INTERDISCIPLINARY SOLUTIONS TO THE FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION CIRCUMSTANCE IN ONTARIO

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ABSTRACT

This paper will look at three separate disciplines (Education, Political Science, and Indigenous Studies) with the purpose of understanding an interdisciplinary approach to solving the current First Nations educational circumstance in Ontario. In order to accurately integrate insights and provide a solid interdisciplinary understanding, the addition of a second lens is required. The use of an “Indigenous lens” during the integration of the disciplines indicates that the solution is rooted in authentic cultural inclusion, recognition and implementation of Indigenous governments, and acknowledgement of the need for a new collective relationship.
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Interdisciplinary Solutions to the First Nations Education Circumstance in Ontario

The First Nations education circumstance in Ontario is producing low graduation rates, inappropriate curriculum, and poor achievement in numeracy and literacy. According to the Reforming First Nations Education Senate report 2011, “First Nations education is in crisis.” With staggering graduation rates at 7 out of 10, some communities are in a critical situation. The report indicated that for over 35 years numerous reports have been done but the solutions have not been implemented. The report indicated serious issues in teacher training, retention, recruitment, curriculum, language, involvement and funding.

First Nations leadership has recognized the need for change. “It is time to turn the page on the failed policies and approached of the past, to give full life and expression to First Nations control of First Nations education” (Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, National Chief, Assembly of First Nations, November 2011). The First Nations education circumstance is directly related to the relationship with non-Indigenous people. During the Treaty of Niagara in 1764 the British accepted the Two Row Wampum belt. This signified the acceptance of “a nation-to-nation relationship rooted in a policy of non-interference” (Gehl, 2013). Over the years, that equal relationship has not been the case. The First Nations education circumstance in Ontario needs to change for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The following discussion will focus on an interdisciplinary approach to understanding how we can change the First Nations educational circumstance. By integrating the insights from the disciplines of education, political science and Indigenous studies, this paper will provide an integrated solution to a complex problem. In order to accurately integrate insights and provide a solid interdisciplinary understanding, the addition of a second lens was used. The use of an indigenous lens in all disciplinary areas will provided a
balanced comparison. The Indigenous perspective on the current First Nations educational circumstance in Ontario can be explained and dissected by looking at historical and societal truths. In addition, I will determine if there is a link between Indigenous social movements and the development of education on and for First Nations people in Ontario. A comparative analysis of the history of “Indian Education” in Ontario and “Indigenous Social Movements” in Canada will determine if Indigenous social movements fuel educational change for First Nations people. Are we at a crossroads?

Research Method and Method of Analysis

This paper is supported by using an interdisciplinary approach. By using both the perspectival and classification approaches more possible linkages will be discovered. “When essential phenomena, which are part of the research problem, are examined by more than one discipline. The two main approaches to interdisciplinary research are perspectival and classification” (Repko, 2008, p.84). As Native Studies is viewed as interdisciplinary, using an interdisciplinary approach will fit. “A third justification for an interdisciplinary approach occurs when the problem requires the research to draw upon an interdisciplinary field” (26). Although to a certain degree Native/Indigenous Studies does bring in some of the listed disciplines, it is my hope to examine each discipline’s perspective outside of the indigenous integration. In addition, I hope to use a First Nations interpretive lens in my examination. As noted by Tayler, “the interdisciplinary research process offers the most effective way to consider each contributing discipline’s perspective, find common ground between conflicting insights, integrate these insights, and apply the resulting understanding to broader issues” (24).
Comparative Historical Analysis

First Nations Education in Ontario - History of “Indian Education”

In order to understand the current First Nations educational circumstance it is vital to have a precise historical context. “I want to get rid of the Indian problem … That has been the objective of Indian education and advancement since the earliest times … Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic” (Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs, 1920).

Extensive works have been completed on the topic of First Nations education. It is important to note that these have been completed by both First Nations and non-First Nations people. Indian education in Canada, Volume 1: The legacy and the Volume 2 by Barman, Hebert and McCaskill (1999) provide a concise history of First Nations Education. Ponting (1997) & Dickason (2002) provide a solid balanced base for First Nations history. Graveline (1998) & Johnston (2011) take the reader on an exploration of the indigenous mindset.

