Aboriginal Students and Canadian Citizenship Education

FRANK DEER
University of Saskatchewan

ABSTRACT: Canada's Aboriginal population represent identities that are divergent from that which can be regarded as Canadian. The implication of this state of affairs is that the development of a shared identity with other Canadians in a collective, democratic community may be difficult. Aboriginal students, who are frequently taught by non-Aboriginal teachers with the use of government-developed curriculum and Eurocentric pedagogical practices, may be caught in a struggle of competing values when involved in citizenship development. The following article is a discussion of Aboriginal education and its relationship with accepted conceptions of Canadian citizenship that are used in contemporary schooling.

RESUME: D'un point de vue canadien, la population autochtone du Canada représente des identités divergentes. Dans cette situation, une identité partagée avec d'autres canadiens dans une communauté collective, démocratique, peut évoluer difficilement. Les étudiants autochtones qui reçoivent très fréquemment des enseignements de la part de professeurs non autochtones utilisant un programme mis en place par le gouvernement et des méthodes pédagogiques eurocentriques, peuvent rencontrer des difficultés face à la concurrence des valeurs lorsqu'il s'agit de la mise en valeur de la citoyenneté. L'article suivant soulève la question sur l'enseignement donné aux autochtones et les liens établis avec la conception approuvée de la citoyenneté canadienne, et qui sont utilisés actuellement dans le contexte scolaire.

Introduction

Citizenship education has become an important part of public schooling in Canada (Jones, 2001; McDonough, 2003). Most school jurisdictions identify the goal of assisting students to become good citizens; a goal that has become a part of many jurisdictions' statements of aims and purposes (Li, 2002). Citizenship, which can be defined as the relationship all citizens have with their respective state and their fellow citizens (Sears, 1996), is personified in Canada by the values such as equality, tolerance, and social

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justice (Osborne, 2001). These values are espoused by various levels of government in Canada (Ignatieff, 2000), and are manifest in numerous forms of policy (Li, 2002): a state of affairs that is intended to encourage all citizens to make a positive contribution to society. The notion of good citizenship is one that involves the acceptance of certain responsibilities (Howe, 2005). Among those responsibilities are the respect for Canadian laws, the respect for the rights and freedoms of other people, the willingness to be involved in one's community, and to be peaceful and tolerant of Canada's rich and diverse society (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2004). Governmental authorities also suggest that good citizenship involves acceptance of Canadian values (Hebért & Wilkinson, 2002). These values include equality, freedom, respect for cultural differences, and a commitment to social justice (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2004). In an attempt to establish these desired values among Canada's youth, the values of good citizenship have been embedded in the public school system (Russell, 2002).

What are the implications of these developments for Canada's Aboriginal population? Citing issues of sovereignty and separation in the Province of Quebec, Hughes and Sears (1996) suggest that young people require an understanding of Canada's diverse, multicultural nature in order to encourage tolerance and harmony.

Such an understanding may encourage tolerance and harmony amongst all Canadians, but such a state may only be realized once the perspectives and identities of Canada's Aboriginals are fully realized and better understood (Eisenberg, 2006). It is the mutual understanding amongst all Canadians, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, that is essential to Aboriginal inclusion in the conception of Canadian citizenship. This understanding is developed, in part, in Canada's schools. The following article represents a discussion of Aboriginal education and its relationship with accepted conceptions of Canadian citizenship that are used in contemporary schooling. This analysis will be done in an effort to comment on the implications of Canadian citizenship development for Aboriginal youth in Canada.

Aboriginal Education: The Emergence of Rights and Identity

In recent history, rights have been at the forefront of concerns for Aboriginal people across Canada (Hampton, 2000; Longboat, 1987; Urion, 1993). The focus on rights for Aboriginal people has a special impact on how

education is viewed and administered in numerous jurisdictions in Canada (King, 1987). Rights, whether they are inherent, treaty, or constitutional, can affect educational issues such as funding, programming, community control/influence, and Aboriginal student development (Battiste & Semaganis, 2002). It is possible that the future of Aboriginals in Canada depends, in part, on the quality and content of education that is provided to Aboriginal children (Alfred, 1999; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Wheaton, 2000).

