

Truth in Education: From Eurocentrism to Decolonization

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Abstract

As a settler colonial country, social institutions in Canada such as the judicial and educational systems are inevitably founded on and grounded in settler colonial logics (Tsosie, 2017). As such, Canada's provincial publicly funded education systems are inherently Eurocentric and often operates in direct opposition to Indigenous cosmologies. This paper stems from a more comprehensive investigation conceptualized from Indigenous research methodologies that examined Indigenous-centred and led education in the context of decolonization and reconciliation in Canada and focuses on the emergence of a significant theme grounded in the data described as Truth in Education. Moreover, this paper provides context of a culturally appropriate interview grounded in Indigenous epistemologies that facilitated a conversation between an Indigenous graduate student and mainstream scholar, and an Indigenous community member participating in culturally safe community programs at a Native Friendship Centre in Ontario, Canada. This paper discusses the critical role of Indigenous-led education based in truth and Indigenous cosmologies as one avenue toward decolonizing education in Canada. Among the significant outcomes of the more comprehensive study is that for non-Indigenous people, recognizing and understanding the harms that mainstream Eurocentric education inflicts on Indigenous peoples in Canada is a first step toward decolonizing education.

Keywords: Indigenous cosmologies, settler colonialism

1. Introduction

The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) chronicled the first-hand testimonies of residential school survivors and the oppressive and abusive conditions they experienced. Among the objectives of residential schools was to assimilate Indigenous children into Eurocentric education practices at the expense of the education systems in place prior to first contact that addressed Indigenous learners' emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions (Kainai Board of Education, 2006; Neeganagwedgin, 2013). Education, according to Starblanket and Hunt (2020), remains one of many settler colonial institutions in Canada that normalizes and falsifies Indigenous peoples' experiences.

Moreover, formal education practices and policies that serve as extensions of settler colonial ideologies have not only positioned Indigenous knowledge in the margins of Western approaches but have contributed significantly to the

intergenerational consequences suffered by many Indigenous peoples (Griffith, 2018). It is of little surprise, thus, that the families of Indigenous students are often reluctant to communicate with teachers and other school officials and are less likely to be perceived by educators as actively involved in their children's education (Milne, 2016; St. Denis, 2011). Among the results of these intergenerational and more contemporary consequences is a fundamental disconnect of Indigenous student engagement and achievement since Indigenous students do not feel represented in publicly funded schools and classrooms (Cherubini, 2014). In these instances, Indigenous students cannot readily connect the provincial curriculum with neither their experiences nor their Indigenous worldviews (Silver et al., 2002).

In the Ontario (Canada) context specifically, education policy has meant to close the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and has commissioned various stakeholders, including school board administrators, principals, and teachers to work collaboratively with Indigenous community partners to meaningfully incorporate Indigenous perspectives across school practices (Cherubini, 2018). As some have argued, schools across Canada need to establish more invitational learning spaces for other ways of knowing and cite Indigeneity as a space that honours the individual's narrative in response to more dominant colonial paradigms (Bediako-Amoah, 2018). In this respect, decolonization practices are considered necessary to promoting a broader decolonized society (Griffith, 2018). Culturally respectful schools and classrooms can foster Indigenous student achievement by promoting the norms, values, and cultures of Indigenous students in invitational and safe spaces (Stephens et al., 2012).

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine how the Eurocentric foundations of mainstream education may harm Indigenous students and how Indigenous-led education can be a path away from these harms and toward decolonizing education in Ontario, Canada. This paper is the second of two discussions that are an outcome of a comprehensive research study that considered Indigenous centred and led education in the context of decolonization and reconciliation in Ontario, Canada. The research study included a post-secondary institution and Native Friendship Centre in Ontario and sought to recognize the strength and capacity of Indigenous community members (Boidin, Cohen, & Grosfoguel, 2012). The study was guided by Indigenous epistemologies informed by the Indigenous community partner and community members themselves. This examination stems from a culturally appropriate interview between an Indigenous community member in Ontario, Canada, and an Indigenous graduate student and mainstream scholar.

