

Research Note

Discourse and Difference: An Initial Examination of Aboriginal Education Policy in Ontario

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The Ontario Ministry of Education's (OME) attention to Aboriginal education policy has aimed to, among other objectives, create capacity for teachers, principals, and school boards to address Aboriginal students' needs and learning styles in publicly-funded schools. The 2007 *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (the Framework) identified Aboriginal student achievement (including closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student achievement) among the primary objectives. The priorities outlined by the OME policy initiatives are certainly well-intentioned. My research has sought to interrogate the implications of the discourse across various policies related to Aboriginal education, including the critical and interpretive perspectives that emerge in these documents (Cherubini, 2010; 2012; 2016).

This note is an extension of the aforementioned policy studies and details a research-in-progress concerning the front matter of a more recent 2014 OME publication, *Implementation Plan: Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (the Plan). It entails an examination of the discursive frameworks in the document that, first, situates Aboriginal students in a position of difference, and second, that imply a level of responsiveness on behalf of the OME that is subject to further consideration.

To proceed with their self-declared commitment to Aboriginal education, the statement on the first page of the Plan document indicates that "the ministry continues to advance the goals [of the 2007 Framework] through meaningful collaboration" with Aboriginal partners (2014, p.3). The declaration is positioned on the top of the page and is printed in a larger font and different type-set than the rest of the print matter throughout the document. Moreover, it is graphically represented so that it dominates the overarching OME vision statement for Aboriginal students in provincial schools directly below. The statement includes the same purposeful language that is consistently employed throughout the front matter of the document. Specifically, the statement alludes to the fact that the OME "continues to advance" the objectives of the 2007 policy Framework and hence, underscores the sustainability of their commitment to these goals. The language of 'advancing' implies that previous OME policy initiatives have been successful and are deserving of further commitment. In addition, by including "the meaningful collaboration" with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit partners in the scope of 'continuing to advance' previous policy directives, the language gives the strong impression that these partners have been key stakeholders in an inclusive and accommodating process of policy creation and implementation. This initial statement, that by its position on the first page of the document

takes precedence over even the OME vision itself, implies a broad view of the considerable development of previous policy initiatives.

In the Introduction of the Plan document the two primary objectives of the 2007 policy Framework are re-stated; namely, improving Aboriginal student achievement and well-being and closing the achievement gap between Aboriginal students and “all students” (2014, p.4). While the footnote explains that ‘all students’ includes the entire student populations enrolled in English- and French-language schools in Ontario, the provincial baseline data is “based on the achievement of self-identified Aboriginal students” and framed in the discourse of “gaps ... between the numbers of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students and the numbers of English- and French-language students” (pp. 4-5). One cannot help noticing the degree to which the language underscores Aboriginal students as “the Other.” As an already socio-historical and political marginalized demographic, the language in this case positions a comparison of Aboriginal students on the one side, and the vast majority of students (English- and French-language) on the other (see also, Milne, 2016). This would seem to further entrench Aboriginal students in the historically and all-too familiar context of difference (Battiste, 2013; Neeganagwedgin, 2013). Using this point of reference, much of the introductory chapter details the significant and “persistent gap” in achievement levels between Indigenous students “and all students” based on 2011-12 data (four years after the publication of the 2007 Framework). According to the scores on provincial standardized assessments administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) in grades 3 and 6, there was a range from 5 to 33 points (28% gap in reading scores); a 27% gap in writing results (ranging from 8 to 35 percentage points); and an especially alarming range from 6 to 51 percentage points (45% gap) in mathematics scores (2014, p. 4-5). The difference in test scores seems to embed Aboriginal students as distinctly “the other” in comparison to the achievement levels of “all [other] students” in provincial schools. Stated differently, the significant gaps emphasize the differences between Aboriginal and ‘all other’ students across grades and regions. Given these results, it may be worthy to further examine how the “persistent gap[s] in achievement levels” (p. 4) affect and impact upon Aboriginal students’ sense of “well-being” (identified as an objective in the introduction of the document), and relatedly, the extent to which the test scores are valid and reliable data since the standardized large-scale instruments are administered to Aboriginal and all other students in the province (Hardwick, 2015; Pirbhai-Illich, 2013). The language in the last section of the front matter that is entitled, *Our Way Forward*, may also be subject to further thought. The diction in the first paragraph reinforces the OME’s “commitment...to build on” their Aboriginal education strategy (2014, p. 6). One may note the inference in the language of ‘building on’ as it implies that the OME’s commitment to Aboriginal education has been both sustainable and deserving of further investment. The third and fourth paragraphs in this section solidify this discourse. It is stated that the OME and provincially-funded school boards “will continue to implement” key policy initiatives, and even “increase focus” in key areas. The discourse is framed in a manner that justifies the OME’s commitment to Aboriginal education, and indirectly, to the marginalized ‘Other’ who requires the government and school boards to provide opportunities for them to bridge the gap that separates them from ‘all other’ students.

Note, as well, how the discourse positions the OME as having the critical capacity to “continue to recognize the importance of meaningful collaboration [with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit stakeholders] to improve student achievement and well-being” for Aboriginal learners (2014, p.6). The importance of inviting and working with key Aboriginal community members is a consistent point throughout the front matter. The discourse frames the partnerships between

the OME and Aboriginal communities as instrumental in “continuing to support Aboriginal students” (p. 7). As a specific strategy, publicly-funded school boards “will continue to strengthen the involvement of Aboriginal parents, communities, and organization partners [to] support Aboriginal learners” (2014, p.7). The discourse brings to light the OME’s efforts to be responsive to Aboriginal learners’ needs, as well as their commitment to “strengthen meaningful and reciprocal relationship building, engagement, and collaborative work” with Aboriginal partners (p. 7). Here too the discourse implies first, that key and mutually-beneficial relationships already exist and warrant to be strengthened, and second, that the OME continues to embrace and be responsive to the input of Aboriginal partners.

This research note is an overview of an investigation that will account for the entire 2014 Plan document. The discourse in the document situates Aboriginal learners as the ‘Other,’ and simultaneously uses this position of difference to inform the actions of the OME. There seems to be a conceptual and ideological tension in how policy is enacted and embodied that may also be subject to further investigation.

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