

## Accountability and Aboriginal Education: Dilemmas, Promises and Challenges

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Aboriginal knowledge and teaching have relevance for both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal communities. Unfortunately, many recent attempts have also come with increased emphasis on 'accountability' mechanisms; namely, an increased emphasis on measuring student success. This article examines Saskatchewan, which as a province where approximately 20% of its school-aged children are Aboriginal, offers an interesting insight into placing Aboriginal knowledge in schools. The province has recognized Aboriginal rightfulness of place in the curriculum and has built policy on four key components in conjunction with First Nations input. These policies are: 1) Aboriginal peoples have the right to participate in the co-management of the education system, 2) There exists differences in the learning styles between Aboriginal children and non-Aboriginal children, 3) There is ongoing cooperation between federal and provincial levels to meet the needs of Aboriginal students, and 4) There are programs at the community level to improve the success of Aboriginal students.

While the province has been largely successful in implementing a wide variety of programs within the education system, there are still a variety of systemic barriers to Aboriginal knowledge in the classroom, including a lack of Aboriginal knowledge on the part of non-Aboriginal teachers. Furthermore, socioeconomic issues such as a lack of graduation, low grades and a lack of gainful employment among Aboriginal youth persist despite these measures.

The Saskatchewan government has aimed at solving these issues by encouraging all schools to ramp up their 'accountability' measures (as elsewhere in Canada). Unfortunately, the narrow terms of accountability – including standardized testing, an ethic of competitiveness, academic achievement and a 'dominant culture' worldview – are often in direct contrast to the Aboriginal emphasis on learning. This is problematic as the accountability rationale posits that progress in socioeconomic status is in direct relation to high achievement scores; a relationship that is not necessarily cause-and-effect. Achievement tests also place an inordinate amount of value on quantifiable subjects – such as math and science – and place less emphasis on critical thinking and creative skills. Lastly, these accountability measures have the potential to increase stigmatization of Aboriginal students and place increased stress on teachers' practices. This environment is one that does not bode well for creating a foundation of trust in the classroom, so necessary in the context of the Aboriginal experience.

Placing Aboriginal content into the high school curriculums have across the country been undertaken as a kind of additive approach – sometimes referred to as 'tokenism' – within the current Eurocentric curriculum. This article argues for the teaching of Aboriginal education as holistic knowledge: epistemology, philosophy and scientific reasoning. This includes "a focus on relationships, patterns, and processes, particularly the interconnections and inter-dependence among all living beings (p.17)." These concepts, focusing on the spiritual 'whole' stand in marked contrast to Western dichotomies of good and evil, natural vs. human, and much more. Aboriginal content has much value in offering alternative insights into the classroom, into learning process and practices, and into creating a more willingly-holistic and sustainability-focused high school graduate.