

Book Review

Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives Into the School Curriculum: Purposes, Possibilities, and Challenges

Yatta Kanu

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Yatta Kanu's *Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives Into the School Curriculum: Purposes, Possibilities, and Challenges*, is an invaluable text for educators, curriculum scholars, qualitative researchers, graduate students, and policy-makers interested in Aboriginal issues, anti-racist, postcolonial, and social justice work. Although Kanu is not Aboriginal, she has had to negotiate the legacy of a colonial education. She writes:

The colonial education I received in Sierra Leone and, later, my post graduate studies in Britain and Canada exposed me, firsthand, to the subjugation or misrepresentation of the rich historical and cultural knowledge and traditions of not only African peoples but also those of other racial and ethnic minorities. I know all too well the struggle for identity, the erosion of self-confidence, and the resistance to Eurocentric forms of education that such subjugation and misrepresentation can produce in those that suffer them. (Kanu, 2011, p. x)

Kanu's personal and professional experiences as a student and later a teacher educator in Canadian universities not only inform her writing and studies, but have led to a highly nuanced, thoroughly researched, and engaging analysis of Aboriginal education. In answering calls made by policy-makers and educators who want to address missed opportunities for engaging more Aboriginal learners in public education, Kanu carefully resists a discourse of deficits, and examines multiple layers of challenges and opportunities that would help to create a more ethical space for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners/teachers to transform a Eurocentric curriculum with a deeper understanding of Aboriginal cultures, knowledge, and histories. She clearly stipulates that curriculum alone cannot solve the very real material conditions of poverty that a disproportionate number of Aboriginal people systemically exist within, but she calls on educators to pay attention to what the educational space can do to be more accommodating for Aboriginal learners, families, and communities, and to be more respectful of the historical relations pre- and post-settler society.

From the outset in chapter 1, "Introduction: Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives Into School Curricula: Why Does it Matter?" Kanu's understanding of the importance and urgency of the need to "decolonize Aboriginal education and improve the educational attainment of Aboriginal

students,” locally and internationally, is evident. She locates the project of infusing and honouring Aboriginal culture, knowledge, and diverse histories within a critique of the impact of colonialism and its continued legacy on the lives of contemporary Aboriginal people. For Kanu, the challenge is two-fold:

1. To identify the privilege dominant groups in society continue to maintain if Aboriginal knowledge continues to be devalued and/or systemically absent from the official curriculum.
2. To legitimize “Indigenous knowledge as relevant and significant.” (2011, p. 4)

Kanu builds her research around the assumption that the lack of engagement by Aboriginal youth in the public school system exists because there is a disconnect between home and school. While she does acknowledge the impact of residential schools (a discussion of the impact of intergenerational trauma could prove helpful), poverty, and so on, she builds upon a growing body of research that suggests that the public education system may stop failing Aboriginal children if it paid attention to and valued Indigenous voices/perspectives/histories. Kanu draws from psychosocial and cultural-historical views of learning and child development to underscore the importance of youth being and feeling valued by the education system. Her discussion of cultural citizenship and who has access to citizenship, that is, who is able to effectively participate and exercise one’s rights and responsibilities, elevates this discussion to the level of social justice. If society wants Aboriginal youth to be more engaged in schools and receive the benefits of such a credential, that is, develop a positive self concept, have pride in one’s rich heritage, have more opportunities to participate in the economic life of the country, and exercise full citizenship, then the institutions that facilitate education, economic well-being and citizenship need to redress the “assimilationist models of citizenship, racism, discrimination, unequal organization of social structures and decisions making bodies” (2011, p. 11).

True to her endeavour to value Indigenous knowledge in and of itself, Kanu offers refreshing insight into the benefits of “broadening our knowledge base in a knowledge society” (2011, p. 13). Drawing upon insights with regard to the transformative aspect of intelligence, Kanu synthesizes a large body of research that views intelligence as “multiple, infinite, and shared” (2011, p. 14). Kanu further maintains that not only can much be learned from Aboriginal knowledge, such as ecological knowledge, but that a failure to do so “does nothing but decrease Canada’s funds of knowledge” (2011, p. 15). In continuing to privilege Eurocentric perspectives and failing to access the knowledge, wisdom, and perspective of others, we harm not only ourselves, because we limit what we know, but also society at a time we need to draw upon our “collective intelligence for more success in a competitive global environment” (2011, p.15).

The following example provides evidence of Kanu’s deep commitment to decolonizing education, so that all people benefit from Indigenous knowledge and expand our “capacity for informed action” (2011, p.15). She writes:

. . . there are factual truths in Canadian history that we all need to know, not only to deepen our own intellectual understanding and awareness of ourselves as people but also to be able to make appropriate, informed, political decisions for our nation and for our lives. For instance, because of our lack of understanding of the relationships between Canada’s Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian federal government, many of us stereotype Aboriginal peoples as receiving special privileges that other Canadians do not get. Because we may not know that Aboriginal peoples signed treaties with the federal government that granted Aboriginal peoples certain rights in exchange for the cession of

millions of acres of Aboriginal land (for example, the constitutional and treaty right to formal education for successive generations of First Nations peoples), we look upon these so-called privileges not as treaty or constitutional obligations but as Aboriginal people getting something for free at the expense of other Canadians. In short, our ignorance leads us to look at policies divorced from historical contexts. (2011, pp. 15-16)

Ultimately, in order to enlarge our understanding, thinking, creativity, and knowledge, curricular reform is needed. Kanu's discussion of curriculum is equally as salient when she asks what does democratic curriculum entail for Aboriginal people/voices epistemologically, politically, economically, ideologically, technically, aesthetically, and ethically (2011, p. 18). Certainly, her book begins to respond to the complex call to integrate Aboriginal cultural knowledge and curricula into Canadian schools, while at the same time acknowledging the complexities, tensions, and possibilities of such a project.

