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ABSTRACT

The Western paradigm of education regards schools as the essential institutionalized cultural settings in which formal learning can take place and as the only socially valid settings in which learners can get a formal education. Knowledge is commodified and may be exchanged for currency in the form of jobs or licenses. Learning that occurs outside this institutionalized educational system is judged by the dominant culture to be invalid for certification or professional recognition, is labeled informal, and is associated with the unschooled. This dichotomization of education into formal and informal learning serves to maintain unequal relations of power in education as well as the control, marginalization, and exploitation of minority groups in society. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Canada Natives had their own highly successful systems of education. The Elders are the most knowledgeable people in Aboriginal societies, yet their learning has been through informal practices and is therefore unrecognized by the dominant culture. Aboriginal people want their children to learn everything that formal education has to offer, as well as their own culture and ways of doing things. The work of Elders must be incorporated into the practices of the formal educational system so that it contributes to the acquisition of credit in formal courses. Obstacles to Elders' participation in formal education must be identified and overcome. (Contains 19 references.) (TD)

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TOWARD A REDEFINITION OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING: EDUCATION AND THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

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Abstract

The work of Elders is associated with informal learning. Yet, Elders are keepers of tradition, guardians of culture, the wise people, the teachers (RCAP, 1996). This article describes the context of the work of Elders and underlines the importance of Elder involvement in formal education.

Les Aînés jouent un rôle clé surtout dans l'apprentissage non structuré. Cependant, on les qualifie également de sages, d'enseignants et de gardiens de traditions culturelles (RCAP, 1996). Il s'agit d'un article qui donne un aperçu de l'apport remarquable des Aînés à la société autochtone et qui souligne le rôle important qu'ils jouent dans l'éducation formelle.

Formal education is recognized in most countries as an important mechanism of socialization, cultural identity, social control, labour force production, social mobility, political legitimation and stimulation of social change (Thomas, 1983; Fagerlind and Saha, 1989). In the white western paradigm of education, formal education is an institutional matter. State sanctioned agencies such as the school, college, university and so on are viewed both as the normative exemplar of education, and the only bona fide value structures within which meaningful teaching, learning and education is perceived to occur. There is a prevailing, often uncontested belief within this tradition, that mainstream schools are universally functional and singular institutions which exist to fulfil the needs of individuals and social collectivities.

This pervasive paradigm of education regards schools as the essential institutionalized cultural settings in which formal learning can take place and as the only socially valid settings in which learners can get formally educated.

The process of institutionalization in schooling within this Eurocentric paradigm of education mirrors the beliefs, values, traditions, practices and normative expectations of those comprising the culture of domination. Learning which occurs outside of mainstream organizations, agencies or communities as a result is judged by the culture of domination; hence, invalid for certification, professional recognition or indexes of recognized (legitimated) knowledge; to be informal; a mode of education associated with informal teaching, informal knowledge, informal learning, informal education, and the unschooled.

Knowledge is, hence, commodified, and in the case of degrees, professional offerings, certification and other academic recognitions, which often literally may be exchanged for currency in the form of jobs or licences, includes/excludes who may engage in formal practice. In this paradigmatic model, the ideological emphasis is always on the individual level of attainment; yet, paradoxically, it is in the social institutionalization and regulations, and other forming of time, space and quality of valued knowledge that this western model has a rigid equation and lockstep relation between valid knowledge and formal education with its intended trappings of certification, streaming, segmentation by particular scholarly fields, and so on. One becomes an "expert" within -- and generally only within -- the compartmentalized parameters drawn by this model. Knowledge in this way is ordinated, sorted into hierarchies of sacred and profane; sanctioned and unsanctioned; knowledge versus understandings.

