REFEREED ARTICLE

Indigenous Content in Curriculum: The Challenge

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Abstract

Canada has legions of strong Indigenous voices, yet our educational system fails many of our Indigenous students. A comparison of Metis, First Nations and Inuit high school graduation rates to non-Indigenous students in Manitoba shows significant disparity. Reasons for leaving school are complex, and disengagement with education can generate adults vulnerable to low income realities. Broadly recurring challenges include diversity of Indigenous communities, communicating and understanding new curriculum, transitioning existing classroom practice, authenticity of presenters, necessity of expert knowledge, problematic textbooks, meaningfully incorporated material, assigning value to Indigenous programming, and navigating a multicultural framework. Evolving education to include Indigenous perspective better serves all students and our larger society.

High school graduation rates in Manitoba show a devastating deviation in performance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Although our economy has a multitude of strong Indigenous contributors at every level, the educational system fails many. Lower education levels bring exposure to higher levels of poverty. Poverty brings with it a higher incidence of many debilitating conditions. Academia is embracing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action 62-65, and the abecedarian stages of evolving the massive educational system are upon us. Diversity of Indigenous communities, and the challenge it brings to developing program content and delivery, are complex issues. Broadly recurring challenges include communicating and understanding new Indigenous curriculum directives, socially rooted frameworks and identities of teachers themselves filtering classroom content, authenticity of presenters, meaningfully incorporated material, undervaluing Indigenous course content, and the balancing philosophy of multiculturalism. Enhancing transformative change will require building stronger relationships within our communities, requiring careful, structured and sustained funding in identified frameworks for success. Targeted evolution of curriculum perspectives will benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners, better serving a growing segment of our identity, and our nation as a whole.

The Statistics of Education

There are powerful Indigenous voices of success in every level and profession in Canada. These numbers are multiplying, but tremendous educational challenges still face Indigenous Canadians. Statistical facts show us that our schools continue to fail many Aboriginal students (St. Denise, 2010). In Manitoba, the 4-year graduation rate in 2018 of non-Indigenous girls was 90.6%, while only 51.2% for Indigenous girls. It is worse for boys, where non-Indigenous boys graduate at a rate of 85.4%, compared to Indigenous boys at only 48.5% (Manitoba Education and Training). When separated into Metis, Inuit and First Nation, Metis students accomplish slightly higher graduation rates at 67.4% vs 47.1 % for First Nations (Ontario Ministry of Education). The causes of this achievement gap are complex and interconnected (Ferguson, 2019), but there is no questioning its consequences. A quarter of a million Manitobans are Indigenous, and 31.2% are aged 14 and under (Statistics Canada, 2017). The educational system is underserving a large portion of our community, and there is an urgent need to change.

Poor education manifests adults in a weak economic position. Numerous studies across North America have linked lower education levels to low household income, and many more link poverty to crime and incarceration rates (Duke, 2018; Dyson et al., 2009; Rotenberg, 2016). Having less than high school education is one of a team of predictors that connect poverty with poor long-term health, unemployment, food insecurity, low household income, and poor housing (Rotenberg, 2016). Poverty is the result of a complex system, to which poor education is deeply connected.

As a demographic, First Nations, Metis and Inuit are over exposed to poverty and the socio-cultural norms associated with it. Within Canada's demographic profile, Indigenous peoples experience the highest levels of poverty: 25% are living in poverty including 40% of Indigenous children (Canadian Poverty Institute, 2019). When compared to the national average of 9.5% in 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2019d), there is a clear demographic distinction to poverty exposure.

There are strong links between lower education levels and high incarceration rates, as high as 70% (Duke, 2018). This rate is mirrored in Saskatchewan, where 70% of chronic offenders qualify as low income (Boyce et al., 2018). Indigenous youth are significantly overrepresented in our corrections programs, with 81% and 92% of admissions to youth custody identified as Aboriginal males during 2017/2018 in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and 98% vs 2% female youth (Statistics Canada, 2019a). Admissions to adult custody in Manitoba were 75% Indigenous vs 25% non-Indigenous in 2017-2018 (Statistics Canada, 2019b, 2019c), numbers that are signals of a complex system of disenfranchisement, in which education is deeply embedded.

Evolving perspectives will benefit all learners. Indigenous disenfranchisement is a complicated problem. Dropping out of school is driven by many influences, and students' inability to see themselves or their communities reflected in institutionally mandated knowledge and society plays a large role (Brant Castellano, 2014). When student self-esteem is supported by showing respect and value for community and culture, attendance improves, and self-identification increases (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). Actively supporting culture strengthens resilience in youth (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). It is clear that education is empowering, that education needs to evolve to meet the needs of today's learners, and that change will benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Hansen, 2016; Manitoba School Boards Association, 2016; St. Denise, 2011).

Inclusion of Indigenous Perspectives

Although the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Education for Reconciliation mandates continue to be supported and implemented with success in areas across Canada, the work to "integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) faces significant and complicated challenges. Indigenizing perspectives will be a living, complex work of a generation (Pidgeon 2015). It is a multifaceted interplay of policy change and engagement with Indigenous communities, across widely diverse cultural practice, geography, and community experience.

