

## SPECIAL INTEREST ARTICLE

### Barriers to Indigenous Perspectives in Education

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#### **Abstract**

*Educational outcomes for Indigenous students in Manitoba are poor. In response, educational policy across Canada is evolving to incorporate Aboriginal, Metis and Inuit perspectives into curriculum to support positive change. Years into this effort, we can identify common barriers. Undoing generations of cultural suppression will be a slow process. Implicit bias, fueled by a lack of awareness of complex and interconnected Indigenous issues creates racial blindness, a crippling obstacle in understanding Indigenous issues. Changing the English Canadian narrative of today's education system will involve difficult conversations around privilege and viewpoint. Hiring and empowering Indigenous educators enables internally proliferated resources. Access to regional professional development on Indigenous issues needs to expand.*

Educational outcomes for Indigenous students in Canadian schools are poor. In Manitoba, non-Indigenous boys graduated in 2018 at a rate of 85.4%, compared to Indigenous boys at only 48.5% (Manitoba Education, n.d.a). This is an improvement from the previous generation when only 25% completed 12 or more years of school (Chan et al., 2012, Socio-demographic Characteristics section, p. 18). A continued lack of engagement with the educational system, a key component of economic viability, “isolates, underserves and undervalues” Indigenous students (Zinga & Gordon, 2016, p. 1090). In response, educational policy across Canada has evolved to incorporate Indigenous perspective into curriculum in order to address the need for supporting positive change in Indigenous educational outcomes. Circumventing barriers these will be the challenge of this generation. We are faced with the task of recognizing disadvantageous patterns that have played out for generations, and redeveloping a more humanistic practice that connects us to each other (Csontos, 2019). Recurring impediments in this evolution include implicit bias, racial blindness, a lack of awareness of complex Indigenous issues, interconnectivity of Indigenous issues, and a reluctance to recognize Indigenous viewpoints. Paths forward include hiring more educators that are Indigenous, increasing access to professional development on Indigenous issues, ensuring uniformly applied expectations among students, and building resiliency. Building local Indigenous community connections in conveying cultural content is a key focus moving forward.

#### **Undoing Generations of Cultural Suppression**

Generations of cultural suppression are not easily undone. Public schools and society set a frame through which students see the world. Up until 1951, the Indian Act made the practice of Indigenous cultural and spiritual ceremonies a criminal act (Simpson & Filice, 2016). Federal control over reserve communities forced secrecy to become part of common practice. Manitoba did not begin a policy change for Indigenous content until 1995 (Manitoba Education, n.d.b). Recognizing Indigenous culture as valid and essential to contemporary Canadian reality is an important step in acknowledging a different worldview. In our era, generations of suppression will not be balanced quickly.

For many past Metis, passing as white was an advantage on many levels. “Status” meant that one could not own land, or even vote until 1960. For parents during this time, perceived societal discrimination could interfere with employment opportunities. Catholicism, popular in Manitoba’s Metis community, did not encourage Indigenous world views. Indigenous perspective was not supported in

school curriculum. There were many disadvantages to being Indigenous, which were avoided if a person could “pass” as white. Recovery from a suppressive mindset will happen slowly.

## **Implicit Bias**

Implicit bias affects everyone. In the teaching world, this manifests as being a stranger to each other’s personal realities. As an educator who is Metis, I have seen alternate perceptions of what Metis means or looks like within my own teaching experience. When I present an unusual perspective, surprise or even questions about authenticity have arisen. This should be no surprise given that Metis identity has always been about bridging two worlds. Who is and is not Metis is hotly debated. It is revealing that fellow professionals feel entitled to measure quantum. How we frame our basic vision of reality is implicit bias, and it affects all that we see and hear.

## **Lack of Awareness of Complex and Interconnected Indigenous Issues**

Racial blindness is a crippling obstacle to understanding Indigenous issues for our students. Defining racism as a narrow, personal experience between individuals is disarmingly myopic. Race and economic class define the educational experience of students (Brown & De Lissovoy, 2011). Truly appreciating the generational effect of colonialism, how it is manifest as control of governing power, material and natural resources – and entitlement as a daily replication across social and institutional settings (Gebhard, 2018; Madden, 2017) – is a key step to identifying and changing perspective. Until we can clearly see the problem, racial blindness will keep us from understanding and articulating Indigenous issues.

