

# Decolonization, Reinhabitation and Reconciliation: Aboriginal and Place-Based Education

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## **Abstract**

*Aboriginal/Indigenous education is being increasingly emphasized in Faculties of Education across Canada. Through self-study as an instructor of a mandatory course in Aboriginal education in a Faculty of Education, the author is exploring the use of local, place-based education in the fostering of cross-cultural understanding of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians as having interrelated histories and contemporary realities in Canada. Place-based education has the potential to further the goals of Aboriginal education: to serve Aboriginal learners as a tool of resurgence and sovereignty, to disrupt racialized perceptions of Aboriginal peoples, to create awareness of the cultural location of all peoples and pedagogies, and to create right relation between the peoples and the lands of Canada through decolonization, reinhabitation, and reconciliation.*

## **Résumé**

*L'éducation autochtone est de plus en plus utilisée dans les départements d'éducation partout au Canada. Par l'introspection, un facteur d'enseignement obligatoire en éducation autochtone dans un département d'éducation particulier, l'auteur examine l'usage d'une méthode d'enseignement locale visant à favoriser l'entendement interculturel des Canadiens autochtones et non autochtones dans un contexte d'antécédents et de réalités contemporaines liés les uns aux autres, au Canada. L'éducation locale peut servir les objectifs de l'éducation autochtone : il s'agit d'un outil de renaissance et de souveraineté pour les élèves autochtones permettant de changer les perceptions raciales sur les autochtones, de sensibiliser l'élève à la situation culturelle de tous les peuples et pédagogies, et d'établir des rapports favorables entre les peuples et les terres du Canada par la décolonisation, la réintégration de l'habitat et la réconciliation*

**Keywords:** Aboriginal/Indigenous Education, decolonization, place-based education, teacher education, self-study

## Introduction

Canada is a “contact zone of contested place stories” (Somerville, 2007, p. 81); these conflicts express a deep schism in the relationship that the peoples of Canada have to each other, to the history, and to the lands of Canada. Educational curriculum and what is left out of curriculum regarding Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> history and

peoples detrimentally impacts both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners and has contributed to a profound lack of understanding and acknowledgement of the interrelated history and current realities of Aboriginal peoples, communities, and places in Canada by Canadians (den Heyer, 2009; Donald, 2009; Godlewska, Moore & Bednasek, 2010; Kanu, 2005; Tupper & Cappello, 2008). Place-based Aboriginal education is a practice of both social and ecological justice—an opportunity for Canadian learners to be in right relation to the peoples and the lands of Canada through territorially and culturally specific teachings. In this early stage of my self-study as a teacher educator, I am encouraged by the formal and informal feedback from learners, and by the writings and experiences of scholars across the country, in supporting the importance and power of place-based education in Aboriginal education in teacher education.

### Personal Location

I am a White, Celtic settler, and an apprentice ally. I am a PhD student and a teacher educator, instructing several courses in Aboriginal education on both campuses of the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University. As an educator of teachers, I have a responsibility and an opportunity to change the way that First Nations, Inuit and Métis people are learned from and about in the Ontario education system. I am committed to teaching and learning in this field within the principle of “relational accountability” (Steinhauer, 2002), that is, to recognizing the ways in which I am answerable or responsible to the peoples and communities with whom I am in relation (i.e., involved), and acting in a way that respects and honours these relationships. I see myself as implicated in relationship with the peoples and the lands of Canada, as a citizen, as a treaty partner, and as someone who cares profoundly about the lands of Canada. My upbringing, my education, and my professional choices have all led me to this location.

I have spent almost every summer of my life as an inhabitant of some of the “wilder” spaces of the northern part of southern Ontario. My family had a place on the north end of Lake Joseph, in the Muskoka region of Ontario, from 1870 until 2007. I grew up there, and love it fiercely. I attended and then worked at a summer camp in Algonquin Park from 1984 until 2009, participating in and then leading canoe trips, and have been an outdoor educator in Algonquin, Temagami, and Quetico. I love these places fiercely also. In my work, and in decolonizing my own perspective, I can now name these places as the traditional territories of the First Nations of the Algonquin of Pikwàkanagàn (the Ottawa Valley–Algonquin and Samuel de Champlain Park), the Anishinaabe of Zhingwaako Zaaga’igan (Quetico Park and the Boundary Waters), the Temagami First Nation, and the Mohawk of Wahta (Muskoka). I wanted to learn about the epistemologies birthed out of places that I loved; my undergraduate degree is in Native Studies, from Trent University. Some of my professors were Elders, namely Anishinaabe Elders Edna Manitowabi and Paul Bourgeois, and Cayuga

