

'Closing the Gap' at the Peril of Widening the Void: Implications of the Ontario Ministry of Education's Policy for Aboriginal Education

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There is a crisis relevant to the publicly funded education of Aboriginal students in Ontario. This article, which presents the details of the crisis, analyzes recent policy statements released by the Ontario Ministry of Education designed to address that crisis. By defining the nature of this critical juncture, presenting how these policies may be "widening the void" rather than "closing the gap," and offering opportunities to respond by improving the capabilities of teachers to enact those policies in their classrooms, the authors appeal to school boards, faculty associations, as well as Deans of Education, to act decisively to support Aboriginal self-determination.

Key words: Aboriginal student achievement, Aboriginal languages and student identity, teacher education

Une crise sévit en ce moment au sujet de l'enseignement autochtone en Ontario financée à même les deniers publics. Dans cet article, les auteurs décrivent les détails de la crise et analysent des énoncés de politique récents du ministère de l'Éducation de l'Ontario visant à dénouer la crise. Tout en se penchant sur la nature même de ce problème épineux, en expliquant comment ces politiques risquent de « creuser le vide » au lieu de « combler l'écart » et en offrant des possibilités de réponse par l'amélioration des capacités des enseignants de mettre ces politiques en application dans leurs classes, les auteurs font appel aux commissions scolaires, aux associations universitaires et aux doyens d'éducation afin qu'ils soutiennent activement l'autodétermination des autochtones.

Mots clés : réussite des élèves autochtones, langues autochtones et identité des élèves, formation à l'enseignement.

Generations of neglect and ill-conceived policy directed at Aboriginal peoples have systematically tarnished the "Honour of the Crown" (Eberhard, 2007) and by extension the honour of all Canadians. On June 11, 2008, the Prime Minister of Canada issued a sweeping Statement of Apology to Aboriginal Canadians for the residential school era and directly linked that experience to the contemporary realities of Aboriginal peoples. Many recognize this statement as a demarcation point on the long road to address the core issues that underlie the contemporary social, economic, and cultural realities of Aboriginal peoples in this country. Although contemporary Canadians are not responsible for the past abuses perpetrated in the name of the Crown, they are now responsible for how they choose to act to change these realities. All have a part to play.

The contemporary realities of Aboriginal peoples are arguably the greatest single social justice issue in Canada today, and the publicly funded education of Aboriginal children in Ontario is an obvious locus of Aboriginal self-determination. Although some work has been done to address Aboriginal educational needs in teacher certification, so much more is required. Without a profound investment in the re-education of in-service teachers and pre-service teacher candidates, the predominant experience of Aboriginal children will effectively undermine their respective communities who are actively engaged in building their children's capacity to be self-determining.

There is a rising chorus that warns of the real potential of a lost generation of Aboriginal children in Ontario public schools. This article is intended to provide details of a crisis relevant to the publicly funded education of Aboriginal children and to overview recent policy initiatives of the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) designed to address that crisis. To that end, this article explores present realities, critically reviews existing Ontario Ministry of Education documents, and discusses thoughts on how a Faculty of Education might begin to envision a more supportive and yet critical component to Aboriginal self-determination.

BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY

Statistics Canada (2003a) recorded some 188,315 Aboriginal people residing in Ontario in 2001. By 2006 that population had grown to 242,495 (representing a 28.3 per cent increase) while non-Aboriginal populations increased by only 6.2 per cent during the same period (see Table 1). Overall, Aboriginal populations in Ontario are significantly younger than non-Aboriginal populations with 47.3 per cent of the total Aboriginal population under 25 years of age, approximately 1.5 times higher than the Ontario average. The most current data from the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME, 2007b) estimate that the 50,312 Aboriginal students currently enrolled in provincial elementary and secondary schools (18,300 First Nations, 26,200 Métis, 600 Inuit) and a further 5,212 students living in First Nation communities are being served by local school boards through various tuition agreements.

When reviewing the traditional benchmarks of academic achievement, some tracked for well over a decade, one is struck by the small increments of advancement that suggest more than just an inability or unwillingness to be academically successful. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2007b) reported that in 2001, the proportion of Aboriginal people with less than a high school diploma dropped to 39 per cent from 46 per cent in 1996; those with a high school diploma rose to 23 per cent from 21 per cent in 1996; and those with post-secondary qualifications rose to 38 per cent from 33 per cent in 1996.

