REFEREED ARTICLE

Western Literacy and First Nations Education

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Abstract

Many First Nations people in Canada struggle in the acquisition of the skills associated with western literacy, that is, with the skills necessary to communicate through reading, writing, and numeracy in either English or French. Rooted in the history of colonial education, this problem continues to have a negative impact on the lives of individuals and communities. Its solution requires a change of attitudes, respect for Aboriginal knowledge and teachings, recognition of the importance of lifelong learning opportunities, academic research, political will and, most importantly, the real and continuing participation of all stakeholders.

Western literacy in Canada is primarily concerned with the skills necessary to communicate through reading, writing, and numeracy in either of the two official languages, English and French. For many First Nations people, the acquisition of these skills is a persistent problem. Students and adults often demonstrate lower literacy levels than other groups in the general population, with long-term consequences for the quality of individual lives and the community as a whole. Low skill levels in western literacy continue to affect the lives of many First Nations people in Canada for a variety of reasons and, while some solutions have been suggested, the problem has not yet been effectively addressed.

The effects of low literacy levels and low educational achievement can persist throughout life, affecting personal well-being as well as the well-being of the community, and ultimately the country. Poor education impacts negatively on self-esteem and employment opportunities, which can lead to apathy and welfare dependence (Helin, 2008). A low income can often mean poorer nutrition and relegation to sub-standard housing, which in turn can cause or exacerbate health problems. Poverty can lead to illegal ways of making money and, while this behaviour is obviously a choice, incarceration rates decline as education and employment situations improve (Statistics Canada, 2009). Childhood poverty, which was supposed to have been eradicated in Canada by 2000, is actually increasing and is linked to low levels of parental literacy skills (Antone et al., 2003). Parents with literacy challenges cannot help their children with schoolwork and may be reluctant to be involved in their schooling, priming the cycle to repeat itself. Given the cost of low literacy levels to the individual and to society in general, it is very surprising that more government attention is not given to this issue.

The causes of low literacy levels are deep rooted and complex, and have their origins in Canada's colonial past. Residential schools are gone now, but the full intergenerational impact of their legacy is frequently misunderstood. The purpose of the schools was to eradicate the Aboriginal identity of the students, and to create a permanent underclass of labourers and servants without equality or genuine education, and without cultural identity (Sabourin & Sabourin, 2004). If an underclass can be characterized by persistent poverty, unemployment, low education levels, poor health, high incarceration rates, addictions, and violence, situations that plague many Aboriginal people today, then the pernicious influence of residential schools persists into the present. Living with any or all of the factors listed above can jeopardize a child's chances of educational success. Serious family dysfunction, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and fetal drug effects can make successful learning all but impossible (Fournier & Crey, 1997). Although these situations stem from behaviours that involve choices on the part of the parents, they also have their roots in the intergenerational effects of residential schools and the subsequent normalization of dysfunctional behaviour (Tait, 2003). Even if a student does not

suffer personally from any of these effects, the behaviour of his or her classmates who do will hinder his or her success in school. Canada's past colonial policies continue to cast a long shadow over the present.

Another cause of school failure to teach literacy skills is that Aboriginal youth find school itself to be irrelevant, and disconnected from their experience and culture (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008). In my experience, Canadian society in general often seems very reluctant to be honest with regard to its historical treatment of Aboriginal people. Perhaps this reluctance is because the lie goes to the very heart of the nation, its view of itself, and its prosperity. Land was taken under false pretences, using treaties that were not honoured, and claims issues continue to be largely ignored ("The Battle," 2009). Government policy with regard to residential schools was designed to eradicate Aboriginal people, culturally and politically, and those who survived were not given an equitable chance as farmers or as participants in the Canadian economy (Miller, n.d.). These truths and many more seem to have been conveniently erased from the collective memory of Canada, replaced by stereotypes that make blaming the victim easier. Until recently, this denial has been reflected in school curricula, allowing Canada's memory lapses to pass from one generation to the next (Battiste, n.d.). This lack of a "true history," and the consequent excluding and dishonouring of Aboriginal culture and experience, to say nothing of pervading colonial attitudes, may be part of the reason why school was, and still is, often seen by Aboriginal youth as irrelevant, unwelcoming, and alien.

There are several other possible reasons for low literacy levels and lack of school success. Getting an education may be seen as pointless, as in the past many doors have been firmly closed to Aboriginal people, resulting in a severe shortage of appropriate role models (Lindsay, 2003). Peer pressure and the perception of school as being a "White" institution, and therefore something to be resisted, is also a significant factor. I have heard the terms *apple* and *potato* used derogatively to describe students who are seen as "un-Indian" – red on the outside and white on the inside – because they are striving for success on the White man's terms by succeeding in school. In addition, political will seems severely lacking in the area of improving Aboriginal education results. Lifelong learning initiatives such as pre-school programs, family literacy, and adult education are given only intermittent support, and the increasing inequity of teacher pay is causing a two-tier education system to develop in Manitoba, as many band-operated schools fall further and further behind the pay scales of school divisions (Assembly of First Nations, 2005). Some schools with high numbers of special needs students, including students with literacy challenges, have great difficulty in providing adequate services due to funding shortfalls. In my experience, services to Aboriginal students are seriously lacking, which has had a very negative impact on their chances of developing the literacy skills required to be successful in school.