Elder Chief Jake Thomas. Other notable teachers included Mohawk faithkeeper Dan Longboat, and highly respected non-Indigenous advocates for Indigenous peoples Drs. John Milloy and Peter Kulchyski. What I learned through this degree eventually led me to York University for my Masters in Environmental Studies.

At York, my MES Major Paper was an exploration of experiential environmental education in the Don River valley. What I discovered was a near-total lack of acknowledgement of Aboriginal history, community or knowledge at the two major educational sites there, the Evergreen Brick Works and the Toronto Botanical Gardens. (Evergreen has since addressed this lack.) This work eventually led me to a job at the Orillia campus of Lakehead University in the traditional territory of the Ouendat, on the lands of the Chippewa of Mnjikaning, where I taught eight sections of Aboriginal Education, a required course in the Faculty of Education. I loved this work and was both devastated by the lack of knowledge of Aboriginal peoples and history of the student teachers and propelled to apply for the PhD program at Lakehead University to formalize my learning and uphold my intention to continue in the field of Aboriginal education in teacher education as an ally, a citizen and a treaty partner.

### Aboriginal Education

Aboriginal peoples in Canada are the original inhabitants of this land, and they are founding peoples of the nation of Canada. Education is a guaranteed treaty right of Aboriginal peoples in the letter and the spirit of the original nation-to-nation agreements between the British Crown and the Aboriginal signatories of the treaties. These rights are enshrined in the Royal Proclamation of 1763, the British North America Act of 1867, the Indian Act of 1876, and the Constitution Act of 1982 (Henderson, 1995). Despite these rights and the original spirit and intent of these agreements, the history of Aboriginal Education in Canada is one of degradation, attempted assimilation, and genocide (Hampton, 1995; Milloy, 1999).

The current education system perpetuates a lack of acknowledgement of Aboriginal history and of the current realities of Aboriginal peoples in Canada while continuing to exclude and marginalize Aboriginal learners. In 2007, it was estimated that 50,312 Aboriginal students were enrolled in Ontario's elementary and secondary schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) and this number continues to grow. In Ontario, the Aboriginal population under 25 years of age represents 46% of the total Aboriginal population and the birth rate is 1.5 times higher than the Canadian average. Estimates suggest that 60 to 80% of Aboriginal youth will leave secondary school early each year (Haig-Brown & Hodson, 2009). The lack of acknowledgement and respect for Indigenous history (most notably the many sites of resistance and sovereignty) and of contemporary communities and resurgence is evident in the widespread ignorance and racialized perceptions of Canadian history and of Indigenous peoples by

non-Indigenous Canadians; these perceptions are widely reported in the experiences of teacher educators across Canada in Faculties of Education (den Heyer, 2009; Donald, 2009; Kanu, 2005; St. Denis, 2007; Tompkins, 2002; Tupper & Capello, 2008). Preservice teachers are produced by and are implicated in the reproduction of these unequal power relations and perceptions (Schick & St. Denis, 2003). The greatest predictor of Indigenous students' school success is the availability of teachers that are engaged in a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations (Berryman, Bishop & O'Sullivan, 2010).

More teacher education institutions across Canada are requiring instruction in Aboriginal/Indigenous education, and are requiring more integration of Indigenous perspectives into course content and pedagogy to align with federal and provincial calls for greater focus upon Aboriginal learners and Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations and cross-cultural understanding in the interests of social justice in Canada for Aboriginal peoples, such as that found in the *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Carson et al. (2009) argue that, "Theoretical and conceptual notions about diversity and difference are ineffectual unless they translate into real-world practice in today's classrooms and unless they are grounded in the lived experience of beginning teachers" (p. 3). Place-based Aboriginal education in teacher education offers just such an opportunity. Learning from and about local Indigenous peoples and communities is also a part of regenerating the crucial understanding that people are dependent upon natural processes, and are implicated in relation to human and ecological communities. As Cajete (2009) states, "Indigenous education is, in its truest form, about learning relationships in context" (p. 183). All of these practices require decolonization—of pedagogy, of content, and of the teachers and learners themselves.

