

Teaching Aboriginal perspectives: An investigation into teacher practices amidst curriculum change

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This paper reports on a study exploring ways in which five experienced teachers interpreted and responded to a curricular initiative in Alberta calling for teachers to help students see social studies through multiple perspective lenses representing Aboriginal (and Francophone) communities. Over the course of the study, which focused primarily on how the research participants integrated Aboriginal perspectives in their teaching, the teachers generally interpreted and practiced the teaching of multiple perspectives as providing students with alternative viewpoints on contemporary issues. Of note were teachers' resistances to affording room for Aboriginal perspectives, and a general absence of engagements with these perspectives in the classroom. I argue that these resistances may stem from the legacy of a collective memory project that has worked to foster a historical consciousness that makes it hard to perceive, as well as acknowledge the relevance of engaging 'Other' perspectives. In response, I draw attention to perspectives unique to Aboriginal traditions and communities and then offer possibilities for how teachers could alternatively conceptualize and take up this curricular mandate.

Increasingly, curricular initiatives across Canada emphasize the need to teach social studies from the perspective of peoples who have been traditionally marginalized in, or excluded from, national narratives told in schools. This shift in outlook reflects a move away from engaging students with any singular conception of a national past, integrating multiple perspectives in the telling of Canada's stories of origin, its histories, and the movements of its people. One jurisdiction where this policy shift has been most pronounced is the province of Alberta where a social studies program of study introduced incrementally from 2005 to 2010 calls for teachers to engage the twin pillars of citizenship and identity through multiple lenses of diverse communities. Specifically, the program asks students to "appreciate and respect how multiple perspectives, including Aboriginal and Francophone, shape Canada's political, socio-economic, linguistic and cultural realities" (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 2). The new program states that for historical and constitutional reasons, an understanding of Canadian citizenship and identity requires an understanding of Aboriginal and Francophone perspectives, experiences, and their "particular needs and requirements" (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 4). Although the Alberta Social Studies Program of Studies is not distinctive in asking teachers to address multiple perspectives when teaching social studies, the program may be unique in naming, specifically, the communities whose perspectives are to be engaged. Interestingly, the program does not name the dominant (White/Euro-centric) perspective on which these two new perspectives are to be added (den Heyer & Abbott, 2011).

This curricular initiative departs from traditional approaches to social studies whereby elite descendants of white Anglo-Saxon protestant settlers sought to impose and have people conform to their particular vision of Canadian identity (Osborne, 1997; Stanley, 2007). In contrast, the Alberta program restores Aboriginal and Francophone people, communities, and their diverse perspectives to a permanent seat of national deliberations around the future of

the country. Scholars speaking to the potential of this curricular shift in Alberta argue that re-reading and reframing stories of the nation will open up a space to cultivate care and attention towards groups formally positioned as 'Other,' while also broadening the range of responses available to meet issues of concern in our national and global communities (den Heyer & Abbott, 2011; Donald, 2009a, 2009b; Thompson, 2004).

Although this body of scholarship has reported on theoretical possibilities, as well as some of the challenges teacher candidates have faced in relation to this curricular mandate, my review of the literature suggests a dearth of empirical studies on the ways teachers in Alberta are interpreting the teaching of multiple perspectives and taking it up in their social studies classrooms. In response to this gap in the literature my study, started in the Fall of 2008, involved trying to understand how and in what ways five experienced social studies teachers teaching a grade 10 course focusing on globalization understood and engaged the program directive to teach social studies from Aboriginal and Francophone perspectives. Due to space limitations, in this article I will focus only on those themes related to the teachers' understandings of the program's directive to include Aboriginal perspectives into their teaching.

