

ABORIGINAL  
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT  
AND ACHIEVEMENT  
EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AND  
CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

Lorenzo Cherubini

Foreword by Lyn Trudeau



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## Foreword

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It is late summer as I write this foreword. Before long, the tell-tale signs of autumn will be upon us. A cool breeze touches my skin, telling of change; new energy will soon be ushered in with the coming of a new season. I sit as Wind rustles softly ... It is a good time to give voice to this work.

In many ways, this work displays a beautiful growth of Spirit. This growth stems from our Aboriginal communities reaching out to collaborate with Western educational authorities in order to make old dreams new realities: our students, at least in the program and school featured in this book, are now receiving instruction that is culturally rooted and that nurtures a true sense of our identity, of who we inherently are. This book also speaks to holistic education by providing a thought-provoking analysis that takes a fresh look at what *is* working for Aboriginal youth as opposed to the all too often negative focus on what is not working.

Lorenzo Cherubini gets to the heart of what Aboriginal education seeks to be. He offers a holistic approach and takes into consideration all the concerns that the Aboriginal learner needs to see addressed. He shows an understanding of, and a reverence for, our traditional ways, and it is due to a mutual respect that his works are able to move forward and be rewarding for all those involved. Dr. Cherubini has taken the time to be mindful of our practices and to forge good relationships with all the communities that played a role in this research endeavour. It has been a pleasure working alongside someone who welcomes our ways of knowing and encourages the

harmonious inclusion of all knowledges. Work that not only involves but also revolves around our teachings is always worth pursuing.

This work displays:

Strength of Courage ...

Strength of Weakness ...

Strength of Good Medicine ...

Many peoples, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, gave selflessly of their time to develop and initiate positive stratagems to implement in the learning environment, thereby affording our Aboriginal youth a safe place to receive instruction and to learn. Only when we can identify and reflect on our weaknesses and areas of concern can we move forward with wisdom and insight. It is from this place that new strength and power is drawn. Good Medicine in Aboriginal culture is meant to speak to sources of healing and overall goodness and wellness. Medicines are received, given, and enacted.

This book speaks to educators, parents, community members, and policy makers alike and shows what can happen when we listen to one another and work together to create better learning environments and communities for all our children: engaging the Spirit engages the mind.

Wind has come to visit today, and for this I am thankful. Wind is a powerful spirit that echoes across all lands carrying the voice of our ancient ones, prayers to the open skies, and even carrying the power of change. Today Wind carries this Good Medicine towards a transformative season for Aboriginal youth in the realm of education.

All my relations,  
Lyn Trudeau,  
Ojibway, Eagle Clan

## Introduction

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Canadian public education is experiencing decreases in enrolments and increases in school closures. School-aged Aboriginal children are one of the few growing demographics within education, with one in five children being Aboriginal and 70 percent of the Canadian population now living in urban centres. Combined with the recent call for greater transparency, ministries of education across Canada are being asked to account for the dismal levels of completion rates, specifically among the Aboriginal student population. This has contributed to various federal and provincial initiatives, and yet the increase in graduation rates across the country has been less than impressive. This book is a partial response to these inconsistencies.

One wonders to what degree colonialism still exists in provincially funded education in Ontario. A central theme of *Aboriginal Student Engagement and Achievement* concerns the fact that the schooling experiences of Aboriginal students are affected by colonialist factors that continue to marginalize them within public school culture. As Kanu (2011) suggests, formal education and Eurocentric scholarly practices promote and validate the knowledge paradigms of dominant groups. Despite various educational reforms intent on changing these experiences for Aboriginal students, public school classrooms often continue to typify Eurocentric educational principles, which fail to recognize the legitimacy of Aboriginal epistemologies or to adequately incorporate them into curricula. As Tharp et al. (1999, 15) suggest, there have been “waves of well-intentioned but misguided reform