As noted by Kirkness, pre-contact times involved learning through teachings focusing on traditional values such as humility, honesty, courage, kindness and respect. Traditional education was strongly linked to the survival of the family and the community. Learning was geared to knowledge necessary for daily living. Boys and girls were taught at an early age to observe and utilize, to cope with and respect their environment. Independence and self-reliance were valued concepts handed down to the young. Through observation and practice, children learned the art of hunting, trapping, fishing, farming, food gathering, child-rearing and building shelters. They learned whatever their particular environment offered through experiential learning. During this
time it should be noted that the education of First Nations people was truly First Nations education by First Nations people (Kirkness, 1999).

Upon contact, Protestant and Catholic missionaries established schools to spread Christianity. This continued until the early 1800’s. Confederation gave the federal government the responsibility of education of First Nations children. From this time to the 1950s, federal Indian education policy was the residential school system. The Indian Residential Schools (IRS) educational system saw more than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis children taken to boarding schools, miles away from their families, to be “civilized,” educated, and converted to Christianity. (Senate) In Canada, the first known Indian school was established in 1784 and the last school closed in 1993. (Barman, Hebert and McCaskill, 1999) The famous quote from the superintendent of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott, was as follows, “To kill the Indian in the child”. The Indian Residential School era is felt today through the generational effects that have been described as a dark shadow on our country’s past.

In the 1950s provinces began to see an increase in First Nation students attending their schools as a shift in policy began to include integration. In 1969, the federal government issued its “Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy”, or “White Paper”. This document proposed the complete integration of First Nations children into the existing provincial and territorial education systems. In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood, responded with a position paper entitled “Indian Control of Indian Education”. This document set out an educational philosophy affirming the principles of parental responsibility and of First Nations local control of education. Indian Control of Indian Education directed policy and the federal government began to transfer administrative responsibility for on-reserve elementary and secondary education to First Nations. It is important to note that the responsibility sits with the
federal government to take care of the costs associated with First Nations education. This is included in many treaties within Canada.

**First Nations Social Movements in Ontario**

First Nation led activism has been taking place since contact. “It would be only through their own activism that they would be able to establish their right to self-determination in Canada” (Reed, pg. 285). Many organizations located in Ontario are involved in self-determination and the pursuit of equal education; these include the Assembly of First Nations, Union of Ontario Indians, Chiefs of Ontario, and the Nishnaabe Aski Nation. Many of these organizations are tasked with supporting First Nations people through advocacy and lobbying initiatives with the goal of decolonization. It is through the development of these organizations, resourceful leaders, and forcing concerns onto the Canadian agenda that has resulted in change through activism.

The relationship between the federal government and First Nations people is in fact what sparked the renewal of activism. In 1964, the federal government commissioned the Hawthorn Report. Harry Hawthorn, an anthropologist for the University of British Columbia, produced a two-volume report that mapped out the First Nation poverty and inequality that was taking place. Hawthorn recommended that First Nations people begin to be treated as “Citizens Plus” as they have rights that flow from treaties. Hawthorn also recommended that reserves run more like municipalities, communities be given control of citizenship, and First Nations have more authority over education and culture.

The federal government ignored Hawthorn’s recommendations. In 1969 Department of Indian Affairs Minister Jean Chretien delivered a report on Indian Policy that would repeal the
Indian Act, revoke the treaties, transfer responsibility for Indian Affairs to the provinces, and abolish Aboriginal rights (Reed, 2011).

Renewed activism came with the Red Paper, the First Nations response to the White Paper. The Red Paper was coined to signify extreme opposition to the white paper. The Red Paper included the position of “Citizens Plus”. In addition, the book entitled “Unjust Society”, written by Harold Cardinal, created a second wave of public support. This was the first time in Canada’s history that First Nations presented a united front and defeated government policy (Reed, 2011).

