

CULTURE AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

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In this paper we concern ourselves with the ways in which schools in general and special education procedures in particular tend to not be successful for those of our students who are from a different culture. (While we focus on Canadian Aboriginals, we also extend our thinking to those children who come from different races, ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, etc.) We outline the stories that have brought us to this place. We then go on to suggest that the adoption of different understandings and approaches could lead to the academic success of children from a variety of different cultures and backgrounds. We conclude with some direction for change.

In this paper we, two white educators, concern ourselves with the education of those students of Aboriginal descent who are seen by the school system as *special*. Our concerns are based on the stories we use to understand ourselves and our actions - stories of mistold history, socio-political issues, racism, the misuse of science - and the ways those stories disadvantage those who are different. Our hope is that we can begin to explore different more hopeful and empowering stories.

There are many reasons to be concerned about the existing state of special education, particularly with our Aboriginal students. Currently the following are common;

1. Our special education classes are top-heavy with Aboriginal and disadvantaged students.
2. We tend to focus on the deficits in *other* children rather than on the *possibilities*. We could embrace the position of William Glasser (1986): we choose to be whom and what we, and others, believe we are.¹
3. We do not concern ourselves with the differences brought to school by children from other than the dominant culture.²
4. We are asking all small school children to do the pretty much the same thing at pretty much the same time and to meet some arbitrary standard of what they should or should not be able to do. We act despite current research concerning physiology and early childhood experience, which suggests that children are not ready for the same task at the same time.
5. The tests that we give children to determine the reasons for failure at school tasks are fallible and culturally insensitive and subjective.
6. A label tends to freeze a child in the definition attached to the label.

¹ Bloom (1981) believes that the intellectual potential of all students is pretty much the same. The difference is in history. Malia Kan'iaupuni (2005) is concerned that if you focus on a deficit-based approach to education then you often miss the expertise that exists in communities and families, viewing instead outside experts as the only ones capable of "fixing" our problems.

² Including Aboriginal, Black, Hispanic, recent immigrants and the poor.

7. We have a tendency to *blame the victim* or to *blame the social background* rather than look at ways we can change.

Clearly we need to find another way of viewing children and their learning. We are hoping to uncover stories that currently mediate, impair and colonize our special education practices, thereby beginning a dialogue concerning alternative stories of strength, knowing and power.

Stories that Get in the Way

History Stories

Malia Kan'iaupuni (2005) tells us how archeologists and historians have accepted a theory of accidental migration from Polynesia to the Hawaiian Islands to explain a 2200-mile voyage on the open seas. This in spite of evidence to the contrary, which makes it clear that the early Polynesian explorers did indeed have the sophisticated system of navigation needed for a planned and successful voyage. Malia Kan'iaupuni's point is that the assumption of a people with no learning, no culture, no anything but maybe good luck, made it possible for colonizers to take on - in their own minds - the mantle of rescuer.

Iseke-Barnes (2005) is also concerned about the misrepresentation of Indigenous history and science. She wants us to challenge those assumptions that the colonizers found a people in need of saving from their own ignorance.

Paulo Freire (1971, 1997) has spent many years studying the impact of oppression on the colonized. In the name of saving a backward people from themselves the colonizers were able to perpetuate acts of cultural genocide and worse. The use of this story continues to impact on how the dominant cultures act out their oppression.

History is written by the winner, therefore we need to be highly critical of the history we read. While more blatant misrepresentations of the history of Canada are beginning to disappear, the whole story of colonization is not being told or written or disseminated. Instead, we are still trying to save lost Aboriginal souls. History stories mediate, impair and colonize special education practice, which we will illustrate by describing a socio-political and a scientific rigor story.

A Socio-Political Story

This is a story of the purpose of education. We suppose schools are places where children are educated. But what are children educated to do or be? Gitlin (2005) gives a disturbing answer to this question:

[Public education is] not intended to fill the young of the species with knowledge and awaken their intelligence ...Nothing could be further from the truth. The aim ...is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the safe level, to breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality. That is its aim in the United States... and that is its aim everywhere else. (p.22)

Many may disagree with this disturbing answer, suggesting that school graduates, for the most part, go on to become productive citizens. But citizenry becomes problematic when referring to Aboriginal peoples – it seems clear that, for the most part, people of Aboriginal heritage do not go on to become productive citizens within the dominant culture. A lack of successful citizenry by Aboriginal peoples seems to justify special education programs that are top heavy with Aboriginal students.

