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Cultural Capital and Cultural Community Wealth: A Critique of the BEST Report

Ellen Bees¹

In 2019 the government of Manitoba set out to perform a review of its education system. Expressing concern with low test scores in literacy, numeracy and science, the government tasked the Manitoba Education Commission with determining the best way to improve student outcomes. Indigenous achievement gaps were cited as a concern and the commission indicated that cultural responsiveness was a guiding principle of their work as they proceeded to consult with stakeholders across the province (Manitoba's Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2019). Some people criticized the commission's work, particularly the lack of culturally appropriate consultation with Indigenous people and Elders (Hendricks, 2019). In light of these criticisms, it is important to consider the outcomes of the Commission's investigation in relation to cultural capital. Cultural capital represents the social assets or resources an individual possesses that can promote social mobility (Fitzmaurice et al., 2020). An education review that centers the cultural capital of racialized groups would be more culturally responsive and would better support those groups within the education system. However, upon close analysis of the education policies and directives that result from the Manitoba Education Review, it is clear that the cultural capital of racialized groups is not prioritized.

When the Manitoba Education Review Commission's report was released in March 2021, the government of Manitoba released Bill 64, a document that aims to drastically alter the school system by fundamentally changing its organizational structure. In support of the bill, the government of Manitoba also released a report entitled *Better Education Starts Today* (BEST) (2021), which outlined the government's priority actions for the education system. Based on Yosso's (2004) concept of cultural community wealth, in this paper, I draw from critical discourse analysis to examine which kinds of cultural capital are prioritized in the school system according to the government in BEST. In particular, I demonstrate how BEST either ignores or instrumentalizes the cultural capital of racialized groups in order to prioritize dominant cultural capital and neoliberal ideals.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws from the work of Bourdieu (1977, as cited in Fitzmaurice et al., 2020) and his theory of social reproduction. Bourdieu defined capital in terms of economic, social, and cultural

¹ Ellen Bees is a Master's student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba and a middle school teacher. She can be reached at beese@myumanitoba.ca. All contributors of papers retain the copyright of their work.

capital. As Fitzmaurice et al. (2020) summarize, “cultural capital takes the form of cultural goods in its objectified state, educational qualifications in its institutionalised form, and dispositions in its embodied state. Social capital refers to the resources accruing from connections, networks, and group membership” (p. 3). Bourdieu argued that for middle class families, cultural and social capital act to enable social and cultural reproduction, offering a route to success for families whose cultural and social capital align with the capital of the school system (Bourdieu, 1977, as cited in Fitzmaurice et al., 2020). This alignment of cultural capital between school and home acts to advantage some students over others.

These ideas of social and cultural capital have been used to explain how students from middle-class backgrounds gain an advantage in the school system (Fitzmaurice et al., 2020). However, some researchers have criticized the approach as over-emphasizing class-based master-narratives. Richards (2020) explains how cultural capital research often portrays inequality as being primarily caused by class differences, without interrogating how the social class that is considered elite is predominantly white. As Richards claims, “this centering of whiteness, while denying its existence with class-based narratives, serves to perpetually infuse whiteness with positive social attributes, while reinforcing deficit perspectives of racialized minorities” (p. 2). Richards advocates for a race-conscious model when analyzing the transmission of cultural capital, which I will take up in this essay.

A compatible framework to Richards’ ideas is the theory of community cultural wealth developed by Yosso (2005). In this framework, Yosso uses critical race theory to criticize Bourdieu’s interpretation of cultural capital, indicating that “cultural capital is not just inherited or possessed by the middle class, but rather it refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills and abilities that are *valued* by privileged groups in society” (p. 76). Using a critical race theory lens, Yosso identifies that the privileging of the cultural capital of the dominant group leads to deficit views of Communities of Color. These communities have their own forms of cultural wealth that help people of colour navigate barriers that exist in white-dominated spaces.

