

Engaging Teacher Candidates about Aboriginal Education Perspectives in Ontario

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Knowledge of the Aboriginal socio-political history in Canada has historically been excluded from public education in Ontario. The Ontario Ministry of Education has created the Aboriginal Education Strategy, which includes policies and resources for teachers. However, teachers frequently only teach the minimum required curriculum about Aboriginal peoples as they do not have adequate knowledge or feel that they lack the ability to teach about this subject. The Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto has implemented the Deepening Knowledge Project to provide teacher candidates with an increased awareness and knowledge about Aboriginal histories, cultures and worldviews for their future teaching careers. This article will provide insight into the project and the curriculum developed for working with teacher candidates.

ENGAGING TEACHER CANDIDATES ABOUT ABORIGINAL EDUCATION PERSPECTIVES IN ONTARIO

ONTARIO CONTEXT

There are 301,425 people who identify as having Aboriginal ancestry in Ontario, which is 21.5% of the total Aboriginal population in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2013) and 2.4% of the total population of the province (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2013). The Aboriginal population in Ontario is increasing “five times faster than the 4.8% rate of growth for the non-Aboriginal population (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2013; p. 1). Approximately 22.6% of the total Ontario Aboriginal population is between 0 and 12 years of age according to the 2006 Census (Ontario Trillium Foundation, 2011). It is estimated that one-third (approximately 33%) of the Aboriginal population in Ontario is under the age of 19 years compared to 23.8% of the non-Aboriginal population (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2013).

An increasing amount of this population is now residing off-reserve. According to the Ministry of Finance (2013) only “15.9% of all Aboriginal peoples in Ontario lived on reserves in 2011” (p.1), and thus the majority of Aboriginal people reside in areas with non-Aboriginal people. More than half of Aboriginal people in Ontario live in Brantford, the Greater Sudbury area and Thunder Bay. These changing demographics suggest there is a need to bring awareness and education to non-Aboriginal people about the history, cultures, languages, and worldviews of Aboriginal people.

THE EDUCATION LANDSCAPE IN ONTARIO

It is estimated that there are 78,000 Aboriginal children between age 5 and 19 years in Ontario with approximately 64,000 attending provincial schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). This presence is only one argument in favour of all teachers incorporating Aboriginal content into their curriculum. In 2007, the Ontario Ministry of Education developed the Aboriginal Education Strategy, which includes the Ontario First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework. This framework includes specific indicators to reduce the gap in academic achievement and calls for each school board in the province to create a policy to promote the voluntary self-identification of Aboriginal students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). In 2013, the Ministry of Education indicated that they had collected baseline data about Aboriginal student success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). However, they defined this success based on results from standardized tests given to all Ontario students in grades three, six, nine and ten. The baseline data for these tests show a clear deficit for self-identified Aboriginal students compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). However, these tests are likely not reflective of how Aboriginal students learn, and not inclusive of their lived reality.

The Ontario Ministry of Education created *Aboriginal Perspectives: The Teachers Toolkit* (available for all grade levels) (Ministry of Education, 2013). This toolkit was created to provide teachers and educators with concrete examples of how to integrate Aboriginal content into their classrooms. In addition, there are currently nine ‘Native Studies’ courses at the secondary school level available for provincial schools and school boards to provide to their student population (Ministry of Education, 2013). Upon review of available resources, there are no statistics about which schools and/or school

boards are offering these courses nor is their data on the number of students enrolled in any of these courses. Faries (2004) found that many First Nations schools on reserves were offering at least one of these courses (Table 1). These courses were developed to begin to infuse Aboriginal content into the Ontario curriculum and allow Aboriginal students an opportunity to (re)connect to their culture, knowledge, and traditions. From a review of the publicly available information about the Aboriginal Education Strategy, there have been no significant efforts to engage educators to include the provincially developed curriculum into their classrooms.

