



## *Working With Aboriginal Children and Families: Cultural Responsiveness and Beyond*



## *Le travail avec les enfants et les familles autochtones : l'adaptation à la culture et au-delà*

### KEY WORDS

CULTURAL COMPETENCE

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

FIRST PEOPLES OF CANADA

SOCIAL JUSTICE

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### Abstract

Cultural responsiveness is often evoked as an ideal to which service providers for Aboriginal peoples in Canada should aspire. In this paper, the author reviews concepts and approaches related to cultural responsiveness in the literature in the field of education, pointing out how these are parallel with or might further inform practices in communication sciences and disorders (CSD). The drawbacks of approaches focused on cultural responsiveness are also identified, and a complementary or alternate focus on social and economic justice for Aboriginal peoples is discussed and advised.

### Abrégé

L'adaptation culturelle est souvent évoquée comme un idéal auquel devraient aspirer les pourvoyeurs de services pour les peuples autochtones du Canada. Dans cette communication l'auteure passe en revue des concepts et des approches, dans la littérature, qui ont trait à l'adaptation culturelle dans le domaine de l'éducation en faisant ressortir à quel point ceux-ci sont parallèles aux pratiques ayant cours dans les sciences et les troubles de la communication (CSD – communication sciences and disorders) ou pourraient davantage donner forme à ces pratiques. Les inconvénients des approches orientées sur l'adaptation culturelle sont également identifiés, et une orientation complémentaire ou alternative sur la justice sociale et économique envers les peuples autochtones est discutée et conseillée.

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### Working with Aboriginal Children and Families: Cultural Responsiveness and Beyond

In response to a recent survey about speech, language, and hearing services in Canadian Aboriginal communities, speech-language pathologists (S-LPs) largely agreed that novel approaches are needed to better serve Aboriginal children (Ball & Lewis, 2011). One of the needs expressed by survey respondents was greater awareness of cultural patterns of language and communication to inform both assessment and intervention. Such awareness might be considered an aspect of cultural competence, identified as an important feature of service delivery to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples (Bernhardt et al., 2011; Zeidler, 2011). A recent report on speech, language, and hearing services for Aboriginal people (Speech-Language & Audiology Canada, 2010) also identified cultural competence as a desirable outcome for clinicians. The report appealed to a definition provided by British Columbia's First Nations Health Council (FNHC). According to the FNHC (2009), cultural competency involves not only having knowledge about other cultures but also taking actions which "positively influence and even fundamentally change the way a person or organization operates in order to improve outcomes" (p. 39).

As these reports demonstrate, cultural responsiveness (encompassed in cultural competency) is a central theme in discussions about service provision for Aboriginal children. In the present paper, I discuss culturally responsive instruction in education, introducing some of the ways such instruction is conceptualized and implemented, and drawing parallels between ideas and practices in education and communication sciences and disorders. In the final section I turn to a concern in both fields with 'larger' factors (often referred to as macrosystemic or macrostructural variables) influencing the lives of Aboriginal adults and children.

My interest in the educational literature stems partly from my work experience. Trained as an S-LP, I initially practiced in schools (including local Mohawk schools), and went on to become a university instructor in education, initially teaching occasional courses to Mohawk and Cree preservice teachers and now teaching in an education department, primarily to students who are not Aboriginal. Perspectives within the educational field should be of interest to S-LPs contemplating how best to approach services for Aboriginal children. Familiarity with the literature from education may also help S-LPs achieve common ground with teachers and school administrators, and thus support the preventive, community-based approaches that S-LPs working with Aboriginal communities favour (Ball &

Lewis, 2011) and have been recommended within the field (SAC, 2010). Finally, reading widely and across disciplines allows breadth, which I believe is needed for S-LPs to work successfully with Aboriginal children and families and to advocate for services as needed.