Lost in the valorization of this compartimentalization of knowledge are the histories, biases, beliefs and collectively shared knowledge that organizationally link the individual and group as social extensions of one another. A particular history linked to a unique zeitgeist (world view), and way of processing the world. Western practice of the construction of formal knowledge, of course, was (and is) always riddled with such realities: implied bifercations such as Judeo-Christian -- other as an organization of cosmologies and theology; the primacy of logo -- deductive reasoning and so on. Max Weber (1947) and other social scientists often implicitly acknowledge this in dichotomies such as subject-object; verstehen (understanding) versus scientific fact. But, these histories and particularities were relegated as interesting, but beyond the scientific pale. Unlike facts, such understandings were viewed as an embarrassment as to how knowledge was constructed. Yet, it is the sharing, processing, and valoration of such processes that First Nations and Indigenous knowledge encapsulates itself. Elders are valued, at least in part, because they are the carriers and emblems of this communally generated and mediated knowledge. In the western paradigm, such relations and processes of knowledge transmission is "informal". Yet, these same processes are at the heart and soul of what is "formal" to Indigenous knowledge.

Thinking and normative practices in white western institutions, by contrast, structure dichotomization between formal and informal learning. This is not happenstance; to the contrary, they have social intent. Combined, they comprise a dynamic complexity which results in boundary maintenance of unequal relations of power in education and domination, control, marginalization and exploitation of minority groups in society. Schools are sites for reproducing societal inequalities. The dichotomization of formal and informal education can be perceived as a dichotomy of social relations pertaining specifically to the Aboriginal peoples. Eurocentricity has devalued and negated the saliency of non-western forms of knowledge and their relevance to education in North America (Dei, 1996, p. 107). Stated differently and more succinctly, the dichotomy in formal and informal education is also a dichotomy in social power relations. Both exist as dichotomies of Aboriginal and white western world views; dichotomies which are the result of the hegemonic forces of Eurocentricity.

The history of formal education and formal learning under the influence of formal institutions and agencies in Canada, including those of the Government of Canada, provincial governments, the Churches, and provincial school boards, as such learning pertains specifically to the Aboriginal peoples, is a tragically oppressive frequently genocidal history. Formal education, from the banning of the potlash to the imposition of English (or French) at residential schools, is instrumental in the reproduction of inequalities in society. The results of formal education and formal schooling have had devastating effects on the Native peoples. In the wider Canadian society, Aboriginal peoples are the most marginal economic and social group. Education policies and practices in Canada, pertaining specifically to Native

children, youth and adults have been and continue to be paternalistic, racist and systemically discriminatory in character (Burns, 1998). Residential schooling, mainstream schooling and master tuition agreement schooling have been used as instruments for achieving cultural genocide of the Native peoples. They have served as oppressive instruments by acculturation, assimilation, integration and an overall intentional eroding of both social cohesion and self reliance amongst the Aboriginal people (Bums, 1997).

Over the past two hundred years, Canadian society has systematically stripped the Native people of their land, their culture, their language, their education, their spiritual beliefs, and their way of life (Chisholm, 1994). The nation state has been unrelenting in its attempts to break the Native spirit. It has used laws, the Indian Act, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), and schools to eradicate the Aboriginal peoples as a distinct and unique peoples (Comeau and Santin, 1995). Virtually, all government organizations have served as instruments in efforts to marginalize the needs, interest, and rights of Native peoples and the formal education system has been among the worst agents of this grim construction (York, 1992).

Aboriginal peoples, in colonized countries have internationally recognized rights to their languages, their cultural practices, their heritage, and their self-determination over their lives, their institutions, and their territory. Mindful of this reality, the federal government of Canada appears to be working towards a reconciliation with the Native peoples.

The Government of Canada provides a partial perspective to the historical legacies of institutionally imposed formal education practices in the following way.

