AN ANALYSIS OF ONTARIO ABORIGINAL EDUCATION POLICY: CRITICAL AND INTERPRETIVE PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT. This paper provides an historical and contemporary interpretation of the developmental influences that have led to the Ontario Ministry of Education's recent focus on Aboriginal educational policy in Ontario, Canada. It offers an interpretive and critical perspective on the rhetorical constructions, assumptions, and value-orientations implicit in two seminal documents. This discussion will assist Aboriginal Advisory Groups and communities, as well as policy-makers and practitioners, to think clearly about implementation strategies in the broader context of Aboriginal socio-educational development.

UNE ANALYSE DES POLITIQUES D'ÉDUCATION DES AUTOCHTONES EN ONTARIO: PERSPECTIVES CRITIQUES ET INTERPRÉTATIVES

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article offre une interprétation historique et contemporaine des facteurs ayant influencé le développement et contribué au récent intérêt du Ministère de l'Éducation de l'Ontario au Canada pour une politique éducationnelle autochtone. Il apporte une perspective critique et interprétative des fondements et rouages rhétoriques, des hypothèses et des valeurs fondatrices formulées implicitement dans deux documents fondateurs. Cette discussion guidera les groupes consultatifs et les communautés autochtones, ainsi que les politiciens et les professionnels responsables de formuler les politiques, en les amenant à articuler d'une manière claire les stratégies d'implémentation dans le contexte plus étendu du développement socio-éducatif des autochtones.

INTRODUCTION

The current Aboriginal education policy in Ontario, Canada (OME, 2007a), represents a self-declared commitment by the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) to address the learning needs and achievement of Aboriginal[1] students in publicly-funded schools across the province. Since public education is a provincial responsibility in Canada, the OME has made a 12.7 million dollar investment to support its policy initiatives and allocated an additional 22.7 million dollars towards resources and services (2007a). The OME's seminal policy document, *First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (OME,

2007b; hereafter, the Framework), aims to reconcile the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Ontario, an intent that has been noted in previous government publications (Paquette, 2007). The Framework states that school boards, administrators, teachers, and the OME itself will make an active commitment to more adequately address Aboriginal students' distinct learning needs. The Framework cites the importance of providing Aboriginal students with culturally-relevant learning environments that better reflect their epistemic traditions and values.

The companion and equally important document, *Building Bridges to Success for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Students* (OME, 2007c; hereafter, Building Bridges), provides public school boards in Ontario with an outline to develop and implement policies for Aboriginal students to voluntarily self-identify themselves. According to the OME, Aboriginal student self-identification will provide data on Aboriginal student achievement in provincial public schools that will assist in the development and evaluation of programs to address their unique needs as learners. In this light, all public school boards are required to develop a self-identification policy to better focus their attention on strategies and programs for improving Aboriginal student achievement. Furthermore, the OME suggests that Aboriginal self-identification will better equip educators and policy-makers with improved decision-making capacities to distinguish the success of various program interventions in meeting the needs of Aboriginal learners. The document underscores the necessity of drawing upon accurate and reliable data to assess Aboriginal students' progress and, in turn, close the aforementioned achievement gap. Both documents recognize that Aboriginal student achievement is subject to a myriad of historical and socio-cultural realities (Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000; Hill & George, 1996). The OME documents address the necessity of heightening the awareness of teachers and school administrators in regards to Aboriginal student preferences, and suggest that pedagogical practices be more aligned with holistic epistemic understandings of teaching and learning. They also cite the significance of providing a welcoming and culturally-sensitive environment in the classroom and school for Aboriginal students, parents, and the Aboriginal community at large.

