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Examining Differing Notions of a “Real” Education Within Aboriginal Communities

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Abstract

On a recent visit to an on-reserve school in western Canada, the lead author of this paper, who is Aboriginal, was told that it was “not a real school,” a sentiment both authors have heard expressed by Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals alike. We unpack this conversational fragment to show how it is implicated in some of the most difficult challenges educators and policymakers face in enhancing the lives of Aboriginal peoples and communities. Guided by a hermeneutic sensibility and Indigenous conceptions of time, we present three possibilities of what it might mean for an on-reserve school to be deemed less than real and trace the historically rooted assumptions that inform these differing perspectives. We then draw on the insights of several indigenous scholars to reread key themes that emerged from this analysis with the hope that it might offer more productive and relational possibilities for discussing educational futures for Aboriginal peoples.



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On a recent visit to a reserve community in western Canada, I (Dustin) was interested to find a newly constructed school building that would seamlessly fit within the suburban neighbourhood of Calgary, where I currently live. The school stood out in contrast with the rest of the buildings in the economically struggling reserve. Inside the school were state-of-the-art classrooms, sparsely attended by a handful of students. I could see that the staff and the administration of the school were passionate about the students' education; however, with only a few students attending class regularly, they were having difficulty developing the educational environment they had envisioned for the school. Over the next few days I had the opportunity to talk to a number of students and teachers. During these conversations I heard a phrase repeated several times: "This is not a real school." This statement has since stuck in my mind. As an Aboriginal man, PhD candidate, and educator, who has grown up around First Nations reserves until I left for university at the age of 18, and who has since gone on to work with many First Nations communities across western Canada, this is not the first time I have heard an on-reserve school described in this way. When I have visited other First Nation communities I have similarly heard various Aboriginal community members and, in particular students, describe the on-reserve school as not "real."

I (David), a white Anglo-Canadian, have also heard the sentiment expressed, particularly when I began my teaching career in a high school in a small town in the interior of British Columbia. In light of what seems a not uncommon perception that some on-reserve schools are seen as less than real, what we aim to do in this paper is show how this belief is implicated in some of the most difficult challenges policy makers and educators face in realizing a vision of education that can enhance the lives of Aboriginal peoples and communities in contemporary times. In doing this, our paper has three primary aims. First, we want to offer three interpretive possibilities for what it might mean for an on-reserve school to be deemed less than real. Specifically, in the first section we suggest that some Aboriginal youth may themselves not feel like "real" students due in large part to the historical legacies of the residential school system. From the vantage point of this historical context, in sections two and three we explore how contemporary policy debates in Canada around the future of education in on-reserve schools largely reflects two competing visions of what constitutes a real education for Aboriginal students. The first vision can be seen in the federal government's recent tabling of Bill C-33: The First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act (Parliament of Canada, 2014) that would have increased spending for band-run schools if they agreed to various external accountability measures including better aligning their programs with provincial systems of education (Barrera, 2014). However, this vision for educational reform runs counter to demands by many Aboriginal leaders to place sole jurisdiction over education in the hands of Aboriginal communities and parents so that these schools can offer more "culturally and linguistically appropriate teaching and learning environments" (Assembly of First Nations [AFN], 2013, p. 6).

Noting that Bill C-33 was never passed due to widespread opposition from many leaders in the Aboriginal community, the second aim of this paper is to bring a greater level of historical consciousness to contemporary debates about educational reform in Aboriginal communities. To do this, throughout this paper we trace the historically rooted assumptions and conditions that make it possible for anyone to make a claim about what constitutes a real education for Aboriginal students. In undertaking this work we are informed by both hermeneutic sensibilities (Caputo, 1987; Friesen & Jardine, 2009; Smith, 2006), as well as indigenous conceptions of time (Donald, 2012; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996a). These sensibilities attune us to the ways "in which the past occurs simultaneously in the present, and deeply

influences how we imagine the future” (Donald, 2012, p. 38). The need to bring a greater historical consciousness to discussions around contemporary issues, is additionally affirmed by Smith (2006):

To think about the future, it is best to work backwards, tracing trajectories to the present moment, carefully working out the lineages that brought current conditions into being. Only then can thoughts of “what is to be done” be meaningful. (p. 83)

Guided by these insights, in the discussion section we explore how indigenous wisdom traditions and worldviews could offer new, more productive possibilities for thinking about the future of education for Aboriginal communities and peoples. However, in offering new possibilities for guiding dialogue and policy reform, we are not interested in adopting a problem/solution mindset. Rather than proposing simplistic solutions, we seek to “restore the original difficulty of life” (Caputo, 1987, p. 92) by moving into the inherent tensions and complexities that exist in relation to education in Aboriginal communities. As Donald (2011) has written, it is “by remaining amidst, and engaging the messiness and difficulties of a situation or context that creates opportunities, for new knowledge and understanding to arise” (p. 120).

