Schools and Curriculum: A study applied to First Nations Education

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“Learning is boring.” (Brogan, *personal communication with my 7 year old son,* 2016). There is a problem in our schools in Canada. More and more people are starting to write and speak up about the way schools are run, what they are actually teaching and what their true purpose is. John Holt (1989) started recognizing the need for change in schools in the 1960’s. Ivan Illich wrote books about the same subject in the 1970s. More recently, books have been written by John Taylor Gatto (2006), whose compelling writing style has captured many people’s imaginations. When one is teaching aboriginal students and reading about aboriginal education issues, one may start to wonder if these critiques apply even more to aboriginal students in Canada. There has been an ongoing collision between the descendants of the white settlers and the aboriginal people of this country, mainly because the former has acted in a very arrogant and Eurocentric, xenophobic way towards the indigenous peoples almost from the beginning. Attempting a cultural genocide through residential schools and continuing to teach a watered down version of events that favour the settler’s point of view in schools is just some of the ways that this is played out. The question is, if how we teach in schools and what we teach in schools is not benefitting the students in the schools, then why do we continue? More importantly, where do we go from here? Knowing that the schooling system has hurt and is continuing to damage the children it’s supposed to be helping causes a need to open a dialogue about completely restructuring schools and redesigning what is being taught; add-ons and tweaks are not going to be good enough.

The residential school system was quite obviously a cultural genocide. There are countless stories of the abuse and hardship suffered by children who were forced to go to those schools. Daniel Paul (2006) wrote a story about a young boy who was force fed porridge that he had accidentally put too much salt on (p. 289-290). Another story was told to our Social Studies class recently about a girl who had pins stuck in her tongue, and was forced to bite down upon them, because she had made the grave error of speaking Cree in the school she was forced to attend (Dennis Whitford (2016), *in a lecture given in my classroom*). The reason we re-tell these stories is to examine the true purpose of the schools in the first place. When the stories are told, a larger picture emerges and that is one that is quite a bit darker than the story told by the government at the time. “In order to educate the children properly we must separate them from their families. Some people may say that this is hard but if we want to civilize them we must do that.” said Hector Langevin, Public Works Minister of Canada, 1883 (Truth and Reconciliation Committee, 2012). This story is so dark, so awful, that it silences classrooms whenever it is told. Stories of abuse, of experiments being done on children (Paul, p. 90), and of generations of children being told they were heathens and worthless to society (Whitford *in a lecture in my classroom*, 2016). They were separated from their families, a practice designed to break familial bonds (Battiste, p. 56) and forced to learn another religion, quite foreign to their own. All of these practices do not point to a government whose purpose was to help, but instead to destroy. Education was secondary, or perhaps not even relevant at all, to breaking down a people who threatened the worldview of the European settlers/invaders.

The residential school system was horrific. It was, without doubt, an attempt at cultural genocide. The results have been and will be far reaching and profound. People growing up in a residential school have difficulties being parents, being good spouses, and knowing how to show love. They know discipline and hardship when they leave and have no frame of reference for love and kindness because they have never been shown it (Whitford, 2016). This attitude towards aboriginal people in Canada didn’t stop or start at the doors of those schools though. They were and are believed by the wider society and this has also led to difficulty and hardship for aboriginal peoples in society. The attitude is that if aboriginal people want to get an education, they must leave their culture at the door and assimilate (Paul, p. 282). This has led to aboriginal student’s lack of success in school (Battiste, p. 64) and has generated more of an attitude in the general society about the role of aboriginal people in our society. This belief system is so insidious and plays out so latently that it is difficult to combat with the system as it is today.

Part of the problem with education is the model, the system, the ways of doing things. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2000) mentions the teacher’s role as an issue (p. 73) and links it to the wider system being a way to perpetuate oppression. He said that the attitudes of what teachers are supposed to do; “teach” and what students are supposed to do; “learn” is a ‘banking concept of education” where children are to quietly accept whatever learning that is handed to them, without questioning, without wondering, without thinking (p. 73). This idea is echoed in Battiste’s book “*Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the learning spirit*” (2013) when she says that the way schooling is done and the racism within schooling robs children “of their learning spirit and their potential.” (p. 65). Gatto (2006) calls this “empty child theory” (p. 261) and says that the true idea is that children are empty vessels (p. 262) and are programmable with “controlled experience and sensation” (p. 269) and that this programming had a purpose; to abolish thinking (p. 276). If all this is true, then the school system as it exists today does not just affect the aboriginal people in Canada but affects everyone. It infuses in the minds of young people a one-way mindset that is harmful to society. It gives them the idea that there is one set of people in this country that deserve to be privileged and then teaches them, carefully and completely, who those people are. If the student is not part of the privileged class, one might understand why they so often choose to disconnect from the process.

One of the primary issues that these authors have with compulsory schooling is the inability for schools to truly meet the needs of the individuals inside the buildings (Holt, 1989, p. 149). Mass schooling is a good methodology for making a lot of people obedient and compliant in a fairly short amount of time but it’s very expensive for what it accomplishes (Gatto, 2000, p. 375). Added to that is that we don’t really need compliant, obedient people in our society anymore. More and more companies and businesses are complaining about the lack of life skills and common sense that young people have when they enter the job market (p. 376). If the real reason we need people to be compliant is so that we don’t have a lot of people questioning the status quo, or deciding to get out of debt and then not participating in the market economy that the capitalists have set up, or so that they will continue watching paid TV, reading mass literature and magazines and generally being satisfied with their lot in life, then there may be a problem with not only our methodology but our reasons right from the inception. Gatto (2000) says, “modern schooling has no lasting value to exchange for the spectacular chunk of living time it wastes or the possibilities it destroys” (p. 375). How very disturbing indeed.