Purpose of the analysis

This paper provides an historical and contemporary interpretation of the various developmental influences that have led to the Ministry of Education's focus on Aboriginal educational policy in Ontario, Canada. The analysis offers an interpretive and critical perspective on the Framework and Building Bridges documents. It closely examines the rhetorical constructions, contextual variables, value-orientations, and assumptions implicit in the policy documents. This discussion will assist Aboriginal advisory groups, communities, parents, and students, as well as policy-makers, administrators, and teachers, to think clearly about implementation strategies in the broader context of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal socio-educational development.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: DEVELOPMENTAL INFLUENCES

It has been 200 years since First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples were granted Constitutional rights to a federally-governed education in Canada. Beginning in the 1800s and continuing well into the 1980s, Aboriginal children attended church-operated residential schools and, subsequently, residential and band-operated day schools as well (Lobo & Talbot, 2001; Sellars, 1993). The Acts of 1868 and 1869 that were passed by the Canadian federal government commissioned residential schools to assimilate Aboriginal children into Eurocentric values and norms (Haig-Brown, 1988). The missionary-educators forced Aboriginal students to comply with their rigid and relentless prohibition against Native languages and the practice of traditional Aboriginal ceremonies. Already separated from their Aboriginal families and communities, Aboriginal children were corporally punished, humiliated, and abused for resisting the assimilationist practices of the residential schools. Aboriginal children were often denied necessary supplies and basic needs and thus suffered from malnutrition and chronic illness (Ellis, 1994). The governing policy justified residential schooling practices on the basis of redeeming Aboriginal children from their primitive lifestyles in the bush to a more civilized way of life. As a result, Aboriginal socio-linguistic traditions became victim to the acts of cultural genocide at the hands of the colonizers (Bonvillain, 2001; Moran, 1998). Of equal consequence to the loss of socio-linguistic knowledge are the still-painful psychological wounds experienced by the victims of residential schools (Battiste, 2000, 2002; James, 1996). Furthermore, the consequence of this historic reality has been the multi-generational loss of parenting skills experienced in various Aboriginal communities (Robertson, 2003). Such oppression was characteristic of conquest, power, and domination by a colonizing presence determined to assimilate what they perceived to be an uncivilized peoples (Healey, 2006).

The Hawthorn Report (1966-67) stated that First Nations students' academic achievement was significantly lower than mainstream Canadian students. According to Battiste and McLean (2005), a great proportion of Aboriginal epistemic and socio-linguistic traditions were already lost. This did not prevent the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) from appealing to the ruling government bodies that Aboriginal communities should have control over the education of their children, and over rights related to hunting and fishing; yet, the Federal government expressed little interest in the collective nature of Aboriginal peoples' rights (Graham, Dittburner, & Abele, 1996). Aboriginal leaders have consistently campaigned for these entitlements from the mainstream governing parties, yet policy-makers and authorities have refused to relinquish such control (Cherubini, 2009b). Aboriginal peoples argued that reclaiming and sustaining Aboriginal socio-linguistic and cultural traditions could be best achieved through the control of their education that would, in turn, reestablish the sense of self-identity in Aboriginal children (Assembly of

First Nations, 1988, 1990, 1994; Confederacy of Cultural Education Centers, 2000). However, the landmark documents of the past 40 years are testament to the inactivity of federal and provincial policymakers: "At least until patriation of the constitution in 1982, the agendas of the federal government and provincial governments were preoccupied with the federal/provincial tug-of-war over constitutional and other issues and with management of broader economic and social issues" (Graham et al., 1996, p. 28). Aboriginal scholars have endorsed these calls for control over education and referred to the notion that Aboriginal epistemologies are distinct from colonial paradigms of teaching and learning (Hill, 2000; Womack, 1999). In fact, in forcing assimilation and acculturation to Eurocentric knowledge, modern governments and education systems have displaced Indigenous knowledge. It is clear, however, that the exclusive use of Eurocentric knowledge in education has failed First Nations children (Battiste, 2002, p. 9).

