

**Ontario Ministry of Education Policy and Aboriginal Learners'
Epistemologies: A Fundamental Disconnect**

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Abstract

The Ontario Ministry of Education has made a recent commitment to address the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students with the release of various policy documents. Yet, there appears to be a disconnect between the policy principles and the standardized means of reconciling these differences in achievement, teacher education, and parental involvement. The dualities between the expressed intent presented in the policy documents and the reality of Aboriginal epistemologies imply overtones that are symptomatic of the colonial treatment of Aboriginal peoples in this province and country. There is, then, a need to rethink critical aspects of the policy, for the profound implications it has on educational policy and student achievement in this province and beyond.

Conceptual Framework

From a historical perspective, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (Aboriginal) peoples in Canada were granted Constitutional rights to a federally-operated education system in exchange for land transfers to the Crown over 200 years ago. Federally legislated and church-operated residential schools for Aboriginal children emerged in the 1800's and continued until the 1990's (Lobo & Talbot, 2001). The Canadian federal government declared the residential schools as extensions of the Acts of 1868 and 1869 and conceptualized them as vehicles towards educating Aboriginal children to an agrarian lifestyle and to assimilating them into European societal norms (Haig-Brown, 1988). Aboriginal children were transported away from their families and communities and registered in boarding schools to ensure their physical disconnection from their cultural surroundings. The missionary activities within the schools were primarily directed towards transforming the students' Aboriginal values and practices. Those who legislated and operated the residential schools declared that Aboriginal languages were at the core of students' identity, and as a result felt justified in eradicating their practices in what is commonly referred to throughout the literature as acts of cultural genocide (Bonvillain, 2001).

At present, many First Nations schools continue to be federally operated, while publicly-funded schools in the province of Ontario are a provincial responsibility. The Ontario Ministry of Education establishes the policies and procedures that govern publicly-funded schools. The 2001 Census reported that 1.7% of the total population in Ontario is of Aboriginal

descent, and 70% and 78% of First Nation and Aboriginal peoples respectively live off of reserve-land (as cited in Aboriginal Education Office of the Ministry of Education, 2007). There are over 50,000 Aboriginal students who attend public elementary and secondary schools in Ontario (Ontario Policy Framework, 2007). Understandably, Aboriginal peoples advocate for educational experiences that identify, represent, and celebrate *their* values. Based on this premise, Aboriginal languages are understood to complement cultural education and significantly contribute towards instilling traditional beliefs in Aboriginal students. In fact, teaching Aboriginal languages to Aboriginal students is considered imperative in defining and understanding Aboriginal self-identity (Corbiere, 2000; Norris, 2006). Similar petitions to restore Aboriginal identity have been tabled by Aboriginal interest groups at the Assembly of First Nations (1988; 1990; 1994) and the First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Center (2000) and have been founded on the argument that languages and educational epistemologies point toward the uniqueness of Aboriginal cultures that are intrinsically associated to traditional knowledge (see, for example, Norris & MacCon, 2003). These appeals are in response to Aboriginal worldviews that are considered holistic and embedded within respective languages and values (Cohen, 2001; Corbiere, 2000; Elijah, 2002; Kavanaugh, 2005). Schools that foster learning environments that honour the cultures and languages of Aboriginal students not only augment Aboriginal students' sense of identity, but improve their chances to be academically successful (Hilberg & Tharp, 2002; Kanu, 2002; Swanson, 2003).

Purpose of the Paper

This paper examines recently published Ontario Ministry of Education policy documents and initiatives in the context of reframing Aboriginal education reform in Ontario. It situates the analysis in a Canadian and Ontario context and provides a brief overview of the various policy documents and initiatives in Ontario, including *Many Roots, Many Voices* (2005), *The Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007), *Building Bridges to Success for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Students* (2007), and the inception of the Aboriginal Education Office. Subsequently, this policy analysis discusses i) the paradox of standardized provincial assessments ii) the reframing of teacher education to support Aboriginal self-determination, and iii) the meaningful engagement of Aboriginal communities.

