# INCORPORATING ABORIGINAL CONTENT INTO PUBLIC EDUCATION: ONE WAY TO IMPROVE RELATIONS BETWEEN ABORIGINALS AND SETTLERS, OLD AND NEW, IN CANADA

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## ABSTRACT

In the past decades, a number of inclusive educational programs aimed at incorporating Aboriginal cultural content and perspectives have been established in some provinces in Canada. This inclusive model has proved beneficial for mutual understanding and better relations between Aboriginals and settlers, old and new. This paper will first define and describe some of these programs and make a comment on what considerations should be taken into account to ensure that these inclusive programs best serve the needs of Aboriginal students as well as non-Aboriginal students. It is hoped that this inclusive model of education can be applied by other ethnic groups to help them address their own educational, cultural, and diversity issues.

## INTRODUCTION

As one of the biggest immigrant countries in the world, Canada has used models of assimilation, genocide, integration, and cultural pluralism to control or manipulate Indigenous People. Currently, Canada uses multiculturalism to treat its diverse ethnic groups including Aboriginals and settlers, old and new, which sets a precedent for other countries in addressing the protection of cultural diversity. Canadian provinces continue to struggle with and initiate policies to protect their Indigenous Peoples and honor their traditional ways. Old and new settlers as well as other ethnic groups certainly have a lot to learn from Aboriginals and about their existence, history, and culture.

Unfortunately, Aboriginals have traditionally only been studied, rather than consulted, considered or respected, and have even been seen as a disadvantaged class. They are still facing serious psychological, identity, and identity-redefinition problems because of the injuries and losses they have suffered. These are complex issues that cannot be solved easily and they are further related with how Aboriginals and settlers look at their own history and culture and how they can establish harmonious relations with each other.

Therefore, this paper will introduce some educational models (initiatives taken by different provinces) that aim at incorporating Aboriginal cultural content and perspectives into the public school system. These inclusive models not only help Aboriginals feel better about themselves and regain confidence, they also make it possible for non-Aboriginals to learn about First Nations Peoples and their history. By revealing what settlers did to Aboriginals, these models set the stage for all involved to think about ways of achieving reconciliation. I believe that knowledge of the history and culture of the Aboriginal groups can lead to mutual understanding, a better life for Aboriginals, and better relations between Aboriginals and settlers, old and new.

First, I will define and describe some of these educational programs and then comment on what should be taken into account to ensure that these models best serve the needs of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students alike. I hope that other countries where minority ethnic

groups are experiencing similar situations will draw upon the Aboriginal experience in Canada to address their own educational, multicultural, and diversity issues.

## INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM AND ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

Generally speaking, inclusive curriculum is a broad concept of providing opportunities for full participation and equal chances for all students. The issue of the importance of Aboriginal culture in the education of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students was promoted during the 1970s. In the past years, a variety of initiatives have been taken by different provinces to incorporate Aboriginal cultural materials into the existing curriculum, which already includes cultural material from other cultures. The purpose of this kind of inclusive education is to strengthen Aboriginal worldview and perspectives, and to increase educational opportunities for all Aboriginal students, thereby strengthening Aboriginal cultural knowledge and improving the coexistence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge.

In Canada, as in the United States, the idea of incorporating Aboriginal cultural perspectives, content, and knowledge into the school curriculum is not a new one, but it is one that has taken time to be acknowledged. The issue of Aboriginal culture in Aboriginal students' education is a subset of multicultural education, which is being applied across Canada, and has different meanings from province to province and from school to school. Some choose to focus on human relations and the activities that promote cultural and racial understanding among different groups, while others study groups individually, such as Black Studies and Women Studies.

Incorporating Aboriginal cultural content and perspectives, in this regard, does not mean making a teepee or an igloo in Art class, an Aboriginal dance in Physical Education class, or reading a book written by an Aboriginal writer in Language Arts class. Instead, entrenching Aboriginal heritage into a significant portion of the curriculum should help young Aboriginal students emerge as confident individuals who recognize that they are valued within Canadian society and begin to believe that they are fully capable of making a contribution (Repo *et al.,* p. 45).

