APPROACHES to Aboriginal Education IN CANADA

SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS

Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, editors

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Dedication

In Memoriam
Larry Gaynor
1939–2010

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Introduction

Hunting Assumptions[1] in the Search for Solutions

> For a teacher to mandate in advance—either explicitly or implicitly—that only one ideological interpretation or outcome is permitted in a discussion or assignment is to contradict a fundamental tenet of critical thinking. That tenet holds that all involved—including teachers—must always be open to reexamining the assumptions informing their ideological commitments. (Brookfield, 2012, p. 134)

On February 25, 2010, we travelled to Edmonton, Alberta, to give a presentation at the Greater Edmonton Teachers' Convention Association (GETCA). The event would impress upon us the constraints on honest discussions about Aboriginal education, eventually leading to our decision to edit this volume.

The speaking engagement, to occur the following day, was the result of an invitation from Hope Knudsen, the president of the association. Ms. Knudsen had heard one of us (Frances Widdowson) being interviewed by Michael Enright about our book *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation*. After listening to Widdowson's arguments, Knudsen thought our research and observations would be of great interest to teachers (Knudsen, personal communication, August 5, 2009). Consequently, she asked Widdowson to make a submission to the convention, and the proposed talk, "Speaking Frankly about Aboriginal Education," was added to the program.

Upon checking into our hotel, we received a message inviting us to have a drink with conference organizers that evening. We were

informed during the meeting that GETCA was under pressure to have Widdowson excluded from the program. Fortunately, the association was standing firm but was concerned about the reception Widdowson might receive; Widdowson assured the convention organizers that she was not worried and hoped that her presence would encourage much needed debate on Aboriginal education. It was then decided that another session, presented by an Aboriginal member of the association, Patrick Loyer, would be cancelled so that he could comment on Widdowson's speech (presumably so that GETCA could meet the opponents' demands).

Although the presentation did not result in the acrimony feared by GETCA organizers, the matter did not end there. After arriving back in Calgary, Widdowson received a telephone call from Andrew Hanon, a journalist at the *Edmonton Sun*. Hanon informed Widdowson that a professor from the University of Alberta, Cora Weber-Pillwax, and two of her graduate students, had issued a press release entitled "ATA Invites Racism into Alberta Classrooms" (2010). The press release asserted that "the Alberta Teachers Association is complicit in furthering … racist and assimilationist views" by inviting Widdowson to speak. The evidence used to support this assertion was Widdowson's observation, in an interview given in 2009, that "there is no history of literacy, science and mathematics in aboriginal societies, and therefore little expertise exists to improve native educational levels." Widdowson's criticisms about the relevance of Aboriginal traditions to modern educational processes were claimed to be "a threat to the sense of security of every Aboriginal child in Alberta" and "a direct attack on Aboriginal students in this province" (Weber-Pillwax, Rost, & Auger, 2010). Weber-Pillwax and her graduate students had concluded that "we cannot trust that the ATA would support and promote the safeguarding of our children now that we have witnessed their support of professional development that denies the existence of Aboriginal knowledge and, essentially, of Aboriginal humanity" (Andrew Hanon, personal communication, March 4, 2010; Hanon, 2010).

The events that transpired at the GETCA convention exemplify a disturbing trend in the discussion of Aboriginal policy today. As Alan Cairns (2001), a long-time observer of Aboriginal affairs, has pointed out, "Aboriginal policy is extremely politicized, and subject to taboos which constrain both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants" (p. 155). These taboos prevent dissenting opinions from being expressed, narrowing the range of views considered. This makes effective policy development difficult, because the validity and accuracy of

the assumptions behind current initiatives are rarely analyzed, and alternatives are not explored.

The attempt to shut down Widdowson's speech in Edmonton was certainly not the first use of this tactic. At the Canadian Political Science Association conference in 2008, for example, a number of political scientists debated whether to have Widdowson charged under hate speech provisions of the Criminal Code for suggesting that Indigenous theories and methodologies did not meet the standards of rigour demanded in the discipline of political science (Shimo, 2009; Widdowson, 2009; Ajzenstat, 2008). Further opposition was encountered at the Aboriginal Research Policy Conference in 2009, when some participants threatened a boycott if we were allowed to speak. Conference organizers again stood up to the pressure, but our presentation was removed from its original placement on a panel and held separately at the request of another presenter.

These problems are particularly acute with respect to discussions specifically about Aboriginal education. Although a variety of perspectives exist, there is a reluctance to incorporate alternative viewpoints in edited anthologies. This circumstance is illustrated by the volumes on Aboriginal education published over the last 25 years. All of these edited anthologies embrace what we refer to as parallelist assumptions. They make no attempt to include other perspectives that would challenge the existing orthodoxy with respect to Aboriginal education.