The Canadian and Ontario Context and the Ontario Ministry of Education Policies and Initiatives

It has been suggested that mainstream Canadian society be more willing to recognize Aboriginal epistemologies and, perhaps more significantly, account for the inequities inherent in power relationships between themselves and Aboriginal peoples (Battiste, 2002; Neegan, 2005). This consideration is especially timely when one considers that public education is experiencing an unprecedented and steady increase in the number of Aboriginal children in Ontario classrooms and yet teachers, and predominantly non-Aboriginal teachers, are ill prepared to provide a learning

environment that is conducive to Aboriginal student needs. One-third of Aboriginal students are aged 14 or under, far higher than the 19% within the non-aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2003). Aboriginal children and youth feel disconnected from formal schooling. In 1996 only 12% of Aboriginal youth earned a secondary school diploma (Government of Canada, 1996). Consider as well that in excess of 12% of Aboriginal Canadians (those between 15 and 29 years of age specifically) abandon school after their elementary education (in comparison to 1.9% of non-Aboriginals in Canada) and nearly 50% of Aboriginals in the 18 to 24 demographic age bracket do not have a secondary school education – in light of 20% of non-Aboriginal peoples (Robertson, 2003). Sadly, Aboriginal youth (those between 15 and 24 years of age) cited boredom as the most prominent reason for quitting school (Statistics Canada, 2003).

A growing number of Aboriginal scholars and researchers (Battiste & Barman, 1995; Castellano et al., 2000; Hill & George, 1996) believe, therefore, that Aboriginal academic achievement is influenced by a complex mix of socioeconomic, sociohistoric, and sociocultural realities that are the residue of the colonizing efforts that continue to underscore the contemporary reality of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. This reality is also enacted in the publicly funded classrooms of the nation through teachers who are largely unaware of these realities and therefore unable to work effectively with Aboriginal students. The resulting academic achievement 'gap' between many Aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians is compounded by significant increases of populations, particularly among school-aged children, and the

flood of Aboriginal families into urban centres and urban schools. In spite of a growing and authoritative body of knowledge that connects Aboriginal educational achievement to cultural and linguistic inclusions (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Goulet, 2001), theory and practice have yet to come together. This dissonance continues to shape the experience of most Aboriginal peoples in publicly funded education in Ontario. In response, the Ontario Ministry of Education has made a public commitment to address the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal students in provincially funded public schools. Consider, for example, the following policy documents and initiatives.

Many Roots, Many Voices

In *Many Roots, Many Voices* (2005) the Ontario Ministry of Education articulates the common commitment of the province's teachers to ensure that students, regardless of culture, language, and heritage, are served effectively. The document states that all students deserve a positive and enriching learning experience. In it, teachers are urged to orchestrate scholarly environments that endorse the positive self-identities of English language learners. In a related document entitled, *English Language Learners: Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools* (2007), the Ministry of Education identifies Canadian-born English Language Learners to include Aboriginal students who speak a first-language that is not English (sec 1.2:1). First languages, according to the 2005 document, uphold the vital cultural ties that often bind students to their self-

identity. Literacy skills are described as foundational in students' language development, and as a result, teachers are required to assign tasks to students that align with their level of proficiency in English, negotiate supportive classroom cultures that accept language errors in light of advancing learning, and engage language learners in activities that represent their prior knowledge, experiences, and cultural nuances. Particularly noteworthy is the Ministry of Education's stance on monitoring and assessing English language learners. The document underscores the necessity that teachers formulate a "clear and fair picture of these students [by implementing] a wide range of assessment strategies and tools, and learn to look beyond these students' limited ability to communicate in English to discover the true extent of their learning" (p. 32). A variety of strategies are listed including the employment of various instructional strategies, assorted learning resources, and accommodations to assessment practices.

The Aboriginal Education Office

Equally as noteworthy is the investment and expansion of the Aboriginal Education Office responsible for coordinating Aboriginal education issues and initiatives across the province in collaboration with Aboriginal councils, public school boards, and federal education representatives. The Aboriginal Education Office authored *The Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007) that explicates the key initiatives intended to bolster learning and achievement for Aboriginal students in publicly funded provincial schools. It also assumes the responsibility for

increasing awareness among mainstream students, teachers, and communities about the distinct cultures of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples.