Historical Context

One way we interpret why Aboriginal students attending an on-reserve school would see their school as not real is that they have difficulty seeing themselves as real students. This sentiment reflects a wider experience many Aboriginal people have had with education where, according to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), “rather than nurturing the individual, the school experience typically erodes identity and self-worth” (1996b, p. 405). For multiple generations Aboriginal people have been bombarded with negative stereotypical images of their culture (Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2001), while being subjected to systemic racism (Miller, 1996). As reflected in the reality that Aboriginal students are placed in non-academic streams at a far higher rate than non-Aboriginal students (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013), we believe that some Aboriginal students have internalized these negative stereotypes in ways that may cause them to view a school full of Aboriginal students as less real or valid than one attended by primarily non-Aboriginal students.

These realities have contributed to a contemporary situation where many Aboriginal students are struggling within formal school settings, both on and off reserve. One of the most telling statistics in this regard are graduation rates. A 2013 study by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), for example, found that only 39 percent of First Nations people 20–24 years old had completed high school, while their non-First Nations counterparts had graduated at a rate of 87 percent. Studies have additionally found significant disparities in academic achievement levels between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students in British Columbia for instance, make up more than 38 percent of the students in lower academic alternative programs in provincially run schools, while only composing 11 percent of the overall student body (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 7). For students attending on-reserve schools, although it is difficult to find statistics, lack of attendance continues to be cited as one of the most significant reasons why Aboriginal students are failing to succeed and continue on in their studies (Bell et al., 2004; MacIvor, 1995).

To gain an appreciation of why so many Aboriginal students do not regularly attend school, are struggling academically, and may have difficulty seeing themselves as real students, it is necessary to understand the experiences Aboriginal peoples and communities have historically had with formal schooling. As outlined in the Royal Commission for Aboriginal Peoples (1996a) *Looking Forward, Looking Back*, during the 1870s, when many Aboriginal communities were at their most vulnerable, diminished as they were from disease and often starving, various national communities, including the Plains Cree and the Blackfoot Confederacy, negotiated and signed the numbered treaties with the Crown. As part of these treaty negotiations, Aboriginal leaders sought to ensure that provisions for education were included, which resulted in the federal government agreeing to take over responsibility for education in Aboriginal communities. Initially, many Aboriginal leaders were thus willing participants in assisting the government's efforts to establish schools on the lands reserved for their use (RCAP, 1996a, p. 134). This reality speaks to the importance leaders in Aboriginal communities placed on education as a tool for helping their people adjust to the new economic and political realities their nations were facing.

Despite these agreements, the idea that there could be a creative engagement between these two cultures, where they could learn from each other in balanced ways, never occurred to government agents, nor the majority of the new settlers arriving in Canada in increasing numbers from the early 1800s on. Instead, based on the assumption that Aboriginal cultures and traditions were inferior and unequal to European cultures and belief systems, the Canadian government soon sought to impose an educational policy that could most effectively assimilate Aboriginal peoples into the dominant Anglo-Euro society (Gereluk & Scott, 2014). To achieve this goal the government introduced the Indian Act, which provided the legal basis to forcibly remove Aboriginal children from their families and communities and place them in mainly Protestant- and Catholic-run industrial schools (later called residential schools; Miller, 1996). Speaking in the House of Commons in 1883, the father of Confederation, John A. MacDonald, explained the need for residential schools:

When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with his parents who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. (as quoted in Saul, 2014, p. 12)

As has been well documented in the literature, prohibited from speaking their maternal languages or practicing their traditional cultural teachings, children in these schools were harshly disciplined, often insufficiently fed, clothed and housed; and moreover, fell victim to various forms of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse (Miller, 1996). When children came home from these schools, those who “were not openly alienated and ashamed of their heritage, experienced great difficulty in re-adjusting to life among their own people” (Grant, 1996, p. 84). By 1920, attendance at residential schools was compulsory for all Aboriginal children. When the last school was closed in 1996, it is estimated that as many as 150,000 Aboriginal children went through the residential school system (Miller, 1996).

The legacy of the residential school systems continues to live in powerful ways within the lives of many Aboriginal peoples and their communities (Fontaine, 2010; Regan, 2010). One of the most negative legacies concerns how it severed the transmission of culture and language from one generation to the next. As a result, many young Aboriginal people today do not know how to speak their ancestral language and lack a firm grounding in the traditional teachings of

the community (Battiste, 2000). In addition, because many Aboriginal people have historically had such negative experiences with formal institutions of education, as I have seen in my own community, some parents have learned to see little value in attending and succeeding in school and have passed on these attitudes to their children (Kirkness, 2013). This view has been reinforced by the experience of many Aboriginal youth within formal systems of education who often speak about the racism they experience, as well as the ways Aboriginal values and perspectives are largely non-existent in the curriculum and life of these schools (AFN, 2013; RCAP, 1996b).