Among the most interesting themes, the teachers merged the curricular directive to teach social studies from Aboriginal perspectives with a parallel call within the Alberta program to engage multiple perspectives when teaching and learning about contemporary issues in the world. Resulting from this latter interpretation, the teachers engaged in rich and varied forms of inquiry exposing students to a range of alternative viewpoints on contemporary issues related to globalization, which was the focus of their instruction during this study. This included, for example, offering students differing ideological orientations for understanding the benefits and shortcomings of economic globalization. During a series of individual interviews with each of the participants along with a focus group discussion, my research participants communicated that it was not always necessary to afford room for Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum. They argued this was best undertaken when studying a historical event or issue where Aboriginal groups were specifically involved. Because the content they were addressing, namely assessing the economic and environmental impacts of globalization (Alberta Education, 2007), did not explicitly implicate these groups, the teachers felt it was therefore not necessary to engage Aboriginal perspectives in relation to this topic. Additionally, they felt further hindered in engaging these perspectives because the heterogeneous nature of Aboriginal communities made it impossible to offer students one uniform viewpoint from the perspective of these groups.

As I will explore, although these interpretations are understandable, they are also worrisome. This is because they work against the spirit and animating vision of the program explicitly directing teachers to employ Aboriginal (and Francophone) perspectives when exploring larger thematic issues in the program such as globalization, nationalism, and democracy. In response to this problem, I draw on work in the field related to this curriculum mandate, along with theory and research on historical consciousness (Létourneau, 2004, 2007) to critically examine the assumptions informing how my research participants conceptualized the teaching of multiple perspectives. Taking up the work of Donald (2007, 2009a, 2009b) in particular, I then explore how the teaching of Aboriginal perspectives could be reconceptualised to better reflect the intent and vision of the Alberta program of studies. I conclude by showing how Aboriginal perspectives could inform deliberations on issues related to the economic and environmental impacts of globalization.

Review of the literature

In asking teachers to help students imagine the past and take up issues of concern from Aboriginal (and Francophone) perspectives, the Alberta program gives teachers an opportunity to depart from the “collective memory” (Seixas, 2000) approach to social studies education that has guided classroom instruction for much of the 20th century. Within this frame, social studies classrooms became spaces for affirming and acculturating people into a shared sense of national culture while also advancing national prestige. Seixas (2004) asserts that the creation of a common national past is one of the primary instruments for fostering a shared national identity. A common past is in turn preserved and promoted through what French historian Nora (1996) refers to as ‘*lieux de memoire*’ or sites of memory that include history textbooks, museums, memorials, popular films, and even beer commercials. Within the realm of the classroom, as part of this process, students have been presented an authorless and authoritative story of the nation, seemingly immune to interrogation, that scholars have variously termed a “single-best story” (Seixas, 2000) or “grand narrative” (Stanley, 2007; den Heyer & Abbott, 2011).

As documented by Létourneau (2007), the promotion of an officially sanctioned national narrative reproduced and reinforced over many generations has meant that people who have been educated and live within a particular cultural milieu with strong institutional coherence generally share a common collectively held vision of the past which cohere into peoples minds into what he terms “mythhistories” (p. 71). Extensive empirical research by Létourneau (2004, 2007) and colleagues in the area of historical consciousness examining the process by which people “acquire, internalize, and make use of the history of their nation” (Lévesque, Létourneau, & Gani, 2012, p. 55) has identified the presence of a powerful mythhistory in Quebec. Specifically, this research found that when young Franco-Québécois living in Québec City are asked to tell the story of the nation the vast majority draw on a ‘*la survivance*’ (survival) narrative template recounting a “relatively linear and unhappy representation of Québec’s national place in history rippled with ideas of nostalgia and historical melancholy” (Lévesque et. al, 2012, p. 56). Underpinning this narrative template is the story of an alienated and impoverished people seeking emancipation from their largely Anglophone oppressors. Within this matrix of understanding, the British conquest of New France in 1759 set off a long struggle by the Francophone peoples in Québec to liberate themselves from the continual pressure of the British to assimilate them. In this way, events such as the Quebec Act of 1774 through to the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s can be understood as part of a dynamic whereby the Québécois attempted to assert and preserve their unique language, culture, religion, and identity against the continual incursions of the greater Anglophone community.