The *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007) is self-declared by the Ministry of Education as the basis of providing an exemplary education for Aboriginal students. This policy represents a commitment by the Ministry of Education to improve education outcomes for Aboriginal students, particularly in light of their disadvantaged and exploited past experiences. In order to address these outcomes, the policy framework includes specific strategies that are closely aligned to the needs of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students:

The strategies outlined in this framework are based on a holistic and integrated approach to improving Aboriginal student outcomes. The overriding issues affecting Aboriginal student achievement are 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 Nation, Métis, and Inuit cultures, histories, and perspectives. (Ontario Policy Framework, 2007, p. 6)

The document further extrapolates that Aboriginal student success is dependent upon culturally sensitive pedagogical approaches that are relevant to their learning needs, a curriculum that represents the fabric of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit identity, and school cultures that foster positive student and parent involvement. In fact, among the 4 core principles presented in the framework is equity and respect for diversity (p. 8), explained as school environments that foster positive personal and cultural identities for Aboriginal students in mainstream schools and school communities.

A second publication from the Aboriginal Education Office, entitled *Building Bridges to Success for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Students* (2007), is an outline for Ontario public school boards in developing policies for voluntary, confidential Aboriginal student self-identification. The impetus for this document, according to the Ministry of Education, rests on the collection of data in regards to Aboriginal student achievement to better discern the success of programs that address their unique needs as learners. The document encourages school boards to develop self-identification policies to improve Aboriginal students' academic achievement and in turn, reduce the disparities between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal students in literacy and numeracy, and in school retention and graduation rates. The self-identification of Aboriginal learners is considered "the solution" to what the Ministry of Education has identified to be "the challenge [of] assessing progress [given] the absence of reliable student-specific data on the achievement of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students across Ontario" (p. 7). This document provides a detailed explanation of "how important it is to have accurate and reliable data in order to assess progress towards the goal of improving Aboriginal student achievement" (p. 7).

Reframing Aboriginal Education Reform in Ontario

If one lesson is clear from the history of our country it is that imposition of a model of change from outside of the experiences, understanding and aspirations of the community group is doomed to failure. Failure, that is, if the objective is other than assimilation or the perpetuation of a situation of dominance and subjection. (Bishop and Glynn, 1998, p. 45)

Given the conceptual and contextual frameworks already discussed, we believe that there are three significant elements within the policy documents under discussion that demand an alternative perspective if the goal of improving Aboriginal achievement is to be achieved in publicly funded education in this province. These elements include: i) the disconcerting paradox of standardized provincial assessments, ii) reframing teacher education to support Aboriginal self-determination, and iii) the meaningful engagement of Aboriginal communities.

As a premise to our discussion, consider that in Ontario the incidence of Aboriginal youth suicide is stunningly high with several districts reporting unbelievable loss of life. Of most note are the 24 Nishnawbe Aski communities in the Sioux Lookout District in north western Ontario that have suffered more than 300 child and youth suicides over the last decade (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2006). All of that loss within a population of 2,542 children and youth is a paralyzing reality that cuts into the heart of any community and impedes self-determination. There is mounting evidence that suggests a link between Aboriginal youth suicide and cultural/linguistic education.

Dr. Michael Chandler's (2005) research with Aboriginal youth in British Columbian communities from 1987 to 2000 asked: What distinguishes Aboriginal communities with no youth suicides from those in which the rate is alarmingly high? Chandler concluded that the individual survival of Aboriginal youth and the survival of their culture, described as *cultural continuity*, are

strongly linked. First Nation communities that succeed in taking steps to preserve and teach their heritage culture and work to control their own destinies are dramatically more successful in insulating their youth from the risks of suicide. Chandler's theory of cultural continuity places a strong emphasis on the link between high rates of youth suicide and first language retention in Native communities.