> Sadly, our history with respect to the treatment of Aboriginal people is not something in which we can take pride. Attitudes of racial and cultural superiority led to a suppression of Aboriginal culture and values. As a country, we are burdened by past actions that resulted in weakening the identity of Aboriginal peoples, suppressing their languages and cultures, and outlawing spiritual practices. We must recognize the impact of these actions on the once self-sustaining nations that were disaggregated, disrupted, limited or even destroyed by the dispossession of traditional territory, by the relocation of Aboriginal peoples, and by some provisions of the Indian Act. We must acknowledge that the result of these actions was the erosion of the political, economic and social systems of Aboriginal people and nations ... One aspect of our relationship with Aboriginal people over this period that requires particular attention is the Residential School system. This system separated many children from their families and communities and prevented them from speaking their own languages and from learning about their heritage and culture. In the worst cases, it left legacies of personal pain and distress that continue to reverberate in Aboriginal communities to this day. (Statement of Reconciliation: Learning from the Past, 1998)

The Aboriginal peoples of North America had their own systems of formal education prior to the arrival of Europeans -- systems which were by all accounts highly successful. After confederation, the British North American Act (1867) gave the federal government jurisdiction over "Indians and lands reserved for Indians", including the formal education of Indian children. Jurisdictional interference on matters pertaining to the schooling of Aboriginal children, youth and adults continues to occur to this day. Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education and devolutionary practices are not necessarily leading to social acceptance of the formal and informal learning and teaching activities and practices which take place in First Nations and/or in Aboriginal communities, organizations and agencies.

The Aboriginal people have long been the object of attempts by state and church authorities to use education to control and assimilate them, not only during the residential school era, but also more subtly today (Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Such issues are central to this dimension of our larger project entitled "Informal Learning Culture Through the Life Course: Initiatives in Native Organizations and Communities" (Burns, Beaudin and Olson, 1997-2001).

Corson (1998), for example, points out that Aboriginal peoples of Canada of all ages, who have Aboriginal language expertise, tend to have learned their language informally through primary group relations and/or informal relations within their community settings. And yet, such bilingual proficiency

is rarely recognized in formal institutions in general, and in terms of Aboriginal peoples having the knowledge, expertise or credentials required to teach an Aboriginal language in formal education settings. Elaborated further, there is an overall non recognition of community-based Native education which takes place in First Nation communities as well as in Aboriginal organizations, agencies, and other settings in Aboriginal communities.

Among the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, for example, the Tyendinaga Elders are walking history books (Brant, 1995). Elders possess formal knowledge and expertise. Through orality, the Elders provide lessons on how to go about living the right life. Elders impart knowledge, values and traditions. They play important roles in correcting misconceptions about the Aboriginal peoples including their beliefs, values, customs, traditions, culture and history. White western ignorance and ethnocentricity have led to the institutionalization of a false logic of prejudice, stereotyping, racism and systemic discrimination directed toward the Aboriginal people. That false logic has been pervasive throughout the formal structures of formal learning in mainstream education institutions.

The Elders are the most knowledgeable people in Aboriginal societies. Yet, what they have come to learn has been learned through informal practices in the course of becoming adults. There is no Aboriginal formal education system for developing the knowledge and wisdom held by Elders. There is also no formal education system in Aboriginal society or in non-Aboriginal society for transmitting the knowledge and wisdom of Elders. How do Elders learn what they know? What do they know? Who do they teach? What do they teach? How do they teach (processes)? What are the impacts of Elders? Where do they teach? What implications does the work of Elders have for developing both new linkages and effective linkages between Aboriginal communities and institutionally sponsored, school-based formal learning? And, how can the work of Elders be deliberately encouraged by education organizations? These are some of the issues being examined in the Bums' dimension of the project; a component of the project which attempts to document the informal teaching practices of Elders, the processes by which they occur, their effects, and their potential implications for formal education.

Why can't the work of Elders be incorporated into the practices of the formal educational system in a way that it contributes valuably to the acquisition of credit in formal courses and/or units of study? There is the need of a self-determination praxis of liberation of Aboriginal peoples in formal education which serves the self-government needs and interests of the Aboriginal peoples as a distinct and unique peoples and which also addresses their concerns for social justice, equity, and power sharing in the larger Canadian society; a society of multiple interests. There is also the need of schooling which helps Aboriginal children, youth and adults learn the skills they need to participate fully in the economy and to develop as citizens of Aboriginal nations -- with the knowledge of their languages and traditions necessary for cultural continuity (RCAP, 1996).

