

LINKING WESTERN AND INDIGENOUS THEORIES OF DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING THROUGH STORY

“Diverse cultural perspectives can offer unique insights into learning,” Alicia D. Hiebert and Nikki Yee begin, noting the prospect of that warrants bringing “diverse Indigenous” and “Western perspectives” into “dialogue with one another,” dialogue that “may support an interrogation and re-imagining of colonial structures that continue to impact the educational experience of Indigenous learners.”¹ At the “heart” of their inquiry is the question: “How might Indigenous and Western perspectives on learning and development work in concert to create supportive and inclusive educational contexts for all children?”²

For some reason Hiebert and Yee feel the term “Indigenous” needs defining, and so they do: “In this article, we use the word ‘Indigenous’ as a collective term referring to the culturally and linguistically diverse Nations of First Peoples in the place now known as Canada, adding that “Indigenous perspectives have often been set in opposition to Western understandings, a fact they deem a “result of Canada’s colonial worldview,”³ as if Indigenous scholarship doesn’t hinge on that “opposition.” Do they hope to negotiate the terms of a truce, given that their “goal is to work beyond colonial boundaries and bring different perspectives into dialogue with one another,”⁴ again apparently assuming that only colonists and neo-colonists distinguish between Indigenous and Western worldviews. Acknowledging the homogenizing effect of the term “Indigenous,” Hiebert and Yee intend “to recognize the rich diversity of cultures and nations that existed prior to settler colonialism, [so] we refer to specific nations or cultural groups where possible.”⁵

“In the fall of 2020,” we learn, “Alicia enrolled in Nikki’s Introduction to Educational Psychology course at the University of the Fraser Valley, located on the unceded and traditional territory of the Stó:lō First Nations,” a course during which “Nikki wove together elements of Western educational psychology ... with diverse Indigenous perspectives on learning and development,” an “approach that, “for Alicia, ... shed new light on what it means to learn and teach.”⁶ “Alicia’s story,” we learn, is that “I was drawn to the energy that glistened in my grandmother’s eyes when she told me of her past and I was intrigued by the playful and vibrant emotions that flowed from my dad’s lips as he carefully fantasized legends of his own during walks through an old town or as we trudged through old-growth forests.”⁷ For “many Indigenous” – and non-Indigenous – children, “stories hold meaning, guidance, emotion and power.”⁸ She continues: “With this fascination for Indigenous oral tradition and holistic education, I crafted the following story, which I hope will guide others in their journey into a nuanced and inclusive understanding of learning and development that can be woven into the fabric of Canada’s classrooms and teaching pedagogies.”⁹

In this story – titled “Fuzzy Feet and the Skunk”¹⁰ – Annie realized she was “faced with a number of challenges that Indigenous students in Canada encounter on a regular basis,” as “the story surfaces the colonial educational context for Indigenous students and highlights the racism, discrimination and disenfranchisement that Indigenous students typically need to overcome to access education.”¹¹ She reports that the “story allows us to bring Indigenous and Western theories of learning and development into dialogue with one another to gain insight into how colonialism may be addressed within the educational system.”¹² Citing the scholarship of Gloria Snively and John Corsiglia,¹³ authors affirm that “variance in cultural diversity and traditional ecological knowledge are not contrasting, but can be used in parallel with each other to offer a holistic understanding of the natural world.”¹⁴ As a consequence of this view, “pedagogical approaches and curriculum need to be reconsidered, in order to open decolonizing possibilities and support the kind of innovative understanding that flows from interactions with different cultures and knowledge systems.”¹⁵

“Indigenous and Western theories of learning and development,” Hiebert and Yee continue, “can help frame these colonial experiences so that educators can understand the challenges Indigenous students face and implement practices to support all learners.”¹⁶ According to what they name as the “First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model,” the “racialized and colonial context may have profound impacts on what and how students are able to learn,”¹⁷ an obvious observation that could also be made concerning non-Indigenous students. The First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model “suggests that social forms of knowledge are critical for balanced individual learning and development,” Hiebert and Yee noting that this is a “view echoed by numerous Western theorists.”¹⁸ Then they add another obvious observation. “Although Indigenous students may need to develop additional sets of skills to navigate and thrive in a mix of cultures during development, curricula that value different ways of knowing can be beneficial to all students in developing cultural understandings,” an observation they then contradict by adding: “Educators who respect the value of Indigenous epistemologies integrate perspectives across the curriculum rather than offer stand-alone or optional content.”¹⁹ Apparently there is only one “way of knowing” – “Indigenous epistemologies integrate perspectives across the curriculum.”