<i>Grade Level & Course Code</i>	<i>Title of Course</i>
Grade 9 – NAC10	Expressing Aboriginal Cultures
Grade 10 – NAC20	Aboriginal Peoples in Canada
Grade 11 – NBE3U & NBE3C	English: Contemporary Aboriginal Voices
Grade 11 – NDA3M	Current Aboriginal Issues in Canada
Grade 11 – NBV3C & NBE3E	Aboriginal Beliefs, Values and Aspirations in Contemporary Society
Grade 12 – NDG4M	Aboriginal Governance: Emerging Directions
Grade 12 – NDW4M	Issues of Indigenous Peoples in Global Context

Table 1: Secondary-level Aboriginal courses in the Ontario Curriculum

It is important to ensure that teacher candidates are familiar with Aboriginal history, knowledge, culture and education prior to their first work experience in a classroom. Many of the teacher education programs in the province have taken up the mission to educate teacher candidates about Aboriginal issues and history, and are signatories to the Accord on Indigenous Education developed by the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE, 2011). It is also not yet evident what, if any, concrete and province-wide initiatives will be taken to (re)educate teachers about these issues. However, there are more resources available to teachers now than there has ever been before, including the Deepening Knowledge project detailed later in this paper.

TWO SOLITUDES OF EDUCATION

Aboriginal ways of seeing and interacting with the physical and spiritual world differ significantly from Western methods, which are

reflected in the vastly different approaches each has to education. While traditional Aboriginal education has been described as “intra-personal, subjective, holistic, spiritual and transformative” (Kanu, 2011, p. 105), Western ways of knowing and education are most often characterized as “secular, fragmented, neutral or objective” (Kanu, 2011, p. 105), or unfolding in a linear fashion (Borrows, 2001; Alfred, 2009). The entire community has always been responsible for educating Aboriginal children and youth, including the children and youth themselves (Stonechild, 2006). This holistic way of imparting knowledge ensured that entire knowledge systems would be provided to various members of the community for continuity through generations. To create a holistic approach similar to an Aboriginal approach within the mainstream school system in Ontario, it is necessary for educators and teachers to learn, understand, and incorporate knowledge about Aboriginal worldviews into their own vision of education at not just the level of the classroom, but at the level of curriculum creation and school structure. Indigenous scholars have authored a growing number of articles about Aboriginal worldviews and the importance of community learning (Stonechild, 2006; Battiste, 2004; Alfred, 2009; Tully, 2006; Cardinal, 1969).

For three hundred years, Aboriginal peoples living on the land now referred to as Canada have suffered oppression as a result of contact with settler peoples. This included traumatization at the hands of the education system, which for Aboriginal peoples took the form of residential schooling from the late 1800s until relatively recently (the last of these schools closed in 1996). If individuals or their family members have been traumatized by the Western education system they may choose to stay away or keep their children away from it, in order to shelter them from the Western paradigms espoused within these institutions (Jones, 2006; Gone, 2007). The mainstream education system that is provided to Aboriginal children and youth also acts to assimilate them into the mainstream economy (Barman, 1995; Faries, 1996; Stonechild, 2006). This has also led to a negative view of education with few Aboriginal advocates for using such a system (Stonechild, 2006).

An increasing number of Aboriginal people encourage Aboriginal children and youth to finish high school and move on to post-secondary education (Mendelson, 2006; R.A. Malatest, 2004). It is felt by many, including the former (and most recent) Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Shawn Atleo, that participating in education will build ‘strong First Nations’

helping Canada to 'fulfill its economic potential' (Atleo, 2010). Many scholars and Aboriginal communities agree that it is necessary to participate in mainstream education, but that at the same time, it is also necessary to use traditional methods of teaching to pass on cultural knowledge to future generations (Atleo, 2010; Mendelson, 2006; RCAP, 1996; Stonechild, 2006).

