REFEREED ARTICLE

Cultural Disconnect Causes Early Withdrawal for Aboriginal Students in Manitoba

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Abstract

Although more effort is being placed on retaining Aboriginal youth in the public education system, failure to respect cultural differences continues to dominate the typical high school classroom. A recognition of this cultural disconnect is needed in order to see any change in withdrawal rates of Manitoba's Aboriginal students. The author discusses current models of practice, assessment, cultural differences, and holistic beliefs in an attempt to discover a way to incorporate two different educational beliefs that will keep all students in school.

The ongoing efforts to increase the graduation rate of Aboriginals in Manitoba have not been effective. As of 2006, "33.7% of 15-29 year olds had not completed high school" and "12.4% had not completed grade 9" (Owens, 2006, p. 1). The cause of this problem has not been sufficiently addressed, perhaps because there has been "little recognition given in education to cultural difference from the mainstream" (Dunn, 2001, p. 678). The cultural differences between the Aboriginal view of education and the Eurocentric model used by public school can be seen in the areas of learning style, literacy, engagement, assessment, and best practices in the classroom.

The worldview held by most Aboriginal cultures is one that addresses all things on earth, from the trees and animals to the soil and rocks, as being intricately and cyclically connected. This worldview would suggest that "indigenous pedagogy recognizes the child as a physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual being, one who learns best in a circular, holistic, child centered environment" (Ledoux, 2006, p. 270). This is also a strong belief of early childhood education. Although the goal of all education systems, whether government or Aboriginal, is "to prepare children for their lives as positive, participating and, contributing members of society" (Ledoux, 2006, p. 271), it is apparent that this viewpoint changes at the upper levels of a Eurocentric education model. There is recognition in the education system that all people have an individual learning style and that an Aboriginal learning style encompasses a holistic belief. However, the standardized approach to curriculum and school environment creates a school culture that is in opposition to what an Aboriginal approach to teaching and learning would look like. The Manitoba classroom contrasts "traditional Native teaching and learning patterns" (Ryan, 1996, p. 119). Aboriginal teaching practices encourage "contextual learning in real-life context" (Ledoux, 2006, p. 273). Contextual learning blends seamlessly with a holistic view of teaching and learning; however, neither concept is easily mixed with the design of the public school system.

A holistic learning model is characterized by "the principle of interconnectedness and wholeness; seeing the whole student mind, body, emotions, and spirit" (Holistic Curriculum, 2008, para.1), which is reflective of the Aboriginal worldview. A holistic learner will more likely take in the whole concept and sort out the intricacies of it later. These learners will read a whole novel for example, and then go back chapter by chapter to dissect the story. Learning strategies exemplary of a holistic classroom include student-centered activities such as fish bowling, interest inventories, and personal goal statements. The processes by which these activities are undertaken give students the opportunity to have input into the path of a lesson, thereby enhancing individual learning styles and student engagement. Offering students the chance to have input into their own learning is always a positive factor when creating a classroom wherein students feel that they are respected and welcomed no matter what their culture.

A holistic approach to teaching, incorporated within existing teaching practices, may be the best way to encourage Aboriginal students to continue forward in the public school setting. However, what must first be addressed are the current literacy problems of Aboriginal students. In 2003, the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) discovered that "about 60% of the urban Aboriginal population in [Manitoba and Saskatchewan] scored below Level 3 on the prose scale" (Statistics Canada, 2005, para. 32). Language is considered to be a "constantly metamorphosing intersection between linguistic elements, identity, culture, history, reality, information, and communication" (Kouritzin, 2006, p. 6). It therefore must be addressed how Aboriginal students are learning language. Many Aboriginal youth are coming from homes with a first language that is not the dominant language of the majority (English or French). However, when they enter public school there is an unspoken expectation that the dominant majority language in the home was French or English, not Cree, Ojibway or Saulteaux. These students then become victims of first language loss. The loss of a mother tongue can have detrimental effects on the desire to engage in public school, as "school practices encouraged minority language speaking children to develop shame, while school work and school friends become linguistic cultural invaders" (Kouritzin, 2006, pp. 21-22). If consideration is not given to the language spoken in the home, then public schools run the risk of "leaving children unaware, or ambivalent, unable to incorporate their ethnic or linguistic identities" (Kouritizin, 2006, p. 22) and creating more culturally disrespectful classrooms.

There is a need to be culturally aware while teaching students of a minority language and culture; however, "pumping up" basic skills in Aboriginal literacy programs is not likely to improve literacy levels or participation in schools because this treats the symptoms rather than the underlying causes of the disease" (Dunn, 2001, p. 679). Improving Aboriginal literacy rates does not simply mean including Aboriginal literature in a high school English class, either. What needs to be remembered is that "all cultural groups can establish adequate procedures for the development of language and cognition in their young children" (Dunn, 2001, p. 679). It is prudent for Manitoba schools and educators to recognize literacy levels in both on-reserve and off-reserve homes, in order to develop best literacy practices within the community.

