"Taking Haig-Brown Seriously": Implications of Indigenous Thought on Ontario Educators

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> Indigenous thought has the potential to reframe and decentre, in intellectually productive and practical ways, conventional scholarship about most things including Canadian curriculum studies. (Haig-Brown, 2008, p. 13)

Celia Haig-Brown's (2008) paper in the most recent issue of the *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, "Taking Indigenous Thought Seriously: A Rant on Globalization with Some Cautionary Notes," offers an intriguing and thoughtful discussion on her experiences of profound learning and teaching with scholars of Indigenous thought. As a self-declared Euro-American white woman with a wealth of experiences working with Aboriginal peoples, Haig-Brown explores how Indigenous Knowledge complements her understandings of the inter-relatedness of peoples and place that honours a holistic interpretation of Indigenous thought. She also elaborates upon how it conflicts with the more mainstream and reductionist tendencies that compartmentalize understanding. Haig-

Brown does not shy away from discussing the various philosophical implications associated with curriculum studies that engage both of these epistemic paradigms. She suggests that scholars need to account for the diversity that Indigenous Knowledge represents, and recognize it in light of its common background to curriculum studies. According to Haig-Brown, this would lend a sense of intellectual cohesion to curriculum studies scholarship and distinguish interpretations of Indigenous Knowledge that are currently relegated to the academic margins. Haig-Brown's paper is more than what she describes in her title as a *rant*. Rather, it offers a definitive statement of the multi-epistemic implications of Indigenous and mainstream knowledge paradigms as they influence curriculum studies. For Ontario educators its impact centers ultimately in forcing us to make sense of our own epistemic experiences in light of Indigenous ontologies and curricular policies. The paper, from my perspective, invites a conversation. Such a conversation is timely and certainly long overdue.

As such, the aim of this paper is to apply the descriptive points of view that Haig-Brown presents into a more extended conversation as it applies to a provincial context. More specifically, to first offer a conceptual analysis of the principles of integrating Indigenous Knowledge into mainstream curriculum in the context of Ontario Aboriginal education policy. Second, to discuss how Indigenous Knowledge has the potential to "reframe and decentre" educators' paradigms of curriculum, teaching and learning from the same policy context (Haig-Brown, 2008, p. 13). Last, this paper comments upon how the Ontario policy has the potential to dismantle the "border-world" that Indigenous epistemologies have been relegated to by colonial understandings of teaching and curriculum (Haig-Brown, 2008, p. 14).

Contextual Framework

Given the recent emphasis on the achievement gap between Aboriginal and mainstream students in Ontario, the Ontario Ministry of Education's (OME) *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007) makes a commitment to addressing the unique learning styles of Aboriginal students attending public schools. The policy document declares that teachers, principals, and district administrators will provide a more culturally-responsive curriculum and pedagogy for Aboriginal students by addressing their distinct socio-cultural and epistemic values and beliefs. The *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* suggests that Ontario schools will reflect a more invitational and culturally-relevant learning environment that will improve Aboriginal student achievement. It further implies that educators' awareness of Aboriginal students' worldviews, customs, and traditions will be accounted for in their curricular practices. These aims recognize the fact that Aboriginal student success in mainstream public educational institutions is often influenced by a wide-array of historical, social, economic, and cultural realities (Banks, 2008; Cajete, 2008).

The OME's *Policy Framework* brings to light the fact that teachers and principals' understanding of Aboriginal students' learning needs and preferences, as they are influenced by various linguistic and cultural realities (Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000; Corbiere, 2000), needs to be enhanced for public schools to successfully engage Aboriginal students in the mainstream curriculum. The policy document includes a strategic approach for educators:

> The strategies outlined in this framework are based on a holistic and integrated approach to improving Aboriginal student outcomes. The overriding issues affecting Aboriginal student achievement are a lack of awareness among teachers of the particular learning styles of

Aboriginal students, and a lack of understanding within schools and school boards of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit cultures, histories, and perspectives. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 6)

