

12-1-2005

Decolonizing Indigenous Education: Beyond Culturalism: Toward Post-cultural Strategies

Yatta Kanu

University of Manitoba, kanuy@cc.umanitoba.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci>

Recommended Citation

Kanu, Yatta (2005) "Decolonizing Indigenous Education: Beyond Culturalism: Toward Post-cultural Strategies," *Canadian and International Education / Education canadienne et internationale*: Vol. 34: Iss. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci/vol34/iss2/2>

This Research paper/Rapport de recherche is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian and International Education / Education canadienne et internationale by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact kmarshal@uwo.ca.

Decolonizing Indigenous Education: Beyond Culturalism: Toward Post-cultural Strategies

Yatta Kanu (University of Manitoba)

Abstract: As a response to the recent international calls to decolonize the education of Indigenous students and increase school success among them by including indigenous knowledge into school curricula, aspects of Aboriginal¹ cultural knowledge/perspectives were integrated into the Social Studies curriculum in a Canadian inner city school in order to appraise the effect on academic achievement, class attendance and school retention among some Canadian Aboriginal students. Results suggest some optimism about increasing school success among these students by integrating Aboriginal perspectives. Five effective approaches to the integration of Indigenous perspectives into the school curriculum and some critical elements of instruction that appear to affect academic achievement, class attendance and school retention among some Canadian Aboriginal students are discussed.

Résumé: Les récents appels internationaux exigent la décolonisation de l'enseignement des élèves indigènes pour augmenter leur succès scolaire en incluant les connaissances indigènes dans les curricula des écoles. Pour répondre à ces appels, des aspects de la connaissance et des perspectives de la culture autochtone ont été intégrés dans le curriculum des sciences humaines d'une école dans un vieux quartier pauvre du Canada afin d'évaluer les effets sur l'accomplissement académique, l'assiduité et le redoublement scolaires chez quelques élèves autochtones canadiens. Le résultat suggère un certain optimisme dans l'augmentation du succès scolaire chez ces élèves avec l'intégration des perspectives autochtones. Cinq façons efficaces pour intégrer les perspectives indigènes au curriculum de l'école et quelques éléments critiques de l'instruction qui semblent avoir affecté le succès académique, l'assiduité et le redoublement scolaires chez quelques élèves autochtones canadiens sont examinés ici.

Introduction

The recent calls in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Alaska, Hawaii, and the Pacific Nations to decolonize Indigenous education is part of a larger effort to reflect critically on the impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples, in particular internal colonization whereby carefully selected mechanisms, such as the subjugation of Indigenous knowledge and the use of colonial ideology to cultivate psychological subordination in the colonized, are employed by dominant groups to subordinate or regulate Indigenous populations. As culture has always been a crucial site of struggle in the colonization and decolonization of the Other and as formal education plays such a pivotal role in the promotion and validation of the cultural knowledge of dominant groups as "official

knowledge” for all, Indigenous scholars have focused on challenging the dominance of the West in defining, shaping and transmitting educational knowledge, and reclaiming Indigenous knowledge hitherto devalued and delegitimated in formal education. Reclamation of Indigenous knowledge in education is seen not only as a strategy of resistance and decolonization (Battiste, 2000) but also as a means of reconnecting the education of Indigenous students to its cultural roots (Cajete, 2000) and expanding the general knowledge base of education (Thaman, 2003), especially in the information age when capital is invested with knowledge which in turn is invested with cultural values.

Multiple critical sites of struggle in assisting the reclamation of Indigenous knowledge in education have been identified in the literature. Three such sites are: the need to decolonize research (Smith, 1999; Mutua and Swadener, 2004); the strategic reinvestment in theoretical tools that challenge the status quo and assist the positive transformation of Indigenous communities and peoples (Smith, 2003); and the engagement of state socialization apparatuses such as the school to position and legitimize Indigenous knowledge as relevant and significant in the hierarchy of valued knowledges (McConaghy, 2000).

The research reported in this paper was an attempt to explore the third of these three sites—namely, the engagement of the school for promoting Indigenous interests by integrating the cultural knowledge/perspectives of Canadian Indigenous Aboriginals into the public school curriculum. The research was undertaken as a response to recent statistics and other reports in Canada which have pointed out that although there have been some significant improvements in schooling outcomes among Aboriginal peoples, public education, to a large extent, is still failing Aboriginal youth (for example, a 2002 study by the Manitoba Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat indicated a dropout rate of 66 percent among Aboriginal students compared to 37 percent for non-Aboriginals; a 1996 Canada census statistics had reported similar findings). Internationally, the disproportionately lower rates of academic success among Indigenous Aboriginal students has been consistently explained in terms of the discontinuity between the home culture of these students and the processes and environments of the school (see, for example, the Canadian study *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, 1996; the Australian report by the National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1982; and Friesen & Friesen, 2002). Particularly in the case of Aboriginal students who move from their home communities to attend urban/metropolitan public schools where over 90 percent of the teachers are non-Aboriginal (Brady, 1995) and belong to the dominant culture (French or English in Canada) the lack of Aboriginal cultural knowledge in school curricula and among teachers has been identified as one of the crucial factors in school failure, prompting calls for the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives across school curricula and teacher education programs. The argument is that decolonization through processes such as the integration of Aboriginal cultural knowledge/perspectives may close the educational

achievement gap between Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal counterparts in the public school system (Battiste, 1998; Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; McAlpine, 2001; Friesen and Freisen, 2002).

These calls have invited four questions requiring immediate research attention because of the potential they have for providing answers that may contribute to educators' and policy-makers' understanding of effective ways of integrating Indigenous knowledge into the school curriculum not only in Canada but also other dominant culture societies with Indigenous populations that are marginalized in the public school system. The four questions are:

(1) What specific aspects of Aboriginal cultural knowledge/perspectives can teachers include or draw on to enhance and support classroom learning for Aboriginal students in urban public schools? (2) What are the most effective ways of integrating such knowledge/perspectives into the school curriculum? (3) How does such integration impact on academic achievement, class attendance and school retention among urban Aboriginal students? (4) What are the critical elements of instruction that appear to affect academic achievement, class attendance and school retention among this group of students?

