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Culturally Unresponsive: The Manitoba Education Review and Colonial Perspectives

Ellen Bees and Shannon D. M. Moore¹

In 2018, the Conservative government of Manitoba launched an independent review of the provincial education system. According to the commission tasked with conducting it, the aims of the review were “about improving student outcomes, ensuring long-term sustainability and enhancing public confidence in Manitoba’s K to 12 education system” (Manitoba Education, 2019c, p. 3). In early 2019, the commission organized a series of consultations to receive feedback from the public via meetings, written responses, and online surveys. Despite early criticism that Indigenous voices were not being effectively consulted (Hendricks, 2019), documentation from the commission indicates that cultural responsiveness was intended to be a key part of their work. The commission stated that it’s work would be guided by the principle of being “culturally responsive – It will respect diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities, *la francophonie* and newcomers, and value the critical relationships between language and culture” (Manitoba Education, 2019c, p. 20). But beyond this superficial declaration, these principles are not enacted during the commission’s processes; instead, colonial and deficit perspectives that run counter to culturally responsive theories and practices are evidenced throughout the commission’s publications and processes.

Culturally Responsive Practices

While the Manitoba Education Commission discusses being culturally responsive, this concept is actually originally rooted in the United States. In response to the failure of the American school system to meet the needs of African-American students, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) called for a culturally relevant pedagogy. Breaking away from explanations of cultural deficits or disadvantages, she called for “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). By encouraging such critical perspectives, culturally relevant pedagogy is oriented towards challenging systemic inequities and the current status quo. Geneva Gay (2010), another scholar whose work more intently focuses on classroom practices, emphasizes that culturally responsive teaching should be empowering, transformative, and ultimately emancipatory for students, as it

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. Shannon D.M. Moore is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at The University of Manitoba. Prior to joining the faculty, she was a high school social studies teacher in Vancouver. She can be reached at Shannon.Moore@umanitoba.ca. All contributors of papers retain the copyright of their work.

aims to challenge the status quo of the education system. Culturally responsive teaching “acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students’ dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum” (Gay, 2010, p. 31). Gay (2010) stresses the dynamic and changing nature of culture in students’ lives, noting that culture is influenced by a variety of mitigating variables beyond race or ethnicity alone. While Gay’s work focuses more on the practice of teaching, both scholars emphasize the importance of developing broader critical perspectives about inequitable systems.

In Manitoba, culturally responsive pedagogy is an important practice, particularly considering that 18% of Manitoba’s population identifies as Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2017) and ongoing settler colonialism negatively impacts Indigenous students in the school system. The provincial context necessitates culturally responsive practices where Indigenous ways of knowing are prioritized. Such practices work to demonstrate respect for knowledge systems that have traditionally been marginalized in Western school systems, to unsettle the hegemony of Western knowledge, and to recognize the ontological and epistemological backgrounds of students. Moreover, culturally responsive pedagogy rejects deficit perspectives of marginalized students and counters institutional and systemic inequities. Rather than relying on data from test scores and grades, culturally responsive pedagogy challenges the legitimacy of standardized assessments and practices, and instead considers how the conditions that contribute to “low achievement” can be changed. Culturally responsive approaches require challenging inequities, valuing marginalized students’ lived experiences, and emphasizing student strengths over supposed deficits.