Clearly, some major changes are necessary to support successful literacy development for First Nations people. In theory, there appears to be widespread general agreement with the belief that school curricula must change and become more inclusive and honouring of First Nations historical experience, culture, and values, if Aboriginal students are to become more successful (Reeves, 2009). Some writers go much further, advocating for the distinct concept of Aboriginal literacy, defined as a holistic idea that is much more than reading, writing, and numeracy (Antone et al., 2003). Aboriginal literacy focuses on the learner as a whole person, and involves many different traditional ways of knowing: cultural knowledge, Aboriginal language, oral literacy, communicating through art and music, conventional western literacy, technological skills, and spiritual knowledge (Woman, 2005). It is not so much a skill set as a way of life. These holistic values have been applied with marked success in adult literacy programs (Woman), and have been argued as essential to the success and applicability of Aboriginal-specific early childhood education (Greenwood et al., 2007). They have also played a significant role in successful family literacy programs designed for Aboriginal communities (Timmons et al., 2008). Aboriginal literacy programs combine western literacy skill sets with First Nations teachings, and they therefore require the involvement of the First Nations community.

Not all of those involved in teaching Aboriginal children agree with the concept of a culturally appropriate curriculum for Aboriginal students, particularly if this programming involves segregation of the students, which it often does in the mainstream school system (Helin, 2008). The Grandview/?Uuquinak'uuh Elementary School in East Vancouver, British Columbia, radically improved the performance of all of its students, 50% of whom were Aboriginal, by desegregating classes, focusing on academics, and insisting on high expectations for every student (Helin, 2008). Subsequently, the school's ranking in the province-wide Foundation Skills Assessment went from the bottom to the top. The COGENT program is another example of marked improvement in literacy skills due to strong, focused, instructional strategies (Hayward, et al., 2007). The COGENT program proved successful in improving the reading skills of remedial Aboriginal students, by integrating cognitive processing strategies with direct instruction in prerequisite reading skills. It is my own experience that the guided reading method of reading instruction, if practised every day in small supervised groups, is a very effective way to improve literacy skills. Investigation into whether Aboriginal children have a distinct cognitive style seems to suggest that this is not the case (Das et al., 2007). There may be no reason that focused literacy instruction methods that work in other settings cannot be successfully used with Aboriginal students, and no justification for segregating students into Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups.

Government also needs to recognize the crucial importance, and the social and financial significance, of proactive funding and support of literacy initiatives. Children with special needs of all kinds require access to appropriate educational supports that will help them to fulfil their potential. Lifelong learning support systems, such as early childhood education, family literacy programs, and adult education facilities, must be recognized as having a very important role to play in improving literacy levels, and be funded accordingly. The fundamental solution to poverty is education (Helin, 2008), and proactive problem solving on the part of government may ultimately save much of the money currently spent on welfare, corrections, and health care.

Putting theories into viable practice is the hardest part of real change, and will not happen without the meaningful and consistent involvement of all stakeholders (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008). Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth (2005) has taken definite steps towards the goal of making the curriculum more inclusive and honouring of First Nations, particularly in the development of its new social studies curriculum. It is to be hoped that this type of leadership will continue, leading to greater understanding and eventually changing the attitudes of future generations. Another way to encourage inclusion and relevance is to continue to train and hire Aboriginal teachers, and to ensure that their training equips them to work in mainstream as well as band-operated schools. The presence of Aboriginal teachers will give positive role models of Aboriginal people to both mainstream and Aboriginal students, and it will increase the comfort level of Aboriginal students and their parents within the public school system. The concept of Aboriginal literacy will not be easy to apply to the existing school system, though perhaps, as Western values continue to move slowly towards Aboriginal teachings, it may one day become a reality. Some aspects of a holistic vision for education, however, are already familiar in mainstream schools, for example, the recognition of different learning styles (Woman, 2005). Other holistic practices that are recognized as being preferred by Aboriginal students are collaborative group work, a visual style of representing information, and a more reflective style in processing information (Das et al., 2007). All of these represent current best teaching practices in mainstream schools, so perhaps the concept of holistic literacy is not as far away as it seems, and these existing practices can be built on and developed with the leadership and involvement of all stakeholders, particularly the Aboriginal community.

Because of their degree of autonomy, and because they are usually situated within Aboriginal communities, band-operated schools may be considered to have more opportunity to develop holistic and culturally appropriate programming. However, deficits in funding, the difficulties inherent in producing appropriate community or culturally based materials, and the requirements of the regular curricula make these initiatives more complicated than they may at

first appear. Nevertheless, band-operated schools have significant opportunities to encourage student and community involvement, and to provide positive role models within the community, and some do develop their own unique programs. For example, Peguis Central School in Manitoba offers a required course in either Aboriginal Law or Aboriginal Studies, and one of the community's goals for the school is that senior students should understand and defend Aboriginal rights (Simard & Anderson, 2004). Band-operated schools play a major role in giving Aboriginal people control over the education of their children.

The First Nations students who went to the very first residential schools to learn the skills of Western literacy were secure in their own language and culture. The first schools did not outlaw native languages, and the first students went to residential schools with the blessing of their families, in order to supplement their existing skills with the new skills necessary for survival alongside Europeans (Pelletier, 2001). Wasacase (2004) reported that the residential school students did so well that their success was regarded as a problem by the bureaucrats in Ottawa, who did not intend to have Aboriginal people who were better educated than the Euro-Canadians. Ottawa then introduced the half-day system, whereby students worked half of each day to make the schools less reliant on government funding. Clearly, there is nothing so inherently difficult about Western literacy that Aboriginal people cannot master it; they have not failed, but the system has failed them (Woman, 2005). Fixing our current Canadian system requires a radical change in attitudes that will engender different curricula based on truth, on inclusive and respectful attitudes, and on respect for the value of holistic teaching and Aboriginal knowledge. It requires effective, researched, literacy programs that have high expectations and result in academic achievement. It demands the attention and meaningful support of the government, the real involvement of all stakeholders, including Aboriginal community members and educators, and the funding of early childhood education, family literacy programs, and adult education facilities. Western literacy has become an essential skill in today's society, and First Nations children cannot grow into their full potential or take their true place in society without it.

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