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION: A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

There has been a 28% increase in the Aboriginal population in Canada (compared to 6% in the mainstream population) between 2001 and 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2008). In Ontario, over 47% of the Aboriginal population is below 25 years of age, and there are in excess of 50,000 Aboriginal students (18,300 First Nation; 26,200 Métis; and 600 Inuit students) enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools across the province (OME, 2007b). Academically, Aboriginal students continue the historic trend of under-achieving compared to their non-Aboriginal peers. The Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (1997), Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), and the National Indian Brotherhood (1988) have been adamant that Aboriginal students' education should be more responsive to their socio-linguistic and cultural value systems (Kavanaugh, 2005; Cohen, 2001) to address what the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples referred to as the educational deficit problem. The Auditor General's Report (2004) predicted the bleak reality that it would require an additional 28 years to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners. Consider that in 2001, nearly 40% of Aboriginal people did not complete a secondary school diploma and that more than 12% of them (between the ages of 15 and 29) quit school after their elementary education. Most telling, Aboriginal youth (those between 15 and 24 years of age) reported boredom as the principal cause for abandoning their formal education (Statistics Canada, 2003). The proportion of Aboriginal children across North America with an Aboriginal mother tongue decreased from 9% to 7% between 1996 and 2001 (Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2001). The various recommendations on the part of Aboriginal leaders towards self-determination (see, for example, Elijah, 2002; Fishman, 2001), over the last 30 years in particular, have not only seemingly gone unheard, but have resulted in rather disparaging educational experiences for Aboriginal children in public schools (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008).

Although there has been an emergence of some Aboriginal curricula in Ontario public schools (e.g., secondary school Native language courses), Aboriginal epistemic traditions have not been represented in the public school system, and this may be a cause of the inequities in power relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in various socio-political institutions, including education (Neegan, 2005). Traditional epistemic practices tend to marginalize Aboriginal students who do not necessarily fit into the dominant definitions of academic success. Such an imbalance of power may, according to some scholars, account for the consistent rendering of Aboriginal peoples in Canada into the lowest income brackets, higher unemployment and school drop-out rates, and a disproportionate dependency on social assistance when compared to similar cohorts of populations from mainstream society (Redefining Success, 2007). Aboriginal students, as well, are depicted in government publications and mainstream scholarship through a comparable "deficit lens" that distinguishes them by higher absenteeism and lower achievement scores and graduation rates (p. 8). Such a deficit lens, be it in the context of socio-economic status or education, creates (and reinforces) a dangerously negative stereotype of Aboriginal peoples (Métis National Council, 2007; Kusugak, 2004).

DISCUSSION

As attested to in the previous pages, various historical influences have affected the current state of Aboriginal education in Ontario. The OME policy initiatives, the Framework and Building Bridges, are an outcome of these influences. The documents draw attention to the unique needs of Aboriginal learners, the importance of infusing culturally-sensitive pedagogy into teachers' practice, and the need to create inviting school environments for Aboriginal students and communities. Given that these initiatives are relatively recent publications and are in the developmental stages of implementation across the province, an interpretive and critical discussion is warranted. The rhetorical constructions, contextual variables, value orientations, and assumptions implicit in the policy documents will be more closely examined.

Aboriginal education policy in Ontario: A self-declared solution

Three critical considerations shape the framework of the policy analysis discussion. The two documents will be examined according to (1) the rhetorical constructions that position the governing body as provider, (2) the implicit assumptions of soliciting partnerships with Aboriginal communities, and (3) the value-orientations of student achievement and accountability.

1. The rhetorical constructions that position the governing body as provider

The OME's commitment to "working with Aboriginal leaders and organizations" is explicitly clear in the introductory pages of the policy Framework (OME,

2007b, p. 5). The governing body positions itself, in official public policy, as willing to extend its attention, support, and services towards Aboriginal students by working with Aboriginal representatives. On the same page, the policy document states that the OME "has identified Aboriginal education as one of its key priorities" (p. 5). The rhetoric of dedication and commitment to what is referred to as a priority reflects a unique and innovative policy direction. Yet, for over 30 years, the same Aboriginal communities, leaders, and organizations that the policy Framework invokes have been questioning and challenging the mainstream educational systems in Ontario and across the country. As previously discussed, Aboriginal communities have advocated for the restoration of control over educational matters. These most recent documents – the Framework and Building Bridges – positions the OME as having a benevolent and sensitive recognition of the rather emergent needs of Aboriginal learners. The policy Framework states that the strategies presented in the document are "based on a holistic and integrated approach to improving Aboriginal student outcomes" (p. 6). In various sections throughout the Framework policy, references are made to Aboriginal learners' unique and diverse learning needs. Boards of education, schools, and teachers will, according to the policy, familiarize themselves with these learning preferences and provide Aboriginal students with opportunities to better engage them and their communities with the public school system.

