

Book Review

Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit

Marie Battiste

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Given the current North American political, economic, and cultural context, the question arises as to how people might nourish their learning spirits. As an educator and researcher, I have been taught to consider the effects on education, curriculum, and pedagogy of all I read and experience. It is evident that Marie Battiste thoughtfully considers a myriad of possible effects in her writing, as she provides a space for readers to ponder their own sources of nourishment. Her latest book, *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit* (2013), is a multi-faceted inquiry into how all education may be decolonized. For the first time in her writing, Battiste shares in detail her own roots, making the text come alive with stories of her childhood, her university studies and other educational experiences, and her ongoing pedagogical passions. These stories appear in each chapter where they are best able to illustrate particular responses to this pressing question of how one may find nourishment in learning.

Organized into 10 chapters that each provide a different angle from which to consider the learning spirit, the book is informative, thoughtful, and motivated by activism. Battiste's work is premised on setting forth a new vision for education, one in which we as "[e]ducators must now reconceive what we thought we knew" (p. 124).

In Chapter 1, Battiste outlines how decolonizing education is for everyone, not just for Indigenous students, explaining how all Canadians will benefit from this decolonization. Battiste frames this entire text as a "critique of current Eurocentric education" and her book "advocat[es] for systemic change and trans-systemic reconciliations" (p. 14). The academic reader is immediately drawn in to consider how this type of change may come about.

Chapter 2, *The Legacy of Forced Assimilative Education for Indigenous Peoples*, outlines how current education systems in Canada perpetuate bias. Battiste makes her stance clear that "[t]he education system has not yet ensured that non-Indigenous children develop an accurate understanding of the Indigenous peoples in Canada and their knowledge systems, much less who is their neighbour" (p. 32). She notes that all Canadian citizens are connected to assimilation and that both historical and contemporary relationships with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples and immigrant settler populations are not well understood. Furthermore, she asserts that "Aboriginal peoples in Canada and Indigenous peoples throughout the world are feeling the tensions created by a Eurocentric education system that has taught them to distrust their Indigenous knowledge systems, their elders' wisdom, and their own inner learning spirit" (p. 24). This distrust has been ingrained, crushing the spirit and increasing self-doubt in many

Indigenous individuals. This tension arises differently as anxieties appear in non-Aboriginal Canadians any time “treaties and Aboriginal rights are asserted” (p. 27) when relationships built upon treaties and further agreements are not well understood.

Chapter 3, *Mi'kmaw Education: Roots and Routes*, provides a detailed historical account of the Mi'kmaw people and outlines their longstanding interactions with the French missionaries and later, the English settlers. Treaties were signed in the spirit of good relations, and

[t]he First Nations saw these obligations as sacred promises for their friendship, moving and allowing settlement on their lands, while subsequent governments saw these treaties as ways to get more land and as part of their assimilation plan, to be conveniently forgotten until they needed them. (p. 52)

Battiste outlines the assimilation plan of the Canadian government and the subsequent loss of Aboriginal rights. By unearthing the roots and routes of her people, she aptly articulates how differently the two groups approached the same events and treaty agreements, which allows readers to understand more deeply “where [things] went wrong” (Donald, 2004, pp. 31-32).

Chapter 4, *Creating the Indigenous Renaissance*, is one of the most provocative chapters of the book. Here, Battiste draws upon the work of Shawn Wilson in her discussion of Indigenous epistemology. Her thoughts about epistemology, or ways of knowing, build upon Wilson's (2008) assertion “that Indigenous epistemology and ontology are based upon relationality” (p. 11). This relationality is at the core of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, connected both to place and to fellow humans, animals, and plants. Battiste summarizes that “Indigenous knowledge is inherently tied to the people's mutual relationship with their place and with each other over time” (p. 95). She discusses both the current activism of Indigenous peoples and the importance of ethics, outlining the necessity of both. Battiste explains the link between ethics and Elders in Indigenous epistemology, as “[t]he fullest expression of a people's ethics is represented in the lives of the most knowledgeable and honourable members of the community, often considered respectfully as the Elders or knowledge holders” (p. 76). When defined as such, the Elders are truly honoured. “However, Canada's educational institutions have largely ignored, and continue to ignore, Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy” (p. 87) and with it the valuable insight of the Elders. If readers focus on only one chapter of this entire book, I would recommend Chapter 4 because it covers vast content areas while outlining the importance for educators to “nurture Indigenous knowledge, its dignity, identity, and integrity by making a direct change in school philosophy, policy, pedagogy, and practice” (p. 99).