Létourneau (2007) believes the way a mythhistory is narrated has profound implications for identity formations in the present in terms of how people orientate themselves in the world and relate to ‘Others.’ This is because embedded in the narrative structures, or what Wertsch (2004) calls a “schematic narrative template” (p. 55) of a mythhistory are reference points for making sense of the world involving “binary notions of insiders and outsiders, stereotypes, and other representations that act as a basic matrix of understanding” (p. 79). Létourneau claims that people too often become so deeply situated in particular matrixes of historical understanding that it limits their ability to see the past in ways that depart from the dominant narrative. He believes this is the case even when a narrative has long outlived its usefulness and has been shown to poorly reflect the nature or complexity of the past. In this way people become trapped in mistaken identities where they come to see those positioned within the narrative as ‘Other,’ in ways that have little connection to reality. Within the Franco-Québécois narrative template, Létourneau (2007)

notes the way Anglophones are positioned as threatening and dangerous outsiders, while the contribution and participation of minority groups such as women, Aboriginal people, and immigrants are rendered invisible.

This same dynamic is similarly at play in educational jurisdictions outside of Quebec where scholars argue that elite descendants of white Anglo-Saxon protestant peoples that first settled Canada were able to impose and have people conform to their particular vision of Canadian identity (Osborne, 1997). To promote an Anglo-Euro vision of Canada generations of students have been presented a grand narrative that presents a particular “schematic narrative template” (Wertsch, 2004) of the nation. Donald (2009a) argues the narrative template promoted by the collective memory project involves a European settler story of European ‘explorers’ first ‘discovering’ Canada with later European arrivals carving civilization out of a largely unoccupied wilderness. Stanley (2007) similarly asserts that the officially sanctioned history of Canada focuses on “the progress of European resettlement, emphasizing ‘nation building’ by far-seeing ‘great men’ and even, today, the occasional ‘great women’” (p. 34)¹.

Although this narrative has been presented to students as if it was the past itself, this narrative is far from neutral or value-free. Stanley (2007) notes for example, that within this framework Aboriginal people like Elijah Harper, or Métis people such as Louis Riel, seem to only intrude when they block the nation building process. In a similar vein, Donald (2009a) writes that the historical reference points used in this narrative such as ‘settling the West’ or ‘the opening up of Western Canada’ create an imagined past where these lands were empty and untouched, simply waiting for Europeans to put them to productive use. This frame of reference and matrix of understanding, similar to the Franco-Québécois “schematic narrative template” (Wertsch, 2004), in turn positions Aboriginal peoples outside the story of Canada. When Aboriginal peoples are made visible, Donald (2009b) argues that Indigenous peoples have been storied as unfortunate historical remnants of the civilizing process of building a nation. While not making Quebec and Canada’s Francophone populations invisible, scholars have argued that the dominant narrative has placed them on the margins (Osborne, 1997; Thompson, 2004). Francis (1997) further contends that the official story of Canada has traditionally worked to infantilize the Québécois in a variety of ways including portraying them as living in a perpetual state of rural backwardness.

How a mythhistory like the English Canadian grand narrative (Stanley, 2007) operates has profound implications for the teaching of multiple perspectives. By simultaneously enabling and limiting how people perceive the past, many Canadians are unaware that the story of Canada they have come to know is not a universal and transcendent retelling of the past ‘as it was.’ As a result, in line with Létourneau’s (2007) argument, many Canadians possess a historical consciousness that makes it difficult to appreciate that the past could be imagined outside particular matrixes of understanding that they have come to see as natural and value-free. This assertion is supported by the work of den Heyer and Abbott (2011) who asked groups of teacher candidates to produce two digitally rendered historical narratives that convey interpretations of Canadian history not reliant on dominant perspectives. Their findings suggest that the understandings of Canadian history these pre-service teachers had been acculturated into limit their ability to imagine a narrative from another perspective.

Donald (2009a) believes that the official story of Canada continues to deny and marginalize the historical, temporal, spatial, and legal relationship among Indigenous peoples and Canadians. He writes, “Canadians have given themselves so deeply to this mythic national narrative that the story has come to *own* the ways in which they conceptualize their

¹ See also den Heyer & Abbott (2011) for further pedagogical engagements with grand narratives.

past and present relationships with Aboriginal peoples” (p. 3). As a consequence, Donald (2009b) theorizes that the nation-building narrative and its accompanying colonial imaginary have made many educators “unable to comprehend historic and ongoing Aboriginal presence and participation within Canadian society” (p. 23). Accordingly, Donald believes that the stories of Canada that young people have been taught in schools has made it hard for them to see the relevance of ensuring that Aboriginal people, communities, and their diverse perspectives can and should inform deliberations around the future of the country.