It is intriguing to consider the language of the OME's policy statement goals, framed as it is in the rhetoric of benevolent provider of educational services to Aboriginal students and communities. More specifically, the goals are presented in frames of reference that employ action and demonstrative verbs, thereby underscoring the sense of commitment to Aboriginal education across Ontario. The verbs strategically describe the vast extent to which the OME is willing to go in order to improve Aboriginal student achievement. Throughout the policy goals is the OME's stated commitment to "increase," "respond," "provide," "create," "support," "facilitate," "develop," and "implement" various resources and materials to better the educational experiences of Aboriginal students (2007b, pp. 7-8). The language of the policy Framework unmistakably underscores the OME's willingness to "consult," "develop," "provide," "enhance," "support," "partner," "employ," and "implement" resources and training, research, human capital, and the necessary finances to improve Aboriginal student achievement and close the achievement gap in a spirit of self-professed "collaboration with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit communities and organizations, parents, and students" (p. 11). As background, the document explains that "many Aboriginal people have few employment skills and lack the academic / literacy skills needed to upgrade their qualifications in an increasingly knowledge-oriented labour market" (p. 24). The rhetorical and discursive stance throughout the document not only further portrays the OME as benevolent and conciliatory providers of educational services, but subtly reproduces a depiction of

Aboriginal peoples from a deficit perspective – uneducated citizens who are unqualified to make a significant contribution to society. This depiction is further complicated by Eurocentric and capitalist rhetoric and paradigms (see, for example, Ore, 2006). Definitions of "knowledge" and references to "labour market[s]" are based on ethnocentric understandings that consider mainstream post-colonial knowledge and standards of living to be the defining understandings of these principles for all peoples. The inclusion of the adjective "many" to describe Aboriginal peoples' employment and literacy rates amplifies their underprivileged status in Ontario and Canadian society, making the OME's commitment more impressive at the potential cost of further contributing to this marginalized populations' social exclusion (Neal, 2004). These rhetorical constructions within the policy Framework also seem to accentuate the OME's status as provider of the necessary skills and services that will redeem the Aboriginal population and enhance their potential to more meaningfully contribute to a capitalist and market-driven economy – an intention that may not necessarily be too strikingly different from the assimilationist colonial practices of years gone by.

Similar to the rhetorical constructions of the Framework policy, the OME's Building Bridges document (OME, 2007c) positions the governing voice quite favourably. It reiterates the OME's commitment to Aboriginal learners and communities. It also emphasizes that in order to fulfill this commitment there must be recognition by district educators, principals, and teachers of how pedagogical practice needs to address the particular educational needs and learning preferences of Aboriginal students. The document "was designed to help Ontario school boards develop effective policies and practices for voluntary, confidential Aboriginal student self-identification" (p. 4). Self-identification, according to the document, can help the OME focus on supporting Aboriginal learning based on objective and reliable data. The rhetorical frames of reference are perilously similar, however, to the language that described the historical negotiations in North America. Decades ago, Aboriginal peoples gave their *Native* land to the colonial presence in *exchange* for the government's promise of *providing* for their needs. The money from the sale of the property was to be kept in secure trust funds and *managed* by the colonizers in the *best interest* of the colonized (Lui, 2006). On a completely different level of subtlety and sophistication, the most recent Aboriginal education documents (and in this case Building Bridges) may imply that in *exchange* for Aboriginal peoples' consent to self-identify, the OME will *provide*, facilitate, support, develop, and enhance (respective of the exhaustive list of action verbs throughout the document) the learning opportunities for Aboriginal students in public education. Further, the respective public finances, human capital, and resources associated to the goods and services that the OME promises will be determined and *managed* in the *best interest* of the Aboriginal students and their communities. There may be, at the very least, a scent of the assimilationist practices imposed upon Aboriginal peoples in the not-so-distant past.