Chapter 5 is a discussion of trans-systemic education systems while highlighting how both the humanities and the sciences might be decolonized. Battiste begins by outlining how “part of the ultimate struggle is a regeneration of new relationships among and between knowledge systems, which needs scholars competent in both knowledge systems to converge and reconcile these and other knowledges, ways of knowing, and systems” (p. 103). Battiste goes on to acknowledge that this type of practice is underway in certain places, as evident in the work of scholars who embrace wisdom traditions as a theoretical framework. This chapter wonders about which knowledges have been prioritized and how and in what ways current education systems may be different if alternate ways of knowing were to take this central place. She asks, “we, as educators, must determine when we are thinking about mainstreaming, whose is the ‘main’ that is ‘streamed?’ Whose experiences are normalized as centre?” (p. 107). To decolonize education, a creative re-thinking and transformation is required, which will come only if educators are willing to think in new ways.

Chapters 6 to 8 highlight the need to eliminate racism, to respect Aboriginal languages, and to displace cultural imperialism. Battiste articulates how race is a social and cultural construct, explaining how learned prejudices may also be unlearned. Detailed facts are outlined, indicating repeatedly how “Aboriginal peoples face persistent barriers that far exceed those facing non-Aboriginal Canadians” (p. 138). Battiste clarifies how “[i]n Canada, every Aboriginal language is endangered” (p. 144) and how language loss affects many aspects of life: identity, self-esteem, self-confidence, connections to family, and community connections. She reviews Aboriginal language programs across the country and explains how “[a]lmost all North American Aboriginal languages fundamentally operate from a view of the world as interrelated and in flux” (p. 149). I feel as though this view offers a deeper understanding of the connections between all living beings and the places in which we live. Indigenous Knowledge (IK) is distinct from Eurocentric knowledge in that it rests upon an understanding of the importance of inner space, which draws upon “discoveries of the spiritual connections to all things” (p. 160) and moves beyond knowledge that focuses primarily on the outer and physical realm. Inner discoveries may work toward displacing cognitive imperialism through ritual, ceremony, and tradition to bring about “deep introspective learning and attention, not only to the teachings of elders and to the ancestors, but also deep connections to how one is present with oneself” (pp. 160-161).

Chapter 9 outlines 14 *Recommendations for Constitutional Reconciliation in Education*, which are “based on reconciling Aboriginal and treaty rights within the various educational provisions of provinces or in a federal First Nations Act” (p. 170). Battiste considers these recommendations as a way to proceed. She asserts, “Canadian administrators and educators need to respectfully blend Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy with Euro-Canadian epistemology and pedagogy to create an innovative ethical, trans-systemic Canadian educational system” (p. 168). She distinguishes between understandings of IK being viewed as “ways of knowing” or as “religious content” (p. 169), and says that administrators and educators who view IK as religious content often tend to leave these knowledges out of the curriculum. Yet, if they are viewed as ways of knowing, then they are more likely to be drawn upon in classroom settings. I view this distinction as essential to how we might proceed as educators.

In Chapter 10, Battiste shares *Possibilities of Educational Transformations*. She starts by reminding readers of the contaminated educational system that exists in Canada to articulate how decolonizing education “is the act of love that generates [her] passion and [her] activism and [her] truths” (pp. 190-191). I am reminded of the words of Thomas King (2013), “Native cultures aren’t static. They’re dynamic, adaptive, and flexible, and for many of us, the modern variations of older tribal traditions continue to provide order, satisfaction, identity, and value in our lives” (p. 265). By recognizing that IK and ways of being in the world are not static entities but are rather constantly in relation to that which is all around us, meaning and purpose arise. Through seeing Aboriginal students as diverse learners and drawing upon the many features of IK and pedagogy, there is possibility for transformation in education.

Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit does a great job of “critiquing past and current systems and directing attention to the disciplinary omissions that perpetuate stereotypes and contribute to cognitive assimilation” (p. 102). While it aptly summarizes the past and current situation, I feel as though it is somewhat lacking a provocative vision of what might be. While there is no doubt that Battiste feels strongly about decolonizing education, at times, the language comes across quite sharp as she tells the readers what they “must” (p. 175) do and how things “must” (p. 180) change. I agree that much is in need of changing in educational systems across Canada, and would like to see Battiste’s work connect with a wider

audience to spread this message so that they too might see it as an “act of love” (p. 190). While the themes in the text are ones which all Canadians and particularly pre-service teachers would benefit from learning, I fear that their portrayal at times may be too couched in academic language to be fully accessible.

This text is timely, as there is currently much redesign taking place in education across Canadian provinces and territories. Amid consideration of which curricular outcomes may be most pertinent to young people today, educators should also pay attention to “whose knowledge is offered, who decides what is offered, what outcomes are rewarded, and who benefits, and, more importantly, how those are achieved in an ethically appropriate process” (p. 28). *Decolonizing Education* provides an opportunity for educators, researchers, students, and parents alike to think about how it is they envision a well-rounded, just, and balanced curriculum.

Battiste recognizes the current challenges while encouraging educators to think critically about how to move forward. Throughout this entire account, her care for her people, for entire education systems, and for students of all ages is evident. Nourishment on many levels is essential, engaging IK and teaching and learning in a holistic manner. This sustenance may be received if people open their hearts and minds “to make educational opportunities for students that nourish their learning spirits and build strong minds, bodies, and spirits” (p. 100).

References

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