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9. ANTI-RACISM AND DECOLONIZATION IN EDUCATION FROM AN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

In *Anti-racism and Decolonization from an Indigenous Perspective* McFarlane brings forth the legacy of forced assimilative education for Indigenous peoples. From her own personal experiences, and support from Indigenous research, McFarlane discusses how colonization and racism have played a large role in Indigenous peoples' lives, and questions how anti-racism and decolonization can work when colonization is still ongoing and based on ideologies of Eurocentrism and racism. In practice, Eurocentrism and racism are intertwined: they reinforce superiority by stating that European languages, knowledge systems, and cultures are superior, scientific, and civilized. It is with this ideas in mind that McFarlane deconstructs and analyzes how anti-racism and decolonization works within academic institutions, especially when Indigenous knowledges are still relegated as inferior.

Keywords: anti-racism, decolonization, indigenous, academic institutions

LOCATING THE SELF

As an Anishnaabe kwe and a student in academia, racism and colonization have played a huge role in my life. As a racialized person, I confront racism every day, not only because of the colour of my skin, but also because of who I am – an Indigenous woman. Though my post-secondary education is something that I have had to fight for, it can also be considered a privilege because I have received government funding to attend school, whereas there are a lot of Indigenous people like myself who cannot receive funding to obtain a post-secondary education due to rules, regulations, and criteria set in place by the Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

I study in an educational system that mainly caters to a non-Indigenous curriculum, while my people continue to fight to get Indigenous curricula introduced into the system. We are still largely misrepresented and used as stereotypes. Stereotypes such as “All Indians are drunken Indians,” “All Indians are on welfare,” or “All Indians go to school for free.” Since the time of contact, Indigenous people have suffered from colonialist and assimilationist policies because our culture, traditions, and languages were all considered inferior to that of European Canadians.

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I am the first in my biological family to enter the post-secondary system and to pursue a Master's degree. In the past, education was largely used as an assimilationist tool to eradicate the ways of my people. My biological mother and most of her family are residential school survivors. I remember my mom's aunt telling me that as children they were herded like cattle onto the back of a truck and driven away to a school that was far from their homes. What a memory to have. It tears me up inside knowing that residential schools existed and that my family was hurt by that system. To this day, much of my biological family fight with addiction and mental health issues because of what happened to them in those schools.

Today I fight for an education; I fight to know my culture, my traditions, and language because I want generations behind me to know that education is our right, just like anyone else. It is not something that should be feared. I fight because I no longer want to be the sole Anishnaabe kwe sitting in a university classroom fighting for my voice to be heard. As a writer, in my personal life, I write about what is close to me; I write what I feel passionate about. I write stories about healing for newspapers like Anishinabek News and the First Nations House Magazine. In these publications, I write about the positive things my people are doing. I do this because I am tired of hearing only the negative reports about my people. We are a strong and resilient people who deserve much better than what we have received.

COLONIZATION

According to Goulet and Goulet (2014) in, *Teaching Each Other: Nehinuw Concepts and Indigenous Pedagogies*, “[c]olonization affected and continues to affect, Indigenous people economically, politically, socially, emotionally and spiritually. The loss of territory and land, and the depletion of resources such as buffalo and fish, wiped out the economic base of Indigenous societies, causing death and poverty” (p. 39). With colonization, the governing and decision making processes of Indigenous peoples were suppressed, often by military force, then replaced with a European model of governance where most decision making took place outside the community, and authority was externally imposed. Colonial relationships continue to be marked by the abuse of power, with one side imposing its history and denigrating the others' ways of being, thinking, and doing. The practices, beliefs, and actions of Indigenous peoples were viewed through a Eurocentric lens, measured and judged by using European values and norms.

I wonder how it made my people and my ancestors feel when they could not practice their traditions and ways of life without being punished. I know that even now I fight to learn my culture and traditions. I only speak a bit of my language as a result of learning it in my undergraduate studies. My biological mother never speaks the language with me, even though sometimes I really wish she would. It was through resistance and perseverance that some of our traditional practices of spirituality and healing were carried on, but much knowledge and self-reliance was lost through colonization.

ONGOING RACISM

Goulet and Goulet (2014) further argue, “racism is a social construct existing in societal and institutional structure” (p. 39) and that it is also an internalized condition. Racism affects individual belief systems. The turmoil that is caused by colonization can be reflected in personal and social problems of community and its peoples. With this, comes intergenerational trauma in Indigenous communities because the ills of the past are often passed down from one generation to the next. When racism is embedded in our society, everyone hurts because it occurs on many levels and in many forms. The Indian Act of Canada is an example of a racist law that is imposed on Indigenous peoples because some people have status and others do not, due to the establishment and continued dictates of the Indian Act itself.