First Nations have become actively involved in defeating government policy since the Red Paper to present day. First Nations lobbied for acknowledgement in the Constitution Act of 1982. As a result section 35(1) of the constitution acknowledges “existing Aboriginal and treaty rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada” (Dickason 2002). In 1990 First Nations defeated the Meech Lake Accord when Manitoba legislator Elijah Harper says no to the vote. In 2000 the Nisga’a people accepted an agreement to control their land and manage their resources. In 2000 the Inuit won the largest land claim in world history and created a public government for Nunavut. Back in Ontario, in 1995, the Anishinabek began negotiations for the recognition of Anishinabek Nation jurisdiction over governance and education (UOI).

**The Relationship Discussion**

In Ontario, in the nineteenth century, three basic views of Indian-White relations existed: integration or assimilation of Indians into White culture; biracial harmony or co-existence (Europeans and “civilized” Indians); and segregation (Wilson, 64). Many would argue that this still exists today. As you examine the history of “Indian Education” and social movements some
dates stick out. Residential schools took children away to be “civilized” but some parents were able to take their children into the bush away from the harms of residential school. This defiance towards the department of Indian Affairs allowed for many families to continue traditional teaching practices. This began the reactive relationship that exists between the government and First Nations. For example, the White Paper of 1969 was followed by the Red Paper, First Nations response, and Indian Control of Indian Education in 1972. Since the 1970s a new First Nations educational circumstance has been brewing.

**Educational Circumstance**

The First Nations educational circumstance is a two-pronged force. The first is the circumstance that must be lived through by the indigenous population in Ontario. Each student is affected by the devastating lack of funding and generational effects of residential school. In Ontario First Nations students continue to rank far lower in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts. Statistics Canada continues to show comparison rates in educational attainment. According to Statistics Canada, the Aboriginal population will increase even more in the coming years, resulting in more students having to go through the failing system.

The second part of the educational circumstance force is the creation of a system that places learning about First Nations people at a low priority. It was only in the past few years that Native Studies had entered the Grade 9 to 12 curriculum documents in Ontario. The option to take Native language is also available in some elementary schools in Ontario based on need.

**Indigenous Lens**

The First Nations education circumstance in Ontario needs to change for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. In order to accurately integrate insights and provide a solid
interdisciplinary understanding the addition of a second lens is required. The use of an indigenous lens in all disciplinary areas will provide a concrete comparison based on Indigenous theory. This paper will look at three separate disciplines with the purpose of understanding an interdisciplinary approach to solving the current First Nations educational circumstance in Ontario.

**The Disciplines**

**Education**

In the discipline of education two distinct areas contribute to the circumstance. The first, educational theories, which drive the system and the second prominent component is the actual culture of the educational experience itself.

In the discipline of education there are various theories of learning. These theories of learning are woven in with curriculum to enrich the learner experience:

The first theory is constructivism, which is based on reflection. It states that we develop our individual understanding by reflecting on our lived experiences. Students are encouraged to analyze, interpret and predict. Constructivism also calls for the elimination of grades and standardized testing. Secondly, behaviourism defines learning as the acquisition of a new behaviour. Thirdly, brain-based learning requires the teachers to design learning around student interests. Finally, observational learning involves attention, retention, production and motivation. Models of learning are directly linked to curriculum through both content and strategies.

In 2007, the Ministry of Education in Ontario developed the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework. The implementation of the framework was to focus on improving achievement among First Nation, Metis, and Inuit students and close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in the areas of literacy and numeracy, retention of
students in school, graduation rates, and advancement to postsecondary studies by 2016 (Ministry of Education). The framework includes strategies that “have been identified as necessary elements in achieving the ministry’s goals for improving education outcomes of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students” (Ontario Ministry of Education).

The strategies include building capacity for effective teaching, providing increased support, appreciation of Aboriginal culture, and the engagement of family/community.

