DECOLONIZING AND INDIGENIZING ARTS EDUCATION. PROMISING PRACTICES IN URBAN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION. BUILDING SCHOOL/COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT This paper highlights innovative and promising approaches to urban Indigenous education, within the Toronto District School Board, through the arts and school/community relationships that serve to increase capacity in delivery, and establish culturally responsive and relevant pedagogical practices that support student success and well-being.

This paper provides a decolonizing and Indigenous epistemological lens in which to view arts education. Considering this perspective, Indigenous art can be seen as an act of resistance and self-determination that participates in the project of decolonization. Throughout the paper, the ideas of Indigenous knowledge and art as a decolonizing strategy in education are discussed. The paper draws on the experiences of secondary visual arts educators involved in a pilot project going into its second year. Fifty-five teachers across the Toronto District School Board are currently implementing the Native Studies course, *Expressing Aboriginal Cultures*, NAC 10. This pilot project is providing a culturally responsive and pedagogical framework in which to interpret and engage with Indigenous perspectives and narratives as expressed by Indigenous Elders, storytellers, artists and scholars who are directly involved in the project. This relationship/partnership served to increase capacity in delivery and establish exciting learning opportunities for all students.

Central to Indigenous ways of knowing and being is storytelling. We can experience it in many ways, through drama, dance, music, visual arts, interdisciplinary arts, literatures, and across a variety of media forms, from video and to new multi-modal media technologies. All of these forms provide opportunities to engage with Indigenous artists and scholars.

Central to Indigenous conceptualizations of education is this pedagogy of relationship. The focus of curricular reform has often focused on the revision of content to better reflect Indigenous perspectives. However, revising and rethinking pedagogy to include Indigenous ways of knowing and being needs to involve not just curricular change, but also more inclusive and "wholistic" teaching and learning experiences for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students that focus on Indigenous pedagogies. These experiences create possibilities for a common commitment to social justice, and movement toward a more equitable and inclusive society.

The focus of the pilot is to move beyond "cultural tourism" and towards a deepened understanding of the importance of building trusting, reciprocal and respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. This

requires acknowledging and recognizing the critical issues affecting Aboriginal students in systems of schooling. Educators have opportunities to learn from and with Aboriginal artists in building awareness of the histories, diverse cultures, achievements, contributions and experiences of First Nation, Métis and Inuit peoples in Canada. This moves beyond infusion to decolonization.

Decolonization is not "integration" or the token inclusion of Indigenous ceremonies. Rather, it involves a paradigm shift from a culture of denial to the making of space for Indigenous political philosophies and knowledge systems as they resurge, thereby shifting cultural perceptions and power relations in real ways (Paulette Regan, 2010, p. 189).

"It is clear from this report that the TDSB has made a serious commitment to Aboriginal Education and is taking positive steps to cultivate conscious awareness of Aboriginal presence, the integration of Aboriginal subject material across the curriculum in all schools, the creation of school communities that are positive and welcoming places for Aboriginal students, families and community members" (Dr. Susan Dion, Stepping Forward, 2013).

RESUME Cet article passe en revue les approches novatrices et prometteuses en enseignement auprès des Autochtones vivant en milieu urbain, plus précisément les approches utilisées dans les classes relevant du Toronto District School Board. Ces approches basées sur les arts et l'établissement de relations entre l'école et la communauté visent à établir des pratiques pédagogiques pertinentes et culturellement adaptées qui favorisent la réussite et le bien-être de tous les élèves.

Cet article propose une approche basée sur la décolonisation et les épistémologies autochtones pour l'enseignement des arts. À travers cette approche, l'art autochtone peut être conceptualisé comme un acte de résistance et d'autodétermination qui joue un rôle dans le projet de décolonisation de l'éducation. À travers cet article, nous allons discuter de l'art et des connaissances autochtones comme stratégie de décolonisation en enseignement. Cet article se base sur les expériences des enseignants en arts visuels au secondaire qui prennent part à un projet pilote qui en est maintenant à sa deuxième année. Cinquante-cinq enseignants du Toronto District School Board donnent présentement ce cours en études autochtones, intitulé *Expressing Aboriginal Courses*, NAC 10. Le projet pilote offre un cadre conceptuel pédagogique culturellement adapté qui permet d'interpréter et de se familiariser avec les perspectives et les discours narratifs autochtones tels qu'exprimés par des aînés autochtones, des conteurs, des artistes et des chercheurs qui sont directement impliqués dans ce projet. Cette relation/partenariat a permis de renforcer la capacité de prestation de ce projet et a offert des occasions passionnantes d'apprentissage pour tous les élèves.

