Addressing the Academic Achievement Gap: Finding Strategies that Encourage Greater Participation from First Nation Students

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Introduction

Regional graduation rates amongst First Nation students are consistently coming in at less than fifty percent. When compared with seventy eight percent of non First Nation students it is no wonder so much attention is given to the discussion of what needs to be improved. ¹ ² Well intended school districts, band leaders and politicians deliberate on policies and methods to close this troubling achievement gap. Public pressure is mounting and policy makers rush to find solutions, or give the appearance of trying to find solutions. Many First Nations communities are appealing for self directed forms of education to close the achievement gap attaching their principles to the larger scope of Indigenous self government. ³ Amidst the pretext of this convoluted dialogue I underwent my own journey in search of useful strategies

² A dearth of material has been written on the subject.
For a First Nation perspective on the achievement gap see: Linda Akan.
that I could easily implement in a secondary classroom that would directly benefit my First Nation Students.

I began to wonder if there was a systemic problem in the education system in regards to First Nation people and what small part I could play to mitigate it. This study looks at creating classroom environments that encourage greater commitment to study and participation from First Nation youth. My critical question was: Will the inclusion of more First Nations knowledge and greater emphasis on group work lead to higher levels of participation amongst my First Nation students? This research strives to find a way to meet the educational needs of all students from all cultures. At a deeper level it looks at the numerous obstacles that hinder naïve notions of success and at the core it looks inwardly and probes the obstacles that I have within me that pose challenges to educating from an indigenous perspective.

**Background for the Study**

Pursuing an understanding of the issues and concerns of First Nation education has been an interest of mine for a while. In 2010 I went to upgrade my education at the University British Columbia Okanagan (UBCO) in Indigenous Studies for the purposes of equipping myself to teach Social Studies in British Columbia and possibly Saskatchewan with cultural sensitivity and awareness. Our professor Greg Younging said that he would teach the content from a First Nations perspective and that his perspective would no doubt clash with our Eurocentric education. During his first lesson he told us that everything we know about First Nation people has been filtered through a racist Eurocentric lens. Younging challenged my way of thinking and
gave me a greater understanding of land disputes and the challenges that First Nation people have inherited from a Canadian system which was, and still is, designed to marginalize them.

There was however a negative impact in attending that class. As a result of that education I felt at a greater distance from First Nations people. I realized that my way of thinking is fundamentally different. In short an “us and them” mentality was being taught to me. First Nation perspectives in Younging’s class were set in diametric opposition from the perspective of a capitalist and greedy world which most Canadians ascribed to. The class I was taking to equip myself ironically made me feel like I was on another end of a chasm, for the first time being white felt detrimental to teaching. In some ways my instructor’s perspective gives me a different window or lens through which I can take an introspective look at myself and question what kind of instruction I would give in my own classroom. Would I force Eurocentric or colonial ideals on my students? I had never thought in terms like this before.

Applying this cogent line of thinking to my teaching practicum became an enterprise of monumental difficulty. I became easily distracted by the symptoms of a much larger disease. On my first day the principle toured our small contingent of nervous student teachers around the halls and told us about the demographic challenges that Quamichan Middle School faces. He encouraged the student teachers to familiarize ourselves with the resources for First Nation students that their school provided and to seek the advice of their competent staff if we were having challenges.

I was surprised to see the dichotomy in the students’ behaviour. First Nation students and non-First Nation students rarely seemed to spend much time together, especially in larger
group settings. In the halls, pockets of First Nation students would cluster together but rarely integrated with students of other ethnicities. Non first Nation ethnic minorities seemed more comfortable socializing amongst non-First Nation students than with the First Nation students.

My sponsor teacher was the first to point out to me that disproportionate amounts of First Nation youth wander the halls during class time. I realize it is not uncommon to see students of any ethnicity escape into the refuge of the hallway, but in my mind, and in the mind of my sponsor teacher, it seems that the First Nations students were skipping classes more often than other students. A perfunctory glance at the attendance record which I kept during the practicums substantiates the statement.

First Nations and non First Nations students behave differently within the classroom context with respect to where they tend to locate themselves. In the classroom I was teaching in, the First Nations students curiously sat in desks in the distant corners of the classroom often leaving a birth of an empty desk to separate themselves from other students. Only one First Nation student during my first practicum would sit near the center of the room. Sometimes this was due to the seating plan, but during the few times when I allowed students to seat themselves or changed the desk arrangement it was self imposed.