Aboriginal educators have addressed the need to develop curricula that deal more conscientiously with the cultures and beliefs of Canada's growing Aboriginal community. This need has come up particularly in recent years, since an increase in the Aboriginal population has resulted in the large number of Aboriginal students currently enrolled in public schools. This increase has affected the public educational system, so that schools now require teachers to integrate Aboriginal content into their regular classroom instruction. Accordingly, various inclusion initiatives have been implemented in different schools to facilitate changes to the curricula, including Aboriginal cultural content and perspectives as a part of public school core curriculum.

In this paper, I begin by presenting some of the inclusive programs that seek to incorporate some of those Aboriginal cultural contents and perspectives into public educational systems. More particularly, I will explore the implementation of these programs in four Canadian provinces that have a relatively higher percentage of Aboriginal students. Then, I will describe the related problems and concerns based on current literature. Finally, I will discuss what should be taken into account to ensure that these inclusive programs best serve the needs of Aboriginal students. I am hopeful that this paper will shed light on educational issues for Aboriginal Peoples in Canada and other ethnic groups who find themselves in similar situations.

## IMPLEMENTATION OF SPECIFIC INCLUSIVE PROGRAMS

In this section I describe some of the inclusive programs implemented by different schools across four Canadian provinces: Saskatchewan, Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia.

With the highest proportion of Aboriginal youth of any province, Saskatchewan continues to lead the way. Saskatchewan has introduced many diverse and innovative initiatives that call for Aboriginal content and perspectives to be integrated across the curriculum to give all students the opportunity to learn about Native Peoples and how they live.

Sakewew High School opened its doors in the fall of 2002, providing Aboriginal students in North Battlefords with a place where they can learn about Aboriginal culture as well as reading, writing, and arithmetic. The school was created through a unique partnership between the Battlefords Tribal Council and the local public and Catholic school divisions as a way to provide students with a high quality academic program, while incorporating First Nations and Metis culture wherever possible. The three partners formed the Battlefords' Board of Education, the first of such partnerships in Canada.

As part of its mandate, the school incorporated Aboriginal content throughout the curriculum while still meeting Saskatchewan Learning Guidelines. It has even taken further steps to help students with personal problems that may arise during the school year. A full-time community liaison from Social Services meets with students when a personal crisis emerges. Sakewew's principal, Colin Sutherland, firmly believes the school

can be a success because it understands the social environment within which many of the students find themselves (Ross, 2002).

At Mary's Community School, hoop dance resource kits and other projects include material devoted to the construction and significance of the teepee, Metis history and culture, and the Aboriginal's unique relationship with the environment. This school has worked hard to make Aboriginal content a part of their everyday lives in the classroom. These resources are regarded as complementary rather than supplementary (supporting what is already being taught). What's more, these resources are useful and teacher-friendly. All students, not just those of Aboriginal descent, feel the benefits of this increased attention to Native themes, activities, and beliefs. Just as Ross Kimble (2003), a writer, explains:

> *We do it so Aboriginal students can see a glimpse of themselves, their families and their communities reflected in their school experience. It's about Aboriginal students finding identity and belonging within our schools [...]. It will be about leading the way toward the change, and demonstrating to educators across the country that there is no need or reason for a separation of Aboriginal and non-aboriginal topics. (p. 12)*

In Ontario, provincial curricula have long recognized the need to include aspects of the Aboriginal experience into public schools, and efforts have been invested to compensate for the gap. In 2001, the Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies (CAAS) published a report entitled "Learning about Walking in Beauty: Placing Aboriginal Perspectives in Canadian Classrooms." This report raises the concern of how today's students will eventually make informed decisions on major issues between Canada and Aboriginal Peoples, when they did not benefit from an inclusive curriculum (CAAS, p. 172). Concerns also came from teaching and administrative bodies: "the lack of knowledge about the Aboriginal experience is astonishing, yet not surprising. It is critical that this ignorance be reserved to enable a stronger unified nation" (Fife, 2004).

