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Tensions Inherent in Public Education for the Common Good: Literature Review

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Abstract

This literature review outlines an historical understanding of the goals of public education in Western society and attempts to analyze how these goals have ignored or outright negated Aboriginal ideologies and practices. Using the four basic hallmarks of public education as a framework, including education for the purposes of personal growth, democracy, citizenship, and the economy, this review provides a critical analysis of evolving educational policies and initiatives as they impact Aboriginal learners. Current contextualized provincial policies from Saskatchewan's Ministry of Education, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, the Saskatchewan School Boards Association and other key stakeholders is undertaken for the purpose of unveiling how seemingly benign policies have been undergirded by a Eurocentric paradigm.

This literature review delves into current educational policy and initiatives, attempting to analyze how they intersect with Aboriginal paradigms. Toward this end, the authors have provided a discussion of historical understandings of the goals of education for the common good. Thereafter, we have demonstrated the tensions that are inherent in western understandings of public education for the common good, particularly as they relate to Aboriginal learners. Finally, we have considered how educational policies in Saskatchewan have been influenced by a western paradigm and how this influence has created tensions for Aboriginal learners in the public school system. While numerous

studies have analyzed the various roles public education is meant to play in western society, this review is unique in that it investigates the intersection of public policy (with an emphasis on Saskatchewan education) with Aboriginal paradigms and the resultant disengagement of Aboriginal learners.

Goals of Public Education

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, public education¹ was established as a means of ensuring that education would be universally available and free of charge to all children as a public responsibility (Ichilov, 2011). One objective of public education was to provide equitable opportunities for all children regardless of social class or socioeconomic circumstance, a goal that working class parents, particularly, sought for their children (Carnoy and Levin, 1985). Theoretically, if all children were given the same sorts of educational opportunities, then all children would have equal opportunities for social mobility. Furthermore, public education has always been charged with the role of promoting another aspect of the common good- that is, preparing children to become responsible citizens who have the ability to create a better society (Wilson, p. 12). Ichilov (2011) considers public education itself a common good and defines the common good as “usually delivered by government and financed from public funds... distribution of such goods is non-competitive and universal... [and] includes goods that serve all members of the community” (P. 284). However, defining parameters of this concept of the common good, as well as identifying that which ought to be emphasized in public education, has created numerous contested ideologies about the role of public education. As such, the concept of the common good, and the role education is to play in promoting the common good, has been contested.

Generally speaking, the concept of a common good of education can be divided into four basic purposes: 1) promoting individual growth, 2) promoting democracy, 3) providing citizenship education, and 4) promoting economic growth. Although the public will generally agree upon these four ideas, there tends to be some disagreement on *interpretation* of what each means in and of itself and for the practice of education. However, this delineation is useful in outlining a framework for understanding historic and current tensions that exist in providing education for all children.

As mentioned, the first general requirement for education for the common good is that of promoting the individual growth of each person in the quest for each to meet his or her potential, both as an individual and as a productive member of the larger community. Holmes (1990), although arguing that public education is neither possible nor desirable, identifies this egalitarian objective as one in which schools “provide reasonable access so that all children however unequal their home backgrounds, have a chance to make real choices in school” (p. 235). The National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations (1972) also recognize this imperative, stating that “pride encourages us to recognize and

¹ defined as education that is publicly funded and thus tuition-free, accountable to public authorities, and accessible to all students

use our talents, as well as to master the skills needed to make a living” (p. 1). While recognizing that schools can and do provide social mobility for disadvantaged groups, Carnoy and Levin (1985) argue that this social mobility is restricted by economic demands and by the strength of social movements in the larger social world. Nevertheless, individual achievement in the broader social context is one cornerstone of the common good of education.

