

## GATHERING THREE

### Colonialism Evades Ontario's Education System

Hanah H. Howlett-McFarlane

Education is a treaty right. Therefore, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people share the responsibility of creating curriculum and assessment criteria that move toward an education system that represents and empowers all students.



#### **Treaty Responsibilities**

Mi'kmaq scholar and educator Marie Battiste explains that the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in 1996 “was the result of a huge mobilization of Canadian scholars and public servants in an effort to unravel the effects of generations of exploitation, violence, marginalization, powerlessness, and enforced cultural imperialism on Aboriginal knowledge and peoples.” Additionally, RCAP “proposes Canada must dispense with all notions of superiority, assimilation, and subordination and develop a new relationship with Aboriginal peoples based on sharing, mutual recognition, respect, and responsibility” (2013: 26). Battiste looks at past treaties, such as those affirmed in Canada’s constitution and legislation, and charters such as the United Nations Charter of Human Rights (2013) in order to highlight the depth of responsibility toward educational rights for Indigenous people. For example, the first treaty, the Wampum between the Haudenosaunee and Dutch settlers in 1613, describes two cultures living in a mutually respectful way:

The Ogweho:weh said the way we would symbolize our agreement is that we Ogweho:weh have our Canoe, we will put everything we have in our Canoe.

You also have your Ship where your people, your beliefs, your languages, your laws shall be placed. Also, between the Canoe and the Ship, we shall have rules of conduct between our peoples. Three principles shall be adhered to between our peoples. First, there will be everlasting peace; second, we will maintain a good friendship; and third, we will always practice the Good Mind (Leroy (Jock) Hill in Kelsey 2014: 1).

Through education there is opportunity in contemporary society to re-establish the relationship defined in this original treaty. Education is a central pillar in the spirit of this treaty for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, who share the responsibility of upholding the principles of the Wampum. In understanding this, we can move toward a reciprocal relationship between the people of this land and all living things upon it.



## **Resistance**

Despite the existence of many treaties and laws defining the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, Indigenous people have had to expend significant energy and resources to see treaty rights and the right to self-determination upheld. Despite some recent attempts by the Canadian government to recognize Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous nations across Canada are still fighting for equity and inclusiveness in education, which would support and promote academic success for Indigenous students.

Contemporary understandings in the mainstream education system of what defines success in education are based on core competencies, such as those in traditional science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects and studies of European languages. Conversely, Indigenous pedagogy defines success in education to be based on ancestral wisdom, traditional teachings, and original languages (Manuelito 2004: 246). Only through a co-construction of competencies will the education system truly serve the unique needs of Indigenous communities and honour Indigenous pedagogy, where values are seen as equally important and relevant as core competencies.



## **Revitalization**

Discussions of reconciliation and language revitalization have begun to surface in the mainstream education system after many years of Indigenous scholars and communities lobbying for such. As Ball maintains:

First Nations leaders have linked improvement of developmental conditions for children to the reconstruction of their cultural identity, revitalization of intergenerational transmission of culture and traditional

language, and reproduction of culturally distinctive values and practices in programs for children and youth (2005: 455).

Continuing this discussion in the political arena of education research, recently the Canadian government has started to recognize ...

the importance of language revitalization for the health and well-being of individuals and communities, and is therefore providing support for innovative language immersion programs, language teaching, teacher education, and language documentation and digitization activities.

Research on language revitalization and maintenance within Indigenous communities, both within and outside Canada, is becoming very visible at present, given the high stakes and dire consequences of not acting to preserve these languages (Duff and Li 2009: 3).

Despite understanding the importance of language revitalization and the integration of traditional Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum, a lack of commitment to reconciliation persists within the education system, particularly in the curriculum. Such lack of commitment is detrimental to efforts towards equity of diversity; these concepts need to be integrated inclusively in the curriculum and school environment to best support and encourage Indigenous students in the Ontario mainstream education system.



### **Indigenous Knowledge in the Ontario Curriculum**

The Ontario Ministry of Education, in 2007, proposed a vision for “prosperous and healthy Aboriginal communities that will create a better future for Aboriginal children and youth” and a commitment by the Provincial government to work “with Aboriginal leaders and organizations to improve education outcomes among Aboriginal students.” The vision focuses on improving achievement for First Nations, Inuit, and Metis students and closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in areas of literacy, numeracy, retention, graduation, and advancement to post-secondary education (Ontario First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework 2007: 7).

The findings in the Ontario First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework claim that the overriding issues affecting Indigenous student achievement are derived from “a lack of awareness among teachers of the particular learning styles of Aboriginal students, and a lack of understanding within schools and school boards of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit cultures, histories, and perspectives” (2007: 8). Although these two observations are accurate, unfortunately what is not articulated as an issue affecting Indigenous student achievement is the complexity of Indigenous experiences in the Ontario educational system that stem from a colonial past, out of which pedagogy and curriculum continue to flow. Although this history is hinted at in several ways in the 2007 Policy Framework, colonialism is never named.