Some answers to the first question were provided through a previous study conducted by this author in an alternative high school with predominantly Canadian Aboriginal (First Nations) students, in which these students identified nine aspects (and several sub-aspects) of Aboriginal culture that appeared to influence/mediate how they learn in the formal school system (Kanu, 2002). Briefly, these findings included story-telling, providing learning scaffolds through precise directions and examples and illustrations from Aboriginal culture, learning by observing and emulating, use of talking/problem solving circles, community support, infusion of Aboriginal content, use of visual sensory modalities, linguistic clarity between Aboriginal students and dominant culture teachers, and teacher respect and warmth towards Aboriginal learners. The study, however, suggested that if these findings, and indeed any other Aboriginal perspectives, were to be included in the existing public school curricula, rigorous explorations of the remaining three questions were needed not only to ensure that integration resulted in positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal students but also to inform dominant culture teachers' understanding of the integration processes, especially in light of Kleinfeld's (1995) study which suggested that what differentiated effective teachers of Indian and Eskimo students was their instructional style, not their ethnic membership.

The investigation of these three questions has been the focus of a research project by this author/researcher. The objectives were to integrate the outlined nine Aboriginal cultural aspects and other pedagogical and classroom interaction patterns identified as successful with Aboriginal students into the planning and teaching of the grade 9 Social Studies curriculum in an inner city high school with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and appraise the effect in terms of academic achievement, class attendance and school retention among

Aboriginal students. This paper discusses the research processes and results of this investigation.

Theoretical framework

Two prevailing theoretical frameworks that inform cultural conflict and minority student learning are the *cultural discontinuity hypothesis* (Wertsch, 1991; Winzer & Mazurek, 1998; Gay, 2000) and *macro-structural explanations* of minority education (Ogbu, 1982; Ledlow, 1992; Huffman, 2002). The cultural discontinuity hypothesis (the more popular of the two theoretical positions in terms of influencing research, pedagogy and political activism) posits that prior cultural socialization influences how students learn in the school system, in particular how they negotiate, mediate and respond to curriculum, instructional strategies, learning tasks, and communication patterns in the classroom. Winzer and Mazurek (1998), for instance, have argued that children's conceptual frameworks (that is, their learning and thinking processes) are deeply embedded in their own cultures and that difficulties in classroom learning and interactions arise when there is a discontinuity or mismatch between a child's culture and all the intricate subsets of that culture, and the culture of the teacher and the classroom, setting up that child for failure if the school or the teacher is not sensitive to the special needs of that child. The assumption, therefore, is that making the curriculum and the classroom processes culturally compatible will mean higher rates of successful school outcomes for those students whose home cultures conflict with those of the school (for example, Indigenous Aboriginal students).

This hypothesis is located within what McConaghy (2000) calls *culturalism*—that is, the contention that issues of culture and cultural difference must be considered first and foremost before issues of policy, curriculum and pedagogy. Culturalism has served as a major political driving force behind the conception, practice, and decolonization efforts of Indigenous education (see for example, Cajete, 2000; Lipka, 2002; Demmert, 2001). Over the last two decades proponents have moved from the theory of cultural incommensurability (between Western and Indigenous cultures) which advocates for separate or 'special' programs for Indigenous peoples, towards notions of cultural diversity and sensitivity which is concerned with the incorporation of both Western and Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum. The "Both Ways" approach to Indigenous education, as this latter movement has come to be known in countries like Australia and New Zealand, has received significant endorsement both as an anti-colonial strategy by which marginalized Indigenous voices can "make the voyage in" (Said, cited in McConaghy, 2000) and as a model for the development of Indigenous education.

Macro-structural theorists (notably Marxist anthropologist, Ogbu, 1981; 1982), on the other hand, have explained minority school failure largely in terms of macro-structural conditions such as racism and racial discrimination against minorities, the poverty that plagues the lives of many minority groups, and the generally low status they have been accorded in dominant culture

societies—all of which produce structural inequalities and inequities that cause school failure. Ogbu (1982), without disputing the importance of prior cultural socialization in school learning, has heavily criticized the cultural discontinuity theory for its failure to explain the school success of immigrant minority students who experience cultural discontinuities between their home and schools at least as severe as those experienced by Natives/Indians, Blacks, Chicanos/Chicanas, and Puerto Ricans who have consistently experienced school failure. Ogbu largely attributes the failure of these groups to what he calls their caste-like minority status. Castelike minorities, according to Ogbu, are those who have been incorporated into the society involuntarily and permanently; they face a job and status ceiling and tend to formulate their economic and social problems in terms of collective institutional discrimination and other societal barriers. In addition, because of the inferior status accorded them by the dominant culture, castelike minorities define their culture not merely as different from the dominant culture but in opposition to it and may therefore resist achievement in school which they see as representing dominant cultural values (Ledlow, 1992). In other words, as Ledlow explains, the cultural discontinuity argument that minority students experience failure merely because of cultural differences between their homes and the schools denies the historical and structural contexts in which those differences are embedded. In explaining minority school failure, therefore, Ogbu (1981) recommends looking beyond the micro-ethnography of the classroom, the home and the playground, towards an ecological framework. He writes:

...the ecological framework suggests that these classroom events are built up by forces originating in other settings and that how they influence classroom teaching and learning must be studied if we are ever to understand why a disproportionate number of minority children do poorly in school, and if we are ever going to design an effective policy to improve minority school performance (Ogbu, 1981, p. 23).

The compelling arguments put forward by both sides of the debate suggest a synthesis of these opposing viewpoints where, in examining causes and remedies for school under-performance among minority students (e.g., Indigenous students) the fundamental differences between minority students' cultures, interests and expectations and the macro-structural determinants of under-performance are taken into account. In this study, it was such a synthesized framework that guided the investigation of the effect of the integration of Aboriginal cultural knowledge/perspectives into the curriculum.

