Education as Regeneration: Process of Decolonizing

Literature Review

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In the past, the Canadian government tried to assimilate Canada’s Indigenous people into mainstream culture by forcing Western ideologies onto Aboriginal children through the use of residential schools. These residential schools taught Western principles and Catholicism to Aboriginal children, while, at the same time, attempting to erase the 'Indian out of the Indian.' Children attending these schools were not allowed to speak their native languages, nor were they permitted to display any cultural artifacts in the school setting, or severe punishment would follow. It has been argued by several education and history scholars that much of the Aboriginal language, culture and heritage has been lost as a result of the residential school era (Haig Brown, 1988; Barman, Hebert & McCaskill 1986).

After centuries of subjugation, Aboriginal people have finally reclaimed some control over their education system and other educational facilities. However, despite the fact that they obtained control over certain aspects of their lives, the current education system within Canada is still failing to serve Aboriginal students; as the school systems often employ predominately Western pedagogy methods that are very diverse from the Aboriginal teaching system. Michael Mendelson (2008) reports that there has been a continuing failure to educate Aboriginal students, even after the conclusion of the residential school era. Furthermore, his findings indicate that, on average, only twenty-nine percent of Aboriginal students actually graduate from high school in Canada. Thus, Aboriginal students are not succeeding in the school system and are in fact falling behind academically because they are being educated in ways that do not necessarily correspond with the traditional education values of their family and community. Many, Aboriginal people perceive that knowledge originates in the spirit world and therefore the process of learning is focused on learning about oneself in relation to all other aspects of life (heart, mind, body, soul) (Graveline, 1998). They also believe that they are taught primarily through communal relations, lived experiences, storytelling, dreams, oral languages, observations, experimentation and participation in tribal ceremonies (Stiffarm, 1999). As it is evident our current education system does not reflect Aboriginal perspectives, traditions, and values and nor does it often acknowledge the Indigenous ways of knowing.

Aboriginal people, after centuries of colonization, are ready to “heal their people, restore their inherent dignity, and apply fundamental human rights to their community” (Battiste, 2000, p. 6). Educational facilities are one domicile where decolonizing and regenerating Indigenous culture can emerge. Incorporating Aboriginal culture and traditional practices into an educational facility will not only improve the student’s academic rates, but will also educate students on their culture and heritage. In order to regenerate Aboriginal ideologies and culture it is imperative that their school system incorporates the use of their indigenous language, takes on a holistic approach to learning, enforces communal involvement, and acknowledges traditional Aboriginal pedagogy methods in the classroom.
Incorporation of Native Language

Historically, it is estimated that previous to contact with Europeans there were approximately 65 indigenous languages spoken in Canada (Labercane & McEachern, 2008, p. 2). However, out of the 65 languages, only 3 of Canada’s native languages—Cree, Ojibwe, and Inuktitut—are considered to be strong enough to survive due to their high population rates (Labercane & McEachern, 2008; Burnaby, 1996; McLvor, 2009). According to Burnaby (1996), English is the language of instruction for practically all native education systems in Canada. As a result of the decrease in the use of native languages in the Aboriginal community, the “mother tongue languages of many native groups have dropped alarmingly from a reported high of 87.4 percent in 1951 to a low of 29.3 percent in the 1981 census” (Burnaby, 1996). With the decline in native language usage a decrease in cultural identity, cultural preservation and traditional knowledge will emerge.

In order to regenerate and restore Aboriginal culture back into the community it is imperative that Aboriginal languages are incorporated into the education system as a means of a decolonizing method. Incorporating Aboriginal languages into the school setting will allow these students to increase their self confidence, gain closer ties to their cultural heritage, and feel a sense of belonging in Canada’s multicultural diverse society (Cummins, 1989). Furthermore, Labercane and McEachern (2008) discuss that by altering the curriculum by integrating indigenous people’s first language it will increase this cultural groups self-pride as they feel proud in knowing that their culture and heritage language is respected and acknowledged by the general public.

Incorporating Aboriginal languages into the school system will not only restore cultural traditions but will also improve student academic rates. Wright, Taylor, and Macarthur (2000) composed a study that assessed the learning and academic achievements of Inuit students in both an Inuktitut-immersion program and a second-language program. Their research concluded that the Inuit students in the immersion program displayed higher academic levels in both their native and secondary language, and, additionally, these students maintained a close relationship to their tribes. On the other hand, the Inuit children who were educated entirely in English or French, deserting their mother tongue, did “not develop English or French skills that were equivalent to the Inuktitut language skills acquired by the students in the Inuktitut-immersion program” (Wright, Taylor, & Macarthur, 2000, p. 68). This study acknowledges that utilizing Aboriginal language into a classroom setting will benefit the students by restoring their culture and develop higher-level language skills in Aboriginal students.

