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# MOVING TOWARD CRITICAL SERVICE LEARNING AS A SIGNATURE PEDAGOGY IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES: WHY GOOD INTENTIONS ARE NOT ENOUGH

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*This study examines the experiences of student teachers that participated in a service-learning program working in Indigenous communities throughout Alberta.*

*The intent of this study is to share what student teachers experienced as they combined formal theoretical knowledge and course content with community-based praxis. Initial results point to a synergistic relationship between the length of service learning and the depth of critical reflection. Those education students who were able to shift their understanding of the educational gap from a deficit perspective to recognition of their own gaps in knowledge are often those who think, act and perform with integrity.*

Keywords: critical service learning; Indigenous education

Signature pedagogies call on educators: “To *think*, to *perform*, and to *act with integrity*” within their chosen profession (Shulman, 2006, p. 52). This motto resonates powerfully in the wake of a growing national consciousness around Indigenous realities, and particularly within teacher education programs where stories from residential school survivors, coupled with an Aboriginal perspective on the colonial history of our country, are increasingly being mandated as part of

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teacher education programming. Coming to terms with these seldom-heard stories is no easy task as people across our nation struggle to understand how a colonial regime, in the guise of schooling, brought destruction and despair to Canada's First Peoples. These stories are tragic, shocking, and often recursive. Given the impact of colonial realities on Canada's First Peoples, it should not be surprising that a significant disparity exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners' schooling outcomes; an 'educational gap' that persists despite a host of promising practices and programming (Alberta Education, 2012; Deans' Accord on Indigenous Education, 2010).

Significantly, the recent calls to action by the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (TRC) (2015) bid post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms (p. 7). In 2013, the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary demonstrated strong leadership in this area by hiring a critical mass of Indigenous educators, and by establishing a mandatory course on Indigenous education within its Bachelor of Education program. While many students describe their learning in this mandatory course as transformational, we are aware that classroom learning is limited in its impact. In 2015, the authors set out to address this limitation in student learning by implementing a service-learning project with local Aboriginal schools. This program works to extend student learning but also furthers the prioritization of Indigenous education by initiating new, and deepening existing, relationships with local Indigenous communities (*Indigenous Education Task Force Report*, 2015). By combining lessons learned in the mandatory course with firsthand experiences in these schools, we seek to increase praxis and the possibility of transformational learning.

## **CRITICAL REFLECTION IN SERVICE LEARNING**

While the *Deans' Accord on Indigenous Education* (2010) outlined the commitment of Canadian Deans of Education to move towards educational reform in the area of Indigenous education, there are serious challenges to be overcome. According to Cote-Meeks (2014), most teachers feel ill-equipped to deal with the serious issues that Indigenous students are facing. Many educators lack relevant knowledge on Indigenous topics and some hold negative misconceptions about Indigenous learners that are grounded in stereotypes (Godlewska, Moore & Bednasek, 2010). Together, these limitations prevent educators from understanding the complexities of Indigenous issues, thereby decreasing their overall teaching effectiveness as well as the possibility of meeting national directives such as the TRC's calls to action. Importantly, this gap in understanding translates to how teachers teach outside of First Nations communities. Canadian scholar and Mik'maw educator, Marie Battiste (2013) reminds us: "each educator has a role, if not a responsibility, in changing her own and her students' conceptions about First Nations students, their heritage, and their contributions to society...education can reshape the order of the world here and beyond" (p. 177). As we see it, critical reflection makes this work possible.

Reflection is proven to be a potent method of encouraging pre-service teachers to examine their beliefs about other cultures (Lin, 2009; Lucey, Ransdall & Anderson, 2008). This learning is further strengthened through a praxis-based approach and the formulation of critically reflective pedagogy (Freire, 2000; Phillips & Whatman, 2007; Schön, 1987; Zeichner, 2002). Through critical reflection, student teachers are able to name their positionality and confront their pre-existing beliefs as one way to consider the reality of what they are experiencing (St. Denis & Schick, 2003; St. Denis, 2007).

## **METHODOLOGY**

Currently, our teacher education program provides student teachers with information around First Nations, Métis and Inuit schooling through a mandatory class offered in the second year. Knowing the limitations of a solely classroom-based approach to this difficult learning, we launched a program of critical service learning in 2014 where participating students were offered an opportunity to volunteer their time in Indigenous schools. Consistent with Brookfield (1995), and later scholars such as Phillips and Whatman (2007), we encouraged student teachers to engage in a critically reflective process to unearth any pre-existing assumptions, as well as their own positionality, in relation to the communities they were serving. We collected one pre-service learning reflection in tandem with weekly critical reflections. These provided data on student teacher beliefs and positioning relative to the communities they were serving (Schön, 1987) and, over time, increased the likelihood of transformative learning (Freire, 2000).

