

Research

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“Just A Pepper In A Bunch Of Salt”: Aboriginal Students’ Stories Of School

**A Summary of a Master’s Thesis by
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- Summary
- Introduction
- Aboriginal Education:
The Contemporary Landscape
- Colonialism and Decolonization
- The Literature Review
- Implications

Executive Summary

“Just a Pepper in a Bunch of Salt”: Aboriginal Students’ Stories of School

*A summary of a master’s thesis by Heather Findlay –
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The Saskatchewan education system is failing its Aboriginal students. This research explores high-school aged Aboriginal students’ stories of place, curriculum, and teachers and administrators. Data was collected through interviews and utilized Critical Race Theory to analyze the data. Participants asked for the creation of a sense of belonging through the inclusion of Aboriginal artifacts and the meaningful actions of teachers. Also, teachers authentically infusing Aboriginal content throughout core curriculum, and educators overcoming disconnect with Aboriginal students by developing close relationships and engaging in processes of decolonization.

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Introduction

Any research involving Aboriginal peoples must begin with a discussion about naming and the importance of names. This is because, as Warry (2009) reminds the reader, “words have power” (p. 9). Similarly, names have power. The power of the Canadian government to name groups and determine membership in these groups is a remnant of Canada’s colonial history. The term Aboriginal refers to the original inhabitants of North America. The Canadian Constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples: Indians, Métis, and Inuit (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2003). Consequently, I have elected to use the term “Aboriginal peoples” throughout this thesis to describe my participants. It is important to remember, however, that each of the aforementioned groups is linguistically and culturally distinct. Even within these groups, there is much diversity, as Aboriginal peoples across the country have many unique histories, cultures, and traditions (Statistics Canada, 2003, p. 8). Aboriginal peoples share many features of an indigenous heritage and a colonial legacy that continues to have devastating impacts on many communities. At the same time, however, Aboriginal communities also have substantial heterogeneity marked by numerous forms of differentiation including “cultural heritage, identity, legal status, region, class, age, and gender” (Wotherspoon, 2006, p. 674). The use of the all-inclusive word “Aboriginal” in this thesis does not signify or imply any form of generic, one-size-fits-all approach to the realities of Aboriginal peoples. On the contrary, it must be recognized that the Cree/Nêhiyaw, Dakota, Dene (Chipewyan), Nakota, Saulteaux, and Métis people that call Saskatchewan home are highly diverse in their cultures, languages, values, beliefs, histories, contemporary realities, and aspirations (Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir, & Muir, 2010, p. 331).

Warry (2009) explains that the use of the plural “Aboriginal peoples” is important because it also signals political orientation. While the use of “Aboriginal people” can be grammatically correct in specific contexts, this characterization homogenizes; it turns all Aboriginal persons into a “type,” a generalized category. The use of the pluralized form Aboriginal peoples immediately recognizes the diversity of Aboriginal cultures – and there are many distinct Aboriginal cultures in Canada (p. 10).

Throughout my research, scholars and participants have used various terms to refer to Aboriginal peoples. These include “Indigenous”, “Native”, “Native American”, “North American Indian”, and “Indian”. Warry (2009) informs the reader that, “a writer’s choice of words indicates political orientation and potential bias” (p. 9). As much as I could, I have attempted to honor the choice of words of both the participants and authors that I cite by using their terminology wherever possible. It is important to remember that in Canada, “Indian” is a legal term: it is used to signify those people the government recognizes as having Indian status; that is, those people who are recognized under the *Indian Act*. The term “non-status Indians”

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is formally used to refer to Native people who are not recognized by the government because their parents or ancestors enfranchised or lost their Indian status for a variety of reasons. Non-status Indians may identify themselves as Aboriginal, yet they are not considered status Indians by the government and so do not have many of the same rights under the law (Warry, 2009, p. 9). Consequently, “the *Indian Act* definition has been and continues to be a divisive force among Canada’s natives” (Cardinal, 1969, p. 18). Since 1970, however, the term “Indian” has been replaced with “First Nations”.

At the same time, another indicator of political orientation is whether or not to capitalize terms. Aboriginal and Indian, like other designations based on the social construction of race such as White, is capitalized. It is important to note, however, that “Aboriginal denotes more than race: it signals a special political status in the same way as the adjective Canadian” (Warry, 2009, pp. 10–11).

Aboriginal Education: The Contemporary Landscape

According to Statistics Canada (2011) in 2011, there were 1,400,685 Aboriginal people in Canada, accounting for 4.3% of Canada’s total population (p. 6). 157,740 Aboriginal peoples live in Saskatchewan, representing 11.3% of the provincial population. At this time, 46.2% of Aboriginal peoples were under the age of 25, compared to 29.4% of non-Aboriginal people (p. 5). While the largest numbers of Aboriginal peoples are found in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and the Canadian territories have the highest percentage of Aboriginal peoples in comparison to the overall population (Levin, 2009; MacIver, 2010; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009c).

The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) notes that the non-Aboriginal school-age population in Canada is expected to decline by nearly 400,000 children from 2001 to 2017. Conversely, the projected increase of the Aboriginal school-aged population by “374,200 students from 2001 to 2017 means that Aboriginal peoples will constitute a larger proportion of Canada’s school-aged children” (p. 4). The situation in Saskatchewan mirrors the national trend. Contrary to the overall provincial decline in student population, the Aboriginal student population is experiencing significant growth (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008; MacIver, 2010). For example, there were 1,832 more self-declared Aboriginal students in 2009–10 than in 2008–09 (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 51). By 2017, the Saskatchewan Aboriginal population is projected to increase by 30% from the 2001 numbers and, therefore, will present a situation that will challenge the Eurocentric educational system currently found in the province (MacIver, 2010, p. 2-3).