2. The assumptions of soliciting partnerships with Aboriginal communities

Just as there exists a sense of governmental control in the rhetorical constructions of provider within the Framework and Building Bridges documents, so too it surfaces in various implicit assumptions in the context of partnerships with Aboriginal communities. "Through cooperation and partnerships with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit families, communities, and organizations, First Nation governments and education authorities ... the Ministry is committed to developing strategies" to meet the needs of Aboriginal learners (OME, 2007b, p. 7). While the language of this objective suggests partnership between mainstream and Aboriginal stakeholders, there is the assumption that Aboriginal families and communities share the same intent to cooperate. Does such an intent on the part of the OME assume that Aboriginal peoples want to cooperate with a school system that historically has been perceived "as the agent of their oppression and [the source of their] suspicion [given] its attempts to respond to Aboriginal students" (Robertson, 2003, p. 553)? Further, by mobilizing colonial discourses of Aboriginal peoples as poorly educated and unqualified citizens in a market economic society, does it not *coerce* Aboriginal communities into a forced compliance to cooperate and partner with the benevolent and sympathetic mainstream educational governing authorities who promise to provide for a more culturally-responsive educational experience for Aboriginal children? Given that Aboriginal children are forced to negotiate the cultural discontinuity between their Aboriginal and mainstream school communities (Huffman, 2001; Piquemal, 2005), the Ministry of Education's expressed public intent to cooperate and partner puts the Aboriginal community in a compromising position. As a principle of the Framework, the policy states that such "cooperation" is "essential" to provide the necessary services and resources to close the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (OME, 2007b, p. 8). If one takes into consideration the lavish investments in Aboriginal educational policy, the conciliatory rhetoric in the OME policy document, and the commitment being made to Aboriginal students and their families, the same question resonates: that is, are Aboriginal communities in a socio-political position to reject the policy initiatives? The OME is extending its "support," and the support of school boards, schools, principals, and teachers to develop policies of self-identification for Aboriginal peoples (p. 11).

What would be the public perception if Aboriginal communities decided to decline the exhaustive support and lofty objectives as they are expressed in the documents? The policy Framework cites the formal gatherings of the Council of Ministers of Education (2004) and the First Ministers' Meeting (2005) as representing two federal political bodies that have recognized the urgency to make Aboriginal education a priority (OME, 2007b, pp. 25-26). While the national focus is commendable, it inevitably represents another socio-political influence that positions the mainstream governing bodies as sensitively responsive to these matters. This seems to further compel Aboriginal

families and communities into cooperating and partnering with mainstream educational providers who, at no fault of their own, govern a western-oriented and epistemic school system. The cultural divide between Aboriginal and mainstream peoples regarding the goals of education may be best represented by the Aboriginal belief that schools should follow the wishes of the community. The school's values are rooted in the community and reflect the social and moral interests of families in the context of Aboriginal community-defined outcomes (McCarty, 2002). Interestingly, the policy Framework also cites the National Indian Brotherhood – Indian Control of Education (1972) request for "the need for control of First Nation education by First Nation people" (2007b, p. 25). Yet, upon closer examination, one is left to wonder how Eurocentric measures of student achievement and goal statements that position the OME as a provider willing to extend itself to further the cause of Aboriginal student learning actually addresses the core issue of sovereignty that was clearly delineated in 1972.