A lack of awareness of complex Indigenous issues influence personal perception. Systemic factors hold strong influence over how we all, staff and students, perceive reality. Ongoing colonial history, the profound influence of the Indian Act, Indigenous funding structures for healthcare and education, over exposure to poverty, and how Indigenous resources are distributed are complicated. A lack of awareness limits personal perceptions of many complex Indigenous issues.

The Indian Act is a powerful piece of legislation affecting every Canadian’s life, and yet we do not teach it. Until 1951, it was a crime for First Nations person to leave reserve without a pass from the Indian Agent, hire a lawyer, or even own property. In an economy where wealth is anchored in land ownership, being barred from land ownership disenfranchised generations from accumulating wealth. We should be teaching about the Indian Act, and how it affects all Canadians.

Overexposure to poverty as a demographic means that many Indigenous issues are poverty issues. Forty percent of Indigenous children live in poverty in Canada (Canadian Poverty Inst., 2019, A Few Facts section, para 2). The insidious ways these social configurations bind and collaborate to replicate inequalities must be considered (Brown & Lissovoy, 2011). Poverty issues are a significant Indigenous issue.

A lack of awareness of complex issues is an impediment to educators. Realities of on and off reserve Indigenous life are unfamiliar to many non-Indigenous people. The ongoing effects of colonialism, federal funding structures, and systemic over exposure to poverty are complicated realities. Personal perceptions framed by a lack of awareness of complex Indigenous issues is a significant barrier to Indigenous perspectives.

The interconnectivity of Indigenous issues means evolving education is only part of the movement needed to improving academic outcomes. Supports need to improve outside of the classroom, as well. For example, Horton et al. (2011) indicated recurring themes emerging in interviews with successful Indigenous high school students, including the vital importance of parental involvement, family and community trauma, cultural affinity within Indigenous families, local connection to cultural programs, the need for role models, destructive community divisions, and strong relationships with teachers. Most of these influences occur outside of the school building. Complex educational barriers require solutions that follow a path of partnerships among educators,

families, and the aggregate community (Horton et al., 2011). The interconnectivity of Indigenous issues requires a complementary, community approach.

## **Reluctant Recognition of Viewpoints**

A reluctance to recognize Indigenous viewpoints within the classroom is fueled by a lack of awareness. Today's education system evolved and is framed in an English Canadian narrative (Den Heyer & Abbott, 2011). A deficit of expertise, resources, and training in Metis, First Nation and Inuit perspective has made thousands of non-Indigenous teachers, constituting the vast majority of our education workforce, hesitant to engage (Gaudry, 2016; Milne, 2017). Fear of misrepresentation, appropriation, controversy, white privilege, and Indigenous privilege keep policy and practice distant cousins in many classrooms (Higgins et al., 2015; Kearns & Anuik, 2015; Scott & Gani, 2018). Reluctance to recognize Indigenous viewpoints continues to be a barrier to incorporating Indigenous perspective.

The idea of privilege of viewpoint, of white privilege and Indigenous privilege, is a circling conundrum. It encapsulates the core of the phalanx of barriers we encounter. Race conversations are emotionally volatile subjects, something most teachers avoid. White privilege is an advantage or entitlement bestowed upon an individual solely based on skin tone. Indigenous privilege is much the same. Challenging institutional racism will involve having difficult conversations around privilege and viewpoint.

An event that conveys a clear snapshot of the dichotomy generated by a reluctance to recognize Indigenous viewpoints occurred in 2020 near Duck Lake, Saskatchewan on the Beardsy's & Okemasis' Cree Nation. The local governing health authority called RCMP to disperse a gathering, a Sundance, which is a sacred healing ceremony. Protocols were unintentionally broken by the arriving officers, and the right to conduct Indigenous-based healthcare was raised by participants. This interruption speaks to the right to gather for ceremony during COVID-19 restrictions, local awareness of protocols, and the institutional de-valuation of the ceremony itself ("Rising Tensions," 2020). Recognition of the Indigenous viewpoint would have avoided much unnecessary tension and anger between the community and the institutional systems meant to support them.