This objective of public education, to promote individual growth, is closely linked to a second objective of public education to promote democracy by educating citizens in the ways of democracy (Osborne, 2000). To educate citizens in how democracy works, Osborne (2000) posits that one of the common goods promoted in public schooling is that of ensuring intelligent voters who can, “read and think well enough to understand the issues they faced . . . and perhaps even become involved in political life themselves, and to live with political disagreement, conflict and ambiguity” (p. 12-13). Ichilov (2012) echoes this argument, emphasizing that the requirement of schooling ought to be to prepare children for participation in a democratic society as critical thinkers. However, Klenowski (2009) argues that democracy, in a neo-liberal political climate, promotes education that provides for a “positional good rather than a public good” (p. 6) where parents can buy a better social position for their children by virtue of choice of schools. Despite these differing ways of defining democracy, public education has always been meant to play an instrumental role in its maintenance.

A third imperative of education for providing for the common good is to provide citizenship education for all people. Osborne (2000) outlines elements of citizenship education including “a sense of identity; an awareness of one’s rights and respect for the rights of others; the fulfillment of duties; a critical acceptance of social values . . . and the capacity to reflect on the implications of all these components and to act appropriately” (p. 19). However, he further notes that beginning in the mid-1980’s, citizenship education has been relegated to particular subject areas, such as Social Studies, taking a back seat in public education. The focus has shifted to training for participation in the global economy. Moreover, Sears and Hughes (1996) argue that the nature of citizenship, and the degree to which each person can participate in decision making, is a contested concept. Similarly to Osborne (2000), Hughes (1996) allow that the current conception of citizenship has more to do with economic than social imperatives.

The fourth objective of public education identifies economic growth and development in a country as a cornerstone of the common good, which is linked to the economic motives for public education. Carnoy and Levin (1985) argue that the focus of public education is determined by the nature of the workplace and its demands and by the social response to workplace conditions. They propose that public education is the “arena of conflict . . . a place where social movements try to meet their needs and business attempts to reproduce its hegemony” (p. 50), where preparation for job performance is viewed as most important. Wilson (1988), while arguing that schools have been employed to fix all that is wrong in society, identifies the misappropriated role of the school in economic development. He noted that “schools do not create jobs” (p. 13) even though rectifying unemployment rates

and economic ills has been a role thrust upon public schooling. Apple (2004) identifies market requirements as being not necessarily for the common good but “constituted out of the sum of individual goods and choices” (p. 29). Further, Klenowski (2009) recognizes that educational policies supporting market demands do not account for factors such as race, social class or even the physical location of students for access to educational opportunities. More currently, C21 Canada (2012) provides a model for education in the 21st century emphasizing the role of the school to position learners for success in the global marketplace. This policy posits seven principles that can be read and analyzed as an alternative description of what constitutes the common good in a highly technological society. .

Recognizing the sometimes convergent, often conflicting objectives placed upon public education, it becomes clear that public education for the common good is not easily defined and even less easily made purposeful for all people in all contexts. Holmes (1990) notes that all arguments in favor of public schooling are somewhat independent and that most supporters of public education would not wholeheartedly embrace all of them. Carnoy and Levin (1985) posit that these conflicting goals for public education explain the dissatisfaction that seems to be chronically attached to public education. Furthermore, they argue that schools, being conservative, tend to

preserve existing social relations. In historical periods when social movements are weak and business ideology is strong, schools tend to strengthen their function of reproducing workers for capitalist workplace relations . . . When social movements arise to challenge these relations, schools move in the other direction to equalize opportunity and expand human rights” (p. 248).

Thus, the focus of the role of public education in providing for the common good sways with popular social movements and with marketplace requirements as well as with the current vision of what constitutes legitimate knowledge and justice (Apple, 2004).

