Community-Based Education and Student Achievement

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I speak to you as a retired non-Aboriginal male who has largely spent my career as an ally of First Nations, Metis, and working non-Aboriginal peoples, working as a faculty member of two universities, a classroom teacher or school administrator in three First Nation communities, a Director of an inner city teacher education program, and both a community and union organizer. I am currently a Community Associate of the Centre for Culture, Identity, and Education at the University of British Columbia. I come to you not as a person aiming to polarize policy discussion, but humbly, as a person who knows very little about the actual day-to-day operations of the Regina school system and who respects a number of the aspects of your program about which I do have knowledge. I know from first-hand experience that you have some absolutely first-rate staff members. I understand that, given that you are in some ways accountable to the provincial government, your policy options are sometimes comparable to choosing between Pepsi and Coke. I speak as a citizen to contribute to your knowledge and decision-making regarding your stated priority areas. I choose to begin with a relevant quotation from the Indian novelist Arundhati Roy: "The trouble is that once you see it, you can't unsee it. And once you've seen it, keeping quiet, saying nothing, becomes as political an act as speaking out. There's no innocence. Either way you're accountable." (2001, p. 7). All references cited in this presentation are available upon request.

The Meaning of Culture

The Continuous Improvement Plan for 2011 - 2012 states that the Board continues to implement Antiracism Cross-Cultural Training and significant Aboriginal education programming, as well as uphold a commitment to the priority of achieving equitable opportunities and outcomes for all. You have made the achievement of equitable opportunities and outcomes for students of First Nations and Métis ancestry a particular priority. You've implemented a number of policy decisions at significant expense to ensure that these statements go substantially beyond rhetoric.

However, I do wonder how your policy planners conceive the notion of "culture" throughout the Continuous Improvement Plan, especially when you say that you "support. . . division-wide culture-based programming" (p. 16). In my understanding, Culture is "the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system." (Fiske, 1989, p. 23). Culture is an *active process*. This means that it is constantly being both produced and reproduced. This process unfolds in relation to an existing *social system*. For example, my experience as a Language Arts teacher in the northern Manitoba community of Wasagamack First Nation from 2003 - 2005 taught me that popular music appealed to many of my students, with the hard rock group Metallica and rap music, enjoying priority. Tributes to Tupac Shakur were graffitied on the walls of more than one old building. In part, rap music may have enjoyed popularity because rappers often address issues faced by many First Nation communities - - serious health problems, high unemployment rates, overcrowded housing, unacceptably high youth suicide rates, and psychological depression. Thus, the enjoyment of rap music arises out of the context - or existing social system - of Aboriginal Canadians.

Culture is also lived concretely by ordinary people in their specific, local circumstances. By way of example, throughout the period I served as a school administrator in Chemawawin Cree Nation (2006 - 2007), community leaders struggled with the community's crack addiction problem, housing infested by poisonous asbestos, interpersonal violence as well as a high level of petty crime. These problems were not significant in the peaceful and culturally proud community of Wasagamack, partially due to relatively greater geographic isolation. Thus, while

the influence of hard rock and rap in Wasagamack help illustrate the penetrations of an increasingly global culture, cultural formations are also lived, specific, local, and continually changing. We need to take our understanding of cultural relevance beyond simplistic assumptions that, for example, all Aboriginal children learn better through observation or that teaching culture means *only* teaching heritage and treaty-making. Appreciating and encouraging respect for cultural traditions and achieving a multicentric curriculum where the world and its histories are understood from multiple standpoints are marks of a healthy curriculum. However, to rest on the assumption that this is sufficient is to freeze the meaning of "culture" as a set of practices residing only in the past.

Urban Education

A good number of years ago I was enjoying a conversation with an Afro-Canadian friend who had moved to work in Tennessee. We spoke about the common American reference to "urban education." At one point Dr. Wright stated excitedly, "Don't you see, Rick! When they say 'urban', they mean Black." In our own context," urban" means more than Aboriginal, and it means more than Black in the U.S., but the term nevertheless has a distinct meaning: roughly, a geographic zone of disadvantaged neighborhoods which may or may not be centrally located within a metropolitan area. "Urban education", as in Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP) has meaning because it signifies that living and learning conditions in North Central Regina or near the intersection of Winnipeg St. and Victoria Avenue are usually importantly different than those in Normanview or Southeast Regina. Thus, to report that all School Community Councils have been consulted, and to report on that consultation quantitatively without disaggregating them, is as meaningful as reporting the achievement statistics for all of Regina as a homogenous whole.