Barman, Hebért, and McCaskill have illustrated the historical struggle of Aboriginal people in Canada's education system and their efforts to affirm their rights to live the life they would like to live and educate their children in a way that is congruent with their beliefs, ideals, and values:

> Throughout the world, aboriginal (sic) people are taking control of their own lives. After centuries of subjugation, they are reaffirming the validity of their own cultures and redefining their identities within the context of contemporary society. Underlying this revitalization is a shift of power from external entities, including colonial administrations, to the aboriginal (sic) peoples themselves.. .central to this process is control over education. The key to the future of any society lies in the transmission of its culture and worldview to succeeding generations. (1987, p. 1)

Although Barman and colleagues provided a primary focus on education, there is an underlying focus on the issue of self-determination and self-realization. In order to establish themselves as a legitimate, respected, and prosperous society, Aboriginal Canadians feel that they should enjoy a measure of control over their own social, economic, and governmental affairs. Thus, Aboriginals feel that "control over education is a central component of a more general campaign for political self-determination and cultural revitalization" (1987, p. 1). Barman and colleagues view of how Canadian Aboriginals value education is a departure from how some have described the way many value education primarily as a means for acquiring the skills necessary to compete in an increasingly competitive job market (Emberley & Newell, 1994; Robertson, 1998).

Aboriginal culture, which was rich and vibrant prior to European colonization (Battiste & Semaganis, 2002), is at present attempting to revitalize itself, and it is this revitalization that is the driving force behind the emerging importance of education for Canada's Aboriginal people (Friesen & Friesen, 2002).

Battiste (1986) explored the realm of literacy to illustrate how culture can impact upon how a minority group acquires knowledge and receives

instruction. Battiste suggested that there can be a struggle for youth to become literate in terms of their own culture when there are competing cultures at play. When literacy is "forced" on youth who are not of that culture, what results is what Battiste refers to as "cultural and cognitive assimilation" (p. 23). Battiste refers to these forms of assimilating literacy as *modern* forms of literacy. The main purpose of Battiste's discourse was to demonstrate that a minority cultural group that has a historically divergent form of literacy will have difficulty coping with modern forms of literacy: forms of literacy that Battiste suggested may not have any value for some who are Aboriginal. Battiste also suggested that this dialectic relationship between modern forms of literacy and those of Aboriginal people has resulted in portions of Canadian history representing a "fictitious history" (p. 40). Literacy may be an important issue to consider in the discussion of citizenship when one considers the primacy of literacy in modern educational settings. Hebért (2000) provided a useful illustration of how Aboriginal students can cope with competing forms of literacy. Hebért strove to reconcile the differences between modern forms of literacy, educational practice, and the cultural realities of Aboriginal people in Canada:

> Given the symbolic importance of the knowledge systems that permeate educational content and processes, Aboriginal language and literacy programs are essential to the development of future citizens of Aboriginal nations and of the Canadian state. We need future citizens who are secure in their being, their languages, and their cultures; citizens who are able to participate in the (re)construction of society; citizens who not only exercise their rights but also their responsibilities and duties while participating actively in society. (p. 55)

Hebért conceded that such goals are not easily realized, and certain conflicts must be recognized. The conflicts that Hebért cautioned readers about can be found within the three predominate goals of educational curriculum: socialization, rational reality, and individuality. There are numerous conflicts that arise from the attempts to reach these three goals. For example, the goal of socialization requires an attempt to help students develop in coherence with the accepted norms and conventions of society. Creating a classroom environment that is conducive to the achievement of this goal may pose a barrier for the realization of the goal of individuality, which is the aim of helping students develop in accordance to their individual potentials and talents. Hebért, in recognition of the problematic nature of these goals, asserted that effective schools are those that overcome such difficulties. She suggested that for Aboriginal-focused school

settings, the predominant goals of education should be adjusted to take into account community imperatives. According to Hebért, what is called for is a system of goals and imperatives that "reflects the distinct needs of heterogeneous Aboriginal learners ... [and] draws selectively upon the most suitable approaches of the past while avoiding the errors that accompanied that experience" (p. 72). Though her article is in relation to literacy education, the themes of citizenship and responsibility are the undercurrents of Hebért's work. One dimension that Hebért does not explore is the issue of school settings that are multi-cultural (i.e., provincial schools with a mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students). According to some (Magsino, 2002; Williams, 2000; Wu, 2005), such an exploration may address important questions of how the predominant goals of education are dealt with in environments where divergent conceptions of social imperatives are prevalent.