Tension Inherent in Perceptions of Public Education for the Common Good

Given these generalized categories of that which constitutes the common good, one tension that becomes apparent is in the attempt to provide for all of these objectives within one system. Wilson (1988) observes that schools cannot possibly be effective in providing a cure for all of society’s economic and social ills, particularly in the current context when society itself lacks a common belief system. Nevertheless, schools, being funded by public monies, come under scrutiny as those institutions that should provide such a panacea. The tension that pulls public education in opposing directions is that between providing for the marketplace, on one hand, and for social betterment, on the other. What is emphasized at any given time is determined by the dominant political, social and cultural ethos or discourse, arguably, dictated by market demands. According to Carnoy and Levin (1985), this struggle for direction occurs because schools “reproduce the unequal, hierarchical relations of the capitalist workplace . . . [and] represent the primary force . . . for expanding

economic opportunity for subordinate groups and the extension of democratic rights” (p. 144). These authors view public education as the area of conflict between reproducing the workers required for the workplace and mollifying social movements that emphasize educational and workplace equity.

More recently, Apple (2008) identifies the current power bloc influencing education as that of the alliance between neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism, authoritarian populist religious conservatism, and middle class professionalism, the overall objective of this bloc to ensure that public schools educate students who are competitive in the marketplace, but who are schooled in values that are attributable to a romanticized and idealized past. This alliance, generally speaking, calls for a free market approach to schools that ensure that “only good ones survive” (Apple, 2004, p. 17), an “educational Darwinism” that assumes that good schools produce good students with good marks and a good chance of being successful in the workforce. This educational paradigm contrasts with the more inclusive paradigm that emphasizes public school as a social equalizer through the provision of equitable opportunities for all (Ichilov, 2011), rather than the promotion of those children who are already advantaged by social class, race, and ability. As Dei (2002) notes, discussions of job market attributes such as individualism, competition, meritocracy, hard work, and a host of other such values removes education from the realm of local communitarian values and issues of equity and social justice, creating a tension between individuality and communitarian values. Thus, citizenship education that emphasizes the common good is pulled in two opposing directions, that of emphasizing individual rights as democratic citizens and that of emphasizing communitarian responsibility.

Public Education and Intersections with Aboriginal Epistemologies

Using the four basic hallmarks of public education as a framework, including education for the purposes of personal growth, democracy, citizenship, and the economy, this second section of the paper will critically investigate educational policies and initiatives to reveal how public education for the ‘common good’ has been underscored by a western epistemology, thus creating tensions for those learners who are not in the majority, specifically the First Nations’ population. Moreover, this portion of the paper will analyze current, contextualized provincial policies from Saskatchewan’s Ministry of Education, the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation (STF), the Saskatchewan School Boards Association (SSBA), and other key stakeholders to unveil how seemingly benign policies within public education have been undergirded by a Eurocentric paradigm. A central aim in this section is to offer the public, educators, and policy makers, a critical examination of public education, in hopes that this awareness will entice individuals to desire and strive for a more just system.

Tensions Inherent in Public Education for Individual Growth

An immutable goal of public education is to promote the individual growth of each learner in a quest for each to meet his or her potential (Holmes, 1990). That said, a common understanding of what is meant by individual growth, and the techniques used for

measurement, have not been shared universally among diverse populations in Canada. For instance, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL, 2007) notes that individual growth and development from an Aboriginal epistemology and ontology is viewed from within a larger context of contributing to the collective. Using this framework, individual growth can be measured by examining the relationships, participation, and the culture of trust within a community (CCL, 2007). In contrast, those operating from the western paradigm tend to view personal growth as something that is innately individual and most often measured through the use of rigorous data collection of achievement scores (Ministry of Education, 2009, 2010; SSBA, 2011b). Undoubtedly, competing definitions of what constitutes individual growth, and the techniques used for measuring growth, have created inherent tensions within public education. How then, have the western ideals of learning success intersected with Aboriginal epistemologies?