Personal racism takes on a whole new level of experience when it occurs in interpersonal contexts. I remember as a teenager being the only Indigenous student in the town and foster home that I lived in and the high school that I attended. I was a brown face in a sea of white faces, and racism was rampant when it came to how I was seen and treated. I remember one day, while in high school, I was walking down the street from my foster home at lunchtime, when a girl who did not like me gathered around me with her friends. I was terrified, as the group of predominantly white girls who were bigger than me, started to circle around me. Though I was saved at the last minute by my foster mother driving by, I still hate to think about what could have happened if I had not been picked up and driven the rest of the way to school that day.

Today one of the most pervasive forms of racism is institutionalized. The failure of the school system to meet the needs of Indigenous students is an example of institutional racism. Goulet and Goulet (2014) state that “there are many factors that lead to this failure, such as the chronic, systemic underfunding of First Nations schools, teacher beliefs and expectations, and discriminatory practices” (p. 41). The teaching staff in Canadian public schools remain predominantly white and middle class, and this can be problematic if the teacher does not see beyond their own unearned opportunities that comes from being white in our society. “Many Euro-Canadian teachers are not prepared to examine their white racial identity and the privilege that confirms their position of power in our society, or acknowledge the effects of our colonial history on Indigenous peoples” (Goulet & Goulet, 2014, p. 41). Without acknowledging our colonial past and present and the ongoing racism that is infused into our education system, it is easier to put the blame on Indigenous students and their families rather than look at the curriculum and the education system that contributes to the dropout rates and lack of success amongst Indigenous students.

ASSIMILATIVE EDUCATION

Battiste (2013) positions the experiences of immigrants in relation to assimilative education differently to that of Indigenous peoples. She argues: “Immigrants,

including refugees, make their way to Canada knowing that they will have to learn a particular culture. For some, the choice of living in a culturally similar community or having a school that guides them along the way helps them make this transition” (Battiste, 2013, p. 24). I also believe that the willingness of some immigrants to assimilate is different from what Indigenous peoples in Canada experience. By being a part of a treaty system and subject to residential school legislation, Indigenous peoples in Canada from the time of contact have endured a tenuous relationship with the Canadian Government and Crown. According to John W. Friesen and Virginia Lyons Friesen, “it is sometimes confusing to readers unfamiliar with Native history to decipher the legal complexities of such phenomena as Indian Treaties, the Indian Act, and the ownership of Indian reserves” (2005, p. 17). Although treaties were agreements about the surrendering of Indigenous lands, there were other provisions concerning our right to education based on our own knowledge systems. Battiste (2013) also states that it is crucial to understand that “the central concepts of the Aboriginal and treaty right to education were an enriched education of First Nations that supplemented the learning system that is integral to the transmitting of knowledge, identity, and life skills to First Nations children” (p. 24). Instead, the education that Indigenous peoples received was based on a Western curriculum and not of their own worldview.

As a result of the forced assimilative education practices of Canada, Indigenous peoples have yet to receive the enriched education promised in their treaty agreements. Indigenous peoples throughout Canada are feeling the tensions created by a Eurocentric education system that has taught them to distrust their Indigenous knowledge systems, the wisdom of their elders, and their own inner learning spirit. “Neither the assimilative path of residential schools and day schools in the first half of the last century, nor the integrative approaches of the second half of the century in Canada have succeeded in nurturing many Aboriginal students beyond high school. Most consider education an ongoing failure” (Battiste, 2013, p. 25).

CONTINUAL CHANGES IN EDUCATION

Educational institutions in Canada are continually feeling pressure from Indigenous peoples to make education accessible and relevant. With the rise of Indigenous populations, especially in the Northern Territories and Prairie Provinces, educators are aware of the need to generate a more diverse population of trained workers, as they seek to address the diversity that exists in the increasing population of young people. As diversity is recognized, so are questions about the processes of being more inclusive, tolerant, and respectful.