The weekly reflections also provided rich insights into the learning processes student teachers go through in order to teach in a manner respectful of Aboriginal cultures. To ensure ongoing support for these students, we hosted monthly learning circles to discuss their experiences and introduce them to relevant resources, including Thomas King's (2012) *The Inconvenient Indian*. What we found was that many students became motivated to realize their role and responsibility in affecting positive social change - a signature pedagogy framed around integrity or what is deemed "good work" (Shulman, 2005).

We adopted a descriptive phenomenological theoretical framework and methodology in order to get as close as possible to the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of the student teachers who participated (Ehrich, 2005). We asked student teacher participants to share their perspectives on their most significant learning experience, their greatest challenge and how this would impact

their teaching. Prior to collecting reflections, we asked students to consider what they might encounter in order to assess their prior knowledge and expectations. Before sending the students out, we held a preliminary information session for students whereby a panel of Indigenous educators shared general information with participating students. During the first year, 13 student teachers participated in the program in three separate schools. The majority of students (85%) had little to no former experience with Indigenous peoples although several of the participants indicated that they had grown up near these communities.

## **FINDINGS**

In our examination of student teacher reflections, we noticed a pattern related to students' frequency of visits in the community and their level of critical consciousness. Students who volunteered one or two times were more likely to remain at surface level awareness in their reflections while those who attended more frequently began to notice events that were either disorienting, or dissonant, to their earlier experiences. Early student reflections point to a measure of satisfactions (Coles, 1993), while later reflections point to cognitive dissonance that signal the onset of transformational learning (Mobley, 2011; Doerr, 2011). While levels of student awareness around underlying community issues tended to increase over the weeks, those who spent less time in the schools were more apt to rely on a prejudicial understanding of Indigenous issues (Godlewska, Moore & Bednasek, 2010).

In their initial narrative, prior to beginning in the schools, many of the pre-service teachers expressed fear and apprehension. One student described her fear about entering the "forbidden land," while another shared that he had "never stepped on reserve land, merely 40 km from where I was born and raised." Several students expressed fears about working with students who might have behavioral issues and lack interest in learning.

After several weeks, student teachers began to express delight in how the schools, principals, staff and students were welcoming. Their reflections described a family-like atmosphere in the schools quite distinct from other schools they had experienced. Several students commented on the positive inclusion of local culture: “There is a respect of the culture that is present on the walls and students are encouraged to say hello in their own language.”

In later reflections, student teachers began to notice that the schools often dealt with far more complex issues than they had initially recognized and how these issues are often ignored: “Low attendance, pipes burst, boil water advisory...[amongst all of this] I thought once again how unimportant First Nations issues are amongst the general public.” They began to probe deeper asking questions such as, “Why is the front door locked? Why are breakfast and lunch served at the school?” Many noticed a pattern of high absenteeism in the classrooms. Along with this growing awareness, students began to express a strong appreciation for the commitment of the schools and teachers to their students: “I got a sense of the struggles of the teachers, and the different dynamics at play in this district, and I also [got] a sense of a strong willingness to help despite very complex situations. It is always crucial to consider the whole student (home life, social, etc.) but especially in this community.”

## CONCLUSION

By integrating key aspects of critical service learning within its design, our service learning program has given pre-service teachers the opportunity to experience *in situ* learning with Aboriginal communities and learners that classroom instruction alone cannot provide (Harper, 2000). This program also afforded students the opportunity to experience modern interpretations of rich and vibrant cultures. Equally important, they witnessed firsthand the tragic repercussions

of a colonial past on Canada's First Peoples, namely a continued lack of trust around schooling, the repercussions of chronic underfunding, along with a host of complex societal issues.

Through our service-learning program, we have furthered the signature pedagogy of future educators by providing them with a focus on social justice issues in a local Indigenous context. Additionally, our study highlights the risk that a lack of critical reflection within these types of service learning programs may have in widening educational gaps. It is also vital to remember that this service learning opportunity is currently an optional undertaking for pre-service students - one that requires a certain level of risk-taking and courage, but ultimately can result in greater integrity in teaching.

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