While the belief that knowledge and education appears to benefit the growth of all learners, Battiste (2005) posits that a fundamental assumption that has underpinned public education in Canada is the conviction that only certain knowledges have value in measuring learning success. Hence she argues that “... the most serious problem with the current system of education does not lie in its failure to liberate the human potential among Aboriginal peoples, but rather in its quest to limit thought to cognitive imperialistic policies and practices” (Battiste, 2005, p.9). While Bouvier and Kalenzig (2006) acknowledge the necessity of accountability practices in publicly funded education, they too argue that current practice tends to be reductionist in how success is defined. They note that success for the Aboriginal population involves the mastering of a curriculum as one objective, but further, requires that the student retain his or her cultural identity, something not measured in standardized testing procedures. The National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations (1972) provides a similar argument, noting that the values needed by Aboriginal children “are not written in any book” (p. 2) but found in the culture, the language, and the history of the people. Although purported to be necessary in ensuring that all children meet their potential, accountability measures have been narrowly defined. These measures have “reduced too many classroom lessons to the cold, stark pursuit of information and skills without context and without social meaning” (Westheimer, 2010, p.6). This, in effect, reduces education for the common good to the production of factually knowledgeable, but critically, deficient citizens. Finally, Dei (2002) notes that the notion of excellence in schooling tends to be equated with test scores and with learning outcomes rather than with measures of equitable opportunities. He notes that the two ideals are often placed in opposition to one another; having one negates the existence of the other. Accountability measures, as defined by current discourse, tends to center on the western paradigm in opposition to an Aboriginal paradigm. This reduces the ‘common good’ to that which can be understood and measured by western epistemologies. The acknowledgement that the ‘common good’ is neither necessarily common, nor good, for the Aboriginal population is addressed further in research that considers the discourse around accountability practices in education.

A critical investigation of the current policies and practices in Saskatchewan similarly illustrates how cognitive imperialism, as defined by Battiste (2005), has been validated as a

means of privileging those individuals in the majority, while simultaneously oppressing Aboriginal learners. For instance, reports published by the Ministry of Education (2009, 2010) and the SSBA (2011a, 2011b) acknowledge an achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners. These results are based on standardized provincial scores, ignoring holistic learning that engages all aspects of the individual, including emotional, physical spiritual, and intellectual development (Brant Castellano, 2000; CCL, 2007). As Battiste (2005) proposes, the reliance on these standardized provincial assessments that test intellectual performance rather than the growth of the whole person results in a form of cognitive imperialism. This cognitive imperialism constrains Aboriginal ways of knowing and confines education to a narrow view of measuring success. Arguably then, Aboriginal learners in Saskatchewan have not benefitted from the educational experience in public schools to the same degree as their counterparts.

In a desire to eliminate this gap, the Ministry of Education has published several policy frameworks on its website to address a renewed emphasis on improving learning outcomes. The most recent publications include *Inspiring Success: Building towards Student Achievement* (2009) and *A Time for Significant Leadership: A Strategy for Implementing First Nations and Métis Education Goals* (2010). Additionally, the Government of Saskatchewan has emphatically announced, in the *Government Direction for 2011-2012: The Saskatchewan Advantage*, its number one priority is to improve educational outcomes (SSBA, 2011b). To this end, the province has renewed curriculum, initiated recommendations regarding K-12 student achievement, and implemented First Nations and Métis Education Plans as components of the provincial Continuous Improvement and Accountability Framework (SSBA, 2011b). Schick (2011) noted these efforts, suggesting that policies and initiatives to close the achievement gap have occupied a significant space in public education discourses within Saskatchewan. However, despite the elaborate plans for transforming measurable educational outcomes, government policies have fallen short in many ways (Schick, 2011). A glaring example of this is measuring personal growth by graduation rates, which highlights the western paradigm. For instance, the most commonly reported indicator to measure success of Aboriginal learning in Saskatchewan is the high-school dropout rate. This theme is repeated in reports provided by the Ministry of Education (2009, 2010) and the SSBA (2011a, 2011b) which draw attention to the significant number of Aboriginal students who leave school prior to receiving a grade twelve diploma. The CCL (2007) has deconstructed and reinterpreted provincial data to challenge this format for measuring success, revealing that much of the analysis that had been completed used a deficit model. Redwing Saunders and Hill (2007) confirmed this by observing that many publications highlighting Aboriginal education have confused the lack of educational attainment with lesser abilities. This miss-labeling again draws on the deficit model and masks inequities in the system. Moreover, the CCL (2007) notes that the provincial reports that have documented gaps in achievement and Aboriginal high-school dropout rates ignore colonial influences. Contextual information could explain the myriad of challenges that face Aboriginal learners. Thus, a continuing challenge for public education is to critically re-examine and re-articulate a more comprehensive definition of what is meant by learning success and individual growth.

