

A FUNDAMENTAL DISCONNECT? POLICY AND ABORIGINAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Lorenzo Cherubini and John Hodson examined Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) policy documents and initiatives regarding Aboriginal education reform, including *Many Roots, Many Voices* (2005), *The Ontario First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007), *Building Bridges to Success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Students* (2007), as well as the establishment of the Aboriginal Education Office.¹ They identified “three significant elements within the policy documents”² that, he judged, undermined the actualization of their objectives: 1) standardized provincial assessments,³ 2) inadequate teacher education,⁴ and 3) lack of meaningful engagement of Aboriginal communities.⁵ “For Aboriginal peoples,” Cherubini and Hodson point out, “school is not just a contested space; school is a hostile and alien space. Schools are places where the ghosts of residential schooling hover in the recesses of consciousness.”⁶

By “Indigenous thought,” Celia Haig-Brown refers to “knowledge that arises from innumerable generations of people living in relation to a specific land and seeing it as the source of all their relations.”⁷ By “land,” she means not only materiality, but spirituality as well, encompassing “rivers and streams, air and wind as animate beings in our existence. Indigenous thought is founded in a deep understanding that we all live in relation to land.”⁸ As such, Haig suggests that Indigenous thought can change the field of curriculum studies,⁹ as it enables scholars to “inhabit border worlds wherein” we come to see our space [as\ shaped irrevocably by the colonial presence that created this new nation, Canada, as an overlay of multiple existing nations.”¹⁰

Haig-Brown worries that “Indigenous knowledges remain relegated to the margins.”¹¹ While “distinct from most Western European thought on which curriculum studies are based,” Indigenous thought, she suggests, “has resonances with certain aspects of this thought,”¹² if heard, can result in curriculum in a new key.¹³ Characterizing Haig-Brown’s statement as a “definitive statement of the multi-epistemic implications of Indigenous and mainstream knowledge paradigms as they influence curriculum studies,” Cherubini concludes that “its impact centers ultimately in forcing us to make sense of our own epistemic experiences in light of Indigenous ontologies and curricular policies.”¹⁴ He suggests principles toward “integrating Indigenous Knowledge into the mainstream curriculum” as he discusses the potential of Indigenous Knowledge - quoting Haig-Brown - to “reframe and decentre”¹⁵ educators’ paradigms of curriculum.¹⁶ Cherubini suggests that the Ontario policy¹⁷ he examined has the potential to dismantle –again quoting Haig-Brown¹⁸ - the “border-world” to which Indigenous epistemologies have been relegated by “colonial understandings of teaching and curriculum.”¹⁹

While promoted in policy, Cherubini continues, Indigenous knowledge is not

being integrated into school curriculum “in *practice*.”²⁰ Forced to comply with OME directives, educators may employ “an advocacy-oriented stance that is innately disconnected from true understanding.”²¹ Mere compliance, then, is insufficient; what is required, Cherubini insists, is that educators face “how mainstream educational practices privilege some students and disadvantage others ... [and] discover how their curriculum practices influence the culture of the diverse world in which their students live.”²² To do so, Cherubini seems sure, teachers must “transcend taken-for-granted organizational and conceptual arrangements of what it means to teach and learn,” an undertaking requiring subjective reconstruction of “who they are as peoples and teachers.”²³ He concludes: “For OME policy interventions to be sustainable, the issues of identity, curriculum, and professional and personal development must be accounted for in all of their complexities.”²⁴

In another article Cherubini revisits the OME policy document, attending to its “companion and equally important document,”²⁵ *Building Bridges to Success for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Students*, which provides public school boards in Ontario with an outline to develop and implement policies for Aboriginal students to voluntarily self-identify themselves, so that data on Aboriginal student achievement in provincial public schools can be collected. “Both documents,” Cherubini judges, “recognize that Aboriginal student achievement is subject to a myriad of historical and socio-cultural realities.”²⁶