One of my major concerns was that students of non First Nation decent are failing to integrate with First Nation students inside the classroom setting. I am not the only person to notice an ethnic disparity; the struggle between First Nation and non-First Nation students to integrate with one another receives frequent comments in the staff room. During a casual conversation with the schools Aboriginal support worker about what I was witnessing, she said
“it’s always been a problem at Quamichan.” The Aboriginal support workers do what they can to bridge what they see as two communities. In one instance the Aboriginal support worker told me about a special female Aboriginal spear fishing trip she had planned for the weekend. Her First Nation students were excited and looking forward to attending until she gave a single condition, “you have to invite one non First Nation student to come with you.” Instantly the excitement was drained from the excursion. Her students’ aversion to talking to non First Nation students was keenly felt to the point of being stressful. She began preparing her students and instructing them on how to give invitations to “white people.” Thankfully she had enough rapport and courage to address the dichotomy directly and later on I heard that the spear fishing activity went ahead with multiple ethnicities present.

This story highlights the social segregation that is acutely felt in Quamichan School and the drastic measures that need to be enforced to overcome them. This segregation is discouraged by the staff at Quamichan and frequently addressed, as a result, much of the racism and ostracization is subvert rather than overt but still remains an obstacle in creating a positive learning environments.

Sadly, social disparity between First Nation and non First Nation students seems to be linked to academic achievement. In my own class this is to a certain extent quantifiable due to the fact that students had been tested for literacy and comprehension the week prior to my arrival. On average the First Nation’s students were three grades below grade level reading compared to the rest of the class that on average was one grade below grade level reading. It was not hard to notice the ethnic imbalance and lack of integration between ethnicities.
During my first attempt to remedy the perceived problem I tried to get students to intermingle a little by randomizing groups so that First Nations students and non First Nation students would be forced to work together. One group which had two First Nation students and two non first Nation students sat in utter silence. During an assignment designed around sharing ideas, they were unwilling to speak to one another. The students in this group were not shy, one student (non First Nations), is normally the most gregarious student in the room; for the first time he had nothing to say. Students felt awkward and well out of their comfort zone, and by extension I felt awkward.

Two other First Nation students who were alone in their groups with other white students put their heads on their desks and from my perspective deliberately disengaged from the task while the white students around them shared ideas comfortably amongst themselves. My brilliant assignment designed to share ideas and integrate students from various ethnicities fell apart at the gate. The racial tension was palatable and sickening. After class, my sponsor teacher advised me to not use group activities unless necessary because the students were “not ready”. The advantages of group work for the purposes of educating students are well documented and yet I found myself avoiding groups due in part to racial concerns.

Parker Palmer states that, “Fear shuts down those ‘experiments with truth’ that allow us to weave a wider web of connectedness.” It could be that the assignment that I saw as a total

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4 I should mention that the group assignments were not as structured as they needed to be and my lesson notes state that I need to clearly communicate my intentions and develop criteria for every assignment. The failure of the activity was due to multiple reasons, including my own inexperience. Nonetheless, the racial tensions were not imagined, they were overt.

5 For an very brief overview on the body of research see: Alexandra Smith, “Study finds Group work benefits pupils” *The Guardian.* (March 31, 2006)

failure was in fact a step in the right direction, but my fear shut down any hope of a future experiment with truth. I did not do group work again until the next practicum, I avoided good classroom pedagogy because I was afraid to address the social injustice in front of my face.

It is from a humble place that I admit my apprehension to address a perceived problem which I had studied in an undergrad degree. Normally I consider myself brave when it comes to addressing problems. It would be easy to ignore the First Nation student who quietly sits in the corner and does not do their work. It would be equally easy to allow First Nation students and non First Nation students their comfortable divisions. It is a lot harder to try to motivate and encourage students to integrate and support multiculturalism. Sadly, I think many teachers take the path of least resistance.

These examples, in particular the lesson where students of different ethnic backgrounds felt awkward to speak to one another, are both the reason and continued motivation for more research into what I can do as a teacher to create an integrated safe environment which garners equal participation from all students. What can I do to bridge these seemingly insurmountable social issues? My goal was to address some of my concerns about teaching First Nations students and create greater connectedness between students of all ethnicities. If I am to teach First Nations students successfully I must find some sort of solution to address what I am witnessing.