The education of Indian, Inuit, and Métis (Aboriginal) ¹ children in Ontario is in crisis resulting from the significant increases in school-aged populations, chronic underfunding, decaying infrastructures, shortages of qualified/knowledgeable Aboriginal and non-aboriginal teachers, community disconnectedness, and a curriculum that is culturally irrelevant. These realities converge to create a situation where the level of

¹ The use of the all-inclusive word "Aboriginal" in this article does not signify or imply any form of generic, one-size-fits-all approach to the realities of Aboriginal academic achievement in Ontario schools. On the contrary it must be recognized that the Anishinabe, Haudenosaunee, Inuit, Métis, Mushkeygo, and Nishnawbe-Aski peoples that call Ontario home are highly diverse in their cultures, languages, values, beliefs, histories, contemporary realities, and aspirations.

Table 1
Aboriginal Populations Living in Ontario Urban Centres
(2001 and 2006 Census)

Communities in Ontario with Significant Numbers of Aboriginal People (2001 and 2006 Census)		
City (C) or Census Metropolitan Area (CMA)	2001 Aboriginal Identity Population*	2006 Aboriginal Identity Population**
Toronto (CMA)	20,300	26,575
Ottawa (C)	8,625	12,965
Thunder Bay (CMA)	8,205	10,055
Greater Sudbury (CMA)	7,385	9,970
Hamilton (CMA)	7,265	8,890
London (CMA)	5,640	6,195
St. Catharines-Niagara (CMA)	4,970	6,650
Sault Ste. Marie (C)	4,530	7,760
Windsor (CMA)	3,965	5,585
Kitchener (CMA)	3,235	4,650
Oshawa (CMA)	3,020	4,785
Timmins (C)	2,880	3,280
Brantford (C)	2,475	3,865
North Bay (C)	2,320	3,715
Kingston (CMA)	2,205	3,290
Mississauga (C)	2,055	N/A

Sources:

* Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007b). Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit education policy framework. Toronto: Aboriginal Education Office, Ministry of Education. (p. 34) Retrieved April 11, 2010, from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/aboriginal/fnmiFramework.pdf>

** Statistics Canada. (2008). *Aboriginal identity population by age groups, median age and sex, 2006 counts for both sexes, for Canada and census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations – 20% sample data*. Aboriginal Peoples Highlight Tables. (Catalogue no. 97-558-XWE2006002). Ottawa, ON: The Author. Retrieved April 11, 2010, from <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2006/dp-pd/hlt/97-558/pages/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo=CMA&Code=01&Table=1&Data=Count&Sex=1&Age=1&StartRec=1&Sort=2&Display=Page>

dropouts for Aboriginal students is on average twice as high as non-Aboriginal Canadians (OMEB, 2007).

ABORIGINAL SELF-DETERMINATION IN ONTARIO

To be self-determining in one's life depends on the existence and maintenance of social/cultural institutions that reflect and encourage a particular way of being. Such institutions – spirituality, language, governance, law, marriage, clan, intellectual/cultural property, and education, to name a few – reflect the epistemic heritage, the values and beliefs, of a culture around which a community, a nation, and individuals may align their existence. Aboriginal peoples have a fundamentally moral right to self-determination within their epistemic heritage, and to that end, have worked tirelessly to express and exercise that right. The recent adoption in September 2007 of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2007) by the United Nations General Assembly has defined that moral right within Article 3 and simply states: "Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development" (p.4).

Few would argue against the desirability of Aboriginal personal, familial, and national self-determination within the contemporary nation state of Canada. And yet, the convergent phenomena that are the legacies of colonialism shape the realities of all Aboriginal peoples, inhibiting all manner of socio-cultural growth, and continuing the suppression of Aboriginal values and ways of being. None has a more profound impact on Aboriginal self-determination than the educational experiences of Aboriginal children in provincially funded schools that effectively continue to impose mainstream values. The publicly funded education of Aboriginal children is a social and spiritual abyss that will need to be bridged if the journey to Aboriginal self-determination is to continue to flourish.

