Essay

The Power of Voice: Advocating for Aboriginal Voices

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Defining and articulating the concept of voice is particularly troublesome because of the numerous and varied definitions and connotations in the usage of that term. For example, children in school are often taught that voice is the feeling and conviction of the individual writer coming out through the words, a definition that focuses on voice as an individual accomplishment (Sperling & Appleman, 2011). However, voice can also be defined in terms of the expression of a point of view, the right to express that point of view, and the expectation that the point of view will be heard and imbued with meaning and value. In these terms, the concept of voice also connotes understandings of power or lack thereof as in, *he had a voice in that decision*, or, alternatively, *his voice was not heard in the boardroom*. If voice then is linked with power structures, understanding voice is a prerequisite to understanding privilege and resulting oppression. This connotation of voice has implications for individuals, for communities, for cultures, and for the extended national and international community. The tying of voice to power forces one to recognize how using one's voice might advantage or disadvantage a group of people. Furthermore, an understanding of the power of voice has implications for how one might become an ally for Aboriginal populations in a quest to challenge oppression and racism.

This paper has two sections. The first section outlines how and why voice and the language that empowers particular voices serves to discredit the Aboriginal point of view. A discussion regarding the power of the media in silencing Aboriginal voices as well as a brief discussion of education as a tool of oppression follows. The second section draws on the work of Kevin Kumisharo, a leading thinker in the field of anti-oppressive education. Using Kumisharo's research as a framework, this section extends an amalgam of four approaches outlined by Kumisharo to actively challenge oppressive education and addresses the role of the ally in advocating for voice.

Voice and Power Structures

Voice and power are concepts that are intricately linked. Having a voice means having a measure of power or control over one's destiny or the destinies of others. Sperling and Appleman (2011) assert that voice is socially and culturally mediated by experience and is developed and asserted based on the encounters of the individual with the social world. Therefore, one's way of interpreting and speaking about his or her world cannot be developed or exist in isolation but is always the outgrowth of one's experiences in the social world. As such, then, voice can be understood to hold status depending on the social and cultural context in which that voice is heard, or often, not heard. Therefore,

> . . . one's voice is taken to be more than one's speaking or writing personality or style, but rather the ideas one assumes by virtue of one's social positioning to count in the world. Ways of expressing and shaping those ideas in language, as a result of social and cultural mediation, can be taken as authoritative or not, depending on their perceived place in the social sphere (Sperling & Appleman, 2011, p. 75).

Critical to a better understanding of the complexities of human relationships and further, to the provision of a just social order, is the analysis of whose voices are heard, and why; also critical is whose voices are silenced, why they are silenced, and what are the effects of being silenced on the individual himself or herself, on a culture, and on historical and current power inequities that exist between those with a voice and those who remain voiceless.

Language is that powerful tool for understanding one's life situation and giving voice to that life situation. Paulo Freire understood this link between language and power, teaching basic literacy to peasants in South America and so providing them with the language they needed to describe their lives differently (Freire, 1997). In a similar manner, Michael Unger (2007) argues that the thoughts people have and the articulation of their experiences are dependent upon the words provided by their culture and community. He writes that, "[t]he language we have may or may not allow us to adequately describe what happened in our past, or what is happening to us now" (Unger, 2007, p. 27). In other words, the language of thought is culturally imbued and has the power to provide individuals with ways of articulating experience. Similarly, lack of an adequate language base can act as a barrier to understanding experiences and thus the ability to articulate those experiences for others to understand.

So, language, spoken or written, provides the framework from which one's voice emerges, as powerful or not, as considered or not worthy of consideration, or as meaningful or not. Paulo Freire (1997) notes that it is difficult to think about language without thinking about ideology and power. The English language, for example, when spoken and written following the devised rules of correct grammatical structure, has been granted great power to sway others and to ensure that the individual using this language is heard and considered. Thus, those who are illiterate in this particular "Queen's English" experience difficulties giving voice to oppression, articulating the exact nature of the oppression, and finding ways to resist that oppression against a dominant culture that owns the powerful voice. Arthur Lloyd (1972) notes Freire's argument that, ". . . illiteracy is the mark of men robbed of their words, who exist not for themselves but for another, the oppressor" (p. 9). Illiteracy in the dominant discourse keeps individuals and cultures in a state of dependency and oppression, and serves to ensure that certain voices have no power to articulate change. When voices are silenced, perspectives are stifled and the system of dominance is maintained.