Tensions Inherent in Public Education for Democracy

The hidden curriculum, which is often synonymous with education for democracy, aims to increase civic mindedness and create a population that is more likely to vote, be involved, and be politically active. Recent educational policies (Ministry of Education, 2009, 2010; SSBA 2011a, 2011b) reference the importance of community well being, active engagement, and shared responsibility, but the authors skirt around the terms that have been traditionally tied to education for democracy. It is noteworthy that Aboriginal people have long advocated for a learning approach for the development of citizens who can be responsible for their nation and who can participate in Canadian society (CCL, 2007). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was charged by the federal government to carry out an independent inquiry into the strained relationship between Aboriginal peoples, the Canadian government, and Canadian society as a whole. Specifically, the mandate of the commission, as established by the government, was to investigate the problems that face Aboriginal people and to propose specific solutions that would improve intercultural relationships and ensure the equitable participation of Aboriginal people in Canadian life (Brant Castellano, 2000). In the final analysis, the report advocates for a holistic and lifelong learning framework of education, underscored with, what some might perceive as, education for democracy. Have frameworks that would allow for active engagement and authentic democracy been realized within Saskatchewan education?

The call for active participation and shared responsibility in civic duties is a cardinal goal of education for democracy. To this end, we will examine education for democracy as related to stakeholder input into policy development. The evolution of policy development in Saskatchewan called for shared partnerships as early as 1997 in the report *Our Children, our Communities, and our Future: Equity in Education* (Saskatchewan Education, 1997). This policy was jointly produced by the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, the Saskatchewan School Trustees' Association, the League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents, Saskatchewan Education, and the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission. Its purpose was to secure equity in education for the well being of children and communities and for the future of Saskatchewan. However, a critical reading of the report exposes the omission of Aboriginal organizations or partnerships that should have been invited to author this document. Excluding such consultation demonstrates a critical flaw in the development of this policy. Without a voice in producing the equity framework, it is not surprising that the action plan initiatives have been ineffectual for the First Nation's people in Saskatchewan.

More recently, provincial policy frameworks have emphasized the importance of partnerships and shared decision making. For example, the policy report *Inspiring Success: Building towards Student Achievement* (Ministry of Education, 2009) highlights that:

Publicly funded education is foundational in a democratic society. Saskatchewan's education system must continue to represent the people it serves at every level of planning and decision making. With dramatic shifts in demographics in the province, this means that new and creative structures

and processes are needed to ensure that First Nations and Métis peoples are involved and have a voice (p. 28).

Mirroring this objective, the SSBA (2011) conveys sentiments that encourage collaborative partnerships to improve public education through the engagement of parents and the larger community. Moreover, the SSBA draws on a vast amount of research to support its claim that increased family involvement in education has a constructive impact on student achievement.

While one might argue that significant gains have been made in fostering democratic partnerships and active participation in educational policy development, Schick (2011) would disagree. She sharply notes that the Ministry's interests in improving social relationships has less to do with creating authentic partnerships and more to do with justifying the initiatives. Namely, she suggests that these partnerships have only gained attention due to the demographic shift in the population. In 2016, it is estimated that about forty-five percent of the children entering kindergarten will be of Aboriginal ancestry. This change in demographics has become important to the dominant culture concerned for workplace preparation (Schick 2011). From this perspective, the partnerships in policy development boast active participation from all of the stakeholders, but are little more than tokenisms that have been created by the dominant culture.