Yosso identifies six forms of capital. First, aspirational capital is the ability to dream and hope for a better future, even when confronted with hostility or structural racism. Linguistic capital consists of the skills gained by communicating in multiple languages. Familial capital is the cultural knowledge that is part of one’s family and community. Social capital is the networks within communities of colour that can help individuals navigate various institutions in white dominated spaces. Yosso emphasizes communities of colour using social capital to lift each other up and counter adversity. Navigational capital is the skills needed to navigate through institutions like school or the job market. Finally, resistant capital is the knowledge or skills that people of colour gain when opposing inequities. Yosso emphasizes the importance of considering these types of capital when discussing communities of colour since “[critical race theory] shifts the research lens away from a deficit view of Communities of Color as places full of cultural poverty or disadvantages, and instead focuses on and learns from these communities’ cultural assets and wealth” (Yosso, 2005, p. 82). This paper aims to discuss if these types of cultural wealth are acknowledged within BEST, how they are emphasized, and the resulting implications in the school system.

Dominant Cultural Capital

To understand what kinds of cultural capital are valued within the framework of BEST, it is necessary to consider how the provincial government defines success within the education system. Early in the document, key goals are identified including “to ensure our students have the most improved performance in Canada... [and that] students receive high-quality education and programming in both English and French to achieve improved outcomes throughout their K-12 education and beyond” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 8). The aim to improve student performance is perceived as key, with the document mentioning “improved outcomes” 27 times and “improved achievement” 18 times. Improved student outcomes could be measured in a variety of ways, such as improving skills relating to problem solving, citizenship, or students’ general mental health and well-being. However, the document does not mention citizenship skills at all. While problems solving skills are mentioned, they are not a consistent focus. Mental health is listed as an important part of preparing future-ready students, but it is also framed as a means to student engagement, rather than an end in itself. When BEST discusses improving student outcomes, components like mental health, problem solving and citizenship are not key considerations.

Improved student achievement and outcomes are often framed in terms of proficiency in literacy and numeracy skills within BEST. It identifies “literacy and numeracy skills [as] the foundation of better educational outcomes, economic well-being and social inclusion” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 13) and indicates that student achievement on provincial numeracy and literacy assessments is cause for concern. Furthermore, the document identifies Manitoba students’ low scores on the Programme for International Student Assessment as problematic, particularly in reading and math. Literacy and numeracy skills are a key focus in the document. As a result, the knowledge, skills and dispositions that allow students to acquire literacy and numeracy skills and demonstrate achievement on assessments and standardized tests would be the key cultural capital that is valued in this vision of the education system.

Another broader definition of success relates to the perceived purpose and goal of education that is evident in BEST. In the document, the concept of improved outcomes is often linked to the need to prepare students for the workforce, with 25 references to the workforce, workplace, labour force or labour market. A key pillar of the document is the need to create “future-ready” students, which is intrinsically linked to preparing students for the workplace. This orientation towards work is consistent with a neoliberal view of education where the school system is a means to support the economy, rather than a public good that supports democratic participation and citizenship (Giroux, 2013). As a result, the cultural capital that would be viewed as valuable in this context are the skills, knowledge and dispositions that facilitate entry into the workforce and success in the workplace, in addition to student proficiency in literacy and numeracy skills.

As Fitzmaurice et al. (2020) observe, students with these kinds of cultural capital would enjoy greater success within an education system that values the same capitals. However, it is important to identify which groups possess this kind of cultural capital. Richards (2020) is highly

critical of how dominant cultural capital works to perpetuate racial inequalities within the education system and indicates that:

mastery of dominant forms of cultural capital contributes to the academic and economic success of those who possess it, in part because of the power that elite whites have had historically to build social institutions that reward those who embody white elite ways of existing in the world. (p. 6).

In the context of BEST, the document embodies cultural capital that historically privileges white students over racialized groups. For example, the document emphasizes a more standardized education system, while also suggesting education's prime role is to support the economy. In combination, these two elements suggest neoliberal ideals. Neoliberal education reforms, which seek to "frame education as both a commodity for individual economic advancement and a tool to shape workers for the global economy" (Sleeter, 2012, p. 577), have been widely criticized for negative effects on racialized groups (Au, 2016; Sleeter, 2012; Turner & Beneke, 2020). This would suggest that a document that emphasizes neoliberal ideals would not be centering the needs of racialized students.