Furthermore, one language will not directly translate into another language without a loss of meaning or intent because language, being ever changing and adapting to meet the needs of the user, reflects cultural values, norms, and priorities. Leanne Simpson (2004), in her work with the preservation of Indigenous knowledge, articulates the difficulties experienced when attempting to share Indigenous knowledge with non-Indigenous environmentalists. One such barrier is that, ". . . when knowledge is made into a text, it is translated from Indigenous languages into English, locking its interpretation in a cognitive box delineated by the structure of a language that evolved to communicate the worldview of the colonizers" (Simpson, 2004, p. 380). She argues that the language of the colonizers, those non-Indigenous environmentalists, is not adequate to transmit the cultural intentions of the Indigenous worldview without full Indigenous participation with the sharing and the use of the knowledge. Furthermore, the knowledge held by Indigenous people cannot be divorced from the land and from the experiences of the indigenous culture, just as the language of the colonizer cannot capture the intent of the Indigenous worldview. Effective sharing of knowledge necessitates power equities between two groups of people because knowledge is a commodity that, unlike other commodities, cannot easily be taken out of context and exploited in the traditional manner of the settler society.

As such, exploitation does occur in the transmission of Aboriginal knowledge. Numerous writers have argued that native writers experience unique obstacles to being heard, obstacles that allow exploitation of individuals and their knowledge to go mainly unchallenged. These include language barriers, cultural differences in ways of telling stories, and palatability to the readership (Beard, 2000; Cook-Lynn, 1993, 1995; Grant, 1990; Valandra, 2005; Wentz, 1998). Edward Valandra (2005) writes scathingly about the literature produced in what he calls, the 'as-told-to [auto]biography'- that is, the life story of a Native person, told to and duly recorded by a non-Native biographer. He notes that the non-native biographer brings a white agenda to the stories and thus the voice of the Native speaker is effectively silenced. His main concern with this type of writing is that these stories serve to confuse both the Native and the Non-Native populations. Valandra (2005) writes, that, ". . . the teachers and students of Native studies and other cross-cultural studies who believe they are receiving a factual rendering of Native life and culture with this form of Native literature are victims of a cruel literary hoax" (p. 5). When a voice is silenced in this manner, confusion results because readers of this work, assuming that the voice being read is authentic and speaks with authority, believe that they are gaining knowledge that is truly Indigenous knowledge when in reality, the voice being heard is the voice of the oppressor who is using the language of oppression, writing what readers want to hear and intentionally or unintentionally suppressing stories that are less palatable to the readership or that are contrary to the predominant story that is being told. The voice of the colonizer is heard, perpetuating false or incomplete stories and disregarding crucial discussions about colonization and the effects of historical and current occupation, so, in effect, positioning readers in ways that they do not have to change their own thinking.

Besides the issue of authority in voice, that is, which voice is being heard and how authentic that voice is, voices can be silenced through a lack of reflexivity on the part of the writer or speaker. Reflexivity refers to an author's ability and desire to take into account his or her own perspective and bias when he or she is narrating a story or articulating an argument. If the dominant discourse is the grid that lies over articulated experience, that is, if the myths that have been perpetrated as common sense become the assumed framework in which narratives are interpreted, then particular interpretations never get articulated. Barbara Applebaum (2008) argues that the voice of dominant discourse serves to ensure that voices articulating the marginalized experience of racism and oppression are denied because of the continuous process

of recentering the dominant story and reducing the numbers of possible and novel interpretations for lived events. In other words, master narratives preclude the voices of the oppressed from presenting not only the nature of the oppression, but also, the interpretation of the oppression from his or her own perspective.