The document underscores the need for teachers and principals to understand that Aboriginal students' socio-linguistic and socio-cultural worldviews consist of cross-generational teachings of traditional knowledge (Elijah, 2002; Kavanaugh, 2005). Colonization essentially displaced Aboriginal epistemologies as schools were founded upon Eurocentric paradigms of knowledge-creation (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). As a result, public school teachers and principals are generally unequipped to employ pedagogy and curricular practices culturally-appropriate for Aboriginal students in their classrooms (Cummins, 2001; St. Denis, 2007). As the policy framework states, Aboriginal student achievement is adversely affected by teachers' "lack of awareness of the particular learning styles of Aboriginal students, and a lack of understanding [of] teaching strategies that are appropriate to Aboriginal learner needs" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 6). Schools will, therefore, "develop the awareness among teachers of the learning styles" of Aboriginal students (p. 12), and teachers will use instructional strategies that are "designed to enhance" Aboriginal students' academic success (p. 12). The policy framework seems to be sensitive to the multiple literacies of Aboriginal languages, orthographies, and symbolism that constitute Indigenous Knowledge (Battiste & McLean, 2005). Further, it implies a degree of accountability among educators to appropriately contextualize their practice (Ball & Farr, 2003; Lee, 2008) and devise strategies for creating more spaces for students to bring their multiple literacies (and underpinning epistemologies) into the classroom.

Extending the Conversation: A Conceptual Analysis

The OME's policy initiatives related to Aboriginal education are most relevant to Haig-Brown's "cautionary notes" on Indigenous Knowledge and notions of globalization. The Ministry's policy framework addresses the specific provisions of Aboriginal students' learning in public schools and alludes to the integral relationship between Indigenous Knowledge, holistic learning, and interrelatedness. However, as suggested in Haig-Brown's paper, it may be prudent to approach this curricular policy initiative from a somewhat cautionary and conceptual stance.

Principles versus Practice

Judging from the recent OME initiatives related to Aboriginal education in Ontario, there seems to be substantial attention being paid to connecting Indigenous Knowledge to the public school curriculum in Ontario. Curriculum is here understood as providing educators, students, and parents with an explicit program of what ought to happen in public education (Ellis, 2004; Tanner & Tanner, 1995). Curricular policies refer to the criteria and guidelines that determine curriculum development and implementation in schools (Danielson, 2002). Based on the policy framework, it seems that the policy makers have captured a number of the significant characteristics of Indigenous knowledge alluded to by Haig-Brown and that teachers will manage their instruction and curricular practices to engage Aboriginal students. The policy framework suggests that educators will represent what Haig-Brown (2008) refers to in her paper as the beliefs that are "fundamental to sense-making" (p. 12) in the traditions of Indigenous Knowledge. Further, it advocates for various provisions of ideas, strategies, and interventions on the part of public school principals and teachers to not only close the aforementioned achievement gap but also in essence represent the notions of "traditional indigenous social, political, and cosmological ontologies [in] alternative frameworks" (Haig-Brown, 2008,

p. 13). In this way, the policy framework necessitates a shift in mindset for teachers to critically consider the various factors that have compounded Aboriginal students' difficulty in public education. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers, principals, and school board supervisory officers will have to shift their understandings to facilitate what the policy framework recognizes as a mutual accommodation in classrooms and schools across the province.

Based on my reading above, it would seem to be an uncontested point that the *principles* of Indigenous Knowledge are indeed accepted in Ontario public educational policy; less convincing, however, is the evidence that these principles of integration into school curriculum are in fact being implemented in *practice*. To borrow from Herman Melville (1967), we cannot be certain (and perhaps should be cautious – as Haig-Brown advises) of what "mystery [lurks] beneath" the tranquil and hypnotic waters of the Pacific Ocean (p. 399). Such a tension, of course, is not unique to the state of Aboriginal education in Ontario and has been documented in various locales across North America that have implemented similar curricular policy to address minority interests in mainstream institutions (see Bay, 2000; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Bonilla-Silva & Glover, 2004; Taguieff, 2001). While one cannot help but be impressed with the comprehensiveness of the OME's curricular policy framework, its potential ideological implications for the educators mandated to implement it into school curriculum and practices are less clear.