Deconstructing Indigenous knowledge stands in contrast to Indigenous pedagogy, which is premised on holistic visioning. By selecting and integrating only parts of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit knowledge into a non-Indigenous framework, it can appear that colonialism is addressed while the reality is that nothing about the ethnocentric curriculum has been changed. Alternatively, “considering a shift in pedagogy which integrates Indigenous ways of knowing into the whole framework of education could support reconciliation in education rather than sustaining the superiority of Eurocentric knowledge and processes” (Battiste 2013: 28).



### **Assessment and Achievement**

An over-emphasis on Euro-Western perceptions of success and achievement and an under-emphasis on traditional Indigenous knowledge found in most mainstream education systems cannot be denied. Sheila Watt-Cloutier (Inuk woman, educator, activist, and Nobel Peace Prize nominee) articulates this problem clearly:

Schools spend much of their energy teaching and testing knowledge; yet knowledge by itself does not lead to wisdom, independence, or power. If education does not genuinely empower children, then pretending that it does will only confuse them further. And it may even help to break their spirits because they will think it is their fault that they can find so little meaning in it (Watt-Cloutier 2000: 118).

Measuring and testing knowledge and defining success and achievement through a colonial understanding creates a narrative of blame for those who are marginalized (as Watt-Cloutier explains: “they will think it is their fault”) even if the overall goal is empowerment for First Nations, Inuit, and Metis students.



### **Recommendations for Anti-Colonial Pedagogy**

Recent Euro-Western research suggests that reconciliation in education can be achieved through stories, which Indigenous societies have practiced since time immemorial. Through telling and hearing stories we can better understand how notions of success are created, which serves the purpose of improving academic success for all students inclusively (Dei 2008: 211). To approach educational reform from a place of shared responsibility, honest reflection, and as an opportunity to discuss inequality within our education system, we can move towards reconciliation that will help all students achieve academic and personal success.

Additionally, Celia Haig-Brown and Kaaren Dannenmann have found that a connection to the land is lacking in the Provincial curriculum. Their research in *The Land is the First Teacher: The Indigenous Knowledge Instructors' Program* (2008) describes an Anishinabe course designed to share traditional Indigenous knowledge through land-based traditional practice as a way to learn, re-learn, and reclaim knowledge lost during colonialism in what is now Canada. Their goal is to re-establish land-based learning in contemporary life as a means of infusing traditional Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum that...

...serves as a model of a very old pedagogy speaking to the current context and the future. A pedagogy of the land brings material reality to the fore. Based in Indigenous epistemologies, this material reality can never lose sight of its complex spiritual, historic, and futuristic possibilities (2008: 262).

Land-based programs become a literal “grounding of pedagogy” (2008: 261) and shift out of the classroom toward traditional land-based knowledge. This shift provides opportunity for Indigenous people to take back control of education and rediscover methods of teaching students that draw on a tradition of skills that can be applied to, and in fact are needed in order to, address contemporary challenges.

In a 2012 policy paper highlighting the “history of residential schools, treaty negotiations, and past issues whose impacts linger in communities today” (Popovic 2012:15) several reforms are suggested for mainstream school educators, ranging from early childhood education to post-secondary schooling. For mainstream school educators, the focus should be on incorporating Indigenous ways of learning into the curriculum to help First Nations, Inuit, and Metis students “overcome feelings of alienation” (Popovic 2012: 1).

Other recommendations include providing:

- equitable resources for on-reserve schools
- additional financial and knowledge sharing resources, and
- making First Nations, Metis, and Inuit languages, cultures, and worldviews more visible in the provincial curriculum (Popovic 2012: 7-12).

Adding to these recommendations, Battiste offers several important practices based on past successes in Indigenous learning environments. Examples include:

- respecting diverse learning styles
- legitimizing Indigenous voices through a transformative, community-based approach
- normalizing Indigenous knowledge, and
- clarifying expected results and measurements of success (Battiste 2013: 176).

Overall, it is found that “The relinquishing of control [by non-Indigenous educators] will require open and honest dialogue on the part of both the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal nations if we are to genuinely empower ourselves and to regain control over our lives” (Watt-Cloutier 2000: 127).



## **Conclusion**

Education can, and should be, empowering for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Honouring treaty rights and efforts toward reconciliation have led to some inclusion of Indigeneity in the curriculum, however more opportunities remain for the revitalization of Indigenous cultures, languages, traditions, and

worldviews to be embedded inclusively within the Provincial curriculum, school environments, and assessment practices.

Taking the lead from Indigenous educators, Elders, and community members is essential to incorporating models that put Indigenous knowledge, stories, languages, and land at the center of learning, and to creating shared definitions of success. Doing so establishes learning in ways that are culturally relevant and meaningful and creates an approach to teaching and learning that helps teachers become empowered to include mutually respectful opportunities for reconciliation through education for all students.