

Imaginative Engagement in Culturally Diverse Classrooms

Changing Teacher Thinking and Practice within a Community-University Research Alliance

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ABSTRACT

Can a focus on imaginative engagement help mainstream public schools improve the academic success and life chances of Aboriginal children? This question lies at the heart of a five-year research project in British Columbia, funded by the Community-University Research Alliances program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. This paper describes the design of the project and summarizes results from the first year of implementation. Particular emphasis is placed on the ways in which project teachers translate theory into action in their classrooms, and the kinds of intervention and support that appear most likely to facilitate lasting changes in thinking and practice. Three subsequent papers from researchers in the project focus on other issues of particular interest: literacy, special needs, and media education.

INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal children, like other children from marginalized families and communities, do not fare well in mainstream public schools in Canada. This mismatch manifests itself in a number of ways, including low high school completion rates and achievement scores in high-stakes academic subjects, over-inclusion in various “special needs” categories, and literacy rates well below provincial averages (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2001). Aboriginal children are also at higher risk for a number of health and behaviour problems that reflect, at least in part, the difficulty of fostering self-awareness and self-respect for all students in these culturally diverse, and often socially divided, settings.

From the research literature on similar situations throughout the industrialized world, it is clear that the causes of this situation are multiple and complex (Deyhle and Swisher, 1997). Many initiatives may help to address the problem, including the inclusion of Aboriginal languages and cultures in the curriculum, greater representation of Aboriginal people in the teaching profession, and Aboriginal political control of educational institutions (Assembly of First Nations, 1988; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Castellano, Davis and Lahache, 2000). Yet despite progress in all these areas, Aboriginal graduation rates from high school remain at about half those of the non-Aboriginal population, with substantially lower participation rates in high-stakes academic subjects such as English, mathematics and science at the Grade 12 level. It is clear that further changes are needed, particularly at the level of classroom teaching, for schools to become genuinely inclusive and educative places for all students.

Specialists in multicultural and bilingual education emphasize the need for pedagogies that encourage active language use, experiential-interactive approaches that enable learners to generate their own knowledge, and assessment practices that help teachers and learners alike to focus upon

building strengths (Cummins, 1994; Nieto, 2000). Other researchers place such changes in the context of a deeper rethinking of the nature and purposes of education (e.g. Bowers, 1987; Cajete, 2000; Chrisjohn, 1999; Hampton, 1995). The project described in this paper builds upon both of these approaches within a theoretical framework first developed by Kieran Egan, a professor of education at Simon Fraser University. Under the title of “Learning for Understanding through Culturally Inclusive Imaginative Development” (LUCID), the project brings together researchers in the Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, and school district-First Nation partnerships in three regions of British Columbia. Teachers in the project, presently concentrated in Grades 4-7 in three to four schools per district, are asked to make the imaginative engagement of the learners central to the way in which they plan and teach the curriculum. Among other advantages, this approach enables the flexible and meaningful incorporation of First Nations cultural knowledge and practices in ways that enrich rather than conflict with standard academic objectives (cf. Goodefellow, 1994).

The project, funded for five years by the Community-University Research Alliances program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, began in January 2004. At the time of writing (May 2005), project teachers are completing the first school year in which they tried out some of the principles of culturally inclusive imaginative education in their classrooms. To date the major focus of the project has been on developing teachers’ understanding of and confidence in the basic approach, and on building strong collaborative relationships with school districts and First Nations communities. Hence this paper will concentrate on the design of the project, the ways in which project teachers translate theory into action in their classrooms, and the kinds of intervention and support that appear most likely to facilitate lasting changes in thinking and practice. Assessment of the effects of this approach on student engagement and learning will be addressed in the future, as will the question of how successful practices might be integrated within school district culture in the long term.

IMAGINATION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Before describing the design of the project in detail, it may be helpful to outline the central ideas about teaching and learning that it is designed to test and refine.

