

Accountability and Aboriginal education: Dilemmas, Promises and Challenges
Summary and Critique by Gatlin Saip, EDCP 333

Bouvier, R. & Karlenzig, B. (2006). Accountability and Aboriginal education: Dilemmas, promises and challenges. *Our Schools, Our Selves*, 15(3), 15-33.

Bouvier and Karlenzig's article entitled "Accountability and Aboriginal Education; Dilemmas, Promises and Challenges" addresses many of the challenges inherent in a synthesis of Western educational ideals and Aboriginal values. In an attempt to be inclusive of Aboriginal cultural practices and Indigenous knowledge in the classroom, some educational programs have unknowingly undermined these very practices by emphasizing mechanisms of accountability that repudiate Aboriginal education. In the Western academic tradition, accountability is often sought through an increase in summative assessment and standardized testing; in Aboriginal culture however, accountability structures and strategies come in less rigid forms.

The article focuses its attention on the province of Saskatchewan, which is among the highest in its Aboriginal population in schools. In that province, roughly one in five students in schools are Aboriginal, which means teachers are confronted head-on with Aboriginal forms of knowledge and education. The province of Saskatchewan has taken significant steps to recognize the importance of Aboriginal knowledge in the school classroom. They have done this in consultation with various First Nations groups and individuals who have contributed to the institution of new policies and practices. These include:

- recognizing the value of Aboriginal input in schools
- acknowledging that Aboriginal children learn in ways that are fundamentally different from non-Aboriginal students
- promoting collaboration between provincial and federal institutions to serve Aboriginal students
- creating programs to ensure Aboriginal students succeed and thrive in school.

Bouvier and Karlenzig, while recognizing Saskatchewan's steps toward inclusive policy, do point out the ineffectiveness of these policies to ratify the challenges Aboriginal students face throughout their schooling. This failure, they argue, is due to an increase in standardized methods of assessment aimed at raising the level of accountability in schools. These methods of accountability are narrow and rigid, and are not representative of the creativity and critical problem solving skills many Aboriginal students possess in great measure, but instead ascribe greater value to traditional academic skills, such as literacy, science, and mathematics. Measures taken to incorporate Aboriginal knowledge are seen as secondary or supplementary to existing

curriculum; a more integrative approach is needed if Aboriginal knowledge is to be given primacy in school classrooms, and if Aboriginal students are to experience success in school.

The fundamental issue I see with Bouvier and Karlenzig's article is in their seeming advocacy of an approach to schooling that is shaped profoundly by Aboriginal forms of knowledge; these form of knowledge in and of themselves are neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but they may not be applicable to all kinds of students in a "one-size-fits-all" approach, though Aboriginal students are in dire need of greater advocacy and representation in educational settings. Perhaps the forms of knowledge represented in Aboriginal communities are suitable for full integration into the classroom (not simply addition), but need not be given primacy in directing the education of all students. In some cultures, different theories and forms of knowledge are constructed and perpetuated; Aboriginal culture tends to give preference to those that are more 'holistic' or 'all-encompassing' in nature, advocating a worldview that is centered on relational and inter-connected values. Western tradition typically values components above the whole, and constructs categories and genres in which to conceptualize knowledge and ideals. Neither of these conceptual frameworks is superior to another; both are worthy of representation and integration in school.