Assessment practices are a key example where the cultural capital of the dominant group is privileged. Standardized testing, a common neoliberal education strategy, has long been criticized as a racially biased assessment tool. Wayne Au (2016) is critical of high stakes, standardized testing, stating that these tests profess to increase achievement of racialized students, while further entrenching racial inequality. He indicates that "as a racial project, high-stakes, standardized testing constructs which children (and communities) are identified as 'failures' by the tests, how such 'failure' is used to justify neoliberal conceptions of individualist educational attainment and the denial of structural inequalities" (Au, 2016, p. 42). Under this racial project, closing achievement gaps with the use of standardized tests becomes the ultimate goal, ignoring factors like systemic racism and biased tests that privilege white students (Au, 2016). BEST demonstrates ideas that are consistent with Au's criticisms. The document cites Indigenous achievement gaps as a primary concern, along with poor achievement on international standardized tests by Manitoba students more generally. To address the latter concern, the document lists a priority action to implement new provincial summative assessments at a variety of grade levels. While the exact make up of these assessments is still to be determined, the document indicates that "more rigorous student assessment [is] required for all students to realize their potential as they engage in advanced education and the labour market" (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 13). In considering Au's criticisms of high-stakes standardized testing, this suggests that the cultural capital of the dominant group is valued over the cultural capital of racialized students.

Cultural Capital of Racialized Groups

While there is evidence that cultural capital of the dominant group is emphasized in BEST, the document has an uneven approach when it comes to the cultural capital of racialized students. The cultural capital of Indigenous communities is featured most prominently. This emphasis is connected to the need to close achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous

students, a factor that is a cause for concern in Manitoba. While Indigenous students are a main focus, non-Indigenous racialized communities are never specifically mentioned. This erasure suggests a colour blind approach that negates the importance of the cultural community wealth of non-Indigenous racialized groups. The document does refer to newcomer, English as an Additional Language (EAL) students and refugees, but is silent on racialized groups that do not fall into those categories. This omission devalues the cultural capital of Black communities and communities of colours who are not newcomers. When newcomers are discussed, it is in connection with language learning, with one action listed as “include EAL and Newcomer Education perspectives... as one of the pillars within the new K to 12 Curriculum Framework so that all curriculum will embed language, literacy and cultural components” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 14). This action could point to the valuing of linguistic capital. The current draft EAL curriculum in Manitoba incorporates “an additive approach to English language learning [which] begins with the learners, affirming and drawing whenever possible on the linguistic, cultural and personal resources that they bring with them” (Government of Manitoba, 2011, p. 4). While more information is necessary for a definitive curriculum direction, BEST frames the teaching of EAL learners in similar terms, suggesting it places value on the linguistic capital these learners bring to the classroom.

The cultural capital of Indigenous students is featured more prominently as an important element of their learning. Section 2.4 of BEST focuses on improving achievement for Indigenous students, citing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s call to close achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The document proposes the following:

Learning environments for Indigenous students must infuse culturally and evidence-informed strategies that embed Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Students need to see themselves reflected in the space and in the texts they interact with by incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing and being in classrooms. This will build a sense of community for all learners and help close the achievement gap. Indigenous curriculum should include First Nations, Métis and Indigenous histories, cultures, traditional values, contemporary lifestyles and traditional knowledge systems. Additionally, land-based education and the inclusion of Elders and Knowledge Keepers are critical components of the Indigenous curriculum. (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 16)

Priority actions include the development of an Indigenous Inclusion Strategy and an Elders and Knowledge Keepers in Schools Initiative. In that section, traditional Indigenous knowledge and culture are highlighted as essential for the learning of Indigenous students.

Considering these elements through the lens of Yosso’s (2005) cultural community wealth, it is clear that steps are being made to incorporate types of capital that Indigenous communities possess. In particular, familial capital is present as there is emphasis on cultural knowledges that are taught among kin. Yosso indicates that the concept of kinship in this context is broad, so inviting Elders and Knowledge Keepers into schools to teach Indigenous curriculum could demonstrate the inclusion of familial capital. Similarly, BEST emphasises including Indigenous ways of knowing and being as a means to promote a sense of community. The cultural knowledges that are part of familial capital are positioned as a significant part of the education of Indigenous

students. This would suggest that their familial capital is valued and fostered as a means of encouraging the achievement of Indigenous students.