The objective of this book is to break down these barriers to discussion and debate, allowing a diversity of views to be represented in one volume. Readers can examine the assumptions of each, and evaluate the accuracy and validity of the evidence used to support the various perspectives. This will encourage critical thinking in assessing the merits of opposing viewpoints, and begin the process of considering what course of action should be pursued.[2]

It should be mentioned that even the publication of this book has been subject to the censorial attitudes that have come to hinder discussions about Aboriginal education. Just as the book was going through the final stages of its preparation, Weber-Pillwax—this time in her capacity as one of the editors of the *Canadian Journal of Native Education*—again acted to restrict the open discussion of ideas. Although permission for publication had already been granted by the journal to reprint four articles, Weber-Pillwax's interference led two authors—Marie Battiste and Paul Berger—to request that their articles be withdrawn from the volume. As a result, this book's coverage of parallelist perspectives is not as complete as was originally intended.

Hunting Assumptions in Parallelist and Integrationist Approaches

In attempting to understand Aboriginal education in Canada, two quite distinct outlooks are evident. They entail very different goals and assumptions, and thus provide a basis for categorizing the many proposals intent on improving Aboriginal education in Canada. The images on the cover of this book represent these two theoretical positions.

The first, and most prevalent, perspective argues for Aboriginal self-determination and autonomy from the rest of Canadian society. This "parallelist" position advocates Aboriginal education functioning in a separate realm from non-Aboriginal education, with different content, teaching practices, and forms of organization. Parallelism is represented on this book's cover by the wampum belt showing two rows running side by side but never coming together.

Integrationist assumptions are quite different from those held by parallelists. From an integrationist perspective, Aboriginal educational success is perceived in terms of the successful participation of Aboriginal people in a common scientific and humanistic educational system. Educational achievement is determined according to whether all students, including those of Aboriginal ancestry, meet universal standards such as thinking critically, writing clearly, and understanding mathematical relationships. Represented on the cover of this book by the different strands of yarn retaining their unique character, but interwoven to create a stronger whole, integrationist perspectives assume that all people can contribute to improving humanity's common understanding of the universe.

Although parallelist and integrationist approaches often put forward contradictory assumptions, it is important to point out that discussions about Aboriginal education do not always fall neatly into the two camps. Parallelism and integrationism each exist within a spectrum. The articles in this book illustrate that parallelist approaches rarely reject all European influences on Aboriginal education, and integrationists often argue that a certain amount of Aboriginal autonomy in the Canadian education system is necessary. Parallelism and integrationism, therefore, constitute ideal types; various degrees of difference can exist within these categories.

Parallelism: Self-Determination and Traditional Cultural Revitalization

The term *parallelism* was coined by Alan Cairns (2000), who described it as "Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities travelling side by side, coexisting but not getting in each other's way" (p. 6). Parallelism can

be found in a number of Aboriginal education anthologies,[3] as well as the five-volume report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP).[4] Furthermore, it is the viewpoint overwhelmingly expressed in the most significant journal devoted to the subject of Aboriginal education in Canada—the *Canadian Journal of Native Education*.

In the parallelist view, Aboriginal–non-Aboriginal relations are visualized as "two parallel rows of purple wampum that represent two vessels travelling upon the river" (Edward J. Cross, as cited in RCAP, 1996, Vol. 4, p. 120). Each row of purple shells represents the "laws, traditions, customs, language and spiritual beliefs" of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples (Cross, as cited in RCAP, 1996, Vol. 4, p. 120).[5] So accepted is the two-row wampum metaphor, in fact, that it is a dominant image in many discussions of Aboriginal policy. It is the motif used throughout Cannon and Sunseri's edited book *Racism, Colonialism, and Indigeneity in Canada*.[6] In their introduction, Cannon and Sunseri (2011a) discuss the two-row wampum belt as a treaty document that shows that Aboriginal peoples are "sovereign nations whose inherent rights were granted by the Creator," and racism is even defined "as something that violates the ancient principles set out in Two Row Wampum" (pp. xiv–xv, xix).