Some Indigenous scholars, Elders and community members believe that participating in Western education can provide Aboriginal people with knowledge of how to defend themselves against colonialism, oppression, and discrimination (Turner, 2006; Alfred, 2009). Writing from the prairie context, Stonechild (2006) argues that for his people, education (including formal Western education) will be the new buffalo, in that it will nourish, clothe, shelter and heal them, in part by allowing Aboriginal peoples to find ways to maintain their cultural identities while also enabling them to choose to participate in the Western economy. It is necessary to engage educators, teachers and learning institutions in order to develop awareness, appreciation and understanding of Aboriginal peoples and the socio-political history that they have endured to ensure that if and when Aboriginal children, youth and adults enter the Western educational system, they feel included, recognized, and validated by what is taught in the classroom.

It is critical that teachers and teacher candidates acknowledge their responsibility to both their Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Restoule, 2011). The socio-political history that Aboriginal communities have endured has created a tension that forces Aboriginal students to choose between leaving school and assimilating. As mentioned, many universities are trying to assist their teacher candidates by infusing the existing curriculum to include Aboriginal content, including OISE/UT.

THE DEEPENING KNOWLEDGE PROJECT

'Deepening Knowledge, Enhancing Instruction' (commonly referred to as the Deepening Knowledge Project) is a special project at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE/UT) which has brought together faculty, instructors, and students with the goal of increasing knowledge of Aboriginal histories, perspectives and contemporary communities among OISE instructors and teacher candidates. Under the leadership of the Executive Director, course instructors in the Initial Teacher Education program were asked to host at least one workshop in their classrooms to

relay information to teacher candidates about Aboriginal topics for use in their classroom instruction beginning in the spring of 2011.

The authors of this report were recruited to design and conduct workshops for teacher candidates in both elementary and secondary streams as part of the Deepening Knowledge Project. Angela Mashford-Pringle and Angela Nardozi are from both cultural and educational backgrounds. Angela Mashford-Pringle is an urban Algonquin scholar with her M.A. in Aboriginal and Adult Education from OISE/UT and her Ph.D. in Aboriginal Health from the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto. Angela Nardozi is a qualified teacher, who has taught in and conducted research with a northern First Nations community to complete her M.A., and who herself graduated from the Initial Teacher Education program at OISE/UT. Together, the authors developed workshops that varied in length from 45 minutes to three hours. The workshops addressed: (a) who are Aboriginal peoples; (b) the historical and intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal peoples through residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and legislation (*Indian Act*, Constitution of Canada, etc.); (c) statistics of Aboriginal people in Canada and specifically Ontario; (d) videos about Aboriginal peoples and the social injustices they have and continue to face; and (e) potential ways to include Aboriginal subjects into the curriculum, including resources that could be used by teachers and/or their students. At the end of the workshops, most classes were provided with an evaluation form to complete, the results of which provide the basis for this report.

THE SETTING

Early adopters of the presentation in the Spring of 2011 included all elementary and some secondary cohort instructors. After an increase in outreach efforts, the majority of secondary instructors also booked a presentation for their class by the 2011-2012 academic year.

As the schedule of presentations unfolded, teacher candidates reacted with shock at the material being shared, repeatedly wondering out loud why they had never been exposed to Aboriginal issues in this way in their previous educational or lived experiences. These responses are reflected in the post-presentation evaluations, which are discussed below.

METHODOLOGY

OISE/UT's Initial Teacher Education program graduates approximately 1,000 teacher candidates a year. The teacher candidate population consists of mainly of settler and settler-diasporic candidates (Cannon, 2011); the majority of the population enrolled in the program continues to consist of female, middle-class candidates (Solomona, Portelli, Daniel & Campbell, 2005). Teacher candidates who attended the workshops were provided with an evaluation form co-created by the authors of this paper.