Tensions Inherent in Education for Citizenship

Despite ongoing citizenship education in public schools, the concerns Aboriginal populations experience as a result of colonization are not addressed. Deer (2009) identifies colonization and estrangement as *the* critical issues leading to a potential loss of Aboriginal culture, leading to marginalization and estrangement for this growing population of people. Apple (2008) argues that policies that are implemented tend to advantage those who are already advantaged, thus contributing to continued social stratification. He recommends that those making policies reposition themselves to view outcomes from the position of those who have the least power. Furthermore, thinking about education requires the ability to think relationally, that is to "situate it back into both the unequal relations of power in the larger society and into the relations of dominance and subordination" (p. 241). This same consideration is taken up by Gérin-Lajoie (2012). She argues that diversity tends to be addressed in a superficial way and that official policy discourse tends to be assimilationist because it ignores the effects of power relations. In effect, reform tends to be rhetorical rather than practical, superficial rather than authentic, which reinforces the status quo (Apple, 2008). Rather than thinking about identity as something that is innate or determined by the individual, it is more helpful to understand one's identity as something that has been socially constructed as a product of social and historical relations (St. Denis, 2007).

The relationship between identity and citizenship education for Aboriginal students is presented most strongly in the work of Deer (2009, 2011). Deer argues that citizenship implies a shared identity based on the ethnicity and nationality of the dominant group.

Clearly, this shared identity, which omits the Aboriginal identity and worldview, is problematic for the Aboriginal population. Citizenship itself has been overtly coercive in the past. The belief in citizenship led to the establishment and entrenchment of residential schools to ensure that Aboriginal children become good citizens. Hence, the idealism of Canadian citizenship, which boasts equality for all of Canada's diverse ethnic backgrounds, is incongruent with the Aboriginal experience (Deer, 2011). Osborne (1996) points out that for Aboriginal people, indeed all minority groups, citizenship education means "assimilation into the dominant culture which [is] defined largely in Anglo-Canadian terms, centering upon command of the English language, [and] loyalty to Canadian nation . . ." (p. 14). Dei (2002) similarly acknowledges this difficulty for minority students, noting that the struggle to negotiate one's self and cultural identity, in the midst of an overwhelming insistence on one definition of identity, contributes to the high dropout rate of minority students. This sense of citizenship is obviously problematic for Aboriginal students because the 'common sense' understanding of citizenship does not relate to the Aboriginal identity.

In the arena of public education, citizenship and national identity have been hallmarks within the Saskatchewan curriculum. A critical examination of provincial policy, however, highlights the tensions inherent in citizenship education. Notably, recent frameworks presented by the Ministry of Education (2009, 2010) boasts cultural responsiveness as a key principle in its policy statements. While culturally responsive initiatives do have merit in policy designs that are meant to promote a more just system of education, it is important to analyze the context in which these terms have been used to advance policy in Saskatchewan. For example, in *A Time for Significant Leadership: A Strategy for Implementing First Nations and Métis Education Goals*, the Ministry of Education (2010) makes it clear that culturally responsive pedagogy is closely tied to multi-cultural education. Thus, while the definition of cultural responsiveness carries with it an acceptance of First Nations and Métis ways of knowing, it does little to create the space that is needed to implement curricular changes that reflect more than just an alternate view of multiculturalism. Specifically it ignores the call to implement changes that reflect the nation's shared history and true representations of the Aboriginal experience and identity. Conveniently, this omission also denies the dominant culture an opportunity to examine its own privilege or Whiteness that is entrenched so as to appear natural and normative (Ireland, 2007). This privilege is further perpetuated in classrooms by maintaining the myth of ideological and cultural neutrality through the presentation of seemingly neutral model of education that celebrates diverse cultures equally (Ireland, 2007).