As part of this dynamic Donald (2009b) argues that many educators have developed resistances to taking up or engaging Aboriginal perspectives in their teaching. Because the grand narrative creates an architecture of insiders (Canadians) and outsiders (Aboriginal peoples), many educators have come to see Aboriginal ways of knowing and being as existing completely outside of Euro-Western civilization and therefore unknowable. Consequently, cultural differences come to be seen as an “imposing rift that works to restrict membership, and its related authority to speak and re-present, to those deemed most culturally authentic” (Donald, 2009b, p. 32). In other words, when teachers are confronted with the directive to engage knowledge or perspectives they deem foreign and outside what is knowable, Donald argues that they often retreat behind a wall of wilful ignorance, invoking self-disqualification to speak on behalf of an Aboriginal perspective because only those that are authentically Indigenous can so.

To remedy this situation, Donald believes that teachers need to appreciate that Aboriginal peoples and Canadians do not inhabit separate realities. In line with the thinking of Saul (2008), Donald argues that seeing Aboriginal peoples and Canadians as completely separate peoples ignores the long history of contact, cooperation, collaboration, integration, and inter-mixing through marriage that occurred for hundreds of years on this land we now know as Canada. In this way Aboriginal peoples cannot be ‘Othered’ as, to a certain extent, the ‘Other’ inhabits who ‘we’ are as people living in Canada. Informed by an ecological imagination that emphasises relationships among people and all living entities, Donald (2009a) promotes an pedagogical approach he terms “Indigenous Métissage” (p. 5) involving the juxtaposition of dominant historical perspectives and beliefs about Canada with Aboriginal historical perspectives. Donald (2009a) writes:

The ethical desire is to reread and reframe historical understanding in ways that cause readers to question their own assumptions and prejudices as limited and limiting, and thus foster a renewed openness to the possibility of broader and deeper understandings that can traverse perceived cultural, civilizational, and temporal divides. (p. 5)

For Donald, one of the central goals of this orientation is to create an ethical space whereby Aboriginal-Canadian relations can be decolonized and re-imagined.

As part of this decolonizing process, Donald asserts that educators could respectfully draw on Indigenous wisdom traditions for guidance on how to live well on the land. In so doing, teachers and students could move towards seeing the introduction of Indigenous perspectives in the classroom “as an opportunity to learn *from* Aboriginal perspectives rather than as a government-imposed requirement to learn *about* Aboriginal peoples” (Donald, 2009b, p. 29). Here teachers would be aided by a rich body of scholarship documenting ways of knowing, traditions and perspectives found in Aboriginal wisdom traditions. This includes cyclical understandings of time where the past, present, and future are simultaneously intertwined (Lightning, 1992; Indian and Northern Affairs of Canada, 2009); an ecological imagination which emphasises the interconnectedness of all things (King, 2003; Lightning, 1992); spiritual principles emphasizing an integral relationship and connection to the land

and specific sacred sites (Borrows, 2000; Christensen, 2000); as well as a particular understanding of the land as citizen whereby we cannot differentiate ourselves from the earth and must preserve it for future generations (Borrows, 2000; Donald, 2007). By exposing students to ways of knowing and being found in Indigenous wisdom traditions and oral stories, teachers could broaden the range of responses available to meet issues of concern in our national and global communities.

Study

In this study, begun in September 2008 and completed in July 2009, I explored how five social studies specialist teachers interpreted, understood, and taught the call within the Alberta Social Studies Program of Study (2007) to engage students with multiple perspectives. Adopting a case study approach (Yin, 2009), I employed purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009) to identify five experienced teachers² at a large, ethnically diverse urban high school in Alberta to participate in my study. I chose to work with experienced teachers based on an assumption that the opportunities and challenges these highly competent and seasoned practitioners experienced would be similarly reflected in the broader teaching community.