Observations, questions, and comments from each presentation were recorded afterwards by the authors to be used in addition to the comments on the evaluation forms. Qualitative responses were often about the content. This data was coded and analyzed using NVIVO 9 software looking for themes that came from the forms. The data was checked individually by both authors to ensure that all data were entered accurately. The authors conducted member checks with some teacher candidates from each workshop and with the instructors for each of the cohorts. While the authors intended to receive responses from each teacher candidate who attended the workshops, some groups were not provided with the evaluation form due to time constraints.

After most presentations, we distributed evaluation forms to teacher candidates in attendance and relayed that their feedback would remain anonymous. If they chose not to participate, candidates were asked to hand their form back blank. We combined the results from both years of presentations after we analysed the data separately and determined that the results were similar. Over the two academic years, 844 evaluations were collected after 25 presentations. In total, 36 presentations were given, but due to a variety of factors (most often lack of time at the end of presentations), 11 groups were not asked to fill out evaluations.

Presentations ranged in time from 45 minutes to 3 hours (with a 15 minute break) with the final length determined by the amount of time allotted to us by the regular course instructor. The first round of presentations launched during two weeks in April 2011. After viewing the impact they had on their teacher candidates, many course instructors suggested they be held earlier in the academic year, and in 2011-2012, the majority of instructors hosted the presentation prior to second practicum in February 2012.

RESULTS

The evaluations indicated that, depending on their particular courses and instructors, a portion of teacher candidates were graduating from OISE during the time of our study, without receiving instruction on Aboriginal content. On our first set of evaluations, conducted at the end of the 2010-2011 program, 30% of teacher candidates responded that they had not received instruction on Aboriginal issues. In some classes, the number who had received instruction during their teacher training program that year was much lower, with only 26% in one group responding positively and 48% in another. In the second year of data collection where presentations were held throughout the year, 33% of respondents replied that they had received instruction on these topics prior to our presentations. These results indicate that for some teacher candidates, the Deepening Knowledge Project workshop may be the only education on Aboriginal topics they ever receive in their teacher training at OISE/UT.

Indeed, evaluations revealed that the workshop might be the only education on Aboriginal topics that teacher candidates receive ever in their educational journey, as some teacher candidates indicated that they did not recall being exposed to this material in elementary, secondary or postsecondary education. Some candidates educated outside of Canada shared that they were not required to learn in-depth material about Aboriginal peoples in order to become a citizen, and that the presentation for them presented entirely new information. It is even more important for Initial Teacher Education programs like OISE/UT to provide Aboriginal content as the program represents the last required opportunity to learn about this material in a formal setting before embarking on a teaching career.

On evaluations, teacher candidates were asked a short series of questions about their relationship with Aboriginal topics prior to attending the presentation. The first probed how comfortable they felt teaching or speaking about Aboriginal issues. When combined over both years, 15.5% of respondents stated they were 'very comfortable' doing so, 24% stated 'comfortable', 35% stated 'somewhat comfortable', and 15.5% stated they felt 'not at all comfortable.' A second question probed how important respondents felt Aboriginal content was in their classrooms prior to the presentation. Only 4% of all teacher candidates responded that they felt Aboriginal content was not important. The remaining were divided among

'somewhat important' (23.5%), 'important' (35.5%), 'extremely important' (28%), and 6.5% answered that they were unsure.

The second series of questions indicated that they were to be answered taking into account the experience of the presentation the teacher candidates had just participated in. After the presentation, 90% of teacher candidates felt they had a better understanding of Aboriginal peoples, and only 6% shared that they did not. Teacher candidates were also asked if they were inspired to learn more about Aboriginal peoples after the presentation, and an overwhelming majority of 93.5% responded favorably. From these questions we took that not only were the presentations successful in their objective to educate teacher candidates, their limited timeframe was somewhat mitigated by their ability to inspire teacher candidates to further action and self-education. As we delivered more presentations and their content evolved, we began to include resource recommendations both for teachers to expand their learning and for use in their classrooms, both in response to comments requesting these, and to assist in the self-education that so many teacher candidates indicated that they wanted to take up.