Recent information from Statistics Canada (2003) reports that "the proportion of North American Indian children with an Aboriginal mother tongue fell from 9% in 1996 to 7% in 2001" (p. 29). Also in 2001 reports suggest that 61% of the Aboriginal population live off reserve and now reside in urban centres in Ontario. In short, the education of Aboriginal children in Ontario schools is overwhelmingly punctuated by struggle – struggle to see one's culture or language in the classroom, struggle between conflicting values, struggle for understanding and a never ending search for relevance that often results in spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical disconnection from that education. While the intent of the Ontario Ministry of Education to genuinely account for Aboriginal epistemologies and culturally-relevant pedagogy in public schools is noteworthy, there is a fundamental disconnect between the intent and outcome of these initiatives.

The Disconcerting Paradox of Standardized Provincial Assessments

[U]nless educational reform happens concurrently with analysis of the forces of colonialism, it can only serve as a insufficient Band-aid over the incessant wound of imperialism. (Grande, 2004, p. 19)

To begin, the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007) identifies the need to collect "reliable and valid data" to measure Aboriginal students' progress. The first goal of this policy framework addresses high-levels of student achievement that includes a performance measure to gauge "the significant increase in the percentage of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students meeting provincial standards on province-wide assessments in reading, writing, and mathematics" (p. 11). While this renewed focus on Aboriginal peoples' educational experiences is long overdue, there seems to exist an inherent conflict of expectations; more specifically, the "reliable and valid data" identified by the Ministry of Education as baseline performance indicators for Aboriginal students are in fact high-stakes external and standardized assessments that have unsavory implications in their relative cultural inaccessibility. Such baseline data is based on Eurocentric principles of teaching, learning, and student assessment. While the Ministry of Education's intent may be noble, the selected means to track student achievement is suspect. The research into improving literacy programs for Aboriginal students underscores "a willingness to use appropriate assessment tools to monitor student learning and program effectiveness" (Bell, 2004; as cited in Raham, 2004, p. 2). External assessments based largely on a standardized colonially-influenced curriculum would seem to merely perpetuate the bias that typically favours students from the dominant culture. Or as Bishop and Glynn (1999) observe "...the beneficiaries will be those most like the ones who designed and implemented the system" (p. 11).

The literature is equally emphatic about the unique learning needs of Aboriginal students that necessitate a transformation and genuine commitment to culturally sensitive pedagogy that includes diverse assessment and evaluation strategies to support Aboriginal students in mainstream learning environments (see, for example, Toulouse, 2006). Given these, it would appear that province-wide external assessments are invalid interventions in terms of charting Aboriginal student achievement and connote a Eurocentric cultural relativism that fails to account for the epistemological, cultural, and spiritual schemata of Aboriginal learners. Externally imposed student assessments can be perceived by Aboriginal worldviews as inimical, puerile, and disproportionately representative of the privileged mainstream epistemology that exists in provincially-funded schools. The language of standardized assessments is reflective of linguistic privilege that keeps alive "a populist elitism" that hinders the translation between minorities, individuals and popular cultural stances (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Giroux, 1992, p. 220; see also, Giroux, 2003; 2004).

The *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007) defines student academic success in Eurocentric terms that quantifies knowledge acquisition and literacy development by criterion and norm-referenced test scores. This appears to be contradictory to some of the other components of the policy framework document that directs school boards to "support teachers in adopting a variety of approaches and tools to teach and assess Aboriginal students more effectively" and schools to "develop awareness among teachers in the learning styles of First Nation, Métis, and

Inuit students" while employing "instructional methods designed to enhance the learning of all Aboriginal students" (p. 12). The policy document reflects the literature that attests to Aboriginal students' learning preferences towards holistic education, visual organizers, reflective learning, and the active engagement in collaborative tasks to complete assignments (Hilberg & Thorp, 2002). Aboriginal students learn best, according to Gamlin (2003), by first-hand experiences with the learning activity and by being engaged in the learning process (see Corbiere, 2000). The document favours a language experience approach to Aboriginal student learning that includes practical applications that have contextual relevance to students' life experiences. It recognizes the deterministic cultural influences that distinguish Aboriginal student learning from the mainstream population that have translated into larger social, cultural, and educational consequences. The language of the policy framework employs frames of references that convey immediate significance for all stakeholders.

