

THE CANADIAN TEACHERS' FEDERATION

PRESIDENT'S FORUM ON

FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS AND INUIT

Pamela Toulouse addresses themes that emerged from the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) July 2013 President's Forum on First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) education. Among these were "strategies, programs and wise practices for wholistic Indigenous student success," as well as "current research focused on equitable education environments based in social justice philosophies, inter-agency approaches, culturally relevant pedagogy, system wide change and inclusion."¹ Emphasizing the significance of "understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples," Toulouse incorporates "advice, teachings, models and principles from students, educators, researchers, leaders, Elders and other stakeholders."² For example, she cites Elder Gordon's reminder to Forum participants that "we are at the heart of change," to "be creative in our approaches to building, healing and restoring First Nation, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) communities."³ Reiterating that "action and change was required of us," Toulouse names them: "shift the colonial gaze onto ourselves," and "work together in more effective ways to make a difference in the lives of FNMI students."⁴

Invoking the metaphor of "shadows" to denote the presence of the past in the present, Toulouse notes that Norman Henchey "systemic racism" is "adversely impact[ing] the relations between Indigenous Nations and non-Indigenous Nations," as too many non-Indigenous peoples "continue to perpetuate distorted images of Indigenous peoples."⁵ She quotes an Elder lamenting that "the only way an Indian would make it on the news is if he or she was one of the 4 Ds: drumming, dancing, drunk or dead."⁶ This stereotype – disseminated by popular media "into the mindset of popular consciousness" – is "often also combined with the image of the warrior," resulting in inaccurate representations of Indigenous peoples "as troublesome, stuck in the past, as victims and as aggressors."⁷ This "negative narrative" is embedded, she continues, in "policies and programs" that undermine Indigenous efforts at achieving an "equitable quality of life."⁸ But the Indigenous push back – Idle No More is one example – determined to "assert their rights," to reform "relationships," including "between students on playgrounds, in classrooms and in schools."⁹ In addition to systemic racism, Toulouse reminds her readers of other "shadows," among "residential schools, federal day schools, stereotypes, oppression and poverty," shadows that contribute to high mortality rates, low graduation rates, increased diabetes, youth suicide among others."¹⁰ Only light – "Indigenous truth" – can dispel "these shadows."¹¹ That truth includes:

- “Land based experiences and character education opportunities with Indigenous cultural resource people (i.e. Elders, Métis Senators, Traditional Knowledge Experts) as key facilitators
- Critical thinking activities and action research projects that challenge stereotypical images, address current Indigenous issues and confront colonial history in authentic partnerships with Indigenous communities
- Local Indigenous worldview and global Indigenous connections that highlight the diversity and richness of culture, traditions, values, contributions and uniqueness of these many Nations
- Culturally competent pedagogy in schools that is derived from strategies, content, resources, protocols and concepts that reinforce Indigenous self-esteem and that model wise educational practices for all students.”¹²

Are these topics to supplement the current curriculum or to replace it?

“We are called to action,” Toulouse reiterates, invoking the concept of “social justice” as “a critical tool in initiating significant educational change,” change conceived as the “celebration of diversity, equitable access to education, addressing the roots of poverty, interrogating privilege and embracing hope.”¹³ This requires the involvement of “Indigenous students and communities” as the “leaders of this journey,” as “they have the knowledge, agency, solutions and teachings to guide us.”¹⁴ “Beginning points” include “mental health, literacy, technology/e-learning, access initiatives, and curriculum integration,”¹⁵ a stunningly standard list of topics, the last one answering the question I posed earlier. Prerequisites include “fiscal stability ... willingness and commitment.”¹⁶ Among those Indigenous contributions the curriculum will honour are: “Hockey, basketball, lacrosse, canoes, kayaks, dogsleds, axes, pulleys, saws, asphalt, compasses, mirrors, anesthetics, diuretics, ephedra, cataract removal, nursing, skin grafts, smelting, ironwork, chocolate, potato chips, food colouring, mouthwash, toothbrushes, tax systems, apartment complexes, insulation, stonemasonry, seawalls, urban planning and dreamwork psychology.”¹⁷ Toulouse characterizes these as “only a few of the innovations that Indigenous people gave to the world.”¹⁸ (I suspect the list raises eyebrows.¹⁹) Honouring these contributions is “paramount to the success and engagement of Indigenous students, parents/guardians and the communities,” Toulouse insists.²⁰

Nearly every province and territory in Canada has established a dedicated Ministry/Department and policy that focuses on Aboriginal (FNMI) education, she continues, adding that the Canadian Teachers’ Federation has its own body of research focused on “Indigenous student achievement” and “capacity building.”²¹ Reiterating her earlier point, Toulouse advises those committed to these goals “to go to the Indigenous Nations themselves and build an authentic foundation of trust.”²² For “critical knowledge exchanges to occur,” she continues, “we [must] learn to humble

ourselves by acknowledging our own limited knowledge of Indigenous peoples,”²³ by which one decodes the “we” as non-Aboriginal peoples. The “exchange” seems to be one-way as she asserts that to “honour the gifts of Indigenous peoples is to validate the experiences of Indigenous students in school,” as such validation is a “step towards building trust and meaningful connections.”²⁴ “