Research Methodology

The study addressed three specific questions:

- What are the most effective ways of integrating Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum of urban public high schools?
- How does such integration impact on academic achievement, class attendance and school retention among urban Aboriginal students in the public high school system?

- What are the critical elements of instruction that appear to affect academic achievement, class attendance and school retention among urban Aboriginal students?

Over one academic year (September 2003 – June 2004) an ethnographic study was carried out in a large inner city school, selected for its mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and predominantly dominant culture teachers (mainly Anglo and Euro-Canadian). Close to 33% of the 1100 students in this school are of Aboriginal heritage. Data collection occurred in the two grade 9 Social Studies classrooms in the school, one of which was enriched by the integration of Aboriginal content, resources, and instructional methods and interaction patterns identified as successful with Aboriginal students (hereafter referred to as the “enriched” classroom) and one which was not (the “regular” classroom). Enrichment materials were provided by both the researchers and the class teacher. The intent was to document, analyze and describe educational outcomes (in terms of academic performance, class attendance and school retention) among Aboriginal students in a classroom where Aboriginal perspectives were consistently integrated into the prescribed curriculum, and one where no such integration occurred.

Research participants

The research participants consisted of 31 Aboriginal students (15 from the enriched classroom and 16 from the regular classroom) and the two dominant culture (Anglo-Canadian) Social Studies teachers teaching these students. Like the majority of the students in this school, the students in the study were all from similar low socio-economic backgrounds. 27 out of the 31 Native students taking part in the study reported having access to help and support at home with schoolwork if needed, suggesting that a low-income background does not necessarily preclude involvement by Aboriginal families in the education of their children. Prior to beginning the study, the teachers reported that students were assigned randomly to their Social Studies classes with respect to overall academic ability, and did not know beforehand about the differences in the content and approach to teaching in the two Social Studies classrooms.

The two teachers had similar qualifications (a Bachelor’s degree with a major in the Social Studies areas of history and geography) and over 15 years Social Studies teaching experience in the grade 9 classroom. Both teachers reported similar goals in their teaching of Social Studies, namely, the development of students’ conceptual understanding of topics/ideas/concepts and higher order thinking, and the ability of students to apply learning beyond the lesson. Both used the same Social Studies textbook and taught the same unit topics twice per week in their respective classrooms.

What set the two teachers and their classrooms apart was their understanding of, and approaches to, the integration of Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum. While both expressed the belief that Aboriginal perspectives should be integrated into school curricula, the teacher in the enriched classroom

(we will call him Mr. B.) placed such integration at the center of his teaching, believing it to be a philosophical underpinning of the curriculum. When the integration of Aboriginal perspectives is believed to be a philosophical underpinning of the curriculum, it ceases to be an occasional add-on activity in the classroom and becomes an integral part of curriculum implementation. Perhaps one reason why we welcomed Mr. B's class for enrichment for the purpose of our study was his belief in the transformative power of integration "to enhance students' understanding of Aboriginal culture and issues, increase the self-esteem and pride of Aboriginal students, and alleviate ignorance and racism among dominant cultural groups" (interview, 24/08/04). To be able to live this belief in his classroom, he willingly attended workshops to enhance his knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal issues and histories and routinely used resources and pedagogical approaches found to be effective with Aboriginal students.

On the other hand, Mr. H. who taught Social Studies in the regular classroom understood integration as occasionally adding Aboriginal content to a curriculum that remained largely Euro-centric. He pointed out during an interview that although he believed inclusion "was the way to go" he still felt uncomfortable singling out Aboriginal perspectives for consistent integration into the curriculum because "...doing so would be unfair to the other ethnic minority students in the class" (interview, 21/08/04). In any case, Mr. H. revealed, the lack of easily available student level Aboriginal material for use with his class or time to adapt materials for students meant that he could not include Aboriginal materials beyond what was given in the textbook.

The drawback, however, to including only what is given in the school textbook/curriculum is that such material typically represents what King (2001) calls "marginalizing knowledge", a form of curriculum transformation that can include "selected 'multicultural' curriculum content that simultaneously distorts both the historical and social reality people actually experienced..." (p. 274). As Swartz (1992) suggests, such a curriculum is a "master script" from which all other accounts and perspectives are omitted unless they can be disempowered through misrepresentation. Critical race theorists see this kind of official knowledge of the school curriculum as "a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain the current social order" (Ladson-Billings, 2004, p. 59). Except where a teacher is trained in double reading the code, distorted information is passed on to students inadvertently.

The contrast between how these two teachers perceived integration and how these perceptions were enacted in their pedagogies and interactions with students are described in more detail in the *Findings and Discussions* section of this paper. Suffice it to state at this point that there were sufficient differences between the two classrooms to yield a rich and complex database and to warrant our use of Mr. H's classroom as a frame of reference in our discussion of students' outcomes in the enriched classroom, especially how different pedagogical styles and teacher personalities may produce different outcomes.

How Aboriginal perspectives² were integrated

The guiding principle for our integration effort was provided by Friesen and Friesen (2002) who describe integration as a mixing of ideas, a coming together of minds with appreciation for alternative ways of thinking. This principle implied that genuine transformation would only occur if Aboriginal perspectives were infused throughout the curriculum and pedagogy of the grade 9 Social Studies. Therefore, during phase 1 of the research, the researcher, her two Aboriginal graduate research assistants, and the teacher from the enriched classroom worked collaboratively to integrate the nine aspects of Aboriginal culture and other Aboriginal perspectives into the instructional planning of the grade 9 Social Studies curriculum units. Drawing on suggestions from the Manitoba provincial curriculum document titled *Integrating Aboriginal perspectives into curricula* (2003), we integrated Aboriginal perspectives into (a) the student learning outcomes for each unit, (b) instructional methods/strategies, (c) learning resources, (d) assessment of student learning, and (e) as a philosophical underpinning of the curriculum.