## Decolonization

Colonization is a term for the political, economic, social, and cultural oppression of one people over another. Kulchyski (2005) writes that, "colonial power can be identified with any process that 'totalizes', working to reshape indigenous peoples and their lands so that they will come to embody and reflect the colonized" (p. 17). Colonialism refers to the practice or process by which European rule was expanded globally over many hundreds of years. Furthering the widespread resistance to colonization, Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia, New Zealand and North America have taken up decolonizing discourses.

Den Heyer (2009), Kanu (2005), St. Denis (2007) and Tompkins (2002) have all written about the need for non-Aboriginal teachers and teacher educators to decolonize their own perspectives and practices in the context of transforming Aboriginal education in Canada to increase success of Aboriginal learners and ensure greater cross-cultural understanding of non-Aboriginal learners. Battiste (1998, 2000, 2005) consistently problematizes the many sites of Euronormative

colonialism that remain explicit and hidden in the Canadian education system available to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners. Increasingly, Battiste is calling for the acknowledgement of relation to place as an important site for cross-cultural understanding: “Every conception of humanity and education begins from a human body in territory and a consciousness in which a specific place takes prominence” (Battiste et al., 2005, p. 8).

One of the legacies and continuing practices of colonialism in Canada is the continuing perception that the land is separate from people instead of “emphasizing the relationality and connectivity that comes from living together in a place for a long time” (Donald, 2009, p.6). The privileging of a static historical ideal of ecosystems and of cultures has, at its heart, an agenda that is fundamentally out of touch, perhaps even dysconscious (King, 1991), of the dynamism and resilience of ecosystems and of people; this perception is necessary to the abrogation of implication in and of personal responsibility to the people or the place. As Donald (2009) said, “This reductive Canadian national narrative weighs heavily on the consciousness of Aboriginal peoples and Canadians, and continues to influence the ways in which we speak to each other about history, identity, citizenship and the future” (p. 3). Continued teaching and use of the historically inaccurate stereotypes of Indigenous peoples perpetuate profound and dangerous misunderstandings and social injustices towards Indigenous peoples.

Places are the literal common ground. Exposing the ways that a different experience of a place and the signifiers that make meaning out of place can create rich dialogue and understanding across perspectives. A complex and rich understanding of place can change the view from where one is standing. The very best thing that a learner can say to me is: “I never saw it that way before.” Sharing perspectives on literal common ground means shared points of reference seen in a whole new way—a whole new set of relations to people and to place; this is the practice that I am employing as a teacher educator in Aboriginal education. This process begins with an acknowledgment of one’s own location.

### Cultural Location

As a White, settler, Canadian teacher educator, critical Whiteness is an important discourse for me to continually engage with. I endeavour to live “the double movement of awareness of race privilege and the forging of practices, methods, and relationships that shift identity formations forged in oppression” (Swiencicki, 2006, p. 354). The vast majority of the student teachers I have taught have been White—in each class of 30-40 students, there have been at most five students in each class who were not White. An oft-reported obstacle in anti-racist education in general is widespread resistance to, and disavowal of the cultural/racial location of being White; this resonates with my own experience teaching Aboriginal education. Hill-Jackson (2007), Adair (2008) and Santoro

(2009), among many others, have written articles documenting the unsettling of White student teachers' uninterrogated cultural locations through different programs in Australia and the southern USA as a necessary precursor to being engaged and effective educators in multicultural educational settings.

To further complicate the implications of learning about cultural location in the classroom, there are also some learners in these classrooms who are neither White nor Aboriginal. Enacting a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations to these students in a classroom dedicated to anti-oppression education where the topics include racial stereotyping in media and in education, racialized oppression, and Eurocentric norms, is complex and sensitive. In the context of Aboriginal education in Canada, this unsettling takes another step in positional dissonance by decolonizing not just cultural location of the student teacher and their pedagogy, but also of engendering an acknowledgement of legislated implication in the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationship in Canada given all Canadians are treaty partners.

