

Prospective Teachers' Perceptions: A Critical Literacy Framework

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ABSTRACT: The education of Aboriginal youth is, in some respects, in crisis. Aboriginal communities in Ontario (Canada) are as a group currently experiencing marginalization within the education system. As such it is imperative that efforts be made to better understand the system to improve the success rate for Aboriginal youth. The *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007) has committed to “improve achievement among First Nation, Métis and Inuit students and to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students” (5). English and Language Arts teachers (K to 12) are compelled to consider how the policy discourse of the 2007 Aboriginal Policy Framework implicates upon the socio-political and socio-historical currency of literacy in their instruction. Consequently, this qualitative study examined one component of a large-scale project, in the tradition of grounded theory, including the implications of Aboriginal education policy discourse on literacy instruction as it applies to over 200 prospective teachers enrolled in a Teacher Education Program in Ontario, Canada. Participants identified two themes that they believed Aboriginal students would find most challenging, including: (i) tension with provincial curriculum and, (ii) feelings of misrepresentation.

KEYWORDS: Aboriginal students, critical literacy, education policy

1. Introduction

The education of Aboriginal youth is, in some respects, in crisis. Aboriginal communities in Ontario (Canada) are as a group currently experiencing marginalization within the education system. As such it is imperative that efforts be made to better understand the system to improve the success rate for Aboriginal youth (Cherubini 2010; 2014). The Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework (2007) has committed the Ministry to serving the needs of this quickly growing population. As identified in its Framework (2007), the Ministry of Education will work to “improve achievement among First Nation, Métis and Inuit students and to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students” (p.5). The policy Framework recognizes that Aboriginal epistemologies reflect traditional knowledges and values (Kavanagh 2005).

According to Aikenhead and Michell (2011), it is imperative that teachers demonstrate the ability to understand and incorporate learner-centered instruction in an Aboriginal context; in so doing, classroom teachers can include curriculum-related material that endorse and respect Aboriginal students’ community understanding over individual interest. There have been several educational reforms in Ontario focused specifically upon Aboriginal student engagement in public schools, particularly over the past thirty years. Yet, in many instances, Aboriginal students’ epistemic practices are not necessarily represented in the standardized provincial curriculum and their learning preferences and unique needs are generally not being addressed by the well-intentioned mainstream teachers in public schools.

For secondary school English and elementary school Language Arts teachers, it is particularly imperative to account for the Ministry of Education policy discourses related to Aboriginal education in Ontario in terms of the Aboriginal literature selected for their students and the pedagogical practice they employ to deliver the material. Significant to these considerations is the fact that Aboriginal content and literature have not held a prominent place in public school classrooms across Canada (Preston 2016). English and Language Arts teachers are compelled to consider how the policy discourse of the 2007 Aboriginal Policy Framework implicates upon the socio-political and socio-historical currency of literacy in their instruction. Literacy, in these terms, implies a more general understanding that recognizes the centrality of reading and writing, but also the other means that students perceive and make sense of information considering their circumstances and experiences.

Among those positioned to speak of Aboriginal students’ experiences in mainstream public schools are prospective teachers themselves who complete teaching-practicum

assignments in a variety of classrooms throughout their teacher education. Their collective interpretation and insight are often overlooked in the literature; in this instance, prospective teachers provided first their anticipated perceptions of the educational experiences of Aboriginal students and on perspectives related to critical literacy. The subsequent secondary phases of the same research study will focus on the same sample of study participants and examine their actual experiences in the classroom.

2. Methodology

This study examined the implications of Aboriginal education policy discourse on literacy instruction as it applies to over 200 prospective English and Language teachers enrolled in a Teacher Education Program in a mid-sized University located in southern Ontario, Canada. Participants were provided with a link to the consent form at the beginning of the electronic survey. They simply inferred their consent by agreeing to complete the questionnaire. Given that this was an anonymous questionnaire, participants' completion and return of this survey indicated their consent to participate and thus no further personally identifying details were required.

The qualitative data was subjected to a systematic coding process in the tradition of grounded theory (Charmaz 2000; Cherubini 2007). Each qualitative response was considered a textual whole and examined as an independent text at first. Key words and phrases were further distinguished into more elaborate observations (Strauss & Corbin 1990; 1998). The text of each response was read and coded by theme. Patterns and codes between themes and within responses were factored (Creswell 1998). Descriptors distinguished the specific properties of each theme and were subsequently grouped to formulate preliminary categories. Categories were compared, and the respective relationships between categories were examined. In line with the description of process from Glaser and Strauss (1967), constant comparison further compared codes and categories for commonalities. The categories were modified and reconceptualized throughout the data analysis.

3. Findings and discussion

The presentation discusses one component of the large-scale study (electronic survey) that was administered prior to participants' practice-teaching assignment; namely, prospective teachers' perceptions in the context of Aboriginal education policy and

teaching practice that have implications for the literacy engagement of Aboriginal students. Prospective teachers identified two key themes that they believed the Aboriginal students in their classroom would find most challenging, including: (i) tension with provincial curriculum and, (ii) feelings of marginalization and misrepresentation.