In this section, teacher candidates were also asked how confident they now felt teaching these issues. To this, 12% of teacher candidates responded that they did not feel confident, 47.3% felt 'somewhat confident', 29.2% responded that they felt 'confident', and only 6.9% of respondents felt 'very confident' that they could teach this material after the workshop. These results indicate that a short presentation of this nature is not enough to ensure that all attendees will feel confident to teach this material in their future classrooms. Follow-up workshops and other in-class instruction about lesson planning may assist in raising confidence.

Respondents were also asked what components of the presentation they found 'most interesting' and which components they found 'least interesting' in two separate open-ended questions. A variety of responses were given to the first question, but the video clips we selected to show and information on Residential Schools emerged as the clear favorites. Many respondents indicated that they found all of the information included in the presentations to be of interest. The majority of teacher candidates indicated that they found nothing in the presentation to not be of interest. The other responses to this question mentioned various aspects of the presentation, including the two most popular aspects mentioned above. No themes emerged from the responses to the latter question.

Teacher candidate responses to other qualitative questions registered support for the presentation and its objectives. "This is a subject one cannot know enough about." "I feel like this should be a larger priority at OISE. One hour-long presentation is not enough." Frustration also emerged in some comments such as "why is this only a workshop? Why is there no mandatory class? We talk about social justice and multiculturalism...but why is that we don't hear about First Nations?" During the first round of presentations, when they were scheduled only at the very end of the school year, teacher candidates expressed alarm at their timing, "The workshops should not be presented at the end of the year. It should be integrated into the year in all our curriculum. ALL of our curriculum." "[This] should be at the beginning of the program." "Have this workshop earlier in the year, I could have used this in my practicum – it would make more confident teaching this."

Also on the evaluations, resistance emerged to the focus on Aboriginal issues. As the original inhabitants of Toronto, Aboriginal peoples hold a unique place in its history and in contemporary urban culture. Some teacher candidates expressed concerns about the importance of learning Aboriginal topics in a multicultural city where they felt Aboriginal people were not a significant portion of the population. As the presentations continued, effort was made to highlight that Toronto has one of the largest populations of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and to discuss why many perceive this population to be invisible.

There are in-program opportunities available to teacher candidates who do wish to deepen their knowledge about Aboriginal topics while enrolled in their teacher training at OISE/UT. Teachers in both the elementary and secondary consecutive programs are required to take one elective course chosen from a menu, which includes one course on Aboriginal worldviews and education. If enrollment caps are reached or a particular teacher candidate has a specific interest, an individual may seek special permission to take a graduate level course in an area such as Aboriginal histories, health or culture.⁵

The Deepening Knowledge Project presentations outlined in this paper are only a first step towards greater inclusion of Aboriginal histories, cultures and contemporary experiences in OISE/UT's Initial Teacher

⁵ The Initial Teacher Education Program is currently undergoing a series of changes, and the elective course offerings are one element of the program being affected. The description included here was accurate as of 2012-2013 academic year.

Education Program. Evaluation results indicate that they did inspire many teacher candidates to take their learning in this area into their own hands. The response to the material demonstrates that teacher candidates do want to learn more about Aboriginal topics. It is our hope that in some way, the impact of these presentations is continuing to ripple through the lives and teaching practice of those candidates we encountered.

ENGAGING TEACHER CANDIDATES: ON THE ROAD TO THE 'NEW BUFFALO'