**Research of First Nation Students’ Education**

The research into how to best support First Nation students in their education is multifaceted, incongruent, and highly political. Statistics on First Nation graduation rates across the
nation are well charted and quite public. Moreover the rapid growth of First Nations populations in Canada is being closely followed in journal articles and surveys. One local article on the subject of Cowichan First Nation’s population growth was read out loud in the staff room during my practicum; one teacher responded to it as if the population boom were some sort of viral spread which the education system could not handle.  

Most teachers remained quiet. This quote that I stripped from a different action research project sums of the statistical analysis:

First Nations populations have been increasing at about twice the rate of that of the general Canadian population. Demographic projections forecast continued higher growth rates for First Nations than for the general population over the next forty years (Frideres, 1998). First Nations also comprise a young population, with one-third younger than 15 years of age and over half younger than 25 (Statistics Canada, 1995). This population trend is the reverse of other sectors in Canada. This shift means that educators will see more First Nations students in their classrooms in the coming years.

These statistics combined with the fact that less than fifty percent of First Nation students receive their high school diploma within six years of entering grade eight has some obvious implications. If the statistics do not change we are going to have an enormous uneducated First Nations population in the near future. The impetus to “do something” has never been greater, what to do however remains hotly contested.

Many First Nation communities want to take a more active role in the education of their own youth.  

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reaffirming the cultural, political, economic and environmental differences between people of European dissent and First Nations people.\(^{11}\) He has written and spoken extensively on why aboriginal forms of land use, justice, economics, education, and spirituality are better suited to the First Nations people and the world as a whole, yet another system is constantly being imposed. Many of First Nation systems of education are not being implemented due to a culture of government control and political fear that is reluctant to hand over the educational reigns to First Nation communities.\(^{12}\) Moreover the notion is a slap in the face of a public education that seeks to be adequate for all Canadians.

Public education in British Columbia is trying to accommodate First Nation ideals but individuals remain hostile to any ripple in the status quo. In one journal article, a social studies teacher expressed that any change, even a minor one, to the course curriculum would be ‘spoiling’ First Nation Students.\(^{13}\) In the face of such stubbornness many First Nation leaders have come to believe that their own educators, elders, teachers and role models are required to teach their own ways of thinking to their own youth. At face value this talk sounds positive and it would be easy to ascribe to. However, the rhetoric of authors like John Mohawk have divisions built in, where first nation youth receive one form of education, which is culturally sensitive to their needs, and non first nation youth receive another which has cultural values which are diametrically opposed. Is supporting this dichotomy truly the future of education? I would prefer not to embrace division of any kind in my own classroom and yet was I prepared


\(^{13}\) Orlowski, P. "That Would Certainly Be Spoiling Them": Liberal Discourses of Social Studies Teachers and Concerns About Aboriginal Students. *Canadian Journal of Native Education.* 31(2), 110-129,
to teach in a culturally sensitive way for my First Nation students? I set this line of thinking aside during my in-class-research but it later resurfaced as the central issue in this personal journey.

Some writers, like Battiste have come to believe that we don’t need divisions that separate Indigenous knowledge and European knowledge, rather a “trans-systemic synthesis in an educational context that respects and builds on both Indigenous knowledge and European Knowledge” is somehow possible. She believes this synthesis is already underway and represents an “Indigenous knowledge renaissance” which has been in progress for some time. Yet despite this so called renaissance some scepticism and fear exists. Minnis notes that this over decade long renaissance has had no noticeable change in graduation rates amongst First Nation students. Moreover, there is deliberation on the fact that First Nations students on Reserve Schools perform in general less favourably than those in the public system on government issued standardized tests. To which Deer responded with a curt rebuttal, stating that Minnis’ arguments are both Eurocentric and inappropriate. Cutting through this political rhetoric and finding useful and practical solutions to my own research in the classroom was a large part of the problem. Thankfully there is some research out there that takes a proactive approach.

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15 Ibid.
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I needed a strategy that could easily be implemented. I decide to closely follow the research of a study called “Strategies for facilitating success in First Nations students.”¹⁹ The study triangulated its data by interviewing a series of First Nation students, educational administrators, and educators who had had considerable success educating First Nation youth.

Three strategies emerged. One was to be personable and understanding of First Nation students, the other was to make learning a communal rather than individual venture and the third strategy was to interweave First Nation content into the classroom.