Au cœur de la façon d'être et de la façon de conceptualiser le monde des Autochtones se trouve le récit. Le récit est présent dans bien des modes d'expression ; dans le théâtre, la danse, la musique, les arts visuels, les arts interdisciplinaires, les littératures, ainsi qu'à travers une grande variété de formes médiatiques, allant de la vidéo aux nouvelles technologies multimodales. Toutes ces formes nous permettent d'entrer en relation avec des artistes et des chercheurs autochtones.

Au cœur de la façon dont les Autochtones conceptualisent l'enseignement se trouve une pédagogie axée sur l'établissement de relations sociales. La réforme pédagogique se produit souvent par une révision du contenu menant à l'inclusion de perspectives autochtones. Toutefois, revoir et repenser l'enseignement afin d'inclure des façons d'être et de conceptualiser propres aux Autochtones nécessite non seulement d'effectuer des changements dans le curriculum, mais également d'accorder une plus grande importance aux modes d'enseignement et d'apprentissage autochtones qui sont plus inclusifs et « holistiques » pour tous les étudiants, autochtones et non autochtones. Ces expériences nous donnent l'opportunité de renouveler notre engagement envers la justice sociale et de nous réorienter vers l'établissement d'une société plus équitable et inclusive.

L'objectif du projet pilote est d'aller au-delà du « tourisme culturel » et de nous diriger vers une compréhension plus approfondie de l'importance de bâtir des relations de confiance, de réciprocité et de respect entre les peuples autochtones et non autochtones. Ceci nécessite que nous reconnaissions les importantes difficultés auxquelles sont confrontés les étudiants autochtones dans le système d'éducation. Les enseignants ont la possibilité d'apprendre des artistes autochtones et de collaborer avec eux sur la sensibilisation des élèves envers les histoires, les cultures, les réalisations, les contributions et les expériences des Premières nations, des Métis et des Inuits au Canada. De cette manière, nous allons au-delà du tourisme culturel et nous nous dirigeons vers une réelle décolonisation.

La décolonisation n'est pas l'« intégration » ou une inclusion symbolique (tokenism) des cérémonies autochtones. Il s'agit plutôt d'un changement de paradigme où l'on passe d'une culture de déni à une culture qui offre un espace aux philosophies politiques et aux systèmes de connaissances autochtones alors qu'ils resurgissent, déstabilisant ainsi concrètement les perceptions culturelles établies et les rapports de pouvoir (Paulette Regan, 2010, p. 189).

« Il ressort clairement de ce rapport que la TDSB a pris un engagement sérieux envers l'éducation des Autochtones et prend des mesures positives afin de reconnaitre la présence autochtone, d'intégrer des sujets autochtones dans le curriculum de toutes les écoles, de créer des communautés scolaires qui sont des lieux positifs et accueillants pour les étudiants, les familles et les membres de la communauté autochtone » (Dr Susan Dion, Stepping Forward, 2013).

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous art production as storytelling can provide a potent vehicle for engaging in a decolonizing process. As an Indigenous artist, creating our own stories as Indigenous people provides an opportunity for resistance and for constructing counter hegemonic meaning about who we are, from our own truths. For Indigenous people, the arts constitute a living and dynamic entity that has spirit and is sacred. Richard W. Hill explains the relationship between spirit and Indigenous art:

> *For many Native people, there is a living spirit in nature that permeates our lives. We know that spirit and communicate with it. One of the most important motives of our art is to show our understanding of that spirit and our relationship to the world. It is nearly impossible to separate from aesthetic principles. Words such as art, culture, and religion are unnecessary: the values they represent are ever-present in the daily lives of traditional Native peoples.* (Trépanier, F. & Creighton – Kelly, 2011 C. p. 17)

Storytelling in Indigenous worldviews is central to understanding perspectives in Indigenous arts. Indigenous worldviews were traditionally passed on orally from one generation to the next. Elders are often an important presence in giving advice on questions of Indigenous epistemologies and protocols. Indigenous art enables a decolonizing strategy. This process will help to define how Indigenous cultural knowledges are recovered through artistic practices related to ceremony and can be used in decolonizing spaces of teaching and learning. Indigenous Elders, scholars and artists provide strategies in which we can engage in decolonizing our minds and knowledge systems that have been predominantly shaped by colonial ideologies (Iseke-Barnes, 2005).