The Canadian education system is failing its Aboriginal students (MacIver, 2010). Across Canada, the graduation rates of Aboriginal students are substantially lower than their non-Aboriginal peers: 50% of Aboriginal peoples between 18 and 24 years of age have not achieved a high school diploma compared to only 20% of their non-Aboriginal peers (Riley & Ungerleider, 2008; Silver, Mallett, Greene, & Simard, 2002). The majority of Aboriginal youth do not complete high school. Consequently, they leave the school system without requisite skills for employment and without the language and cultural knowledge of their people (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 434).

In Saskatchewan, the picture is equally bleak. In 2010–2011, 187,710 students in Saskatchewan self-declared as Aboriginal totaling 20.9% of the total student population (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2011b, p. 3). However, this number may not be completely accurate as the Ministry of Education relies on self-identification on the part of the parent or student in the calculation of the numbers. The graduation rate of Aboriginal students is abysmal when compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts. In calculating graduation rates, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education

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reports on the number of students who graduate grade 12 within three years of starting grade 10. Using this lens for analysis, the most recent cohort for whom data is available entered Grade 10 in 2008–2009. Of those students, only 32.7% of students who self-declared as Aboriginal graduated within three years of starting grade 10. Comparatively, 72.3% of non-Aboriginal students graduated within the three years (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2011b, p. 6). As a comparison, the previous cohort entered grade 10 in 2007–2008. Of those students, only 32.5% of those identified as Aboriginal graduated by the 2009–2010 school year and the majority, 58.1%, were still enrolled in school (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 84).

The percentage of Aboriginal students who complete high school within the typical three-year period has only increased from 27% to 32.7% since 1996–1997 (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 84).

This trend of low graduation rates within the three-year time period has been calculated by the Ministry of Education for over fifteen years. While rates fluctuate year to year, the percentage of Aboriginal students who complete high school within the typical three-year period has only increased from 27% to 32.7% since 1996–1997 (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 84). Currently, the 5-year average of on-time graduation rates for Aboriginal students is at 32.1% (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2011b, p. 6).

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education also calculates the rates of high school completion over what it refers to as the five-year extended time. This statistic examines how many students complete high school over that period. The most recent cohort for which data is available are the students who graduated in the 2006–2007 school year. During this time, the number of self-identified Aboriginal students who graduated within the three-year period was 31.6% (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009c, p. 101). Using the extended five-year calculations, the number of Aboriginal student graduates increased to 48.1%. Conversely, the number of the non-Aboriginal graduates within the three-year calculation was 73.8% (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009c, p. 97). After the extended five-year period, the percentage had increased to 81.1 (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2011b, p. 6).

A clearer picture of why the graduation rates are so low can be seen through the examination of the marks achieved in classes and credit accumulation for Aboriginal students. First, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2010) reported that self-declared Aboriginal students had lower grades in their classes than non-Aboriginal students in all the regions of Saskatchewan: urban, rural, and northern (p. 39). Of note is the fact that northern self-declared Aboriginal males have the lowest average Grade 10 marks. In fact, the average marks for self-declared Aboriginal males who live in northern Saskatchewan in English Language Arts A10 and Mathematics 10 were lower than 50%; the mark that allows students to progress to the next level (p. 38). It is no surprise, then, that the number of credits earned by Aboriginal students every year is lower than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2011b) notes that, “to graduate within the typical three year period after beginning

Grade 10, students must accumulate an average of eight credits per year to achieve the minimum requirement of 24 required secondary level credits” (p. 7). The average number of credits earned by non-Aboriginal students in 2011 was 7.9. This number has remained constant for the past five years. However, the number of credits earned by self-identified Aboriginal students in 2011 was only 5.8 credits per year (p. 8).

Examining the progress of students as they move through the grades also highlights the failure of the education system for Aboriginal students in the province. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education documents the number of students who completely transition between grades 2 and 3, grades 6 and 7, and grades 9 and 10. The self-declared Aboriginal and northern sub-populations have the lowest proportions of students who continue directly to Grade 3, Grade 6, and Grade 10 from the previous grades (MacIver, 2010; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010). Statistics indicate that while most students repeat the grade in which they were held back, a portion of these students were not re-enrolled. Furthermore, the percentage of students who do not re-enroll increases as grade level increases (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010; Steeves, Carr-Stewart, & Marshall, 2010). However, the true picture of Aboriginal students within the province is incomplete as the Ministry of Education does not desegregate statistics along Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal categories, thus making comparisons between the two groups impossible.

The final indicator of the failure of the education system for Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan can be seen in the results of large-scale assessments conducted by the Ministry of Education and in students’ average marks for specific classes. According to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2010), “large-scale assessments occur periodically as students progress through school. Information from these assessments not only reflects the learning during that school year, but also the learning that took place in previous years” (p. 42). The province participates in three large-scale assessments: the provincial Assessment for Learning program (AFL), the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Of those three, only the Assessment for Learning program provides data that separates Aboriginal students from their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010). The 2010 AFL focused on writing. On this assessment, Aboriginal students did not demonstrate the same level of achievement as their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Steeves *et al.*, 2010). According to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, “a smaller proportion of Aboriginal students achieved the standards in all categories tested when compared to the provincial average” (2010, p. 44).