The concept of knowledge, as an example, entails rich and complex meanings for mainstream teachers that may be profoundly different from the notion of Indigenous Knowledge to which Haig-Brown and the policy framework refer. Having an awareness of Indigenous Knowledge is markedly different than understanding it and being able to genuinely incorporate it into pedagogical practice. Conversely, although mainstream educators will most likely accept the principles of the integration of Indigenous Knowledge into their curricular practices, the

danger exists that their actual implementation is based on an advocacy-oriented stance that is innately disconnected from true understanding. The risk exists that educators will feel what Cotti and Schiro (2004) describe as the ideological pressure to abide by the OME's curricular focus, navigate through the respective curricular policy rhetoric, and in the most well-intentioned sense implement an incoherent focus on Indigenous Knowledge. The resulting clash of curriculum ideologies, understood through educators' actions while they are immersed in curriculum activity or pondering curriculum issues (Schiro, 2008), may exist on three separate but interrelated levels, including: (1) tension for educators between accepting the principles of Indigenous Knowledge and implementing them into practice; (2) tension for educators to discover and understand the culture and values of Indigenous Knowledge as they relate to Aboriginal students' epistemic and traditional worldviews in light of their Western paradigms of schooling and Eurocentric conceptions of knowledge; and (3) tension between the implemented curriculum on the part of educators and the nature by which it is perceived as genuine and congruent by Aboriginal students. How the curriculum ideology of Ontario education, that is representative of mainstream society's values and symbol systems to legitimize order (Lyle, 1997), actually translates into the engagement of Aboriginal students in public education may be the defining factor of the policy framework's success.

To "Reframe and Decentre"

The potential for Indigenous thought to, as Haig-Brown (2008) describes, reframe and decentre conventional scholarship (including curriculum studies) is particularly noteworthy for Ontario Aboriginal education policy. The opportunity exists for educators to confront their epistemic and ontological assumptions about teaching and learning, as

well as the established curriculum practices and interests that have been traditionally exercised in public schools. Smith (1999) clearly articulates how Western knowledge has been privileged over Aboriginal knowledge and used as a tool by Europeans in the process of colonizing Aboriginal peoples after contact. For educators, therefore, the implementation of the policy may foster pivotal opportunities to critically reflect upon taken-for-granted assumptions, in the tradition of Foucault (1982), and to understand that what is perceived as normal is in fact an outcome of certain knowledge paradigms that have been historically established (Gyllenhammer, 2009; Joseph, 2004). The OME's policy framework represents an opportunity to challenge oneself about how mainstream educational practices privilege some students and disadvantage others. It represents, ultimately, an opportunity for educators to discover how their curriculum practices influence the culture of the diverse world in which their students live. This is particularly relevant to what Haig-Brown (2008) refers to as "the possibilities [for educators and scholars alike] that lie with engagement with such epistemologies and ontologies" (p. 13). Engagement is indeed the operative word. The policy framework may serve as the impetus for educators to recognize diverse Aboriginal voices that have socio-historically been silenced in curricular policy and practice. For the conscientious educator, this means the self-cultivation of meaning and responsibility in light of recognizing Aboriginal students' multi-epistemic realities as they are enacted in public school. As Battiste and Henderson (2000) state, Canadian educational systems

> teach this double consciousness to Indigenous students. Canadian educational systems view Indigenous heritage, identity and thought as inferior to Eurocentric heritage, identity and thought…. Educators still know very little about how Indigenous students are raised and socialized

in their homes and communities, and even less about how

Indigenous heritage is traditionally transmitted. (p. 88-89)

For educators, the challenge of the policy framework represents having to transcend taken-for-granted organizational and conceptual arrangements of what it means to teach and learn. The possibility, as Haig-Brown (2008) alludes to, may very well rest in educators' willingness to examine who they are as peoples and teachers in relationship to alternative frameworks. In the process of coming to understand Aboriginal thought, educators may garner a greater sense of authenticity and presence in terms of the roles they are fulfilling as teachers, principals, and school board administrators. Promise rests in the fact that educators may come to understand the means by which *knowledge* is used differently in curricular, policy, and personal ideologies. This may facilitate, for educators, Aboriginal and non-aboriginal students, and entire school communities, more sustainable means of communicating and delivering policy and curriculum (Boldt, 1993).