The concept has received strong endorsement from educators at every level. Like all great changes, there are stages of evolution "indifference, intimidation, image, integration, incubation and initiation" (MSBA, 2016). It is important to acknowledge that all of us are at different stages in this journey. Lakehead University and the University of Winnipeg, which have made Indigenous studies mandatory for service careers for years, are developing an expansion of this mandate to include all course studies. We must think very carefully about how to implement changes in a way that moves us forward as a diverse educational community. To borrow a fitting colloquialism, the Devil really is in the details.

Diversity of Indigenous Communities

Diversity of Indigenous communities engenders a variety of experiences geographically, historically, and socially. There are 633 First Nation communities, with over 60 language dialects (Assembly of First Nations, 2012). Relevant content must therefore be addressed with an equally diverse social story. Local perspective must come from local communities (Hansen, 2016; Milne, 2017; St. Denis, 2011).

Lack of information about resident First Nation, Metis, and Inuit communities reflects the disconnectedness of our society. This knowledge gap is understandable given that Indigenous culture and shared traditions were institutionally and legally discouraged for generations (Hansen, 2018). After a week-long discussion on Metis issues with @IndigenousXca, one participant claimed having "learned more about Metis in a week than throughout their entire formal education" (Gaudry, 2015, p. 96). Because there are close to 90 000 Metis in Manitoba (Statistics Canada, 2017), this excludes a significant perspective to our social story.

Because of the diversity of Indigenous cultural practice, geography merits deep consideration, and a pan-Indian mindset must be avoided. Michelle Diagle expressed frustration at continually being approached, as an Indigenous academic woman, to consult and join research projects while new to the University of British Columbia. As a Swampy Cree from Treaty 9 in Northwestern Ontario, she was entirely unfamiliar with the local Indigenous political and legal traditions of coastal British Columbia, and was shocked that colonial settlers, who had lived there all their lives, knew so little of it. She cautioned requests for personal consultations on local issues, citing ignorance of local Indigenous communities and a lack of local connections. Meaningful dialogue calls for a geographically sensitive, integrated approach in the continued evolution of Indigenization of course content (Daigle, 2019).

Developing Program Content and Delivery

A lack of expertise is crippling, and speaks to the necessity of expert knowledge. This is compounded by the fact that social identity is a fluid construct dependent on lived experience (Ferguson, 2019), which can manifest as a spectrum of practice within Indigenous communities. When unprepared instructors teach what they know of Indigenous perspective, it is frequently wrong (Gaudry, 2016). Articulating meaningful Indigenous perspective onto course work means moving beyond beads and bannock (St. Denis, 2011). It is of paramount importance that content reflects accurately meaningful Indigenous perspectives, or we risk repeating the very institutionalized mistakes we are trying to rectify.

It is important to acknowledge that Eurocentric perspective pervades our curriculum. Defying a change of this re-affirms the power of colonialism, an active process that reproduces advantages for some and disservice to others (Gaudry, 2016). Indigenization of curriculum perspective changes a colonial educational system. Just as it is our inherent right and duty to be stewards of the land, it is also our responsibility to be a part of shaping how classrooms construe our world (Pidgeon, 2016). We must embrace this opportunity to create a system reflective of who we are.

Teachers want a textbook to pick up and teach from, and an Indigenized one is generally not available (Milne, 2017). Textbook definitions of racism are problematic. Defining racism as a personal flaw, as attributing behaviours or values to a racial group, leaves out the dynamic of systemic racism, whereby hidden yet more powerful disadvantages connected to race exist in our institutions (Montgomery, 2005). One example is the difference in funding allocated per student for federal reserve schools versus public provincial schools. As such, the experience of racism is narrowly defined, and thereby partially ignored. To pass the course, students must learn a lens of perspective that subtly legitimizes and formats preference to a colonial settler viewpoint (Montgomery, 2005). This is a powerful indoctrination into colonial societal beliefs.

As a Metis student, my personal experience with social studies classes was uncomfortable. The textbook portrayal of Metis felt like disloyal villains. This did not match what I knew. I realize now that events were explained from a Eurocentric point of view. As an educator, including Metis perspectives years later when I taught the course myself was a natural transition. The unfolding events of the Red River Rebellion and the Manitoba Act are far more complex, and infinitely more engaging to teach and debate, when connected to personal accounts. This is how we will bring about change; all of us have to risk being willing to contribute.

Broadly Recurring Challenges

Releasing new educational directives and seeing them manifest in the classroom are not immediate and fluid events. Many Ontario teachers remain uniformed of Indigenous curriculum initiatives (Milne, 2017). During the implementation of a new, Indigenized social studies curriculum in Alberta in 2010, overall resistance within the teaching body was documented (Scott & Gani, 2018). Even when given a strong curriculum to follow, personal frameworks and philosophies of teachers implementing the new curriculum have a profound impact on effective delivery. A perception that only Indigenous teachers should teach Indigenous content exists (Milne, 2017; Scott & Gani, 2018), and the practice of undervaluing Indigenous course content in comparison to other subjects continues (Milne, 2017; St. Denise, 2011). Multiculturalism has also been identified as an argument against inclusion of an Indigenous perspective (Scott & Gani, 2018; St. Denise, 2011). These difficulties have been cited broadly across Canada as challenges to implementation.