This vision of parallelism is supported by social movements espousing an ideology referred to as "the politics of identity and entitlement" (Ball, Dagger, Christian, & Campbell, 2013, pp. 221–246). In these movements, groups come to identify with one another because of a history of shared oppression and exclusion. Their attempts to achieve emancipation include efforts to change the social beliefs that justify their marginalization and inhibit their capacity for liberation. The lack of recognition of marginalized group identities is viewed as discriminatory and oppressive, resulting in demands that these movements be portrayed in a positive light and compensated for past ill-treatment (Ball et al., 2013, p. 223).[7]

The politics of identity and entitlement has led parallelist approaches to focus on the lack of public recognition of Indigenous nationhood and sovereignty—aspirations that Indigenous movements point out have been repeatedly suppressed by colonization. This loss of political independence, according to parallelists, has prevented Aboriginal people from asserting control over their lives, resulting in impoverishment, low educational levels, and social pathologies (Monture-Angus, 1995, pp. 26, 51–52; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, pp. 22, 29). It also, parallelists point out, has resulted in the destruction of Aboriginal cultural features. The retention of Aboriginal

traditions is regarded as essential because Aboriginal culture is understood as being innate (RCAP, 1996, Vol. 1, pp. xxiii–xxiv), a view that has similarities to the primordialist nationalist paradigm.[8] Aboriginal culture is assumed to be tied to ancestry, as Aboriginal traditions are understood as instructions from the Creator that have been passed down from one generation to another.[9] This results in the parallelist argument that the diminished usage of Aboriginal languages, and erosion of spiritual beliefs, is a form of genocide.[10] These cultural characteristics are perceived as being inextricably connected to Aboriginal identity (Alfred, 2009, p. 7; Alfred, 2004, pp. 89, 95), and so Aboriginal well-being is linked to their revitalization in a separate educational system.[11]

In contrast to universalist notions of progress found in integrationist perspectives, parallelist assumptions are culturally and epistemologically relativist[12]—an ideological position characteristic of postmodernism.[13] This is seen in the labelling of the Canadian education system as "Eurocentric"—the implication being that modern educational methods are applicable only to those with European heritage. This label is used by parallelists, in fact, to challenge the idea of universal educational standards (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, pp. 21–23).

Nowhere is the relativist character of parallelism more apparent than in discussions about Aboriginal epistemology. Sometimes it is argued that there are two knowledge systems—one Aboriginal and one that exists among white settler Canadians (Ermine, 1995, pp. 101–112); at other times it is maintained that each Aboriginal group has its own epistemology drawn from its unique tribal experiences and interaction with the spirit world (Redwing Saunders & Hill, 2007, p. 1019; Battiste, 1986, p. 25).

While parallelists stress the difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal education, there is also a tendency advocating a merging of the two paths, proposing that participation in the former will facilitate Aboriginal participation in the latter (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 28; Brant Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000c, p. xiv). In fact, many argue that preserving Aboriginal culture will enable Aboriginal peoples to *more* fully participate in Canadian society (Brant Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000c, p. xiv; RCAP, 1996, Vol. 4, pp. 522, 530–531; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 28). Another argument is for Aboriginal cultural features to be incorporated into the Canadian educational system, which would simultaneously enhance Aboriginal success in the mainstream and improve the Canadian system (Friesen & Friesen, 2002; RCAP, 1996, Vol. 1, pp. 684–685).

These arguments result in the proposition that more funding is required for building a separate Aboriginal educational system, and to some extent, to radically transform mainstream education (Barman, Hébert, & McCaskill, 1986a, pp. 16–17; Brant Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000b, p. 251).

Although parallelist approaches are the most prevalent in discussions of Aboriginal education policy, this viewpoint has been challenged by a number of academics and educational professionals. These critics espouse what can be loosely characterized as integrationism. These approaches oppose parallelism's focus on promoting Aboriginal difference over the common values and knowledge that are required to contribute to humanity as a whole. They also reject parallelism's reliance on cultural and epistemological relativism.

Integrationism: Inclusion, Universality, and Progress

In contrast to parallelism, integrationism rejects the idea that the future for Aboriginal–non-Aboriginal relations can be improved by encouraging an autonomous and culturally different Native educational system. It sees parallelist arguments as being equivalent to the "separate but equal" logic that opposed black integration in the United States. Integrationist proponents are universalist, not relativist, in their underlying assumptions about the development and acquisition of knowledge, maintaining that educational progress has been a continuum throughout history. All should be able to enjoy the fruits of human educational development, integrationists assert; they argue that improving the educational achievement of all, including the performance of Aboriginal peoples in the conventional system, should be the focus.

There is a binary distinction in integrationist approaches, however. One is informed by liberalism and the other by the political economy tradition. Liberal integrationist approaches regard individual freedom, not group identity, as the important agent for change in determining the good life (Ball et al., 2013, p. 40). Freedom of the individual can be nourished by removing obstacles—discriminatory laws, racist attitudes, traditions, etc.—that thwart a person's ability to choose how they want to live their life (Ball et al., 2013, p. 41). It is assumed that all individuals have the capacity to use reason to determine what is in their best interest, and any attempt to link a person's status to heredity, or limit individual freedom by excessive government regulation or appealing to group solidarity, is questioned.

