and Norton 2000, 39.

¹⁰ Fettes and Norton 2000, 45.

¹¹ Fettes and Norton 2000, 45.

¹² Fettes and Norton 2000, 45.

¹³ Fettes and Norton 2000, 49.

¹⁴ Fettes and Norton 2000, 49.

¹⁵ Hébert 2000, 55.

¹⁶ Hébert 2000, 62.

¹⁷ Hébert 2000, 67.

¹⁸ Hébert 2000, 67.

¹⁹ Hébert 2000, 67. These are problems familiar to curriculum studies scholars, an impetus to undertaking this synoptic text.

²⁰ Hébert 2000, 67-68.

²¹ Hébert 2000, 68.

²² Hébert 2000, 68.

²³ Hébert 2000, 68.

²⁴ Hébert 2000, 69.

²⁵ Hébert 2000, 72.

²⁶ Hébert 2000, 73.

²⁷ Hébert 2000, 73.

²⁸ Pinar 2019, 168, n.189.

²⁹ Pinar 1981.