For the sake of anonymity I have given the five research participants pseudonyms as follows: Tom, Doug, Ben, Danna, and Mary. All the teacher participants, like myself, reflect the largely Anglophone, white, and middle class backgrounds of many teachers in Alberta. Notably, however, Mary has a Franco-Albertan background on one side of her family. Over the course of my research study, all five participants were teaching the grade 10 Alberta social studies course on globalization and their teaching was focused on “Issue 3” from the program of studies, which asks students to “assess the economic, environmental and other contemporary impacts of globalization” (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 23). During this time, Ben was teaching the 10-2 for ‘non-matriculation’ stream students, Mary and Doug were teaching the mainstream 10-1 class, and Tom and Danna taught the advanced course for students who planned to enter the International Baccalaureate program the following year.

My data collection process began with semi-structured individual interviews with each of the five teachers (Creswell, 2008). I then augmented the data generated from these conversations with classroom observations of each of the five teachers over the course of one unit ranging from eight to ten classes. In order to elicit richer and more nuanced data, I subsequently engaged in a final focus group interview (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007) where the five teachers and I discussed various themes that emerged during the interviews and classroom observations. All interviews and classroom observations were digitally recorded and over the course of the study I kept detailed field notes in a personal journal. Once I transcribed all the interviews and focus group discussion, I began coding the data set based on common categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994) reflecting shared and corresponding interpretations and understandings of the teaching of multiple perspectives. Wishing to verify if the participants’ interpretations were reflected in their pedagogical practices, I then examined these categories in relation to the data I had gathered in their classrooms.

To develop the interpretive framework that would inform my analysis of the data, I began by conducting a close reading of the Alberta Social Studies Program of Study (2007). Here, I sought to understand what the program was specifically directing teachers to do when teaching social studies from multiple perspectives. To analyze my research participants’ interpretations and enactments of the teaching of multiple perspectives, I drew on my review of the literature. Specifically, I was informed by literature related to the curricular mandate

² Here I am referring to teachers with at least five years of experience teaching high school social studies.

in Alberta to teach from multiple perspectives (den Heyer & Abbott, 2011; Donald, 2007, 2009b) as well as scholarship on historical consciousness (Létourneau 2004, 2007; Stanley, 2007; Seixas, 2000). Additionally, I drew on literature outlining ways of knowing and beliefs particular to Aboriginal wisdom traditions (e.g., Borrows, 2000; Christensen, 2000; Donald, 2009a). Taken as a whole, this diverse body of scholarship lent insight into the challenges and potential resistances my teacher participants might be facing in teaching multiple perspectives. As well, it afforded me access to a range of rich conceptual possibilities opened up by this curricular mandate.

Results

The first major theme to emerge from the data involved an argument that the teaching of multiple perspectives should not be limited to a specific focus on Francophone or Aboriginal perspectives. During the individual interview, when asked how she understood multiple perspectives, Danna explained that:

When I talk to other people about multiple perspectives, for them it's the traditional European perspective, it's the Aboriginal and the French Canadian perspective. But that is not at all how I interpreted the new curriculum. When you look at just the curriculum it is there, it is part of our history but I'm not limited by that. (Danna, 58-61)³

That the teaching of multiple perspectives should not be only limited to addressing Francophone and Aboriginal perspectives was also in line with Tom's thinking:

Rather than different opinions supposed to be French and Aboriginal, I see it as, here is a given way of looking at an issue, here is a counter argument from what you just heard and now how do you decide. (Tom, 76-78)

He elaborates on this point later in the interview:

Yes, the Francophone perspectives and Aboriginal perspectives are written into the curriculum and that is what we are supposed to be doing, but what I am finding out is that it is possible to teach the course without dealing with that stuff at all if you don't want to; some teachers won't. I think there is another way of interpreting multiple perspectives; it could just be simply differences of opinion or points of view on particular issues and that offers you all kinds of opportunity to bring in different voices and different perspectives. (Tom, 118-123)

In contrast to an interpretation of multiple perspectives emphasizing teaching social studies from specifically Aboriginal and Francophone perspectives, Tom's interpretation frames multiple perspectives around differences of opinion or points of view on particular issues. Despite an explicate curriculum directive to do so, Tom's comments make it clear that it is possible to teach the grade 10 program without in any way engaging Aboriginal (or Francophone) perspectives.⁴

³ These indicate transcript line numbers of the individual interviews I had with each of my research participants. The transcript for the focus group discussion is labelled as FG.