However, given these calls to meaningfully incorporate Aboriginal epistemology and culturally appropriate activities into the public schools and individual classrooms, combined with the mandate to "teach and assess" (p. 12) Aboriginal students in more cultural and linguistic sensitive ways, one cannot resist the question of how the standardized provincial tests (considered by the Ministry of Education as valid and reliable data to measure Aboriginal student achievement) reflects the literature that discusses Aboriginal student success. There appears to be a fundamental disconnect between the re-conceptualization of teachers' pedagogical and

assessment practices in mainstream schools to account for Aboriginal learners' predilections, and measuring student achievement by the imposed western colonial paradigm of standardized testing. While the Ministry of Education's commitment to support policy development in light of Aboriginal linguistic and cultural tradition is commendable, as is their objective to foster intercultural dialogue between school communities, there remains a glaring inconsistency of how the provincial student assessments will reconcile Aboriginal students' learning inclinations to perceive concepts from whole to part, to have sufficient time and culturally sensitive resources to reply to the respective questions, and to engage in group work in non-threatening learning environments that respect their physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual selves. The matter is further confounded when one considers that Aboriginal students are less than optimally successful in following the standardized provincial curriculum:

The provincial curriculum does not allow First Nation students to learn in their own language or learn their own history in a meaningful way...nor does it accommodate a rate of learning that is consistent with their individual learning styles. (Anderson, 2004, p. 8; also see Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies, 2002)

The external provincial assessments will, however, be used as performance measures for Aboriginal student learning according to standardized grade and age appropriate benchmarks that are in themselves standardized concepts that function in a mainstream educational system based on age-grade progressing that is incongruent with Aboriginal children's learning styles. One need only point to the literature that identifies the consequences of employing standardized tests as measures of student learning in respect to

Aboriginal students in northern Canada. The low test results assume that Aboriginal students have inferior intelligence and cognition capacities (see Davis, 1982; Mueller et al., 1896; Wilgosh et al., 1986).

In the policy initiatives already discussed it is acknowledged that curriculum needs to correspond to the particular identity of Aboriginal students if it is to have a meaningful and sustaining influence on their learning (see, for example, Curwen-Doige, 2003). The school environments that best foster Aboriginal students' identity honour their distinctiveness as peoples (Antone, 2003; Gamlin, 2003; van der Wey, 2001). Formal education that is culturally informed and authentically incorporated into students' learning experiences augment the positive identity of Aboriginal students (Battiste, 2005; Toulouse, 2006).

Building Bridges to Success (2007) facilitates for public school boards the process of developing policies for voluntary, confidential Aboriginal student self-identification to garner the self-declared "accurate and reliable data in order to assess progress towards the goal of improving Aboriginal student achievement" (p. 7). The Ministry of Education, in March 2006, requested the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) to report on the achievement of Aboriginal students based on the six school boards who had a self-identification policy as a result of a provincially-funded pilot project. In turn, school boards were encouraged by the Assistant Deputy Minister for French-Language Education and Educational Operations to "work directly with the EQAO to finalize plans for the separate reporting of results for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students" (p. 8). Given the widespread

implications of using external standardized assessments as reliable and valid data, and the conceptual disconnect between standardized tests and experiential learning and assessment strategies aligned with Aboriginal students' learning needs, the request for Aboriginal peoples to self-identify themselves apart from mainstream learners, and the Ministry of Education initiative to separately report Aboriginal students' standardized test scores, seems antithetical to the spirit of thoughtful and respectful inclusion expressed in the various policy frameworks. Aboriginal peoples are being asked to voluntarily self-identify themselves so that a mainstream branch of the government (EQAO) can publish and disseminate the results of Aboriginal students' achievement on standardized assessments that are exclusively emblematic of colonial measures of academic success. It is potentially grossly exploitative to the identity of Aboriginal learners to have the reporting of their test scores segregated from the same mainstream learners with whom they share a publicly-funded education. The enthusiastic initiatives on the part of the Ministry of Education and the Aboriginal Education Office to have cross-cultural representations of Aboriginal language, culture, and epistemology risk being perceived as hollow and self-indulgent to mainstream practices of public accountability. Seeing that the results of standardized test scores are typically lower for marginalized and under-represented Aboriginal students, the separate reporting of test results can be considered a self-referential protocol whereby mainstream student performance indicators are no longer statistically anchored by Aboriginal cohorts of learners. Of significant interest and profound irony, the Dominion

