

## SELF DETERMINATION, EDUCATION, AND INDIGENOUS LIBERATION

Central to the question of indigenous education is that of self determination. Since the inception of the Canadian state, attempts have been made to assimilate and control indigenous people through various means, imposing colonial structures of economy, culture, and life, which are not only antithetical to the traditional practices of indigenous peoples but that actively threaten to destroy their very way of life. To this day, they suffer under a colonial model built with the specific goal of furthering its domination over them. This context and understanding is vital to diagnosing and combating the problems that currently present themselves in indigenous education.

Throughout its history, the Canadian state has made many attempts to “educate” indigenous people. The Residential School system, implemented in 1894, sought to ‘kill the indian in the child’, an attempt to force Indigenous peoples to adopt colonial modes of thought through brutal repression, the state-kidnapping of children from their parents, and harsh punishment for any dissent. Later, the 60s Scoop continued this policy, albeit in a different form; this model too saw the state sanctioned theft of indigenous children run rampant, once again with the goal of ‘improving their education’. In both of these cases, a clear pattern emerges; one of intense colonial violence in the name of education, built on a paternalistic imperialist mindset.

The effects of this repression carry over to this day, as stated by the Accord on Indigenous Education; “the processes of colonization have either outlawed or suppressed Indigenous knowledge systems, especially language and culture, and have contributed significantly to the

low levels of educational attainment and high rates of social issues such as suicide, incarceration, unemployment, and family or community separation. In secondary schooling, for instance, 2006 graduation rates are still below 50 percent nationally for Aboriginal students and only 8 percent for university degree attainment, in contrast to the 14 percent Canadian average for persons over 15 years of age” (Archibald, Jo-ann. Lundy, John. Reynolds, Cecilia. Williams, Lorna, 6). A clear line can be drawn between the worse outcomes for indigeneous students today and the settler colonial violence of the past. However, a purely historical analysis fails to discuss the continuities in colonial education which still serve to disadvantage, and to do violence to, indigenous peoples. Lilly Brown, who conducted research with Australian Aboriginal students facing analogous conditions to those of Canadian indigenous students, says that “In making sense of the students’ experiences as a reflection of broader structural injustice, I find it useful to extend the reality that settler colonial invasion is ‘a structure and not an event’ (Wolfe, 2006: 388) by drawing on peace scholar Johan Galtung’s theory of violence. Such a consideration allows a complex reading of the connection between Indigenous educational disadvantage as a product of colonial dispossession. In doing so I suggest that Indigenous educational disadvantage, and the policy failure to adequately address this inequality, are forms of structural violence”, (Brown). The origins of educational inequality in public policy should form the basis of all analysis of the subject (May, 141). Colonial education is still in place in Canada, and is reflected in government policy regarding indigenous education. The government frames the goal of policy regarding indigenous people as broad assimilation into the state-owned school system, with a focus on ‘closing the gap’ that fails to take into account the value of indigenous self determination and self education. Resources are focussed on the

implementation of state schooling, with a curriculum determined by the Federal Government, that attempts to 'set indigenous students up for success' in the colonial world by indoctrinating them into colonial modes of thought (Brown) (Moreau, 204) (May, 143). However, this attempt to resolve inequality, as itself that inequality's source, does not succeed, and indigenous education continues to suffer.

It is necessary to analyze why the colonial curriculum currently imposed by the federal government fails indigenous students. Ultimately, the issue is one of cultural discongruency and the importance of education to a young persons' cultural identity. Education forms the most important part of socialization (Moreau, 208), and putting indigenous students through non-indigenous education essentially robs them of their ability to be socialized in a culturally appropriate manner. By forcibly divorcing education from this cultural context, the colonial education system fundamentally fails to educate indigenous youth in a way that isn't incongruous with the rest of their education, thus overriding the valuable cultural education that indigenous people provide to their children (Blesse, 18, 21). This incongruity tangibly worsens outcomes for indigenous learners, by placing them in an alien, oppressive, and imposed cultural environment, disadvantaging them as compared to their non-indigenous peers (Brown). The Accord on Indigenous Education holds that indigenous knowledge is necessary to indigenous success, and notes the harm done to children educated by a system not constructed by their community (Archibald, Jo-ann. Lundy, John. Reynolds, Cecilia. Williams, Lorna, 4). The imposition of a colonially constructed education system on a colonized community is a longstanding tool of imperialism (Moreau, 196), and its use not only worsens educational outcomes, but does massive violence to individual indigenous children (Brown). These