But *success* is politicized. Skovsmose (2005) outlines how schools practice both *classic*³ and *progressive*⁴ racism. Such practice allows us as educators not to have to take any responsibility for the failure of the child, as clearly the child brings the cause for his or her weak performance into school. Therefore:

Many deficiency theories (theories of the deprived child) follow the approach of racism in explaining away the socio-political dimension of school performances, by privatizing and personalizing the causes of such performance. (p. 5)

³ Classic racism assumes that the obstacles to learning are to be found in the child.

⁴ Progressive racism assumes that any weakness in the child is the result of social background.

So:

The epistemic interpretation of learning obstacle is not the only one possible. However, processes of exclusion in education can be dressed up in such a way that their political dimension becomes hidden and ignored. It could appear that exclusion is not imposed on students. Instead, exclusion may appear as a consequence of some students' so-called low achievement. (p. 4)

He goes on to say that this leads to a particular way of organizing teaching/learning processes in ways that prevent students from acting like learners. In other words our story leads to actions that support the story.

A Scientific Story

A scientifically rigorous story dominates special education practice. The story, in brief, is that learning disability can be attributed to biological and environmental factors. Current models of abnormality are often based on the premise that a person will have a biological disposition toward a disorder, but that the presence of a disorder will also depend on environmental factors (Wortman, Loftus, & Weaver, 1999).

Brain function consists of biological processes involving genetic tendencies, chemical levels and electrical activity. Normal brain function can be delineated according to normal biological processes. In other words, we assume that learning disability is at least partially caused by excessive deviation from a normal range of biological processes. These biological processes can be measured in terms of genetic profiles, chemical levels (e.g., hormones found in blood) and electrical levels in the brain. Hence, it is assumed that learning disability can be measured using physiological properties of the brain. These ideas are supported by a dominant scientific culture, where scientific evidence generates *facts* that cannot be refuted.

Special education for children of Aboriginal heritage has been colonized by this scientific rigor story. In schools, we identify learning disabilities as follows: A teacher identifies a student who appears to be struggling, and refers the student to a team of specialists. The specialist tests, diagnoses, labels and sets out a remediation program. The teacher implements the program. It seems like a perfectly reasonable system of trying to help those with disabilities, based on scientifically rigorous knowledge.

But the story is flawed in three ways. First, the story of scientific rigor is told by a dominant culture. The colonizers write the books of knowledge, thereby attempting to establish without doubt what is true and what evidence is required to make a truth claim. Culturally laden epistemology certainty invades special education. For example, based on research literature generated by the dominant scientific culture, there is currently little scientific evidence to support a biological cause or disposition for most disorders of the brain (Wortman, et. al., 1999). It is assumed that biological roots exist that accurately captures a disability label. There is no scientific rigor in labels. The assumptions have pervaded special education and are taken as scientific fact. This is a writing of special education knowledge by colonizers.

Second, this scientific rigor story is based on behaviour and biology, while special education practice is based solely on behavior. Teachers, resource teachers, special education consultants and school psychologists base their labels on observing behaviour. Medical technologies are not used to detect genetic make-up, chemical levels or electrical activity in the brain, generating a diagnosis based on deviations from a normal range. We assume that our interpretation of behavior correctly identifies mental disability. But as we are caught inside stories that get in the way, we should not accept our interpretations of behaviour without question.

Third, this scientific rigor story is enacted in contradictory ways. To see the contradiction, we need to set the stage by describing physiological and behavioural evidence generated by scientific research. Studies of the physiology of the forebrain and hindbrain have shown that the slow processing of learning cannot occur during a moment of fear (Kalat, 1988). Based on this physiological evidence, educators might wonder about school and classroom environment. If a child is afraid, or afraid to learn, then they will not learn. Researchers have found connections between emotional states and learning (Zimbardo & Gerrig, 1996). Evidence of a connection between learning and emotion is accumulating to such an extent that there is a branch of psychological and educational research

concerning emotional intelligence (EQ). For example, researchers have found correlations between EQ and ability to learn (Goleman, 1998). It is concluded that emotions should be nurtured as part of intellectual growth.

Moving from physiology to behaviour, psychologists have found evidence to support a strong connection between emotion and behaviour. Notable among this research is Glasser's (1986) claim that as learners we need to have the mental image of ourselves doing that task, we need to know we can do it. For children if we firmly believe that a child could do something and bring them to the same belief, then learning previously thought impossible takes place. We suspect other teachers, based on their personal experiences, have similar beliefs concerning the potential of children to learn.