Furthermore, the media often silence voices. The media provide a powerful glimpse into the social workings of any community because it is often the media that provide the 'official story' that is heard and taken to be truth. When the media discourse in dominant group language, and when the media portray and perpetuate an incomplete story, then voices are necessarily silenced. It is important to remember that, for the most part, the media are made up of individuals, including Aboriginal people schooled and socialized in the larger and dominant white society, who have been raised with white values as the normative background against which other values and cultures are judged. This became clear during the serial killing spree in Saskatoon in 1990, when at least three Aboriginal girls were brutally murdered by John Martin Crawford. Media coverage was almost non-existent, and what was available was not front-page material, unlike the coverage provided by the media for the Bernardo/Homolka killings that were going on at the same time in another part of Canada. Warren Goulding (2001) identifies this discrepancy and argues that these two cases illustrate one of the most profound failings of the Canadian media. He suggests that "[t]he media is most comfortable dealing with stories in which they can empathize with the central characters, whether as victims or perpetrators" (Goulding, 2001, p. 211). He argues that the Canadian mainstream was unable to feel any commonality with either John Crawford or his Aboriginal victims, who were most often portrayed as women who frequented downtown bars and worked as prostitutes. Arguably, however, the use of language was isolating, not the lack of commonality between the victims and those reading the paper. Had the media portrayed these women as beloved daughters and mothers, a common shared experience of loss would have been more likely and the larger community could have empathized with the Aboriginal families. In reality, the media have great power in silencing marginalized voices by virtue of being able to determine which stories will be highlighted and which stories will be relegated to back pages and thus mostly dismissed.

What seems to occur when one's voice is disregarded is alienation from the larger community. For example, Unger (2007) documents the trend of young people who have no voice with authority figures to turn to peer groups that alienate themselves through anti-social acts. A

critical analysis of Aboriginal history demonstrates this same trend. Historically, residential schools separated community members from one another and, in the process, deliberately and systematically took away the language that would have allowed Native people a comfortable voice. As Native children were forced to forgo their traditions and languages, they often became ashamed of their communities and their knowledge, and in that shame, confident voices were less likely to emerge. Cook-Lynn (1987) writes that when children see themselves as, ". . .excluded from a world which is created and recreated with the obvious intent to declare him or her *persona non grata*. . . [s]ilence is the first reaction. Then there comes the development of a mistrust of that world. And, eventually, anger" (p.57). In practice, this silence, mistrust, and anger plays itself out in a number of different ways, including hopelessness, alcoholism, addictions, crime, and even suicide. Sam McKegney (2007), clearly demonstrates the affects of loss of community on the Aboriginal population in his discourse on residential school when he writes that,

> . . . the vigour with which the goal of separating children from their cultural, spiritual and linguistic heritages was pursued ensured that most of the children would experience a profound sense of disconnection from family, culture, and community upon re-entering Aboriginal society. The results of this onslaught are now widely documented: Native children divorced from their traditional Native cultures, while at the same time refused entry into prosperous white Canada because of inferior educational practices and racism, and occupying a liminal space characterized by disillusion, identity crisis, and despair. The legacy of this genocidal atrocity ripples throughout Native Canada, its fingerprints on the domestic violence, poverty, alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicide rates that continue in many Native communities (p. 28).

This forced marginalization and the expectation that one's voice will not be heard manifests itself in disenfranchisement and hopeless and a lack of motivation on the part of individuals and communities to engage in the larger community.

Furthermore, disenfranchisement and the direct results of disenfranchisement leads to the creation of myths about a group of people, myths that further authorize dominant groups to dismiss the voices of the less powerful. Myths, generally speaking, provide people with a framework for understanding the world in a predictable and orderly way, but become so powerful as to disregard other ways of explaining phenomena. Once they have become

entrenched in the dominant discourse, they build on assumptions that are incomplete, providing simple explanations for what should be complex relationships and realities. The myth of the Native 'problem', the myth that women do not have the ability to do the work that men do, or the myth of a safe and non-violent society, to name a few, serve to protect those in power from having to consider the complexities of relationships and the effects of language and voice on power inequalities. In effect, myths are troublesome because they create stereotypes that do not encourage the exploration of alternate stories about historical, political and cultural experiences that underlie current experiences (Adichi, 2009). Nevertheless, these myths become the official story, documented as historical truth. Once stereotypes are created, all events can be explained by those stereotypes as in, *yes, that's how they all are*, or *you are a tribute to your people because you are different from everyone else in your group*. The same stereotypical mindset pervades both.