These strategies seemed simple, yet logical enough. When I met with a former First Nation student of Quamichan, now an educator himself, he reiterated these points to me without prompting. Stating that the best thing I can do for my First Nation students is getting to know them and finding ways to develop a relationship of trust with them. He also mentioned a need to have a basic understanding of Stz'uminus and Cowichan culture. I began planning two units that would include First Nation content and provide opportunities for group study.

Setting for the Study and Research Population

My research took place at Quamichan Middle School, from February sixth to seventeenth. However, due to a professional development day and the birth of my second son, the study was further limited to seven days of in class teaching. My research looked at three separate grade eight classes: division 83 humanities, division 84 humanities, and grade eight

information technologies. Information technology or IT is an exploratory module which conglomerates the four grade eight divisions; some students from the humanities classes were also present during this IT class.

My research question was specifically; will the inclusion of more First Nations knowledge and greater emphasis on group work lead to greater participation levels amongst my First Nation students?

The majority of my data collection was limited to the division 83 and 84 humanities classes. These classes are each about 24 students and 27 students respectively. Div. 83 has five First Nation students and Div. 84 has six first Nation Students though one of these students was not present during the entirety of my practicum. Both classes have visual minorities besides the First Nation students which have been grouped into the category of non First Nation students for the purposes of this study.

Method of Data Collection and Clarification of Terms

The plan for my research was to compare two class assignments which embedded First Nations ways of knowing, to two which did not. I wanted to know whether lessons that incorporated First Nation’s ways of knowing would be of greater interest or acquire more participation from the First Nation’s students. In addition to including Indigenous knowledge in my lessons, I also included more group questioning techniques. Specifically, I was observing to see if my First Nation Students would contribute in group settings. Speaking or listening to others on subjects that pertained to their age and stage of life.
Qualitative methods of data collection were chosen for the purposes of this study. I focused mainly on the observational data of both myself and the sponsor teacher who kept a running log during six of my lessons. A qualitative comparison of the levels of First Nation participation was to be done after all the assignments were completed.

Since this research focuses largely on participation or non participation it’s important to qualify how I judged these somewhat subjective terms. Participation included any on task behaviour, be it writing, speaking, reading or viewing. Asking questions to clarify a task or answering or responding to questions asked by myself or peers was classified as participatory. Showing up on time prepared to work was counted towards participation along with contributing to group projects by speaking to other members of the group. Non participation includes: avoiding work, showing up late, skipping out of class, not contributing in peer to peer discussion, sleeping, not listening to classmates and coming to class without work supplies. Neither of these lists should be seen as comprehensive, students can be quite inventive in finding ways to participate and not participate, for example, sharpening pencils for five minutes or taking lengthy bathroom breaks.

**Research Analysis**

It is hard to quantify my research in a succinct way. It is hard to assess whether the class had any change in the level of participation. Assignments which included First Nation content seemed to receive the same lack of participation to those that did not. This failure to determine whether my First Nation students were more engaged and participatory as a result of my strategies is a result of four key elements:
1. There are a plethora of factors which affect and determine whether students wish to participate in school work. It is hard to isolate one element that may affect participation and test it definitively, even if a concerted effort is taken.

2. Some of these factors which affect a student’s school participation are outside of my control or sphere of influence and dramatically skew results.

3. The belief that seven days with incremental change in classroom pedagogy would somehow result in the change of entrenched classroom culture suggests some naïveté on my part.

4. More personal time on my part needs to be spent finding ways to integrate First Nation knowledge systems seamlessly into the content of the classroom.

I will expand on each point briefly.

The humanities classes in Quamichan School were working on a unit in public speaking when I arrived. The unit was designed by the teacher with a moderate amount of input by me. Students were to research a belief system, religion or “way of knowing” and create a poster about it and then present that poster in front of the classroom. Most of the First Nations students availed themselves of the opportunity to present their own beliefs. However, when given time to work on their project only a few managed to pick up a pencil or pen and get started. Even after coercing and encouragement they were unable to share in private what they already knew or what they had learned. In one sense this assignment reveals an appetite on the part of my First Nation students to connect and study their own beliefs and in another
sense it resembles the same lack of participation that spurred this research on in this first place. There is some interesting quantitative data that explains clearly the levels of participation.