“Self-governance and self-determination permeate the contemporary discourse of Indigenous politics,” Toulouse reminds, “especially where land claims, constitutional reform and educational dis/achievement (residential schools, attrition rates) are concerned.”²⁵ While “self-governance” and “self-determination” may “cause “unease” in the Non-Aboriginal population, recognizing “the right to decide and fully participate in the direction and quality of one’s life” is key to “relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.”²⁶ And “relationships are the grounding element in fostering educational change for Indigenous students,” she reminds, requiring the “engagement of parents/guardians, communities, leaders, cultural resource people and other critical stakeholders.”²⁷ Such “relationships require care, truthfulness and protocols that are culturally appropriate,” difficult discussions on Indigenous rights and the history of colonialism will be a part of this process.”²⁸

These “difficult discussions” are a necessary but insufficient condition for “educational change narrative,” as Toulouse (after Walker, Mishenene and Watt) identifies five tenets of what constitutes a “welcoming environment” for Indigenous students: (1) “Cultural and language-based curriculum and professional development that is transparent in the activities of staff at school. (2) Integration of Indigenous content with cross-curricular instructional opportunities where all students are taught this as core knowledge. (3) Connections with the Indigenous community by opening up school facilities for extra-curricular events. (4) Practicing cultural proficiency by having a diversity of Indigenous resources in the library and experiential learning applications. (5) Meaningful relationships between Indigenous students and their teachers that are based in authenticity and real-life conversations.”²⁹ She adds what every teacher should and perhaps does know, namely that parents (Toulouse specifies Indigenous parents or guardians) “entrust educators with their children and this responsibility should be embraced as a gift.”³⁰

Accompanying the gift of children is engagement with their parents or guardians, Toulouse continues, which “will require patience, time, consistency and understanding.”³¹ To parents and guardians Toulouse adds Elders, Métis Senators, Traditional Knowledge Keepers, craftsmen/women, business owners, leadership (elected and traditional) and extended definitions of family as also interested members of Indigenous communities, reminding educators that “each student’s situation and location will be different; however, it is critical to uncover the significant connections that he/she has in their lives,” these significant others “can impact student success effectiveness,” making “engagement” with “these stakeholders ... invited, valued and required.”³²

Toulouse identifies “risk factors” not exclusive to Indigenous children, including “poverty, food security, childcare, housing, unemployment and health/wellness challenges,” each requiring “social support and [a sense of] belonging” that recommend “networking with Friendship Centres, Native Counsellor Associations, Political/Territorial Organizations, Indigenous Research Centres, Indigenous Businesses and Aboriginal Health Access Centres.”³³ Toulouse emphasizes that “awareness of these Indigenous organizations and the services/resources they provide can mean the difference between an Indigenous student succeeding or not.”³⁴ She regards “planning for these potential risk factors and linking with the appropriate organization is a fundamental step in the wholistic success of Indigenous learners in classrooms today.”³⁵

Toulouse asserts that the “inclusion of Indigenous content ... ultimately comes down to the preparation and dedication of teachers,”³⁶ an insight emphasizing professional ethics, including the obligation to make time to continue one’s academic study.³⁷ “The knowledge of educators ... is critical,”³⁸ an insight that reminds that narrowly focused training in “appropriate practices” is insufficient, as even their enactment requires knowledge. Administrators and school boards have important roles to play as well,³⁹ as “the building of allies (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) is ... critical to a mass transformation towards cultural competency in schools.”⁴⁰

“So,” Toulouse asks, “is Indigenous education a Canadian education?” She wonders what it looks like in classroom, what pedagogy and practices distinguish it? Honouring Indigenous students is the main thing, characterized by “interactivity, assessment for/as learning, experiential opportunities, character education, commitment to the environment, wholistic approaches to teaching, differentiated instruction, parental/guardian involvement, community engagement, hands-on activities, the use of exemplars, inquiry based projects, consistent/safe classroom leadership (i.e. procedures & routines), technology, scaffolding and student centred learning goals (i.e. clear success criteria and descriptive feedback).”⁴¹ These “strategies” are not only “effective” for Indigenous students but also for all students,⁴² thereby answering her earlier question. “The inclusion of Indigenous resources ... and worldview ... within the curriculum is also vital to a meaningful Canadian education,” she affirms, as “understanding treaties and the constitutional rights of Indigenous Nations in Canada is also an integral component of this form of educational content,” to be “integrated within the curriculum from kindergarten through grade twelve.”⁴³ “Indigenous worldview is a gift that is based in time-immemorial understandings of the earth,” she explains, “embedded with diversity and uniqueness in terms of languages, traditions, ceremonies and innovations.”⁴⁴ “Action” for “transformative educational change is not just for Indigenous peoples,” she concludes, “it is rooted in a shared responsibility with Canadians who are concerned with social justice, stewardship, healing and leaving an earth that our future generations can be proud of.”⁴⁵

COMMENTARY

“In this report,” Kiera Brant-Birioukov writes in a note to me, “Pam Toulouse highlights themes of 2013 Canadian Teachers’ Federation forum on First Nations, Métis and Inuit education,” explaining the almost breathtaking range⁴⁶ of concerns Toulouse lists. That range implies the complexity and intensity of the crisis Indigenous students face, a crisis only a Herculean effort could hope to address adequately. While doubting none of it, I am nonetheless struck by the absence of any listing of internal challenges Indigenous students themselves must face if they are to inhabit two (or more) cultures at the same time. Perhaps the cultivation of a “double consciousness”⁴⁷ – singularly sculpted while culturally informed – could reduce the inner intensity of the crisis, make it more survivable?