One of the issues of disconnection is curriculum. Ivan Illich (1972) says that schools sell curriculum (p. 41). The problem with this, he says, is that “the issue is that one person’s judgement should determine what and when another person must learn.” (p. 42). Battiste (2013) also speaks about what is learned in school and how it affects aboriginal students. She says that often when entering post-secondary education, students are unaware of how the First Nations people have suffered as a result of governmental policies (p. 126) and that indigenous knowledge is misunderstood, mis-taught, and therefore the indigenous ways of knowing is completely ignored (p. 75). She is highly critical of the Eurocentric way of knowing things, and says that even scientific thought is flawed in European ways of knowing because it is assumed that knowing the parts will help you know the whole (p. 120), which is completely opposite of the indigenous ways of knowing (p. 97). Not teaching the whole truth, ignoring different ways of knowing or discounting them entirely, using a prescribed curriculum that is definitely slanted towards one way of thinking about things…all of these things disadvantage all students but especially affected are aboriginal students in Canada.

John Taylor Gatto (2000) advocates closing all government schooling (p. 385). John Holt (1989) says we should teach our own at home and they will learn far more. Ivan Illich (1972) says we should “Deschool society” (p. 1) and Marie Battiste (2013) argues that we need to decolonize education (p. 178) and recognize the whole person when speaking of education, focusing on life-long learning (p. 181). Schools have been talking about life-long learning since I became a teacher but just in the past few years, I have recognized that it isn’t really true. Sitting a child (especially an active child like my son) in a seat for six hours a day, forcing them to learn from a set curriculum and forcing them to do it at a pace that is not likely suited for them personally, is to create the idea that ‘learning is boring’ (Brogan, 2016). Students have always asked, “Why do we have to learn this?” What is the answer? What is REALLY the answer?

Education is important, there is no doubt. Schooling (not to be mixed up with the term education) has been presented as “a vital tool to provide First Nation citizens with the ability to appreciate and modernize their ancient cultures” (Paul, 2006, p. 282). However, it’s clear that schooling as it exists today, does nothing of the sort. In order to truly meet the needs of our society and truly include all the people in it, we need to either rethink schooling entirely, or look for a new model. This doesn’t mean looking for tweaks or add-ons. Adding on to the curriculum has resulted in a very vague, often shallow teaching of history from an aboriginal perspective. Sometimes. Textbooks do not include many references to the perspectives of aboriginal peoples or to any other perspectives other than the European ones at all and most teachers do use textbooks. No, we need to move away from tweaking and move into true change. Change that could transform people’s lives.

Illich (1972) suggests teaching your own kids at home, unschooling them, moving away from a curriculum based model and into a more holistic model, allowing them to learn what they want to learn, when they are ready to learn it (p. 65). The idea is that human beings are learning-ready and when they get curious about something, they will sit down and try to master it. However, if you force them to try and learn it before they are ready, they will resist and find it painful. Learning should be exciting, not boring! Holt (1989) says that once children start school, they start seeing challenges as threats, which they often are (p. 17). There is no room in schools for mistakes, only room for right and wrong and this causes unnecessary stress. Children should be learning that when you try something new, failure is an inevitable and necessary part of growth towards understanding. Holt (1989) mentions the process of learning to read and mentions many children who have taught themselves to read because they started to see it as important and then put the time and energy necessary into learning themselves (p. 18). Battiste (2013) does not go as far as to say we should take our children out of schools but she does echo the ideas presented in the other books: learning should be holistic, involve the whole person, match their worldview and language, involve the whole community, and rooted in experience and be spiritually connected (p. 181). This is likely the key to transforming education into something that will actually benefit people in society instead of hurting them and continuing to perpetuate the status quo.

After researching schooling and the ideas of the people who criticize compulsory education, one cannot leave without many doubts about what we are doing in schools and question whether or not we should continue at all. Schools have been quite hurtful. An extreme example of this creation of pain is the residential school system, designed to kill a culture and break down individuals within it so they are more compliant. This is an extreme example but the breaking of family bonds and the weakening of communities are still very much a part of compulsory education as we know it today. This is especially true for our indigenous learners who through schools are learning that their worldview is not really acceptable as part of the mainstream, that their spirituality, scientific knowledge and perspective is completely irrelevant (p. 161). I have no doubt that educators are not doing this on purpose but neither are they attempting to hurt the general population with their version of education. However, the results are quite clear. Students come away from their schooling experience with the idea that learning is boring, that their time there was something they had to suffer through, that what they learned in school was pointless (aside from the diploma they receive at the end) (Gatto, p. 310). The only way to move forward effectively is to change everything. Change the way we run schools (if we have them at all), change what we teach, to whom and in what way. Include other worldviews in our model of education, erase the Eurocentric viewpoints in the textbooks and curriculum (Battiste, p. 180), create more choices, including ones that will actually feel relevant to the students who attend these new schools. A learning spirit is needed in schools (Battiste, p. 182) that currently does not exist. Only by cultivating that spirit and rethinking everything will we be able to make schools relevant, helpful and compatible with our future world.

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