Terms are filled with meaning and theoretical lineage. In using the term culturally responsive, the Manitoba Education Commission is suggesting an alignment with the theorists affiliated with this work and the underlying principles. While the commission relies on the term culturally responsive, close reading of its documents show a lack of information on the theories behind the term; or, more cynically, they are using the branding of the term absent the substance. Although they claim to be culturally responsive, the Manitoba Education Review evidences perspectives that are at odds with culturally responsive practices, namely deficit and colonial perspectives. Deficit perspectives mobilize the very negative perceptions of marginalized students that culturally responsive pedagogy aims to counter. Deficit thinking involves “concentrating on what ethnically, racially, and culturally different students don’t have and can’t do” (Gay, 2010, p. 13). This paper will demonstrate how the Manitoba Education Review exhibits deficit perspectives about Indigenous students. Further, the review demonstrates colonial perspectives that aim to assimilate or eliminate Indigenous peoples. Behind the veil of the term culturally responsive, the review advances colonial systems and narratives.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Governments rely on discourse to naturalize ideologies and legitimize policy decisions (Fairclough, 2013). Alongside manufactured crises, or “need creation” (Parker, 2019) discursive strategies are used to sell particular policies. The Manitoba Education Review, for example, is grounded in the idea that student outcomes in the province are low and that the public has lost faith

in the system. These manufactured crises are used to undermine confidence in the current system, veil underlying issues (such as poverty and underfunding), distract the populace, and encourage “buy in” for particular reforms. These discursive strategies are most effective when they are rendered invisible, naturalized, and made common-sense (Lemke, 2015).

Critical discourse analysis unveils hidden discursive patterns, exposing discourses that mobilize meaning and ideology (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The purpose is to reveal the operations of power at play (Rogers, 2004). Critical discourse analysis reveals the way that language can be manipulated to advance certain epistemological or ontological stances (Fairclough, 2013; Parker, 2019). It is a form of explanatory critique or deconstructive process that has identified a problem it wants to solve. The problem, in our mind, is the way in which the Manitoba Education Review co-opts the language of culturally responsive pedagogy while advancing colonial perspectives. An analysis of the *Public Consultation Discussion Paper* (Manitoba Education, 2019c) and the commission’s final report, *Our Children’s Success: Manitoba’s Future* (Manitoba Education, 2020), allows us to demonstrate how the commission purports culturally responsive intentions while relying on conflicting and contradictory colonial ideologies. Before looking at the specific documents, we would like to outline the conditions, context, and spectacle within which these documents were created. We feel that this is an important pause as it illuminates the way the process itself ignores the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Barriers to Participation in the Consultation Process

The Manitoba Education Review was rooted in democratic colonialism. Wotherspoon (2014) defines democratic colonialism as:

legislation, discourses and practices in which rights for indigenous people (associated with both citizenship and indigenous status) and opportunities for equitable participation in Canadian society exist alongside mechanisms that marginalize, exclude or pose indigenous people as outsiders relative to dominant societal norms and practices. (p. 328)

Wotherspoon notes that Indigenous people are frequently viewed as objects, rather than active participants in Canadian educational reform processes, and that federal Indigenous education reform movements have been criticized for limited transparency and consultation. Similar criticisms can be levelled at the Manitoba Education Review.

For instance, the composition of the commission does not effectively make space for local Indigenous experts in education and culture. Of the nine commissioners, two identify as Indigenous. One is Terry Brown, who was chair of the Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce and has strong ties to the business community. The other is Jill Quilty, a lawyer from Newfoundland who has a background in literacy education, but who only served on the commission for the first five months. None of the other commissioners’ racial or ethnic backgrounds are mentioned, although they appear to be white (Manitoba Education, 2019b; Thompson Citizen, 2019). A culturally responsive process should include Indigenous members in the commission, as the Manitoba Education Review does. However, if the review is truly interested in considering Indigenous perspectives, greater priority should be given to local Indigenous voices who have experience with Indigenous education

in Manitoba, or to Indigenous Elders from local communities. None of the commissioners have Indigenous education listed as a specialty, nor are they identified as Indigenous Elders (Manitoba Education, 2019b). Furthermore, while the commission has invited a consultant with expertise on school board reorganization, no media coverage has indicated that similar measures have been taken to consult experts in Indigenous education (The Canadian Press, 2019). According to available public documents, local Indigenous experts on Indigenous education and culture have not been granted a voice at the ground floor of the commission.