Coupling the physiological and behavioural evidence above suggests that a label is as much responsible for a child's learning success as any other biological or environmental factor. The stage has been set for noticing a contradiction in the scientific rigor story within special education. We are colonized to believe the scientific truth that disability is biological and behavioural. Hence, we label disability in hopes of solving the problem. But the same scientific culture generates the truth that labeling at least partially causes the behaviors associated with a disability. We label behaviour, not noticing that our stories mediate, impair and colonize our interpretations of behaviour.

Conceptualizing Change

There is no doubt in our minds that we are working with the best of intentions. We are not setting out to further disadvantage those who come to us from already established positions of disadvantage - impoverished backgrounds, different cultures, stressed families. We are doing the best we can with the knowledge and resources we have. What gets in our way is lack of imagination. We assume that the way we do things is *the* way to do things. We may be comfortable with some tinkering. But we see ourselves as educated people who are neither racist nor biased, and who are working in a good system, but with damaged and/or deficient people – this story concludes that systemic changes are not required.

We have a rigid educational system that states that success is measured in yearly doses and in each of those years students are expected to master a particular body of knowledge. It is an expected linear progression to success. Certain cultural imperatives are in place so that children from the dominant culture will more likely be successful. If you are not successful you are *treated*. The process of *treatment* takes away from your sense of competence as a learner, particularly in the school setting.

Here we want to become specific. The focus of this paper is on the teaching of Aboriginal learners, and what stops us from being successful. The linear model used in our factory model schools gets in our way. The assumption that we have the one right way gets in our way. History gets in our way. Racism gets in our way. Scientism gets in our way. We are not noticing alternative stories.

Previously we wrote (Betts & Bailey, in press) about using a different metaphor for education, one that was not linear. We suggested that we use the metaphor of fractal geometry (and all that means in terms of quantum mechanics and chaos theory). In fractal geometry the smallest part is a reflection of the whole. For example a twig is really a little tree.

In Aboriginal cosmology the basic unit is the Medicine Wheel, by definition a circular model so nothing is more important than anything else, all is of equal value. Each member of the community is an essential part of the whole. Earth, flora, fauna, human are all part of the circle of life required for existence. Education was a part of the whole, an on-going component of life (Courtney, 1986, Graveline, 1998, Regnier, 1995).

We illustrated that a non-linear and holistic story of education was tell-able within ultra-modern Western thinking and within the ancient wisdom of Aboriginal cosmologies. We saw with alternative stories. To see education for children, all of whom are special, rather than special education, as non-linear and holistic seems a place to begin.

We also see that a starting part is not enough to catalyze change. It is clear to us that the foreground must be that Aboriginal peoples have been and are oppressed and colonized. We do not need to go into the history of the subjugation of an entire race practiced over the years by the European colonizers. We

all know the steps that were taken to destroy any vestige of the civilization that was in place at the time of contact. We get confused as to what to do about it now. After all, it was our ancestors, not us.⁵

We see what we are doing now in schools as an extension of that destructive process. Our governments are slowly beginning to allow for the full participation of Aboriginals in our world. But in many small and highly destructive ways we continue to contribute to the marginalization of that population. The world of special education is one place where we continue to do so. Knowing that a high proportion of the identified *special* population is Aboriginal, we continue to act as we always have, even in the face of evidence that the actions we take are not effective.

Paulo Freire (1971) suggests that it takes several generations for a culture to overcome the impact of oppression. Certainly we can see the truth of that statement as we watch many colonized peoples learn how to care for and govern themselves. In Canada, Aboriginal peoples are slowly, and over generations, learning how to be who they are, and to be successful in both cultures. This will not happen quickly, but it will happen surely. In the meantime there is no question that our Aboriginal population is dealing with serious problems and some of those impact on the ability of their children to learn, especially using the mores of another culture.

Our typical reaction as white educators is to want the Aboriginals to change. All would be right if only kids would come to school and on time. All would be well if their parents would stop drinking. All would be well if so much money wasn't being squandered on band council trips to Las Vegas. All of which may be factual, but *does not* excuse us from doing what we can to better the situation for the special children. The current reality of an oppressed population does not give us the right to blame the victim. Rather, as Skovsmose points out:

...“meanings of learning,” “meanings for students,” and “each student's meaning production” must be investigated and interpreted with reference to the dispositions of the student (including their background and foreground). Meaning production takes place in terms of what the students see as their opportunities, including motives, perspectives, hope and aspirations (p. 8).