Over the last 25 years, Aboriginal communities have gained some of the tools to counter these trends through greater autonomy in the administration of education for Aboriginal students who live on reserves. Many reserves now have their own schools that are controlled by an Aboriginal administration, which, in most cases, means the band council runs the school. As a result, band-run schools have been able to hire more Aboriginal teachers and staff—often from within the community—and introduce language classes and some curricular initiatives that reflect the culture and traditions of their nation. Given these changes, as outlined in the Indian Act, on-reserve schools continue to exist under the sole authority of the federal government who only provides 75 percent of the per student funding given to provincially run schools (Bell et al., 2004). These realities may help explain why the majority of youth who attend on-reserve schools do not graduate, or leave school with the knowledge and skills needed to secure meaningful employment (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013; Richards, 2008; RCAP, 1996b).

Bill C-33

The notion that on-reserve schools are not “real” schools was something I (David) heard often when I began my teaching career in a high school in a small town in the interior of British Columbia. When Aboriginal students who had attended on-reserve schools until grade 8 or 9 came to my classroom, I assumed that they had not received the same quality of education as the students in town and that many students would therefore need to be placed on a modified program, as well as require added assistance and resource support. On the surface, the designation of an on-reserve school as not “real” may thus speak to a perception that some on-reserve schools do not maintain the same level of academic standards in comparison to their off-reserve counterparts in terms of, for example, homework expectations and the number and the rigour of assignments that students must complete. It may also point to a lack of attendance common to many schools on reserves (particularly once students reach the high school level), which, in addition to diminished levels of funding, means that these schools are often unable to offer the diversity of courses that exist in provincially funded schools.

Over the last decade, the perceived failings of on-reserve schools to increase graduation rates among Aboriginal youth and provide students with the necessary skills and knowledge to enter into the Canadian workforce caused the Stephen Harper–led Conservative government to make the reform of federally funded on-reserve schools a policy priority. The need for immediate action has additionally stemmed from the realization that over the next 15 years, an estimated 400,000 Aboriginal youth are projected to enter the labour market (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2014). One can read into the way this statistic is repeated in many federal policy documents, a fear of the profoundly negative sociopolitical ramifications that would follow if a large demographic of young adults are not able to become self-sustaining members of the Canadian economy. Tied to this realization, pressure for reform has come from

Aboriginal communities and leaders who argue that a better future for Aboriginal cannot be realized when band-run schools are expected to operate on a budget that is 25 percent lower than provincially run schools (Bell et al., 2004).

As a result, with the support of Shawn Atleo, the AFN National Chief, in May 2014 the Conservative government tabled Bill C-33: The First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act (Parliament of Canada, 2014). At the time, Bernard Valcourt, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development who introduced the bill in the House of Commons, stated that the act will “help First Nations access the skills they need to live healthy and successful lives. This is good for First Nations, for Canadians, and the country’s future” (“Bill C-33, First Nations Control,” 2014, para. 12). Within this proposed framework, all First Nations bands would gain the right to establish elementary and secondary schools within reserve land and receive increased and stable levels of funding from the federal government that would increase annually at a rate of 4.5% per year (Parliament of Canada, 2014). Valcourt stated that once the bill was passed, First Nations schools would receive an estimated \$1.9 billion in new funding starting in the 2015 calendar year (Barrera, 2014).

However, in order to receive this funding, First Nations schools would need to ensure that children “have access to elementary and secondary education that allows them to obtain a recognized high school diploma and to move between education systems without impediment” (Parliament of Canada, 2014, para. 7). To achieve this end, on-reserve schools would be required to adopt parallel testing and academic accreditation requirements mandated by the provincial jurisdiction in which they are situated, and moreover, hire only provincially certified teachers. In addition, this policy framework would put structures and appropriate financial penalties in place to ensure minimum attendance requirements. To ensure that on-reserve schools lived up to their responsibilities, Bill C-33 called for the creation of a Joint Council of Education Professionals, comprised of experts in education who would “advise the Minister, councils of First Nations and First Nation Education Authorities on any matter relating to the application of this Act” (Parliament of Canada, 2014, section 11.1). This framework reflects the thinking of policy leaders such as Richards (2008), who have pointed out the limitations of current educational structures on reserves where authority over education has largely been in the hands of the band council. Citing the difficulties band councils have had in improving education on reserves due to the fact that they are often run by people with little expertise in the area of education, Richards has argued that “reserve-based Aboriginal leadership has not placed education achievement high among its priorities” (2008, p. 116).