When Jean Anyon published her book *Ghetto Schooling* in 1997, she had little confidence in inner-city education, arguing that "long-lasting substantial educational improvement will not occur without the restoration of *hope* in the hearts of all involved" (p. xvi, emphasis in original). Anyon did, however, recommend full-service schools, along with meaningful employment programs. She also recommended solid, well-financed provision of programs for children with special needs. In her second book on urban education, published in 2005, Anyon placed first priority on the need for macro-economic policies which could provide the essential basis for long-term educational change in student outcomes. Despite her sober long-term outlook, Anyon did proffer some more immediate findings:

> When educators work with community residents as equals and as change agents to organize for better education, schools typically improve and student achievement increases. Research suggests that there are several reasons for this raised student achievement, including community pressure for more resources and district accountability, increased parental engagement, and improved staff development and pedagogy (p. 181).

We know that well-functioning community schools do make a contribution to advancing urban students' academic achievement (Phillips, 2008). Here I am simply suggesting that a community organizing role strengthens this possibility. Anyon identified two other contributions to this increased student achievement. First, she identified a correlation between organizing and a reduction in student mobility. Second, Anyon suggested that there "may be an increase in trust and respect" (Ibid) which tends to arise when parents and teachers work together for change. Anyon pointed to convincing evidence regarding the correlation between trusting relationships and student achievement in urban low-income schools.

In a more recent contribution, Anyon opines in her Forward to Soo Hong's *a cord of three strands: A New Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools* (2011, Harvard Education Press), that a means to change urban school culture was not previously at hand. With the completion of this new groundbreaking book, however, "Soo Hong at last offers us a remedy" (p. xv). Hong's book is essentially a case study of how Chicago's Logan Square Neighborhood Association organized two parent programs which led to "the integration of families within schools" (Ibid).

Charles Payne's text on inner-city education, *So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools* (2008, Harvard Education Press), reveals that increased parental involvement can lead to increased parent-teacher tension - - initially. However, Payne then cites research based on a survey of over 8,000 middle-school students, many of them "high risk", which demonstrated that the number of supportive adults in students' lives had the strongest relationship to school engagement. Payne also shares the findings of an increasing research literature suggesting that good extracurricular and community-based organized activities correlate with lower rates of school failure, lower dropout rates, school attendance, more satisfaction with the schooling experience, and lower rates of antisocial behaviour.

Mediratta, Shah, & McAllister's (2009) study of *Community Organizing for Stronger Schools* (Harvard Education Press) provides case studies showing that test scores were improved across a large number of schools in Austin, Miami, and Oakland when sustained school-level organizing was conducted. These activities also revealed early signs of lower dropout rates and a higher percentage of graduates.

Cultural Meanings "On the Ground"

It is necessary to consider what lived, concrete culture really means for educational achievement and outcomes. Lisa Delpit has been a leading figure in the related domains of urban and multicultural education for decades. Delpit argues that ("A)ppropriate education for poor children and children of color can only be devised in consultation with adults who share their culture" (1996, p. 45). We know that "the overwhelming factor in how well children do in school is social class" (Reay, 2007, p. 85). This fact is verified in the Western Canadian context with research cited by Hurton (2009). When Delpit asserts that not only Afro-American and other parents of color, but also "members of poor communities (need to) be allowed to participate fully in the discussion" (op. cit, p. 45) of the nature of their children's education, she is talking about working class and "underclass" cultures. Delpit claims that education policy which genuinely reflects the goals of the people who it will affect comes as close as possible to being truly effective. Delpit is *not* referring to a process where consultation takes the form of "tightly regulated public hearings where the public may air grievances and opinions but decisions are made elsewhere" (Lipman, 2011, p. 13).

So when we are thinking about the local cultures of schools and their neighborhoods, we need to be meaning lived cultures intersected by both race (in the Saskatchewan case, primarily, but by no means solely, Aboriginal peoples) and class. When SCCs were expanded to include most provincial schools, the "talk" was that all schools are community schools now. In a sense, notwithstanding open boundaries, this remains quite true. The critical importance is that some "communities" will count as "urban", reflected to some extent by their designation as "community schools." I have shown above that there is an important correlation between community engagement and students' academic achievement. That claim is not new, nor is it peculiar to urban settings. However, for both historical and contemporary reasons, Aboriginal and low-income parents are much less likely to grace the doorways of their children's schools and classrooms. For at least forty years we have known that "the persistence of bureaucratic structures. . . have separated urban schools from the communities that they are supposed to serve

and made them resistant to reform" (Kantor & Brenzel 1993, p. 387). To change these conditions may require many profound reforms, but this presentation has argued that community organizing and engagement can improve these circumstances concretely. Lisa Delpit's argument supports the notion that the process will be enabled with the use of community-based cultural brokers, individuals with knowledge of and facility with the cultural codes, linguistic forms, and communicative strategies from both the professional and local neighborhood communities. Who better to lead the process of community engagement with schooling and thereby improved student performance than community school coordinators?