The 2011 AFL focused on both math and reading. In the area of math content skills, only 44.4% of Aboriginal students at the elementary level and 42.8% of Aboriginal students at the middle years level performed at the “adequate and above” level, compared to 76.8% and 73.9% of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. In reading comprehension skills, 57.4%

of Aboriginal students achieved at the level of “adequate and above,” compared to 84.9% for non-Aboriginal students at the elementary level. At the middle years level, the scores of “adequate and above” were 62.6% for Aboriginal students and 86.5% for non-Aboriginal students. Finally, at the high school level, the scores were 74.6% and 90.6% for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students respectively (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2011b, p. 7).

Colonialism and Decolonization

Canada’s history is shaped by colonialism, which may be understood as “the subjugation of one cultural group by another” (Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies, 2002, p. 140). Weenie (2000) explains that the belief in European supremacy was the basis of colonization. The belief set up a “civilized/uncivilized dichotomy” where “colonizers are depicted as the advanced civilization” and “the colonized are depicted as backward nations” (p. 66). Colonialism resulted in the “dispossession and near extermination” of the Aboriginal populations in Canada by the conquering Europeans (Sterzuk, 2011, p. 3).

The colonial process in Canada was manipulated through the passing of key government legislation such as Section 91(24) of the *British North America Act* and *The Indian Act, 1867* and its amendments. These pieces of legislation created an “elaborate systems of legal and administrative control over Aboriginal Peoples” (Fitzmaurice, 2010, p. 358). The result of these and other colonial acts was to bring “complete disorder to colonized peoples, disconnecting them from their histories, their landscapes, their languages, their social relations and their own ways of thinking, feeling and interacting with the world” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2010, p. 28). Thus, it is important to remember “colonization occurs not only institutionally, but physically, emotionally, and spiritually as well” (Calderon, 2011, p. 111).

Sterzuk (2011) describes how in Canada, “European conquest and colonization are often denied, largely through the fantasy that North America was peacefully settled and not colonized (p. 4). Scott (2013) supports this statement when he describes that the official story of Canada “continues to deny and marginalize the historical, temporal, spatial, and legal relationship among Indigenous peoples and Canadians” (p. 23). It is through the establishment of the official stories of how Canada came to be that colonialism continues today. However, this process is not limited to Canada. Tuhiwai Smith (2010) explains this process is true of all colonized nations when she describes “the history of the colonies, from the perspective of the colonizers, has effectively denied other views of what happened and what the significance of historical ‘facts’ may be to the colonized” (p. 67). The denial of Indigenous views of history is a “critical part of asserting colonial ideology, partly because such views were regarded as clearly ‘primitive’ and ‘incorrect’ and mostly because they challenged and resisted the mission of colonization” (p. 29).

It is clear then, that despite the myths to suggest otherwise, “the institutions and legacy of colonialism have remained” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2010, p. 98). Fitzmaurice (2010) describes how “we have created a colonizing state, and the state further creates us” (p. 358). Sterzuk (2011) notes that colonialism “positions white settlers at the top of a racial hierarchy” through “the processes and institutions that serve” them (p. 4). It is through the creation of the dichotomy between the colonizer and the colonized that Weenie (2000) describes above that “allows settlers to feel justified

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in the dominance and control of the colonized people” (Sterzuk, 2011, p. 68). However, colonialism has created a situation where these processes are invisible to most people. Calderon (2011) is quick to note that “White ignorance is not confined to White people alone” and that Indigenous scholars point out “the process of colonization leads to a type of ignorance” for all members of the society (p. 122). Therefore, she advocates work towards decolonization.

It is important to note here that I have elected to use the term decolonization throughout this thesis rather than postcolonial. However, I am aware that this term also has its critics who suggest that to imagine that anything in the present can be decolonized is naïve at best. I have elected to use this term over postcolonial. One well-known critique of the term postcolonial is that it brings forth the idea that colonialism is over and, given the continuing effect of colonialism in present-day societies noted above, it is clear Canadians have not moved past the influence of colonialism (Sterzuk, 2011; Tuhiwai Smith, 2010).

Costello (2011) describes how Non-Aboriginal teachers often seem reluctant to explore “the relevance of colonization when seeking a deeper understanding of the issues faced by Aboriginal peoples and the subsequent effects these challenges have on education” (p. 19). However, because colonialism is “sustained by an intimate relationship with education” (Weenie, 2000, p. 66), it is vitally important that teachers embark on the journey of decolonizing themselves and education. Decolonization is a process which engages with colonialism at multiple levels. For teachers, “one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations, and values which inform practice” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2010, p. 20).

It is important for teachers to look at decolonization as a journey as it is “a lifelong struggle filled with uncertainty and risk taking” (Regan, 2010, pp. 217-218). This is because the process of decolonization means searching “new ways to incorporate decolonizing principles and practices into our daily lives and working in ways that shift binary colonizer/colonized identities” (p. 218). Similarly, Costello (2011) describes how decolonization of the non-Aboriginal teacher is not a “project” with a marked end; “it is a re-learning of one’s history, a reshaping of one’s touchstone stories, the capacity to culturally respond by shifting their teaching identity, and the ability to re-imagine a future as a reconciling Canadian” (p. 71). Both Regan (2010) and Costello (2011) are clear that one of the ways that White teachers can engage in the process of decolonization is through developing relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal peoples. Through engaging in “unsettling encounters” (Regan, 2010, p. 218), non-Aboriginal teachers are put in a place where they are able to continually interrogate “their own innate Eurocentric perceptions and practices” as well as critically analyze Eurocentric history (Costello, 2011, p. 31).