The following are a few specific examples of how Aboriginal perspectives were integrated during this phase of the study, once the teaching units for the 2003/04 academic year had been identified by the teachers.

Integrating student learning outcomes: Student centered teaching starts with placing the students at the center of planning for teaching—who the students are, their histories and experiences, their aspirations and how these can be captured and incorporated in the teaching/learning goals and objectives. Mr. B. felt that integrating Aboriginal perspectives at the level of intended learning outcomes and sharing these outcomes with students at the beginning of each lesson would help him and the students keep their eyes firmly on “the ball” while remaining alert to any unintended learning outcomes that might emerge during the lesson. In setting student learning outcomes, therefore, we targeted Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives. Although the specific learning outcomes depended on the specific lessons, in consultation with the Aboriginal graduate research assistants, we identified and included some values and issues reported as common and important among many Aboriginal communities—for example, understanding the importance of respectful interactions in Aboriginal cultures, the vital role of elders, the importance of family and community to Aboriginal identity, the importance of spirituality in learning/education and in the lives of many Aboriginal peoples, the various effects of European contact and settlement on Aboriginal peoples, and Aboriginal contributions to Canadian society.

Integrating learning resources: Aboriginal literature, including myths, legends and stories written by First Nations authors (e.g., Moses & Goldie, 1992; Roman, 1998) were used to complement Social Studies unit topics (for example, First Nations origin/creation stories, stories describing Aboriginal ceremonies, and stories depicting the holistic and interconnected nature of Aboriginal identity were integrated into the grade 9 unit on Canadian identity). Videos and print material on Native issues/perspectives that enhanced certain Social Studies

unit topics were incorporated (for example, videos on the various ways in which European contact impacted on Aboriginal lives, and print materials on the Indian Acts and how they impacted the human rights of Aboriginal peoples). Other Aboriginal content materials, particularly content and perspectives that were absent from the curriculum or that provided *counterstories* to what was presented in the textbook were integrated (for example, Aboriginal governing structures such as the Iroquois Confederacy prior to European contact were incorporated into the unit on Government and Federalism, to counter the myth that Aboriginals had no organized form of government before the arrival of Europeans). Counter story-telling “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (Delgado and Stephancic, 2001, p. 144). Based on the premise that society constructs social reality in ways that promote its own self-interest or that of the elite (DeCuir and Dixon, 2004) counter story-telling is a means of exposing, challenging and critiquing normalized privileged discourses, the discourse of the majority and, therefore, serves as a potent decolonizing tool.

Integrating instructional methods/strategies: Lessons in the enriched classroom were planned and implemented in ways that integrated pedagogical practices documented as effective in the teaching/learning of some Aboriginal students. For example, where appropriate, stories were used to enhance students’ understanding of curriculum content; sharing/talking circles were utilized to facilitate discussion on an equal, respectful and non-threatening basis; learning scaffolds in the form of illustrations and examples from Native culture/experience were provided; fieldtrips to a pow-wow and a sweat-lodge were arranged; community support through group work and classroom visits by knowledgeable guest speakers from Native communities were features of the Social Studies lessons; and opportunities for kinesthetic, visual, and auditory learning were provided.

In teaching the Social Studies concepts and in setting tests and, or examinations, care was taken to eliminate or minimize any unnecessary complexity in the use of the English language that might interfere with students’ understanding of the concepts or test items (for example, simpler words and shorter sentences were often used).

Integrating assessment strategies: Strategies such as the use of journals and portfolios identified as culturally responsive and effective with academically struggling students were included as tools for assessing student learning. Also included were students’ written work, class presentations of research projects (several on Aboriginal peoples and issues), story/drama performances, and traditional paper and pencil tests. To enhance the chances for student success on the tests and examinations, the teacher carried out extensive reviews of previously taught content and skills just before each test or examination.

Integration as a philosophical underpinning of the curriculum: The integration of Aboriginal perspectives constituted a guiding principle of curriculum implementation in the enriched classroom. Therefore, in addition to the consistent use of content materials, resources and pedagogical strategies

consistent with Aboriginal world views, there were Aboriginal resources and displays everywhere in this classroom and Mr. B. reported integrating Aboriginal perspectives not only into the Social Studies course but also his other teaching courses and his extra-curricular activities with students (for example, the weekly La Crosse tournaments he organized).

Data collection : Data collection occurred during phase 2 of the study when the integrated curriculum was implemented/taught in the enriched classroom and the regular curriculum was taught in the other classroom. The following methods of data collection were used: (1) Classroom observations of teaching processes and interactions were carried out (63 classroom observations occurred in the enriched class over a period of 36 weeks and 34 observations in the regular class over the same time period). Data were collected through field notes, audiotapes, and sometimes video-recording to permit more intensive analysis of interactions, episodes, and processes. These data later provided the material for semi-structured interviews with the students. (2) Site texts such as classroom-based scores on three Social Studies tests, two end-of-term exams and two class assignments/projects, samples of Aboriginal students' written work, exit slips where each student summarized what he or she had learned in each lesson, and records of student attendance, class participation, and school retention were collected. The tests/exams and assignments/projects were the same for both types of classrooms and care was taken to target conceptual understanding and higher level thinking in setting the tests/exams and assignments. (3) The teacher and the students in the enriched classroom kept journals where they reflected on classroom activities, assignments, and the integration processes. (4) Semi-structured and open-ended interviews were conducted among all 31 Aboriginal students to gain insights into their reactions to the content materials and teaching processes and how these impacted on their academic achievement, class attendance and participation. Though not a target of the study, 10 non-Native students (5 from each classroom) volunteered to be interviewed for their insights as well. Using stimulated recall techniques (Calderhead, 1987), interviewees were asked to view/read/listen to and then interpret and comment on content material and teaching processes and interactions in order to identify the critical elements of instruction that appeared to affect academic achievement, class attendance/participation, and school retention.