The emphasis on the cultural community wealth of the Indigenous community within the classroom has the potential to positively impact Indigenous students and their learning. However, it should also be understood in the context of how Indigenous knowledge has often been framed as a resource within a colonial education system. Nakata (2007) states that “Indigenous knowledge is increasingly discussed by all as a commodity, something of value, something that can be value-added, something that can be exchanged, traded, appropriated, preserved, something that can be excavated and mined” (p. 185). He cautions about the fragmentation of Indigenous knowledge, as people from various disciplines select and make use of different pieces that suit their purposes. The commodification of Indigenous knowledge can be noticed within BEST. Elements of Indigenous knowledges are positioned as an important means to improve student achievement. Land-based education and Indigenous ways of being and knowing are emphasized, while other elements that are important for Indigenous culture, such as Indigenous languages or the struggle for decolonization, are largely omitted. Indigenous knowledges are treated as a means to an end, rather than a holistic part of the education system.

This commodification of Indigenous knowledges can be interpreted as a means of transmitting the cultural capital of the dominant group. Hardy (2016) analyzed non-Indigenous teachers’ in Australia and how they make use of Indigenous students’ funds of knowledge in order to teach the official curricula. He noted that teachers drew from Indigenous epistemologies as a means of engaging the students in the Western curricula, which led to a superficial integration of Indigenous perspectives. As Hardy (2016) observes,

The approaches fell short of actively valuing the local Indigenous traditions as curriculum... Teachers did not interrogate the epistemic legitimacy of the canonical curriculum, but adopted an instrumental interest in Indigenous funds of knowledge, revealing little capacity to identify the embedded assumptions of whiteness. (p. 672)

Transmitting dominant cultural capital was the key purpose in that case study, which limited authentic engagement and centering of Indigenous epistemologies in the classroom.

A similar philosophy can be seen in BEST. The document makes use of Indigenous knowledges in an instrumental way to close the achievement gap. Promoting an education system that centers Indigenous knowledges is secondary, as evidenced when the document calls for infusing both “culturally and *evidence-informed strategies* that embed Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 16, emphasis added). By putting evidence-informed strategies on par with culturally-informed strategies, the document is qualifying that Indigenous epistemologies must be supported by research in order to be valid. The document never mentions Indigenous research methodologies, and continual emphasis on evidence-based teaching practices, rigorous assessment, and intense focus on standards would suggest this is not the type of research that is being prioritized. Similarly, other benefits of incorporating Indigenous knowledges, such as an increased sense of community and reconciliation, are continually paired

with closing the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Integrating the cultural capital of Indigenous communities in the classroom is promoted, not out of a sense of justice, but primarily as an instrumental means of promoting student achievement. The cultural capital of Indigenous communities is instrumentalized to achieve a purpose that reinforces the dominant cultural capital.

Niigaanwewidam Sinclair, an expert in Native Studies in Manitoba, points to the fact that this delivery of Indigenous knowledges will be part of a province-wide initiative, which could erase local voices and local knowledge. Sinclair (2021) argues that, “without local control of Indigenous education, all that's left is to collapse Indigenous complexity into the ‘Indian’ – a singular category useful only to control, stereotype, and classify differing communities into one group” (para. 14). The document itself does little to mention local Indigenous knowledges, instead saying “Indigenous curriculum should include First Nations, Métis and Indigenous histories, cultures, traditional values, contemporary lifestyles and traditional knowledge systems” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 16). This quote appears to suggest that First Nations and Métis groups are separate from Indigenous groups, which is not true. In a similar vein, Inuit communities are omitted and specific First Nations groups are not mentioned here or elsewhere in the document. The local context is important to ensure that specific First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities have their knowledges, cultures, and traditions reflected in the classroom. Specific reference to local Indigenous knowledges is absent from the document, which suggests limited emphasis on the cultural capital of these local communities.

Cultural Community Wealth and the School System

One means of respecting and promoting the cultural community wealth of racialized groups in Manitoba would be to ensure that racialized people are represented within the school system, that their voices are heard, and that they are able to actively contribute to decision making and policy development. Yosso (2005) describes many forms of cultural community wealth that would be strengthened by better representation. For instance, the social capital of communities of colour would be more effective if school networks had more representation of people who are Black, Indigenous, or members of other racialized groups. Similarly, with more racialized voices in the school system, navigational capital would be enhanced as racialized students would have more guidance in maneuvering through school institutions. As Yosso (2005) argues, “navigational capital thus acknowledges individual agency within institutional constraints, but it also connects to social networks that facilitate community navigation through places and spaces” (p. 80). It is important to question what kind of space is made for racialized people in the education system envisioned by BEST.