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The Literature Review

Place

Schools, like any landscapes, are landscapes of power. The social and the built environment represent particular identities, values, and cultures. Similar to the ways in which specific discourses become authoritative and dominant, spatialities alert us to how certain histories and meanings are constructed, imposed, and endure within landscapes. Critical Race Theory argues that race and racism are deeply embedded in school landscapes and affect the education and lives of Aboriginal students (Van Ingen & Halas, 2006). Therefore, the study of landscape is important because race and racialization of space have some very real and measurable effects on the lives of Aboriginal peoples. For example, school landscapes feel alien to most Aboriginal peoples (Silver *et al.*, 2002, Sterzuk, 2011, Van Ingen & Halas, 2006).

The two approaches to the study of school landscapes that I will take include an examination of the cultural products of schools and an examination of the way in which students move through the space itself. In both cases, White privilege is written into the school landscape in ways that cover the often hidden subtext of race and racism (Van Ingen & Halas, 2006). First, the hidden subtext of racism is marked by the presence of an absence. Here, the figurative presence of race and racism is conveyed through a virtual absence of Aboriginal students in the celebratory spaces of the school (Rosenberg, 2004; Van Ingen & Halas, 2006). For example, Kanu (2005) describes how during classroom observations, one teacher showed prominent integration of Aboriginal content including cultural artifacts, posters and flyers about Aboriginal events on classroom walls and bulletin boards, inclusion of books and other publications by Aboriginal authors, and consistent inclusion of positive content materials about Aboriginal peoples. However, this one teacher, who was also of Aboriginal descent, was the only teacher of ten to do so. In particular, none of the White teachers demonstrated this positive integration (p. 56).

Next, Van Ingen and Halas (2006) note that the manners in which students travel through a school’s hallways provide hints about identity and belonging in the space. In examining how students move through a school, one can study body language, dialogue, decibel levels, laughter, silence, and collectivities and isolation. This is because these traits are all defining characteristics of social interaction. These traits “give insight into discourse as these traits provide clues that help explain how inclusion/exclusion is manifested and experienced” (p. 384). It is necessary for educators to understand the ways in which Aboriginal students’ experiences within school landscapes are conditioned by their racialized treatment. As well, educators must acknowledge how race conditions the social space of school landscapes (Van Ingen & Halas, 2006). One of the ways that this is demonstrated within the school landscape is when students of the same race exclusively “hang out or associate with” members of their race (Ruck

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& Wortley, 2002, p. 190). Both Van Ingen and Halas (2006) and Tupper, Carson, Johnston, and Mangat (2008) describe how their observations in cross-cultural schools demonstrated that students of similar cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds associated with one another. In fact, Van Ingen and Halas (2006) note “there was more segregation than integration across diverse student groups. In the cafeteria, on the sports teams, walking the halls, and even in classes, it was the observation of teachers and students that different cultural groups ‘stuck’ together” (p. 383). It is important to ask the students their perceptions of the landscape of the school because students experience school differently than the adults in the building (Vaselenak, 2009). This is because in spaces such as the common areas and hallways, “students often negotiate their emerging identities, peer group affiliation, and a burgeoning sense of citizenship” (Tupper, Carson, Johnston, and Mangat, 2008, p. 1066). Therefore, in exploring students’ constructs of place, teachers and administrators become better at meeting their needs simply because they are more aware. When students experience attachment to place, they are more likely to develop positive feelings toward that place and as a result stay engaged (Vaselenak, 2009).

Curriculum

A dominant understanding of curriculum is that it is the set of plans of action that a program or lesson encompasses. Therefore, curriculum includes both the overriding content as put forth by the provinces, as well as pedagogy which may be understood as the techniques of teaching mandated curriculum including teaching styles and the recognition on the part of teachers of varied learning styles (Bazylak, 2002; Redwing Saunders & Hill, 2007). The study of curriculum is important to the study of students’ experiences with school because it is laden with power (Orlowski, 2011; Tupper & Cappello, 2008). From a Critical Race Theory perspective, a school curriculum is a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Sterzuk, 2011). An important aspect of curriculum is the idea of the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum refers to the learning outcomes “not openly acknowledged to learners” (McLaren, 2007, p. 213). The hidden curriculum is deeply entrenched in provincial curricula in that it calls for the transmission of Canadian values, which only reflect those of the dominant group (Redwing Saunders & Hill, 2007). In addition, Critical Race Theory maintains that the pedagogy used by many teachers begins from the starting point that minority students are deficient (Sterzuk, 2011). Redwing Saunders and Hill (2007) advocate that mainstream pedagogy is a barrier 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.