During the research and visual poster component, eight of the First Nation students (four from each class) did not complete or received a “does not meet expectation” for their mark. During the oral presentation section, the same eight students did not participate or received a not meeting expectations grade. Only two First Nation students worked diligently on both sections. For both of these assignments ample time, extensions, and accommodations were given, including presenting the topic privately to a teacher. There was also a listening section to this assignment, where students listened to other people’s presentation and made comments on a sheet of paper explaining what they had learned. Six of the ten First Nation students received a mark for this component, albeit two received marks without having actually written any comments on their sheet of paper, but their assessment says that they were clearly listening in class and so some mark should be given to them. Curiously, the non First Nations students by and large participated. Out of forty students only two did not receive grades because they were not present. Even the Korean exchange student who does not have equal access to the English language received full marks for his oral presentation.

As I analyze this first failed assignment I don’t know what evidence to single out as responsible for the lack of participation from First Nation students. There is a possibility that my criteria wasn’t appropriate or clear enough or perhaps presenting this material to non First Nation students was too intimidating. It is possible the students were so anxious about orally presenting that it was hard for them to start. Maybe the subject was treading into sacred
territory, and it would be inappropriate to discuss sacred materials publically. Perhaps the assignment was good it just needed more time and patience and there is also a possibility that the students have no excuse for their lack of participation. In this assignment the first Nation students had an opportunity to work together to present material that uniquely impacts their own culture. The participation was less than impressive however. In the wake of the failure I have little data to make any conclusions as to why.

There are multiple variables that affect participation, not all of these variables are within my locus of control. For example I cannot control my students’ socio economic conditions. Many of the First Nation’s students experience poverty, which is a huge factor, if not the biggest factor in academic performance. My reflective journal and memories from this and prior practicums includes numerous examples of how poverty and adverse circumstances are affecting the First Nation students. For instance, I have First Nation students who have no parents and have been shuffled in and out of foster and group homes. When my sponsor teacher went to check up with a legal guardian regarding the students attendance, he was told by a guidance councillor he was walking into a situation where the “inmates run the prison”. To what degree this statement is hyperbolic remains in question, but it reveals that this student has no accountability, structure or role model in their life. In many ways it is miraculous that she even attends school.

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20 There is a large body of research, some of it challenging the usefulness of the assertion that poverty affects grades. Debating the merits of these arguments comprises a significant deviation from the context of this project. And for the sake of brevity has been omitted. For further information on the relationship between socio economics and poverty see: Sam Redding. “Academic Achievement, Poverty and the Expectations of Parents and Teachers” School Community Journal (1997). 7(2) p. 87 or Machado, C.. Teacher attitudes, achievement, poverty, and Academic Performance Index. Ed.D. diss., Oklahoma State University.
Another student in my class is so self-deprecating that she pulls her own hair out in the classroom; she recently lost a second relative due to a house fire this last practicum. She has been in and out of the councillors’ rooms for grief and suicidal tendencies. When I began urging this student to do some work in class my sponsor teacher took me aside and explained to me what she was going through. There is another student who doesn’t show up for weeks at a time because the mother is afraid of the father coming to take her girl away. I have a student who has been kicked out of every school in the area except for Quamichan. I never saw her this practicum. I have a student who has numerous members of their immediate family in correctional facilities, my sponsor teacher told me he was pleased with the fact that she showed no criminal tendencies herself unlike other siblings that he had taught in previous years. I have a couple of students that show up for less than one third of the classes. Sometimes these students show up for class and I don’t even know their names, then they seemingly disappear by the time I am in my next practicum. I have another First Nation student who confided to the sponsor teacher and me that when his parents divorced neither his father nor mother wanted custody of him and he was sent to live with his grandmother. The student asked quietly, “I don’t think that’s right. Do you?” This student rarely has food or clean clothes and is so academically behind that when my sponsor teacher got him to hand in an assignment the entire staff room celebrated the achievement.