It would be helpful for the reader to know that some of the discussion about the cultural responsiveness of teachers and educational institutions is embedded in a literature on 'multicultural education'. This literature does not uniformly address the education of Aboriginal youth, partly reflecting the resistance of Aboriginal peoples to being situated in terms of multicultural policies (St. Denis, 2011). As Lawrence and Dua (2005) describe, many Aboriginal people experience "discomfort and ambivalence ... when official policies and discourses of multiculturalism and immigration obscure Native presence and divert attention from their realities" (p. 135). On the other hand, multicultural education is often used as an umbrella term for varied approaches, including approaches that are relevant to the education of Aboriginal children in that they call for changes to school curricula (Banks, 2009), in line with goals expressed by Aboriginal groups in Canada (Assembly of First Nations, 2011); have cultural preservation as their goal (Egbo, 2009), and thus tie in to language maintenance and revitalization efforts in Aboriginal communities (McIvor, 2009); or attend to racism and oppression (Naseem, 2011), which directly affect Aboriginal people (Fleras, 2012). Furthermore, approximately half of Aboriginal youth in Canada attend school in urban areas, most of which are now characterized by high levels of ethnic diversity (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2006). Teachers' and administrators' perceptions of and responses to cultural diversity in these contexts are thus pertinent.

### Changing School Curricula

Gérin-Lajoie (2011) contends that the prevailing view of culture amongst Canadian teachers and school principals is "folkloric". Others have referred to a "tourist view" of culture expressed in educational settings as short-lived involvement with foods, folklore, and festivals, all of which aim to be fun (York, 2003). One could argue that social events, music, and visual arts are a good and non-threatening way for children (and adults) to begin to learn about cultures other than their own. The concern expressed in educational circles is not about such 'initiations' per se, but rather about the depth and kinds of cultural knowledge that are ultimately needed to transform education so that it supports all children's success. Banks (2009), amongst others, argues that multicultural education must involve

not only integration of content reflective of students' ethnic origins, but also help students think critically about knowledge: how it is constructed, informed by values and beliefs, and often ethnocentric.

Aboriginal organizations in Canada (e.g., the Assembly of First Nations, 2011) have articulated the need for more substantial changes to curricula and some Aboriginal teachers have expressed frustration with insubstantial ones. As one teacher reported, "[w]hen non-Aboriginal teachers ask us to deal with Aboriginal issues, they expected us to make bannock ..." (St. Denis, 2010, as cited in St. Denis, 2011, p. 314). Another teacher explained that "[a] little content is allowed, nothing substantial, instead of counting sticks, they count buffalo and call that Aboriginal education" (St. Denis et al., 1998, as cited in St. Denis 2011, p. 314). In contrast with these superficial changes are suggestions for incorporating Aboriginal worldviews and values into the education of youth (Toulouse, 2008) and holistic frameworks for lifelong education proposed by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit groups (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). These frameworks inform us about the values some Aboriginal people have expressed as important in education, including a more holistic view of children, cooperation and communal spirit in learning environments, and an appreciation of spiritual connections amongst people and between people and the natural environment (see, in addition to the works cited above, Battiste, 2010 and Dei, 2011).

The integration of Aboriginal perspectives and languages to curricula for all children has been implemented to a limited extent. Examples include "treaty education", mandated by the Government of Saskatchewan for students from kindergarten to grade 12 (Tupper, 2011), and "Native Language" and "Native Studies" courses available to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Researchers have also made smaller-scale changes and studied their impact. Kanu (2007), for instance, studied learner outcomes in social studies classes attended by Aboriginal (described as Ojibway, Dene, Cree, Métis, and Sioux) and non-Aboriginal ninth graders. In one class, Kanu and the teacher collaborated to enrich the curriculum and pedagogy, incorporating elements identified by Aboriginal students as important to their own learning. In the other class, the teacher used the standard curriculum (involving limited Aboriginal content) and his usual teaching approach. Aboriginal students in the enriched class showed greater gains in knowledge, and, when interviewed, attributed their performance to both the curriculum and teaching methods.

Another example, with much younger participants, is reported in McIntosh et al. (2011). He and colleagues examined the effects of a language and early literacy program designed to be culturally appropriate for Aboriginal preschoolers, specifically, Nuuchahnulth First Nations. The program, an adaptation of the Moe the Mouse® Speech and Language Development Program, was delivered to all kindergarteners defined as 'at risk' based on language screenings. It resulted in gains in oral language for First Nations children as well as for the other children in the program. These studies, as well as others reviewed elsewhere (Baker, 2007), suggest that culturally responsive instruction has positive effects on learning, though the study designs rarely allow one to determine the effects of content changes and pedagogy separately.