Cherubini points out that the document portrays the OME as “benevolent and conciliatory providers of educational services, but [it] subtly reproduces a depiction of Aboriginal peoples from a deficit perspective – uneducated citizens who are unqualified to make a significant contribution to society.”²⁷ Aboriginal parents and communities were in no position to decline the offer: “What would be the public perception,” Cherubini asks, “if Aboriginal communities decided to decline the exhaustive support and lofty objectives as they are expressed in the documents?”²⁸

COMMENTARY

Important as they are, policy documents represent only one moment in a long sequence of curriculum development, enactment, and assessment. Cherubini underlines that point while referencing one of the earliest and most influential participants in Indigenous curriculum studies, Celia Haig-Brown, recalling her claim that, if not marginalized but integrated - Indigenous thought can reconceptualize curriculum studies in Canada. (Again I am reminded of Dion’s concept of “braiding” as a complication of “integration,” preserving the distinctiveness of Aboriginal – and non-Aboriginal – thought.) Citing the ongoing concern for curriculum integration,

Cherubini pinpoints the danger of advocacy without understanding, one that can entrap Aboriginal communities between the proverbial rock and a hard place, a point on which Cherubini concludes.

REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

¹ Cherubini and Hodson 2008, 4.

² Cherubini and Hodson, 2008, 10.

³ Regarding high-stakes external and standardized assessments, Cherubini and Hodson (2008, 12) assert: "Such baseline data is based on Eurocentric principles of teaching, learning, and student assessment." This is an allegation Cherubini (2010, 18) repeats.

⁴ Cherubini and Hodson (2008, 20) worry that "non-Aboriginal teachers are ill prepared to provide the learning environment that is necessary to promote self-determination."

⁵ Cherubini and Hodson (2008, 27) conclude that "radical change and it will not occur without the meaningful involvement of Aboriginal parents, Elders, Faith Keepers, Clan Mothers, communities, educators, and researchers."

⁶ Cherubini and Hodson 2008, 24.

⁷ Haig-Brown 2008, 12.

⁸ Haig-Brown 2008, 12.

⁹ Haig-Brown 2008, 13.

¹⁰ Haig-Brown 2008, 14.

¹¹ Haig-Brown 2008, 15.

¹² Haig-Brown 2008, 18.

¹³ That is also the title of Aoki's signature essay: see Pinar and Irwin 2005.

¹⁴ Cherubini 2009, 7.

¹⁵ Haig-Brown 2008, p. 13.

¹⁶ Cherubini 2009, 7.

¹⁷ The Ontario Ministry of Education's (OME) Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework (2007), Cherubini (2009, 8) summarizes, pledges to address the distinctive "learning styles" of Aboriginal students attending public schools by emphasizing a "culturally-responsive curriculum and pedagogy" in service to improving Aboriginal student achievement. Teachers, it promised, are to be held accountable for their awareness of Aboriginal students' worldviews, customs, and traditions. In a later article, Cherubini 2010, 9-10 reports that the OME budgeted 12.7 million dollar to support its policy initiatives and allocated an additional 22.7 million dollars towards resources and services.

¹⁸ Haig-Brown 2008, p. 14.

¹⁹ Cherubini 2009, 7.

²⁰ Cherubini 2009, 10.

²¹ Cherubini 2009, 11-12.

²² Cherubini 2009, 13. Cherubini quotes Haig-Brown's (2008, 13) reference to "the possibilities [for educators and scholars alike] that lie with engagement with such epistemologies and ontologies."

²³ Cherubini 2009, 14.

²⁴ Cherubini 2009, 18. Cherubini (2009, 19) considers this challenge as indicative of the tension between the principles and realities of curricular policy integration."

²⁵ Cherubini 2010, 10.

²⁶ Cherubini 2010, 10.

²⁷ Cherubini 2010, 14-15.

²⁸ Cherubini 2010, 16.