fads that have failed precisely because they are disconnected from the educational needs” of Indigenous students and so have resulted in “new rounds of discouragement.” For the most part, educational systems have not accounted for Aboriginal students’ learning styles and preferences, nor have they defined students’ academic progress according to meaningful and culturally appropriate benchmarks (Garcia 2008). Moreover, institutions responsible for teacher education in Canada and the United States have generally not paid adequate attention to the crisis of publicly funded education as it relates to Aboriginal and American Indian/Alaska Native children. Prospective teachers do not have the same awareness of the needs of Aboriginal students as they do of the needs of mainstream students, and, for this reason, they are unable to create culturally relevant learning environments for the former (Allington 2002; Reyhner and Hurtado 2008). Apart from Manitoba, no province or territory in Canada requires coursework in Aboriginal education for credentialing its teachers. Against this background, *Aboriginal Student Engagement and Achievement* tells a poignant story of how one school created a holistic and integrated educational space for Aboriginal students – a space that enabled the creation of a critical consciousness very much grounded in Aboriginal spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical realities.

It should be noted that the word “Aboriginal” includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis as the three main groups of peoples in Canada as per the Constitution Act, 1982. Although I refer to Aboriginal students, learners, communities, and worldviews throughout this book, this is not meant to negate the fact that each group is separate and unique in its traditions, cultures, and histories (see Kanu 2011). Equally significant is the fact that the word “Aboriginal” is used in the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education 2007, 36), which defines Aboriginal peoples as “[t]he descendents of the original inhabitants of North America. Section 35(2) of the Constitution Act, 1982, states: ‘In this Act, “Aboriginal peoples of Canada” includes the Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada.’ These separate groups have unique heritages, languages, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs. Their common link is their indigenous ancestry.”

This book considers the current literature related to Aboriginal public education in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere and – through a detailed discussion of recent governmental policy and social and cultural trends related to Aboriginal education in Ontario and Canada – presents a story of change. The book shares a number of stories related to an inner-city

Aboriginal community that conceptualized and implemented a comprehensive response to the educational needs of Aboriginal learners, and it includes a number of key perspectives related to the Aboriginal Student Program (ASP) that can be helpful to other Aboriginal communities, boards of education, school administrators, educators, and policy makers as they envision their responses both to provincial policies and to the needs of Aboriginal students. What follows in the stories within the story of the ASP at Soaring Heights Secondary School (SHSS) is an exploration of multiple perspectives on Aboriginal education within a mainstream secondary school. They include observations on program reports and surveys as well as the narrative experiences of female and male Aboriginal students attending SHSS, school and program administrators, youth counsellors, parents, various non-Aboriginal faculty members working in the ASP, and the elder involved in the program. The respective narratives are framed in the voices of the participants themselves so that their stories can speak to the truths both of the ASP and of their experiences in it.

The stories of the various participants help us to understand how Aboriginal students internalize a sense of where they fit in the mainstream school culture in light of their own traditions, culture, and epistemologies. *Aboriginal Student Engagement and Achievement*, in many respects, addresses Briggs's (2005, 20) recommendation that scholarly evidence must resonate with policy makers and practitioners alike by addressing "what has worked and what will work." The intention is not to discredit the valiant efforts of educators, nor is it to suggest that educational and school policy is intentionally inattentive to epistemic diversity; rather, it is to contribute to evidence-based reform in educational circles within and beyond the Province of Ontario as a way of Indigenizing public school curricula. I concur with Slavin (2007), who concludes that educators and policy makers will more readily consult with educational research before making significant decisions about programs and practices when that research is evidence-based. This book, which in many ways is a narrative, invites you to consider the evidence provided by the socio-cultural location of Aboriginal students in the ASP at SHSS – evidence that indicates how they broadened their spiritual, traditional, and epistemic horizons. Ultimately, the discussions bring to light exemplary educational practices for Aboriginal peoples and indicate how teachers, school administrators, school communities, and educational policy makers can participate in sustaining these across schools and communities.