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Incorporating Aboriginal content into the curriculum is done through three methods: specific classes designed to teach Aboriginal culture and languages, such as Indigenous studies or Native Studies classes;

incorporating Aboriginal content throughout subject area classes such as English language arts or math; and through incorporating Aboriginal content into extra-curricular clubs. In their interviews with Aboriginal students from Winnipeg’s inner city, Silver, Mallett, Greene, and Simard (2002) explained how participants remarked that classes designed to teach Aboriginal culture and languages are important and that they matter to Aboriginal students. The authors explained that Aboriginal students want courses designed to teach Aboriginal culture because they want to learn more about themselves, their culture, and their history, as this information is lacking among Aboriginal youth. The same participants noted that extra-curricular activities such as pow-wow clubs or token sharing circles that happen only periodically were not adequate to meet their objectives of learning about themselves (p. 21). Additionally, Silver *et al.* (2007) argued that Aboriginal history and culture has to be infused throughout the curriculum. It has to be something that all students are exposed to on a regular basis throughout all their classes. Redwing Saunders and Hill (2007) refer to this idea as authentic education. They describe authenticity as allowing “students a place within the curriculum where they may be Native, yet not societal 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” (p. 1016).

In the fall of 2008, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education mandated treaty education in the provincial school system from Kindergarten to Grade 12 in an attempt to incorporate Aboriginal history and culture into all provincial curricula. The then Education Minister Ken Krawetz noted, “learning about treaties also promotes cultural appreciation and understanding through teachings that respect and honour First Nations” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009d). However, Kanu (2005) identified that teacher’s lack of pedagogical content knowledge is a significant barrier to incorporating Aboriginal content. Specifically, non-Aboriginal teachers’ “lack of knowledge about Aboriginal content, topics, and issues and about Aboriginal cultural ways of learning make it difficult for them to act as cultural brokers when translating the curriculum to Aboriginal students” (p. 57). Conversely, it may not be that teachers have a limited understanding of Aboriginal peoples including their history, and culture. Rather, it may be that their understanding is informed by dominant discourses (Dion, 2007; Schick & St. Denis, 2005). In addition, Leonardo (2004) notes that provincial curricula fails to encourage students of all racial backgrounds to critique White domination. In other words, “schools may teach White students to naturalize their unearned privileges, but they also willingly participate in such discourses which maintains *their* sense of humanity” [emphasis in original] (p. 144). Therefore, the curriculum remains Eurocentric and mono-cultural (Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007; Howard, 2006).

Teachers and Administrators

The first areas of influence on Aboriginal students in school are teachers and administrators. Crystal, Killen, and Ruck (2010) identify that teacher-student relationships are a critical motivating aspect of school success and academic achievement. In addition, Howard (2006) noted that teacher attitudes have a significant effect on the way students perceive their school experience. However, in studies that examined the opinions of students who were failing in school, the problematic nature of the cross-cultural teacher-student relationship was a recurring theme (Van Ingen & Halas, 2006). Racism is prevalent in schools, particularly in the different perceptions between the Aboriginal students and their White teachers. White teachers can lack a critical social consciousness about what their Aboriginal students experience (Halas, 2011). This can be explained by the fact that there is disconnect, on cultural and class grounds, between Aboriginal students and their largely White, middle class teachers. Although Aboriginal students and community members identify that many teachers are trying, Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal teachers occupy two different worlds, separated by lines of culture, class, and racialization (Silver *et al.*, 2002, p. 17). Halas (2011) refers to this separation when she speaks of the “deep disconnect between what [Aboriginal students] were saying and what some of your teachers were hearing or experiencing” (p. 9).

Most school structures are White, middle-class institutions, and most teachers are White, middle-class people. In their study of Aboriginal education in inner city schools in Winnipeg, Silver *et al.* (2002) identified that one in three students have not had a single Aboriginal teacher (p. 19). The findings in Saskatchewan may be similar as in 2010, only 6.6% of teachers in the entire province were identified as being of Aboriginal descent along with 5.3% of administrators (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 55). As a result, there is a cultural, class and race divide between schools and teachers, and most Aboriginal students and their families. Furthermore, most non-Aboriginal, middle class teachers are unaware of the different set of cultural values that their Aboriginal students and families hold (Silver *et al.*, 2002, p. 15). Sefa Dei *et al.* (1997) explain that the reason many teachers fail to recognize the impact of social cultural exclusion is because of their own “immersion in the normalcy of Whiteness” and the standardization of middle-class values and perceptions (p. 141).

There is a cultural, class and race divide between schools and teachers, and most Aboriginal students and their families.

It is also important to examine how teachers take up the teaching of Aboriginal content in their classrooms. Dion (2007) explains how fears of introducing controversial subject material and of introducing content that challenges students’ understanding of the dominant stories of Canadian history prevent some teachers from engaging with Aboriginal content in their classrooms (p. 331). Dion (2009) explains,

when teachers take up the task of teaching about Aboriginal people, they are enacting historically structured social forms that organize,

regulate, and legitimate specific ways of thinking and communicating. The discourse of the romantic, mythical Other is enacted through the teachers. (p. 64).

Teachers take up dominant discourses as a way of protecting themselves from “having to recognize their own attachment to and implication in knowledge of the history of the relationship between Aboriginal people and Canadians” (Dion, 2007, p. 331). Therefore, Dion (2007) believes that teachers require increased opportunities to learn about and to “learn from” the history of the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and Canadians (p. 340).

