Alberta Journal of Educational Research, Vol. 58, No. 1, Spring 2012, 160-164

Implications of Discourse: A Trilogy of Educational Policy

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The learning ministries in Ontario have made a concerted effort to underscore Aboriginal learners' needs and preferences in publicly-funded and assisted schools and training services throughout the province. Through a trilogy of policy documents, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) have addressed expanded definitions of learning and sought to unfold the socio-cultural and epistemic values related to Aboriginal student and community worldviews:

1. The *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007) commissions the province's boards of education, school administrators and teachers to create culturally-sensitive schools and classrooms.
2. The OME's *Sound Foundations for the Road Ahead* (2009) is a progress report on the outcomes for the aforementioned *Policy Framework* (2007) and aims to assure taxpayers that progress is being made in regards to policy implementation.
3. The MTCU's *Aboriginal Postsecondary Education and Training Policy Framework* (2011) addresses the educational gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and focuses upon training outcomes and skill-development programs for Aboriginal learners.

The policies in many respects represent a poised effort on the part of the learning ministries to improve educators' awareness of culturally-responsive pedagogy, as well as to bring Aboriginal peoples' socio-historical traditions to the fore (Battiste, 2002; Levin, 2009). The trilogy of policy documents refer specifically to the critical role of Aboriginal communities, as described in the literature (*The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada*), in fostering positive social relationships with learning institutions (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009), improved academic outcomes for Aboriginal learners (White, Spence, & Maxim, 2009), and healthy environments (Curtis, Dooley, & Phipps, 2004). In addition, each of the documents recognize the pivotal role of schools and training institutes in terms of endorsing life-long learning and community and civic responsibility (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, 2008, 2009). The policies may also be a response to the fact that "the experience of Indigenous youth remains principally ignored in scholarly, as to an even greater extent, policy discourse" (Friedel, 2010, p. 171).

Pending Research

While the policy initiatives by Ontario's learning ministries undoubtedly represent a collective attention to Aboriginal learners, my current line of inquiry is revealing some noteworthy initial findings that are deserving of further analysis. Interestingly, the policy documents reflect a dominant discourse of an assumed normative educative stance; more precisely, the jargon of data-driven outcomes and evaluative statements throughout all three policies seem to implicate upon normative educative paradigms that, in turn, creates a conceptual tension with the self-declared intentions of the policies themselves. Even with the distinguished political profile of these educational policies, the substantial investments of taxpayers' dollars, the government's goodwill to reach out to Aboriginal communities, and the perceptible moral action to redeem Aboriginal learners' social dependency and prepare them for the (post-colonial) labour markets, one is still left to wonder about the potential consequences that may be in store for Aboriginal peoples if they choose not to self-identify.

Overview

The jargon of data-drive outcomes is symbolic of normative values based largely upon Eurocentric measures. The 2007 *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education), relevant for K to 12 provincial schools, emphasizes the need for "reliable and valid data" (p.10) to measure Aboriginal student learning. The 2009 *Solid Foundations for the Road Ahead* document (Ontario Ministry of Education) cites the importance of using "reliable First Nation, Métis and Inuit student data" (p. 9) to measure the percentage of students achieving provincial standards on large-scale externally-delivered tests. The *Aboriginal Postsecondary Education and Training Policy Framework* (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2011) identifies the imperative nature of analyzing "reliable and relevant quantitative and qualitative data" (p. 20) to evaluate programs and services. The following issues must be considered:

1. I and others have discussed in previous studies the problematic nature of using culturally-inappropriate standardized instruments to evaluate and measure Aboriginal student achievement and progress, particularly given the fact that the same policies cite the holistic and traditional epistemic values of Aboriginal students and communities (Cherubini, 2010; Cherubini & Hodson, 2008; Grant & Sleeter, 2011).
2. The respective policies encourage Aboriginal peoples to self-identify their Native ancestry. It remains to be determined if such endorsements to self-identify positions the onus directly upon Aboriginal peoples to abide by the ministry initiatives.

Each policy goes to great lengths to describe the substantial amounts of public monies that have been invested in order to improve Aboriginal learners' achievement and thereby close the educational and socio-economic gaps that have resulted in their dependency upon various social assistance agencies. The implication exists that in order for Aboriginal learners to benefit from the self-described and oft-referred "support" of the tax-paying public, and hence break the cycles of dependency, they need to self-identify so that the necessary data can be collected and the government can report (perhaps *control* [italics added], as discussed in Funk-Unrau &

Snyder, 2007) on Aboriginal learner progress in light of these educational and training investments.

Similarly, woven throughout the discourse of all three policies are evaluative statements that imply directly that the government's "commitment" to Aboriginal learners (a word used in the introductory paragraphs of each document) includes consultation with Aboriginal community leaders (*see* Macpherson, Kachelhoffer, & El Nemr, 2007). By citing these collaborative partnerships between government and local First Nation communities, the learning ministries position themselves as collegial and inclusive bodies. The general public, thus, can attest to the fact that these relationships are built on representation as presumably so too are the policy initiatives. The government's dedication to improving the apparent plight of Aboriginal learners seems to embrace not only a political but also moral cause, especially given the "great progress . . . in developing stronger working relationships with school boards and Aboriginal organizations" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 5), as one example of an evaluative statement among many others.

Yet, the policy discourse positions Aboriginal learners in a potentially dubious predicament. The attention invested in these high profile educational policies, combined with the various sources of funding and the government's efforts to consult with Aboriginal communities might seem convincing enough for Aboriginal learners to self-identify. However, the political, cultural and epistemic realities and respective complexities associated with self-identification may not necessarily be fully explained in the policy documents. By choosing not to self-identify, Aboriginal learners may be perceived by the general public as rejecting the goodwill of policy-makers and educators and as being resistant to the offers of assistance. Such a perception may in fact contribute to the conceptual tension already inherent in the policy discourse.

Further Analysis

The aforementioned policy documents produce a dominant discourse of a normative educative space that through the jargon of data outcomes and evaluative statements may create a profound conceptual tension for Aboriginal learners. Subsequently, and still to be determined, is how the Aboriginal communities and First Nations representatives are receiving these documents. Said differently, how have the community consultations materialized first from supposed embedded understandings to policy, and currently in practices related to self-identification? I suspect that the educative view of these policies will not be uncontested for too long.

Acknowledgement

This study is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SHRCC).

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