Bureau of Statistics cited over 81 years ago the misleading comparison of Canadian literacy statistics in comparison to other nations, and stated:

...it is very clear the illiteracy of the Indians ought [sic] to be considered as a thing apart from the rest of the population...[for] taking the illiteracy of the population excluding Indians [would result in] a more accurate description of the true situation. (1926, p. 38; as cited in Stewart, 2006, p. 1003)

In some respects, the Ministry of Education's initiatives can be perceived as an extension of the same Eurocentric bias and exploitation of Aboriginal epistemology, language, and culture that has been historically chronicled. The ambiguous dualities between the expressed intent and practices presented in the various policy framework documents imply overtones that are symptomatic of the colonial treatment of Aboriginal peoples in this province and country (see Macpherson, 1991).

This is not to deny the fact that the *Building Bridges to Success* (2007) policy framework document distinguishes the importance for Aboriginal families to be aware of the presentations of the data from external organizations in regards to Aboriginal learners' achievement. These reports, according to the policy framework, "tend to bring attention to low student achievement, and can have a negative effect on First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students and communities" (p. 13). The language is tentative and inexplicit as it relates to this most significant caveat that strikes at the core of Aboriginal peoples' identity as learners. The document assures that personally identifiable data is protected from the public domain, although on the same page explains that EQAO and the Ministry of Education will disclose the reporting of information (including EQAO standardized test results and

course completions) on "Aboriginal student achievement at an aggregate level" (p. 15). The request to have Aboriginal learners voluntarily identify themselves in effect subjects them and the results of a culturally and epistemologically biased performance measure before public and mainstream scrutiny. In these instances, positions of power and social agency are inequitably represented. As Giroux and McLaren (1992) suggest, "we have failed to develop a comprehensive understanding of language, identity, and experience and their relation to the broader power-sensitive discourses of power, democracy, social justice, and historical memory" (p. 8). Does this not serve to propagate a history of educational, cultural, and societal stratification that has threatened the very identity that these policy framework documents claim to be recognizing and advocating for in mainstream public schooling?

Reframing Teacher Education: Supporting Aboriginal Self-determination

[M]any educators remain ignorant of the fact that they bring to educational interactions their own traditions of meaning-making that are themselves culturally generated. This invisibility of culture perpetuates the domination of the 'invisible' majority culture. (Bishop & Glynn, 1999, p. 78)

Few would successfully argue against the inevitability of Aboriginal personal, familial, and national self-determination within the contemporary nation state of Canada. And yet, there are convergent phenomena that reach across the time of barbaric colonialism to shape the contemporary realities of all Aboriginal peoples, inhibiting the inevitable and continuing the colonial project. None has a more profound impact on Aboriginal self-determination

than the educational experience of Aboriginal children in provincially funded schools that effectively continue the colonial project in Ontario classrooms. In real terms, the publicly funded education of Aboriginal children is a metaphoric abyss that will need to be bridged if the journey to Aboriginal self-determination is to continue uninterrupted.

Public education is experiencing an unprecedented and steady increase in the number of Aboriginal children in Ontario classrooms and yet those teachers, predominantly non-Aboriginal teachers, are ill prepared to provide the learning environment that is necessary to promote self-determination.

Today almost half of all Aboriginal people, 15 years and over have less than a high school diploma (Aboriginal Education Office, 2007, p. 35). It is not this lack of a credential that is the issue in itself. Nor is the unprecedented and related number of Aboriginal children dropping out of Ontario schools. Nor are the spiritual wounds inflicted on Aboriginal children as they unsuccessfully search for cultural representation and relevance within provincial classrooms. Nor is it the realization that Aboriginal children are especially vulnerable because they live in communities already burdened by the outcomes of the colonial period. All of these are merely symptomatic of a greater and more profound dis-ease. What is the core issue, the metaphoric dis-ease, is how the entire experience of Aboriginal children in the province's schools continues the colonial project by inhibiting the next generation's capacity to be self-determining.