⁴ I remind the reader that, due to space limitations, I will restrict my analysis to the participants' discussions of integrating Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum.

This resistance to affording room for Aboriginal perspectives was an ongoing theme throughout the study and reflected the classroom practice of my teacher participants. Over the course of the study I observed only one class when the participating teachers specifically addressed Aboriginal perspectives. This occurred during a discussion on economic cycles in one of Danna's classes. When Danna was discussing the Great Depression, she asked her students about what this time must have been like for Aboriginal people who were living on reserves and were previously unable to participate in many of the economic benefits of the former boom years. The conclusion by Danna and the class was that the lives of Aboriginal people, which were already very difficult, would have become even harder during this sustained economic downturn.

In contrast to a general absence of engagements with Aboriginal perspectives, during the study I observed rich and purposeful examples of pedagogical practice orientated around Tom's interpretation of multiple perspectives emphasizing providing students with differing viewpoints on contemporary issues. In the case of Tom, Doug, and Ben's classes, students had the opportunity to explore a number of issues related to the economic and environmental impacts of globalization from a range of conflicting and divergent viewpoints. For example, Doug began his unit on economic globalization by providing his students with the guiding issue question: "To what extent is economic globalization a positive force in the world?" He then exposed his students to a range of thinkers on this issue including people he terms 'globophiles' (e.g. Milton Freedman) and others he terms 'globophobes' (e.g. Naomi Klein). While the former see economic globalization as a profoundly positive force in the world able to lift millions out of poverty, globophobes see globalization as an environmentally destructive excuse for a small group of elites to enrich themselves at the expense of the majority of the world's population. Doug ended the unit with a class debate around the guiding inquiry question.

The participants' interpretations and teaching of multiple perspectives reflected relevant and provocative possibilities for what this curricular mandate could entail. However, their emphasis on exposing students to alternatives viewpoints on issues meant the teachers did not assess the economic and environmental impacts of globalization (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 23) from Aboriginal perspectives. Consequently, during the focus group session I sought to better appreciate how my research participants understood the nature and place of Aboriginal (and Francophone) perspectives in the curriculum.

During the focus group discussion all five teachers agreed that teaching from an Aboriginal perspective meant providing a uniform group perspective around an issue. Based on this understanding, the research participants spoke to the difficulty, and even impossibility of providing one uniform viewpoint from the perspective of Aboriginal peoples. For example, Doug stated:

I don't cover this [an Aboriginal] perspective all the way through [the course], even if there was a way; what is the Aboriginal perspective on the internet? You can come up with examples of a First Nation using the internet but that's not really a perspective, what is the Franco-Albertan perspective on the world trade organization? (FG, 111-114)

During this explanation, Tom added: "I can't say what the Aboriginal perspective is on mining and logging" (FG, 115). The participants felt that presenting one uniform Aboriginal perspective was particularly untenable given the diverse, varied, and complex situations and circumstances of Aboriginal peoples and communities today.

This understanding, however, was accompanied by the belief among my research participants that certain topics lend themselves to engaging Aboriginal perspectives, while

other topics do not. For example, during the individual interview Tom stated that the only time he could talk about Aboriginal perspectives would be with regard to particular circumstances, such as the “conditions in communities and residential schools” (FG, 137). In this instance he would be able to help students understand how Aboriginal people have been badly treated in the past. Similarly, in my individual interviews with both Mary and Doug, the same theme re-emerged. Mary felt that the best opportunities for engaging Aboriginal perspectives would be in relation to an historical event or an issue where these groups were involved. Mary elaborated that if this were not the case, bringing in Aboriginal perspectives would be contrived (Mary, 76).

In what follows I want to unpack and critically examine some of the assumptions underpinning my research participant’s interpretations of the teaching of multiple perspectives. Before proceeding; however, I want to make clear that my intent is not to critique the practice of these teachers. All five participants were responding to a new program of study that they were teaching for the first time. In this regard, the directive within the program to specifically consider and acknowledge Aboriginal and Francophone perspectives in relation to a topic like globalization created a challenging pedagogical space for teachers. Moreover, as I only observed one unit of instruction, the claims I make only reflect a small portion of the participants’ total course as a whole. Rather than critique these teachers’ practice, my intent is to explore the themes that emerged from the data in relation to insights offered through my review of the literature. In doing this I seek to offer conceptual possibilities as to how teachers could richly engage the opportunities offered by this curricular initiative.