Within a particular interpretive framework, the Harper-led drive to make on-reserve schools more like provincially run schools through the introduction of accountability measures that would increase educational standards seems like common sense. However, the limitations of the interpretive lens can be seen through better appreciating the origins of modern schooling practices, which are deeply implicated in attempts to forge a unitary, homogenous nation-state (Gereluk & Scott, 2014). Within this European-inspired model of nation building, one dominant national group uses its power over the state as a means to assimilate peoples deemed “other” into its own language, culture, and, in some cases, religion (Kymlicka, 2007, pp. 62–63). In relation to the Canadian context, within provincial jurisdictions of education outside of Quebec, elite descendants of settlers from the British Isles (e.g., England, Scotland, Ireland) have used their control over public education as a means to eradicate the unique languages and cultures of “minoritized” peoples—including immigrants peoples—so as to assimilate them into the

dominant Anglo-Canadian culture and English language. Seen in this light, the residential school system can thus be seen as a more virulent and brutal manifestation of educational aims that have historically guided public systems of education in Canada more generally.

While assimilation has guided the educational aims of public education, instructional practices in schools have been organized around the logics of an empiricist scientific worldview that parallels the rise of the efficiency movement in the early part of the 20th century. As Friesen and Jardine (2009) outlined, in order to prepare young people to take their place in industrial enterprises or within highly stratified bureaucratic organizations, policy elites in Canada at this time created an education system that emphasized obedience and compliance. Drawing inspiration from the factory room floor, curriculum became conceptualized as a mass production line delivering "those not-further-divisible 'bits' out of which any knowledge was assembled" (Friesen & Jardine, 2009, p. 12). Specifically, as Friesen and Jardine have outlined, within this matrix of understanding, learning was conceived as a linear process of either getting a prescribed body of externalized content into the students' heads, or breaking down any complex task into its basic parts and sequencing these in a way that could be easily assimilated into the mind of the learner. To ensure maximum efficiency, students needed to be under the constant surveillance of the teacher who ensured that they were all facing the same direction, focussed on the same subject matter, at the same time (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 162). It was unnecessary for students and teachers to be thoughtfully engaged in either the teaching or the learning that was occurring in the classroom; in fact doing so was discouraged, as this would only slow down the perpetual and relentless need to move on to the next set of isolated and fragmented learning outcomes (Friesen & Jardine, 2009, p. 11).

Promoting Culturally Authentic Forms of Curriculum and Pedagogy

During my schooling years, I (Dustin) attended off-reserve schools in northern British Columbia, where the institutional criteria for success in education was strictly related to an ability to achieve high marks and become an attractive candidate for post-secondary education. However, the education I experienced in the schools I attended had little relationship to my identity as Carrier man (my First Nation). While Aboriginal knowledge was not openly derided in this educational environment, it certainly was not valued or recognized. The absence of experiences fundamental to my Carrier identity, like attending potlatches, the expectation of generosity, or the elevated position of my great-grandmother in our matriarchal community, reflect how Aboriginal traditions, perspectives, and ways of knowing are rarely recognized within most formal educational settings. Throughout my professional life, I have been fortunate to spend a great deal of time with educators who have dedicated their lives to reimagining educational systems that support Aboriginal youth. From these experiences it has become clear that non-Aboriginal policy makers, academics, administrators, and teachers need to re-examine what a real education may mean to Aboriginal communities, who may base their priorities in education on an entirely separate set of assumptions than those found in non-Aboriginal communities.

This differing value system in terms of how a real education should be defined for Aboriginal students on reserves can be seen in how the introduction of Bill C-33 played out in the popular arena. Although Shawn Atleo, former national chief of the AFN, claimed to have the backing of many of the chiefs when he supported Bill C-33, once the details of the bill were known, both his position in supporting the bill and its policy framework came under widespread

opposition from many leaders in the Aboriginal community. The activist and Indigenous law professor Palmater (2014), for example, argued that Bill C-33 had gone ahead without proper consultation from Aboriginal communities and, moreover, “increased ministerial control over education in very paternalistic ways (including co-managers and third-party managers of education); it did not guarantee specific levels of funding; and English and French were made the languages of instruction” (p. 1). Soon after the bill was tabled, Atleo abruptly announced that he was stepping down as national chief as a result of sustained opposition (Kennedy, 2014). The federal government has said it will not attempt to pass Bill C-33 into law until it has the support of the AFN.