Finally, many authors have suggested that a solution to these identified problems is to hire more Aboriginal teachers (Bazylak, 2002; Levin, 2009; Silver *et al.*, 2002; St. Denis, 2010). More Aboriginal teachers, they said, would contribute to overcoming the distance between schools and Aboriginal students and their families, and would make both students and parents feel more comfortable in schools (Bazylak, 2002; Silver *et al.*, 2002). However, it is not just a matter of putting more Aboriginal teachers in the classroom despite how important this would be. It is also that White teachers must understand Aboriginal history and culture, and must understand what it is to be Aboriginal (Silver *et al.*, 2002, p. 20). Therefore, it is imperative that White teachers engage in the process of decolonization in order to be able to understand these important concepts. Furthermore, it is then important that White teachers turn the gaze back upon themselves to understand Whiteness, power, and their place within society.

It is imperative that White teachers engage in the process of decolonization in order to be able to understand these important concepts.

Racism

Racism is a pervasive and consistent element in the schooling experiences of Aboriginal youth. Students experience racism in a number of ways and from a variety of sources, including “paternalism,” prejudice, “harmful assumptions,” low expectations, stereotypes, violence, and “biased curricular materials” (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 951).

Racism can be thought of as “representational practices and performances that create and reproduce racialized categories, discriminatory practices of exclusion and inclusion, and consequences of *both* subjugation and empowerment” (Montgomery, 2013, p. 6). There are many types of racism identified in the literature, including overt, covert, and institutional. In their study of Aboriginal high school students, Silver *et al.* (2002) learned that a significant number of students felt that there was racism in their school and that much of the racism they described was overt. In particular, the students identified overt racism in the form of stereotyping and name-calling. It was noted, however, that some Aboriginal students, especially those who are light-skinned and who do not appear to be Aboriginal, may not see or may experience racism differently. In addition, students in Brady’s (1996) study confirmed the examples of overt racism when they identified areas of the school where “Indian students” were not allowed (p. 11).

St. Denis (2010) and Silver et al. (2002) discovered that a common form of covert racism appeared in lower expectations held for First Nations and Métis students as opposed to the expectations held for non-Aboriginal students. This may lead to streaming Aboriginal students into non-academic programs or too quickly pushing them into special education.

Students also experienced covert racism which Silver et al. (2002) define as “the buried stereotypes that many non-Aboriginal people carry in their heads” (p. 3). St. Denis (2010) and Silver et al. (2002) discovered that a common form of covert racism appeared in lower expectations held for First Nations and Métis students as opposed to the expectations held for non-Aboriginal students. This may lead to streaming Aboriginal students into non-academic programs or too quickly pushing them into special education. Through interviewing students and teachers of color, Sheets and Gay (1996) found that although racism was “under cover”, it was “intentional, deliberate, and conscious” (p. 85). Their study revealed that both students and teachers felt racism was a motivating factor in disciplinary actions toward students.

Finally, students experience institutional racism in many forms. Wise (2011) defines institutional racism as that which allows racial disparity to be produced and maintained as the product of normal operating procedures. Silver et al. (2002) identify that one example of institutional racism is the predominance of non-Aboriginal people working in the education system. They note that an Aboriginal student coming into a high school and seeing that almost none of the teaching and administrative staff members are Aboriginal “is likely to feel that the school is an alien institution” (p. 25). In addition, institutional racism can be seen in the use of textbooks that advance subjects and perspectives from the dominant culture or textbooks that depict Canada as a multicultural nation having overcome racism from the past. In both instances, Aboriginal peoples are constructed as the Other (Montgomery, 2008; Silver et al., 2002). Finally, standardized testing, “which takes almost no account of cultural difference, is another form of institutionalized racism” (Silver et al., 2002, p. 25). This problem of racism in schools and the education system must be exposed so that people have an understanding of the discourses that are being enacted and so that change can begin to happen.

Whiteness

Huber et al. (2002) describe how it is unfeasible to attend to the stories of Aboriginal children without also attending to stories of the Whiteness of the researcher. This is because issues of Whiteness lie at the very core of educational policy and practice (Apple, 2004). White privilege is defined as a system of opportunities, benefits, and advantages conferred upon people just because they are White (Leonardo, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Therefore, race is an organizing principle that cuts across class, gender, and other imaginable social identities. Whites as a racial group secure supremacy in almost all facets of social life (Leonardo, 2004, p. 140). Whiteness, then, becomes inseparable from humanity, individuality, and personal freedom (Vaught & Castago, 2008). Wise (2011) explains this principle when he writes that being a member of the majority, dominant group allows one to ignore how race shapes his life. For those called White, Whiteness simply is. Whiteness becomes, “the unspoken, interrogated norm, taken for granted, much as water can be taken for granted by a fish” (p. 2). White privilege is often expressed through majoritarian stories, that

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privilege “Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference,” thereby silencing the experiences of people of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28). Howard (2006) suggests a remedy for this silence in the need to identify Whites as ethnics who have their own histories and identities. “Without a recognition that Whites are ethnic – a designation usually reserved for anybody who is not White, and sometimes for those groups of European heritage that have not quite “melted’ into the pot – it is too easy to characterize Whites as ‘normal’ and others as ‘different’ or ‘exotic’” (p. xv).