The organization of the consultation process also produced significant barriers. One of the authors attended the first public consultation session on April 24, 2019, at the Caboto Centre in Winnipeg. The session started with breakout discussions on predetermined topics based on feedback received from online registration forms, although participants were able to propose and discuss additional topics at the meeting. None of the original topics dealt with Indigenous education, although it was added after the fact, along with tables discussing kids in care, poverty, and inclusion. Rather than a central focus, the topics were afterthoughts. Although limited, their eventual addition demonstrates the importance of community engagement. Through this engagement, commissioners were also urged to consider the geographic bias of the session locations. During the question period, the commissioners were urged by participants to add sessions in the city centre. The concern was that the selected locations and times were inaccessible by bus and would restrict accessibility for many Indigenous people living in the core of the city (personal communication, April 24, 2019). While the commissioners were initially dismissive about adding another session (Manness, personal communication, April 24, 2019), a public meeting was eventually added in the North End of the city (Wasyliw, 2019). This was an appropriate choice, but the situation reveals a lack of consideration for including Indigenous voices. By selecting locations and times that would produce participation barriers for Indigenous communities, the commission privileged settler perspectives. This is also apparent with the initial choice of discussion topics that do not include Indigenous education or culture, nor Truth and Reconciliation. While participants did add some relevant topics, stronger participation from Indigenous communities would invite different feedback from the settler perspectives. Greater attention to making the meeting venues more accessible would make the process more culturally responsive.

The public consultation model itself can also be criticized. In a news article, Elder Barbara Nepinak, an Ojibwe member of Pine Creek First Nation, indicated a greater need for the commission to reach out to the Indigenous community. She noted that proper protocol required that Knowledge Keepers be asked directly to participate (Hendricks, 2019). With this protocol in mind, expecting Indigenous Elders to independently come to a public consultation meeting is not a respectful way to engage with Indigenous communities, nor likely an effective means of promoting meaningful feedback, particularly for a commission that does not appear to have any Indigenous Elders as members. This ineffectiveness is further supported by the briefs the commission solicited from the public. In total, 62 briefs were submitted from a variety of organizations, school divisions and individuals. Only five briefs touched on Truth and Reconciliation, Indigenous perspectives, or issues of equity in substantive ways. Of those, only one brief offered insights from Indigenous organizations, a combined effort from the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg and Neeginan College and

the Winnipeg Indigenous Executive Council Education Committee (Manitoba Education, 2019a). To the commission's credit, this group, along with the Manitoba Métis Federation, the Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba, and the Southern Chiefs' Organization participated in consultations in late June 2019 (Manitoba Education, 2020). However, the selected locations and structure of the process itself facilitated settler feedback, while shutting out Indigenous participation. This process demonstrates democratic colonialism, which contradicts the review's guiding principle of cultural responsiveness.

Deficit Perspectives in the Manitoba Education Review

Besides being rooted in democratic colonialism, the review's documentation demonstrated deficit perspectives that further emphasize a lack of cultural responsiveness. One of the Manitoba Education Review's main aims is to improve student outcomes. The Public Consultation Discussion Paper (Manitoba Education, 2019c) defines student performance through data relating to provincial assessments, pan-Canadian and international assessments, grade nine credit attainment, and high school graduation rates. Relying on this decontextualized data, the Discussion Paper fuels a crisis about student outcomes, stating that "there are still persistent trends that indicate little or no improvement over time" (p. 7). Once a crisis about student outcomes is manufactured using this decontextualized data, the public is invested in improving outcomes in these particular areas. That is, the crisis rhetoric about test scores turns the public's focus to improving test scores--thereby legitimizing standardized tests as valid indicators of learning and rationalizing investments in improving these scores. It is unsurprising that the commission would choose to focus on test scores and achievement data, as the provincial government views these statistics as a meaningful way of comparing schools (Froese, 2018). Reliance on this data not only narrowly defines students and learning, it also legitimizes the data sources despite substantial scholarship critiquing standardized assessment