One can see in the opposition to Bill C-33 the mistrust many Aboriginal people have towards the federal government’s efforts to reform education on reserves due to the role education historically played in attempting to systematically dismantle and eradicate Aboriginal cultures, languages, and ways of knowing by forcibly separating children from their families and traditions (Miller, 1996). Thus one of the central demands of Aboriginal leaders, as noted in Palmater’s (2014) critique of Bill C-33, is to place control over education for Aboriginal students on-reserves in the hands of Aboriginal organizations, communities, and parents. This distrust of the federal government’s ability to act in the best interest of Aboriginal communities is well founded in the literature where scholars have pointed to the ways not only residential schools, but modern schooling practices in general, have silenced and repressed traditional Indigenous ways of teaching, knowing, and being that grew out of thousands of years of observation and participatory relationships with the natural world and territories in which particular Aboriginal communities live (Bowers, 2007).

To better appreciate the nature of traditional Aboriginal approaches to teaching and learning, and the unique ways of knowing that grew out of these communities, it is not possible to articulate one universal Aboriginal perspective. However, it is possible to outline some broad principles common to most Aboriginal communities and traditions. As many Indigenous educators have argued, Aboriginal approaches to education first and foremost seek to promote a process of intergenerational renewal, where the sacred traditions of the community are passed on to the young (Bastien & Kremer, 2004; Neegan, 2005). In contrast to Western models of education that tend to focus primarily on cognitive development, Aboriginal approaches to education are, moreover, more holistic in that they seek to address the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical development of the child (Neegan, 2005; RCAP, 1996b). As Hodgson-Smith (2000) argued, traditional Aboriginal ways of teaching also tend to emphasize the collective rather than the individual, where the young are encouraged to avoid basing their motivations on ego or personal achievement, and instead strive for what was best for their family, kin, and community, along with the more-than-human world. This way of being in the world reflects an ethic of reciprocity, as well as a view of knowledge that emphasizes appreciating one’s position within webs of relationships (Davis et al., 2008, p. 12).

Much of the opposition to Bill C-33 can be seen as a rejection of the idea that on-reserve schools should simply become facsimiles of mainstream institutions of education that would make it impossible to pass on these unique indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world, as well as particular national languages, to the next generation of Aboriginal children and youth. This is not to say that Aboriginal leaders argue that schools should not prepare young people to take their place in the wider Canadian society, economy, or systems of education. However, it does suggest that

schools serving the needs of Aboriginal learners have far more complex roles than those serving the mainstream student population . . . [and] must recognize and validate the student's own world-view while introducing her/him to the linear way of thinking and knowing that comprises Canadian education. (Bell et al., 2004, p. 29)

This statement suggests that, along with preparing the young for life in the greater Canadian society, on-reserve schools must also foster linguistically and culturally competent children and youth who can assume the responsibilities of their nations (AFN, 2013; RCAP, 1996b). As part of this process scholars have worked to identify and enact more culturally relevant or culturally authentic forms of curriculum and pedagogy for Aboriginal students (Ball, 2004; Battiste, 2000, 2013; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). In this regard, Battiste (2000), for example, wrote that there is a need to "develop a cooperative and dignified strategy that will invigorate Indigenous languages, culture, knowledge, and vision in academic structures" (p. xxi).

Discussion

As we write this article, the federal government and the AFN have come to an impasse over the future of education within Aboriginal communities. To many casual Canadian viewers and some of the mainstream media, this impasse reflected another example of Aboriginal intransigence where Aboriginal leaders wanted condition free money from the government without committing to reforms and accountability measures that would address the shortcomings of an educational system that is clearly failing First Nation students (see, for example, Ivison, 2014). As we outlined in the second section of this article, this need for universal standards and external accountability measures is rooted in an empiricist scientific worldview that possesses deeply assimilatory aims.

In order to counter the tendency of many policy makers, as well as the general Canadian public, to see issues in education exclusively through an ahistorical empiricist scientific interpretive lens that is deeply problematic for Aboriginal communities and peoples, in what follows we want to "reread" ideas developed in this article through the lens of indigenous wisdom traditions and worldviews. We believe indigenous notions of time (Donald, 2014; RCAP, 1996a), ways of apprehending reality (Ermine, 1995; Little Bear, 2011), and approaches to education (AFN, 2013; Battiste, 2013; Ottmann, 2009), as well as Donald's (2012) notion of "ethical relationality" (pp. 44–45) that draws insights from Blackfoot and Plains Cree elders, in particular, offer new pathways for thinking about education in Aboriginal communities. However, in line with these sensibilities, we do not wish to adopt a problem–solution mindset that involves reductive answers to what are extremely complex, multifaceted, and historically rooted problems. Rather, we wish to show how honouring the organic continuity of indigenous worldviews and traditions, in line with the thinking of Donald (2012), can create the conditions by which more productive discussions of shared educational futures can occur.