The Government of Canada holds responsibility for education for First Nations people in Canada. This fiscal responsibility is often under criticism for lack of funding. On June 21, 2011, the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education for Students on Reserve was launched. Their mandate was to “identify ways of improving education outcomes for First Nation students who live on reserve, as well as to develop strategies for improving governance and clarifying accountability for First Nation education” (AFN). As noted in their final report five main recommendations were put forward:

1. Co-create a Child-Centered First Nation Education Act
2. Create a National Commission for First Nation Education to support education reform
3. Facilitate and support the creation of a First Nation education system through the development of regional First Nation Education Organizations (FNEO) to provide support and services for First Nation schools and First Nation Students
4. Ensure adequate funding to support a First Nation education system that meets the needs of First Nation learners, First Nation communities and Canada as a whole
5. Establish an accountability and reporting framework to assess improvement in First Nation Education
The indigenous perspective on education as a discipline is that education itself is a life-long learning process. Education takes place in all places by all people. In addition, we have many different teachers in life. Battiste explains that Aboriginal pedagogy is found in taking or sharing circles and dialogues, participant observations, experimental learning, modeling, meditation, prayer, ceremonies, or story telling as ways of knowing and learning. “The distinctive features of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy are learning by observation and going, learning through authentic experiences and individualized instruction, and learning through enjoyment” (18).

The difference being that it embraces both the circumstance and the student’s belief of the circumstance. By using “culturally sensitive instructional strategies” (Aikenhead, 232), students begin to develop confidence in the material. Respect for local knowledge is a foundation not an add on. Students need to have the opportunity to bring in their community’s Aboriginal knowledge, language, and values into the classroom. Bringing their community into the classroom is not a show and tell situation. This represents creating a learning space that is 100% integrated with their language, culture, spirituality and connection to the earth.

Political Science

Political science provides an interwoven perspective on the challenge to change the First Nations education circumstance. It is important to note that in the study of public policy and administration, First Nations have historically been the recipient of the actual policy and
administration (INAC). Both the government of Canada and Ontario have various jurisdictional debates regarding First Nations issues. This is a result of the historical relationship that the Indian Act has created. In Ontario, the Ministry of Education is responsible for developing curriculum policy for students in the public system. This accounts for approximately 46 000 (OCT, 2013) students. The overall responsibility lies with the Government of Canada who holds a fiduciary responsibility for First Nations education.

The study of comparative politics is at times difficult as the recognition of traditional First Nations governance structures has yet to reach mainstream society. However, opportunities to learn about both Indigenous and non-Indigenous governance structures are becoming available. The literature on intergovernmental relations also suggests that the urbanization of the Aboriginal population is resulting in complex relations where responsibilities and jurisdiction have been dysfunctional (First Nations Governance).

The analysis of critical policy issues in community development and education do not have consistent separation lines but rather blur together. The government believes that the answer to fixing the First Nation Education circumstance lies in policy. As noted in the report from the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education for Students on Reserve, “A fundamental part of an education system that supports this goal is comprehensive legislation that establishes and protects the rights of the child to a quality education, ensures predictable and sufficient funding, provides the framework for the implementation of education support structures and services, and sets out the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of all partners in the system” (2013).
In contrast, the indigenous view looks at the discipline of political science, specifically the area of governance, from a spiritual and intellectual perspective. The creator gave the Earth’s people a framework of government to give them strength and order. (Benton-Banai, 1998, pg. 74) The Odoidaymiwan (Clan System) is a structure of governance which gives each group a function to serve the people. The focus is on responsibility for all not self. Within this structure education fits as one of the clans responsibilities. Therefore the right to educate your own people was given by the creator not by policy.