Introducing and fostering awareness of this dialogical relationship is challenging work. Bishop (2002) terms this a "structural and historical approach" (p. 125) to anti-oppression education. Doing this work in a way that is both unsettling and invitational is tricky but also very much in line with the teachings I was given at Trent, as explained here by Fitzmaurice (2010) in his excellent chapter in the book *Alliances: Re-envisioning Indigenous-non-Indigenous Relationships*:

To paraphrase Elder Jim Dumont, it is a core value stemming from the Anishinaabe creation story that the Aboriginal self and the white Other are so inextricably intertwined that they are almost the same, connected by the spirit, and of the same mother, the Earth. Moreover, it is a relationship that needs ongoing attention and care as it changes over time, in perpetuity...Indigenous knowledge suggests more than a world of coherent and separate identities based in fear and competing power. Rather, it offers the possibility of a theoretical, spiritual, and experiential understanding of interconnectivity, interdependence, and community within a view of power that is based in collectivity and spirit rather than being entirely about force. (pp. 362-363)

In my experience, awareness of cultural location is best introduced from the perspective of shared/common physical location through local, place-based inquiry. In my own decolonizing journey and to enhance my practice and understanding of critical place-based Aboriginal education, I have begun and am continuing to use self-study as a methodology.

## Self-Study

I have conducted the first stage of a self-study of my practice as a teacher educator in Aboriginal Education. The data I am using is from ongoing personal

writing, themes from instructor evaluations and assignments, and anonymous informal feedback. I am using self-study as my methodology for several reasons: The goal of self study is to investigate questions of practice “that are individually important and also of broader interest to the teacher education community” (Loughran, 2004, p. 9). As well, self-study identifies reflective practice as a primary goal of teaching, and the literature consistently uses descriptive words such as relational, humility, vulnerability, and accountability, and openness about personal location, one’s “situated context” (Samaras & Freese, 2006, p. 41), is a central concern. In researching methodologies, these characteristics of self-study were all very attractive to me and felt the most akin to Indigenous methodologies in their calls for respect, relationality, humility, and location (see, for example, Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008).

Kitchen (2005a, 2005b) describes self-study as a personal journey of discovery that is significant primarily because it has the potential to improve teacher education practices and student teacher learning. As a non-Indigenous researcher and instructor, it is very important that I do not claim expertise in Indigenous methodologies/cultures. However, I identify the relationship I see between Indigenous methodologies and self-study out of respect for Indigenous methodologies. As a teacher educator striving to contribute to the understanding that Indigenous knowledges and practices are of crucial value in serving Indigenous sovereignty and in shifting perspectives of all Canadians, centering Indigenous methodologies, pedagogies and knowings in Education is an ongoing relational practice. The Indigenous Knowledge (IK) of the Anishinaabe that I have learned has been incredibly important to the development of my own citizenship and my connection with the communities where I have lived and worked. It is important to me that I continue to honour what I have learned in my teaching and research practices too.

In my work as an environmental educator and as a teacher educator in the field of Aboriginal education, it has been experiential learning that has created the most lasting and dramatic effects upon the student teachers in my classes. In all 12 courses that I have taught (to close to 400 student teachers at this point), the overwhelming favourite classroom experiences reported in student assignments and feedback have been the times spent on the land, the field trips, and the guest speakers from the local Indigenous communities. The favourite assignment has been the “Local Assignment” whereby the student teachers are asked to identify a place to which they feel connected, and to research the local Indigenous community there. (Questions I ask include: What is the treaty region? Whose traditional territory is it in? If this is contested, tell the stories. What is the name of the community/ies in their own language? Is there a cultural or an education outreach person?) What local, place-based education provides is a way of seeing common ground in a different light. We are using what we know to see what we can learn. By using familiar places, names, plants, stories, and accessible resources such as people, centres, and areas, a sense of competency is already in place—this makes the new perspectives or knowledges more

accessible and gives more sense of agency to the learner. Aboriginal education is anti-oppression education and, as such, it can be incredibly disruptive–unsettling, if you will. By using familiar contexts to which learners are already connected, more ground can be covered. The discourse and practice of place-based education provides support for this assertion.