These traditions continue to the present day through multiple modalities. For instance, Saulteaux artist Robert Houle (1982) describes Indigenous art:

> *Today there is an emergence of a new art by a new generation of young artists. These come from two different aesthetic traditions: North American and Western European. The first is deeply rooted in tribal ritual and symbolism; while the latter is an irreversible influence committed to change and personal development. This new art is traditional and contemporary in source. Also, it is innovative and sophisticated in style and technique.* (pg 82)

RATIONALE

This paper, as articulated in the abstract, is intended to provide a decolonizing and Indigenizing lens in which to view and approach arts education. The First Nation, Métis and Inuit Studies course, *Expressing Aboriginal Cultures*, was piloted in twenty-one schools across the Toronto District School Board in 2013/2014. Secondary visual arts teachers offering the course were supported throughout the year through engagement in professional learning communities to provide opportunities for reflective practice.

The course examined First Nation, Métis and Inuit cultures in Canada through an exploration of art forms created by Aboriginal artists. As outlined in the curriculum by the Ontario Ministry of Education, it is intended for students to gain an understanding of the relationships between Aboriginal histories, cultures, traditions, and beliefs in a variety of art forms. Themes such as Indigenous epistemologies, identities, relationships, and sovereignty were central to understanding the relationship with Indigenous knowledges. These themes provided an opportunity for educators, Indigenous artists, scholars and Elders to co-construct curriculum and create contexts whereby Indigenous artists could reclaim voice in (re)telling their stories through their own diverse narratives. This relationship provided opportunities to decolonize and Indigenize arts education and situate Indigenous knowledges at the centre of the curriculum and challenge colonial constructions of education, art and power. For too long Indigenous ways of knowing and being have been relegated to the margins in public education. Because of this, Indigenous art needs to be included in education as a legitimate source

of knowledge that is imperative in creating positive social change and supporting cultural continuity of Indigenous peoples.

As the pedagogy of relationship is integral to the process of decolonization, ongoing consultation with the Aboriginal Community Advisory Committee of the Toronto District School Board was critical. Members of the committee expressed the need to proceed with caution and care, in order to prevent further marginalization of Indigenous peoples and perspectives through distorted misrepresentations. A recommendation to meaningfully involve Indigenous Elders, scholars, artists, and community members was made and honoured, bringing the responsibility of building respectful relationships to the forefront of decolonizing and Indigenizing education. A set of consultations for co-construction of a curriculum and professional development sessions were developed.

LOCATING MYSELF

I begin locating myself by telling a part of my own story, as asserting and restoring ourselves as Indigenous peoples comes first (Absolon & Willett, 2005). I am a Métis/Cree/Saulteaux educator/artist and have been a classroom teacher, a secondee at York University, Faculty of Education in teacher education, and am currently in the role of coordinator, Aboriginal Education with the Toronto District School Board. Throughout my personal and professional educational experiences (elementary, secondary, and post secondary) Indigenous perspectives have been largely marginalized, trivialized and erased. I was taught throughout my education and undergraduate arts education that there was no word for "art" in Aboriginal cultures. This is where I began to strive to find innovative and creative ways of transforming the status quo in arts education by examining art production as mirroring Indigenous ways of knowing in a decolonizing approach, by creating new spaces where the telling of our own truths, as Indigenous people, will provide opportunities for creating transformative spaces that will support Indigenous well-being and social change.

In the past five years, my work has particularly focused on understanding and responding to issues related to Aboriginal Education within the Toronto District School Board. Much of the work undertaken by the TDSB Aboriginal Education Centre has been undergirded by the report, *Decolonizing Our Schools*, presented in September 2010, written by Dr. Susan D. Dion, Krista Johnston and Dr. Carla Rice. The report looks at Urban Aboriginal Education in the TDSB between April 2009 and September 2010 and was funded through the Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project of the Ministry of Education (UAEPP). The research confirmed what Aboriginal families and communities already knew, that the TDSB is failing to provide Aboriginal students with the education environment and experiences that they need to achieve success and well-being. The report highlighted that educators lack the requisite knowledge and training for meaningfully teaching of Aboriginal subject matter. One of the recommendations stated that meaningful incorporation of Indigenous content and issues must be supported by providing thoughtful professional development for teaching staff, as a part of the larger process of decolonizing and Indigenizing. It is with this recommendation that infusion of Aboriginal perspectives throughout the curriculum be taken seriously. Hence, the course, Expressing Aboriginal Cultures, is a site of potentiality for exploring such themes through the professional development offered. It is through this that teachers had opportunities to engage in reflection and transform practice.

