Research Note

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A Bi-epistemic Research Analysis of New Aboriginal Teachers: A Study Within the Study

Introduction

The preparation and induction of Aboriginal educators is critical to educational achievement among Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Recent developments indicate that Aboriginal teachers who are culturally sensitive to their epistemologies will have an increasing role in sustaining Aboriginal language and cultures while promoting self-determination among Aboriginal students. This research will inform educational decision-makers both in reserve schools and in the mainstream to address the needs of new Aboriginal teachers and to consider how to support them during their professional induction.

Context

The literature suggests that new teachers who successfully negotiate the complex dynamics of the classroom and collaborate with colleagues to improve student learning have a positive effect on teacher retention (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, 2005; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004) and improve teaching practice (Evertson & Smitney, 2000; Schaffer, Stringfield, & Wolfe, 1992). Because new teachers generally enter the profession with a genuine commitment to be competent practitioners (Zambo & Zambo, 2006), effective induction programs assist them to make sense of their often complex experiences (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Romano & Gibson, 2006). Although teacher preparation and induction have been extensively documented in the research, relatively little attention has been given to new Aboriginal educators.

As a bi-epistemic team of mainstream and Aboriginal researchers, graduate students, and an esteemed Elder, the opportunity to engage in a systematic analysis with new Aboriginal teachers underscored the prejudicial value loadings and undesirable stratification experienced by Aboriginal teachers and gave testament to the ephemeral interests in Aboriginal learning conditions of mainstream educational policy-makers (Duquette, 2000). Just as significantly, this collaborative research endeavor established the specific contextual

relevance of the study in that participants' experiences represented their vital function as Aboriginal teachers serving Aboriginal students' cultural and linguistic needs (Iseke-Barnes, 2002). From a mainstream perspective, this research, although in its infant stage in terms of data analysis, has already distinguished itself as a study within the study. Listening to the stories of new Aboriginal teachers and making sense of their experiences alongside Aboriginal research team members, including an Elder, exposed us to novel experiences and Aboriginal epistemologies.

Method

This research gives explicit attention to the voices of new Aboriginal teachers across Ontario. The distinctive circumstances facing new Aboriginal teachers were specifically provided by six participants in a Wildfire Research Method (WRM, Hodson, 2004) that included Anishinabe, Hotinonsho:ni, Nishnawbe-Aski, and Métis teachers who were brought together for three days to engage in respectful conversation in a sacred process based largely on traditional beliefs of Aboriginal people. The participants represented a cross-section of teachers from across the province. Each participant had between one and three years of experience. The process marked a sharp deviation from mainstream induction inservices. It served as a catalyst to provide participants with an opportunity to identify issues of concern and share their narratives of experience as teachers and Aboriginal people. The sharing of stories through the WRM also deepened cross-cultural understandings.

Analysis

The research team has completed the first stage of data analysis. A bicultural research team coded transcripts to identify key themes across participants' experiences. Among the important themes that have emerged thus far are (a) the need for culturally appropriate teacher education, (b) the lack of adequate teacher induction support, (c) the challenges of teaching Native languages where language and culture have been eroded due to the effect of residential schools, (d) the challenges of teaching in a culturally appropriate manner, (e) the importance of school-community partnerships, (f) institutional discrimination, and (g) the dedication and commitment of beginning Aboriginal educators. We intend to honor the richness of the stories and conversations by focusing on the participants' understandings of their experiences and the needs of Aboriginal teachers and students. The Aboriginal research team members, particularly the Elder, have helped us to develop understandings of the participants' Aboriginal world views founded in collectivity and connection that we would not have been able to glean based on our more empirical Western paradigms (Smith, 1999).

Discussion

There is a genuine need to understand the experiences of Aboriginal educators as expressed in their own words in safe environments. The WRM, along with the involvement of an Aboriginal facilitator and an Elder, provided an opportunity for rich and authentic conversations. As the three-day retreat progressed, the participants shared honestly from their experiences, while also learning from the experiences of their peers. It was also a time of individual

and group healing thanks to the WRM and the wisdom of the Elder. The Aboriginal members of the research team and the Elder have also played critical roles in the analysis of the data emerging from the gathering. It is our intention to write about this culturally sensitive process both as professional development and as research.

Critical to understanding new Aboriginal teacher experiences is to commit oneself, at least from a mainstream perspective, to engage in "an attitude of mindfulness" that challenges Eurocentric concepts of knowledge and accounts for "a multitude of other interpretive possibilities" in what has emerged as a study within the study (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 180). In this multifaceted and often convoluted conceptual framework, new Aboriginal teachers' experiences can be more authentically examined and accurately represented (Battiste, 1998). Speculative knowledge characteristic of broad and culturally insensitive generalizations will not inform educational policymakers and mainstream governing agencies to give serious attention to the profound disparity of Aboriginal school communities. This bi-epistemic and collaborative research project endeavors to recognize the circumstances of new Aboriginal teachers, their formal teacher preparation, and the extent to which resources are allocated to support them in their beginning years by honoring their voices in a research methodology that is harmonious with their traditions. Simultaneously, it seeks to embed knowledge itself within the spirit of the interrelated and interconnected realities of who we are and who we are becoming as a team of researchers and as peoples.

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