There is an abundance of research that has long-existed about the flaws of standardized tests, including that: tests do not measure or equate to learning; the content of standardized tests is subjective; standardized tests do not reflect our curriculum, what is taught, what is learned, or what is valued by society (Barrier-Ferreira, 2008; Kempf, 2016; Pelech, 2009; Rubin & Kazanjian, 2011). Standardized tests cannot measure complex understandings, critical thinking, or creativity (Harris, Smith, Harris, 2011). Instead, these tests breed compliance, value homogeneity, and devalue the diversity of students (Graham & Neu, 2004). Moreover, standardized testing reproduces inequities (Kearns, 2011; Ryan & Whitman, 2013). Standardized testing values a standardized student and betrays the theories of culturally responsive pedagogy. Moreover, this orientation advances a deficit view within the Manitoban education system and obfuscates other significant questions that could be asked. As Eisner (2001) asserted when discussing test scores, "as we focus on standards, rubrics, and measurements, the deeper problems of schooling go unattended" (p. 299). A compelling deeper problem is the issue of educational equity, which could have been a key focus of the review.

A culturally responsive review should prominently feature a critique of societal inequities, particularly those that impact student "outcomes". Instead, within the long-term vision section, the

documentation indicates that “education equity and fairness for all” is one area of six “you may wish to consider” (Manitoba Education, 2019c, p. 9) then proceeds to fixate on equitable funding formulas instead. The passive language of “may” is notable here, as it positions education equity and fairness as an optional endeavour instead of an educational priority. Participants in the public consultations might choose to discuss equity, but for the commission it is not a mandatory focus when it comes to long term vision within the education system. Equity is not a central concern in the document. As a result, calling the review culturally responsive is misleading, as it does not prioritize tackling root causes that reproduce inequity.

The review’s lack of concern with equity is clear in the accountability and student learning section, where a deficit perspective is present. The review indicates:

Research shows, for example, that when parents read to their children, it makes a difference in their literacy acquisition. But school systems cannot depend on this, as the time, skills and availability of parents vary. Parents may respond differently, based on their resources, skills or levels of comfort, with what schools ask of them. Schools therefore have a key role to address *the inequities that socio-economic status and other factors place on students*. (Manitoba Education, 2019c, p. 12, emphasis added)

In saying that socio-economic status places inequities on students, the commission blames the students’ status for a lack of literacy acquisition. This normalizes the idea that an element of the students’ identity is to blame for these educational inequities, rather than larger societal inequities that the government bears responsibility for addressing. Moreover, the preceding discussion of parents’ role in literacy acquisition links these inequities to parents’ lack of involvement. In effect, it is taking a deficit perspective by fixating on what students and families lack while not acknowledging that greater systemic factors also play a key role. Although the review asserts that schools should address inequities, the phrasing enables the commission to dodge greater responsibility for addressing systemic factors like poverty. The commission could better define these systemic inequities and discuss supports that would challenge systemic factors, such as affordable childcare or nutrition programs. However, in saying that the parents’ status places inequities on students, the document casts blame on the families, rather than actively engaging with the systemic factors that cause the inequities. A culturally responsive approach would critique these inequities more explicitly rather than omitting discussion of systemic factors and casting blame on parents and families.

The deficit perspectives of parents who are unable to assist their children is problematic. As Gay (2010) states, “simply blaming students, their socioeconomic background, a lack of interest in and of motivation for learning, and poor parental participation in the educational process is not very helpful. The question of ‘why’ continues to be unanswered” (p. 17). The commission does not choose to investigate this question or suggest that an investigation is necessary, instead asserting that schools must take over. It does later suggest that “home-school communication about student learning” (Manitoba Education, 2019c, p. 13) is one of eight areas that “may” be worth considering. However, this suggestion is not phrased in a way that would promote strong partnerships between parents and schools. First, it has a lack of commitment demonstrated in the use of the term “may”.