Diversity, an important aspect of Canada's cultural mosaic, is a prominent part of Canada's Aboriginal population. Urion (1993), who explored the evolution of Aboriginal education in Canada, pointed out that the effort of remedying past injustices against Canada's Aboriginals is a complex process when one considers the number of different types of Aboriginal groups that exist in Canada. Such an abundance of different cultural groups can represent numerous sets of divergent interests that will have a significant impact on how the goals of education, socialization, rational reality, and individuality, are seen:

> It is not surprising that such diverse backgrounds have produced at least as much contemporary diversity among Canadian Aboriginal people as there is in the rest of Canadian society in terms of lifestyle, aspirations, and attitude. Canada's one million Native people are even diverse in terms of legal status: the peculiar way that Canada has defined its responsibilities under law and treaty has created a bewildering list of Aboriginal legal statuses that vary by region and bear only tangential relationship to common logic, heredity, or community histories. (p. 98)

In the early 1970s, as a result of negotiation between the Canadian Government and Canada's Aboriginal people, policy was developed that allowed local control of education for First Nations communities. Such local control, where curriculum had to be "bilingual and bicultural in order to be culturally relevant" (Urion, 1993, p. 102), allowed First Nations to adjust what was taught in schools so that education was better suited to the community's conception of socialization, rational reality, and individuality. As positive as such a state of affaires may be for Aboriginal cultural

perspectives on First Nations reserves, there may still be a struggle for what cultural perspectives are served in Hebért's (2000) three goals of education in off-reserve provincial schools. It is important to note that a large portion of Canada's Aboriginal population reside off-reserve and in Canada's major cities (Urion, 1993).

Canada's Aboriginal peoples share numerous circumstances as a result of colonization and socio-political disenfranchisement. In spite of such similarities, Canada's Aboriginal peoples represent a diverse set of nations who possess different traditions, histories, values, languages, and treaty relationships with their colonizers. Beyond these nations are those Aboriginals who live off-reserve and do not have the benefits of being a status Aboriginal. Canadian Aboriginal peoples, status Indian or otherwise, represent identities that deserve recognition in the development of a wider, inclusive conception of Canadian identity. Essential to this development is the affirmation of the right that all Canadian Aboriginals have to assert their own identities, heritage, and language.

Citizenship Issues for Aboriginals

Aboriginal perspectives, however divergent they may be, are crucial to the identity of Aboriginals across Canada (Dauvergne, 2005). An important part of that identity is not only traditional cultural practices and observances, but language as well. Cardinal (1977) demonstrated how Aboriginals in Canada are "strangers in the classroom" (p. 72). Cardinal's discourse on educational shortcomings for Aboriginals focused on two general areas of concern that are related to Aboriginal estrangement in education: the lack of suitable educational environments for Aboriginals, and community involvement in Aboriginal schooling. In regard to the lack of suitable educational environments, Cardinal referred to many problems and areas of change. For instance, Cardinal demonstrated that schooling for Aboriginal Canadians was not sensitive to Aboriginal cultural realities and did not help those Aboriginal students or their families develop a sense of value or trust in the school system. Within this statement lies some of the problems that Cardinal outlined: a need for Aboriginal staff for Aboriginal schools, appropriate programming that is culturally sensitive to the Canadian Aboriginal experience, and a safe respectable environment that does not persecute or defame aspects of Aboriginal culture or the people of the Aboriginal community.

In regard to community involvement in Aboriginal schooling, Cardinal echoed the call of the National Indian Brotherhood to encourage more parental and community involvement for Aboriginal schooling, because it

was felt that such involvement was crucial to the revitalization of Aboriginal identity:

> As such time as Bands assume total responsibility for schools, there must be full consultation with the Band Education Authority regarding the appointment of teachers and counsellors. As part of its involvement, the community should also take the initiative in helping the teachers and counsellors to learn the culture, language, and history of the local community. (p. 76)

Cardinal repeatedly asserted the importance of using resources in the community that already exist, but were not being taken advantage of due to the insensitive nature of the existing educational system. For instance, because English and French were the languages of instruction in Canada, language barriers were built between these Aboriginal youth and the Elders of the community who don't speak English or French. The existing educational system was not designed to cope with the transmission of oral traditions and the practice of experiential learning that was characterized educational in Aboriginal communities.