Further, multiple studies have shown that student mobility retards students' academic achievement, emotional health, and general well-being (Lipman, 2011). Yet when schools are closed evidence shows that the outcome for students relocated to schools outside their immediate neighborhoods is a psychic trauma some call "root shock" (Ibid). The need for close supporting adults in and out of classrooms is even greater. Decisions to eliminate community school coordinator and Educational Assistant positions, in fact to eliminate entire schools are, to be kind, decisions to disproportionately assign some students with particular social characteristics - Aboriginal identity and poverty - to educational failure. In 1985, in Ontario (Human Rights Commission) v. Simpson Sears Ltd., the Supreme Court of Canada rejected the thesis that intent is a necessary element of discrimination. The concept of *institutional* racism refers to the network of institutional structures, policies, and practices that create advantages for White people and discrimination, oppression and disadvantage for racialized people. If we are going to achieve real equity, we must engage in an honest and critical look at the ways in which the seemingly neutral policies of RPSD benefits White people of privilege and disadvantages, in our case, Aboriginal peoples and economically marginalized communities.

The term *renewing*, as in *Renewing Regina Public Schools: A 10-Year Plan* implies *revision* and *revisiting*. Revision and revisiting imply going back over one's work with a view to correcting errors. Consequently, I recommend that the Regina Public School Board:

1. Immediately advertise for full-time community school coordinator positions at any schools currently lacking them. As Dr. Susan Phillips observed in her 2008 study of community schools in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, "the leadership of a Community School Coordinator/Connector is essential to the effective functioning of the community school" (p. 121).

2. Include in community school coordinator job descriptions a mandate to facilitate local community organizing. This would merely return a component of the original role played by community school coordinators when Saskatchewan's model was first developed in Winnipeg. I can sympathize with any Board or senior administration member who thinks that the last thing you want is another Real Renewal. However, in this period of evidence-based decision-making I have provided evidence that community organizing contributes to improved student achievement. The research may be inconclusive about the effect of community school programs on students' academic achievement (Thompson, 2008,p. 17). However, I've seen no contrary evidence concerning community schools that encourage community organizing. Furthermore, the US-based Coalition for Community Schools, the largest North American organization in the field, advises coordinators that "A good way to think about your job is to think of yourself as the "community organizer" of the school and community" (http://www.communityschools.org/leadership/coordinator.aspx).

3. Immediately advise the province of the Board's displeasure with the elimination of the First Nations, Metis, and Community Education Branch and call for its restoration.

4. Revise any decision to close existing urban schools and maintain community schools in good functioning condition with the same attention to equity planning and investment as that which underlies your equity hiring program. That is, achieving equity will require deliberate and somewhat special commitments. Maintaining community schools for current neighborhood children also means resisting any plans by the City of Regina to gentrify these communities. The opportunity for choice championed in the 10-year plan should include the right to stay put.

5. Recognize that school planning and development in urban neighborhoods requires supplemental staffing, such as the retention or rehiring of Education Assistant cohorts as supporting adults in young peoples' lives. Therefore, revise your current plan which has seen an incremental disinvestment in this resource.

6. In contrast to the current narrowing of curricula which is a logical consequence of an outcome-based curriculum, seek ways within structures and polices currently imposed by the province to open teaching and learning up so that it becomes more community- and culturally-based. Specifically, opportunities for a *funds of knowledge* approach to curriculum-planning should be investigated (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

7. Keep up the good work you're already doing which was referenced at the beginning of this presentation.

8. I recognize that several of the recommendations made above cannot be realized without a significantly greater commitment to financial investment in community-based schooling. However, to do otherwise is to merely contribute to the ongoing school-to-prison pipeline Canadian and Saskatchewan schooling has built and maintained for poor and Aboriginal people. Currently, as you know, First Nations children are more likely to go to jail than to graduate from high school. The rate for Aboriginal incarceration in 2008 was nine times the national average. In 2007/2008, according to Statistics Canada, aboriginal adults accounted for 22 per cent of admissions to sentenced custody while representing only 3 per cent of the Canadian population. More than one in five new admissions to federal corrections is now a person of Aboriginal descent. One in three federally sentenced women is Aboriginal (Therien, 2011).

   Rather than persistently worrying about "the achievement gap" it is time to deeply commit to resolving the "education debt" that has accumulated over time. Borrowing from the former president of the American Educational Research Association and advisor to Barack Obama Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006, p. 3), this debt comprises historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components and, in the Canadian context, refers to a debt owed to Aboriginal peoples for a history of miseducation. Assuming partial responsibility for sustaining this education debt by the Regina Board of Education has a number of implications, including joining in a call upon the provincial government to dramatically increase educational funding.

   Changing these conditions is not something non-Aboriginals should support out of sympathy, pity, or some sort of enlightened thinking. The continuous, and urgent

improvement of social and educational conditions for poor and/or Aboriginal people is in the interests of all Canadians. Fundamentally, supporting and improving community school coordinators and other ancillary staff improves the life chances of inner city kids. You've seen it. You can't unsee it.You're accountable. Act.