Second, it fails to centre how to overcome barriers that inhibit strong home-school partnerships. By taking a deficit approach when considering parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds, the Manitoba Education Review fails to consider how to involve these families in a more meaningful way and, in turn, is not being culturally responsive.

Finally, the Manitoba Education Review is grounded in deficit thinking in relation to conceptions of diversity. When describing the diversity in the province's student population, the commission indicates that:

schools and classrooms across the province welcome students from the full socio-economic spectrum – from privilege to poverty; those with exceptional needs – gifted or challenged; from stable homes and those who move in and out of foster care; and students who have experienced disrupted learning or trauma on their journey to becoming a new Canadian. (Manitoba Education, 2019c, p. 4)

In this quote, diversity is dichotomized into spectrums of good to bad: privilege to poverty, gifted to challenged, and stable home to foster care. These binaries connote good (privilege) and bad (poverty). As a result, students who do not fall into the "good" side of the spectrum are considered to be disadvantaged, emphasizing an underlying deficit perspective that centers the individual rather than highlighting the conditions that reproduce these disadvantages. These categories impose deficit narratives on students that impact how they are viewed and how they come to see themselves. This is an overly simplistic view of Manitoba's students, that fixes students' identities into dichotomous categories, and ignores other forms of diversity that do not fall so neatly into a dichotomized spectrum. For instance, the document frames newcomers as having experienced trauma, but fails to account for strengths, skills, or aptitudes they also possess. A more culturally responsive approach would consider the strengths of students more broadly rather than relying on binaries that emphasize student deficits.

Ongoing Settler Colonialism

The deficit perspectives apparent in the Manitoba Education Review documentation also play a key role in mobilizing colonial perspectives. Colonial perspectives in the education context seek to perpetuate oppressive structures that view white settlers as central and Indigenous peoples as deficient. Culturally responsive teaching counters these oppressive structures. However, some researchers have criticized culturally responsive pedagogy and how it is frequently applied by white teachers with the narrow aim of increasing student achievement. In approaching culturally responsive pedagogy as a checklist of items to accomplish, white teachers fail to evaluate their own involvement in colonial practices (Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2017). The education review commission accomplishes a similar feat by claiming to be culturally responsive while relying on colonial perspectives.

A prime focus in the Public Consultation Discussion Paper is Indigenous achievement. The commission mentions concerns about the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students three times. It should be stated that other achievement gaps do exist in Manitoba. For instance, the commission mentions that "a high degree of variability in student

achievement is observed when data is analyzed geographically” (Manitoba Education, 2019c, p. 7). However, given that no further details are provided as to which geographic regions are involved, the focus remains on Indigenous achievement. The commission particularly focuses on graduation rates, noting that disaggregated data shows that “fewer than 50 per cent of Indigenous students graduate high school within four years of entering Grade 9” (Manitoba Education, 2019c, p. 8). While the review does not specify which other achievement gaps are present, data from the Manitoba Education website indicate that substantial gaps exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student achievement for mid-grade assessments for grade seven number sense, grade eight reading comprehension and expository writing, grade three numeracy and reading, and attainment of math and language arts credits in grade nine (Manitoba Education, 2021). The commission identifies these gaps as “the most important educational challenge Manitoba is facing today” and further states “the historical, moral and economic imperatives to close this gap are critical” (Manitoba Education, 2019c, p. 8). At face value, these statements are supportive of improving Indigenous achievement.

However, the provided data in the Discussion Paper is somewhat limited. Only one concrete example of an achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is provided. The other gaps are kept vague in the Discussion Paper, although presumably were considered by the commissioners during their deliberations. Even so, as the Discussion Paper was meant to inform the public and lead to meaningful public feedback, greater detail would be useful. Moreover, Indigenous students are treated as a single entity. Gay (2010) makes the point that “no ethnic group is culturally or intellectually monolithic” and as a result disaggregated achievement data is essential in a culturally responsive setting (p. 18). While the data is disaggregated according to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, breakdowns according to other demographic categories could be useful for Indigenous, non-Indigenous, EAL students and other groups. Examples could include data that are disaggregated according to more specific geographic regions, as well as more data relating to students in foster care or students living in poverty. These factors are not provided.