Data analysis: Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were read several times to identify how the content material and teaching processes had impacted on students' academic achievement, class attendance and participation. Data collected during the classroom observations were examined by the research team and the student interviewees through a successive iterative process to discern critical elements of instruction that appeared to affect academic achievement, attendance and retention. Identified elements were coded and analyzed through an extensive ongoing process of constant comparative analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Scores on class tests/exams and assignments, as well as data on

class attendance and school retention among Aboriginal students in both classrooms were compared and charts were used to display the findings clearly and concisely. Exit slips and collected samples of students' written work were examined for evidence of conceptual understanding and higher-level thinking versus simple recall of information, and these were also compared. Throughout, data analysis and interpretation were informed and guided by the research questions and the theoretical frameworks presented earlier.

Findings and Discussions

In presenting and discussing the research findings, I focus on the impact/effect of the integration of Aboriginal perspectives on academic achievement, class attendance/participation, and school retention among Aboriginal students (research question # 2), and the critical elements of instruction that appeared to affect academic achievement, attendance and retention (research question # 3). Discussion of the findings on these two research questions would throw light on question # 1 which focused on the most effective ways of integrating Aboriginal perspectives into the school curriculum.

Impact on academic achievement: Students in the enriched class performed dramatically better than their counterparts in the regular class on Social Studies test/exam scores. They also demonstrated a better understanding of Social Studies content, higher level thinking, and improved self-confidence as the year progressed. Consistently on the Social Studies tests/exams and assignments there was a pass rate of more than 80 % among the Aboriginal students who were regular in the enriched classroom, with overall scores ranging between 83% - 61%, compared to 44% pass rate among regular attendees in the regular class where overall scores ranged between 60% - 40%.

The students in the enriched classroom attributed their superior performance to the following factors which were parts of the integration processes: better conceptual understanding due to the use of learning scaffolds such as examples, demonstrations and illustrations from Native culture during the teaching of Social Studies topics (for this, the teacher sometimes drew on the knowledge of the Ojibway and Cree research assistants); the inclusion of Aboriginal content/perspectives, including the counterstories, which added depth and breadth of understanding for all students; the inclusion of Aboriginal pedagogical strategies such as the use of stories to teach/reinforce content directly or indirectly, talking/discussion circles which provided opportunities for sharing views and ideas, Native guest speakers, and fieldtrips to Aboriginal communities; small group work where students felt supported; group projects which provided opportunities for ownership and decision-making; one-on-one interactions with the teacher; the minimization of complex language on tests and in teaching content; and the extensive test preparation students received (e.g., extensive review of previously taught content and examination questions). Also identified as enablers of their learning were the teacher's superior knowledge of the unit topics and of Aboriginal issues and history, his ability to explain

concepts clearly, and his extraordinary faith in the students which translated into student motivation and respect and warmth towards the students. Neither the Aboriginal perspectives nor the teacher attributes listed were present or actively promoted in the regular classroom, a situation that could have contributed to the poor performance of most of the Aboriginal students in that class.

These findings appear to support the cultural discontinuity position that when school curriculum and teaching/learning processes are compatible with students' cultures and cultural socialization patterns, the chances of academic success are increased and conversely, cultural discontinuity increases the chances of school failure (Vogt, Jordan & Tharp, 1987; Lipka, 2002; Zurawsky, 2005).

Aboriginal resources appeared to be particularly effective in promoting breadth and depth of understanding of curriculum content and higher cognitive skills such as reasoning and drawing conclusions. In both respects, students reported that among the materials used to supplement/complement the content of their Social Studies units, the counter-stories we brought in, or which they found on their own through research, were particularly useful. For example, after a unit on Human Rights during which several supplemental content materials were added to the textbook unit, an Aboriginal student remarked: "...Our discussion of the Aboriginal interpretation of the 1876 Indian Act provided a different perspective and that really opened my eyes... I cannot believe that Aboriginals were not allowed to leave their reserves without a permit". Another said: "I now see the banning of Aboriginal ceremonies in the past as cultural genocide, and I can defend my position on that if asked..."

These positive effects notwithstanding, integration at the resource level was found to be the most difficult to accomplish due to the lack of Aboriginal learning resources for students. Both teachers in the study identified this problem as a serious challenge to the integration of Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom, suggesting the need for greater attention to resource development to facilitate successful integration.

Some of the strategies we integrated appeared to be more effective than others in promoting and assessing student learning. For example, a good number of the Aboriginal students (n=22) reported that they were not comfortable doing oral presentations in front of the class, but the use of journals seemed acceptable to everyone. We gathered from the interviews that journal writing was preferred because of the opportunity it provided for the students to reflect on how they felt, thought, and experienced the content material and the activities provided in the class.

Impact on School retention: There was no apparent connection between student attrition and the integration of Aboriginal perspectives. When the academic year began early in September 2003 there was a total of thirty-nine Aboriginal students in both classrooms. By mid October eight of these students (three from the enriched class and five from the regular class) had left, either because their parents relocated elsewhere in the city, province or country or

because these students were transferred into the school's transition program, an alternative program designed to help some students to cope with high school academic work. These findings appear to contradict previous research suggesting correlations between the integration of Aboriginal perspectives and school retention among Aboriginal students (for examples of such studies, see Coladarci, 1983 and Silver et al, 2002). Rather, and significantly, our findings revealed that factors other than cultural discontinuity may also account for attrition among Aboriginal students and other students from low-income families—for instance, frequent mobility or high rates of migrancy.

Impact on Class attendance/regularity: Initial data analysis did not reveal a connection between the integration of Aboriginal perspectives and class attendance among the Aboriginal students in the study. In each of the two classrooms, there was a steady group of Aboriginal students who were regular in class—ten students with an average attendance rate of 87% in the enriched class, and seven students with 83% attendance rate in the regular class. Attendance among the rest of the Aboriginal students in both classroom types remained sporadic and this was reflected in the lower test scores of these students.