By addressing literacy levels and holistic learning styles, Manitoba educators may finally be able to engage the Aboriginal student, but engagements is more than simply recognizing what is not working. In order to create an environment that makes the Aboriginal student feel at home, educators must understand that student engagement is "commitment to and investment in learning, identification with and belonging at school, and in terms of participation in the school environment and initiation of an activity to accomplish an outcome" (Kortering & Christenson, 2009, p. 7). The most significant part of this definition for the Aboriginal student in Manitoba would be identifying with and having a sense of belonging in school. It is difficult to ask members of an involuntary minority group to feel as though they belong when the environment has no reflection on their heritage or culture. Therefore, it would be best to go directly to the source and ask the students what can be done. For many students, Aboriginal or not, the most important factor in their success at school is the relationship that they have with their teachers. Upon looking into any school classroom, it is recognizable that a "teacher's instructional strategies are a manifestation of the school's culture" (Patterson et al., 2007-2008, p. 8). If the school culture is one that does not value the student- teacher relationship by encouraging "caring teachers [who] hold students to high standards, provide them with assistance and support, and refuse to give up on them" (Patterson et al., 2007-2008, p. 8), then students who learn best from that environment will disengage.

Of careful consideration when trying to engage and retain Aboriginal learners is a teacher's assessment style. In 2006, Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth [MECY] published a document regarding the new focus of assessment within Manitoba schools. This document incorporated principles of holistic teaching and learning, while trying to maintain opportunities for standardized assessment. The document outlines three focuses of assessment: assessment for, assessment as, and assessment of learning. Assessment for learning has one main

characteristic: descriptive feedback. It asks teachers to “use assessment as an investigative tool to find out … what confusions, preconceptions or gaps” (MECY, 2006, p. 29) exist for students early on in the learning of new outcomes. In assessment for learning, students are given several chances to assess themselves, re-evaluate goals, and process the content that they are learning. This style of assessment blends with holistic learning, as it can aid the student and teacher in developing different lesson activities, such as hands-on learning. Assessment as learning is the concept whereby “assessment is a process of metacognition for students” (MECY, 2006, p. 41). At this stage of the assessment model, students are given chances to reflect on their own learning and make adjustments to improve their understanding. In essence, this is the practice stage of learning. The final stage of the new assessment model is assessment of learning, which is the more standardized approach to assessment. It uses formalized testing to “confirm what students know” (MECY, 2006, p. 55). This assessment model encourages student involvement in their own learning, and “when students are encouraged to talk about their learning and to self-assess in relation to criteria, models, or exemplars, they are giving themselves descriptive feedback that helps them learn more” (Davies et al., 2008, p. 22). Having such involvement with the formal parts of education can help keep all students engaged.

Recognizing that Aboriginal students may see more success in secondary school when their cultural differences are addressed does not mean that the school system has to change completely. Many of the ideas incorporated within the Aboriginal worldview will benefit all students in the Manitoba education system. The best practices are performed at the classroom level, involving teacher, student, and community. Teaching strategies that work well for Aboriginal students include modelling and thinking out loud, storytelling, scaffolding instruction, experiential learning, and cooperative learning. Many of these strategies are already a part of common teacher practice. To improve literacy and graduation levels among Aboriginal students, all stakeholders in the education system must realize that Aboriginal “students do not reject the idea of getting good grades; what they reject are ‘white’ attitudes and behaviours conducive to getting those grades” (Catlin, 2008, p. 6). Adjusting the current attitudes and behaviours does not mean overhauling the system. A program that could have merit in improving the literacy levels is the Cognitive Strategy Instruction in Writing developed by Carole Englert (2009). Instilled within the literacy initiative are many holistic teaching styles. The CSIW curriculum uses instructional dialogue with teacher and student, modelling to guided and joint practice, and group situations for question and practice. The CSIW “was designed to scaffold performance” (Englert, 2009, p. 106), in order to ensure student success.

Finally, positive working relationship between the family and the school must display a visible amount of trust for the student to feel safe and comfortable in the public school environment. It is no secret that the legacy of residential schools still hangs over the ability to form this trust. Schools must “reach out” to parents through a variety of methods to bring all parties closer together. Parents are an invaluable resource: “when parents are involved in talking about learning with their children, children achieve more” (Davies et al., 2008, p. 27). It is the responsibility of teachers and administrators to initiate contact by phone or face to face, and to have an open door policy. Schools that have seen success have created a “family centered approach wherein parents and community members are respected, supported, and treated as equals” (Ledoux, 2006, p. 274). An effective tool is to bring elders into the classroom to share stories of history and mythology. This sharing can be done in a history class or an English class, and provides opportunity for varied instruction.

Cultural disconnectedness challenges both the public school system and the Aboriginal students who withdraw from school. It can be overcome through an understanding of the Aboriginal worldview, holistic teaching practices and learning styles, a change in literacy levels both on and off reserve, improvements in student engagement, and alterations in assessment techniques and best practices in the classroom. Many of these changes are beginning to occur within the Eurocentric model of our school system. Respecting Aboriginal culture is the key to improving the high school graduation rates of the largest minority in the province of Manitoba.

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