An important research project by Susan Dion, Krista Johnson, and Carla M. Rice (2010) titled, *Decolonizing Our Schools: Aboriginal Education in the Toronto District School Boards (TDSB)*, demonstrates the importance of an education worthy of “our children and our ancestors” (p. v) in a large and diverse urban context. Her research confirmed what Indigenous parents, educators, and students already knew:

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Institutions of formal schooling, including the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) are failing to provide Aboriginal students with the educational environment and experiences they require to achieve success. Students in urban settings face particular problems since they may not be recognized as Aboriginal or if recognized at all, they may be expected to have access to and be willing to share cultural knowledge. Furthermore they may not see themselves represented in the curriculum or the teaching population and are encouraged to attend school in spite of this. (Dion et al., 2010, p. v)

It is not only students who face challenges in urban settings, school board administrators, teachers, and other Board employees are also encountering similar challenges. These challenges include:

Recognizing Aboriginal student populations. Delivering programs when students are frequently dispersed across a range of schools. Lacking the requisite knowledge for teaching Aboriginal subject material. Engaging families and communities who may be understandably resistant to formal education. (Dion et al., 2010, p. vi)

This research, which was conducted with over 200 students, parents, teachers, community members, and administrators, generated four key findings:

1. The Board must recognize the importance of understanding and responding to Aboriginal students' learning needs.
2. The meaningful and appropriate incorporation of Indigenous issues across the curriculum must be supported by providing in-service professional development for teaching staff.
3. Schools and learning environments must be transformed in order to decolonize and indigenize learning spaces.
4. Aboriginal education must be prioritized across the Board, especially by establishing and maintaining internal and external partnerships. (Dion et al., 2010, p. vi)

This is what it should mean when it comes to an Indigenous conceptualization of inclusive schooling and education. When it comes to representation, recognizing all Indigenous students is not necessarily going to happen in a diverse school because not all students will self-identify. Knowledge representation should include multiple cultures, histories, and experiences to emphasize the complexities of intermixing and cross-cultural exchange. When it comes to deliverance, programs should be inclusive of everyone. If you really want to be inclusive, let the curriculum involve every colour of the Medicine Wheel – red, yellow, white, and black. This is what Indigenous people call “All My Relations.” Lack of requisite knowledge requires Indigenous sensitivity training and this is important because when there is a lack of knowledge, racism, stereotypes, and biases creep in. School and learning

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environments should have an engagement with people from all walks of life within the student population.

Today, the Truth and Reconciliation Committees Calls to Action on Education (2015) outlines clearly how changes can be made for a more positive working relationship that benefits both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the education system. It is important to note that at the core of building relationships with Indigenous peoples is understanding the distinction embedded in treaties and later agreements. These treaties and later agreements framed the relationship of Indigenous peoples with the Canadian Government and Crown. This is least understood in Canada because most Canadians today still view Indigenous peoples as first settlers and not as Indigenous. Seeing Indigenous peoples differently from what they really are, causes problems when it comes to dealing with Indigenous matters in Canada. Non-Indigenous Canadians only see what is on the surface, they do not see the history behind Indigenous peoples and their distinct status (in distinct civilizations). This causes angst and anger that comes to the surface when treaties and Indigenous rights are asserted.

DECOLONIZATION AND ANTI-RACISM:

In the article “Decolonizing Antiracism” Lawrence and Dua (2005) call on postcolonial and anti-racism theorists to begin to take the process of Indigenous decolonization seriously. From my own lived experience with racism, I agree with Lawrence and Dua (2005) when they state that “it is difficult not to conclude that there is something deeply wrong with the manner in which, in our own lands, antiracism does not begin with, and reflect the totality of Native peoples lived experiences – that is, with the genocide that established and maintains all of the settler states within the Americas” (p. 121). One of the arguments they make is that “because of the intensity of genocidal policies that Indigenous people have faced and continue to face, a common error on the part of antiracist and postcolonial theorists is to assume that genocide has been virtually complete” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 123). As a result, programs for anti-racism have not made way to establish a working relationship with Indigenous peoples to address the very issues that affect them.

It is my argument that genocide – outright cultural genocide is still happening with Indigenous people today, and I agree with Lawrence and Dua (2005) when they make the argument that Indians become unreal figures in the storytelling of settler nations. It is just recently in light of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada that the Honourable Murray Sinclair said “I think as commissioners we have concluded that cultural genocide is probably the best description of what went on here. But more importantly, if anybody tried to do this today, they would easily be subject to prosecution under the genocide convention” (Tasker, 2015). Sinclair further states, “the evidence is mounting that the Government did try to eliminate the culture and language of Indigenous people for well over a hundred years. And

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they did it by forcibly removing children from their families and placing them within institutions that were cultural indoctrination centres. That appears to us to fall within the definition of genocide under the UN convention” (Tasker, 2015).