However, when the regular attendees in each classroom were asked to provide *reasons* for their regularity in Social Studies classes, a clear difference that seemed to favour the cultural discontinuity theory emerged. Frequent reasons given by the students in the enriched class for their regular attendance included the following: “Mr. B. is an awesome Social Studies teacher, he is very knowledgeable about Aboriginal issues”; “We are learning a lot about Aboriginal issues in this class, and about other indigenous cultures. The video (*Whale Rider*) we saw about Maori culture in New Zealand has some similarities with Cree culture and it showed us how cultures adapt to change”; “In this class, we get to express our views and ideas and we work together a lot and I like that”; “I look forward to this class every week”. A non-Aboriginal (white) student reported “learning a lot in the class” but thought “there was way too much focus on Aboriginal content and perspectives”, bringing into sharp focus an implementation concern that Mr. H had raised earlier.

By contrast, five of the seven regular attendees in the other class reported that the only reason they came to Social Studies classes regularly was because they were “required/forced” to do so. One of them elaborated: “If I don't get my attendance slip signed by Mr. H., I will lose the government financial assistance I am getting for attending classes”. Another said, “My parents make sure I leave home for school. Once in school, we are not allowed to hang around in the hallways during class periods. Mr. J. and other teachers on duty are always patrolling the hallways”.

When asked specifically what they thought about their Social Studies lessons and the integration of Aboriginal perspectives, their responses suggested that classroom processes compatible with Aboriginal perspectives might have made a positive difference to their attendance and learning. Responses included the following: “We hardly talk about Aboriginal topics except when Mr. H.

talked about Canada before the White people came and the role of the Aboriginal people in the fur trade....I would have liked to have more”; “I have learned quite a bit about the geography and government of Canada, and other topics. Yes, maybe I would have liked the class even better if he had included Aboriginal perspectives more.”

Significantly, however, the cultural discontinuity theory did not appear to hold when the chronic absentees in both classrooms were asked for reasons for their irregular attendance. Responses revealed that frequent or prolonged absenteeism among these Aboriginal students was due to reasons other than the integration of Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum. Some of the reasons cited were: having to take care of younger siblings at home; no money (poverty), so students have to work; problems with parents/ foster parents/ guardians; incarceration at juvenile centers; attendance at juvenile court; returning to the reserve for funeral, wedding, or just to be with family.

This complex array of reasons/issues suggests the need to look beyond the cultural discontinuity theory in accounting for irregular school attendance among Aboriginal students, and examine this problem through the lens of Ogbu’s macro-structural explanations—for instance, the culture of poverty perpetuated by the low participation of Aboriginals in the labour market. According to a recent CBC news report (November 8, 2004), for example, the highest poverty rate in Canada is found among Aboriginal children and the children of new immigrants (one in every five children in these families was reported as living below the Canadian poverty line due to low minimum wages and reduced income support). Silver *et al* (2002) study which looked at a wide range of variables affecting Aboriginal education in inner city Winnipeg reported that conditions are so harsh for many Aboriginal families in the inner city that these families are just basically surviving and that these home conditions may cause kids to be pulled out of school to look after younger siblings as parents (many of them single mothers) are simply ‘swamped’ at home.

The absence of secondary schools on some Canadian Aboriginal reserves and the questionable quality of education in some reserve schools (see Rubenstein and Clifton, 2004) have also meant that Aboriginal students who aspire to high quality education or education beyond the elementary or middle school level have to leave their home communities and live in dormitories or with extended family members in the city. Unsatisfactory living conditions in the city and missing their own families have often caused these students to either drop out of school and return home for good or be absent from school for extended periods of time visiting their families for one reason or another. Prolonged absences may lead to low grades and school failure and dropout which, in turn, perpetuate the culture of poverty by severely reducing Aboriginal opportunity to participate in the labour market. These macro-structural explanations suggest that the effort to increase school success for Aboriginal students by integrating their culture into the school curriculum cannot be pursued in isolation from other factors involving larger societal changes in

policies and practices that enshrine the colonial project of othering and excluding.

Critical elements of instruction that appeared to affect academic achievement, class attendance, and school retention among Aboriginal students.

Consistent with earlier research (e.g., Kleinfeld, 1995; Curwen Doige, 2003) our data suggested that for *all* the students in this study, *teacher capacity* (defined here as teacher knowledge, attitude, personal and instructional style) appeared to be the most critical factor affecting academic achievement. In the enriched classroom, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student interviewees alike mentioned the following teacher attributes as critical factors in their superior academic performance: the “awesome” ability of their teacher to explain concepts in clear and simple language, his use of a variety of teaching methods/strategies including those that appeal to the learning needs of Aboriginal students, his knowledge of Aboriginal cultures/issues/content and his consistent effort to integrate these into Social Studies, his ability to encourage and motivate all students, and his positive attitude and high expectations for students, especially Aboriginal students.

Interviewees from the regular class, on the other hand, frequently expressed the need for a teacher “who cares”, “who is interested in us”, and “who can use teaching methods and resources other than transparency notes or the textbook and its end-of-chapter questions most of the time—that’s so boring”.

This finding suggests that successful integration requires sensitive caring teachers who are knowledgeable about Aboriginal issues/topics and preferred pedagogical strategies (or are willing to acquire such knowledge) and value them sufficiently to integrate them into their curricula on a consistent basis. There is, therefore, need for government at both the provincial and federal levels to provide sustainable funding and encouragement for programs that improve teacher capacity for their role as effective integrators of Aboriginal perspectives.