2. Approach

The history of Canada as a country is a history of settler colonial violence and erasure against Indigenous peoples and their histories. Indigenous peoples and their ways of life, such as their ontologies and cosmologies, have been targeted with settler colonial violence and erasure by white European settlers to facilitate settler stealing and exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources in Canada for the past 500 years (Hill, 2009). To justify this settler colonial violence and erasure, white European settlers asserted that Indigenous peoples were uncivil and needed Eurocentric ideologies to

become civilized (Green, 2017; Tsosie, 2017). Indigenous peoples in Canada were subsequently conceptualized by white European settlers as uncivilized and child-like and thus in need of paternalistic control by European settlers. For example, John Locke, one of the main contributors to educational theory, asserted that a lack of civility in Indigenous peoples in North America stemmed from their child-like nature (Tsosie, 2017). These assumptions about Indigenous incivility were used to justify forced assimilation tactics, which included the use of education to assimilate Indigenous peoples into white European settler society. The use of education to forcibly assimilate Indigenous peoples began with Christian missionaries, which used religious education as an assimilation tactic against Indigenous peoples in Canada from the seventeenth into the nineteenth century (Grant, 2015). Education as an assimilation tactic was then implemented through residential schools, in which Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their communities and forced to assimilate into white European settler society. Although the last residential school in Canada closed in 1996, the Eurocentric foundations of Canadian education, and its use as an assimilation tactic, continue to live on in mainstream education (Ahenakew, 2017).

The Eurocentric foundations of education in Canada are visible in its ongoing erasure of Indigenous histories from the collective national memory in favour of a Eurocentric history (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). The harms that Indigenous students experience because of this settler colonial erasure in mainstream Canadian education are exemplified by one Indigenous community member who engaged in an interview as a component of the larger study.

The data for this research study were analyzed using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory was considered most appropriate for this research project since participants' words served as the data and thus contributed directly to the research findings. The methodology is meant to honour Indigenous community members' experiences, realities, and agencies (see, for example, Naepi, 2019; Nakata et al., 2012; Shilliam, 2016).

Grounded theory is an inductive process that includes a line-by-line coding of the transcripts from participants' interviews during the Research Conversations (Kanu, 2011). Data were coded and compared to identify emerging themes and their respective properties. In selective coding, each theme was theoretically saturated in consideration of the core category grounded in the data. One core category emerged from the analysis of the data and is identified as Truth in Education.

3. Findings

The Indigenous community member first explained that since they were disconnected from their culture and community by settler colonialism, and mainstream education did not teach the truth about Indigenous histories, they were unable to learn about their history as a child: "I didn't know about my language, about my history other than what the history books taught and I wasn't happy with that. I wasn't, it didn't feel comfortable. It didn't feel like the truth." As the participant illuminated, the lack of truth about Indigenous histories and Indigenous-settler relations in mainstream education left them feeling uncomfortable and unhappy. The participant expanded on this point, expressing, "I knew I was different and through the schools, it was they did not teach the true history and that's where it started." Again, the lack of truth in education made

it difficult for the participant to understand why they were different from their peers when they were young.

After explaining their discomfort with the lack of truth in mainstream education, the participant expressed that this lack of truth outcast them from their peers: “I guess I was just one of those, I was too different, I was too, I asked too many questions. I didn’t understand, but I wanted to understand.” Moreover, the falsities disseminated in mainstream education were incongruent with the participant’s lived experiences: “I believe that they would have taken my twin brother and I away from my mother had she not passed for white because on her papers it said white... So that is really probably the only reason we weren’t taken away because we were brought up in the welfare system.” Although the participant experienced marginalization due to the ongoing legacy of settler colonialism in the form of being outcast from their peers and living in poverty, mainstream education did not teach the truth about Indigenous-settler relations or anti-Indigenous racism in Canada and therefore left the participant to understand and work through their marginalization on their own.

Following the discussion about their childhood experiences with education, the participant shared how their experiences informed their approach to and understanding of education now: “I really believe in education and the truth is the number one thing.” Drawing from their lived experiences, the participant identified that truth is an essential aspect of education for Indigenous students. The participant re-emphasized the need for truth in education when they further stated, “We need to get back and telling the truth.” In the context of this interview about their experiences with education as an Indigenous student, the participant again made it very clear that truth in education is paramount to the success of Indigenous students.

4. Implications

4.1 Eurocentrism & the Difficulty of Truth

The core category identified as Truth in Education emerged from the analysis of the data. In discussing their experiences with settler colonial erasure in mainstream education, the participant described feeling uncomfortable with what they experienced. On account of settler colonial violence disconnecting many Indigenous peoples and families from their communities and cultures, many Indigenous students do not go into mainstream education already knowing their histories (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). As such, Indigenous students are told settler stories of Indigenous incivility that are harmful to them and prevent them from learning their Indigenous histories (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). These settler stories also falsely teach that Indigenous peoples willingly rescinded their rights and lands to white European settlers because of the friendly and peaceful relationship between Indigenous peoples and settlers (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). The falsities that these settler stories espouse then cause harm to Indigenous students because, as the participant demonstrated, they distance Indigenous students from their peers and are incongruent with their lived experiences, leaving these students in distress from the lack of truth in mainstream education.