The potential to reframe and reconsider epistemic paradigms, and the possibilities Haig-Brown (2008) refers to in the act of engaging with Indigenous Knowledge, may enable educators to examine the socio-political realities that have marginalized Aboriginal students' experiences in school, and how those experiences (chronicled throughout First Nations history) have taken a toll upon their collective minds, bodies, and spirit. This process invites teachers, principals, and district administrators to explore their identities as educators. This may be among the greatest potential of the possibilities to which Haig-Brown refers. It takes enormous courage to question how one perceives and relates to one's own epistemic values and traditions, particularly when these ideologies are substantially different to the principles of Indigenous Knowledge and thought. From a social psychoanalytical

perspective (Pinar, 1992), teachers' identities influence their theoretical and practical understandings of curriculum theory. Consider that,

> Teachers are conceived by others, by the expectations and fantasies of our students and the demands of parents, administrators, policymakers, and politicians. We are formed as well by our own internalized histories. These various spheres or levels of self-constitution require investigation by multiple intelligences. Locating the process of knowing in the politics of identity suggests escaping the swirling waters created by the demands and pressures of others. The capacity to stand calmly in a maelstrom can come only with knowledge of other worlds, with living in other realities, not split off or dissociated from the work world. Separate but connected permits us to enter the work world larger, more complex, than the roles prescribed for us, making less likely that we will not collapse our identities and our intelligences upon the social surface. (Pinar, 1992, p. 234)

This is of paramount consideration when one considers that public educational policy produces various understandings and perceptions of teacher identity (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Foucault, 2002; Howarth, 2000) reflected in the resurgence of research on teacher identity across the globe (Beijaard et al., 2004; Estola, 2003; Kalmbach Phillips, 2002; Roberts-Holmes, 2003). While the OME policy framework makes clear how policy-makers view Aboriginal education, educators can in turn think about themselves as teachers and how it impacts upon their self-identity:

> In the encounter between teachers and curriculum written by external experts, the teachers connect the proposed curriculum with their current pedagogical content knowledge. They take principles from the proposed

curriculum and put them into their own narrative contexts in a way that they find familiar and acceptable…. In this way, when teachers interpret the contents of a proposed curriculum, they are expressing personal beliefs and ideologies that include their independent understanding of it. (Shkedi & Nisan, 2006, p. 688)

Undeniably, educators arrive to the proverbial school house with preconceived pedagogical values, epistemic preferences, and traditions. Such perspectives, however, may be symbolic of unexamined historically institutionalized educational practices (Reid, 2003). For educators to challenge these preexisting beliefs may be intimidating; however, challenging their curricular ideologies may in fact augment their sense of teacher-identity and illuminate an understanding of Indigenous Knowledge and Aboriginal students' multi-epistemic realities that translates into a lived ideology (Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton, & Radley, 1998; Lamm, 2008). I am sure that Haig-Brown (2008) would agree that the true possibilities inherent to a critically-conscious examination of teacher-identity are not for teachers to become trained to codify Indigenous Knowledge, but for educators to extend the same experiences of reframing epistemic realities that they experience to their students – both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal. This would essentially marry the OME's curricular policy framework to a lived curricular practice and thereby kindle the genuine engagement of Aboriginal students in curriculum and school.

Dismantling the "border world"

Haig-Brown (2008) cites Turner's (2006) philosophical views to underscore the need for scholars and educators to examine curriculum studies from multi-dimensional perspectives. She writes that the work of Indigenous scholars who engage from traditional epistemic and cultural

realities and recognize Eurocentric thought as a distinct entity belongs to "a border world created by colonial conditions" (p. 14). Non-aboriginal people who engage in Indigenous thought will also perceive the existence of this "border world."