POLICY CONTEXT

The education of First Nations' children remains significantly influenced not only by the discontinuity of provincial and federal politics (Redwing & Hill, 2007) but by the profound implications of the European invasion that exploited and oppressed Aboriginal culture and language traditions (Ryan, 1996). The legacy of the effect of residential schools that eradicated Aboriginal languages and practices from students' identity in acts of cultural genocide are well documented in the literature (Bonvillain, 2001; Moran, 1988; Sellars, 1993). As a result many Aboriginal languages, which are steeped in rich cultural knowledge, are at risk of extinction (Battiste, 2000, 2002; Leavitt, 1993). Aboriginal knowledge systems are, however, surfacing in the mainstream Canadian context and gaining influence as legitimate systems of thought (Dei, 1996; Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). In fact, Aboriginal people, who have always resisted government assimilation practices, are at present channeling their strong voices to be self-determined and to teach their children in light of Aboriginal epistemology that celebrates the interconnection of all things (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Brant, 1990). In doing so, they aim to restore the education of their children through the fundamental principles of linguistic, humanistic, ecological, scientific, and spiritual knowledge, unique to Indigenous identities (Brascoupe & Mann, 2001; Grenier, 1998).

At present more than 50,000 Aboriginal students attend public elementary and secondary schools in Ontario alone (OME, 2007b). Seventy and 78 per cent of First Nations and other Aboriginal peoples respectively live in urban areas across the province (Aboriginal Education Office of the Ministry of Education, 2007). Because attendance of Aboriginal children in publicly funded Ontario schools is rising, the petitions to reclaim Aboriginal identity as advocated by the Assembly of First Nations (1988, 1990) and the First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centre (2000) have served as the premise for more recent claims to infuse Aboriginal epistemology into mainstream education to foster Aboriginal students' understanding of their unique self-identities (Corbiere, 2000; Norris, 2006). Ladson-Billings (2006) is a strong advocate of infusing culturally relevant academic knowledge to address the cultural capital of all students. Consider Battiste's (1998) reflection that captures the tension

between the often conflicting epistemological paradigms of Aboriginal and mainstream educational values:

In effect, Eurocentric knowledge, drawn from a limited patriarchal sample remains as distant today to women, Indigenous peoples and cultural minorities as did the assimilation curricula of the boarding school days. For Indigenous peoples, our invisibility continues, while Eurocentric education perpetuates our psychic disequilibrium. (p. 21)

Battiste's assertion explains the disconnection Aboriginal children experience from formal schooling practices. More than 12 per cent of Aboriginal peoples in Canada between 15 and 29 years of age leave school after only grade 8. Nearly half of the Aboriginal population in this country (between 18 and 24 years of age) does not have a secondary school education (Robertson, 2003). Especially telling is the fact that Aboriginal youth between 15 and 24 years of age identified boredom as the most significant reason for leaving formal education (Statistics Canada, 2003a, 2003b). Although Canada is ranked impressively high on the Human Development Index (HDI), Aboriginal peoples in this country are dubiously bestowed with the distinction of suffering from poorer health outcomes, having lower educational achievement, and earning below-average salaries in comparison to the mainstream Canadian population (Kendall, 2001).

To complicate the issue, Aboriginal researchers (Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000; Hill & George, 1996) claim that student achievement is affected by a myriad of influences including linguistic, historic, and cultural realities that undermine the educational experiences of Aboriginal students in Canada. Public school teachers are generally unaware of these complexities and in most instances are unprepared to address the uniqueness of Aboriginal epistemologies in their pedagogical practice. The result of teachers' lack of understanding is what the Ontario Ministry of Education has identified as an academic achievement 'gap' between Aboriginal and mainstream students. The policy analysis that informs the present study, among other objectives, suggests that the Ontario Ministry of Education's focus in the recently released educational policies may in fact assist in "closing the gap" (2008a, p. 1-i) but they are largely misdirected. These policies fail to acknowledge the more pro-

found concern that such a gap represents a far more significant conceptual void between two epistemologies and cultural identities – a void that extends through the cognitive worldviews of mainstream teachers and that lies at the heart of what it means to reveal knowledge, teach effectively, and learn optimally.

THE ONTARIO MINISTRY OF EDUCATION: POLICY INITIATIVES

The Ontario Ministry of Education's recently-released public documents entitled, *Reach Every Student – Energizing Ontario Education* (OME, 2008b) and *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting* (2008a) call attention to the provincial government's mandate to address students' learning potential and to close the achievement gap that exists between certain student cohorts. These documents represent a second wave of initiatives (see for example, *The Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* [2007b], and *Building Bridges to Success for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Students* [2007a]) that express teachers' collective commitment across the province to serve students regardless of the learners' culture, language, or heritage.

