

TEACHER INITIATIVE AND PROFESSIONAL SENSITIVITY: ABORIGINAL EDUCATION AT THE CENTRE

“Pre-service teachers experience apprehension” when they contemplate “integrating Aboriginal perspectives in their teaching,” Frank Deer reports.¹ Deer cites “racism, administrative support, and cultural issues” among the issues in play, but to the “cultural disconnect that may be felt by many non-Aboriginal teachers, these challenges may become so ominous that a piecemeal approach may be seen as the easier course of action – one that does not place the teacher in a vulnerable position in the classroom.”² Since “tools and space” are “improving,” Deer suggests that “teacher initiative and professional sensitivity may represent the next stage of development in the Aboriginal perspectives movement,” and specifically “pre-service teachers’ confidence in their ability to deliver should become a priority.”³

Later, however, Deer seems to suggest “confidence” is insufficient, as some Indigenous “knowledge can be accessible, whilst in other cases it can be rather inaccessible.”⁴ Participants in his study expressed “frustration with how the importance of Aboriginal education in their school experiences was not commensurate with how it was reflected in their teacher education program.”⁵ Apprehension followed: “fear of failure, discomfort with the subject matter, guilt, and not being Indigenous are some of the reasons provided for the apprehension communicated by the teacher candidates.”⁶ Deer regards these reasons as “plausible,” as the “apprehension in question may be, in large part, a result of viewing one’s self as so culturally, ethnically, and linguistically removed from the Aboriginal Canadian experience [so] that the exploration of Aboriginal issues in education may be viewed as the task of an Indigenous peoples.”⁷ Acknowledging that a “student’s identity encompasses more than just ancestral culture,” Deer encourages students to not only “embrace their own cultural identity, but to also make that contemporary, personal connection with those aspects of culture.”⁸

Leddy and Turner argue that “Aboriginal education needs to move out of the margins and into the centre of education in Canada, not only for Aboriginal students, but for all students,” a conclusion they reached after teaching two years in Simon Fraser University’s teacher preparation program.⁹ There they worked from Dion’s methodology (see research brief #2) to “explore our pre-existing relationship with Aboriginal people,” an “intensely personal process that often manifested great discomfort and resistance amongst our colleagues.”¹⁰

Dismissing a model of “multiculturalism”¹¹ that is preoccupied with “pluralism,” Leddy and Turner place “Aboriginal education at the centre,” by which they mean that “knowledge acquired and accrued through experience and interaction is valued on the same level as knowledge acquired by rote or exclusively text-based

strategies, and by the latent colonial messages inherent in old approaches.”¹² Their claims are expansive, insisting that

“locating students, relationships, place and time at the centre of our teaching practices has shown us both the power of Aboriginal pedagogy,” as “it invites students to shift from mere knowing to understanding.”¹³ Students come to “understand themselves as connected and contextual,” and “potentially empowered to participate meaningfully in nurturing their own learning and visions for a collective future.”¹⁴

COMMENTARY

Frank Deer suggests that “teacher initiative and professional sensitivity may represent the next stage of development in the Aboriginal perspectives movement,” and specifically “pre-service teachers’ confidence in their ability to deliver should become a priority.” That confidence, he notes, can be undermined by the disconnect between teacher education in the university and teaching practice in the school. Later, acknowledging that a “student’s identity encompasses more than just ancestral culture,” Deer encourages students to not only “embrace their own cultural identity, but to also make that contemporary, personal connection with those aspects of culture.” Is that advice addressed to non-Aboriginal students and teachers as well? Leddy and Turner argue that “Aboriginal education needs to move out of the margins and into the centre of education in Canada, not only for Aboriginal students, but for all students,” something I’d argued about racial history for U.S. students. While welcome as a temporary move, I worry that long term it represents only an inversion of the hierarchy colonialism and racism (respectively) install. That would represent no progress at all.

REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

¹ Deer 2013, 179. In my experience, pre-service teachers experience apprehension regardless the subject they are to teach.

² Deer, 2013, 180. I felt no “disconnect” when I taught Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* and Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul On Ice* to eight-graders at Roosevelt Jr. High School in the inner city of Columbus, Ohio, in spring 1969. (I recorded the experience in “Ten Weeks in Spring,” an unpublished manuscript stored in the LSU Library, the Pinar Archive). Afterward, I decided I had been in “over my head” there and, despite being offered a job at Roosevelt, I accepted instead a position as teacher of English at Paul D. Schreiber High School in Port Washington, Long Island, just outside New York City. It turned out I was in over my head there too. I recorded students’ experience of the curriculum I taught in *Shadowgraphs*, a precursor to *currere*.

³ Deer 2013, 181.

⁴ Deer 2013, 188.

⁵ Deer 2013, 192.

⁶ Deer 2013, 204.

⁷ Deer 2013, 205. Complaints of cultural appropriation hardly help: Malik (2017, June 15, A23) reported that Hal Niedzviecki, editor of *Write*, the magazine of the Canadian Writers’ Union, was forced to resign after defending the practice of White writers creating characters from minority or indigenous backgrounds. After protests, the sculptor Sam Durant voluntarily dismantled his own piece “Scaffold,” which he had made in honor of 38 Native Americans executed in 1862 Minneapolis. While “appropriation”— what these artists were accused of— implies “theft,” Malik (2017, June 15, A23) reminds us that artists— I would add teachers— always engage with the experience of others. And while everyone “inhabits” a culture, Malik continues, nobody “owns” culture. Acknowledging that “cultural engagement does not take place on a level playing field— racism and inequality shape the ways in which people imagine others— it is difficult to see,” Malik concludes, “how creating gated cultures promotes social justice” (2017, June 15, A23).

⁸ Deer 2013, 207.

⁹ Leddy and Turner 2016, 53.

¹⁰ Leddy and Turner 2016, 56.

¹¹ “Multiculturalism,” Leddy and Turner (2016, 62) assert, “is neither strong enough nor stable enough to meaningfully disrupt the dominant educational discourse nor reform established pedagogy.”

¹² Leddy and Turner 2016, 61. Non-text-based learning was, of course, a feature of 20th century progressive education (see, for example, Pinar 2015), sometimes practiced in service to Indigenous children. In their history of Indigenous education in the United States, Reyhner and Eder (2004, 223) remind that “Katherine Jensen recalled the Indian Service teachers were advised to use the project method. In a 1944 article, Ruth Underhill declared that Papago children traditionally ‘learning through activity, in a system surprisingly like our modern project method.’ A 1948 article on day school methods for Sioux students by the Indian Service’s associate supervisor off education, Gordon MacGregor, noted: “The project method is exceptionally well suited to educating the Dakota because it follows their own method of learning by doing and following the example of others. By bringing the children to participate and to share in the work and the responsibility for completion of a project, this method also reinforces the training for cooperative work already begun in the family.”

¹³ Leddy and Turner 2016, 62.

¹⁴ Leddy and Turner 2016, 62.