Perhaps unconsciously embracing a form of instrumental rationality central to the capitalist culture, a form of rationality that undermines “relationality” and “collective responsibility,” Hiebert and Yee assure us that: “Using storytelling approaches in the classroom supports relationality and collective responsibility, encourages the development of aural literacy and honours the oral traditions of Indigenous cultures.”²⁰ It would appear storytelling isn’t sufficient, as the authors acknowledge that “classrooms may become more inclusive of Indigenous students if teachers developed proficiency in these kinds of teaching approaches, either through their own professional development or through teacher education programs.”²¹ They

conclude: “These kinds of approaches may make the curriculum more accessible for Indigenous (and all) students, as they may provide them with possibilities of working from potentially familiar intellectual structures, and they may open opportunities for all students to build on diverse cultural strategies for thinking and learning.”²² Then Hiebert and Yee acknowledge that storytelling isn’t exclusively Indigenous: “Storytelling approaches not only support Indigenous holistic perspectives of development and learning, but also connect with frameworks from Western perspectives.”²³ Again: “Stories may offer ways for listeners to think about their own intellectual learning and may also help them work through emotional and social challenges,” storytelling characterized a “holistic perspective [that] ties together both Indigenous and Western social-emotional perspectives of development and learning.”²⁴

Summarizing, Hiebert and Yee tell us that “this research demonstrates how diverse perspectives might inform educational theory and pedagogical practice.”²⁵ Their research, they continue, “highlights the degree of resilience Indigenous students are often unfairly called upon to cultivate in response to the incidents of racism that many may face on daily basis in schools.”²⁶ In its depiction of “specific situations experienced by students and educators, the ‘Fuzzy Feet and the Skunk’ story, though fictional, may help teachers reflect more deeply on their own contexts and understand how specific incidents may be seen as reinforcing colonial or racial narratives.”²⁷ Moreover, “this study surfaces pedagogical practices that can build from connections between Indigenous and Western educational theories,” practices that are perhaps already being used by teachers.²⁸ Storytelling, Hiebert and Yee, could provide one bridge “between Indigenous and Western theories of development and learning,” although they concede “we have just scratched the surface of what may be possible.”²⁹ In the future, they “might explore different Indigenous pedagogical practices, such as talking circles, to more fully understand key aspects that might be critical to incorporate in schools.”³⁰ Such circles might serve as a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, as they could be akin to Freire’s concept of “culture circle,” wherein students speak “in their own ways to articulate their understandings of their situations, of the world, attending to how they might act to alter their futures.”³¹ They just might.

REFERENCES

- Hiebert, Alicia D. and Yee, Nikki. 2023. “Fuzzy Feet and The Skunk”: Connecting Western and Indigenous Theories of Development and Learning Through Story, *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, 20:2-3, 11-26, DOI: 10.25071/1916-4467.40795

Miller, John P. 2019. *The Holistic Curriculum*. (3rd edition). University of Toronto Press.

ENDNOTES

¹ 2023, 13.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ 2023, 14.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ It is a story composed by Alicia Hiebert, as Naoki Takemura noted in his commentary.

¹¹ 2023, 17.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/knowinghome/chapter/chapter-6/>

¹⁴ 2023, 19.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. In addition to those they list, I'd add Miller 2019.

¹⁹ 2023, 20.

²⁰ 2023, 21.

²¹ Ibid.

²² 2023, 22.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ 2023, 23.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ <https://www.latinoliteracy.com/paulo-freire-literacy-circles/#:~:text=A%20biographical%20outline%20of%20the%20Brazilian-born%20philosopher%20and,subsequently%2C%20how%20to%20act%20to%20change%20their%20future.>