I would cite the Sixties Scoop, as a genocidal policy that the Canadian Government used against the Indigenous people of Canada. The term refers to the practice of taking Aboriginal children from their families and placing them in foster homes. As a survivor of this genocidal policy, I was removed from my culture, traditions, and language and placed in a non-Native home in the early 1970’s. While there, I was physically and emotionally abused, and then given back to the Children’s Aid Society at the age of ten because my adoption broke down. I grew up in various foster homes and it was not until I was away from my adoptive family that I was able to learn about my culture and traditions. I learned my language not from my own biological mother, but from classes I took in my undergraduate years at the University of Toronto.

As Indigenous peoples, we are relegated to the past in school curriculum. Anti-racism and decolonization needs to focus on where we are as a people today. As Lawrence and Dua, (2005) maintain:

Being consigned to a mythic past or the ‘dustbin of history’ means being precluded from changing and existing as real people in the present. It also means being denied even the possibility of regenerating nationhood. If Indigenous nationhood is seen as something of the past, the present becomes a site in which Indigenous peoples are reduced to small groups of racially and culturally defined and marginalized individuals drowning in a sea of settlers-who needn’t be taken seriously. (p. 124)

We are a distinct people with a strong sense of culture, traditions, and nationhood. For decolonization to work, there needs to be a focus on the positive events that are unfolding in Indigenous communities in order to assist in decolonizing mainstream, stereotypical thinking about Indigenous peoples.

DECOLONIZATION AND EDUCATION

Education regarding the process of ongoing colonization and the impacts on Indigenous people are important because events and policies that happened in the past, can provide insights into processes of domination and resistance in the present (Merry, 1991; Watson, 2009). This means that events and policies of the past affect the social dynamics and attitudes that exist in society today. If we are to truly decolonize our academic spaces, then we must be able to accept all viewpoints and paradigms, and this includes Indigenous epistemologies. Often in Western university systems, researchers are required to link their findings back to established disciplines within the academic community. This often causes difficulties for Indigenous researchers hoping to set their research within a research paradigm that is conducive to their ontology. Therefore, when Indigenous researchers define their

methodological framework, most often they are required to do so within Western paradigms. Forcing Indigenous researchers to fit their approach within Western paradigms ignores the principle that all research paradigms have a specific cultural foundation. Indigenous scholars maintain that valid research involving Indigenous peoples must be based in research paradigms that are similar with Indigenous realities and ways of knowing (Dumbrill & Green, 2008). Furthermore, we need to put these ideas into action because without action none of the ideas are liberating. This stage, according to Indigenous scholars, requires moving beyond a critique of Eurocentrism to restructuring how services and the academy currently work. Moving beyond critique is crucial because simply critiquing European dominance is by nature another exercise in Eurocentrism. (Dumbrill & Green, 2008; Lawrence & Dua, 2005).

How do we put these ideas into action? For instance, Lawrence and Dua (2005) argue that giving one week token attention to Indigenous peoples or forming relationships with those from marginalized groups will not be enough to develop a critical multi-centric academy. The action that is needed is far-reaching; those from the dominant culture need to move over and make space for other ways of knowing (Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011; Dumbrill & Green, 2008).

Making space includes inviting expert members of other groups, such as Elders to teach in the academy and really recognizing Indigenous knowledge (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). This means having people teach even if they do not have doctoral degrees, recognizing and appreciating non-text based materials, including different academic standards; and at the very least, creating more courses on Indigenous knowledges so that students can have choices to select from.

CONCLUSION

In the article “Changing the subject in teacher education: Centering Indigenous, diasporic, and settler-colonial relations” Martin Cannon (2013) states that “[i]n Canada, it is routine to think about colonization as having little, if anything, to do with non-Indigenous peoples. As such, it is typically Indigenous scholars, teachers and populations who are left to explain the impact of colonization and residential schooling in our communities, and the history of oppressive legislation” (p. 21). For myself, I would say that largely my success as an Anishinaabe kwe and a student in the academia comes from a power within. A dream that I have had since I started my academic journey is that I would put all my effort into my studies, excel, and be proud of myself for it, whilst being humble since I have had several supporters along the way.

In Anishnaabe worldview, we do not operate from a sense of power, we operate within a worldview that not only includes ALL OUR RELATIONS, but also the Seven Grandfather Teachings – Love, Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Humility, Wisdom and Truth. In order for anti-racism and decolonization to work in academia, we all must be inclusive of the diverse communities that comprise our schools and be cognizant

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of how each community works within academia. Learning and understanding the truth will lead to 'reconciliation' and this can be done by inclusion, understanding, and respect between Indigenous peoples and settlers. We cannot just assume that the Eurocentric way of teaching and knowing will work for everyone.

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