Indigenous Notions of Time

As reflected in RCAP's (1996a) report, many Aboriginal philosophies possess curricular and cyclic notions of time where the past, present and future are intimately connected, and even amalgamated. If government policy makers, educators, and the greater Canadian public could appreciate this understanding of time more deeply, they would be better positioned to see

contemporary issues as inextricably tied to the past. In this way they would avoid the not uncommon sentiment expressed in relation to the experiences of Aboriginal peoples within the residential school system, to simply “get over it” (Donald, 2014). As Donald (2012) wrote, “The conceptual linking of past, present, and future as intimately interdependent provides an ethical standpoint from which to see more clearly how any theory of the present state of affairs involves a confluence of past and future” (p. 40).

To understand how historical experiences shape contemporary perspectives on education within Aboriginal communities, residential schools can be seen as a fulcrum balancing the past and present. If you were to consider the thriving Aboriginal models of education prior to contact (Ermine, 1995; Miller, 1996), and compare it to the state of contemporary Aboriginal education (Bell et al., 2004; Statistics Canada, 2011) it only makes sense when you consider the residential school era dramatically shifting the aims of education. As outlined in the third section of this article, traditional Aboriginal education placed an emphasis on child-centred, community-based, holistic education (Neegan, 2005; RCAP, 1996b), which resulted in social systems that fostered flourishing communities (Little Bear, 2011). Removing Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education through the residential schools system shifted dominion of educational aims to a paternalistic state that intentionally sabotaged the community building aspects of traditional education involving processes of intergenerational cultural and linguistic renewal (Bastien & Kremer, 2004; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

Despite genuine efforts to atone for the residential school era, beginning with Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s historic apology in the House of Commons (Government of Canada, Office of the Prime Minister, 2008) and followed by the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the imposed educational guidelines and a lack of meaningful consultation that were apparent in Bill-C33 make it clear that federal policy makers do not understand the continued reverberations of residential schools in current educational processes. The mistake of the Harper government in relation to his historic apology was to solely focus on the deplorable behaviour within residential schools, and overlook the paternalistic relationship that made the creation of this institution possible. Understanding the worldview and colonial relationships that made the residential school system possible means creating new relationships and processes of collaboration that refuse to revert to a culture of imposition.

For these new relationships to be forged, there is a need to understand the ways the institution of residential schools involved a deep betrayal of nation-to-nation treaty agreements that were negotiated by Aboriginal communities, particularly on the plains, in good faith. While the Canadian government continues to see these treaties as primarily real estate agreements so that the lands of Aboriginal peoples could be freed for settlement and resource development, “from the Aboriginal perspective, however, the process was broader, more akin to the establishment of enduring nation-to-nation links, whereby both nations agreed to share the land and work together to maintain peaceful and respectful relations” (RCAP, 1996a, p. 133). Viewed in this light, the attempt by the federal government to shift responsibility for education to the provinces can be seen as an indirect way of undermining Canada’s historically rooted treaty obligations (Saul, 2014, p. 24). After a century of government interference and forced assimilation, having outside agents once again tell Aboriginal people what was best for them was too much to bear. For many leaders and Aboriginal people contemporary problems reflect the consequences of other people doing what was best for Aboriginal people. The only way these

problems can be solved is if Aboriginal peoples once again take control over their own affairs in ways that would not be possible as outlined in Bill C-33.

Contested Epistemologies

Another lens that is helpful to foster the conditions by which more productive discussions of shared educational futures can occur involves the work of Ermine (1995) and Little Bear (2011). According to these indigenous scholars, for someone to appreciate their position within webs of relationships, traditional Aboriginal epistemologies viewed relational experiences with the surrounding world in an inside-out manner, attempting to understand their own subjectivity in which to view an ever-changing world. Ermine (1995) has argued that Western knowledge traditions promote “the acquisition and synthesis of total human knowledge within a worldview that seeks to understand the outer space objectively” (p. 102). This discrepancy in worldviews can be broken down to traditional Aboriginal epistemology understanding and exploring the subjective human experience, while the Western epistemological structures are attempting to rid knowledge basis of subjectivity, in an attempt to find objective truth. Despite Aboriginal epistemologies being identified as traditional, it can be argued that contemporary Aboriginal cultures continue to value subjective truth (Doige, 2003), while living within a society that imposes objective educational frameworks (Battiste, 2013).