Contrary to the widespread belief that children's understanding begins with the simple, concrete, and familiar, evidence suggests that even young children learn through imaginative engagement with the complex, abstract, and unfamiliar (Egan, 1986; 1988; 1990; 1992). Evidence also supports the idea that the nature of this engagement develops and changes as children pick up ways of thinking, speaking and acting that are prevalent in their cultural environment. This notion of learning as culturally mediated activity was first elaborated by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (e.g. Vygotsky, 1962; 1978); more recently, Egan has developed a detailed account of the changes in children's imaginative engagement as they acquire first oral, then written language, and eventually come to acquire the sophisticated tools of theoretical analysis that are central to academic practice (Egan, 1997). Most crucially for the present research, Egan has also suggested ways in which this approach to thinking about learning can be applied to classroom teaching in virtually any context.

Space precludes a detailed presentation of Egan's theory here, but a brief example can be given of the kind of insights it yields and its consequences for educational practice. In the case of young children, before they become literate, some of the basic "tools" normally present in their oral culture include a strong sense of story-shaping, remarkable metaphorical abilities, perception and mediation of binary opposites, a sense of rhyme, rhythm, and patterning, appreciation of jokes and humor, prompt generation of mental images from words, and some others (Egan, 1986; 1988; 1997). All of these tools are routinely used in the stories and games that engage children at this stage, but they are rarely used to teach the curriculum (with some exceptions, such as in Waldorf schools: Nielsen, 2004). Arguing that this neglects some of the most powerful and meaningful cognitive abilities available to learners in

elementary classrooms, Egan has designed planning frameworks for teachers that make the use of these tools central to their everyday practice.

To make use of the cognitive tools just mentioned, for instance, teachers might begin by “locating wonder”: “What is emotionally engaging about the topic? How can it evoke wonder? Why should it matter to us?” This sense of wonder can then be used to build a story that dramatizes the topic and links it to memorable images, emotions, and children’s abstract understanding of the world. The unit can be planned so that children participate actively in the creation and resolution of the story. As children’s understanding develops and changes, Egan’s frameworks likewise change to match their passions and abilities; but the central theme is always one of imaginative engagement with what is marvelous and meaningful, often in connection with the history of human thought and culture. In recent work by Egan and his colleagues, this approach to teaching and learning has been dubbed “imaginative education” (cf. www.ierg.net). Educators in a number of countries have used these ideas with success in a variety of teaching contexts (e.g. Armstrong, Connelly and Saville, 1994; McKenzie and Fettes, 2002), but no large-scale implementation project has been reported in the literature.

In culturally diverse settings, as in school districts with high numbers of Aboriginal learners, imaginative education holds some particularly intriguing possibilities. Unlike many widespread philosophies of teaching, imaginative education makes no particular assumptions about the cultural backgrounds of learners. Instead, it requires teachers to attend to the emotional lives of their students, and to look for the real cognitive strengths that children bring to school. Students from predominantly oral cultures, for instance, may have abilities of understanding and language use that are barely tapped in pedagogies oriented to text-based literacy. Students who do not have a strong language background of any kind, owing to social and familial dysfunction, may require a rich oral experience in school in order to acquire the basis for literacy later on. Imaginative education seeks to keep children’s oral

abilities, and the kinds of understanding that accompany them, alive and developing throughout the school-age years.

By focusing attention on emotional and intellectual engagement, imaginative education addresses one of the central issues for at-risk students: their perception of education as irrelevant, boring, or incomprehensible. But it also invites teachers to examine their own beliefs and practices. The challenge of locating wonder and beauty in familiar academic topics can help teachers find new energy and enthusiasm for their work. As their conception of the curriculum shifts, from static authoritative knowledge to a treasure-trove of facts, concepts, images, and stories for engaging the imagination, they may gain greater interest in and respect for the accomplishments of unfamiliar cultures. They may even come to see ways of integrating such cultural content – Aboriginal, for instance – within the mainstream academic curriculum.

The LUCID project, then, set out both to test the viability of imaginative education in diverse classroom settings, and to develop it further in the context of a university-school district-First Nations partnership. To accomplish this, a highly collaborative staged research design was adopted, which itself is worth describing in some detail.

BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

In designing the study, the SFU research team sought out B.C. school districts with high proportions of Aboriginal children, who had developed Education Agreements and collaborative decision-making arrangements with First Nations, and who also had previous experience of working with the Faculty of Education. Also desired was a diversity of social and cultural settings in order to learn more about the impact of factors outside the school on the implementation process. In each district, the project sought out an experienced educator with strong ties to both the school district and

the First Nations community, to serve on a part-time seconded basis as the local Project Leader. A local District Advisory Council was also formed, with participation from parents, administrators, teachers, and other community members, in order to guide the implementation of the project and the interpretation and dissemination of research results in each district.

This research design is in keeping with the objectives of the Community-University Research Alliances Program (CURA) of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which funds the project. The CURA program was established to encourage universities to involve community organizations in the conception, design, implementation and interpretation of research. In this way, it is hoped to ensure that research results are relevant to practice, and that a significant part of the knowledge generated through research is held and used by community members. Some two-thirds of the project budget go directly to the three districts involved in the form of salaries and teacher replacement costs. Most of the rest is used to support student researchers and travel to and from the districts, with a final part being used for dissemination at the provincial, national, and international levels. So far, this design has proven to be highly effective in developing strong collaboration within and between districts.

School District 33 (Chilliwack)

Chilliwack School District 33 is located in and around a city of 86,000 people in the Upper Fraser Valley, one of the fastest growing regions in British Columbia. The district has over 11,500 students, of whom 1,350 (11.7%) are Aboriginal. Most of the First Nation children belong to one of seven Bands (Tzeachten, Squiala, Yakwekwioose, Aitchelitz, Skwah, Skway, and Cheam) who are (or were, until a recent political split) among the 24 members of the Stó:lo Nation.

Many important developments in First Nations education have taken place in Chilliwack over the last ten years. The district offers a Halq'emeylem language program and has three full time First

Nations Kindergartens, an alternative program for at-risk Aboriginal youth, an adult education program, and First Nation support workers in all the schools. In 1998, the district entered into a formal education agreement with the Stó:lo to work together on curriculum development, student placement, assessment and discipline, hiring of cross-culturally sensitive staff, family involvement, and other measures to facilitate greater success of the First Nations learner. A district-wide focus on literacy initiatives has included programs to involve First Nations families in their children's learning. Although there have been improvements in retention rates and academic achievement, there is still concern for high dropout rates (particularly for boys), over-representation in modified programs, and a stubborn gap in grade scores.

The Project Leader in Chilliwack is Brenda Point, a Metis educator who married into a well-known Stolo family. Members of the District Advisory Board include associate superintendent Michael Audet and Stolo education coordinator Joan Adams. Eight teachers are involved in the first phase of the project, drawn from Cultus Lake, Bernard and Evans elementary schools, and the on-reserve Seabird Island Community School.

School District 50 (Queen Charlotte/Haida Gwaii)

Queen Charlotte/Haida Gwaii School District 50 is located on the Queen Charlotte Islands off the northeastern coast of British Columbia. The total population of the islands is only 5,500, located in half-a-dozen small communities, primarily on the northern island (Graham Island). The Haida Nation makes up about 40% of the inhabitants of the islands, but Haida children presently constitute 56% of the school enrollment and this proportion looks likely to increase further in response to the economic difficulties of the region.

Despite the high proportion of Haida learners, neither the school district nor the Haida Nation has a long history of Aboriginal educational initiatives; an educational/accountability contract between

the partners was concluded only in 2003. The project was brought to Haida Gwaii by its Project Leader, Vonnie Hutchingson. A former teacher, principal, Director of First Nation Education Services in Prince Rupert, and Director of Aboriginal Education for the B.C. Ministry of Education, Hutchingson took up the newly created post of Director of Haida Education in 2001. Under her guidance, the project has recruited teachers (eight in all) in all five on-island schools with significant numbers of Haida students: Sk'aadgaa Naay and Tahayghen elementary schools, Queen Charlotte and G.M. Dawson high schools, and the small Band school in Old Massett, Chief Matthews. District superintendent Mike Woods and Masset educator Florence Lockyer are among the members of the District Advisory Board.