Reach Every Student – Energizing Ontario Education

This public document (OME, 2008b) distinguishes that the present Liberal government "inherited an education system that was in turmoil" (p. 3) from the previous provincial Conservative government and restates its commitment to reform education in Ontario with a focus on high levels of student achievement, reduced gaps between student cohorts, and increased public confidence in education. The document makes a public commitment to have more grade-6 students meeting provincial literacy and numeracy standards and to increase secondary school graduation rates. It focuses on reducing the achievement gap for those students who need more assistance to reach optimal performance. Last, it articulates the Ministry of Education's commitment to heighten public confidence in publicly-funded schools as community institutions.

Growing Success – Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting: Improving Student Learning

This document, *Growing Success*, (OME, 2008a) highlights a province-wide pledge to implement an assessment and evaluation policy to benefit every student, and particularly those students with different needs, including Aboriginal, special education, and English-language learner students. Eleven guiding principles, identified in Ontario curriculum policy, are discussed as contributing to “valid and reliable” assessment and evaluation strategies. Among these are (a) teaching strategies that are aligned with the respective learning activities, the instructional purposes, and individual student needs and backgrounds, (b) strategies that are fair to all learners regardless of needs and experiences, (c) communication strategies to provide each student with specific suggestions for improvement, and (d) strategies to nurture students’ proficiency to assess their own growth as learners. These principles are discussed in light of the provincial achievement charts, policies of grading and reporting, assessment of learning skills, late and missed assignments, and English language learners.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research method for the present study were borrowed from the traditions of discourse analysis. This qualitative approach structured the investigation of the discursive representation of provincial policy as it relates to Aboriginal education in Ontario. The researchers analyzed the language of the policies and subsequently discussed their analysis in terms of the emerging implications for public education. Discourse analysis was well-suited for this research, given its focus upon the often subtle manner in which language impacts upon perception to create interpretations of what is real (Johnstone & Frith, 2005). The OME considers the selected documents to be key initiatives in terms of furthering Aboriginal student academic achievement in Ontario and, as a result, construct versions of reality to further this end (Avdi, 2005). The researchers identified the significant discursive references in the policy documents that most significantly had implications for issues related to Aboriginal education.

RECONCEPTUALIZING ABORIGINAL EDUCATION IN ONTARIO

The documents under discussion, like those already cited that include *The Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007b) and *Building Bridges to Success for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Students* (2007a), commission a reconceptualization of public education policy to address Aboriginal student learning in public schools across Ontario (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008). Aboriginal students struggle in public schools because the cultural and linguistic traditions that constitute their distinct identity are essentially not represented. The core values that define Aboriginal epistemologies are situated within competing mainstream tensions, if at all. The results – as the statistics of low educational achievement, below average well-being, and soaring rates of youth suicides (Chandler, 2005) attest to – are fundamental disconnections between Aboriginal students' intellectual, spiritual, physical, and emotional selves and the very system meant to educate them (Cherubini, 2009).

The premise of *Energizing Ontario Education* (OME, 2008b) bears some resemblance to the rhetoric of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (2002) literature south of the Canadian border. The provincial government endorses a “commitment to every student . . . to ensure that we develop strategies to help every student learn” (OME, 2008b, p. 2). Consider, however, a number of implications that emerge in each of its three core priorities that aim to address *every* student. The first identified as high levels of student achievement frames the language of achievement in standardized scores and suggests that the Liberal education reform initiatives in the last four years are already proving beneficial because “the majority of test results have improved by at least 10 percentage points over the past four years” (p. 5). Yet, external standardized and large-scale assessments (distributed to approximately 200,000 students in each of grades 3, 6, and 9 in Ontario publicly funded schools) based on standardized provincial curricula evoke unfavourable responses to Aboriginal epistemologies because they are culturally inaccessible (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008). Standardized tests are manifestations of Eurocentric measures of educational achievement that do not represent diverse Aboriginal learning paradigms, linguistic traditions, and holistic epistemologies (Philips, 1982; Van Ingen & Halas, 2006). Such assessments may conversely sustain the systemic cultural bias of student achievement

levels that favour the mainstream population (Hewitt, 2000). These competency-based educational reform measures are targeted at providing learners with what the dominant colonial power defines as basic knowledge (Corson, 2001). Students who represent various backgrounds are often forced to derive meaning from competing cultural paradigms and worldviews (Cummins, 2000). The incongruence between these perspectives creates significant learning challenges for minority students and risk augmenting adverse identity issues within the school community (Bennett, 2007; Nieto, 2002).