Additional critical elements of instruction identified by the students as positively affecting academic achievement and class attendance/participation were (a) the integration of Aboriginal content and perspectives that provided counter-stories—this challenged what was presented as unproblematic factual information in the school curriculum; (b) community participation through elders and guest speakers from the Aboriginal community—this validated and accorded respect and recognition to Aboriginal knowledge as something different from that found in schools but which complements school knowledge in ways that make it relevant and meaningful to Aboriginal students (both ‘a’ and ‘b’ were also interpreted as having a decolonizing effect in that these elements released Aboriginal students from the constraints of dominant cultural canons of knowledge and ways of knowing) ; and (c) a learning environment that fosters openness, nurtures student confidence, and creates opportunities for the development of student voice. On this latter point about an appropriate

learning environment, an Aboriginal student from the enriched class remarked, "I feel respected in this class. Mr. B. always insists that we listen to each other and respect what each of us has to say...". A non-Aboriginal student agreed: "I have learned more by listening to what they (Aboriginals) feel when they are stereotyped". Our interview with this student revealed that the circle discussions in their class had helped him experience a level of cognitive dissonance from, and uneasiness with, some stereotypical views he had carried about Aboriginal peoples. This in turn had enabled him to develop new perspectives on stereotyping and a better understanding of his north end Aboriginal neighbors.

Conclusions

The research results discussed in this article support previous studies which had suggested optimism about increasing school success among Aboriginal students by integrating Aboriginal perspectives into the school curriculum. Specifically, it appears that integration at the levels of student learning outcomes, instructional methods and resources, assessment of student learning, and as a philosophical underpinning of the curriculum results in positive outcomes such as higher test scores, better conceptual understanding/higher level thinking, improved self-confidence and, among students from socio-economically stable home environments, increased motivation to attend classes. Teacher knowledge, attitude, expectations, and personal and instructional styles appear to be the most important factors affecting academic achievement, class attendance and participation. Aboriginal content/resources, community involvement, and respectful and nurturing learning environments were also identified as critical elements of instruction affecting these outcomes.

Caution, however, needs to be applied in interpreting these results as unproblematic endorsements of cultural discontinuity theorists of learning. For one thing, during the study, an Aboriginal student from the enriched class commented that it did not really matter whether or not Aboriginal perspectives were integrated into the curriculum because: "I get that sufficiently at home and in my community".

This comment is significant because it appears to support research evidence (e.g., Deyhle, 1995; Ledlow, 1992; Smith, 2001) that students with a strong sense of cultural identity (for example, speaking the native language fluently and consistently engaging in traditional spiritual and social activities) have an advantage in that they have strongly developed identities and self-esteem, and do not need to 'resist' White culture or White curriculum to have an identity or to do well in school. Since this particular Aboriginal student belonged to the top five in her class in terms of academic achievement, class attendance and participation this would seem to contradict the cultural discontinuity theory that the more differences there are between the school and the home culture the more problems students will experience in school. It appears, therefore, that Native students with limited participation in their Native culture may fit more closely into Ogbu's category of castelike minorities whose resistance to school poses a far more significant factor.

In addition, it appears that microlevel classroom variables like culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy *alone* cannot provide a fully functional and effective agenda in reversing achievement trends among Aboriginal students or dismantling the persistent colonial dynamics by which educational opportunities for Canadian Aboriginals are constrained. As this study suggests, it is one thing to integrate Aboriginal perspectives into the school curriculum but quite another to ensure that all Aboriginal students, particularly those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, are actually in the classroom to benefit from such integration. As McConaghy (2000) has pointed out in the case of this kind of curriculum reform in Australia, the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives can be achieved without any substantive transformation of the basic structures from which the colonialist curriculum derives its authority. In other words, the “the voyage in” is only possible if those important structural and institutional forces which thwart the capacity of some social groups are disrupted. As Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) have argued in relation to human agency and social structures, “Individuals bear considerable responsibility for their own choices and destinies, but none of these is independent of powerful circumstances that often lie beyond the capacity of the individual to manage or control” (p. 5).

Therefore, macro-structural variables which perpetuate internal colonialism and material injustices that contribute to phenomena such as chronic absenteeism and dropout among Aboriginal students—for example, the poor socio-economic conditions of many Aboriginal families, structural racism, and inadequate resources and poor educational financing for certain segments of the society (e.g., some schools serving Aboriginal populations)—may in fact be significant factors to consider. In fact, according to Ogbu, the castelike status of North American Indians is a far more significant factor in their educational underachievement than their cultures and languages. Ogbu explains: “This does not mean that cultural and language differences are not relevant; what it does mean is that their castelike status makes it more difficult for them to overcome any problems created by cultural and language differences than it is for immigrant minorities” (p. 237). This suggests the need to explore the relationships between microlevel and macrolevel variables affecting schooling and the realization that meaningful and lasting intervention requires a systematic, holistic, and comprehensive approach. For far too long, culturalism has been the dominant factor influencing Indigenous education and social policies. While it has successfully pushed forward issues of identity and representation, the time is ripe to heed critics like McConaghy (2000) who has suggested that we now move beyond culturalism towards an alternative, postculturalism, which “contends that culture is significant, but not always the most significant factor in issues of pedagogy and social policy, and can never be dissociated from issues of class, gender, racialization and other forms of social analysis” (p. 44). The strategies and technologies that produce and reproduce colonialism and school failure are numerous and complex, and the expectation that the inclusion of Indigenous cultural knowledge/perspectives in the school

curriculum will fully effect social change is another colonial desire that unfairly places an onerous responsibility on Indigenous peoples.

Notes

1. In line with Statistics Canada's (1996) definition, the term Aboriginal as used in this paper refers to individuals who report themselves as First Nations (Objibway, Cree, and Metis). In various documents Aboriginals are also referred to as Native, Indian, and Indigenous and these terms are used interchangeably here.

2. In this paper Aboriginal perspectives refer to curriculum materials and instructional methods/styles and interaction patterns that Aboriginal peoples see as reflecting their experiences, histories, cultures, traditional knowledges and values. The instructional methods/styles may include some 'universal' practices which research has identified as maximizing classroom learning for all students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—for example, treating all students with respect and dignity, explaining concepts and expectations clearly and concisely, and creating learning environments that develop students' voices and capacities for making judgments and decisions.