The identification by Aboriginal people of on-reserve schools not being real may reflect the application of imposed objective criteria that fits within Western models of knowing. In this vein, Ermine (1995) has argued that “the ‘fragmentary self-world view’ that permeates the Western world is detrimental to Aboriginal epistemology. The Western education system that our children are subjected to promote the dogma of fragmentation and indelibly harm the capacity for holism” (p. 111). The fractured ways of knowing that emerged from the residential school system (Little Bear, 2000) can be blamed for contemporary Aboriginal people evaluating their own place within educational institutions through a lens that can be incongruent to their subjective experiences.

The need for different lenses by which new educational possibilities can be forged becomes clear when one examines the ways contemporary schooling practices, which emerged in the early part of the 20th century, are having a profoundly negative impact on student engagement, not just among Aboriginal students—but for all students. This can be seen in both levels of student engagement and rates of attendance within provincial systems of education in Canada. In a major study surveying over 32,322 students in schools across Canada, Willms, Friesen, and Milton (2009) found that poor levels of “intellectual engagement” (p. 17) is a pervasive problem in all provinces, particularly at the high school level. For example, in language arts and math, intellectual engagement levels for Canadian students drops from an average of close to 60 percent in the elementary school years to below 37 percent at the high school level (Willms et al., 2009, p. 17). This study additionally found that attendance levels for Canadian students drops from an average of close to ninety percent in grade six, to just above 40 percent in grade twelve (Willms et al., 2009, p. 17). These statistics demonstrate that disengagement in school and lack of attendance is not merely an on-reserve school problem; it is a problem, particularly at the high school level, with a way of organizing schooling that “has simply worn out” (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2008, p. 14). Consequently, despite the assumption of Bill C-33 that the primary answer to the perceived deficiencies of on-reserve schools is to make them more like provincially run schools, the model of education ubiquitous in

provincially funded schools are clearly ill equipped to provide the kind of vivifying environment needed to encourage more Aboriginal students to attend school and continue on in their studies.

However, before moving immediately to processes of education grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and educating as a panacea to this problem, it is important to highlight that these processes, too, if taken up in the wrong ways, could become externalized and distant from the subjective experience of Aboriginal students. In this regard, some Indigenous scholars believe that it is unproductive to identify potentially universalized notions of indigeneity to be passed on to young people without attending to the unique cultural and contextual particularities of a particular Aboriginal community in which a school is imbedded (Donald, Glanfield, & Sterenburg, 2012). One of the main arguments in this regard is that culturally authentic approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, especially if in the hands of teachers from outside of an Aboriginal community, can result in a reduction of Aboriginal culture to “essentializations, meaningless generalizations, or trivial anecdotes” (Donald et al., 2012, p. 66). This argument points to the challenges educators teaching in both on-reserve and off-reserve schools, who are often non-Aboriginal, have had in presenting Aboriginal cultures and ways of knowing as something more complex and meaningful than “food, festivals, tipis, and legends” (Donald et al., 2012, p. 67).

Moreover, as St. Denis (2004), a Cree/Métis scholar, has argued, codifying externalized and universal notions of Indigeneity can lead to a deficiency discourse where an ideal is created that many Aboriginal youth may have difficulty realizing. St. Denis wrote: “Adherence to cultural revitalization encourages the valorization of cultural authenticity and cultural purity among Aboriginal people and has helped to produce the notion and the structure of a cultural hierarchy” (2004, p. 37). Because many Aboriginal youth do not speak their ancestral language or have a full grasp of the depth of their cultural traditions they can become to feel culturally inadequate because they are unable to demonstrate an ability to practice their culture or speak their ancestral language in authentic ways (Donald et al., 2012). This is ironic on several levels. While culturally authentic forms of curriculum and pedagogy seek to ameliorate the effects of the residential school system that made Aboriginal people feel inadequate and in some cases less than human, it can, if taken up without responding to the unique contexts and subjectivities of the students, equally foster another form of inadequacy for youth who fall outside of an externalized ideal of what is considered culturally authentic.

A Call for a New Ethical Relationality

These issues pose a fundamental question concerning how contemporary ways of envisioning and organizing education can ensure the organic continuity of Indigenous worldviews and cultural identities (Donald, 2012, p. 45), while also simultaneously attending to the reality that the profoundly destructive legacies of the residential school system continues to be interwoven into the personal, familial, and social histories of Aboriginal peoples and communities (Davis et al., 2008, p. 186). This question additionally points to one posed by Donald (2012) concerning how colonial relationships could be “decolonized, transformed, and thus, renewed?” (p. 44).