It is important for White teachers to “recognize their complicity in creating and supporting the conditions in schools that lead to failure for so many students of color” (Howard, 2006, p. xv). This is because the societal systems, including schooling, that sustain the reign of White race privilege are

peopled and the concurrent, interactive acts of individuals and systems inexorably reinforce and entrench pervasive racial power across institutions, sites, and events. (Vaught & Castago, 2008, p. 96)

In fact, White institutions create power hierarchies with or without the immediate presence of White students (Vaught & Castago, 2008). Therefore, Howard (2006) argues

the transformation of White teachers is defined by both pain and possibility. Coming to terms with one’s identity is a formidable task. This is true for all people, but for Whites it is especially troublesome because admitting that they have benefited unfairly from their White skin is not only personally disturbing, but also challenges head-on the myths of meritocracy and fair play with which they have been raised. (p. xvi).

Implications

School culture “generally represents the privileged voices of the white middle and upper classes” (McLaren, 2007, p. 244). The stories shared by the participants in this study about school experience are extremely powerful counter narratives to the privileged voices of the dominant group. This study attempted to provide insight into the experiences and realities of Aboriginal students who may be understood as an oppressed group, allowing the reader insight into the experience and realities of an oppressed group within society (Ladson-Billings, 1998); nonetheless the term ‘voice’ does not imply that there is a common voice for all persons of color (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Rather, Dixson and Rousseau (2005) remind the reader that the term ‘voice’ implies there is a common experience of racism that structures the stories of people of color. Consequently, readers should not be stuck in notions of positivistic thinking about reliability and generalizability of the participants’ stories to other contexts. Doing so limits the power of the stories and could create a situation of inaction: if the reader is looking for a reason the stories do not apply to his/her particular context, then the reader is not reflecting on the participants’ message and, therefore, the reader will never be able to understand the implications of the stories for her/himself. Rather, the stories must move the reader to action, a process of holding the stories up like a mirror to reflect one’s position in order to make change to the schooling system and to begin the process of being in alliance with Aboriginal peoples.

Place

One of the basic perspectives of Critical Race Theory is “the challenge to [the] dominant ideology” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 25) that claims educational institutions are race neutral. When accepting this perspective, then, one must acknowledge that schools are landscapes of power and that race and racism are deeply embedded within them.

Educators must take steps to make schools feel less alien to Aboriginal students. The participants consistently pointed to the positive impact viewing Aboriginal artworks and artifacts had on their sense of belonging in a place, and how belonging was also created when the artifacts were located throughout the school and not just centered in one area. Based on these narratives, educators should ensure artworks and artifacts acknowledging and celebrating Aboriginal history and cultures are placed in classrooms and in common areas and ensure these artworks and artifacts reflect Aboriginal cultures as contemporary, dynamic and changing. As well, educators should ensure cultural artifacts are located in prominent positions visible throughout the school.

Having made this recommendation, it is also important to engage in an examination of Whiteness, which is central to a critical race analysis because unacknowledged White privilege and supremacy helps maintain racism’s stories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). It is not enough simply to put

Educators should ensure artworks and artifacts acknowledging and celebrating Aboriginal history and cultures are placed in classrooms and in common areas and ensure these artworks and artifacts reflect Aboriginal cultures as contemporary, dynamic and changing.

All staff members should seek out and establish relationships with Aboriginal students and consider what they can do to make Aboriginal students feel welcome, and they should be encouraged to broaden their understanding of the unique place of Aboriginal peoples in Canada through in-service opportunities.

Aboriginal artifacts in classrooms and open spaces because doing so does not change the underlying structures of White dominance within schools and, in fact, may further mask this dominance. This could be similar to a multicultural approach which Critical Race Theory critiques as it only attends to culture superficially. This approach allows White people to feel good about themselves and their efforts without examining their own social locations. Therefore, all educational stakeholders need to examine the ways that White domination is produced and maintained within the education system in an effort to break down these structures of oppression.

Next, the participants clearly indicated the words and actions of people within the building had to align with the physical space in order to affirm Aboriginal peoples. While this study specifically focused on the actions of teachers and administrators, the participants also pointed to the actions of ancillary staff, such as teaching assistants, external coaches, and support personnel, in creating a sense of belonging. Consequently, all staff members should seek out and establish relationships with Aboriginal students and consider what they can do to make Aboriginal students feel welcome, and they should be encouraged to broaden their understanding of the unique place of Aboriginal peoples in Canada through in-service opportunities. School leaders, such as principals can facilitate this through offering these opportunities on professional development days.

Staff members must be aware that simply establishing a relationship with Aboriginal students does not “end White supremacy” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 124). Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) further explain that establishing relationships with Aboriginal students does not mean staff members “are educated about the complexities of racism, that [they] have worked to address [their] internalized dominance, or that [they] consistently treat [students] with cross-racial sensitivity and awareness” (p. 124). At the same time, staff members must be careful not to fall into the discourse of colorblindness because Critical Race Theory asserts that these discourses serve to maintain White privilege and supremacy. Rosenberg (2004) cautions that although a belief that being colorblind is a way to treat all students fairly, in reality it only serves to silence criticisms from people of color.

Curriculum

Critical Race Theory suggests that curriculum is laden with power and designed to maintain a White supremacist master script. The participants shared many stories of classes where there was no inclusion of Aboriginal content and perspectives. They showed awareness that their teachers were missing pedagogical knowledge about teaching Aboriginal content and perspectives. They described how a lack of integration of content negatively impacted their engagement with the subject. On the other hand, they shared stories of the positive impact of the inclusion of Aboriginal content and perspectives. Consequently, all Saskatchewan K-12 curricula should be examined to determine the extent to which Aboriginal content

and perspectives are included in integrative and meaningful ways. Outdated curricula should be rewritten to include Indigenous cultural knowledges as a foundational element. Furthermore, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education should consider creating one curriculum combining the social studies, Native Studies, and history curricula so that Native Studies becomes the “starting point and continued foundation” (St. Denis, 2011, p. 306) for all Saskatchewan students.