The implications of the second core priority – reducing gaps in student achievement – stem from the first. The Ministry of Education self-identified its commitment as being “recognized internationally as a unique strength of Ontario’s approach to education” (OME, 2008b, p. 8), but this commitment is suspect at best if student performance is measured by external standardized test scores. Provincial external assessments are not legitimate means to measure Aboriginal student performance and instead covertly celebrate a Eurocentric cultural relativism that discounts the epistemological, linguistic, and knowledge traditions of Aboriginal students.

It is ironic that within the description of the third core principle – increased public confidence in the province’s publicly funded schools – the document cites the results of two international reports of external standardized assessments as “a cause for growing pride and confirm[ation of] our own strong achievement results” (OME, 2008b, p. 10). These benchmarks, combined with those that cite the improvement of grade-3 and grade-6 standardized test results since the current legislating political power assumed government, may be quantitatively “closing the gap,” but these benchmarks are ironically measures created by the previous government identified in this same document as governing “an education system that was in turmoil” (OME, 2008, p. 3). It is of little surprise that Aboriginal students consistently abandon formal education, feeling inferior and inadequate in their own intelligence (Champagne, as cited in Van Ingen & Halas, 2006, p. 387).

Similarly, the Ministry of Education’s assessment policy, as stated in *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting* (2008a), identifies the necessity for teachers to adapt curriculum and pedagogical ap-

proaches to the needs of learners to evaluate their achievement. Yet public school teachers, at no fault of their own, are often not prepared to address the uniqueness of Aboriginal epistemology and linguistic traditions in their practice. Redwing and Hill (2007) write,

The largest problem lies in educators locked by pedagogies of practice that simulate past unsuccessful methods (p. 1016) Mainstream pedagogy is a barrier to authentic and equitable education because teachers have been taught and trained that they are the masters of the content and are in place to teach students how and what to think. (p. 1032)

By logical extension, teachers can only validate and empower their students when “they understand who they are and how their identities intersect with the pedagogical choices they make in their practice” (Egbo, 2009, p. 123; see also Sheets, 2005). Teaching styles in Canada are generally reflective of task-orientated, linear-thinking, and passive-learning tendencies that focus on discreet units of understanding rather than on the whole (Ghosh, 2002). The holistic and cooperative learning models that are more closely aligned to Aboriginal epistemologies are generally not very well delivered thereby negatively affecting student achievement (Hampton & Roy, 2002).

Although it is true that assessment and evaluation are not for the sole purpose of ranking and classifying students (OME, 2008a), the most predominant measures of public accountability in Ontario are indeed external standardized tests that inform the general public of school, district school board, and student rank. The results of these external, large-scale assessments have identified a “gap” between mainstream and Aboriginal student achievement (and among other cultural minority groups as well). Yet, the concept of the “gap” is in itself culturally insensitive because it espouses individual achievement of students’ proficiency and achievement over a more collective sense of community well-being. It implies competitive overtones whereby the success of Aboriginal students, according to Eurocentric measures of what it means to be successful, falls short of norm-referenced, average scores. It is a capitalist-oriented paradigm meant to dissect achievement in quantitative and empirical terms, and in so doing isolates achievement according to individuals and cohorts. Given the historical and contemporary realities of

Aboriginal education in Canada, as already discussed, it is viable to suggest that the Ministry's focus on "closing the gap" is a mere distraction to the much broader conceptual void between mainstream and Aboriginal epistemologies and identities. Although these initiatives speak to the issues of cultural diversity and student achievement, it seems that the focus and energies invested in "closing the gap" are futile if the figurative abyss embodied within the cultural, intellectual, spiritual, physical, emotional, and epistemological divide is not given first priority. There may be little use in focusing on the mice in the basement when the proverbial elephants are dancing on the roof!

