REFLECTING UPON THE (RESEARCH) CONVERSATIONS

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Abstract- This research note represents a critical reflection upon my experiences learning from the voices of Aboriginal youth in northern Ontario, Canada. Over the span of two calendar years various Aboriginal students from three different publicly funded elementary schools were invited to attend two Research Conversations at the conclusion of their grade 7 and 8 years. The impetus for the conversations was the 2007 landmark provincial policy related to Aboriginal education, Ontario First Nation, Metis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework (the Framework). Among the intentions was to investigate the extent to which the policy Framework was, or was not, being implemented in publicly funded schools and classrooms in northern Ontario.

Index Terms- Aboriginal education policy, Aboriginal students.

I. INTRODUCTION

The studies under discussion, and several others, contributes to the literature that suggests that industrial and post-industrial paradigms of education in Canada draw largely upon positivist and Eurocentric knowledge systems that have had adverse effects on generations of Aboriginal students and communities [1], [2]. Moreover, and as some scholars have argued, the policies meant to assimilate Aboriginal peoples into mainstream Canadian principles, including the ways of teaching and learning, have failed due to the strong resistance of Aboriginal communities to become oppressed and colonized [3], [4], [5], [6]. Some of our previous studies have spoken to the fact that Aboriginal students in various other locations across the province of Ontario in many cases experience a disconnect in their mainstream provincial classrooms and schools. They do not readily recognize their worldviews and epistemologies in the classroom and hence feel alienated from their learning [7], [8].

II. THE CONVERSATIONS

This research maintained a policy focus and recognized the diverse and rich cultural and epistemic identities of Aboriginal students and communities and their determination to demand educational systems and practices that are engaging and respectful. We invited the Aboriginal students to share their experiences with us. The parameters of the discussions were conceptualized around the principles of the policy Framework, but there were no formal agendas that determined the nature of the discussion. Instead, the students had the opportunity to share their stories with us. And we were very appreciative. The respective narratives were poignant, reflective, and sometimes humorous. The stories represented a multiplicity of voices and the manner in which each student interpreted their lived experiences as Aboriginal peoples and Aboriginal students in publicly funded provincial schools [9], [10]. The interpretations were rich and powerful.

Of note, the students' stories were very much attentive to the key principles and objectives espoused in the Framework. This is not to suggest that the students had a working knowledge of the Framework and hence drew their observations from the policy document; instead, it is to infer that the topics they discussed as being important to their experiences in public schools implicated directly upon the objectives of the Framework. Since the Research Conversations were conducted in a culturally-appropriate and safe environment, the Aboriginal students took it upon themselves to exercise their agency in their discussions of the school environment.

A. Lasting Impressions

As with all longitudinal studies, perhaps, there were certain themes that emerged in the data that resonated long after the analyses were documented. I remember especially the stories of those students that took issue with teacher behaviour that hindered the potential to establish genuine relationships in nurturing learning environments. There was little doubt that all of the students believed that their relationship with teachers was very important, and that the possibility of having an authentic professional relationship with them would go a long way to bridging any of the gaps that may have existed between them. Relatedly, all of the participants shared their approval of teachers that were sensitive to their development as adolescents and that accepted them for their individuality. Students shared experiences of feeling a sense of belonging in classrooms where the teacher created a space for them to have conversations that were particularly meaningful for them. Their stories brought to mind the words of Diane Longboat:

Education can enhance the survival of First Nations' people if it contributes to identity development through learning our languages, our cultural traditions and our spiritual beliefs….A First Nations' person must first know himself, his clan, his nation and his responsibilities if he is to function as an Indian. An Indian identity provides a framework of values upon which one views life, the natural world and one's place in it [11].

Conversely, participants shared the resentment they felt in situations where their sense of difference as both Aboriginal peoples and students was not honoured. They took seriously examples in their classes and school when Aboriginal teachers and Elders were not respected for the different worldviews they represented. Students suggested in various contexts that the behaviour of some Aboriginal teachers and Elders in their schools was often viewed by the non-Aboriginal teachers and students through a filter that transforms Aboriginal realities into images that are more in-line with Eurocentric perceptions [12].

These Aboriginal students readily perceived their difference in the classroom and were less engaged both academically and socially in learning environments where their difference as adolescent and Aboriginal peoples lacked authenticity. Conversely, when their difference was honoured in the classroom by their teachers the Aboriginal students were heartened by the fact that their teachers expressed and shared the pride they had in the students' development. Students perceived teachers who were genuinely in-tune with their difference, and in these instances, did not feel that teachers confronted them with their marginality as both adolescent students and Aboriginal learners.

Just as significantly, I recall the ambivalence to which many of the Aboriginal students referred. The students' ambivalence became a theme in many of the stories. They shared their perception of the provincial curriculum as being systemically bias. They cited examples of text books and other classroom resources that made minimal mention of Aboriginal peoples, especially in the context of Canadian history. The Aboriginal students were very sensitive to how they are historically situated and contextualized in History textbooks. Just as significantly, they were sensitive to the manner in which this positioning implicated upon them in the present day by way of the structures, relationships and contexts that their difference is enacted. These perceptions influenced their sense of belonging in the mainstream classroom and evoked rather dubious responses to their understanding of learning and achievement.

CONCLUSION

Some students clearly felt ignored by the Eurocentric-based curriculum, as they did by teachers who, according to students, operated from a set of prior beliefs and worldviews. Aboriginal students shared their preference for learning in an open environment that respects their broad understandings of difference [13, [14]. It was interesting that the students commented just as much about the values and dispositions of their teachers as they did the skill-set behind their pedagogy. Students' perceptions were very much in-tune with the manner whereby teachers conducted themselves both inside and outside of the classroom. Students resisted those teachers that they perceived were not interested in getting to know them, their culture, and their distinct epistemologies as Aboriginal peoples and students. They had little patience for those peers who refused to consider let alone tolerate difference [15], [16]. Students were very aware of their classmates who were very reluctant to think about each other differently.

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