Also problematic is the continual focus on the achievement gap. Limited contextual information is provided to explain why this gap exists, such as the intergenerational impact of residential schools, the resulting distrust of the education system and government, and other systemic factors like poverty. Moreover, the school system privileges Eurocentric ontologies and epistemologies and marginalizes Indigenous knowledges (Battiste, 1998). In turn, students who are already steeped in these ways of knowing and being are privileged by their centering in school curriculum and assessment. Alternately, students without this type of Eurocentric cultural capital are disadvantaged. Moreover, students whose ways of knowing are not represented in their classrooms may feel demoralized; they do not see themselves in the curriculum. A discussion of these factors would show that the achievement gap is a result of historical and contemporary systemic inequities rather than individual academic achievement. However, a continual focus on decontextualized data frames marginalized students as failures (Au, 2016), revealing further deficit thinking. Ladson-Billings (2006) said that an “all-out focus on the ‘Achievement Gap’ moves us toward short-term solutions that are unlikely to address the long-term underlying problem” (p. 4).

By fixating on the achievement gap alone, the commission misses an opportunity to be more culturally responsive.

Despite these limitations, the commission is reliant on a data-driven approach. It should be noted that even if thorough data were provided, there are significant problems with a predominantly data-driven approach to improving Indigenous achievement. The Canadian Council on Learning (2007), an organization dedicated to providing data to help drive decisions about learning, is particularly critical of how success is defined for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis learning. The council indicates that research on Indigenous learning is generally focused on educational deficits, rather than strengths. Research is often centered on the formal school setting, which does not consider experiential learning or other traditional ways of knowing that take place outside of school. Moreover, “indicators focus on years of schooling and performance on standardized assessments. They do not reflect the purpose or nature of holistic learning—engaging the physical, spiritual, mental and emotional dimensions—for First Nations, Inuit and Métis” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 2). The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) emphasizes that Indigenous learning should be holistic, experiential, and communal, something that is not so easily measurable according to the commission’s data-driven approach. As a result, when the commission asks “How are Manitoba’s K to 12 students performing?” (Manitoba Education, 2019c, p. 2), its answers privilege a settler approach to achievement and learning instead of interpreting the data in a culturally responsive way.

In centering settler perspectives and marginalizing Indigenous points of view, the Manitoba Education Review is operating from a colonial mindset. This outlook is further emphasized in the focus area on funding, where it identifies “Indigenous education and students who are underachieving” (Manitoba Education, 2019c, p. 15) as one item in a bulleted list of topics to consider. By grouping these two topics together, it conflates Indigenous education with underachieving students, which reveals a deficit focus and grossly misunderstands the term Indigenous education. It suggests that Indigenous education is primarily valued as a means of improving student achievement, which in the commission’s view means improving test scores and graduation rates. However, Marie Battiste (2009), an Indigenous author and teacher, argues that Indigenous education goes beyond this limited definition of achievement. In her vision, integrating Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum allows society to find new means of solving contemporary problems. Indigenous knowledges allow us to “ground our interrelationships with each other – all things, animate and inanimate; to honour the land, the animals, the ecology that gives all of us sustenance; to honour our relationships with one another and respect our diversities” (Battiste, 2009, p. 17). Battiste further states that Indigenous knowledges require educators to unlearn racism and Eurocentric perspectives and to commit to equity. By focusing on Indigenous students, there is no necessary spotlight on educators, the curriculum, or the system. This culturally responsive vision of Indigenous education and achievement is not exemplified in the Manitoba Education Review documentation, which is instead rooted in colonial definitions of achievement.

