

Research in the Context of Sustainable Dialogue: Aboriginal Peoples and Educational Policy in Northern Ontario (Canada)

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Abstract:

Public education is experiencing an increase in the number of Aboriginal children in Canadian classrooms. According to recent provincial policies related to Aboriginal education in Ontario (Canada), public school board administrators and elected trustees should be aware and prepared to address the uniqueness of Aboriginal epistemologies and identities that will provide culturally-sensitive school and learning environments in publicly-funded education. This paper provides the context of our ongoing work as a bi-epistemic and multidisciplinary team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators, graduate students, Elders, and Aboriginal community leaders. The research, very much aligned with our previous studies in this same area, compels a reimagining of education for Aboriginal students and communities and creates a vision of public education that transcends Eurocentric educational perspectives and paradigms.

Keywords-component; *Aboriginal education; educational policy*

I. Introduction

Public education is experiencing an unprecedented increase in the number of Aboriginal children in Canadian classrooms (Cooke & McWhirter, 2011). According to recent provincial policies related to Aboriginal education in Ontario (Canada), public school board administrators and elected trustees should be aware and prepared to address the uniqueness of Aboriginal epistemologies and identities that will provide culturally-sensitive school and learning environments in publicly-funded education. The key issue, as we discovered in our previous federally funded-funded research, is that the educational experience of Aboriginal students in publicly funded schools across Ontario (Canada) often inhibits the next generation's capacity to be self-determining (Identifying Reference).

This paper provides the context of our ongoing work as a bi-epistemic and multidisciplinary team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators, graduate students, Elders, and Aboriginal community leaders. We are privileged to have been federally-funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and have applied for further financial support to continue this research.

II. Context

In a previous publication we underscored that the drive for sustainable development in northern Ontario remains strong (Identifying Reference). We noted that northern Ontario comprises nearly 60% of the entire province. Its



boundaries include the White River region in the east and the border of the province of Manitoba to the west. It extends to James Bay and Hudson Bay in the north and to the border of the United States of America in its most southern part. The eastern and western boundaries span more than 1000 kilometers. In many parts of this vast area communities are not accessible all year around. Not surprising, northern Ontario is faced with a variety of challenges including scattered resources and technological difficulties (Northwest Local Health Integration Network, 2005).

In the same publication we stated that Aboriginal communities in northern Ontario recognize that an educated and healthy population is imperative to sustaining thriving communities. It is understood that the inability to sustain effective educational practices and health-care supports has dire consequences upon Aboriginal youth's academic achievement and mental health resulting in dramatic increases of urban migration from the many remote communities characteristic of the northern part of this centrally-located province. From purely an educational perspective, the ripple effect of these realities leads to declining enrolment in publicly-funded schools and to difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified teachers (Identifying Reference; Wint, 2002). Our research recognizes that northern Ontario education systems have historically experienced substantial social and economic challenges that have had adverse effects on the availability of suitable schooling practices for Aboriginal communities (Bachus, 2008).

The Research Project

Aboriginal peoples across Canada envision improved educational systems that will contribute to their socio-economic development (Toulouse, 2013). Northern Ontario is no exception. The goal of our ongoing investigative research project, thus, is to build on the other phases of our SSHRC-funded projects that investigated the impact of the 2007 Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework (the Framework) on Aboriginal students, public school teachers, principals, Aboriginal youth counsellors, and Elders-in-residence (Identifying References, 2010, 2012, 2014). Our previous research has shown that cultural conflict and feelings of marginalization among K to 12 Aboriginal students are characteristic of publicly funded schools that do not adequately implement the respective objectives of the policy Framework. We conducted Research Conversations (Kanu, 2011) sensitive to Aboriginal ways of knowing to gather the perceptions and opinions of the aforementioned stakeholders across Ontario to investigate the impact of the Framework in classrooms and schools. We discovered that collaborative approaches between students, teachers and youth counsellors that honour the strengths and capacities of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students offered the greatest opportunity for successful and sustainable policy implementation and Aboriginal student engagement. Moreover, teachers, principals and counsellors who understood the complex challenges facing Aboriginal communities were better able to effectively develop classroom and pedagogical approaches that resonated most with Aboriginal students. In these instances all students coexisted in social, epistemic, and symbolic spaces that valued the presence of Elders-in-residence as spiritual knowledge-keepers. In the same light, we noted the profound lack of consistent policy implementation in schools and classrooms across Ontario that resulted in few conceptual spaces where Aboriginal students could discern their social location and their individual and collective identity.



Our ongoing work with the Nishnawbe, Métis, Cree, Oji-Cree, and Nishnawbe-Aski peoples appreciates their highly diverse cultures, languages, and histories. To accurately reflect the evolving provincial educational reality depends on engaging these diverse Aboriginal populations. Therefore, the current project engages a cross section of four school boards and their corresponding Aboriginal Tribal Councils to reflect the tribal diversity across Ontario. Although Ontario has advanced significantly as outlined in the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework (2007), the 2nd Progress Report (2013), and the Implementation Plan (2014), we are examining how the Framework and related documents affects Aboriginal Advisory Councils, the educational leaders of Tribal Councils, school board administrators and elected trustees,. The Framework and policies provide strategies that are based on a holistic and integrated approach to improving Aboriginal student educational outcomes. They aim to raise educators’ awareness of Aboriginal students’ unique learning styles. They also address the importance of establishing the positive cultural identities of Aboriginal students in the social fabric across school and school board communities in order to foster self-esteem and engagement. Cited throughout the aforementioned documents is the significance of cooperation between school boards and Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal educational leaders to successfully implement education programs and services that support Aboriginal student achievement and well-being in public schools. It is the voices of the respective Aboriginal community leaders and school board officials that we believe are worth hearing.

Aboriginal communities across Ontario are seeking to advance their adaptive capacities to establish educational programs that reflect epistemic traditions and foster positive self-identities (Ball, 2008; Howard & Widdowson, 2013). Aboriginal peoples advocate for educational experiences that identify and celebrate their values. Among the expected outcomes of our work will be better understandings of how research by/with Aboriginal scholars and communities can be organized.

III. Implications, Challenges and Moving Forward

Among the objectives of our ongoing research in northern Ontario is to respect the traditional knowledge of the people and the natural and social environment in which they live. The research team is engaged in dialogue and consultation for the sustainable development of educational practices that honour Aboriginal students’ socio-cultural and epistemic identities. As we have stated in previous publications, we appreciate the challenges specific to northern Ontario Aboriginal peoples, and fully recognize how important it is to situate ourselves in the life circumstances of these communities (Identifying Reference).

The ongoing research, very much aligned with our previous studies in this same area, will compel a reimagining of education for Aboriginal students and communities, and create a vision of public education that transcends Eurocentric educational perspectives and paradigms. This research will attest to the fact that there are other unique epistemes and ways of knowing and challenge the ongoing Western and Eurocentric educational policies of assimilation. The research will bring to light the internal contradictions between the official recognition of Aboriginal student learning preferences and styles and the unacceptable protocols across schools and divisions to respect and honour these in pedagogy, curriculum, and the social fabric of public education .

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