Change is and has been possible through inclusive programs. In the Niagara Region, teachers have developed Native support circles in five urban schools designed to assist Aboriginal students who have difficulty making the cultural transition from their home to their school. Support circles emphasize Native cultural values and procedures, allowing students to express personal concerns or raise questions about school programs. Teachers in the Lakehead School Division have experimented with a grade nine Aboriginal transition program designed to meet the needs of students who have not achieved the intended outcomes in grade eight. Coordinated by a Native teacher who delivers an all morning and all year program to the students in a homeroom setting, this program helps students from small and remote communities to ease into an urban school setting (Friesen & Friesen, 2002).

The Toronto District School Board, the largest school board in Canada, has taken a number of steps to reach out to and support its Aboriginal students since the board was created in January 1998. These efforts include offering tradition-based curriculum through the First Nations School of Toronto and including Aboriginal history and perspectives across the curriculum. Based on the statistics gathered from Aboriginal organizations (i.e., the Native Canadian Centre and Native Child and Family Services), the Board recognizes from the outset the need for programs such as mentoring, academic tutors, language program, and addiction counseling.

In Alberta's public schools, Aboriginal content and perspectives used to be limited to the Aboriginal 10, 20, and 30 courses offered to high-school students. Starting in 2005, Alberta Learning (a provincial commission on secondary education) introduced a newly revised social studies curriculum that reflects Aboriginal perspectives and other similar areas of the curriculum as well. Edmonton Public Schools have completed a report ("Infusion of Aboriginal Perspectives into Alberta Core Curriculum") that Alberta Learning will use to develop a curriculum to represent Aboriginal students more suitably (Petten, 2004).

Lastly, in British Columbia, although improving Aboriginal education in the province is a priority for the government, efforts to provide Aboriginal students with a culturally relevant school curriculum are only in the early stages. Currently, 14 of the province's 60 school districts have Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements in place, with another 30 close to being finalized. The First Nations communities with agreements in place are pleased to have input into what goes on in the schools that their children attend. The provincial government also provides funding to schools and school districts so they can make such improvements on their own. For example, for each Aboriginal student enrolled, a school district gets $950 in additional funding from the province, specifically for providing programs to its Aboriginal students (Petten, 2004). Such initiatives that involve significant cultural elements help tailor programs to Aboriginal students, which in turn encourage the students to stay in school and do as well as non-Aboriginal students.

In short, the above-mentioned examples reveal that Aboriginal content has become an integral part of regular

classroom instruction. Introducing culturally relevant material, perspectives, and approaches could provide a means by which Aboriginal students can learn about their historical backgrounds, cultural perspectives, and identities within the school context, thus reducing the cultural gap that exists between school and community and also benefiting non-Aboriginal students by broadening their horizons.

The incorporation and accommodation of Aboriginal content and perspectives will offer a further potential benefit to public school education. This different approach to learning could enhance the sense of connection and purpose among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth, motivating them to understand each other better and further their studies. Although it is a long way to go to change negative attitudes towards the significance of traditional Aboriginal knowledge, a more understanding and generous society could be created with collective efforts made by student, teaching, and administrative bodies.

## EFFORTS NEEDED TO IMPROVE INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM

A number of considerations need to be taken into account to improve inclusive curriculum so that these programs best serve the needs of Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students as well. First, achieving an inclusive curriculum requires conditions in which Aboriginal children, youth, and their parents feel comfortable with becoming fully engaged participants rather than being perceived as outsiders. The extent to which they are socially included depends upon the opportunities they are offered to connect with their heritage and communities and gain a sense of independence. In this respect, a broader understanding of culture is necessary so that the daily lives and concerns of students become a central element in what is taught, how it is taught, and how school is organized (Wotherspoon, p. 20).

At the same time, curriculum designers must be well aware that the content of inclusive programs should not in any way deprive students of the opportunity to develop usable skills for today's job market. Generally speaking, present local curriculum changes in Aboriginal communities have successfully bolstered students' confidence and enhanced their market skills. Thus, it is true that such a culturally imbedded inclusive curriculum has become vital for Aboriginal People to achieve and apply the citizenship and social rights they have been and are still being denied by the colonization process.