School District 52 (Prince Rupert)

Prince Rupert School District 52 is centred on a town of 14,000 on the northern B.C. coast, long an important regional hub for the fishing and forestry industries, but currently suffering an economic decline. The district has nearly 2,000 students, more than half of whom are Aboriginal, drawn principally from the Tsimshian Nation but including children from the neighbouring Nisga'a, Gitksan, Haida and Haisla First Nations. The project's principal community partner in Prince Rupert is the district's office of First Nation Educational Services (FNES) and its director Debbie Leighton-Stephens. Since its inception a decade ago, FNES has accumulated an impressive track record in curriculum and program development, and currently enjoys strong support from both the district school board and the Tsimshian Nation.

Among the innovative programs developed by FNES are a First Nations Elementary Program in grades 4-7, intended to help children who are lagging two grade levels or more behind their peers to catch up before they enter high school; and a S'malgyax language program offered in grades 5-12 in the urban schools and K-7 in the village schools (Kitkatla, Hartley Bay and Metlakatla). An integrated

Learning Package (IRP) has been developed and approved for S'malgyax to meet high school graduation second language requirements. FNES has also developed a range of high-quality literacy materials that reflect Tsimshian culture and identity, and provided the schools with an extensive selection of children's books by Aboriginal authors from across North America. Aboriginal home-school support workers are assigned to all the schools. Over the same period FNES has collaborated closely with SFU in organizing three successive intakes into a five-year B.Ed/teaching certificate program with a focus on Aboriginal learners.

The seconded Project Leader position in Prince Rupert is held by Susan Crowley, a senior district teacher who completed her Master's degree in First Nations Education with SFU. In practice, Crowley and Leighton-Stephens collaborate on all important project decisions. Seven teachers are involved in the first phase, at Roosevelt, Seal Cove, and Lax Kxeen elementary schools, along with two district teachers in the Sm'algyax language program and one teacher at Prince Rupert Secondary. The District Advisory Council includes members such as Brian Kangas, recently appointed as district superintendent, and Linda Porte, the principal of Lax Kxeen. The First Nations Education Council has also been actively involved in an advisory role.

A spectrum of settings

Taken together, the three project districts share the broad political and institutional framework of public education in British Columbia. Financial and decision-making structures, policies, curriculum, administrator and teacher preparation are recognizably similar. While schools differ significantly from one another, these limits on institutional diversity make it feasible to compare findings across sites, and increase the likelihood of one school or district learning from another's successes or failures.

Notably, the districts come close to representing the full spectrum of urban settlement in BC, ranging from small towns of 2,000 people in Haida Gwaii, to the regional centre of Prince Rupert, with about 14,000 residents, to the small city of Chilliwack with a population of over 80,000. Only the metropolitan inner city is not represented, presenting as it does a quite distinct social and political context for Aboriginal and multicultural education, with no First Nation community partner comparable to those involved in this project. Acknowledging this exception, however, the study may be expected to provide insights that are relevant to the majority of school districts throughout B.C., and to many others across Canada and elsewhere.

The three districts also represent close to the full spectrum of accommodation to Aboriginal children currently found in B.C. public schools. Accommodation is lowest in Haida Gwaii, and highest in Prince Rupert, with Chilliwack falling somewhere in the middle. This range of settings is expected to yield significant insights into the conditions for successful implementation of culturally inclusive imaginative education in the schools. Such knowledge will be invaluable for assessing the viability of the approach in other settings.

The initial focus across all the sites is in grades 4-7. These are the years in which children come face-to-face with the demands of the academic curriculum, with its characteristic and often alienating forms of oral and textual performance, abstract reasoning and symbolic manipulation. The disciplinary boundaries between subjects are not as rigid in elementary schools, allowing greater scope for innovative curricula and teaching practices. As the project proceeds, it is planned to include teachers in the early years of high school, to begin to address a transition that proves a critical hurdle for many Aboriginal students. In fact, this has already begun to take place, in ways described below.