## **Pathways Forward**

In years of implementing policy change towards Indigenous inclusion, we now have clear indicators of barriers and solutions. We have policy mandates for change. It is in the enacting of that change we now labor. Pathways forward call for the hire and empowerment of more Indigenous educators, increasing representation and influence in schools. Professional development for the legions of non-Indigenous teachers now employed must become common, sensitizing classroom teachers to some level of Indigenous perspective. Schools can strengthen uniformity of applied expectations, and improve access to resiliency training. Addressing barriers with specific, achievable solutions will facilitate change.

## **Indigenous Hires**

Hiring more educators that are Indigenous must be part of the solution (Gaudry, 2016; Milne, 2017, p. 11). The antidote to a lack of Indigenous perspective is as simple as employing and empowering educators with an Indigenous perspective. Indigenousization of education will occur when more Indigenous community members come to the school and become involved (Pidgeon, 2016). In 2013, 12% of teachers identified as Indigenous in Manitoba. Additionally, around 45% reported a complete absence of professional learning activities regarding Indigenous perspectives offered by their division (Manitoba Education, 2013, pp. 8-9; Milne, 2017, p. 11). Hiring and empowering educators who are Indigenous enables internally proliferated resources, and local innovation of content. Indigenous educators on staff can naturally transition perspective within schools.

Chris Scribe exemplifies why hiring Indigenous educators is key to changing perspective. When COVID-19 restrictions struck, he created the platform Think Indigenous - Online Indigenous Education K-8 Facebook page. This platform provides Indigenous learning opportunities for students, teachers, parents and communities. Content on the site crosses multiple disciplines, and has attracted other Indigenous contributors from across Canada. Indigenous teachers can naturally connect Indigenous knowledge to curriculum (Lagimodiere, 2020). Gaining an Indigenous perspective happens successfully by hiring and effectively empowering people who genuinely have one.

## Professional Development

Professional development on Indigenous issues should be standard practice. This should be a regional and local domain, because regional and local community diversity and connections must be developed. Several Canadian universities, such as Lakehead and Winnipeg, are now making Indigenous course work mandatory for more courses. Non-Indigenous educators can improve awareness of Indigenous issues through increased professional development.

Schools must strengthen uniformity of applied expectations. While the most desired teacher traits may be empathy and flexibility, inequitable treatment erodes morale (Zinga & Gordon, 2016). Successful completion of high school for many Indigenous students requires strong relationships with teachers, with an awareness of both cultural and intergenerational trauma (Steeves, 2020). Concurrently, authoritative leniency must be carefully wielded, lest lowered standards become a disservice to students “situating them outside of recognizable learner identities” (Gebhard, 2019, p. 903). Students and parents of Indigenous students report a real desire to see administrators and teachers consistently and uniformly enforce expectations across student populations (Zinga & Gordon, 2016).

Resiliency in students is a key component to staying engaged in education. Enabling resiliency is a long-term, subtle enterprise. School-based resilience programs that teach coping strategies are already in use. The highly structured PAtHs (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) program is used on an intervention bases in Manitoba, using a structured environmental and personal skills approach. Many other programs are available, and each has strengths and critics (Ecclestone & Lewis, 2014). Increasing awareness and access to resiliency programs should be a positive and achievable goal.

## Conclusion

As provincial policy engagement unfolds, barriers to enacting meaningful Indigenous perspective in education across Canada are significant. Generations of cultural repression will be slow in reversing. Implicit bias frames how we interpret all that we see. Blindness to racialized structures and behaviours in our lives, lack of sensitivity to complex and interconnected Indigenous issues, and hesitancy to recognize Indigenous viewpoints are common in classrooms. A call is made towards hiring and empowering more educators who are Indigenous to ease evolution of our perspective, and a strengthening of access to professional development on Indigenous issues. Uniformly enforced expectations, and increasing access to resiliency supports are strong pathways to positive change. Building local Indigenous community connections in conveying cultural content is a key focus moving forward. Generations of Indigenous cultural repression will not be undone by ten years of real policy change and some professional development days. Evolution of curriculum to include Indigenous perspective will be the challenge of our generation.

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