Myths are also predominant in the structure of education. The myth that education is neutral and equitable, the myth that what is taught is necessarily true and complete, or even the myth that there is only one way of knowing, that of the dominant understanding, serves to continue the process of disenfranchisement and shame. Barbara Ann Cole (2009) in discussing narrative as a way of knowing, notes that narrative can be an important and valuable way of knowing other stories, but that, ". . . scientifically based research (SBR) is increasingly becoming known at the 'gold standard' . . . [and] attracting the majority of funding" (p. 573). The myth that there is only one kind of research, that of the powerful elite means that such research receives the bulk of the funding, serving to silence the voices of others for whom narrative best serves articulation of experiences. Thus testimonials or feminist narrative are given second-class status as a way of knowing and analyzing experiences (Cole, 2009). Furthermore, documented history, our understanding of what occurred in the past, is likely to be viewed as infallible, although, Gross (2000, as cited in Legg, 2007) noted that, " . . .particular elites, groups, or institutions have attempted to dictate which values, facts, or historical events are recalled" (p. 459). That which is taught as infallible history is really a series of memories that have been routinised in dominant discourse by the victor of the struggle. Clearly, education is not neutral at all, but rather, an embodiment of the current and dominant understanding of truth.

Education for Alternate Voices

How then can educators, burdened beneath the myth of the neutrality of education, become allies in advocating for the voices of those who have been silenced? Kevin Kumashiro (2000), in his article "Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education", reviews four approaches that have been employed to work against various forms of oppression. Educators, through the use of an amalgam of the four approaches including Education for the Other, Education About the Other, Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering, and Education that Changes Students and Society, have the potential to tackle the multiplicity and situatedness of oppression and the complexities of teaching and learning (Kumashiro, 2000). To address the role of the ally in advocating for voice, this paper will adapt and extend the four approaches, as set out by Kumashiro.

The first approach to addressing oppression focuses on improving the experience and advocating for the voice of students who are Othered, defined by Kumashiro (2000), as, ". . . those groups that are traditionally marginalized in society, ie:, that are 'other than' the norm, such as students of color, students from unemployed families, and students who are female. . . "(p. 26). Kumashiro (2000) argues that educators need to create "space" in the school or academy that welcomes, educates, and addresses the needs of the students who have been marginalized. This space must be an affirming and empowering space where difference is embraced, where normalcy is not presumed, and where students will have a listening audience for the Othered voices. Furthermore, educators must affirm and embrace the diversity among their students, and employ teaching pedagogies to support the specifics of their student population.

As an extension of the work of Kumashiro, one might also explore how educators could use the Language Arts curriculum to support the power of many voices within the classroom. Following Bakhtin's question of who is doing the talking, a number of researchers have chronicled the ways in which the power of discourse has been ideologically steeped, effectively stifling the voices of those who, by virtue of their first language or cultural background, are not as readily heard (Sperling & Appleman, 2011). The native population within the Canadian educational system has been, for the most part, left voiceless in a country that has relied exclusively on a national standard of written language. However, Emma LaRoque (1993, as cited in Beard, 2000) suggests that the Native people were not wordless, but rather, their words were

literally and politically negated. In spite of these obstacles, educators, through the use of supportive methods in teaching, have considered ways in which these unheard voices might be encouraged to speak. As one approach that attempts to mediate the cultural voice with the voice in the academic setting, Sperling and Appleman (2011) extend the Bakhitin notion of double-voiced discourse. In other words, educators might employ methods whereby students are encouraged to mesh their own linguistic codes used in everyday settings with the codes used in academic discourses. The skillful employment of this learning framework examines what youth already know from their everyday lived experience in community to support subject learning in school, so that differences between school-based norms and community-based norms can be negotiated by both students and teachers. (Sperling and Appleman, 2011). The role of the educator, as an ally, then becomes to utilize pedagogical strategies that incorporate relevant cultural literacy in the classroom and to assist students to gain agency and voice.