3.1. Tension with provincial curriculum

In respect to the first theme participants expressed concern that, as one individual stated, Aboriginal students will struggle with “standardized testing and classroom accommodations” because these are not necessarily epistemically aligned to these students’ learning styles. A different participant noted their concern that Aboriginal students “will be facing issues of trying to relate to a curriculum that is not built for all cultures.” In these instances, and in others, participants noted that the Aboriginal students in their classrooms may be frustrated with a provincial curriculum that is reflective of a Eurocentric focus. They cited, time and again, how the “contradictive narratives” of the social science, history, and English curriculum could in fact be a barrier to Aboriginal student engagement. One participant stated that they worried that the Aboriginal students in their primary and junior classrooms (grades one to three) would be challenged by “conforming to the Westernized curriculum.” This is certainly an intriguing insight since there seems to be an inherent assumption that for students to succeed and successfully adapt to educational practices and expectations, they in turn are expected to conform. This may imply that from this beginning teacher’s perspective, and in the reflections of several others, student success is not so much focused upon their personal and intellectual development but more so on their ability to conform to a set of expectations that may not necessarily be aligned to their epistemologies.

A different research study participant stated that “the Aboriginal students will have difficulties connecting to the activities taught in my placement classroom because the Ontario curriculum supports Westernized culture and values...the curriculum is very set in Western culture.” Here too the prospective teacher positions the curriculum as this rigid body of knowledge that will be relatively inaccessible to Aboriginal students (see also, Neeganagwedgin 2013). The research participants were especially concerned with creating a learning environment whereby Aboriginal students may “not see themselves within the classroom or curriculum and not know where to go for help.” Aboriginal students are believed to have competing interests with the provincial curriculum, and as a result, will have difficulty seeing themselves in the cultural and

social fabric of their classrooms and schools – a finding that has been previously identified in the research literature (Cherubini 2014).

Consistently throughout the data, prospective teacher participants indicated their anxiety with having to resolve the differences between the curriculum they will address in their classrooms and the epistemologies and worldviews of Aboriginal students. While they also cited their recognition of the significance of developing the critical thinking capacities of all students, they nonetheless distinguished the provincial curriculum as a genuine obstacle in the development of Aboriginal student consciousness. Another individual wrote, “Aboriginal students will be faced with the challenge of analyzing and relating to literary works describing post-colonial life.” The research participants perceive the curriculum, and the theoretical lens assumed to complement the knowledge, as adversely impacting upon Aboriginal students’ ability to interpret the literary frames of reference presented in provincially-funded public schools.

3.2 Feelings of marginalization and misrepresentation

In terms of the second theme, most prospective teachers cited, like this participant, that Aboriginal students will have “difficulty finding representation of themselves in the materials used in class (like novels) as well as those teaching them (the educators).” Prospective teachers shared their apprehension that the Aboriginal students in their classrooms would struggle with “dealing with histories and lessons that are heavily influenced by western colonialism and western discourse.” The prospective teacher participants were uneasy with the possibility that Aboriginal students “might lack a sense of identity in a classroom that is filled with non-Aboriginal students,” and as another participant wrote, “I believe that they [Aboriginal students] will find the stereotyping and erasure of their history...the most challenging.” The prospective teachers are apprehensive about delivering a pedagogy and curriculum that does not intersect with Aboriginal students’ sense of self, and moreover, with their feelings of belonging in mainstream classrooms (see also Milne 2016).

There is some indication across research study participants’ perceptions that they are uneasy about addressing issues related to misrepresentation with respect; however, one might also suggest that such a respect borders on caution. One participant stated that Aboriginal students will struggle, particularly in circumstances where they are the visible minority in the classroom, with “having their history overlooked in discussions or having it misrepresented and simplified in a way that makes them feel unwanted and unimportant...seeing their stories being told by those who are not connected

to Indigenous communities.” The prospective teachers sense the disconnect that the Aboriginal students may experience in public school classrooms that marginalize their worldviews, traditions and knowledge. Another participant identified the challenge for Aboriginal students to feel “a sense of community” in public schools since, as they stated, there is “a lack of representation of their culture and history” across school communities. For these reasons, and several others related to this theme, the prospective teacher participants expressed their views that “stereotyping can be a major concern” for Aboriginal students (see Vetter & Blimkie 2011). They noted that even in instances when their intentions as student-teachers are genuine, there is the fear that they will misrepresent Aboriginal knowledges, customs and traditions and, as a result, marginalize the Aboriginal learners in the classroom. In this case, several study participants stated that they will only contribute to “the discrimination [directed at Aboriginal students] from other students from different cultures.... Alienation by the classroom and the school because they have not properly integrated other teaching styles that accommodate Aboriginal students.”

4. Conclusions

The results of this initial phase of the study point to the fact that the prospective teacher participants understand the place and proximity of public education policy as it relates to teaching and learning, and just as noteworthy, are nervous about enacting their literacy practice in the context of the policy objectives.

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