For us, Donald’s (2012) vision of “ethical relationality” (pp. 44–45) provides one of the most compelling responses to these questions. Drawing on Ermine’s (2007) notion of “ethical space,” (p. 195) as well as insights from Blackfoot and Cree elders, Donald’s (2012) notion of ethical relationality involves an “ecological understanding of human relationality that does not

deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and position us in relation to each other" (p. 45). In this way, Donald (2012) sees ethical relationality as a meeting place where it becomes possible to step out of our old allegiances towards the creation of relationships that can ensure the continuity of indigenous worldviews and ways of being in the world. To accomplish this, Donald (2012) has argued that Canadians need to abandon the common belief that Aboriginal peoples and Canadians live in separate realities and that relationships with Aboriginal people must involve their "benevolent incorporation into Canadian nationality and citizenship" (p. 45). As opposed to this model, he has called for new kinds of Canadian–Aboriginal relationships focussed on relational repair and renewal towards enhanced levels of mutual understanding. Donald (2012) wrote that a "sustained attentiveness to Aboriginal-Canadian relations and willingness to hold differing philosophies and worldviews in tension creates the possibility for more meaningful talk on shared educational interests and initiatives" (p. 45). As can be seen, rather than seeing difference as a problem to be solved, Donald (2012) has construed difference as the source of new forms of creativity.

However, in light of this possibility, the question then becomes what such an engagement would look like? How can Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators work together in more ethical ways? How can differing worldviews be held in tension in ways that provides sources for more creative and life giving forms of curriculum and pedagogy? We believe that one response to these questions can be found in a recent Nitsitapiisini Stories and Spaces: Exploring Kainai Plants and Culture project (Friesen, Jardine, & Gladstone, 2010) involving a collaborative effort among a Kainai First Nation elementary school teacher, the Galileo Educational Network at the University of Calgary, and elders on the Blood Reserve in southern Alberta. The teacher who took part in designing this project was specifically interested in connecting learning outcomes from the grade four Alberta science program, requiring students to "demonstrate knowledge and skills for the study, interpretation, propagation and enhancement of plant growth" (as quoted in Friesen et al., 2010, p. 181) with the desire of Kainai elders in the community to pass on traditional knowledge of local plants to the younger generation. To do this, elders led the grade four students through their traditional territory, explaining the various plants, their multiple purposes, the stories associated with these plants, and processes for harvesting them. As part of the project students used digital cameras to document the plants and also created a digitized book that included pieces of artwork documenting what they had learned. Rather than taking up the study of plants in the classroom, "as if they had they had no place on earth" (Kainai elder, as quoted in Friesen et al., 2010, p. 183), this inquiry created a means to renew traditional knowledge by weaving "strong threads of connection: a web of children, Elders, plants, landscape and the stories that bind them together" (Friesen et al., 2010, p. 183).

The Stories and Spaces project provides a model for an approach to curriculum and pedagogy that could help us re-envision what might constitute a real education for Aboriginal students attending an on-reserve school. In light of the critique of contemporary forms of schooling, within this rich inquiry knowledge was not treated as isolated, fragmented, or inert. Instead the subject of plants was treated as a "living place, a living field of relations" (Jardine et al., 2008, p. xi). Noting that Aboriginal ways of knowing are rooted in a relational understanding of the world, through understanding knowledge in this way, an opening was created where meaningful connections were made among elders, traditional knowledge, the students, and the unique ecology of the traditional territory in which the learning took place. Importantly, the project reflected traditional Aboriginal approaches to education rooted in intergenerational renewal of traditional knowledge in a way that met the learning expectations of the provincial

curriculum. Because the project involved a collaborative effort among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and organizations, it additionally reflected the kinds of partnerships originally envisioned by the leaders of the Blackfoot Confederacy and other national communities who signed Treaty 7, where this inquiry was undertaken.

Conclusion

While it is not in the space of this paper to explore the many other models and possibilities that exist in relation to the questions we have raised here, we believe that the Nitsitapiisini Stories and Spaces inquiry brought together many of the themes that we sought to address in this paper. One of the reasons we gravitated to this project as a possible model for renewing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadian relations, while also ensuring the continuance of Indigenous ways of knowing and educating, is that it seems to overcome some of the either/or binary ways of thinking that have come to, at times, dominate discussions about the future of education in Aboriginal communities. However, as we continue to reiterate, in proposing viable ways forward, we are continually attuned to the inherent challenges, tensions, and ongoing complexities that exist in relation to education in Aboriginal communities. Conversations informed by Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world can lead us to new more productive forms of dialogue regarding what constitutes a real school in Aboriginal communities, but with the expectation that these conversations will be held upon unstable ground, continually shifting beneath our feet. In this light, what must be first in our minds are new, more historically minded and ethical relationships among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The need for this rests on the reality that, as Kainai elder Andy Blackwater said, the first peoples and the newcomers all “live together in the same place and their tipis are held down by the same peg. Neither is going anywhere” (as quoted in Chambers & Blood, 2012, p. 50).¹

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