Freire (1997) advocates that teachers have a dual responsibility when working with the oppressed; they need both to make clear to students that their language is beautiful, and they need to teach the dominant syntax so that students can articulate their lived experiences with powerful voices in their struggle against injustice. The three day symposium "Celebrating the Local, Negotiating the School: Language and Literacy in Aboriginal Communities" (2010) offers the educator further strategies that might be used to provide practical methods for the classroom and that fit well with Freire's concept of tolerance. From the symposium, a collection of articles were written focusing on the challenges that face many youth in the classroom today because of the devaluation of their cultural language or dialect when judged against the imagined "Queen's English" norm. The resolve of the symposium was to raise the consciousness of educators to the variant Englishes that are used by Aboriginal communities and to bring these additional variants into mainstream spaces, thereby making these mainstream spaces more identifiable and comfortable to Indigenous learners (Battiste, Kovach, & Balzer, 2010). Moreover, Battiste et al. (2010) argue "[b]uilding on the language knowledge of learners enables them to use their linguistic understandings to access standard English as a language of power in the educational realms, without relinquishing their local language, a language of power in community" (p.8). Educators must accept the challenge to look at students with nonstandard dialects, and ask not whether the language appears "good" according to the conventional

textbook style of goodness, but whether it works to good effect to move the readers to see Canadian society through another person's eyes (Grant, 1990).

The second approach that educators might employ in their quest to advocate for voice in anti-oppressive education focuses on what all students, both the privileged and the marginalized, should know about the Other (Kumashiro, 2000). The knowledge that many students have of the Other is often incomplete as a result of exclusion, invisibility, and silence, which is taught both discreetly and indirectly in the educational setting. As cautioned by Adachi (2008), the stereotypes that are created when one story becomes the only story prove dangerous in that they straightjacket the students' ability to think of one another in complex ways. One approach that educators might employ to combat this distorted knowledge entrenched in stereotypes and myth is to engage those members in the marginalized sector to speak for themselves, because it is too often that someone else either speaks for them or about them. Moreover, Jacqueline Royster (2003, as cited in White-Kaulaity, 2006) contends that "subject position really is everything and 'voice' is the central manifestation of subjectivity" (p.9). This argument underscores the need for First Nations people to speak for themselves and to be given access to literature acknowledging the many diverse voices of the First Nations people, in order that they attain a more complete story and recognize their own voices as having power.

How then can educators select literatures that support the First Nations voices? Marlinda White-Kaulaity (2006) provides helpful suggestions for selecting and evaluating authentic literature based on the question of whose voice will be heard through the selected materials. Notably, a key criterion for selecting materials focuses on the question of authorship. To clarify the role for educators, White-Kaulaity argues that the teacher is responsible for researching the background of the authors and from that knowledge, making ethical decisions about what material should be used in the classroom. Another essential criterion for this selection focuses on the accuracy of information provided about the Other. Although text that is inaccurate, romanticized or stereotypical can be useful in teaching critical literacy, the teacher must be cautious about the use of materials that are filled with bias, whether they are a romanticized version of Native people or a version drawn solely from negative stereotypes. Additionally, educators must find texts that speak of authentic Indian people today as opposed to those that speak in the past tense, of a vanished people. Selecting materials that encourage students to

honour each other's worldviews promotes an inclusive learning environment and validates and affirms the voice of all students from diverse backgrounds.

The third approach to anti-oppressive education, as identified by Kumashiro (2000) requires that educators and students examine not only how some groups are silenced while others are privileged, but includes a study of how this dual process is legitimized and maintained by social structures, including educational institutions. Kumashiro (2000), building on the work of Freire's critical pedagogy, advises educators to engage in the pedagogy of positionality that engages both students and teacher in recognizing and critiquing how one is positioned and how one positions others in social hierarchies. Simpson (2001) proposes that the role of allies is to ". . . spend time looking inside themselves, uncovering their own biases, and privileges and. . . [learning] *from* our people – not *about* Aboriginal peoples, but about themselves and their place in the cosmos" (p.145). The strength of this approach is that it not only works against oppression, but charges the oppressor to study his or her complicit role in the perpetration of the oppression.