More importantly, the successful implementation of an inclusive curriculum needs a coordination of efforts from all sides. The most successful schools demonstrate their ability to provide a caring and supportive environment, a commitment to high standards, and a mutually open relationship with the communities they serve. Schools need to acknowledge and incorporate elements of the students' cultures and knowledge systems, and to ensure that teachers and other personnel, including those of Aboriginal ancestry, are present as role models, mentors, and agents who can respond to students' needs. Internally, these schools should equip themselves by prioritizing and devoting resources that offer physical, social, cultural, material, and moral supports which complement the basic learning and intellectual challenges they are expected to provide for all students. Schools are more inclusive when they are arranged as "spaces" that create safe, supportive environments which allow participants to express and develop themselves (Wotherspoon, p.15). They are also spaces in which children and youth, as well as their families, are assured a voice that can help shape their educational experiences. Such schools, of course, cannot function successfully without sufficient integration in other policy domains and agencies that provide services to Aboriginal children, youth, and their families.

According to Erica Neegan's recommendation (2005), "schools need to collaborate and consult with Elders and the community so that Aboriginal worldviews and epistemology can be integrated in the producing and transmitting of knowledge" (Neegan, p. 9). Agbo (2004) also emphasizes that the school should play a vital part in integrating Aboriginal culture and traditional ways to teaching. According to Agbo, "The school should invite Elders to tell stories about the past and about the community in which they live. Schools should organize spiritual events in which elders would teach the youth" (Agbo, p. 31). In her master degree thesis, Sarah Longman (2003) further contends that:

> *[S]uch inclusion enhances and builds communication between the school and the Aboriginal community that, in turn, promotes increased awareness and understanding of the traditions, languages, values, and the spirituality of Aboriginal peoples (p. 53).*

It is important to remain sensitive to the roles that teachers are expected to play in fostering inclusion. While policy-makers continue to address the issue of integrating Aboriginal content into the core curriculum, teachers remain the key link between policy development and actualization of the curriculum in the classroom. Studies have shown that next to parents, teachers play the most important role in forming a student's attitude and predisposition (Longman, p. 7). In this respect, teachers' qualities and degrees of commitment and intervention

are important variables in how education is experienced by diverse groups of students. Teachers are also centrally situated to play the crucial role of advocates for children and youth and present students with opportunities to voice their concerns and interests. While efforts are currently being made to create curricula with Aboriginal content, particularly by Aboriginal organizations, not enough of that content is making its way into the core curriculum. Part of the problem lies in resistance from teachers who see Aboriginal curriculum content as being cultural curriculum rather than academic, and from others who think that they don't need this type of content because the number of Aboriginal students within their classes is not big. Yet others don't understand that Aboriginal knowledge is as valid as Western knowledge.

Thus one way to help support efforts that include more Aboriginal perspectives and content into what is being taught in the classroom is to get more Aboriginal teachers into those classrooms, something that many of the provinces are actively working on. In British Columbia, for example, the provincial government put $80,000 into a plan by the Kamloops/Thompson School District to add two new Aboriginal teachers to its teaching personnel over the next five years (Petten, 2004).

Efforts to improve inclusive curriculum will need to come both from the top down and from the bottom up. In this regard, teacher-training programs must be designed to equip teachers to deliver a culturally relevant education that builds and enhances the educational experience for Aboriginal students as well as develops a sense of respect from non-Aboriginal students. To encourage higher levels of Aboriginal content in instruction, training programs need to focus on how to incorporate Aboriginal content and to form teachers who have high levels of cross-cultural competencies. Non-Aboriginal teachers, in particular, should receive additional training to prepare them for cross-cultural situations. They should be taught how to make the curriculum for Aboriginal students more meaningful and relevant, and also how to fill them with pride and cultural awareness.

## CONCLUSION

Aboriginal education is at the heart of Aboriginal Peoples' struggle to regain control over their lives and their communities. After suffering and having a negative perception of themselves for so many years, Aboriginals feel that it is imperative to put their culture and knowledge at the center of school education. From the inclusive models introduced in this paper, we see an increased sense of participation and an innovative, culturally sensitive programming happening in various regions or provinces, which should be reproduced in schools across Canada.

Of course, incorporating Aboriginal cultural content and perspectives into school curriculum is only one way that leads to better relations between Aboriginals and settlers, old and new. The restoration of pride and self-worth of Canada's Aboriginals may also be a role model for other minority ethnic groups, in Canada and in other countries, to help them address their own educational, multicultural, and diversity issues.

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