The context of the Ministry's assessment policy is situated in criteria that are standard across Ontario and consistently applied so that "assessment of student achievement is fairer and more reliable" (OME, 2008a, p. 3). Indicative of the conceptual divide that separates the intent of the documents and the complex realities of Aboriginal student experiences in public schools are the notions of fairness and reliability. The fallacious assumption implicit in such statements is that the process of standardization (including curriculum and large-scale provincial tests) is culturally sensitive to the nuances within Aboriginal epistemologies and that each individual teacher is capable of tailoring his or her pedagogy to circumvent any linguistic and cultural bias inherent in the standardized curricula. Critical race theorists, such as Solorzano and Yasso (2001), Lynn (2004), and Parker and Lynn (2002), to name only a few, challenge the political realities that govern educational policy by examining the nature by which theory and practice often subordinate various cultural groups. Although the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2008a) assessment, evaluation, and reporting document professes that teachers will employ evaluation strategies and learning activities according to "the needs and experiences of students" (p. 2-i), the assumption remains that mainstream teachers have the culturally relevant academic knowledge (as discussed in Ladson-Billings, 2006) to provide Aboriginal students with an authentic education that allows them a place within the curriculum where they can be Native, yet not social tokens; where they are true designers of their curriculum, not merely puppets within the larger assessment strategy; and where they are active players, not just recipients of information (Redwing & Hill, 2007, p. 1017).

In a similar vein, the standardized learning skills used to evaluate student development include three areas that are disjointed from Aboriginal epistemologies. As an example, criteria that include “independent work” and “class participation” are not necessarily in tune with learning preferences that are more inclined towards holistic education, collaborative learning endeavours, and reflective thinking (Cherubini & Hodson 2008; Hilberg & Tharp, 2002). The criterion defined as “goal setting to improve work” is also of limited legitimacy because it assumes that the goals Aboriginal students establish in the context of how they define improvement will be evaluated according to culturally informed perspectives that facilitate the authentic incorporation of students’ learning experiences into their identity as Aboriginal students (Battiste, 1998; Toulouse, 2006). The point needs to be made that, although it may be appropriate to distinguish instructional approaches and strategies that better address students of cultural difference (Means & Knapp, 1991; Tinajero & Ada, 1993), it is erroneous to assume that blind replication of instructional programs or mastery of particular teaching methods, in and of themselves, will guarantee successful student learning, especially when we are discussing populations that historically have been mistreated and miseducated by the schools (Bartolome, 1994, p. 173).

AT A CROSSROAD

As discussed, public education in Ontario is experiencing an unprecedented and steady increase in the number of Aboriginal children in classrooms, and yet the predominantly non-Aboriginal teachers are ill prepared to provide the learning environments necessary to promote self-determination. It is not the lack of a credential that is the issue in itself; nor is it the unprecedented and related number of Aboriginal children dropping out. It is the spiritual wounds inflicted on Aboriginal children as they search for personal representation and relevance within provincial classrooms, and it is the realization that Aboriginal children are especially vulnerable because they exist in communities already burdened by the outcomes of the colonial period. Still, all these issues are merely symptomatic of a greater and more profound disease. The core issue is how the entire experience of Aboriginal children in the prov-

ince's schools maintains and extends the legacy of colonialism by failing to promote the next generation's capacity to be self-determining.

Aboriginal issues, historic or otherwise, are not a significant part of pre-service or in-service teacher education across all faculties of education in Ontario. At this time, few Ontario universities mandate the completion of an Aboriginal education course in pre-service programs, and few in-service opportunities in Ontario deal exclusively with Aboriginal education. At best, Aboriginal education is relegated to the margins of courses, more often single class periods, dedicated to diversity in the classroom. Combined with the lack of representation at the primary, secondary, or post-secondary levels, most teacher candidates enter their qualifying year woefully lacking in substantive knowledge of Aboriginal peoples: their culture, their beliefs, and their epistemologies. The needs of Aboriginal learners are just not part of teacher candidate knowing and consequently that knowledge is not part of their teaching.

A UNIVERSITY'S RESPONSE

It would be useful to look at how one university is responding to the challenges presented in this article. Over the last decade, Brock University has taken a significant and active position relative to Aboriginal education in Ontario. Innovative programming in Aboriginal teacher education offered at a distance at locations across the province, partnerships with Aboriginal groups and First Nations, language programming, a vibrant Aboriginal Education Council, unprecedented increases in the number of Aboriginal undergraduate and graduate students, as well as a research centre that has attracted well over one million dollars in research and other grants over the last ten years are testament to that activity.