The message we received from the presentation evaluations is that the majority of teacher candidates entering into the Initial Teacher Education Program at OISE/UT do not have a solid sense of Aboriginal peoples, histories and cultures, and do not have confidence in their ability to teach these topics. Data from a question about what other information teacher candidates wanted about Aboriginal topics yielded a variety of answers, including contemporary issues and historical perspectives. More information about Residential Schools were frequently requested by teacher candidates which is not surprising given both the interest that teacher candidates have in education (as evidenced through their enrollment in a teacher training program) and the investment in the Canadian education system that they are on the cusp of making. Our ultimate goal is to have teacher candidates realize, as Hampton (1995) stated, "that education, as currently practiced, is cultural genocide" (p. 35). Therefore, we must strive to further engage teacher candidates in these ideas in hopes to eventually enroll them in the project to change the cycle of harm the Western education system inflicts on Aboriginal peoples. Faries (2004) suggested that education must incorporate Aboriginal knowledge, languages and cultures in order to reduce racism, stereotyping, and discrimination. Teacher candidates will leave their programs and in many cases become employed in a classroom. If they do not have adequate knowledge or resources to teach their students about Aboriginal peoples, then the cycle of ignorance continues and Aboriginal peoples continue to be 'Othered'. Although the Ontario Ministry of Education has an Aboriginal Education Strategy, there is seems to be a disconnection between the curriculum taught to new teachers and that which is to be provided to Ontario students.

The Ministry's Aboriginal Education Strategy is also at risk of being ignored due to resistance to Aboriginal perspectives and racist views towards

Aboriginal peoples in general. During our presentations, a minority of teacher candidates expressed their disagreement with our analysis on political and historical events, sometimes on evaluations and sometimes out loud in class. On the evaluations, for instance, comments suggesting our presentation was 'political' or 'bias' appeared, with some teacher candidates asking us to take a 'neutral' stance towards the topics. Others wrote comments that revealed their preference to explore cultural learning rather than historical or political issues, asking that we share 'artefacts' and 'spiritual routines'. If the Aboriginal Education Strategy is to be taken up by teachers in a way which breaks from the cycle of misrepresentation of Aboriginal topics currently dominating the school system, teachers and teacher candidates need to be brought on board. Our data suggests that for this to happen more time needs to be spent on identity, privilege, bias and perspective, and critical multiculturalism theory prior to and after the presentations

As they enter teacher training, our evaluations revealed that most teacher candidates do not come with prior knowledge about Aboriginal topics, nor do they come with confidence in teaching related material. The presentations, while a start, cannot be the only intervention taken by initial teacher education programs for the reason that this knowledge and confidence is crucial to creating and delivering a curriculum that is appropriate for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children, and for Canadian children in general, as we strive to create a more just society. Much more time must be dedicated within OISE/UT's program to Aboriginal content, and we suggest that ideally, this would take the form of a mandatory full year course, a measure that has already been taken by teacher education programs in British Columbia and Saskatchewan. This should be accompanied by hiring additional instructors in the Initial Teacher Education program who identify as Aboriginal. It could also be required that successful applicants to OISE's teacher education program have undergraduate credits in a course in Aboriginal topics.

CONCLUSION

The Deepening Knowledge Project presentations on Aboriginal histories, cultures and contemporary communities continue to this day at OISE/UT, but only represent a first step towards greater inclusion of this content in the Initial Teacher Education Program. In order to ensure that all

Ontario students learn about Aboriginal peoples, worldviews, knowledges, histories, and cultures, teacher education programs like OISE/UT should re-commit to the Dean's Accord on Indigenous Education, and review the Aboriginal Education Strategy provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education. This would assist these programs with how and what to incorporate into their teacher education programs and assist future educators with becoming 'comfortable' in providing Aboriginal content in their future classrooms.

A growing and increasingly urban Aboriginal population places new demands on teachers to respond to their unique histories, worldviews, and educational needs. Developing a thorough awareness of Aboriginal topics from Aboriginal perspectives is a necessary precursor to develop confidence in educators, but it is only one of many steps needed. Further training in delivering curriculum is also needed, so that teachers feel confident in teaching this material, and so that they may also gain the confidence and awareness to deliver a curriculum that Aboriginal students can see themselves reflected in, and is in general responsive to the needs of the community. This information is also important for Canadian students of all backgrounds and ethnicities, who must learn about Aboriginal peoples in order to break the cycle of assimilation and oppression that Aboriginal people have faced for more than 300 years on this land.

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