It is imperative that Aboriginal languages are implemented into this cultural groups’ school setting for the loss of this language means ‘unique and irrecoverable knowledge about our nation’s past is lost’ (McLvor, 2009, p.2). Immersion programs, guest speakers, daily story-telling from communal elders are a few ways to implement language teachings into the mainstream classroom. In addition using the First Nation’s archival language records, dual language books, and listening to tape recordings in the group’s first language are some teaching and learning strategies that can be utilized to help restore the Indigenous language.
Community Involvement and Holistic Education

Battiste (2002) states that, “Indigenous knowledge is now seen as an educational remedy that will empower Aboriginal students if applications of their indigenous knowledge, heritage, and language are integrated into the Canadian educational system” (p. 9). Implementing traditional Aboriginal teaching practices and involving communal elders in the learning process is a decolonizing method that will not only restore cultural practices but improve the economical, social and academic situation for this ethnic group.

Research has shown that incorporating a holistic approach to education into the school setting leads to academic and social success among Aboriginal students (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Studies that have been composed in the last decade have confirmed that it is, in fact, imperative and beneficial academically that education programs for Aboriginals take on a holistic approach and enforce communal involvement within their schools. Ball and Pence’s (1999), article entitled Beyond Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Developing Community and Culturally Appropriate Practice, describes how educators have acknowledged that communal integration in programs lead to higher student academic achievement. In the article, the authors discuss how early childhood education teaching programs in the Meadow Lake Tribal Area in British Columbia have begun educating teachers on how to incorporate Aboriginal culture and communal practices and the teaching assistance of the communal elders into the school curriculum. They believe that, by doing so, students will improve in all aspects of their lives. In the Aboriginal community, the elders are seen as the wisest, most knowledgeable members who have the capability to teach spiritual wisdom to the community’s youth. Furthermore, Satzewich and Wotherspoon (1993) discuss how elders not only educate the children on the culture’s heritage and history but also help to promote academic learning by promoting a belief system that learning is a continual process and encourage one to search for knowledge rather than accept it.

Schissel and Wotherspoon’s (2003) case study on the Princess Alexandra School, located in Saskatoon, displays how, by conjoining the school and the community, Aboriginal students residing in this poverty-stricken area have begun to improve in their overall behaviour. Students attending the school felt comfortable to ask for help from their teachers as a safe and accepting learning environment is established. Also, by members of the community helping out in the school setting the children gained an appreciation for the roles of all the communal members and developed close relationships, which led to a decrease in student misconduct.

Incorporating native traditions and cultural practices into the education curriculum, Aboriginal students are able to regain the aspects of their culture that were lost to them through the process of colonization. Educators can use elders in their classroom to help tell stories, to perform art activities, or to help teach history. Elders can be used to help teach all curriculum subjects and will restore cultural practices that have been once lost to this group.
Traditional Pedagogy

The Aboriginal community recognizes that “each child is a treasured gift from the creator and each child’s learning path is unique; i.e., each child has his/her own individual temperament, talents, learning style, intelligence, interests, challenges, abilities, and prior experiences” (Battiste, 1995. p. 18). In addition, an Aboriginal traditional perspective on learning is holistic, meaning it ‘engages and develops all aspects of the individual; emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual’ (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). In the traditional Aboriginal education, they believe that education should not only work on improving one’s mind, but should also focus on expanding ones knowledge in areas of the heart, mind, body and soul (Graveline, 1998). To the Indigenous community, the heart, mind, body and soul, also known as the Medicine Wheel, are what makes up a whole person and all components need to be worked on in order for an individual to acquire a successful education. When one part is not working as it should be, then the entire person becomes off center and the body becomes off-balanced (Graveline, 1998). Our westernized system of education only works on educating the mind and disregards all other aspects of the medicine wheel. Thus, Aboriginal students are not succeeding in our school system and are in fact falling behind academically because they are experiencing an imbalance of teachings and are being educated in ways that do not necessarily correspond with the traditional educational values of their family and community (Battiste, 1995). Aboriginal educators need to work on educating the ‘whole’ of the person and not just focus on a segment of the medicine wheel. Incorporating the medicine wheel into the classroom will also restore cultural traditions and enable the Aboriginal youth community to develop a close relationship with the communal elders.
REFERENCES

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