Of note is Brock's recent agreement with the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council to educate 100 new Nishnawbe primary/junior teachers and to upgrade a further 100 existing teachers through the new Bachelor of Education program. This new program, the first of its kind in Ontario, is offered entirely through distance education. Graduates will be fully qualified through the Ontario College of Teachers (the governing body for Ontario educators) to teach both on and off reserve. Brock's Faculty of Education has also offered a Bachelor of Education in Aboriginal

Adult Education at numerous sites across the province since 2000. Today hundreds of Aboriginal people can trace their entry into university studies through this program and a significant number of those graduates are now pursuing graduate work at Brock.

Philosophically, Brock has taken a longer view of Aboriginal education that results in an expanded number of Aboriginal educators, scholars, and researchers who work from within their cultures and languages to co-create change within their communities. The Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education has supported that activity by building relationships with schools, school boards, faculties, various provincial/territorial organizations, First Nations, Tribal Councils, and other like-minded provincial and international universities such as York University in Toronto and the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand.

Listening to the Voices of Teacher Candidates

Each year Brock's Pre-service Department organizes a Social Issues Day at the St. Catharines campus which teacher candidates attend. For the past four years the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education has gratefully participated in that event by engaging various Aboriginal community experts as presenters to expose teacher candidates to some of the critical issues relevant to Aboriginal education. By necessity, the focus of the day is limited to creating immediate awareness of critical Aboriginal learning needs and realities, and expanding teacher candidates' proficiency to address them. Participating candidates hear from an Aboriginal keynote speaker for part of the morning and choose from a number of workshops offered in the morning and the afternoon by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal presenters.

Sixty per cent of the 189-primary/junior and junior/intermediate teacher candidates attending the 2006 Social Issues Day (McGean & Bowering, 2006) completed a short survey to describe their experience of the day. This study was not intended to reflect a statistically meaningful dataset, but rather to present a reflexive snapshot of the learning experienced by teacher candidates who in less than a year would be working in their classrooms with Aboriginal children. Analysis of the collected data demonstrated three dominant themes:

1. participants identified the need for more time, knowledge, or resources to gain a better understanding of Aboriginal education;
2. participants indicated an increased awareness and sensitivity to issues affecting Aboriginal peoples; and
3. participants recognized that the workshops had created a greater understanding of the challenges facing Aboriginal peoples.
- 4.

It is the voices reflected in the words of those teacher candidates that are the most poignant:

I think presentations like this are important for teachers. I would like to learn more about how we can help and integrate Native culture into our classrooms. I have learned to bring respect into the classroom and be sensitive to the different cultural needs of the children.

I really enjoyed being able to question in an environment that understands our lack of information.

I have a better understanding of the cultural beliefs and values of Aboriginals. I also feel better equipped to embrace the students and be compassionate and understanding. I have always thought of myself as an accepting person but this workshop certainly opened my eyes to the ways I can further my acceptance. Also the various traditions that will certainly benefit me as an educator.

It was worthwhile to share some of this information and at least get the "antennae up" for what we may see/encounter in the classroom.

These voices not only speak of an appreciation for the experience, but also expose a serious deficit in teacher learning easily recognized by those participating teacher candidates that, left unchecked, will continue to marginalize the educational realities of Aboriginal children and youth in Ontario.

Envisioning a (Stronger) Response to the Rising Chorus

As an example, Brock University is well-placed to provide leadership in Aboriginal education because it is within an hour's drive of 25 per cent of all urban Aboriginal people and a few hour's drive of six First Nation communities, including Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, the

largest Native community in Canada. Such a concentration of Aboriginal people in the Brock environs renders as an institutional imperative particularly the development of wide-ranging, culturally appropriate and innovative programs for initial teacher preparation as well as for continuing teacher education. Undoubtedly, because teachers graduating from Brock will have significant numbers of Aboriginal children in their classrooms, they need to be fully prepared to address the unique identity and the learning and linguistic needs of those children. It is with this in mind that three possibilities are proposed in an effort to prompt a wider discourse among Faculties of Education in this province with the hope of envisioning a new strategic initiative to strike a balance between existing programming realities and Ministry of Education policy, while creating a meaningful response to this critical social justice issue. Brock's Faculty of Education, and other universities with Aboriginal departments or centres that are responsive to Aboriginal cultures and languages (like the Tecumseh Centre), are uniquely positioned to develop and provide continuing education courses in Aboriginal education to in-service teachers.