A number of newly created educational policies, at the elementary and secondary level (e.g., the *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*, 2007), and at the university level, (the *Accord on Indigenous Education* by the Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010), are current examples of a commitment to transforming education by including Indigenous voices throughout the curriculum. Kanu's book offers a wealth of information to navigate this new trajectory. In addition to a strong first chapter that orients readers to the importance of this endeavour, Kanu's book draws upon three distinct ethnographic research projects that were undertaken between 2002 and 2007 in urban school settings. Kanu explores (a) what Indigenous cultural knowledge could be shared, (b) what are the most effective ways to integrate Indigenous knowledge and culture, (c) what impact integration of Indigenous knowledge/perspectives has on academic achievement, class attendance/participation, and school retention, and (d) what are teacher's experiences and perceptions with integration. Chapter 2 is a thorough exploration of the lenses she uses to guide her research studies, including postcolonial, critical race, and sociocultural theories of learning. Chapter 3 provides readers with the voices of First Nation and Métis youth as they experience school. Kanu describes her rich research study and findings; particularly interesting is the importance of storytelling, communication styles, approaches to learning/teaching, and respectful curriculum. In chapter 4, she is careful to say there is no single Aboriginal perspective, and that there are tensions in the very notion of infusing Indigenous education in a Eurocentric system of education. With different notions of time and space and being in the world, she draws upon thinkers like Bhabha (1994) who uses the notion of a third space, a space where difference is negotiated, and Friesen and Friesen (2002), who emphasize integration as a way to appreciate difference (2011, p. 97), to examine how integration works. The five levels of integration are at the levels of: "(a) student learning outcomes; (b) instructional methods/strategies; (c) curriculum content and learning resources/materials; (d) assessment of student learning; and (e) as a philosophical underpinning of the curriculum" (2011, p. 115).

Chapter 5 offers significant insight into the effects of integration. Kanu did find significant positive responses from Aboriginal youth in classrooms that provided integration of Indigenous knowledge/perspectives/values as opposed to those that did not. I would have made stronger claims about the importance of how Aboriginal youth are made to feel in classrooms that are more hospitable as a significant finding, but I appreciate that Kanu did not want to undermine an equally important finding, that is, that the integration of Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum alone is not enough for school retention and the increased success of Indigenous

youth. From the outset, Kanu has maintained that “recognition and redistribution are irreducible dimensions of justice” for Indigenous youth (2011, p. 24). So, while integration can help promote better test scores, critical thinking, and improved self-confidence, and increase the motivation to attend school for Aboriginal youth in socio-economically stable homes, Kanu found:

. . . culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy alone are insufficient for reversing achievement trends among Aboriginal students. A multi-pronged approach that takes into account macro-structural variables affecting Aboriginal schooling—for example, the poor socio-economic conditions of many Aboriginal families, structural racism, and insufficient educational financing and/or poor financial management of schools serving some Aboriginal communities—is also called for. (2011, p. 140)

In examining the complexity of Aboriginal education, youth are seen as mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual beings that exist in the real world and that an inside/outside school disconnect, as Western thinking positions youth, is not adequate to analyze how schools help or hinder youth. Within schools, chapter 6 offers excellent resources for integrating and expanding educators’ perspectives on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge, though the list of resources is by no means exhaustive. Kanu also highlights the role and positive impact Indigenous community elders, leaders, and representatives have in schools and she argues that more Indigenous voices need to be present in schools.

In chapter 7, we get a real sense of the challenges, resistance, and covert racism that exist within schools and teachers who are asked to do the social justice work of educational policies. Kanu does not shy away from challenging misgivings and apprehension that may lead to the continued silence around Indigenous people in education, such as a fear to offend. Kanu shows the importance of professional development opportunities for educators if they are to meaningfully integrate Indigenous perspectives in the school curriculum. Kanu also found that some educators, as well as some non-Indigenous youth found an increased emphasis on Indigenous people “too much” (2011, p.132). Given the lack of understanding, appreciation, and overt resistance of some non-Indigenous students and educators to Indigenous curriculum, it would have been helpful if Kanu had included a discussion about some of the ways that educators may address these tensions, such as making a distinction between “multicultural education” and Indigenous education, (see Hutchinson, 2007) or unpacking “white privilege” (McIntosh, 1988). However, Kanu does show a tension between navigating the needs of all learners (and teachers) in schools and affirms that the “factors that promote or impede the integration of Aboriginal perspectives” is an area for further research (2011, p. 226). In chapter 8, Kanu revisits her work and the key understandings she learned from her research and shares a vision of curriculum for Aboriginal youth as “livable and imbued with human dignity” (2011, p. 204). She draws upon four curricular metaphors, curriculum as “*curerre*,” as “spiritual journey and transcendence,” as “conversation,” and as “community,” for “empowering learning for students” (2011, p. 204).

Overall, Kanu’s research is an important resource in understanding the importance and challenges of infusing Indigenous education throughout the curriculum. As someone who wholeheartedly supports this endeavour, but has also encountered challenges, resistance, and successes doing this work, Kanu’s text offers real insight for moving this social justice work forward—from policy to practice—with all of its complexity. As Kanu writes, “just as schools

have been an endemic part of Canada's assimilationist policy at almost every turn, so can they play a vital role in directing progressive curriculum efforts towards critiquing and reversing the legacies of Canada's colonial educational policy" (2011, p. 224). For all those who want to or need to learn more about Indigenous education, I highly recommend this work.

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