Restoring Spirituality and Place in First Nations Education in Canada

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For far too long now, First Nations have struggled in the education system and these difficulties can be traced to loss of place, culture and language, spirituality, and the negative effects of this on the community and individuals. This paper seeks to bring together these concepts of place, spirituality, and community schools under the context of First Nations education to show the positive impacts place-based programs have.

Community can be understood as more than just a group of people, to include the location in which this community can be found. In his book, Orr considers place in his discussion of pedagogy and points out "other than as a collection of buildings where learning is supposed to occur, place has no particular standing in contemporary education" (Orr, 1992). He provides the following four reasons to include local context in education: it stimulates thought through experience; it promotes connectivity through subjects, thoughts and actions; it reminds us to care for, and get involved in our own communities, and it is integral to self-identity (Orr, 1992). When it comes to First Nations communities, the concept of place is one that can positively impact both the rebuilding of communities, as well as in education.

Residential schools had a horrific impact on First Nations, one that still carries negative impacts today on "self-concept, parenting, social cohesion, and the intergenerational transmission of language and culture" (Ball, 2004). Community is a very big part of First Nations culture, and an example of this can be found in Jim Dumont's work to build a First Nations Cultural Framework in Research for the Regional Health Survey (RHS) where he realized that First Nations' health cannot be measured by outside standards. Instead, Dumont argues that a healthy community, nation and environment are what make a healthy anishinabe (or First Nations person) leading the RHS to include cultural, educational, spiritual, and societal elements (Dumont, 2011). Dumont's understandings mirror Ball's belief that "the identity and well-being of aboriginal children and their families is inextricably bound with the identity and well-being of their aboriginal community" (Ball, 2004). This understanding of the importance, as well as the loss, of community also influences education.

The concept of place has a lot of potential in meeting needs of First Nations. The concept carries themes of interconnectedness, identity, community involvement, and knowledge development through experience (Orr, 1992). It also allows for a school or program to become part of the ecosystem that is a First Nations community as it

could include education within "the physical and spiritual context of the community" (Ball, 2004) and through this, positive effects can be seen.

Many positive results can be supported and observed through place-based programs. These include continued community healing and building (Ball, 2004), stronger self-identity among First Nations (Ball, 2004; Zine, 2002), capacity building (Ball, 2004; Hatcher et al., 2009), more positive representations of Aboriginal cultural and linguistic aspects (Ball, 2004; Hatcher et al., 2009), a greater respect of Aboriginal knowledge (Hatcher et al., 2009; Zine, 2002), and stronger education outcomes (Ball, 2004). Thus, the potential of place in the First Nations context needs to be seriously considered.

In order to produce these results, a place-based program must include a number of characteristics. These include, enabling the active participation of community members, accepting and nurturing knowledge found within the community, and respect for, participation in, and recognition for their own and First Nations worldviews by those from outside the community (Ball, 2004). Also essential to a First Nations place-based program is spirituality.

Spirituality is described as being more than ceremonies or a higher being as understood in a Western worldview. For First Nations, spirituality "is wrapped up in their language and their songs, their stories and their dances, in how they live and interact with each other, and who or what they honour" (Hatcher et al., 2009). Combined with place, spirituality allows the teaching of both what is physical and spiritual, creating a more holistic mindset to understand place even better (Hatcher et al., 2009; Zine, 2002). It is a part of all elements of life and community, part of the living ecosystem of a First Nations community, and thus essential in the fulfillment of a place-based program.

In conclusion, place has great potential for First Nations education through the positive effects it can produce, as well as through the integration of spirituality in the education system. The First Nations Partnership Programs – a collaboration between the Meadow Lake Tribal Council and the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria (Ball, 2004) – and the Integrative Sciences program at the University of Cape Breton (Hatcher et al., 2009) provide two examples of successful journeys of collaborative curriculum development and the positive influence of place in education. Therefore, these examples, and the potential of place, should be considered when exploring education strategies in First Nations communities

References

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