Once again, Haig-Brown's observation is timely and relevant to Aboriginal education policy in Ontario. The willingness on the part of teachers, principles, and district administrators to interrogate their educational consciousness in relation to Aboriginal worldviews and Indigenous Knowledge traditions may create a conceptual space that sensitizes them to the purposes and subtleties of both the scripted and hidden curriculum (Abbot & Ryan, 1999). This is not to suggest that non-Aboriginal educators should accept and implement Indigenous Knowledge non-judgmentally as if it is beyond contestation by virtue of its Indigenousness; instead, Haig-Brown (2008) implies that the onus rests on educators to critically self-examine their epistemologies in order to produce more informed self-understanding. Only by inhabiting the *border world*, it may be argued, can non-aboriginal educators arrive at an appreciation of its distinctiveness. The OME's policy framework, furthermore, represents an opportunity for educators to dismantle the border world and create in their classrooms a conceptual space that honours Indigenous Knowledge, incorporates Aboriginal epistemologies, and fosters the self-identity of teacher and student alike. For educators to implement the policy framework from an uncontested and superficially understood perspective is to further situate Indigenous Knowledge on the conceptual borders, reminiscent of Haig-Brown's (2008) description of contemporary university settings. Curricular ideologies and theory must foster the creation of conceptual spaces separate from societal and institutional pressure and expectations whereby educators and students can negotiate the terrain of both borders, dismantle the boundaries, and not restrict their emergent understandings of self (Pinar, 1992). To acknowledge the existence of a

border is, after all, an impediment to perceiving and understanding another reality in a fluent and interrelated manner (Davies & Harre, 2001).

As a theoretical presupposition that extends from Haig-Brown's paper, I propose that the conceptual spaces that exist for educators (and ultimately students) to examine curricular and ideological assumptions will be best served only if the aims of the policy framework become sustainable practices in Ontario public schools. Hargreaves and Fink's (2006) definition of sustainability as "focusing on the deep need [for the policy initiatives] for all students" (p. 31) is especially applicable to this discussion. The profundity of this *deep need* lies in educators' willingness to engage with the conceptual questions. For OME policy interventions to be sustainable, the issues of identity, curriculum, and professional and personal development must be accounted for in all of their complexities. Sustainability also demands an understanding that the deeper one engages in these conceptual spaces to negotiate border and mainstream epistemic realities, the more intersections there are to challenge one's assumptions. The cultural and epistemological differences between Aboriginal worldviews founded in collectivity and interrelatedness, and the more empirical notions associated with western traditions will inevitably influence one's understanding of teaching, learning and curriculum (Smith, 1999). At the heart of this challenge is an understanding of one's interpretation and knowledge as "the continuous process of incorporating new experiences into the ecosystem of associations that has emerged from previous experiences" (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 167). Thus, educators are called upon to critically consider how Indigenous Knowledge will have to be accommodated into their own experiences and epistemologies to be successfully integrated into curricula and pedagogical practices. For the OME's policy framework initiatives to become sustainable and to transcend conceptual borders, Indigenous Knowledge and thought has

to be recognized, appreciated, and understood non-judgmentally and independent of preexisting views and suppositions. While the process may be unsettling, it aspires to allow educators to think critically and deeply about their curriculum ideology from an identity stance.

Conclusion

Celia Haig-Brown's (2008) call to "take Indigenous thought seriously" reflects the authenticity of her scholarly and personal voice. She compels readers to confront their own epistemic and ontological assumptions in the face of Indigenous Knowledge and thought. This paper has extended Haig-Brown's thoughts on Indigenous Knowledge in the context of Aboriginal education in Ontario by considering the tension between the principles and realities of curricular policy integration. It has discussed the potential of Indigenous Knowledge to reframe and de-centre the curricular and pedagogical paradigms of mainstream educators from the broader outlook of teacher identity. Last, the paper has considered the sustainability of conceptual spaces amongst the border and mainstream worlds of Indigenous and western thought.

Undoubtedly, public school educators in Ontario are feeling the ideological pressure to implement the curricular focus of the OME's policy framework into their school's classrooms. The political climate in the province expects nothing less. Yet, Haig-Brown's (2008) warning to seriously consider the implications of Indigenous Knowledge eclipses to a much greater extent the politics behind the rhetoric of the policy. The underlying effect of Haig-Brown's position implicates educators' ideologies as they plan and exercise the respective policy interventions into their curriculum, and points mainstream educators towards genuinely engaging into those conceptual spaces that transcend the border worlds of knowledge segregation. Only by understanding one's identity as it is situated in these conceptual spaces, perhaps, can

educators appreciate what Haig-Brown refers to as the possibilities that lie with engagement. And only then can they begin the work of translating their teacher-identities and curricular ideologies into practical action. It is from both these contexts that we need to take Haig-Brown seriously.

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