While authentic integration of Indigenous knowledges into curriculum would necessitate increased focus on equity, this topic is nearly absent in the Manitoba Education Review

documentation. Equity is mentioned a few times, but limited connection is made to the education system being inequitable. In the Funding section, it asks “What actions are required to ensure that the education system is sustainable and provides equitable learning opportunities for all children and youth?” (Manitoba Education, 2019c, p. 15). The question’s connection with how to fund the education system means the focus on equity is secondary to the issue of how to pay for it. However, with a system that is rooted in colonialism, issues of equity could be given more prominence. Pirbhai-Illich et al. (2017) note:

There is also a need to move the focus away from abnormality and individualism and to refocus on the perpetrators – on white peoples and whiteness and *their* need to change, to disrupt their colonial patterns of behaviour and to disrupt systems and structures that continue to harm. (p. 11)

A culturally responsive review would tackle these difficult topics, for instance by asking teachers, especially white teachers, to consider their own practices in relation to a colonial system. Instead, the documentation spends more time focusing on professional standards and teacher accountability. A culturally responsive review would more explicitly focus on issues of equity and power imbalances in the education system, disrupting colonial perspectives instead of supporting them.

The Commission’s Conclusions

In the spring of 2021, the provincial government released the commission’s report entitled *Our Children’s Success: Manitoba’s Future* (Manitoba Education, 2020). While this report discusses feedback and suggestions that align with culturally responsive practices, the resulting recommendations fall short. Participants in consultation workshops recommended curricula that emphasize Indigenous perspectives and the need for teacher training to facilitate the integration of Indigenous perspectives. The commission’s report cites the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg and Neeginan College and the Winnipeg Indigenous Executive Council Education Committee’s recommendations, which emphasized cultural safety in schools, Indigenous perspectives throughout the curriculum, a greater number of Indigenous teachers, better parent outreach, and more Indigenous voice in governance. Further, the report describes research that emphasizes confronting systemic inequities and engaging students using Indigenous perspectives (Manitoba Education, 2020). It is thus clear that the commission heard many recommendations that could lead to more culturally responsive schools.

The report contained eight recommendations relating to closing the Indigenous achievement gap. A few positive points are present, such as recommendations relating to Knowledge Keepers at school or focusing on historical contributions of Indigenous peoples. One recommendation also discusses fulfilling the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action that relate to education. However, instead of explicitly recommending the integration of Indigenous perspectives, the commission calls for “high-impact, evidence-informed practices” (Manitoba Education, 2020, p. 76). It seems clear that in promoting Indigenous achievement, the commission is focused on a data-driven colonial approach rather than a more holistic approach grounded in

Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. This vitally important culturally responsive practice is not the central focus of the recommendations. Moreover, the recommendations do not mention recruiting more Indigenous teachers or creating safer, more inviting spaces for Indigenous communities. One recommendation indicates the need to “put in place programming, supports, and services to assist Indigenous communities” (p. 77), but the vagueness of this statement makes it unclear what type of programming or supports this could constitute. It also harkens back to deficit perspectives of Indigenous communities, suggesting that adding more supports to help Indigenous communities is sufficient. It ignores possibilities for more radical change that could challenge existing systemic inequities and reimagine an education system based in equitable practices. While the commission heard some Indigenous voices, they failed to listen and effectively integrate their suggestions into the final recommendations of the report.

Conclusion

An aim of the Manitoba Education Review was to be culturally responsive, but this assertion is undercut by a series of omissions during the review process. Absent are substantive discussions of how to improve equity or challenge systemic inequities that are ingrained in the system. A multifaceted and nuanced conception of diversity is not included, nor are Indigenous definitions of learning and achievement. While the consultation process appears to be open to everyone, measures to effectively include local Indigenous communities have been limited. When Indigenous voices were heard, their suggestions were not fully realized. Perspectives grounded in deficit and colonial thinking have been tightly integrated into the review process, leading to approaches that are not culturally responsive as those who coined the term had actually envisioned.

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