Although Ontario is making significant and mostly well received plans that are delineated in the already discussed documents, it may be some time

before these new policies affect Ontario classrooms and Aboriginal children. Until that time Aboriginal children will continue to sit in Ontario classrooms with teachers who are ill prepared to deal with their unique learning needs, or meaningfully represent them in their teaching, or support Aboriginal self-determination. In light of this reality there is a critical need to begin to rethink all aspects of in-service and pre-service teacher education and create the changes necessary to offset this reality, and support Aboriginal self-determination and eliminate the educational gap between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal children and youth.

Britzman (2003) calculates "that by the time a person enters teacher education, she or he has spent approximately thirteen thousand hours observing teachers" (p. 27). This set of observations constitutes an immense body of knowledge derived from years of personal learning experience of teachers. It is from this observed experience, this educational biography, that teacher candidates create their own teacher identities accounting for the "persistence of particular worldviews, orientations, dispositions, and cultural myths that dominate our thinking and, in unintended ways, select the practices that are available in educational life" (Britzman, 2003, p. 27). These professional identities are often solidified during in-service teacher education. Even the most cursory review of the existing in-service education dealing with Aboriginal education developed by various provincial ministries of education and other agencies demonstrates (see Alberta Education, 2006; Saskatchewan Education, 2003) an almost singular focus on the 'how' of teaching methods in the hope of shifting teacher practice in favour of

Aboriginal children. In many ways the endless concentration on the 'how' has reduced teacher education and teaching to a very menial level where one generation passes on the tricks of the trade and the "well worn"(out) and "commonsensical images" that effectively extend the colonial project into our classrooms. Britzman would shift that focus by asking us to identify 'what' is it that educators do and 'why' do they do it. Britzman urges us to recognize the power of teacher biographies to shape teaching practice and it would seem that it is those biographies that are the starting point of education reform. Only when educators have a conscious understanding of 'what' they privilege, and by extension, 'what' they penalize in their teaching, and 'why' those dynamics exist, is there the possibility that the educational experience of Aboriginal children will evolve.

What is clear from the related literature is the connection between the educational experiences of teacher candidates, extracted from years of personal observation within their learning, which constitute an immense body of knowledge that teachers draw on throughout their career. It is from this observed experience, this educational biography, that teacher candidates create their own teacher identities and teaching practice. To suggest that Aboriginal issues, historic or otherwise, comprise a significant or meaningful part of that process within pre-service or in-service teacher education is an overstatement. At best Aboriginal education is relegated to the margins of courses, most often part of single classes dedicated to more general notions of diversity in the classroom. Combined with the lack of representation at both the primary, secondary or post-secondary level most teacher candidates

enter their qualifying year woefully lacking any knowledge of Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal peoples are just not part of teacher knowing and consequently Aboriginal peoples are not part of their teaching. What does exist in the collective consciousness of too many teachers are the many stereotypical and long held but discredited views that continue to haunt the Canadian consciousness and affect Aboriginal children. If one holds to the old adage that teachers teach what they know then it is easy to see the connection between what they know and how they deal with Aboriginal children and youth in their classrooms. To change the educational experience of Aboriginal children and youth in public education in Ontario requires, in part, changing the experience of pre-service and in-service teacher education in such a way as to augment those educational biographies.

Beyond the Rhetoric: The Meaningful Engagement of Aboriginal Communities

[I]t is not sufficient to simply raise awareness of other cultural backgrounds; it is also important for educators to critically evaluate how one set of cultural traditions (their own) can impinge on another (their students). (Bishop & Glynn, 1999, p. 78)

The relationship between mainstream parental involvement and the academic achievement of children is well researched and delineated. Less understood is the relationship between Aboriginal parents¹, Aboriginal communities, and the schools their children attend.

¹ In this paper the reference to 'parents' includes mothers, fathers, older siblings, aunties, uncles and grandparents who often have significant responsibilities for the children in their families that are not necessarily reflected in mainstream families.

For Aboriginal peoples, 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. Schools are surrounded by barriers to understanding, knowing, and class that keep families – grandparents, aunts, uncles, mothers, and parents – outside the educational experience of their children. Schools are a space vigorously claimed by teachers, where teacher knowledge is privileged above all and parent knowledge is not understood to be important to the classroom experience.