Richardson (2004) says:

> *"culture is a blanket that protects us, and stories are the threads of that blanket... as Métis people we need our stories for all the reasons we have always needed them, to guide us, to help us connect to each other, and to help teach our children who we are and that will help take us into the future."* (2004, p.69).

As this paper examines Indigenous art in reclaiming and restoring Indigenous voice and vision within systems of schooling, it is fitting to use the quotation:

> *"My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back"* (Louis Riel, 1885)

This statement is an assertion of the role and responsibility that Indigenous artists occupy in recuperating that which is theirs, including the stories told to Indigenous peoples by others about who Indigenous people are. Indigenous art creates opportunities for communities marginalized by misconceptions to transform stereotypes and advance social inclusion.

ENGAGING WITH INDIGENOUS ELDERS, ARTISTS, AND SCHOLARS

Contemporary Indigenous artists in Canada use a variety of art forms to disrupt the master narrative, and the colonial archive by asserting their own voices and reversing the gaze. Ideas of identity, relationship, sovereignty, spirit and resistance are often taken up in their work and explored through the lens of storytelling, activism, decolonizing and Indigenizing. Indigenous art production often critiques and resists the forces of colonization and cultural domination, by 'tal-

king back' to colonial misrepresentations and stereotypes of Indigenous peoples.

Working with Indigenous artists provides a potent vehicle for engaging in the process of decolonizing and Indigenizing arts education. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) explains what this means for Indigenous peoples today:

> *"Every issue has been approached by indigenous peoples with a view of rewriting and rerighting our position in history. Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions in our own ways, for our own purposes. It is not simply about giving an oral account or a genealogical naming of the land and the events which raged over it, but a very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying... Franz Fanon called for the indigenous intellectual and artist to create a new literature... to write, theorize and research as indigenous scholars."* (1999, pp. 28-29)

She further writes:

> *"Decolonization is about centering our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes"* (1999, 39).

Indigenous artists, scholars, and Elders engaged deeply and shaped the sessions and co-constructed the curriculum, through a collaborative process. Educators had opportunities to seriously consider and act on decolonizing and Indigenizing arts education. Questions about Indigenous art, as it relates to theories of decolonization, relationship, reclamation, Indigenous identities, resistance and resurgence were integral to the process. These ideas were held up against the curriculum and discussions about the strands of identity, relationship, sovereignty and challenges were unpacked and troubled to address issues of relevance and responsibility.

Artists and educators are uniquely positioned to use, develop and share this information in respectful and appropriate ways. It is in storytelling that we preserve memory, (re)write history, learn, heal, and entertain. In the (re)telling and (re)visioning of these stories we make connections with others and the world. Storytelling is about reclaiming and honoring Indigenous ways of knowing, understanding, and passing on to future generations important life stories. It is a liberating force that centres us in our knowing. Marjorie Beaucage (1995) states:

> *To govern ourselves means to govern our ways of telling stories... it means that the rhythm of the drumbeat and the language of the smoke signal can be transformed to the airwaves and modems of our time. If we remain true to the value of the traditional storytelling practices, we can use the new technology without destroying the culture.*

Decolonization as a process that takes place at all levels of Indigenous interaction: between ourselves as Indigenous peoples, and between ourselves and non-Indigenous communities and institutions. By engaging students and educators in this framework, dialogues are created that enable this process to take place. As France Trépanier and Chris Creighton-Kelly put it, in *Understanding Aboriginal Arts in Canada Today* (2011), the process of colonization has had a profound and lasting impact on Aboriginal peoples, their land, their languages, their cultures and their art practices. Today many artists consider contemporary art practices to be a process of decolonization, re-appropriation, reclaiming and healing.

CONCLUSION

Wherever Indigenous stories can be shared are where Indigenous identities can be celebrated informed by self-view and expressions of subjective experience. This is a space that connects us as Indigenous people to homeland experiences and invokes our ancestors. Here is where stories are medicine and show us who we are in our own light. Through the process of decolonization and in countering colonial constructs of education through Indigenous storytelling and epistemologies, it is my hope that educators, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, engage in relationships to decolonize and Indigenize arts education. This can provide a means in which to explore how Indigenous peoples express the experience of colonization and how Indigenous art contributes to the recuperation of diverse Indigenous cultures, languages and worldviews. Indigenous contemporary art challenges, interrogates and reveals Canada's long history of colonization that is historically embedded and contemporarily practiced in daring and innovative ways. What cross-cultural connections in ideologies will be made without collapsing differences? Indigenous storytelling, in all its variety, holds a unique place in Canada. The history of Canada starts with Indigenous stories and the land.

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