Therefore in conceptualizing change we of the dominant culture need to place that conceptualization in hands other than ours, in the hands of those who know and honour their unique history and ways of being, who can best find the organic ways of empowering themselves and their children.

Having said that we do have some notions of what white educators can do.

1. Overcome our own racism. Get facts and information. Use our intelligence and face ourselves.
2. Accept the conditions. Things are as they are. Oppression has happened. It will take, according to the Bible and past experience, seven generations for the sins of the fathers to be expiated. In the meantime we have been given the task of teaching the children of oppression. What changes can we make to be more successful at that task?
3. Resist labels. Resist the push to find something wrong with the victim, rather change how we do things, how we approach the task.
4. Give our special kids the confidence to learn. Teachers are in positions of authority. Children really do think we know what we are talking about. If we consistently make it clear to children that they are capable of succeeding at the tasks we give them, sooner or later they will believe us. But first we have to genuinely believe that what we say is true. We cannot be faking it. From there we need to practice power-with rather than power-over.⁶

⁵ In July 2005, the descendants of the colonizer who razed an Indian village at Clyaquot Sound returned to the village to apologize for the deeds of their forefathers.

⁶ Anne Bishop in *Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression* (2002), explicates the difference between power-over and power-with, although we tend to think the concept is somewhat self-explanatory

5. Thus we give our special kids the power to learn. We work *with* them so that they are taking charge of their own learning; we give them agency. This is a difficult task for us to undertake. It means giving up some control, it means *not* taking the linear approach that gives us comfort and assurance through its familiarity. But difficult is not impossible.

6. Above all be patient. We are not going to get it perfect ever, but we will get better at working with rather than doing to, and the students will get better at taking responsibility and determining what they need to be successful.⁷

7. Then celebrate when a child tells you that they can finally do it because no one ever told them they could before.

Maybe the best suggestion we found came from a Native Hawaiian educator, a member of a population that is also dealing with the fall-out of oppression. Malia Kan'iaupuni (2005) strongly advocates for using the heritage and knowledge of the children's culture:

As others before me have done, I end by calling for a new framework that brings to the fore Native Hawaiian strengths that have been too long misinterpreted, misrecognised, and undervalued. (p.32).

In his work he makes a convincing argument for strengths-based education, for using a structure that by definition builds on the knowledge and strengths the children bring into the classroom and at the same time begins to change the socio-political conditions.

First let's be clear that by strengths based, I do not mean glossing over problems in favour of a rosy picture. Strengths-based research, in my view, begins with the premise of creating social change. In contrast to the expert-driven, top-down approach assumed by deficit models, it means treating the subjects of study as actors within multi-layered contexts and employing the multiple strengths of individuals, families and communities to overcome or prevent difficulties. It is also about empowerment, where the purpose of strengths-based research and evaluation is to benefit the people involved in the study by giving them voice, insight, and political power. ... As such it means empowering communities. (p.35)

It would seem obvious that such could be done here for those children who are the fruits of colonial oppression. The work of understanding, telling different stories and taking action continues.

Conclusion

We are not naïve. We know that the process of labeling is the result of the need for funding. We know that with classrooms of more than 20 that kind of individual attention is very difficult. We know that you will be surrounded by administrators, other teachers, parents, even the special children who will tell you to get the testing done and treatment program in place. We know that in the process of decolonization the oppressed can take on the qualities of the oppressor. But we can become resisters, working with a sure knowledge that we know what doesn't work and that it is way past time to try something radically different.

It is clear that the past hundred years or so of schooling directed at Aboriginals has not been a big success. Indeed rather than educating Aboriginals to be successful in the dominant culture, we have an abysmal history of abuse and cultural genocide through education.

Many of the abuses of the past are in the past. However, with kindness and deep concern we are using the special education system to continue to marginalize and discredit a large number of Aboriginal children⁸.

We are suggesting that maybe things could be better.

⁷ Children also fall into the patterns of self-excuse – *I have already been told that I can't read so why would I work at it. Don't you know I can't do that.*

⁸ We do believe that this is the case with all children designated special needs. We may not have the answers but we are pretty clear that we do have a considerable problem that we are not prepared to look at squarely.

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