These issues affect the classroom dynamic and First Nation student engagement level in my classroom. How could they not? The question is to what degree I let it become an excuse for poor academic practices of my First Nation students. It would seem hard-hearted to expect greatness in an oral presentation under the circumstances that many of these children face on
a daily basis. Orlowski calls this line of reasoning the “culture of poverty” or the “poor Indians” excuse.\textsuperscript{21} Many teachers use it. It is a powerful way to rationalize poor achievement levels. Numerous articles state that when teachers lower an expectation along racial lines it has a profoundly negative impact.\textsuperscript{22} Most materials on the subject of Indigenous education agree that if equity is to be achieved in a classroom the teachers should expect equal level of performance from all members regardless of socio economics or living conditions.\textsuperscript{23} One Australian Aboriginal student reflects that, “school had limited expectations of my academic ability; I had actually developed limited expectations of my own ability. I swore that from then on I would challenge all teachers' limited perceptions of what Aboriginal children could achieve in school. Further, I would challenge all Aboriginal children's own perceptions of what they could achieve.”\textsuperscript{24} This reflection illustrates the danger in endorsing a negative feedback loop. Teachers can easily fuel their invisible prejudices by lowering standards due to observable poverty. I see a noble intent in equal expectation, but quite frankly I believe that poverty, hardship and the reservation system (a remnant of the embarrassing Indian Act) is affecting these students’ grades. It seems equal expectation needs to be held in balance with compassion and understanding. I feel that individual First Nation students or any other student for that matter going through adverse circumstance should be granted lenience. If this is a prejudice, then I am guilty. Regardless, the point remains that exceptional circumstances and poverty certainly affect classroom participation and academic achievement.

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\textsuperscript{21} Orlowski. p. 122.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
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A third issue which my research ran into was time. Time is a major factor in the success of this project, just because a strategy didn’t work in seven lessons doesn’t mean that consistency and effort would not pay off over a longer research period. I did not have time to establish a safe learning environment with my students. I come and go from their classroom less than once a month on a bi-weekly basis. Developing a rapport with sporadic attendance with each student is a challenge. Some students were eager to form trust relationships with me, many were not. This action research project assumed there would be a space where First Nation students felt comfortable to share and participate with others. It is clear to me that I have not yet developed that working space or personal rapport. Developing this rapport in a limited and somewhat hectic space of time is certainly one of the challenges I neglected to consider.

The project also made assumptions about my abilities as a teacher. It assumed an environment where I was capable of observing a visible minority amidst the pandemonium of daily work. As a new teacher I am quite focused on simply managing my room from moment to moment, trying to get through my lesson plan by the time the bell rings or stopping boys from changing worksheets into paper airplanes. Addressing the concerns of an action research project while simultaneously implementing strategies from my supervisor and sponsor teacher; coupled with the fact that my child was born in the middle of my research was more irons in the fire than my novice teaching ability could handle. This action research project assumed that I have mastered teaching to a point where I can look to a new and relatively unexplored horizon, when in reality much of my time is still kept trying to keep my neck above the
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In short, this can all be summed up by saying I was naive and had formed a naive and ill-defined notion of success.

The fourth problem is trying to integrate Indigenous knowledge seamlessly into a course curriculum that is Eurocentric. I recently attended a cultural immersion conference where they jokingly made a comment about a “beads and bannock” day at school. The point behind this comment was that it isn’t enough to have a special “event day” where we recognize Indigenous knowledge, while during the rest of school year we ignore it. However, teaching Indigenous content requires a knowledge base and a certain level of creativity and skill to interweave it with the grade eight curriculums.

Just to expand on this idea, grade eight social studies is largely about medieval Europe, Asia and India and involves some basic religious studies, including the major three monotheistic religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The textbook involves: knights, medieval hierarchy and the old land tenure system, the Black Death, The Crusades and castles and ancient wars and sieges. In my own mind this should be the highlight of any school day. I get giddy about teaching this stuff. The curriculum closely follows European history, specifically Western European history. Should I expect my First Nations students to be equally interested in a history that is not their own, the answer is probably not. Although I don’t teach grade eleven social studies I know the curriculum is quite focused on the development of our government system in Canada. Should I expect my First Nation’s students to be interested in a form of government which is foreign and imposed on them?
The answer to the problem is to include components of Indigenous knowledge; this effort is in fact mandated by the government. Teachers have a legal obligation to include First Nation knowledge in all classes, how and when to integrate Indigenous knowledge is the big question that needs a lot more explanation. Orlowski interviewed twelve department heads of social studies in B.C. and concluded that none of them were adequately prepared to teach Indigenous knowledge in their subject.25 It is concerning that very few teachers are prepared to meet the mandate of the government in a meaningful way. The following quote expresses concerns for the education of First Nation students.