In the Building Bridges (OME, 2007c) document, the second step of developing a self-identification policy for school boards is identified as "consultation," and its "success... depends on the support of Aboriginal students, parents, and communities" (p. 12). Note how the onus of responsibility is directly shifted to the Aboriginal community. The implication is that if the request to self-identify is not supported by Aboriginal peoples, then the policy Framework, the OME commitments, and the financial and human resources that the government is willing to invest will be less successful at improving education for Aboriginal children. The document purports to have been developed through consultation with both mainstream public school boards and First Nation and Métis representatives (p. 5), yet the request to have Aboriginal peoples self-identify has implications on two key research findings. First, it may be mistaken to assume that ethnic self-identification is a permanent and static aspect of the self (Hallett, Want, Chandler, Koopman, Flores, & Gehrke, 2008; Stephan, 2000; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Second, individuals fluctuate in the degree to which they consider and value their ethnic identity and this inconsistency can influence a wide array of significant social outcomes (Greig, 2003; Verkuyten, 2003). While it is true that Aboriginal educators were consulted in the process of drafting this document (in fact the OME created an Aboriginal Education Office staffed by individuals of Aboriginal descent), the reality is that these individuals may be prejudicially perceived as the products of White mainstream education and value-systems that are disconnected from their Native communities and worldviews. Aboriginal peoples "educated within the mainstream system risk being labeled as Red Apples, and thus find themselves alienated from the very people they have educated themselves to help" (Thompson Cooper & Stacey Moore, 2009, p. 179). The problems within this identity discourse, incidentally, are equally applicable to the Aboriginal students themselves. Their experience in public school consti-

tutes a significant part of their life experiences and includes opportunities to self reflect, develop functional socio-emotional skills, and adapt to mainstream institutional expectations and values (Macfarlane, Glynn, Grace, Penetito, & Bateman, 2008). This necessitates that Aboriginal youth negotiate their bicultural identities by making sense of the beliefs, relationships, and practices of school and curriculum in light of their traditional teachings and worldviews (Lutz & Ledema, 2004). Furthermore, the shift of responsibility once again positions Aboriginal peoples in a proverbial no-win situation. If they accept the policy initiatives and self-identify, they indirectly consent to a "solution" that is defined, determined, and ultimately managed by mainstream educators who measure student success by standardized and culturally-unfamiliar practices. If they reject the policy and the request to self-identify, they risk being perceived as ungrateful to government (and hence the general public) attention and financial support, thereby satisfying the self-fulfilling prophecy as it has been presented from a deficit lens.

3. The value orientations of student achievement and accountability

The policy Framework states that "in order to assess progress towards the goals of improved student achievement and closing the gap in student achievement, it will be important to have reliable and valid data" (OME, 2007b, p. 10). The Framework's first goal focuses on high-levels of student achievement defined as more Aboriginal students meeting the standards articulated by the OME on provincial standardized assessments in reading, writing, and mathematics (p. 11). There may be, however, an inherent conflict in the value-orientation of measuring student achievement in this context (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008). The "reliable and valid data" are the outcomes of large-scale externally imposed standardized tests administered to every grade three, six, and nine student in publicly-funded schools across the province. For Aboriginal learners, and particularly in light of their holistic and unique epistemologies as referred to in the Framework, such measures of student achievement are culturally and epistemically misaligned. Standardized and external assessments are based on Eurocentric traditions of teaching and learning, and do not lend themselves to the various characteristics associated with Aboriginal student learning needs and preferences (Cherubini & Hodson, 2009). External standardized tests cannot be considered as reliable and valid data if they reflect a Eurocentric-based curriculum, and likely reflect different learning styles rather than ability levels (Gipps, 1999; Lessow-Hurley, 2000). Such assessments may be considered by Aboriginal families and communities as culturally insensitive measures that discount the very same presence of Aboriginal worldviews that the Framework commits to in their policy document. As McCarty (2002) states, "evaluation is ideologically saturated, and competing interpretive frameworks inevitably produce radically different results" (p. 101). Robertson (2003) suggests, "a test-driven system that is designed to sort the winners from the losers has

little interest in non-instrumental learning, let alone using the curriculum as a means of restoring cultural pride and integrity" (p. 553).