With respect to Aboriginal peoples in Canada, liberal assumptions can be seen most clearly in Tom Flanagan's book *First Nations? Second*

Thoughts—views that first appeared in the Liberal government's 1969 White Paper on Indian Policy. In his book, Flanagan (2000) argues against most government intervention on the grounds that it prevents individuals from being free and prosperous (p. 8). He opposes government policies that provide people with different legal rights based on unchangeable qualities such as race and sex, as this impedes the free association of individuals (Flanagan, 2000, p. 8–9). As a result, Flanagan (2000) promotes transferring funding directly to Aboriginal peoples so that government interference can be limited (pp. 197–198). He laments band council control over Aboriginal communities, arguing that this threatens individual freedom and impedes economic efficiency (Flanagan, 2001, p. 154).

Revisions to liberalism, however, challenge Flanagan's classical liberal assumptions about minimal government intervention and equality under the law. Put forward most comprehensively by Alan Cairns (2000) in his book *Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State*, this reform liberal position asserts that ensuring equal legal and political rights is not sufficient to obtain Aboriginal consent in the Canadian political system. Aboriginal peoples need to have their culture recognized by the Canadian state, according to Cairns, if the political system is to become legitimate in the eyes of the Native population. Unlike the case of parallelism, Aboriginal culture is not promoted for its own sake. It is intended to facilitate Aboriginal acceptance of Canadian citizenship—an integrationist goal;[14] Cairns (2001) is opposed to Flanagan's insistence on "a common, uniform citizenship" because this does not recognize Aboriginal peoples' desire for autonomy, recognition, and dignity (pp. 155, 158). Cairns (2001) advocates a positive role for the state to address Aboriginal poverty and the state of crisis that exists in Aboriginal communities (pp. 156–157).

While Flanagan and Cairns do not devote much time to discussing Aboriginal education specifically, other commentators with similar assumptions have. These liberal perspectives focus on the removal of obstacles that prevent Aboriginal people from achieving the same participation rates and educational levels as the rest of the Canadian population, and often refer to individual qualities to explain educational deficits (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, pp. 17–18). They argue that Aboriginal participation in Canadian society can only be brought about through the unencumbered operation of market forces, and this should be facilitated, as much as possible, by the educational system. Special bureaucratic structures devoted to Aboriginal education and legal preferences should be eliminated as these

obstruct individual choice, stifle innovation, and reduce incentives for the Native population to compete with others and take responsibility for their own lives (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 18; Wotherspoon & Satzewich, 2000, p. xxii). As Tom Flanagan (2000) argues, "most aboriginal advocates define 'doing better' as succeeding not by their own efforts, but by getting something from the oppressors," including "the attainment of land and natural resources, bigger budgetary appropriations, and financial compensation for residential schools …" (p. 195). This, according to Flanagan (2000), "does not produce independence and prosperity (p. 195).

When cultural factors are examined in liberal approaches, they are perceived in terms of the extent to which they aid or impede individual integration into the wider society. "Cultural deficit approaches," for example, maintain that certain cultural features in Aboriginal traditions have been detrimental to educational success (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 21; Nagler, 1975, p. 32). These views were prominent in educational anthropology in the 1960s (St. Denis, 2011, p. 178), where it was maintained that certain cultural beliefs and practices made it more likely for marginalized minorities to fail.

Recent developments in liberal approaches to Aboriginal education have shied away from focusing on traditional cultural features as obstacles to Aboriginal educational success. Instead, Aboriginal culture is seen as being helpful in certain contexts. The "cultural discontinuity thesis," for example, maintains that the failure to recognize Aboriginal culture in the educational system has slowed the pace of integration and maintained the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. According to this view, Aboriginal cultures need to be included in the educational system to help students make the transition to an alien cultural framework (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, pp. 21–22).[15] Other liberal perspectives argue that an individual's freedom can be enhanced by cultural supports or "social capital," which is cultivated by the revitalization of Aboriginal political communities (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 19). It is pointed out that a high level of education among Aboriginal people reduces income and employment gaps (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 19), and promoting Aboriginal culture could be used to obtain higher attendance and graduation rates (Abele, Dittburner, & Graham, 2000, p. 8). New legal frameworks also are proposed to facilitate Aboriginal integration into the Canadian educational system. What is needed is more Aboriginal involvement in the development of educational policy to ensure that the Canadian educational system provides appropriate choices and is responsive to Aboriginal concerns.

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