Continuing Education

Aboriginal education is becoming a greater priority in the province of Ontario, a need reflected in the new *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007b) and the other documents highlighted earlier from the Ministry of Education. Local contacts in boards of education and discussions with teachers attending the Ministry of Education sponsored symposia also indicate a growing demand for courses and resources in response to the new provincial initiatives. The Ontario College of Teachers has responded to this demand by revising its additional qualification courses in Aboriginal education offered to in-service teachers.

Pre-service Education

All teachers in Ontario should be familiar with Aboriginal education. In addition to specialized opportunities to pre-service teachers such as Brock's Social Issues days, there should be more Aboriginal content infused into other courses. The immediacy and critical nature of Aboriginal public education in this province demands a significant response from

Ontario universities that can be expressed through mandatory courses for all in-service teacher candidates or, at the minimum, elective courses in Aboriginal education offered to all students. Another approach is to offer an equivalent to the Roman Catholic preparation course, as Aboriginal educational rights are also enshrined in legislation.

Graduate Possibilities

A growing demand for Aboriginal education courses in Canada reflects an interest in Indigenous ways of knowing and a personal commitment to respond to a significant Canadian social injustice. This, combined with the anecdotal evidence that points to growing numbers of in-service teachers in the prime of their careers who are considering graduate education, strongly suggests that courses in Aboriginal education offered at the graduate level have the potential to involve a critical sector of educators.

It should go without saying that both the pre-service and graduate solutions are best served by expanding the number of Aboriginal professors who specialize in Aboriginal education and culture/history, and who are intimately connected to their communities. As academics they could build the necessary critical mass of in-service teachers who can bring their new understanding to bear in their schools and school boards.

THE CHALLENGE FOR ALL – RESPONDING CREATIVELY

In summary, there is a crisis relevant to the publicly funded education of Aboriginal children in Ontario. This article has presented details of the crisis by analyzing recent policy statements released by the Ministry of Education designed to address that crisis. By defining the nature of this critical juncture, presenting thoughts on how these policies may be “widening the void” rather than “closing the gap,” offering immediate opportunities to respond and improve the capabilities of teachers to enact those policies in their classrooms, the authors trust that school boards, faculty associations, as well as Deans of Education, will act decisively to support Aboriginal self-determination. Current research strongly suggests that these possibilities are best served by engaging Aboriginal faculty in both development and delivery (Battiste & Barman, 1995; Cajete,

1994; Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000; Hampton, 1995; Hill & George, 1996) and many universities have been thwarted to achieve this by a province-wide shortfall in credentialed Aboriginal faculty. Over the next few years this will change as increased numbers of Aboriginal people work their way through graduate programming, but university educators cannot wait until that time to address this issue. These circumstances force universities and faculties to think outside their collective experience to identify alternatives that engage knowledgeable, community-connected Aboriginal educators to meet the needs of the institution and the needs of Aboriginal children in publicly funded schools in this province.

In conclusion, this article is not intended to offend or in any way minimize the existing efforts of the Ministry of Education, faculty, or support staff in the Faculties of Education across the province. We applaud the intent of the OME's policy initiative but until educators can connect the cultural heritage of Aboriginal children in Ontario public schools in culturally meaningful ways with the schooling they receive in such schools, the policy will fail. We need to see a renewed emphasis on the preparation of Aboriginal teachers with full Ontario qualifications, the inclusion of culturally relevant and authentic Aboriginal materials in the curriculum of teacher preparation for both mainstream and Aboriginal teacher candidates, and the development of new academics for Faculties of Education whose pedagogical knowledge and cultural understanding bridges the historic divide that is the legacy of colonialism. As a first step educators need to present an education reality and encourage an expanded effort that brings the considerable capacity within Ontario schools, school boards, and universities to address this issue. We believe the core issue is how the entire experience of Aboriginal children in the province's schools maintains and extends the legacy of colonialism by failing to promote the next generation's capacity to be self-determining from within their epistemic heritage.

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