The work of Cardinal emerged at a time when Aboriginal control of education, as a partial result of the National Indian Brotherhood's movement toward autonomy in their 1972 paper *Indian Control of Indian Education,* was still in its infancy. At the current time, academic writing suggests that these problems still exist in spite of some the improvements that have been made in the area of policy development and Aboriginal control of education. Fettes and Norton (2000) asserted that the Aboriginal languages of Canada, a resource that connects Aboriginal people with the land and embodies the beliefs and ideals that they value, are being "heedlessly squandered or deliberately destroyed" (p. 30). For Canada's Aboriginal people, language is an important aspect of Aboriginal identity and culture:

> Aboriginal languages are spiritually interconnected with the land. .. they embody values and relationships; that survival and forgiveness, love and laughter, are all intertwined with the authentic language of a place and people ... these facts are recognized by First Nations and other Aboriginal peoples around the world, who throughout the centuries of colonization have tenaciously clung to language as one of their most precious resources. (pp. 30-31)

The notion of language being an important aspect of Aboriginal identity and culture, and how that important aspect has been stifled in Canada's educational system, provides an example of how Aboriginal people have experienced oppression and disfranchisement through Canadian

governmental authority and, consequently, in Canada's educational system.

Brown (1998) illustrated the cultural differences that exist between Canadian Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, who operate in the western-liberal context, in order to show how different political traditions and perspectives were the catalyst for misunderstanding and struggle that exists today. Brown suggested that non-Aboriginals in Canada conceive society as "an aggregate of individuals who are governed by self interest ... the individual is considered paramount to any particular group, and in relation to the state, individuals are seen as interacting individually not as a part of a group" (1998, p. 5). To illustrate the other side of this cultural dichotomy, Brown discussed political traditions of Canadian Aboriginals in relation to how they see their places in society and the universe and how they address the decision making process:

> Traditional Aboriginal society ... is not centered on the individual but sees the individual as one part of the cosmos. In fact the individual is subordinate to the whole. There is an understanding of the interconnectedness of all life: animal, plant, things. Because of this interconnectedness, there is a harmony, or peaceful cooperation. This cooperative notion was modeled in traditional forms of governance, where communities engaged in an extensive consultative process in order to achieve consensus. (p. 6)

Brown also asserted that, as opposed to non-Aboriginals who see power and authority to be vested in the government under whom they may operate, Aboriginal Canadians traditionally view authority to be vested in the Creator.

Brown's work was substantiated by Boldt and Long (1985) who, while discussing Aboriginal views of authority, stated that "custom carries authority of a moral kind; that is, it obliges individuals, by conscience, to obey" (p. 338). These elements of Aboriginal cultural perspectives provide a holistic framework for such activities as decision making, spirituality, child-rearing, and interpersonal relationships.

Brown also illustrated differences between how knowledge is addressed between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. In non-Aboriginal Western traditions, knowledge is acquired and disseminated by individuals in the interest of progress and preserved in a tactile, usually written, format that acknowledges the individual who was the producer of the knowledge. In Aboriginal traditions, the system of knowledge is related to the interconnectedness of all creatures, the land, and the Creator. In this perspective, knowledge is not measurable as it is in the Western tradition.

As Brown stated, "knowledge is not measurable but based on one's experience, thus there could be many versions of knowledge" (1998, p. 7). In the oral transmission of such knowledge, a mode of instruction and cultivation that can be associated with Aboriginal people, knowledge thus becomes based not only on the individual's own experience, but also of the experience of those who have passed it on.

Academic literature in the area of Native studies and Aboriginal Education is replete with stories and examples of how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture, socio-political structures, and ways of life are divergent (Castellano, 2000). These divergences have had a negative impact upon Aboriginal people and their education, given the position of dominance and power that non-Aboriginals, particularly those of European descent, occupy in Canada (Battiste & Semaganis, 2002). As alluded by Cardinal (1977) who asked "what the hell this struggle really is all about" (p. 7), perhaps the most important question is what it is to be Canadian. In order to establish a standard for citizenship, Cardinal made a comparison between Canada and the United States:

> Whatever we may think about the differences between Canada and the United States of America, at least people in the United States learn one lesson early and well. They are taught, virtually from the cradle on, what being an American is all about. Such teaching may seem to many of us to be chauvinism – distasteful and propagandistic – but from the time they are able to reason, children go through an indoctrination process that gives them a sense of patriotism, a sense of pride in being American. They may not always articulate this clearly, but a sureness of their identity as Americans is instilled in them. While Americans still may not fully understand the meaning of cultural plurality, at least they are not asking each other who they are. (p. 8)

Cardinal's perspective on American patriotism demonstrates his appreciation of a collective acceptance of a national identity. Whether a national identity is pluralistic or multicultural in nature, the broad acceptance of such an identity is important and may assist in the development of a tolerant, harmonious national populace (Hughes & Sears, 1996). In Canada, as stated earlier, the issue of citizenship can be contentious when one considers the large and diverse cultural landscape that exists. The issue of citizenship for Canadian Aboriginals can be illustrated by outlining the differences in culture and world views.