## Place-Based Education

Gruenewald (2003a) synthesized the fields of critical pedagogy, a libertory educational praxis of social justice (Freire, 1970), and place-based education, in what he called a “critical pedagogy of place.” In doing this, he joins other socio-environmental theorists in acknowledging that social justice and ecological justice are connected. For him, decolonization is a crucial element of education in critical place-based pedagogy. In later writing, Greenwood (formerly Gruenewald) suggests that “place consciousness provides a frame of reference from which one can identify, and potentially resist, the colonizing practices of schooling as a function of the larger culture and its political economy” (2009, p. 1). He proposes “decolonization” and “reinhabitation” as twin goals of a critical pedagogy of place. I would add reconciliation to those twin goals, but in a broader context than the word is conventionally employed in the context of healing from the legacy from the residential school system. Reconciliation can encompass regeneration, namely cultural generation and political resurgence (Simpson, 2011, p. 22).

Simpson (2011) asserts that, “Canada must engage in a decolonization project and a re-education project that would enable its government and its citizens to engage with Indigenous peoples in a just and honourable way in the future” (p. 22). In striving to be a place-connected settler, now in the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe of the Fort William First Nation, I believe that learning about and from the Anishinaabe people of this place is central to my own process of decolonization, reinhabitation, and reconciliation. I am employing what Basso (1996) asserts is “the most basic tool of the historical imagination” (p. 5): I am place-making. Like Donald (2009), I argue that “decolonization in the Canadian context can only occur when Aboriginal peoples and Canadians face each other across historic divides, deconstruct their shared past, and engage critically with the realization that their present and future is similarly tied together” (p. 5). This is not an attempt to be “Indigenous” but it is an effort to resist the continuing oppression of the colonizing structures of global capitalist economy, and to generate healthier people and land in a way that honours and respects interrelationship. Darder and Torres (2009) write, “all forms of oppression are ultimately linked to the exploitation and domination of both natural resources and human populations” (p. 164).

Donald (2009) states that “Indigenous place-stories and mapping conventions are expressions of sovereignty that are deeply influenced by wisdom traditions

and provide specific examples of how to recognize the land as relative and citizen” (p. 19). The understanding of “Land as First Teacher” (see Cajete, 2009; Deloria, 1994) is of great importance to my conception of place and of interrelationship, and is central to what I have learned from Indigenous communities, teachers, and scholars. As a human, and as a Canadian, I see myself as implicated in my relationships with the human and more-than-human community, and I continue to learn from and about this responsibility in this place. Indigenous pedagogies and perspectives are of inherent and enormous value not only in the resistance they offer to colonizing history, practice and perspectives, but first and foremost as holistic and sovereign epistemologies. Place-based Aboriginal education in teacher education can offer opportunities for these epistemologies to support the intercultural understandings of student teachers.

## Conclusions

Indigenous scholars such as Battiste and Donald are calling for local, place-based education as the best way to learn about and from Indigenous peoples and places in the interests of social and ecological justice. Cultural and territorial specificity are crucial components of respectful and accurate Aboriginal education. Increasingly, theorists in place-based education such as Greenwood and Somerville are calling for a centering of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge of place for the purposes of living in a more socially and ecologically conscious manner. Through my own self-study of my practices as an instructor in Aboriginal education, I have seen that place-based education is a powerful and strategic pedagogical practice that can promote greater cross-cultural understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, move further towards social and ecological justice, and act as a site of resurgence for Indigenous sovereignty and epistemologies. As more Canadian Faculties of Education promote Aboriginal education, the sharing of such strategies for decolonization, reinhabitation, and reconciliation is of great significance.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> I have employed the terms Aboriginal and Indigenous in this paper. I use the term Aboriginal because it is the word used in the course calendar in the Faculty in which I teach. I prefer to use the term Indigenous, as this term relates to place, as opposed to referring to contact with Europeans. While these terms are essentialist in implication, I see them as useful in describing the vast and complex communities of Indigenous peoples who have had, and who continue to have, a common experience of oppression, of resistance and of resilience in the face of colonization. Wherever possible, I use nation- and territory-specific denominations.

## Notes on Contributor

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