Tim Wise (2008) further expands on the role of the ally in examining privilege and giving voice in anti-oppressive education. Central to role of the ally, Wise suggests, is the ability to recognize the limits of his or her own knowledge and to relinquish the authority he or she has been given when speaking out about oppression, an authority that has been granted only by skin colour. Wise (2008) further cautions that to be accountable to the voices that have been silenced, the ally must " . . . listen more than talk, and follow more than lead" (p.120). Moreover, he suggests that the ally must step back from setting the agenda for the marginalized group because to be deemed accountable means prioritizing what those most impacted by oppression voice as their priorities. In a similar vein, Simpson (2001) argues that Aboriginal people don't want to be just consulted or studied; they want to work with their allies using the knowledge they have to make decisions that impact their people and communities.

The fourth approach to anti-oppressive education, as suggested by Kumashiro (2000) is education that changes students and society. Transformative education requires a dual approach that involves learning to be unsatisfied with the shortfalls of colonialism in education and constructing disruptive, different knowledges that have the potential to transform education. Marie Battiste (2004), Mi′kmaw scholar and professor, proposes the challenge that "[e]ducation can either maintain domination or liberate. It can sustain colonization in neo-colonial ways or it can decolonize. Every school is either a site of reproduction or a site of change" (p.3). Further,

Battiste offers educators a useful definition of the post-colonial approach to transformative education, which she suggests involves the rethinking of conceptual, instructional, cultural, and legal boundaries that are assumed to be universal but which act as barriers to Aboriginal people, women, visible minorities, and others. In contrast to conventional education, which normalizes and privileges Eurocentric ideologies, post-colonial education focuses on unlearning conditions of oppression while constructing new knowledges that draw on the voices of the marginalized and silenced to create new discourses which recognize diversity as the norm (Battiste, 2004). When teachers are able to disrupt the normal discourse, what becomes possible is new knowledge based on hitherto silenced positions.

Although transformative change evolves slowly, and there is undoubtedly much work left to be done, the latest curriculum renewal process in Saskatchewan has begun to include the voices of many native Elders and leaders in the collaborative planning of First Nations educational outcomes. These outcomes, unlike those of the past, are not mere add-ons at the end of the unit of study, but are interwoven into the lessons within the unit. To support both teachers and students in an understanding that we are all treaty people, the Office of the Treaty Commissioner for Saskatchewan has initiated a program that provides training workshops for teachers and provides schools with resource kits for the classroom (Office of the Treaty Commissioner, 2012). . This program is the result of a collaborative effort between the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, the Saskatchewan Department of Education, and the Government of Canada, with the objective of promoting a solid understanding and awareness about treaties in an effort to build positive relationships. Further to that, there have been more recent advances with the potential to transform Canadian educational practices, and which might effectively give voice to those who have been silenced. In February of 2012, the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education for Students on Reserve released its innovative report titled "Nurturing the Learning Spirit of First Nation Students". This panel, mutually created by the federal department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada and the Assembly of First Nations was mandated to identity ways of improving educational outcomes for First Nation students. While this report acknowledged the work that educators have started, it also identified the existing First Nation education system, as little more than a patchwork of agreements and policies that have continued to fail the needs of First Nations children and youth (Haldane, Krause, & Lafond, 2012). The report of the National Panel

has outlined three principles for educational reform and five broad recommendations outlining the steps that should be taken to develop a contemporary education system that will honorably nurture and give voice to the learning spirit of the First Nations students. This recent work provides promise for transformative change for a society too long engaged in silencing the Other.

Despite the relatively recent work being done in Canada and in Saskatchewan in the field of education, allies must continue to recognize that education is not neutral and therefore acknowledge that the opposite is true. Education is a powerful tool for either ensuring that the status quo remains unchallenged, or for the provision of critical understandings of the need for social change. Educators must listen to the voice of the oppressed and provide spaces and places for their bodies and their voices, must educate others about marginalization and about the marginalized, must provide education that allows all people an understanding of colonization and racism and the privilege that is bestowed, and must, through critical literacy, provide a forum for students to desire and work toward marked changes in the social world. Transformative education for all citizens can open up spaces for the disenfranchised to voice pain, fear, anger, and also hope for more equitable distribution of power. With understanding of the deep wrongs that have been done and with the opening up of spaces for other ways of thinking and knowing, the voices of the marginalized, be they voices of the disabled, voices of the young, women's voices, or Aboriginal voices can be heard and granted authority and power.

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