The Framework recognizes that Aboriginal students have unique learning needs that are enhanced by culturally-sensitive teaching practices and varied assessment and evaluation opportunities. Yet the Framework also states that the ultimate measure of student learning for Aboriginal students will be in the same Eurocentric terms that quantify knowledge acquisition and intellectual development by criterion and norm-referenced standardized test scores. Clearly, the value orientations of what are considered reliable and valid data to measure student achievement stand in stark contrast to one another. The re-conceptualization of teachers' assessment and teaching strategies in mainstream schools, as advocated by the Framework, does not seem to support the measuring of student achievement by externally imposed Eurocentric practices (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008). The fact remains that, "the provincial curriculum does not allow First Nation students to learn in their own language or learn their own history in a meaningful way... nor does it accommodate a rate of learning that is consistent with their individual learning styles" (Anderson, Horton, & Orwick, 2004, p. 8).

To gauge Aboriginal student achievement by external standardized tests that reflect standardized grade and age appropriate expectations and objectives presents itself as a less than lucrative opportunity for Aboriginal learners. By focusing on standardization, teachers' capacities to be flexible practitioners able to exercise their professional judgments to suit the needs of their learners is significantly reduced (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Oakes, Hunter Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2002).

The Building Bridges document (OME, 2007c) re-states "how important it is to have accurate and reliable data in order to assess progress towards the goal of improving Aboriginal student achievement" (p. 7). This analysis questions the assumption that external standardized test scores accurately and reliably measure student learning (Jones, 2006). Furthermore, the document suggests that self-identification is necessary for the sake of accountability. However, the notion of accountability (much like the value-orientation of measuring achievement by imposed large-scale assessments) is a somewhat dubious concept. In more specific terms, it is suggested that Aboriginal people self-identify in order to enable the OME to justify their investment in these policy initiatives to the tax-paying public. The OME describes the process of self-identification as "the solution" towards properly assessing and supporting Aboriginal learners (OME, 2007c, p. 7). Yet, it is the solution to a host of problems and complexities related to education, assimilation, compliance, and identity that was created by the colonial presence in the first place. Furthermore, the present system of accountability often impedes school systems in general and teachers specifically from connecting the curriculum and pedagogy to their authentic

epistemic realities (Apple, 2006). The fact that plans are in place for the "separate reporting of results" for Aboriginal students merely contributes to the ambiguous implications of these policies. School boards will, according to the Building Bridges document, disclose the information to the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) and the OME who will officially report their findings to the public (OME, 2007c, p. 15). Because of voluntary self-identification, the EQAO can publish Aboriginal students' results on standardized tests that are culturally and epistemologically disconnected from their learning paradigms. The OME initiatives as expressed in the policy documents seem rather minor considerations (and potentially exploitative) in light of the mandate of public accountability (Cherubini & Hodson, 2009). The request to self-identify may inadvertently place Aboriginal students in a position where their results on the epistemologically-biased standardized tests will be subject to less informed public scrutiny. It has been suggested that in order to properly preside over a population, "one needs to isolate it is a sector of reality, to identify certain characteristics and processes proper to it, to make its features notable, speakable, writable, to account for them according to certain explanatory schemes" (Rose, 1996, p. 334).

Aboriginal students seem in these most recent OME documents to be identified as a separate division of the school population with identifiable learning characteristics that are in need of educational support and assistance from the mainstream educational providers.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has offered an historical and contemporary interpretation of the developmental influences that have in varying degrees influenced the OME's Aboriginal educational policy initiatives. By offering a critical and interpretive perspective on two key OME documents, the Framework and Building Bridges, the analysis examined their rhetorical constructions, contextual variables, value orientations, and fundamental assumptions. Of particular concern to Aboriginal families, communities, and leaders is the prevailing sense of being situated in compromising positions by the rhetorical framework of the documents. There is an impression that Aboriginal peoples are being convinced by rather than engaged in "the solution" proposed by the OME. The OME recognizes the socio-cultural and socio-economic context of Aboriginal peoples' constraints, and offers to provide the services and supports to improve Aboriginal student achievement. The OME also recognizes the demands of measuring outcomes and public accountability. From the perspective of public perception, there seems to be relatively little conceptual space from which to challenge the mainstream discourse and develop counter-arguments. Resistance by Aboriginal families and communities would not seem warranted given the evidence of such a concentrated and overt focus on Aboriginal education.