Representation of racialized groups in schools starts with the staff. In BEST, there is little emphasis on hiring more racialized teachers or staff members. There is one instance that calls for recruiting more Indigenous language teachers, but this seems framed to address the teaching of languages and not relating to the need for Indigenous educators more generally. Hiring more staff of colour is not mentioned. There is no discussion of making school staff more representative of the student communities they serve. This notable absence is not surprising. Burciaga and Kohli (2018)

discuss how teachers of colour are often not valued within an education system that values whiteness and often ignores other forms of community cultural wealth. In that case study, they found teachers of colour were best positioned to teach students of colour because of their shared cultural capital. “Emerging models to determine the effectiveness of teachers... do not take into account how the [community cultural wealth] of teachers of color is insight that can transform predominantly whitestream systems of schooling to engage students and the communities they serve” (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018, p. 11). BEST does not promote making education staff more representative of the student communities but does spend time discussing developing teacher standards and a regulatory framework for the teaching profession. This is suggestive of what Burciaga and Kohli (2018) observed in their study that the whitestream system discounts the cultural community wealth of teachers of colour in favour of dominant cultural capital.

Although BEST does not engage with improved representation of racialized teachers in their hiring practices, the document does discuss improved opportunities for parent engagement in the school system. The document explains the new governance model introduced by Bill 64. In place of school boards and trustees, each school will have a school community council (SCC) which will “advise the school principal on school matters, including the needs of the community it serves and strategies for improving student achievement and well-being” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 31). Each SCC will have an elected executive. The document suggests that SCCs will help reflect diverse voices, although “this will require a renewed emphasis on engaging parents and communities so that they are reflective of the diversity of schools” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 31). However, it is not clear how schools will ensure SCCs are reflective of their community. Bill 64, the *Education Modernization Act*, does not address this issue beyond saying that principals will encourage parents to participate (2021). Similar legislation in Nova Scotia included the provision that some seats be reserved for underrepresented communities, but this is not present in the Manitoban bill (Macintosh, 2021). Moreover, while a parent from each region will become part of a parent advisory council that will advise the Minister of Education, the representation of this council will not prioritize racialized groups. Sixty-three percent of Manitoba’s racialized people live in Winnipeg, which will only have one seat on the parent advisory council (Macintosh, 2021). Racialized parents will have less access to these positions compared to white parents, demonstrating a clear example of structural racism. Consequently, it is evident that the system endorsed by BEST values the cultural and social capital of white parents, while devaluing the community cultural wealth of racialized communities.

Conclusion

Better Education Starts Today has a neoliberal framing which values the cultural capital of racialized groups only insofar as they can be instrumentalized towards neoliberal goals. However, other orientations towards education exist that would emphasize and value the cultural capital of racialized students. Yosso (2005) notes that in emphasizing community cultural wealth, people in the education system make “a commitment to conduct research, teach and develop schools that serve a larger purpose of struggling toward social and racial justice” (p. 82). Instead of viewing communities with a deficit lens, schools can choose to value the linguistic capital of students, to

emphasize the importance of cultural knowledges for their own sake, and to bring social networks of racialized groups into the school community. A more holistic view of cultural capital would lead to a dramatically different vision for education that would be more inclusive of racialized groups and more equitable.

Instead, BEST envisions an education system that prioritizes and privileges the cultural capital of the dominant white group. There is consistent emphasis on student achievement, numeracy and literacy skills and workplace readiness, which stresses the knowledge, skills and dispositions that privilege the dominant group. This neoliberal framing also suggests a school system that aims to control racialized students who must engage with a system that ignores and devalues their own cultural capital. When the cultural capital of Indigenous students is included in the document, it is done through instrumentalization and commodification of Indigenous knowledges and values as a way to achieve the government's own goals. The document does not prioritize improving representation within the school system and structural barriers prevent representation in the political sphere. As a result, opportunities for racialized people to participate in the system and exercise social capital are limited, and local voice and knowledge are erased. Manitoba's plan for the education system ignores the cultural capital of racialized students, except when instrumentalizing their skills and knowledge to better transmit the cultural capital of the dominant group. BEST claims to put students first, however this plan further marginalizes racialized communities and fails to value their cultural community wealth.

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