settler colonial schools are also massively underfunded (Archibald, Lundy, Reynolds, Williams, 3), betraying the ambivalence of colonial education to those it seeks to “educate”.

The solution to all of these problems -- the worse outcomes for indigenous students, the violence done by colonial curriculum, the continued cultural genocide through the domination of systems of socialization -- lies in educational self determination for indigenous peoples. There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that there are better outcomes for indigenous students who are educated in a traditionally appropriate manner. In Canada, “educational policy has long framed Indigenous Knowledges as problems to be taken care of by schooling-- i.e., the ‘Indian problem’ in which the Indigenous Knowledges embodied by Native children were to be erased and replaced, with more civilized, Western forms of knowledge. Rooted in a ‘logic of elimination’, settler colonial educational practices have been premised on policies and practices of Indigenous erasure--removing Indigenous children to attend boarding schools, erasing Indigenous languages and cultures via assimilation, or minimizing Indigenous kKnowledges as primitive. But Indigenous knowledge--which encompasses the complex, intergenerational, and ‘cumulative experiences and teachings of Indigenous peoples’ --are not *problems* to be overcome or addressed by schooling. It is rather the educational status quo that is the problem. Indigenous Knowledge systems are the inherent and protected *rights* of indigenous peoples” (Jacob, Sabzalian, Jansen, Tobin, Vincent, LaChance, 159). Indigenous knowledge is vast and valuable, and can only be appropriately transmitted through an indigenous-controlled education system. “Testimony clearly expressed that Indigenous Knowledges are a gift to students, teachers, and classrooms, and can extend to building community and neighborly relations across Tribal

boundaries” (Jacob, Sabzalian, Jansen, Tobin, Vincent, LaChance, 172). Examples of autonomous indigenous education in practice, such as Lubicon Lake First Nation and the Other Education schools in Chiapas, Mexico, demonstrate the ability and will of indigenous peoples to teach their own children without the intervention of the colonial state (Cardinal, 5) (Schertow). If empowered federally by resources, indigenous local councils, reserve governments, and other indigenous community organizations can engage with their communities to create noncolonial curriculums based in traditional education (May, 141, 143) (Schertow) (Jacob, Sabzalian, Jansen, Tobin, Vincent, LaChance, 174). On reserve, indigenous municipalities should gain sole sovereignty over education, and receive analogous resources to other school administrative networks from the federal government. This allows communities to provide a sufficient and rich education, with enough funding to fully realize their student’s potential, without the violence and incongruity of colonial education. For indigenous individuals and communities off-reserve, local organizations such as indigenous community centers should be given the ability to independently run public schools, with federal and/or provincial funding. These policies, alongside the constitutional recognition of the indigenous right to educational self determination, are necessary to rebuild nation-to-nation relations and end colonialism (May, 143) (Archibald, Jo-ann. Lundy, John. Reynolds, Cecilia. Williams, Lorna, 8). They will allow the colonial state to finally get out of the way of indigenous peoples, to allow for the multitude of indigenous cultures which have been suppressed for centuries to thrive, uninhibited by the yoke of colonial rule. If a people is to be free, and if their culture is to survive, there is no right more important than that of sovereignty of education (May, 140) (Jacob, Sabzalian, Jansen, Tobin, Vincent, LaChance, 160) (Archibald,

Jo-ann. Lundy, John. Reynolds, Cecilia. Williams, Lorna, 7) (Schertow) (Brown).

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