The OME lists the desired outcomes of the policy initiatives and describes the pertinent and relevant interventions necessary for school boards, principals, and teachers to become more responsive to Aboriginal students' learning needs. What remains rather inconclusive, however, is the extent to which the policy initiatives address the issue of sovereignty, which remains among the most vital considerations for Aboriginal peoples. Language and culture are the necessary conduits for cross-generational learning among Aboriginal children and communities (Elijah, 2002). They want to regain control of educational practices that were severed from them upon first contact – a reality that continues to preoccupy their educational experiences. Haig-Brown (2008) states that Aboriginal knowledge and epistemology has the "potential to reframe and decentre" conventional scholarship and Canadian curricula (p. 13). As it currently stands, mainstream teachers translate Aboriginal education curricular initiatives by their own understanding of pedagogical content and therefore situate their teaching from a personal narrative context (Shkedi & Nisan, 2006). This jeopardizes the authentic delivery of Aboriginal epistemology and potentially tarnishes the calls for self-determination. It also seems to narrowly represent what Abele (2007) refers to as "largely symbolic or somewhat essentialist" practices (p. 247). Seemingly absent in the discursive frames, contextual variables, and policy statement is the concept of social agency (Giroux, 2004; Bourdieu, 1998). The rhetorical constructs of the documents are reflective of market-driven value systems that further marginalize Aboriginal peoples to the fringes of educational institutions defined by Eurocentric practices (Dieter-Meyer, 2006; Grande, 2004). Research suggests that Aboriginal youth have traditionally adjusted their socio-emotional behaviours to accommodate the perceived realities of their mainstream circumstances; this merely perpetuates a sense of hopelessness of experiencing an authentic education (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991). Aboriginal scholars want to reclaim their epistemic identities and empower Aboriginal knowledge to rise "in social value [and] status as a system of knowledge, while Indigenous scholars generate the necessary intellectual space to create a conceptual and analytical framework for its development" (Battiste, 2002, p. 6).

The value of self-determination in education and the potential of culturally responsive educational practices cannot be overstated. Culturally responsive schooling advocates for the development of culturally-healthy students and communities, and requires a paradigm shift in terms of how teaching, learning, curriculum, and pedagogy are understood in schools (Beaulieu, 2006; Demmert, Grissmer, & Towner, 2006). The impetus for culturally responsive schools resulted from anthropological, psychological, and sociological studies that illuminated the struggles of minority students in public education (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003). For Aboriginal peoples in Ontario, Canada, and beyond, culturally responsive schools represent the potential to become empowered as nations and to underscore their epistemic, cultural, and linguistic identities as sovereign political entities.

This analysis presents Aboriginal Advisory Groups and communities with some considerations for the assumptions and value-orientations of public educational policy as they seek to fulfill the mandate of integrating the Framework into school board planning. These advisory groups may be better positioned to advocate for culturally responsive practices that respect Aboriginal knowledge systems and meaningfully represent their epistemologies in order to foster the authentic identity of Aboriginal youth. By advocating for culturally-rich learning systems and spaces, Aboriginal students can experience a broad range of value-based educational opportunities. Furthermore, by establishing a communication network among school boards, Aboriginal Advisory Groups can benefit from their successes as they integrate the Framework in their respective school boards. They may also benefit from sharing some of the challenges they encounter as a result of institutional resistance. One can surmise that there will be many cross-current interests between Advisory Groups across the province during the implementation phases of these policy initiatives. By collectively addressing the guiding principles of Aboriginal epistemology and representation in mainstream schools, the voices of the Aboriginal Advisory Groups will be stronger.

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NOTES

1. The use of the all-inclusive word *Aboriginal* might suggest that there is a generic, one-size-fits-all approach to the realities of Aboriginal academic achievement in Ontario schools. However, it must be recognized that the Anishnabe, Haudenosaunee, Inuit, Métis, Mushkeygo, and Nishnawbe-Aski peoples who call Ontario home are highly diverse in their cultures, languages, values, beliefs, histories, contemporary realities, and aspirations.

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