

SEER 2008 ABSTRACT

Northern Exposures: Models of Experiential Learning in Indigenous Education

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This research involves the current educational challenges facing First Nation students of northern Canada through examination of two experiential and place-based educational programs presently being applied in both the public school system of the Yukon Territory (Experiential Programs in Whitehorse and surrounding communities) and in two Cree Nation reserve schools in northern Alberta (Community-Based Experiential Education Program in Kehewin and Cold Lake).

These programs successfully utilize experiential and placed-based initiatives to address the lack of success and disengagement among Indigenous students by promoting a holistic form of education that values the importance of place and its cultural knowledge. The primary objective of this research is to discover which elements of experiential and place-based education lead to greater engagement of Indigenous students and improved educational outcomes. These two programs are practical applications of experiential education and critical theory as praxis. The programs were chosen as they represent an extensive cross-section of cultural groups (Yukon First Nations, Cree, and Dene), the schools' placement in the educational system (public vs. reserve schools), diversity of geographic location (Yukon and northern Alberta), and scope (diverse pedagogies and epistemologies).

Review of Literature

The current state of Indigenous education in Canada is unacceptable (Assembly of First Nations (AFN), 2005). "The majority of Indigenous

youth do not complete high school and, rather than nurturing the individual, the present schooling experience typically erodes identity and self-worth” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 434). The lack of Indigenous cultural knowledge and perspectives in the school curriculum has been identified as a significant factor in school failure among Indigenous students (Cajete, 1994; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). These findings have prompted calls for an increase in research that addresses the need for incorporating Indigenous cultural knowledge and methodologies with public school curriculum to enhance and support classroom learning for Indigenous students. Research is also needed to discover effective ways that Indigenous and dominant-culture teachers can integrate such cultural knowledge into their teachings of the regular curricula at formal schools (Barnhardt, 1999).

Methods

Setting

I spent approximately two months in five schools in two communities observing and creating qualitative case study reports on the following programs:

Experiential Education Program: Wood Street School, Ghùch Tlà Community School, and Selkirk Elementary, part of the Yukon Department of Education in Whitehorse, Yukon.

Community-Based Experiential Education Program: Kehewin First Nation School and Le Goff School, part of Treaty Six Tribal Chiefs Peacekeeping Conservation Commission in St. Paul, Alberta.

Participants

As the collaboration with specific community and school participants is a primary tenet in the delivery of experiential programming, it is also foundational in this action research project. Each community provided a lead collaborator who supplied direction and support for the research. The research included input from Elders, Chiefs, associated community members, parents, educational administrators (department directors, principals, and advisors), teachers, and students.

Data

Qualitative research methods were chosen, as there is some evidence that Indigenous methodologies are conducive to this type of research design (Chavers, 2000). In an attempt to conduct good and emancipatory research, I chose what I believe to be strategies of inquiry that recognize the uncertainty of the human condition, the diverse nature

of knowledge, and the foundational aspect of context (Tobin & Kincheloe, 2006).

Hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry focuses on the participants' "everyday lived experience," as they find themselves in the world and give meaning to it (van Manen, 1990). Evaluation of narratives, interviews, and focus groups that center on student engagement, critical learning, and identity formation provided valuable information for this research.

Participatory and community action research (PAR/CAR) is valuable as community collaboration and critical pedagogy are primary tenets. Through the process of PAR/CAR, a social justice value interacts with community connectedness and participation (Freire, 1970; Reitsma-Street & Brown, 2002) that supports a team approach to the research that respects the contributions of all participants and pays attention to the power relationships between participants, which includes the researcher(s).

Comparative case study analysis provides a textual interpretation of each specific program (Burawoy, 2000; Yin, 2003). A rich description of each program's evolution is included. It is hoped that the particulars of each specific case study and also the commonalities and differences explored through comparative analysis of all three case studies provide valuable information for communities, schools, and educators. While this research does not seek to promote a universal form of education or a one-size-fits-all structure, it foresees some transferability of successful elements for interested educational communities.

Results

The results indicated many similarities in the factors that lead to greater engagement of Indigenous students in the two programs. Specific themes that emerged that were deemed crucial to both experiential initiatives were: (a) the importance of *partnerships* within the community that assisted in delivering the curriculum; (b) the application of *alternative forms of evaluation* in the programs; (c) the use of *field studies* to deliver and engage students often beyond the specific curricular objectives; (d) an acknowledgement of *teacher-centered programs*; (e) an incorporation of Indigenous *culture, language, and spirituality* in all aspects of the educational context; (f) issues of *sustainability* of the alternative programs within a traditional educational setting; (g) and an *alternative structure and scheduling* of the programs. A major difference noted between the programs is in the objectives of using experiential and place-based initiatives. The Yukon program was originally developed to address diverse learning styles and promote a more community-oriented process of education. The northern Alberta program is based on the integration of treaty rights within the process of learning to encourage students to be aware of

and feel responsible for the lands they occupy. It is crucial to note that not only are there definite relations and nuances within each experiential and place-based program but explicitly specific within each school, community, and reserve.

Discussion

In summarizing the contribution that experiential and place-based processes have made to Indigenous education and knowledge production, four possible conclusions are suggested. First, the practical application of theoretical knowledge is a valuable contribution to the learning process. Second, an active participation developed by the immersion experience may provide motivation for recognition of environmental and social variation and the need for new strategies for social change. Third, the students develop an understanding of the relationship between the ecology of their community and its social framework within a global context. Finally, experiential learning provides the Indigenous student with the task of being conscious about and taking responsibility for the reality of his/her own political and cultural awareness. It is in this very act that the central value is realized: the ability of all persons to know their potential for development and self-awareness (Denise & Harris, 1989).

It is a great challenge for educators to find ways of incorporating these alternative forms of education and, more specifically, to include Indigenous methodologies and perspectives into the curriculum as the formal educational system has dismissed such initiatives for years (McLaughlin, 1992). It is intended that the findings provide communities and educators with a better understanding of educational approaches that successfully engage Indigenous students in the process of learning through the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge and methodologies through an experiential model; one that acts on the theoretical underpinnings that are espoused and actually drives the overall operation and philosophy of the school.

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