THE CHALLENGE OF PROFESSIONAL TRANSFORMATION

The research strategy is to begin on a small scale in schools and classrooms that exemplify the challenges to be addressed, and later expand, in the last two years of the project, to involve a greater range of schools and teachers. The initial challenge has been to find ways of introducing teachers to imaginative education that are compatible with their busy professional lives and with the sets of values and commitments they bring to teaching. As the literature on educational change attests (e.g. Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991; Bascia and Hargreaves, 2000), this is no easy task. The initial project timeline foresaw a six-month period of workshops and other in-service work, followed by progressive classroom implementation in the first full school year (2004-2005). At a wrap-up session in July 2004, at the end of the introductory phase, teachers were enthusiastic and energized. “I’ll never be able to teach in the same way again,” was an attitude expressed by several. Yet seven weeks later, as the new school year began, it became evident just how much work remained to be done.

Many of the teachers, it turned out, were still not confident that they had sufficiently grasped the basic principles to know whether they were “doing it right”. Faced with the uncertainties of a new group of students and the workload of a new school year, they were reluctant to let go of what they knew. Others, despite good intentions, found it difficult to sit down and plan “imaginative” units in the limited time available. One teacher who embarked wholeheartedly on transforming her classroom into a traditional First Nation village found it hard to maintain control and direction in the face of the students’ varying enthusiasms. No one followed up on the university’s offer to pair teachers with graduate students or faculty who might provide an additional pair of eyes, a planning partner, or a sounding board. For some months, very little classroom work related to the project took place.

In response, the project undertook two major new initiatives. Project Leaders began to convene regular meetings of project teachers, both in school hours (with the project covering replacement

teachers costs) and after school. In each district, the meetings took on somewhat different forms that emerged from a complex interaction of personalities, district history, and the particular combinations of grade levels and subject areas in each group. In Chilliwack, teachers met in turns at the different schools; one of the earliest developments was the establishment of partnerships between district teachers and teachers at the Band school on Seabird Island. In Prince Rupert, the Project Leaders organized a series of workshops on themes such as the use of narrative, teachers as researchers, and Aboriginal worldviews. The LUCID teachers at one school joined a provincial network for teacher-directed inquiry, the B.C. Network of Performance-Based Schools, in order to pursue research into student engagement and how to assess it. In Haida Gwaii, the Project Leader got teachers working on a series of curriculum units inspired by the Bill Reid sculpture “The Black Canoe,” as discussed in greater detail below.

As the district teams took on form and direction, the SFU team developed and got approval for a two-year Master of Education program to be offered in conjunction with the project. The Faculty of Education had successfully run similar programs in various areas of B.C throughout the previous decade, including one in Prince Rupert with a focus on First Nations education. By January, 2005, a total of 19 educators in Haida Gwaii and Prince Rupert had registered for the program, and the first five-credit course was team-taught in the districts, from January to April, by the LUCID director Mark Fettes and a colleague from SFU’s Imaginative Education Research Group, Sean Blenkinsop. Eight of the 19 M.Ed. students were LUCID teachers, and the course proved invaluable for deepening their understanding and confidence regarding imaginative education. At the same time, the inclusion of other students, with backgrounds in such areas as high school teaching and counseling, began to lay the groundwork for expanding the project to new grades and schools in a later phase.

In the limited space afforded here, it is impossible to summarize all of the insights and conclusions that emerged in this first course. Through the interactive teaching process, a distinctive model of culturally inclusive imaginative education began to take shape, more closely tailored to the perceptions and needs of teachers in diverse classrooms than previous descriptions had been. New connections were discovered between Egan's work and that of other writers, notably art teacher Virginia Jagla (*Teachers' Everyday Use of Imagination and Intuition*, 1994) and indigenous educator Gregory Cajete (*Igniting the Sparkle*, 1999). Most significantly, LUCID teachers began to express some of their own creativity in the planning and teaching of curriculum units. Three examples of the latter are given here; more will shortly be available on the LUCID website, www.ierg.net/lucid/.