References

- Battiste, M. (1998). Enabling the autumn seed: Toward a de-colonized approach to Aboriginal knowledge, language and education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 22 (1), 16 - 27.
- Battiste, M. (2000). *Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision*. Vancouver: UBC Press
- Bogdan, R. C. & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative research for education (3rd edition)*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Brady, P. (1995). Two policy approaches to Native Education: Can reform be legislated? *Canadian Journal of Education*, 20, 349 – 366.
- CBC News Broadcast: November 8, 2004.
- Cajete, G. A. (2000). *Native science: Natural laws of interdependence*. Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers.
- Calderhead, J. (1987). *Exploring teachers' thinking*. London: Cassell Educational Ltd.
- Coladarci, T. (1983). High school dropout among Native Americans. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 23 (1), 15- 22.
- Curwen Doige, L. A. (2003). The missing link: Between traditional Aboriginal education and the Western system of education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 27 144 – 160.
- DeCuir, J.T. & Dixson, A.D. (2004). "So when it comes out, they aren't that surprised that it is there": Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher*, 33, 26 – 31.
- Deyhle, D. (1995). Navajo youth and Anglo-racism: Cultural integrity and resistance. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65, 403 – 444.
- Delgado, R. & Stephancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.

- Demmert, W. G. (2001). Improving academic performance among Native American students. ERIC Database 1992-2003. Access Number ED463917.
- Friesen, J. W. & Friesen, V. L. (2002). *Aboriginal education in Canada: A plea for integration*. Calgary AB: Detselig Enterprises Ltd.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research and practice*. New York & London: Teachers College Press.
- Huffman, T. (2002). Resistance theory and the transculturation hypothesis as explanation of college attrition and persistence among culturally traditional American Indian students. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 40 (3), 1- 23.
- Kanu, Y. (2002). In their own voices: First Nations students identify some cultural mediators of their learning in the formal school system. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, vol. XLV111, 98 – 121.
- King, J. E. (2001). Culture-centered knowledge: Black studies, curriculum transformation, and social action. In J. A. Banks & C. A. M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 265 – 290). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kleinfeld, J. (1995). Effective teachers of Eskimo and Indian students. In L. Roberts and R. A. Clifton (Eds.), *Cross-currents: Contemporary Canadian educational issues* (pp.68 – 96). Toronto: Nelson Canada.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2004). New directions in multicultural education: Complexities, boundaries, and critical race theory. In J. A. Banks & C. A. M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp.50 - 65). New York; Toronto: John Wiley & Son Inc.
- Ledlow, S. (1992). Is cultural discontinuity an adequate explanation for dropping out? *Journal of American Indian Education*, 31, 21 – 36.
- Lipka, J. (2002). Schooling for self-determination: Research on the effects of including Native language and culture in the schools. ERIC Database. Access Number 459989.
- Manitoba Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat (2002). *Aboriginal People in Manitoba*. Winnipeg: Author.
- McAlpine, L. (2001). Teacher training for the new wilderness: Quantum leaps. In K. P. Binda & S. Caillou (Eds.) *Aboriginal education in Canada: A study in decolonization*. Mississauga, ON.: Canadian Educators' Press.
- McConaghy, C. (2000). *Rethinking Indigenous education: Culturalism, colonialism and the politics of knowing*. Flaxton, Queensland: Post Pressed.
- Moses, D. & Goldie, T. (Eds.) (1992). *An anthology of Canadian Native literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mutua, K. & Swadener, B. B. (2004). *Decolonizing research in cross-cultural settings: Critical personal narratives*. New York: SUNY Press.
- National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1982. Rationale, aims and objectives in Aboriginal education. In J. Sherwood (ed.), *Aboriginal education: Issues and innovations* (pp. 61 – 66). Creative Research, Perth.
- Ogbu, J. U. (1981). School ethnography: A multilevel approach. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 12, 3 – 29.
- Ogbu, J. U. (1982). Cultural discontinuity and schooling. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 13, 290 – 307.
- Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996). *Gathering strength. Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, vol. 3. Canada Communication Group.
- Roman, T. (Ed.) (1998). *Voices under one sky: Contemporary Native literature*. Scarborough, Ont.: Nelson Canada.

- Rubenstein, H. & Clifton, R. (2004). The challenge of Aboriginal education. *Fraser Forum*, June, pp. 24 – 25.
- Schissel & Wotherspoon. (2003). *The Legacy of School for Aboriginal Peoples: Education, Oppression, and Emancipation*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Silver, J., Mallet, K., with J. Greene & F. Simard (2002). *Aboriginal education in Winnipeg inner city high schools*. Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives.
- Smith, G. H. (2003). Indigenous struggle for the transformation of education and schooling. Keynote address to the Alaskan Federation of Natives Convention. Anchorage, Alaska. October, 2003.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- Smith, M. (2001). Relevant curricula and school knowledge: New horizons. In K. P. Binda, with S. Cailliou (Eds.), *Aboriginal education in Canada: A study in decolonization*. Mississauga, ON: Canadian Educators Press.
- Statistics Canada (1996). *Census of population questionnaire*. Canada Bureau of Statistics. Ottawa.
- Swartz, E. (1992). Emancipatory narratives: Rewriting the master script in the school curriculum. *Journal of Negro Education*, 61, 341 – 355.
- Thaman, K. H. (2003). Decolonizing Pacific studies: Indigenous perspectives, knowledge and wisdom in higher education. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 15, 1-17.
- Vogt, L. A., Jordan, C. & Tharp, R. G. (1987). Explaining school failure; producing school success: Two cases. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 18, 276 – 286.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1991). A sociocultural approach to socially shared cognition. In L. S. Resnick, J. M. Levine and S. D. Teasley (Eds.), *Perspectives on socially shared cognition* (pp. 85 – 100). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Winzer, M. & Mazurek, K. (1998). *Special education in multicultural contexts*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Zurawsky, C. (2004). Closing the gap: High achievements for students of color. *Research Points*, vol. 2, Issue 3, Fall 2004. Published by the American Educational Research Association (AERA).