Tensions Inherent in Education for the Economy

An overt objective of public education has been that of education for the economy. This aim has been emphasized in studies and policy reports in Saskatchewan (Howe, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2009, 2010; SSBA, 2011a, 2011b; Wotherspoon, 2006). Ken Krawetz, the former Minister of Education, makes this goal explicit in his opening address in the First Nations and Métis Education Policy Framework guide (Ministry of Education, 2009) when he states that "[o]ur work together will ensure that First Nations and Métis peoples enjoy

full participation in education, the economy, and society as a whole” (p.3). Extending this perspective, the report proceeds to statistically graph the economic imperative in public education which suggested that First Nations and Métis learners are potentially Saskatchewan’s greatest asset in meeting the demands of the labour-market (Ministry of Education, 2009). These references to individuals as “assets in the economy” demonstrate how powerful, market-driven language has innocuously seeped into the common sense discourse and policy in Saskatchewan. The Ministry of Education (2009) justifies the critical importance of education for the economy reasoning that “it is simply not sustainable to have Saskatchewan’s largest growing percentage of the population not succeeding in school and continue to be underrepresented in employment” (p.4). Indisputably, these policies present evidence of a neoliberal market-driven business model of education with the objective of advancing the Saskatchewan economy.

The economic imperative within public education is a goal that has been frequently shared by Aboriginal stakeholders. This shared goal is demonstrated in the report *Bridging the Aboriginal Education Gap in Saskatchewan*, (2011) which was commissioned by the Gabriel Dumont Institute. Howe, the author of the report, conducted research focusing on the intersections between education attainment levels and economic impacts for First Nations people. Specifically, the report details the lifetime earnings of individuals in Saskatchewan by level of education, illustrating how Aboriginal earnings are significantly impacted by education gaps at all levels of education. Howe (2011) highlights both individual and social gains that potentially could be made through increased education. Finally, Howe (2011) suggests that increasing the Aboriginal labour force by increasing Aboriginal education levels would be a more valuable resource to the province than potash, coining it the “first ever made-in-Saskatchewan boom” (p.2). The central goal of education for the economy is made explicit in this report. Certainly parallels can be drawn between the Ministry of Education’s (2009) description of individuals as economic assets, and Howe’s (2011) description likening the Aboriginal workforce to a “resource more valuable than potash” (p.2), once more, demonstrating the ever-present neo-liberal influence on policy.

Schick (2011) provides a compelling analysis of Saskatchewan public education for the purpose of economic growth. She proposes that the absence of a historical context in explaining why education for the labour market has failed Aboriginal learners is a glaring omission in Saskatchewan policy directives. To clarify this argument, Schick (2011) emphasizes that:

uncoupling the historic rootedness of inequality from the failure of Aboriginal students is to confuse cause with effect to the extent that Aboriginal people are seen to have created their own problematic social conditions from which the Government intervention appears to rescue them (p. 476)

Interestingly, in Schick’s (2011) analysis of Saskatchewan policy, she notes that Aboriginal people have long been asking for initiatives to increase their success in the labour market. Yet, she has found that the time that it has taken to convince the people in the majority to

declare these steps a priority is striking. In light of this, Schick (2011) aptly provides the predicted motivation behind a renewed emphasis on student attainment and market-driven educational policy. She suggests that it has been underpinned by the concern to replace an aging white work force who may retire without sufficient workers to replace them. While education for the economy has been a longstanding priority for Aboriginal peoples, the renewed interest in First Nation and Métis children, from the perspective of Saskatchewan educational policies, can only be seen as convenient and self-serving.

Conclusion

While numerous studies have investigated the role of public education for the common good, this study is unique in that it investigates educational policy and initiatives as they intersect with Aboriginal paradigms. This literature review is meant to firstly, identify particular components of the common good and secondly, to relate these components to Aboriginal paradigms. In this consideration, the review provides a unique understanding of how the common good of public education, as understood in the western paradigm, is problematic for Aboriginal learners, which leads to the disengagement and marginalization of Aboriginal Canadians. This review also critically analyzed policies and initiatives from within the Saskatchewan context and their problematic assumptions that create tensions for the Aboriginal population. In this endeavor, the hope is that research will be undertaken that will consider how the 'common good' is common and good for some learners while not for others. This research could open up spaces that acknowledge the value of alternate epistemologies for all learners in Saskatchewan.

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