Including truth in mainstream curricula would remedy the harms some Indigenous students experience in their formal education. However, including the truth about Indigenous histories and Indigenous-settler relations in mainstream Canadian education is described as being difficult for three reasons. First, the continued existence

of many Canadian social institutions, including mainstream education, is dependent upon settler stories of peaceful Indigenous-settler relations, the incivility of Indigenous peoples, and consensual land dispossession (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). These settler stories exist to justify and maintain the settler colonial order of society, including the use of Eurocentric ideologies in mainstream education (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). Therefore, and according to some scholars, mainstream education will continue to espouse these settler stories to justify its continued existence. Second, education is inextricably linked with the settler colonial violence and assimilation that founded the Canadian nation-state, as discussed above (Tsosie, 2017). Systems of education are thusly unlikely to adopt the conditions necessary to include the truth about Indigenous histories and Indigenous-settler relations in curricula because their continued existence is closely intertwined with settler colonial violence and assimilation (Tsosie, 2017).

Lastly, due to the Eurocentric foundations of mainstream education, it is incommensurate with Indigenous cosmologies. Not only are Indigenous cosmologies a target of settler colonial violence and erasure, but they also stand in direct opposition to and threaten Eurocentric ideologies and the settler colonial order of Canadian society (Green, 2017). The participant's questions about their own Indigeneity were not only left unanswered but were completely dismissed in their formal education experience.

4.2 Indigenous-led Education

As the participant implied, Eurocentric mainstream education is harmful to Indigenous students because it is unlikely to adopt the conditions necessary to include the truth of Indigenous histories and Indigenous-settler relations in Canada. The participant explained that learning the truth about their history and thereby learning more about who they are as an Indigenous person would have greatly supported them in their journey of finding community and support: "I believe in unity, I believe in love and I believe you need to know who you are and you need to help others find who they are, because when you find out who you are, it's an empowerment to yourself and to others." As inferred by the participant's experiences, due to the harm that mainstream education causes Indigenous students because of its difficulty with adopting the conditions necessary to include Indigenous truths, mainstream education is inadequate education for Indigenous students. Focusing on decolonizing education is vital for supporting Indigenous students in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Indigenous-led education is one key path toward decolonizing education (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Indigenous-led education exists outside of settler stories because it is not founded in Eurocentrism or settler colonialism (Simpson, 2017; Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). Indigenous-led education can also incorporate Indigenous cosmologies as foundational pieces of curricula, making the education no longer constructed by or based on Eurocentric standards and instead created by and for Indigenous peoples (Shorty, 2016). Additionally, Indigenous-led education has the capability of supporting Indigenous futurities in Canada (Simpson, 2017). By turning inward and toward community, Indigenous peoples can create or regenerate Indigenous-led educational systems that are decolonial, support Indigenous students, and support Indigenous cultural and cosmological futurities (Shorty, 2016; Simpson, 2017). For these three reasons, Indigenous-led education is paramount to supporting Indigenous students and decolonizing education in Canada. However, decolonizing education in Canada

through Indigenous-led education is difficult without settler support (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

4.3 Settler Support

Settler recognition and understanding of the harms that mainstream Eurocentric education inflicts on Indigenous peoples in Canada is an important step toward decolonizing education (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). However, as the participant demonstrated, as long as settlers remain ignorant to mainstream education's Eurocentric foundations, mainstream education will not change. Indigenous students who are disconnected from their cultures and communities will continue to be harmed by mainstream educational systems, left uncomfortable and yearning for a truth about their traditional knowledges. One first step that settlers can take toward supporting decolonizing education in Canada is learning, because as the participant explained, "there won't be a day that you don't stop learning, that you don't stop sharing until your last breath leaves this body."

5. Conclusion

From an interview with an Indigenous community member in Ontario, Canada, the core category emerged and was identified as Truth in Education. The Eurocentric foundations of mainstream education make it difficult for these systems of education to adopt the conditions necessary to include the truth about Indigenous histories and Indigenous-settler relations, causing harm to Indigenous students. Indigenous-led education based in truth and Indigenous cosmologies can create decolonial education outside of Eurocentrism, including the truth of Indigenous histories and Indigenous-settler relations in Canada and supporting Indigenous students. For settlers, learning about the harms that Eurocentrism in mainstream education inflicts on Indigenous peoples in Canada is a first step toward supporting decolonizing education.

5.1 Limitations

The findings of this study stem from one person's experiences and perspectives and thus are not necessarily generalizable to other Indigenous peoples and communities in Ontario and Canada. We recognize the diversity that exists across Indigenous peoples' cultural, spiritual, and linguistic traditions, as we do their varied experiences with education in both formal and informal contexts.

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