Elders are first and foremost teachers and role models. They teach others about culture, tradition and about the vision of life that is contained in First Nation philosophies and handed down in ceremonies and traditional teaching (Stiegelbauer, 1996). With an overall recognition that the white western paradigm of formal education oppresses and represses the Aboriginal culture, creating an incompatible cultural hegemony through formal schooling which allows Aboriginal children, youth and adults no future short of assimilation and cultural extinction -- formal system of education can work toward greater degrees of Native inclusiveness. Corson (1997) points out solutions are not to be found in approaches which are based on the belief that Aboriginal people can be helped through intercultural communication. Such notions are ethnocentrically naive. They also tacitly embody an ultimate arrogance; if they (Native) really want to know, they should be like us. There is no reciprocal notion that, if we Westerners want to know, we should be like them, except -- perhaps -- as a study of an archaic anthropological curiosity; a kind of morphological detailing of some extinct petroglyph. A stone for study which curiously can walk, talk and gather. The scope of radical differences between Aboriginal sign systems and European sign systems including their beliefs, values and normative practices is so great that it would take an entire lifetime to grasp them (Wertheim, 1995).

Native thinking processes, bodies of knowledge and structures of knowledge transmission are uniquely different from those underpinning white western institutions. Relatedly, Aboriginal world views and western world view are in paradigmatic clash. This is an overall clash which has implications as to what gets to be viewed as formal, non-formal, and informal teaching, learning and education in

western society as well as to who gets to teach what.

Aboriginal parents and educators want Aboriginal children to learn everything that formal education has to offer, as well as their own culture and way of doing things. Given the devastating effects on Aboriginal children of monocultural education within formal education the role of Elders in informal learning and formal education is an area worthy of study in its own right. There is a need of authentic Aboriginal inclusiveness in formal education. Authentic Aboriginal inclusiveness is needed in formal education. Aboriginal inclusiveness has major implications for formal education along the entire education continuum and throughout the life course.

Non-formal education, informal learning and formal education (see Wain, 1987) are socially organized and socially situated practices. The white western paradigm of formal education mitigates against the involvement of Elders in formal education. Obstacles to Elders' participation in formal education must be identified and overcome. Elders are keepers of tradition, guardians of culture, the wise people, the teachers (RCAP, 1996, Vol. 3, p. 525). Aboriginal education, as assimilation, has always failed everywhere, failed miserably and failed destructively; Aboriginal education for self-determination, controlled by Aboriginal people, succeeds (Hampton, 1996). Thus, the importance of this project. The project takes as its point of reference the existence of the Aboriginal peoples as a people who are distinct and unique, Aboriginal right to self-determination, and the inherent right of self-government; and the meaningful involvement of Elders in formal schooling as a new form of emancipatory praxis whose aim is emancipation, self-determination and self-government within the larger Canadian context.

Learning is always socially situated, socially constructed, socially produced and socially validated within social settings which exist as contextual settings. As a result, this dimension of the project also takes as its point of reference socially produced formal, informal and non-formal knowledge, expertise and practices of Elders in four distinct, but inter-related Native settings: a second level of centralized service organization, a tribal council, a First Nation education centre, a Native friendship centre, and a First Nation community.

The project involves considerable conceptual work: conceptualizing formal, nonformal and informal knowledge, teaching and learning (see Wain, 1987) within the context of not only western world view, but also Aboriginal world views; descriptions of the analytic categories and elements around which formal, non-formal and informal knowledge, teaching and learning occurs within Aboriginal contextual settings; descriptions of the analytic categories of Aboriginal world views and Aboriginal epistemologies which contribute to the development of authentic Aboriginal knowledge and to authentic Aboriginal teaching and learning practices.

Within the context of these issues, it is also of vital importance to discover and describe the elements around which Native knowledge is developed and utilized; the historical context of Native knowledge production and use; the social context of Native knowledge production and use today; and both factors and themes pertaining to formal, informal and non-formal knowledge production and use by Elders in both Native and non-Native education organizations alike.

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