Critical Race Theory is also a framework that can be used to examine and challenge the ways race and racism “implicitly and explicitly impact discourses” (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Because the students spoke of how Native Studies was viewed by both teachers and students as the “*easy class*”. This discourse needs to be examined through a Critical Race Theory framework. Teachers need to understand how this discourse is sending the message that Aboriginal peoples’ histories and cultures are not as important and therefore not worthy of rigorous study. They also need to examine the impacts of this discourse on the students, both Aboriginal and White, as well as on themselves.

Throughout the narratives, the participants spoke of how meaningful Aboriginal content was in their subject area classes, but that integration of this content occurred infrequently. The participants found it especially relevant when teachers addressed current issues and stereotypes with their classes. As a result, teachers and administrators should seek to incorporate Aboriginal content in authentic ways in all classes. Additionally, teachers and administrators should also seek out the opportunity to learn from Elders who are the knowledge keepers in Aboriginal cultures.

Simultaneously, however, teachers and administrators must understand “the relevance of colonization when seeking a deeper understanding of the issues faced by Aboriginal peoples and the subsequent effects these challenges have on education” (Costello, 2011, p. 19). Doing so will give them “critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations, and values which inform practice” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2010, p. 20). One of the ways teachers and administrators can begin to examine their assumptions, motivations, and values is to reflect upon their own education in order to gain an understanding of what stories about Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal cultures, and the history of Canada may be missing from their own educational journey and to determine if gaps exist in their knowledge.

The participants in this study revealed their enthusiasm for special days, field trips, and extra-curricular activities that focused on Aboriginal content. However, they were also aware that these stand-alone activities could present Aboriginal peoples in a tokenistic and essentialized way. Extra-curricular activities involving Aboriginal culture should be offered in schools and should serve to enhance the content that is taught in the classroom rather than to replace it.

Finally, the participants’ stories demonstrated their awareness of the cultural bias that exists in textbooks, the ways in which textbooks present

Additionally, teachers and administrators should also seek out the opportunity to learn from Elders who are the knowledge keepers in Aboriginal cultures.

Extra-curricular activities involving Aboriginal culture should be offered in schools and should serve to enhance the content that is taught in the classroom rather than to replace it.

Teachers need to be supported in engaging critically with subject area textbooks that may not include Aboriginal content and history or include it in only a marginal way. Teachers need to be aware of those elements of Canadian history that are being privileged in textbooks.

Teachers and administrators should engage in self-reflective work on their own culture and position in order to more fully appreciate their understanding of Aboriginal students and Aboriginal culture.

the dominant perspective, and the scarcity of Aboriginal content in these resources. Their stories align with critical race methodology which challenges traditional texts to explain the experiences of people of color. Schools should make a concerted effort to purchase only those textbooks that include Aboriginal content and history in an authentic manner. Teachers need to be supported in engaging critically with subject area textbooks that may not include Aboriginal content and history or include it in only a marginal way. Teachers need to be aware of those elements of Canadian history that are being privileged in textbooks. Finally, textbooks should be used as a vehicle to help teachers and students critically examine White domination and privilege through the examination of whose story is being included and whose story is missing.

Teachers and Administrators

Many White teachers lack a critical social consciousness about what their Aboriginal students experience, since being a member of the majority, dominant group allows one to ignore how race shapes one’s life (Wise, 2011). Both Regan (2010) and Costello (2011) are clear that one of the ways White teachers can engage in the process of decolonization is through developing relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal peoples. Teachers and administrators should work to overcome potential disconnect by developing personal relationships with Aboriginal students and getting to know them intellectually, emotionally, socially, and spiritually.

The participants shared stories that showed their recognition of teachers’ perceptions of both Aboriginal students and Aboriginal content. Teachers and administrators should engage in self-reflective work on their own culture and position in order to more fully appreciate their understanding of Aboriginal students and Aboriginal culture. In doing so, teachers need to confront the stories about Aboriginal peoples that they may have learned through their own history and the media in order to determine potential biases. Furthermore, teachers and administrators should work to decolonize themselves through replacing dominant narratives with counter stories in order to work with Aboriginal students as allies.

The important role that Elders and other community members play in supporting students and teachers must be highlighted because they have the ability to connect the classroom to the real world for Aboriginal students and, in doing so, enhance Aboriginal students’ pride in their own history and culture. Teachers and administrators should work to give Elders a place of honor within the school and to create opportunities for them to share their strengths and gifts. By collaborating with and working alongside Elders, teachers can be supported as they plan and implement authentic Aboriginal content and perspectives into the curriculum.

Critical race theorists believe people of color speak with experiential knowledge about the structural racism in society (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Sterzuk, 2011). The participants in this study shared many stories of experiencing racism from classmates, teachers, administrators, people

in the community, and the media. The participants shared stories about the many ways their experiences with racism affected their schooling. Teachers and administrators must acknowledge the compounding impact these experiences have on Aboriginal students’ lives. By examining how Aboriginal peoples are presented in images, content, and curricula, in addition to examining any negative expectations they attribute to Aboriginal students, White teachers and administrators may be better able to understand the covert messages they send in their daily practice.

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