We applaud the intent of ... the policy initiatives but until educators can connect the cultural heritage of Aboriginal children in public schools in culturally meaningful ways with the schooling they receive in such schools, the policy will fail. We need to see a renewed emphasis on the preparation of Aboriginal teachers... the inclusion of culturally relevant and authentic Aboriginal materials in the curriculum of teacher preparation for both mainstream and Aboriginal teacher candidates, and the development of new academics for Faculties of Education whose pedagogical knowledge and cultural understanding bridges the historic divide that is the legacy of colonialism.26

Essentially, reports like this are saying teachers are not equipped to integrate knowledge of First Nation people. When interviewed, the majority of education graduate students confess to a severe knowledge deficit about Canada’s First Nation cultures.27 Although I have an understanding of Canada’s changing and somewhat duplicitous relationship with First Nation communities this information is confined to the limited scope of politics, land claim issues and

25 Orlowski. 126.
27 Ibid. 340.
the Indian Act. There is a vast difference between knowing the history and embedding a rich cultural Indigenous knowledge into an understanding of the world. In other words my approach to First Nation perspectives is limited by own Eurocentric education as is the approach of most teachers. This is a topic I will cover in greater detail later in this report.

This action research project tossed in three lessons with indigenous content or “beads and bannock days” and expected to see results. It was not my intention to do this or be culturally insensitive. The fact remains that the course content in grade eight does not readily support First Nation knowledge on a daily basis. This coupled with the fact that I may not have the necessary knowledge base to support First Nation learners in a way that extends beyond cursory looks leads to lessons in which First Nation’s content appears to be an anomaly rather than the norm.

Stating that participation was increased as a result of my material or strategies would be stretching my findings. It would be equally erroneous to suggest or leave readers with the impression that there was no impact as a result of this study. A few casual conversations with individuals revealed that my attempts at including First Nation ways of knowing had a perceivable impact. I had a discussion with a First Nation student, who was just beginning their poster a week late due to some absences. She asked what the poster had to be about. I explained that it should be a belief system. She was very confused and told me she didn’t know anything about church. When I told her she could talk about the beliefs of her own Nation her face lit up. There was such a clear contrast in her enthusiasm for talking about her Nation’s beliefs and her distaste for talking about church that I thought I should include it in my research
report. I should mention that this student did not finish their work, she had started on it but apparently did not complete it, which suggest a little ambiguity between my quantitative and qualitative data. Despite her failure to produce any assessable result, I can still safely assume that the likelihood of her finishing was highly increased by inclusion of First Nation content.

In another instance a First Nation parent came to the school frustrated by her child’s underwhelming performance in school and a grievance that the classroom was not set up for the success of First Nation students. I was not present for this conversation; I was due to come to Quamichan the following week, but my sponsor teacher explained to that parent that we were going to be working on a “ways of knowing” unit and her daughter would be able to present her own spirituality in the classroom. Apparently this parent was so touched by the fact that her child had an opportunity to express her own beliefs that she hugged my sponsor teacher on the spot.

From this short narrative I can gather that providing students with opportunities to explore their own culture is deeply meaningful to both the parents and students of cultural minorities. Ironically, that student never applied themselves to that project and did get started on that poster, which once again suggests a certain level of ambiguity between my qualitative and quantitative data.

The final narrative is from a student that did not produce any work. When she was questioned about what she was learning from other students’ presentations she could explain some level of learning. Curiously, she was most interested and could recall the most details from the one First Nation students that did an oral report on a First Nation way of knowing.
I’ve highlighted a couple of reasons why I cannot give authoritative results as to why I did not receive greater participation levels from the First Nation students in Quamichan. This does not mean that the experience was a complete failure. More can be garnered through this initial research than through some deluded notion of success or epiphany.

My experiences taken as a whole lead me to believe there is a hunger from First Nation students and parents for more Indigenous content in the classroom but this hunger does not immediately translate into participation. First Nation students have a deeper curiosity and desire to see their values and culture reflected in their studies but the desire to see more culturally relevant material for First Nation students does not by itself lead to a change in participation and must be coupled with other pedagogies and greater consistency. I surmise that a holistic approach to educating First Nation students needs to be adopted. Creating a community and curriculum that upholds and reflects their values on a daily basis rather than through perfunctory snippets.