Scott (1998) examined the differences between assimilation and differentiated citizenship for Canada's Aboriginals. Scott's discourse explored the historical developments of how Aboriginal people have, and

still are, struggling for cultural recognition and how that struggle impacts upon the Canadian Government's attempts to solidify a notion of citizenship that can be applicable to all Canadians. Scott suggested that Canada's Aboriginal people's expectations of the Canadian Government's ability to deal with Aboriginal affairs in a just and equitable way are very low and have been for some time. In spite of these low expectations, and the resultant level of scepticism that may exist on the part of Aboriginals of any further attempts by the Canadian Government to solidify citizenship, Scott acknowledged that a measure of promise does exist in Canada's historical efforts to unify all Canadians under a shared vision of citizenship that is legitimized by government legislation. Although Scott admitted that a form of assimilation is prevalent in such documents as the 1969 Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy, also know as the White Paper, he suggested that the term *assimilation* is one that has had negative connotations assigned to it. Scott further asserted that the brand of assimilation that is proposed by the Canadian Government is culturally inclusive and gradually enacted in the interests of being sensitive to all those involved:

> Trudeau and Chretien proposed to resolve these problems [Canadians becoming full participants contributing in a positive way to Canada's general well-being] through the assimilation of the Aboriginal people into the mainstream. ... Assimilation in this sense did not mean, as many Aboriginal groups believed, cultural genocide. There have been many examples of forcible assimilation in recent history, such as requiring Aboriginal children to learn English and attend boarding schools in the 1930s. The White Paper did not propose these sorts of ideas. Rather, the White Paper proposals would have encouraged Aboriginal people to join the liberal, Canadian mainstream over time. Aboriginal peoples would still have been free to enjoy their cultures in much the same way that other Canadians enjoy their cultural practices. It would have put them on the same footing as other Canadians in providing for themselves and forming communities. (pp. 4-5)

One of the most significant proposals that the Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy put forth was the discontinuation of legislation that was, and still is, related to the relationship between Canada and its Aboriginal people (Scott, 1998). In effect, documents such as the Indian Act would have been put aside over time. Although Scott presented possible dimensions of differentiated citizenship as an answer to Aboriginal Canadian's objection to these attempts at citizenship development, one of the principle issues of his discourse is that some of

these attempts by the Canadian Government to enact constitutional legislation have been grounded in good intentions: intentions that have been developed in the interest of democracy, equality, multiculturalism, and peace.

Conclusion

Social developments in late 20th century Canada have allowed Canadian Aboriginals the opportunity to rediscover and revitalize elements of their cultural heritage in a climate that is more tolerant and accepting of cultural diversity. After many generations of cultural and social oppression and the imposition of assimilating and disenfranchising policies and institutions, one can understand initiatives on the part of Canada's Aboriginal people to assert their culture, recount their own history, and strive for a measure of social and governmental independence. Given these developments, all parties involved should be mindful of how education is addressed in this situation. Citizenship education programs in Canada should strive to provide guidelines for citizenship development that strive to develop values such as equality, social justice, and cultural diversity. As important as these values may be, the methods in which educators attempt to address these values in schools should be the subject of closer scrutiny. This is so because students of Aboriginal ancestry do not necessarily identify with some of the values that are contained in such programs (Hodgson-Smith, 2000). Many of the outcomes mandated in various curricula either suffer from a measure of vagueness or are overly Euro-Canadian in their associated values (Barman, Hebért, & McCaskill, 1987; Hodgson-Smith, 2000). Teachers must be prepared to mold their pedagogical approach to the social studies curriculum in a way that addresses the curricular mandates appropriately. Students who have the ability to approach school subject matter in a critical manner would be well suited to deal with curricular mandates that are culturally alien to them; those students would be in an even better position to develop into effective citizens with the help of teachers who will help them overcome the difficulties of being in a position of estrangement.

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Frank Deer is a Doctoral Candidate in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan. His research interests include Aboriginal education, Aboriginal identity, and citizenship studies. He has taught at the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Manitoba in the areas of education and Native Studies and is currently a curriculum development specialist in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

Author's Address:
18 Temple Bay
Winnipeg, Manitoba
CANADA R3T 2T9
EMAIL: mrfrank_deer@yahoo.ca