Professional development raises awareness of directives, but does not necessarily change classroom practice. Training to address how teachers are bound by socially rooted frameworks and identities, and an acknowledgement of how this filters classroom content, has to be a cornerstone of introducing Indigenized perspective (Hansen, 2018; MSBA, 2016; Pidgeon, 2016). The reasoning behind including Indigenous perspectives must be clearly articulated and disseminated by administration, not left to individual instructors to create or defend (Daigle, 2019; Gaudry, 2016; Sims, 2016).

Many teachers emancipate themselves from the responsibility of implementing Indigenized curriculum, citing unfamiliarity with the subject (Scott & Gani, 2018; Milne, 2017), and perhaps justly fearing cultural appropriation (Smith, 1999). However, Emily Milne's study of implementing Indigenous policy suggested that many parents and students were accepting of, and open to, non-Indigenous educators teaching Indigenous focused content. Parents expressed support for teachers' efforts, and emphasized that what was important was not the teachers' ancestry, but presenting material in a respectful way (Milne, 2017). As such, much depends on solid supportive training and a willingness to engage by both educators and Indigenous communities.

Employing more Indigenous educators will aid in the curriculum perspective shift. Cluster hires of Indigenous staff, underrepresented in education at all levels, are suggested (Gaudry, 2016; Milne, 2017; Pidgeon, 2016). Implementing language and culture programs within the school will take financial support. Long-term provincial and federal financial support to core funding for successful programs must be addressed (Hansen, 2018; Snyder, Wilson, & Whitford, 2015) in order to animate resources for educational availability. Educational, cultural, and language programs are an asset we must access in order to diversify school programming.

Notions of universal equality, or multiculturalism, have been identified as a reason to restrict Aboriginal curriculum (Scott & Gani, 2018). Explicit multiculturalism suggests Aboriginal perspectives should not be given more precedence than other ethnic histories present in Canada. It is a mistake to equate the experiences of colonial immigrants with the Canadian Aboriginal experience, because it inaccurately assumes commonalties where there are few (St. Denis, 2011). Ongoing land claims and treaty agreements set Aboriginal people apart, in a unique position, where understanding Canada necessitates understanding Indigenous

experience and perspective. Defending public education as neutral denies the Eurocentric perspective it is written in. This is a colonial perspective we must avoid.

Assigning value to Indigenous perspective for all learners is a key component to implementation of programming (Gaudry, 2016; Hansen, 2016; MSBA, 2016). *Indigenization* implies pervasive perspective in content across curriculum. This is a departure from what has been done in the past, and is perhaps a reflection of where we are as individual schools on the inclusion spectrum. Offering Indigenous programs to Indigenous students only during class time actively segregates. Affording language or cultural programs unrecognized for school credit institutionally devalues the language and culture (Milne, 2017). Including meaningful Indigenous perspective is not just counting buffalo instead of sticks (St. Denis, 2011), adding a teepee to the playground, or bringing bannock to class. Careful consultation must happen on goals, what to include, and how to deliver. Including Indigenous perspectives will benefit all learners (St. Denise, 2011). A targeted evolution of perspective will benefit all learners, better serving a growing segment of our Indigenous identity, and our nation as a whole.

Conclusion

Canada has strong Indigenous voices at every level of our economy. However, there is no ignoring the statistics of Indigenous disengagement with high school. Poor education increases exposure to many diseases of poverty such as housing insecurity, food insecurity, poorer heath and higher incarceration levels. High school graduation rates for First Nation, Metis, and Inuit students are dramatically lower than their peers. The diversity of Indigenous communities brings complexity to the development of program content and delivery. The following broadly recurring challenges need to be addressed: (1) communicating and understanding new directives, (2) socially rooted frameworks and identities of the teachers themselves filtering classroom content, (3) authenticity of presenter (4) meaningfully incorporated content, (5) under-valuing indigenous course content, and, (6) the equalizing philosophy of multiculturalism. Professional development, in co-operation with local Indigenous communities, must happen to further strengthen our educational system in order to serve all of our learners.

Looking forward, Indigenizing perspective in a truly meaningful way cannot happen without complicated conversations with the communities we mean to support. In changing the historic dis-harmony between Indigenous comminutes and formal education, we must recognize that tensions will inevitably occur. Evolution is a process, and we must interpret change as a sign we are engaging our communities (MSBA, 2016). Education is our most powerful tool for shaping how we frame our society. As so aptly put by the Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “Education got us into this mess and education will get us out” (Sinclair, 2015). Including culture in curriculum does not magically accomplish reconciliation; however, it is certainly a vital step in our evolution toward a stronger society.

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