This is not an easy target, many First Nation and non First Nation peoples view this balancing of cultural content in schools as a battleground with a zero-sum-game. In other words, one culture must lose some public influence for another culture to gain it. Battiste takes a positive look at the emerging balancing act of what she sees as “opposing forces of knowledge”, European knowledge and Indigenous knowledge:

Now European knowledge competes with Indigenous knowledge and a developing intellectual nexus of trans-systemic theories of knowledge that underscore the importance of Indigenous knowledge and its perspectives. The immediate challenge in
higher education is how to balance colonial legitimacy, authority, and disciplinary capacity with Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies. Such rethinking of education animates the unfolding Indigenous renaissance, worldwide ecological movement, and trans-systemic synthesis.²⁹

Battiste notes that both knowledge systems have something to offer the other. However, until educators are capable of finding ways to weave Indigenous knowledge into the fabric of their room, White educators who are taught with predominantly European values will continue to teach in a Eurocentric model, without even being aware of it.

Further Reflection

The need for social studies educators to have an understanding of Canada and the world through multiple lenses is at the heart of success for First Nation students. The ethos of many teachers is moving in a divergent direction from this, espousing a belief that all students are equal and have equal access. This indirectly implies that First Nations have equal opportunity and any failure on their part is due to laziness. The fact remains that not all students have this equal opportunity. Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton write that, “until teachers develop classrooms that... place the needs of students of color equal to that of white students they will perpetuate and more deeply institutionalize racism on a daily basis”³⁰ As the reality of this statement seeped into my consciousness, I began to wonder, to what extent I am capable of placing the needs of First Nation students on a equal footing. Moreover, to what extent do I desire to teach from multiple lenses? This introspective look has been the focus of my continued research. In an article titled “Troubling National Discourses in Anti-Racist Curricular

²⁹ Battiste 130.
Planning”, Schick and Denis revealed that future teachers resisted the idea that their white skin allowed them to reinforce European dominance without realizing it.

Dominant cultural practices are always “on”. Always the standard or fall back position for the way things are done. This gives enormous privilege to those whose histories, ethnic backgrounds, social class, family assumptions and personal knowledge are in line with these dominant practices. The fact these practices are not the norm for everyone and that one’s achievements may be at the expense of others is often an invisible reality for privileged groups.31

I am aware that my own values are by and large reflected in the public education system. I am awaking to the reality that my own sense of “how things are” comes at a cost to ethnic minorities that do not share this vision. To what extent am I capable of reflecting other value systems so that all students can benefit from education remains to be seen. If we “teach who we are,”32 if that statement has any merit, than this is no simple task.

It would be foolish to believe that holistically embracing another way of knowing happens automatically. The epiphany that our education system dramatically favours students with white skin is the beginning of the journey not the end of it, even with that stated, it is only the beginning if one chooses to embark. There isn’t some static event that can occur where I suddenly decolonize my own way of thinking.

The process is intensely personal, one’s faith, social consciousness, history and assumptions are called into question when room is made to embrace another way of knowing which is foreign and peculiar to me. It is perhaps not surprising that Schick notices visceral

32 Palmer. p.1
responses in future teachers when he takes them through an anti-racist teaching class.\(^{33}\) Schick and Denis conclude their paper with a quote from Felman and Laub, “If teaching does not hit upon some sort of crises, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of critical or unpredictable dimension it has perhaps not truly been taught.”\(^{34}\) Greg Meyer, a district equity coach in the states says, “The truly difficult work is looking deep within myself... Perhaps I can never fully suppress my whiteness within me, and maybe that’s for the better, the process is the task, the journey has no end.”\(^{35}\) The challenge is ever present and never realized because I am not First Nation. Teaching from a First Nation lens thus poses a significant challenge.

**Conclusion**

This research was initially based around finding a magic bullet which I could use to make my First Nations students behave like the rest of the students. The goal was to see First Nation students participating in the classroom. While the goal was noble, the model for success was forged with an underlying principle that my First Nation students should behave in a similar fashion to the majority. This in itself was a step in the wrong direction.

First Nation students do not behave like other students, with a little cultural understanding this can be a cause for celebration and not alarm. Forging a greater unity between students, seeing levels of participation increase from First Nation students and seeing the achievement gap narrow is a dream that has a higher chance of being realized if I and other

\(^{33}\) Schick & Denis. p.310
\(^{34}\) Cited in: Schick & Dennis p.311
\(^{35}\) Cited in Glenn E. Singleton & Curtis Linton *Courageous Conversations about Race* (Corwin Press Inc. 2006) p.241
teachers like me are capable of creating an environment that holistically embraces First Nation knowledge. Not from trivial strategies or token cultural days. To what degree this truly symbiotic culture of education is even possible remains to be seen.
Works Cited