The study of political science also focusses on self-determination and sovereignty from the Indigenous perspective. “New ways of thinking are required with regard to certain crucial conceptual and normative assumptions information indigenous claims. This is true in three areas: sovereignty, political and cultural identity and difference, and contemporary approaches to distributive justice and democratic theory” (Ivision, Patton & Sanders, 11). One of the largest challenges is educating the public on First Nations as sovereign. The reality is the education system in Ontario has painted a much different picture. Currently in Ontario there are four main Provincial Territorial Organizations (PTOs) that represent 133 First Nations that are tasked with delivering and supporting a variety of programs and services ranging from health to self-determination. First Nation communities are beginning to develop their own constitutions. The Anishinabek Nation ratified the Chi-Naaknigewin in June 2012 (UOI), which is a constitution for the Anishinabek Nation. The Anishinabek Nation is currently in negotiations with the Government of Canada to implement their own education system that will be federally funded and parallel to the provincial system. They are also in discussions with the province of Ontario for the creation of a potential Master Education Agreement (UOI).
In our current political landscape it is difficult to distinguish a clear answer to fixing the First Nations education circumstance. It appears that changing this circumstance is on the radar of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous governments. However, the situation of the individual students remains the same. A First Nation student attending a school in Ontario on reserve is in a system with federal financial responsibilities and provincial curriculum requirements. To add more confusion, if that very same student attends school off-reserve the school they are attending will receive more funds than the school on-reserve.

**Indigenous studies**

Indigenous Studies falls under the umbrella of cultural studies. This discipline carries with it a controversial past, present and future. Based on the history of Indigenous/Canadian relations in Canada, one might question, “Is Indigenous studies a discipline?” First Nations people weren’t able to vote in federal elections until 1960 and the last residential school closed in 1993. Many Canadians are shocked when they hear this information (Sharing Circle). Indigenous studies in not a mandatory part of the Ontario curriculum. Many students experience units of study on the “North American Indian” or “Aboriginal people”. Students also have components of “Aboriginal People studies” in part of their history classes.

Indigenous studies as a discipline has many obstacles to overcome. “Eurocentric thinkers dismissed Indigenous knowledge in the same way they dismissed any socio-political cultural life they did not understand: they found it to be unsystematic and incapable of meeting the productivity needs of the modern world” (Maina, 1991, pg. 5). It is crucial to understand this mindset as it provides a clearer understanding of motive.

In the pursuit to change the First Nations educational circumstance perhaps courses on Indigenous studies should be a mandatory component of the Ontario education experience.
Currently the curriculum attempts to integrate units of studies and basic language skills. At the elementary level, the degree of exposure to the “First Nations experience” will be dependent upon the experience of the teacher. At the secondary level this exposure will be left to choice. Students are able to take a course in “Native Studies” as an elective but this is not a consistent mandatory component of their education (Ontario Ministry of Education). Indigenous studies stems out into all areas. As explained by Battiste, “Indigenous knowledge has been exposed as an extensive and valuable knowledge system. According to the categories used by Eurocentric knowledge, it is a transcultural (or intercultural) and interdisciplinary source of knowledge that embraces the contexts of about 20 percent of the world’s population” (2002, pg. 7).

**Common Ground – Change the Story, Change the Circumstance**

The culture of First Nations education during the residential school era resulted in the absence of any learning strategy implementation in the schools. The majority of time was spent learning and completing domestic duties. First Nations people were looked upon as less than. Indian Policy furthered this divide by severing the relationship between First Nations and Canadians for generations. As noted by Battiste, “For Aboriginal peoples in Ontario, Canada, and beyond, culturally responsive schools represent the potential to become empowered as nations and to underscore their epistemic, cultural, and linguistic identities as sovereign political entities” (2002, pg. 18).

The inclusion of authentic cultural practices is critical to the success of the educational experience. The acceptance and implementation of Aboriginal pedagogy allows for the culture of the educational experience to be in-line with Indigenous ways of knowing. At quick glance the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework document looks like a valid attempt to change the First Nations education circumstance on Ontario. The framework takes
various educational theories and intertwines them, in addition to attempting to build partnerships with family and community. The National Panel on First Nations Elementary and Secondary Education for Students on Reserve bring forward valid recommendations. In contrast to Indigenous theory, both the federal recommendations and provincial framework create a system that is implemented for First Nations not by First Nations. The Ministry of Education and Government of Canada are recognized as the “experts”. As outlined in the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Canada proposed that relations be based on principles of mutual recognition, mutual respect, sharing and mutual responsibility (RCAP, 1996). Both initiatives show partnerships with First Nations organizations and both also faced criticism from First Nations and non-First Nations groups. Many First Nations have indicated that they were not part of this federal process. On the provincial front education critics feel the province is not doing enough, “Ontario is nibbling around the edges, the province needs to acknowledge that First Nations kids encounter serious difficulties in the provincial schools,” he adds, citing a lack of student preparation, incidents of racism and insufficient teacher preparation. “All three things are within the responsibility of the provincial government” (Lewington, 2013).

