

## **Review of the book *Aboriginal Student Engagement and Achievement: Educational Practices and Cultural Sustainability***

by Lorenzo Cherubini

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### **Reviewed by**

Gabrielle Lindstrom

University of Calgary

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“The ASP is successful because students believe that it can sustain their cultural identity and foster their abilities as learners” (Cherubini, p. 104).

### **Introduction**

In his book, Lorenzo Cherubini, a professor in education from Brock University, presents the culmination of a comprehensive and holistic research study that evaluates an Aboriginal Student Program (ASP) implemented at a secondary school in Ontario in order to address high dropout rates amongst Aboriginal students attending grades 9-12. Importantly, the book not only tells a story of Aboriginal students in public education systems but also situates the narrative within a broader socio-historical context that serves to provide the reader with significant insights into how the education system in Canada has failed Aboriginal youth. Cherubini’s exploration of the ASP offers educators, administrators, parents, policymakers and other stakeholders an alternate vision of Aboriginal student engagement that is grounded in traditional Aboriginal cultural practices and integrated with mainstream academic supports, thus fostering positive cultural identity and nurturing the academic success of Aboriginal students.

In this review, I will provide an overview of the contextual background and organization of the book, highlight key points within each chapter, and offer an evaluative and critical commentary on its overall impact.

### **Background of the Study**

Using an education policy document put forth by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) as the impetus for the undertaking this study, Cherubini establishes that the ASP was implemented because of high Aboriginal student dropout rates resulting from a general lack of cultural supports and culturally-appropriate learning materials. The ASP is mandated to provide peer leadership opportunities and culturally relevant supports to instil positive attachment to Aboriginal identity and awareness in Aboriginal students.

### **Organization of the Book**

The book consists of five chapters that are divided into two parts. Part one offers an introduction and background of the study coupled with the author's methodological approach to the research and accompanying methods. Cherubini employed a mixed-methods, case study, or 'case-story,' approach, and a qualitative, social constructivist approach to data analysis that was translated into a sequential narrative. Qualitative and quantitative data were supplemented with document analyses of student attendance records and progress reports. Part two, encompassing chapters three to five, provides an overview of the qualitative data from the perspectives of students, teachers, school administrators, Aboriginal parents and community members, as well as quantitative findings and recommendations. Specifically, chapter three findings highlight the importance of relationship-building and implementing cultural practices to foster student identities, and address power imbalances and epistemic conflicts within the context of contemporary educational practices. Chapter four provides a snapshot of the findings gleaned from the quantitative survey data and document analysis geared specifically to school administrators, and program and curriculum developers. In chapter five, the concluding chapter, Cherubini offers a holistic vision of Aboriginal student engagement using the aspects of the Medicine Wheel as the framework for realizing this vision, and argues that educational relevance means creating opportunities for Aboriginal students to connect to their culture to create a "positive self-image that speaks to their everyday realities" (p. 119).

### **Critical Evaluation**

The aim of the Cherubini's book was to develop a holistic framework for evaluating an Aboriginal student support program in a high school that has a large population of Aboriginal students, and it successfully achieved this goal. This undertaking was especially challenging in that Cherubini approached the project from an Aboriginal perspective and incorporated Aboriginal research methods; a difficult task for one who is not Aboriginal.

The faculty survey was most telling of how teacher education programs and entrance benchmarks are reflective of an overall Eurocentric worldview endemic to Canadian society. Moreover, Cherubini highlights how teacher education programs are effective in replicating this worldview and smothering the perspectives of Aboriginal students. The Eurocentric approach of teacher education programs points to a general need for the overhaul of teacher education programs in universities in order to provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to foster reflexive practice, confront Eurocentrism and develop a culturally-inclusive approach to teaching. Additionally, Cherubini provides alarming evidence that professional development (PD) aimed at increasing awareness of the learning needs of Aboriginal students goes largely unheeded and has little impact on teachers' evaluation or teaching strategies regardless of teaching experience or number of PD opportunities offered by school districts.

Although Cherubini provides a comprehensive analysis of his data and synthesizes this into useful recommendations for supporting Aboriginal students in high school in the context of accommodating their learning styles, he does not identify or make reference to what these learning styles are or how they might differ from mainstream students. This was an aspect of the book that created a cognitive separation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, which relationship-building and cultural supports seemed inadequate to bridge. Reports similar to Cherubini's, such as the Canadian Council on Learning (2007), also emphasize how education systems must take into account the lived realities of Aboriginal students but further considers Aboriginal learning in a more tangible and focused way than Cherubini is able to offer.

### **Conclusion**

As an Aboriginal person who has both experienced mainstream schooling within a high school context and now instructs pre-service teachers, certain aspects of Cherubini's overall narrative validate these experiences but also provide significant insight into the future challenges we need to overcome in order to successfully engage Aboriginal students and increase school completion rates. Cherubini's book offers a significant contribution to the landscape of Aboriginal education, opportunities to make further advances in this field, and expands on specific areas related to learning in order to provide increased clarity into the nature of how Aboriginal students learn most effectively.

### **References**

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