REFERENCES

- Aoki, Ted T. 2005 (1987). *Inspiring the Curriculum*. In *Curriculum in a New Key: The Collected Works of Ted T. Aoki*, edited by William F. Pinar and Rita L. Irwin (357-365). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Pinar, William F. 2015. *Educational Experience as Lived: Knowledge, History, Alterity*. New York: Routledge.
- Ruitenberg, Claudia W. Ed. 2017. *Reconceptualizing Study in Educational Discourse and Practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Toulouse, Pamela. 2013. *Beyond Shadows: First Nations, Métis and Inuit Student Success*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Teachers Federation.

ENDNOTES

¹ Toulouse 2013, 1.

² Toulouse 2013, 1.

³ Toulouse 2013, 3.

⁴ Toulouse 2013, 3.

⁵ Toulouse 2013, 5.

⁶ Quoted in Toulouse 2013, 5.

-
- ⁷ Toulouse 2013, 5.
- ⁸ Toulouse 2013, 5.
- ⁹ Toulouse 2013, 5.
- ¹⁰ Toulouse 2013, 5.
- ¹¹ Toulouse 2013, 5.
- ¹² Toulouse 2013, 5-6.
- ¹³ Toulouse 2013, 7.
- ¹⁴ Toulouse 2013, 7.
- ¹⁵ Toulouse 2013, 8.
- ¹⁶ Toulouse 2013, 8.
- ¹⁷ Toulouse 2013, 9.
- ¹⁸ Toulouse 2013, 9.
- ¹⁹ Basketball, for instance, was invented in 1891 by Canadian-American gym teacher James Naismith. He is also credited with designing the first football helmet. He penned the first basketball rulebook, and he established the basketball program at the University of Kansas. Naismith was given numerous posthumous honors for his contributions to the world of sports. He died in Kansas on November 28, 1939, at the age of 78. If Naismith was Indigenous, biography.com makes no mention of it. <https://www.biography.com/scholar/james-a-naismith>. Accessed 2020-04-01.
- ²⁰ Toulouse 2013, 9.
- ²¹ Toulouse 2013, 9. See research brief #14.
- ²² Toulouse 2013, 9.
- ²³ Toulouse 2013, 10.
- ²⁴ Toulouse 2013, 10.
- ²⁵ Toulouse 2013, 11.
- ²⁶ Toulouse 2013, 11.
- ²⁷ Toulouse 2013, 11.
- ²⁸ Toulouse 2013, 11.
- ²⁹ Toulouse 2013, 11.
- ³⁰ Toulouse 2013, 12.
- ³¹ Toulouse 2013, 12. As their involvement is critical for the success of their children, Toulouse (2013, 12) recommends that each school formulate a “a comprehensive parent/guardian partnership/ involvement plan that is written for parents (i.e. in accessible language and in a preferred language) and is respectful of the place of residence (i.e. may have to provide transportation for parents OR may have to go the community/home).”
- ³² Toulouse 2013, 13. While wise, this advice requires time teachers don’t have. Additional funds for a special category - liaison - of teachers’ assistants will be required.
- ³³ Toulouse 2013, 14. Friendship Centres, Toulouse explains, can provide places of security and cultural connection in urban settings; Native Counsellor Associations

can provide links to emotional and financial foundations in remote areas, and Aboriginal Health Access Centres can provide places of culturally safe healthcare.

³⁴ Toulouse 2013, 14.

³⁵ Toulouse 2013, 14.

³⁶ Toulouse 2013, 15. Toulouse (2013, 15) address Indigenous teachers specifically, suggesting that “lived teaching philosophies” are important to enacting “wise” teaching practices, among these the integration of “Indigenous content into mainstream curriculum in systems designed for assimilation.”

³⁷ See Ruitenberg 2017.

³⁸ Toulouse 2013, 15. Conceiving curriculum as complicated conversation underscores the significance of knowledge: after all, as the primary participant in that conversation one must have much to say, not only training in what to do, finally a false distinction, as both methods and knowledge fuse in the person of the teacher. Aoki (2005 [1987], 361) reminds us that “to do something, one has to be somebody.”

³⁹ Toulouse 2013, 15.

⁴⁰ Toulouse 2013, 16.

⁴¹ Toulouse 2013, 17.

⁴² Toulouse 2013, 17.

⁴³ Toulouse 2013, 17.

⁴⁴ Toulouse 2013, 19.

⁴⁵ Toulouse 2013, 19.

⁴⁶ I am reminded of Norman Henchey’s lists (see research brief #29).

⁴⁷ Pinar 2019, 168, n. 189.