Although curriculum in Ontario has changed over the years, it is curriculum that places politics or “government of the day” in the center ring of education. The political landscape for First Nations people is not straight forward. Canada’s historical journey has created many divides in this area. First Nations people in Ontario are affected by provincial and federal politics in addition to First Nations politics at all levels. First Nations are governed by the Indian Act which dictates their daily lives. They are also taught that they have sovereignty from the Creator. It is essentially living in two worlds. “Creating a balance between two worldviews is the great challenge facing modern educators” (Battiste, 2000, Pg. 202).
Indigenous studies as a discipline is viewed very differently by non-Indigenous people. This is slowly changing as Indigenous programs in post-secondary institutions develop. Battiste suggests that Indigenous studies are in fact an interdisciplinary study. It recognizes the importance of all components of a person. Indigenous studies offer the insight of looking at a person as a whole.

**Three Disciplines, Three Insights**

From an interdisciplinary perspective, the root to the solution of the current First Nation education circumstance is provided by three insights from the disciplines of education, political science, and indigenous studies.

The definition of education needs to change. For First Nations people education takes place in all places by all people. If we can think of education out of the walls of a school and separate from the constraints of a clock, we can change the relationship between education and person.

The differences between the Indigenous political arena and the non-Indigenous political area hold a key component. For the Anishinabek Nation in Ontario, the grass roots community implementation of the clan system is a governance structure that allows for the community responsibility and accountability. All areas are covered within the clan system. Everyone has a purpose. Returning to a traditional governance structure will change the story for First Nations as they will not feel confined to federal government policies as their own governance systems will apply.

Indigenous studies needs to continue to challenge all people in Ontario. It is successful at bringing First Nations people back to their culture while inspiring non-Indigenous people to
learn more about Indigenous people. It facilitates the repairing of the relationship. Successful Indigenous programs will change the story for First Nations people in Ontario.

**Conclusion - Changing the Circumstance**

In order to change the education circumstance for First Nations students in Ontario society needs to take an interdisciplinary approach to the solution in addition to actively engaging all people. Wilson & Bird (2005) discuss the intensive process to decolonization. Many people are colonized and do not even realize it. Decolonization is a long process but can be implemented in various ways. Activism is a form of decolonization. DePape (2012) illustrates the importance of youth led activism. The youth can change the story for this country.

In recent years both Shannen’s Dream - Koostachin (2013) & the Idle No More movement have received international attention. Shannen’s Dream had the goal of getting a school built in the community of Kasechewan. Shannen Koostachin made it her personal fight to get a school for her community. She challenged politicians and brought a country to her aid.

The Idol No More movement began with four women from Saskatchewan. Sylvia McAdam, Jess Gordon, Nina Wilson and Sheelah Mclean decided that they could no longer stay silent in the face of legislative attacks on First Nation people, lands, and the waters across the country. They stood up for what they believed in by taking part in peaceful protests. They were joined by a country and then the world. These acts of decolonization both have commonalities. They both have the inclusion of telling the truths of the First Nations circumstance and both contributed to changing the colonized environment.

First Nations people are still waiting for the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) to be implemented. History has taught us that the more First
Nations become involved in the relationship the more progress is made. The two-row wampum belt that was given to the British during the Treaty of Niagara signified a “nation-to-nation relationship rooted in the philosophy and practice of non-interference mediated by peace, friendship, and respect” (Gehl, 2013). This relationship was driven far off course. We have seen community engagement and solidarity throughout time that indicates a return to the right path. With authentic cultural inclusion, recognition and implementation of Indigenous governments, and acknowledging the need for a different story, perhaps the relationship can return to what was intended in wampum.

“My message is to never give up. You get up, pick up your books and keep walking in your moccasins.” Shannen Koostachin June 27, 2008
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