Discussion

Although providing students with multiple perspectives on issues related to the economic and environmental impacts of globalization could open up a conceptual space to engage Aboriginal perspectives, one of the most prominent themes emerging from my study was a belief among my research participants that this was not possible. This belief was partially based on the claim that Aboriginal perspectives are really only relevant when they stand in relation to an issue or historical event in which these groups are associated. Conceptualized in this way, Aboriginal perspectives could be addressed in relation to residential school experiences or treaty agreements. However, because the teachers did not see Aboriginal groups as directly involved in issues concerning economic globalization and sustainability, it was not deemed necessary to engage this topic from Aboriginal perspectives.

An argument can be made that this unwillingness to accept that Aboriginal peoples, communities, and their diverse perspectives could make a meaningful and necessary contribution to national life is rooted in a historical consciousness shaped by the stories of Canada that generations of students have been taught in schools. As outlined in the review of the literature, this story has placed Aboriginal peoples outside the national narrative. Donald (2009a) argues that the way teachers take up Aboriginal perspectives is directly connected to how they imagine the relationship among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples living in Canada. In turn, how people see this relationship reflects the values inherent within the founding myths of the nation. Notably, the *official* story of Canada does not emphasize the original relationship between Aboriginal peoples and Canadians as one of mutuality and interdependence, nor does it promote an idea that the legal and historical foundations of Canada rest on treaty and constitutional agreements where *all* Canadians are treaty people living on treaty land (Indian and Northern Affairs of Canada, 2009; Tupper & Cappello, 2008). In contrast, as Donald (2009a) has shown, this story of the nation continues to deny and marginalize the historical, spatial, and legal relationship among Indigenous peoples and

Canadians. This insight suggests that in order for teachers to see Aboriginal perspectives as relevant to deliberations on issues of national concern, they must first possess a historical consciousness that traces the origins of Canada to an equal partnership among three distinct and equal founding nations.

The second reason why my research participants felt they could not engage Aboriginal perspectives in relation to their topic of study was based on a belief that engaging multiple perspectives primarily means providing students with a series of conflicting viewpoints on a contemporary issue. This interpretation may partially stem from how the Alberta program uses the term multiple perspectives in differing ways. On one hand the front matter of the program states that social studies seeks to help students “appreciate and respect Aboriginal and Francophone perspectives” (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 3). However, later on the same page the teaching of multiple perspectives is associated with helping “to promote metacognition through critical reflection, questioning, decision making and consideration of multiple perspectives on issues” (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 3). This second articulation of multiple perspectives, in line with the teachers’ interpretation, carries with it no obvious connection to Aboriginal (and Francophone) communities and how they shape “Canada’s political, socio-economic, linguistic and cultural realities” (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 2).

This move away from engaging Aboriginal perspectives was also informed by a belief that representing these perspectives involves presenting students with a uniform, collective viewpoint. Because Aboriginal groups are heterogeneous in nature, comprised of people with a wide variety of opinions and viewpoints, the teachers felt that providing a uniform viewpoint was therefore impossible. This interpretation seems justified in the sense that the research participants point to the danger of reducing a group’s perspectives to a simplistic and reductive ‘they think this’ about an issue. However, this understanding is also highly problematic as it negates the possibility of fulfilling one of the central curricular mandates of the Alberta program, namely, asking teachers to engage contemporary issues from Aboriginal and Francophone perspectives.

Part of what seems to be at play here is what Donald (2009b) calls the “cultural disqualification” argument deployed by teachers to justify why they are unable to work with Aboriginal perspectives. Tom’s view that he “can’t say what the Aboriginal perspective is on mining and logging” (FG, 115), for example, seems to follow this logic. As outlined earlier, within this frame cultural difference becomes an imposing rift where only those deemed ‘culturally authentic’ are able to speak from a particular group’s perspective. Donald asserts that this logic of insiders and outsiders allows teachers to “retreat behind the comforting shelter of real or passive ignorance that effectively disqualifies them from participation” (p. 32). Additionally, the idea that Aboriginal perspectives cannot be represented seems to also be influenced by a Euro-Western belief about knowledge that a teacher must be an expert in full control of the information they present to students (Donald, 2009b, p. 33). According to these teachers, they have had little or no exposure to Aboriginal perspectives on citizenship, history, and politics, thus retreating into a shelter of ignorance is understandable.

