

## Eurocentrism in the Curriculum: A Barrier to Indigenous Student Success

Thanks to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), which spent 5 years researching government and church archives and collecting testimonies from Indigenous survivors of residential schools, many more non-Indigenous Canadians are aware of the long-term impacts of these schools on Indigenous populations. There is still an overall lack of awareness of how and why this history has affected the state of mind and motivation of Indigenous students, but the increased coverage of the topic in the media and in education are a sign of improvement in this area. A more difficult barrier to break is the general lack of awareness of the extent to which Eurocentric thinking permeates the educational system at all levels and continues to negatively impact Indigenous peoples and the perceptions of Indigenous peoples by non-Indigenous Canadians.

Several Indigenous scholars and educators from Canada and elsewhere have described the Eurocentric nature of the knowledge that is presented in Euro-Canadian institutions at all levels. Goulet and Goulet (2014) have explained that the very theories of teaching and learning, for example, are based in Eurocentric thinking, leaving out the diverse, rich ways in which Indigenous peoples have known about their world for millennia. Similarly, Smith (1999) has argued that the worldviews in which academic disciplines are rooted actively exclude other knowledge systems. Battiste (2013) has described this as cognitive imperialism, in which European-based knowledge is centred at the expense of other forms of knowledge.

Eurocentrism is so deeply engrained in the educational system, according to Battiste

(2013) that the validity of the knowledge goes unquestioned. True and valid knowledge is perceived as politically neutral, and the European worldview from which academic knowledge is derived is not recognized. Similarly, Smith (1999) has argued that “The globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West’s view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of ‘civilized’ knowledge. This form of knowledge is generally referred to as ‘universal’ knowledge, available to all and not really ‘owned’ by anyone” (p. 63). However, as argued by Battiste (2013), “There is no neutral knowledge system. All knowledge about nature is socially constructed” (p. 199).

According to these scholars, Eurocentric bias in education, when unquestioned, contributes to the further marginalization of Indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing and learning. Battiste (2013) and Smith (1999) have demonstrated this with regards to the humanities, which underpins many other disciplines such as those in the social sciences, and the sciences taught in Euro-Canadian schools. Both of these major fields can be traced back to periods in European history where some worldviews took precedence over others. Battiste (2013), for instance, has argued that Eurocentric humanities emerged during a period of exploration and conquest and that they are intricately tied to the rise of the racial classification. Citing Said’s (1977) work on the way in which European knowledge became “normalized” at the expense of the exotic other, she demonstrated that with racial classification came a centering of European knowledge. Similarly, the classification systems used in science, and given legitimacy

and “naturalness” in educational textbooks, do not take into account the cultural context from which they came forth.

The worldviews that underpin Eurocentric academic knowledge are vastly different from Indigenous worldviews. Sparkes and Piercey (2015) have elaborated on this difference with regards to Western Science. Indigenous worldviews tend to be holistic, privileging an interconnected view of the various elements of life: humans, animals, plants, and so forth. Western Science, on the other hand, focuses on analysis of the individual elements. Furthermore, Indigenous worldviews are based on direct experience in nature, particularly in one’s ancestral territory. Western scientific worldviews are based on facts gained in controlled environments such as labs, often disconnected from their original contexts.<sup>1</sup>

The exclusion of Indigenous worldviews, knowledges, and methodologies, according to all the above-mentioned authors, provides an incomplete picture of the world, which is detrimental to all people. For example, as illustrated by Sparkes and Piercey (2015), Battiste (2013), and Nelson (1993), Indigenous ways of knowing provide in-depth understandings of local environments – understandings that have helped Indigenous populations adapt to and survive in a variety of habitats in North America and elsewhere for thousands of years. As explained by Goulet and Goulet (2014), through observation and direct experimentation, and thanks to a rich oral tradition that records events and movements over time, Indigenous peoples have come to conclusions about their world that are increasingly corroborated by Western science.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Sparkes and Piercey (2015), page 4, for a chart that provides a more detailed comparison of Indigenous worldviews and Western science.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.cbc.ca/beta/news/technology/science-first-nations-oral-tradition-converging-1.3853799> for an example of a recent news story showing that Western science is increasing corroborating Indigenous knowledge.

This exclusion is particularly harmful to Indigenous students. As Battiste (2013) and Goulet and Goulet (2014) have argued, the trivialization of Indigenous knowledge and learning contributes to the social marginalization of Indigenous peoples. The treatment of Indigenous knowledge as archaic and unscientific, for instance, and the simple focus on negative statistics when dealing with Indigenous topics from a Eurocentric point of view hurts the self-esteem of Indigenous students as they internalize negative stereotypes and develop feelings of shame about their Indigenous heritage. They therefore doubt the validity of their own ancestral knowledge systems and their capacity to achieve academic success. Further, the invisibility of Indigenous contributions to Canadian society in the curriculum leads Indigenous students to feel as though they do not have a place in academia. According to Goulet and Goulet (2014), internalized racism resulting from a Eurocentric and stereotypical portrayal has a direct impact on the low numbers of Indigenous students at all levels of education.

Moreover, the well-intentioned inclusion of Indigenous topics, usually without the consultation of local Indigenous communities, still often suffers from a Eurocentric bias. A lack of consideration for the diversity of Indigenous cultures, histories, and knowledges, for example, contributes to the idea that all Indigenous peoples are the same, contrary to the diversity in European-based populations that is more frequently acknowledged in schools. Many teachers at Vanier, for instance, discuss “Native culture” – note the singular “culture” – and fail to distinguish between Inuit, Métis, and First Nations, and between individual First Nations societies. As advocated by Battiste (2013), Goulet and Goulet (2014), as well as several speakers at conferences I have attended in the past 2 years, it is crucial to recognize these distinctions as Indigenous knowledge is rooted in place.

Furthermore, typical portrayals of Indigenous populations either focus on a glorified past or on a problematic present, therefore perpetuating the idea that Indigenous populations are somehow “deficient” and unable to adapt to contemporary society. For

instance, as Dr. Adeela Arshad-Ayaz pointed out in her keynote address during the “Inclusion in Action” conference held at Vanier College in May 2015, high school textbooks in Quebec include many pictorial representations of Indigenous peoples when discussing pre-contact times. However, any discussion of contemporary Indigenous populations focuses on socio-economic indicators relating to “social problems” such as suicide and intoxication. Little visual material providing positive imagery of contemporary Indigenous peoples is provided.

All in all, Indigenous scholars and educators agree that an “add and stir approach,” as described by Battiste (2013), where Indigenous content is added to existing curriculum without providing the proper cultural and historical context is more detrimental than helpful. As argued by Goulet and Goulet (2014), “When improvements in Indigenous education focus primarily on cultural pro-

gramming, taught within the framework of current schooling practices, the initiatives do not expose or challenge power relationships within our society” (p. 22).

Fortunately, more and more educators acknowledge this lacuna in their own education. At Vanier, we are engaging in several efforts to bring Indigenous knowledge into our curricula. The response has been phenomenal. For instance, not only do we have 30 people signed up for a sensitization program on Indigenous Education, but we have a waiting list of over 10 people and many more people inquiring about future iterations of this program. Further, there has been massive support from departments across faculties for the upcoming Indigenous Studies certificate program. In September 2017, Vanier signed the Indigenous Education Protocol (Colleges and Institutes Canada, n.d.), which shows our commitment to continue our efforts on this front.



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