

Approaches to Aboriginal Education in Canada: Searching for Solutions**Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard (eds.).
Brush Education Inc., 2013. Pp. 424.*****Reviewed by* *Hongyan Wang*
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According to scholars such as Linda Clarkson, Vern Morrissette, and Gabriel Regallet (1992), improvements to Aboriginal education involve a long-term and difficult project requiring the transference of all aspects of education to the control of Aboriginal people. The control of educational institutions and recognition of traditional knowledge as equivalent to the knowledge systems of western societies are some fundamental ideas and beliefs that are widely held by Aboriginal educators regarding educational reform. However, such ideas and beliefs often meet with resistance, which suggests the need to rethink the difficulties that Aboriginal students are confronting in everyday life, and the need to further discuss and debate the issues of Aboriginal education.

The title under review, *Approaches to Aboriginal Education in Canada: Searching for Solutions*, offers a new perspective and makes a significant contribution to what the editors refer to as the capacity to “hunt” assumptions that underlie different responses to the issues of Aboriginal education. After writing *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation*, a book that has attracted national media attention, the editors of this book endeavor to face another huge response and debate in terms of finding solutions to Aboriginal education challenges. In this volume, the editors adopt two prevailing approaches (i.e. parallelism and integrationism) to explore Aboriginal education in Canada. Parallelism is symbolized by the two-row wampum where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities travel on separate paths, with the purpose of enabling Indigenous self-determination. Integrationism, as opposed to Aboriginal separation, proposes that the solution to Aboriginal marginalization lies in Aboriginal peoples’ participation in Canadian society and global environment. The editors discuss Aboriginal educational issues in the context of what they pose as a “disturbing trend” which “makes no attempt to include other perspectives that would challenge the existing orthodoxy with respect to Aboriginal education” (p. XIII).

The volume is divided into three parts, each containing a selection of chapters that are representative of the proposed approaches. Part I adopts the separationist view—parallelism; that is, the dominant approach on Aboriginal education in the literature. Included are seven chapters focusing on the revitalization of traditional knowledge and educational practices so that Aboriginal people are able to gain self-determination and autonomy from the rest of Canadian society. The first two chapters are focused on a historical overview of Aboriginal education policy and examine its colonialist nature. They are followed by five more specific selections that investigate different levels of the Aboriginal educational system, ranging from early childhood education, primary and secondary education to post-secondary education and Aboriginal teacher education. Although they address different facets of Aboriginal education, all of them share the common assumption that for Aboriginal education, much work still needs to be done, especially in incorporating traditional values, content, and perspectives in public schools.

Part II draws from different perspectives that the editors characterize as an integrationist approach. The editors meticulously selected nine chapters and classified them into two categories: one is liberalism and the other is political economy. In line with liberalism, six chapters are devoted to options for improving the state of Aboriginal education. These improvements correspond to Ben Levin's (2009) belief that, "It is primarily a matter of high-quality teaching, good awareness, respect for Aboriginal history and culture, and strong outreach to [Aboriginal] parents" (p. 689). The editors classify the other three chapters in this section as representing the perspective of political economy. In spite of the differences between integrationists, they share the assumption that increasing Aboriginal participation in Canadian society is the ultimate goal, since improving Aboriginal educational achievement will "enrich not only individuals and First Nation Communities, but will also provide more systemic benefits for the entire country" (p.288).

In Part III the editors refer to a balanced view which allows the previous two approaches to "speak to each other" (p.357). The first exchange concerns the interaction of parallelism and liberal integrationism, in which they attribute the low Aboriginal educational outcomes to different factors. The former identifies colonialism as the determining factor while the latter regards Aboriginal's overdependence on external money from federal government as the primary factor. The second exchange is between assumptions within parallelism and integrationist political economy orientations regarding the value of incorporating indigenous knowledge into post-secondary education. The critique centers on a good mind v.s. the good life. The final

chapter proposes a dialogue that assumes that there are “paths to truths” (p.416). This dialogue represents “the traditional Aboriginal notions of how one comes to understand” and “creates a broader and understanding of a phenomenon” (p.417).

The strengths of this volume are its openness and its courage to allow different perspectives to exchange and debate about the longstanding and sometimes conflicting issues of Aboriginal education. As education continues to hold a paradoxical status for Aboriginal people in how to live in the mainstream culture successfully and still retain indigenous knowledge in a contemporary society, there is no easy path and there are no clear answers at this time to complex challenges. The approaches of parallelism and integrationism adopted in this volume offer a desirable forum for leading thinkers on both sides to share their perspectives and positions. Moreover, the editors foreground exchange and dialogue by also presenting opposing viewpoints. The combined impact of this debate and discussion is far-reaching, especially for addressing further questions in Aboriginal education, such as the nature of knowledge, the importance of critical thinking, and the purpose of education.

Some omissions are also found in this volume. First, unlike such literature as Marie Battiste’s *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage* (2000) and John Richards’ *Creating Choices: Rethinking Aboriginal Policy* (2006), the volume runs the risk of classifying a variety of chapters into two discrete theoretical positions. All chapters under two approaches are treated as if they are totally separate from each other. In reality, there exist overlapping sets of analyses and no clear-cut boundaries between them. Second, it is regrettable that the volume fails to include contributions by scholars like Marie Battiste, who is one of the most prolific and well-known scholars writing about decolonization of Aboriginal education. Third, despite rich discussions of poor Aboriginal educational levels, much of this analysis focuses on the effects rather than on the socioeconomic factors that caused them. We still know very little about how Aboriginal students are raised and socialized in their homes and communities, and even less about how their heritage is traditionally transmitted and how this knowledge can be integrated into educational practices.

In any case, this volume has huge implications for Aboriginal education. The editors have fulfilled their objective of providing insight into the problems inherent in the Canadian government’s historic and contemporary treatment of Aboriginal people. Yet, there is still so much to be done and there are so many questions to be answered with respect to Aboriginal

education. Perhaps this title merely begins to open the necessary paths for exploration and searching for solutions.

References

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