A Time For ... Ha'li

One of the most inspiring pieces of work that came out of the course was created by two Prince Rupert teachers: Colleen Pudsey, who teaches Grade 7 in an elementary school with a predominantly Aboriginal student body, and Raegan Sawka, who teaches a special Grade 8 class in the local high school for students designated "at risk." Having witnessed increases in student enthusiasm and effort in more modest imaginative units, these two teachers decided to develop an imaginative framework for the entire school year, taking as their starting point the local First Nation (Ts'msyen) calendar. Each month in the calendar is designated as "A time for..." some important seasonal activity: gathering foods, feasting, preparing for winter, welcoming the returning salmon.... From these activities, Pudsey and Sawka extracted a series of transcendent themes, progressing from "respect, responsibility, courage" in the first months of the year to "ingenuity, tenacity, self-reliance" in the closing months. They then sought out related themes in the provincial Grade 7 science curriculum. The result was a year divided into five main "phases" of 1-2 months each: Clans and Crests, Creation, Feasting, Energy, and Survival, tied to the rhythm of the seasons and of community life, and punctuated by celebratory

events to mark the transition from one theme to another. Ultimately, they intend to integrate the entire curriculum in this overall framework.

The Spirit of Haida Gwaii

As mentioned earlier, the Bill Reid sculpture “The Black Canoe,” now featured on the Canadian \$20 bill, provided a valuable focus for the LUCID teachers on Haida Gwaii. The sculpture depicts a large group of mythological beings, drawn primarily from Haida traditions, paddling a canoe towards an unknown destination. Interesting tensions become apparent when one examines the sculpture closely: male creatures look off in one direction, females in another; the Wolf is biting the Eagle, who retaliates by attacking the Bear; the commanding central figure of the Chief contrasts with the small human paddler Reid dubbed “the Ancient Reluctant Conscript,” and with the cowering form of Mouse Woman. Grade 8 teacher Leslie Puley used this image as a metaphor for her students’ high school years, getting them to read, discuss and write on the diversity of characters in the canoe/classroom and on the multiplicity of possible futures awaiting them. In the culminating assignment, students chose a character from the sculpture that held special appeal for them and composed a portfolio that included a description, resume, poem, and achievement award.

Theme Wizardry

Inclusive imaginative units need not have an explicit Aboriginal focus, as another unit from the same teacher illustrates. Pondering how to engage her students emotionally with the key concept of “theme,” Puley came up with the image of a wise person, sage, or shaman, listening to a complex story and responding with a single wise phrase that made its central meaning clear. She then developed a unit in which students were asked to prove their aptitude for “wizardry” by demonstrating their

ability to identify and justify themes in a series of texts. Students initially worked with accounts of everyday events, then with a novel the class was reading together, and finally with novels they were reading individually. As a culminating activity, students used their understanding of theme to produce a poster promoting their individual novel. The unit proved remarkably effective at engaging a reluctant class: When Puley ended the lesson early one day, she was met with a chorus of protest: “What about our wizardry points?”

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As a result of this first year of implementation, the project has now accumulated a much wider range of ideas and examples to help train teachers in culturally inclusive imaginative education. This body of knowledge is now being brought together in a book, *Inclusion through Imagination*, that will play an important role in the second half of the project. Unit plans will also be added to the LUCID website, providing a growing body of ideas and resources for educators interested in adapting this approach to their own context.

The school year 2005-2006 will see the first consistent use of culturally inclusive imaginative education in some project classrooms. Even as the project continues to work with teachers on ways to apply and elaborate the central principles in classroom practice, it will begin to track student engagement and learning through observations, interviews, and new kinds of assessment. Of particular interest is whether this approach leads to lasting gains in student understanding, knowledge, and motivation, and whether such changes can be observed in all students in these classrooms.

At the same time, the project will take the first steps towards involving more teachers and schools. Additional funds will be sought to support curriculum development specific to individual districts: for instance, very few materials related to the Haida or to the history of Haida Gwaii are

currently available in that school district except in the form of expensive trade books. Planning will start on ways of making this approach sustainable in districts, for instance by integrating it within the professional development process, and in Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements. The creative tension between discovering what works best for individual teachers and students, and what is consistently successful across classrooms, school, and districts, ensures that the project will continue to be both challenging and rewarding for all concerned.

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