In seeking a conceptualization of Aboriginal perspectives that is not reductive, and that can open up a space where perspectives from these communities could be brought to bear in helping students deliberate on issues of concern in Canada, the work of Létourneau (2004, 2007) seems highly relevant. His insights point to a conceptualization of a group perspective as a unique set of reference points, traditions, and matrixes of understanding shared by, and unique to a particular cultural community. In reframing the teacher’s role as an opportunity to help students learn *from* perspectives unique to Aboriginal communities and traditions (Donald, 2009b), teachers would be able to draw from the rich body of scholarship outlined earlier.

In particular, teachers could draw on a large body of literature documenting ways of knowing, beliefs, and traditions emerging from Aboriginal wisdom traditions. Accordingly, teachers, for example, could connect issues of globalization and sustainability to the struggles of the Beaver Lake Cree Nation to have their treaty and constitutional rights respected in relation to resource developments on their traditional lands (Pratt, 2013). In examining this issue students could come to appreciate how the Beaver Lake Cree Nation have not been consulted about resource developments connected to the tar sands, which has destroyed animal habitat and compromised the integrity of rivers that sustain the traditional Cree way of life. Here, teachers could expose students to the Kétuskéno Declaration (2008) that highlights treaty and constitutional agreements requiring “deep consultation and accommodation” (p. 1) with the Beaver Lake Cree Nation before any economic activity on their traditional lands takes place. In engaging this issue, teachers would find a range of possibilities for taking up learning outcomes from the Alberta Social Studies program (2007) related to “multiple perspectives on sustainability and prosperity in a globalizing world” and the “impact of actions and policies associated with globalization on the environment” (p. 36).

In this vein, teachers could explore the ascendant and now dominant, rhetoric of globalization predicated on “*Homo Oeconomicus*” or “economic man” (Smith, 2006) that sees humans as primarily consumer driven actors seeking to maximize economic gain. An ensuing discussion with students could involve showing how this value structure justifies increasingly unsustainable resource exploitation, a voracious and dispiriting consumerism, and also supports current economic arrangements that channel the vast amount of economic wealth to a few well-positioned elite. In searching for new models that might inform our stewardship of the natural world, the model of *Homo Oeconomicus* could then be contrasted with insights gained from Aboriginal theories of “landed citizenship” (Borrows, 2000) recognizing the land as a relative and citizen along with values emphasizing the need to preserve the land for future generations (Donald, 2007). Both of these sets of beliefs are evident in the Beaver Lake Cree Nation’s Kétuskéno Declaration (2008):

Our responsibility to this land, our ancestors and our future generations cannot be surrendered or abandoned. We have an obligation to ensure that the lands, waters, and resources in our traditional territory are used sustainably and responsibly. (p. 1)

With the realization that *Homo Oeconomicus* is just one identity formation among many, and one whose values are increasingly becoming problematic, by asking us to attend to the webs of relationships, both human and natural we are enmeshed within, Aboriginal perspectives offer new ways to imagine ourselves and our connection to the natural world.

Conclusion

While the introduction of the curricular initiative in Alberta to teach social studies through the lens of Aboriginal and Francophone perspectives offers the opportunity to engage with perspectives that have been traditionally marginalized in social studies classrooms, this study suggests that significant barriers still exist for the full potential of this curricular initiative to take effect. At the heart of these barriers may be a story of the nation that has worked to deny the historical, legal, and spatial relationships that exists among the three founding peoples of Canada (Donald, 2009a, 2009b). However, by helping students reimagine the nature, place, and role of Aboriginal (and Francophone) peoples, communities, and their diverse perspectives within our national community, teachers can work against this historical legacy and thereby realize the spirit and intent of Alberta’s Social Studies program.

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