Instead, parent involvement is narrowly defined along predetermined lines, “doing the things educators ask or expect them to do – volunteering at school, parenting in positive ways, and supporting and assisting their children at home with their schoolwork – while knowledge, voice and decision-making continue to rest with the educators” (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005, cited in Pushor, 2007). Pushor points out that this domination extends even to the vertical landscape of school space that screams stay away festooned as it is with signage that directs, prohibits, admonishes, and restricts (p. 7).

Schools, then, are an exclusive landscape reserved and controlled by the educational experts who set the agenda and determine whose knowledge is important; a landscape where power and control remains firmly in the hands of principals and teachers. It is in this environment, an environment that is totally uninviting, that Aboriginal parent involvement is judged and found to be a ‘problem’ when viewed through a myopic lens of cultural domination that effectively continues the colonial project. Haig-Brown (1988)

offers an alternative view that suggests that the inability of Aboriginal parents to engage with their children's school is a form of resistance to the colonial occupation that schools symbolize. Under this explanation, being non-engaged can be seen to be a form of personal integrity that resists engaging with an environment that stereotypes, judges, and dismisses Aboriginal parents and communities. Mackay and Myles (1995) suggest:

One indicator that educators use to judge parental interest is the extent to which parents participate in parent/teacher nights organized by the school. By and large, it was reported that Native parents do not attend these meetings. Both Native and non-Native educators recognize that many parents are uncomfortable coming to school... [M]any educators used the presence or absence of parental support to explain a student's decision to remain at or drop out of school...[S]uch an apparently cogent explanation can enormously comfort educators because it places responsibility for a student's behaviour firmly with the parents and releases the school system from blame and remedial action. (p. 166)

Aboriginal people are all too familiar with this landscape, and, given this familiarity, it is a wonder why they do not continue the practice of physically hiding their children in the bush every September as they did during the Residential Schools period.

Meaningfully engaging Aboriginal parents and communities in the education of their children is no easy task and it should not be surprising that trust, or rather the lack of trust, is an ongoing impediment to be constantly negotiated. Ogbu's (cited in Goulet, 2001) work compared the societal oppression of involuntary minorities, Aboriginal peoples, and immigrant minorities. Ogbu concluded that:

When comparing their present status with the future, involuntary [Aboriginal] minorities see their lack of access to economic improvement as relatively permanent, so they do not believe that

education and individual effort will eliminate discrimination because it is institutionalized and enduring. They do not trust the schools or the people that control them. (p. 69)

Trust is created through a long process of consistent positive, friendly, respectful, and meaningful engagement of Aboriginal parents, families, and communities.

Final Reflections

The processes necessary to change the reality of Aboriginal children in Ontario schools (Pushor, 2007; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005; Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996) begins with looking inward at all levels of education to uncover a conscious awareness of what education is and how it is enacted in the classroom. This process reveals the subconscious but all prevailing mono-epistemic primacy that is implicit to how education occurs and how that occurrence influences Aboriginal achievement.

The responsibility for changing the realities of Aboriginal children and youth in publicly funded education in Ontario does not, however, rest wholly with the Ministry of Education, or with principals or teachers. Leadership for change begins at the top with Boards of Education that are prepared to lead, learn, commit, and sustain the necessary resources and hold schools accountable for enacting a cultural change of this magnitude. Make no mistake, this is a radical change and it will not occur without the meaningful involvement of Aboriginal parents, Elders, Faith Keepers, Clan Mothers, communities, educators, and researchers. People with a unique skill set that can effectively bridge the separation between two great worldviews from a

standpoint that acts as a mirror of experience within the inward reflexive stage. Nielsen (1989) explains this unique perspective and capacity in this way:

Standpoint epistemology begins with the idea that less powerful members of society have the potential for a more complete view of social reality than others, precisely because of their disadvantaged position. That is, in order to survive (socially and sometimes even physically), subordinate persons are attuned to or attentive to the perspective of the dominant class...as well as their own. This awareness gives them the potential for..."double vision" or double consciousness – a knowledge, awareness of, and sensitivity to both the dominant world view of the society and their own minority...perspective. (p. 10)

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