Recommendations for the integration of Aboriginal perspectives and practices to curricula derive partly from cultural compatibility theory. Proponents of cultural compatibility theory propose, first, that all children learn "culturally approved" ways of thinking and acting through direct and implicit teaching, guided participation, and social interaction. For some children, however, the beliefs, values, and practices in the home and community differ from those expected at school; the home and school environments are incompatible (Tabachnik & Bloch, 1995) or discontinuous (Kanu, 2007). Compatibility theory predicts that home-school incompatibility will diminish academic achievement.

While cultural compatibility theory remains popular in education and other disciplines, the prediction does not hold universally (that is, home-school incompatibility and high academic achievement can co-occur) (Kanu, 2007), suggesting the theory is incomplete. Also, some claim that the notions of culture informing the theory are too static and lead to stereotyping (Tabachnik & Bloch, 1995). Tabachnik and Bloch also assert that cultural compatibility theory neglects social, political, and economic factors that determine who will succeed. Ways of addressing these concerns of stereotyping and neglect of the sociopolitical and economic context are elaborated below in turn.

### Developing Knowledge and Relationships

One of the challenges in developing culturally responsive education or services is diversity within groups. This challenge is particularly salient when thinking about Aboriginal people in Canada, who, in addition to being very diverse in terms of history, language, and other variables across communities (see Kay-Raining Bird, 2011 for a summary), vary further within groups (e.g., within even a single First Nation, one can expect significant diversity). Furthermore, if one defines culture too narrowly or equates

it too strictly with language, there is a risk of considering some Aboriginal children and/or adults as more “authentic” (i.e., as being more representative of their culture) than others. St. Denis (2007) explains how notions of authenticity relate to cultural revitalization, suggesting that revitalization can be a “double-edged sword” (p. 1078) for many Aboriginal teachers:

[Revitalization] has both a positive and negative potential - it can create a positive sense of identity and common cause, but it also applauds some and discounts others. This tension is poignantly evident in the example of Aboriginal teachers, some of whom are very knowledgeable of their cultural traditions and languages and many others who are not - and most often, not by their own choice (p. 1079-1080).

St. Denis also points out the difficulties of revitalization for some Aboriginal parents and grandparents, who “under very difficult colonial and racist conditions did their best to make good decisions for their children, [but] are now told they made the wrong decisions, and that they must now try to reverse language and cultural change” (p. 1078).

Scholars in education do not claim to have resolved the challenges associated with considering beliefs, values, practices, and language along cultural lines. The literature, however, does offer suggestions for how teachers (and by extension, other practitioners) might develop a more nuanced view of culture. Henze and Hauser (1999) suggest that teachers gain specific knowledge about individual students and families, and also increase their awareness of their own cultural context, beliefs, and practices (p. 2). Their second recommendation has been echoed in a number of disciplines (American Psychological Association, 2003; James, 2010; Kumagai & Lypson, 2009). It also informs the goals of a novel course designed to prepare S-LPs and audiologists to work with children and adults in Aboriginal communities, as indicated by learner objectives, such as “develop[ing] a sense of one’s own identities” and “[c]onsidering oneself in relation to ... First Nation, Métis, and Inuit people in Canada” (Bernhardt et al., 2011, p. 181).

Henze and Hauser (1999) also propose ways that teachers might bring their “implicit cultural perceptions” (p. 8) to the surface. They suggest that teachers observe activities and events in a specific cultural context and note their own interpretations, ideally followed by discussion with a “cultural interpreter” whose role is to elucidate what the activities and events might mean to the people involved in them. The procedures resemble those used in ethnography, a method widely used in educational research. Although still

relatively rare in communication sciences and disorders, ethnography has been used to explore Inuit mothers’ ways of socializing language (Crago, Annahatak, & Ningiuruviik, 1993) and Inuit teachers’ practices and beliefs regarding classroom discourse (Eriks-Brophy & Crago, 1994). More recently, Peltier (2010; see also this volume) integrated ethnographic methods by asking Anishinaabek (more specifically, Ojibway) adults to consider local children’s narratives in light of Anishinaabe oral traditions. While S-LPs might use elements of ethnography to inform their practice, the method requires considerable time and opportunities for observations and analysis, and would therefore likely work best for S-LPs that are non-itinerant and working long-term in a setting or community. However, even S-LPs with less extensive contact can reflect on their own perceptions and values and how they shape everyday interactions with children and families from various cultural groups.

In order for teachers to better know their students and their families, interviews of various kinds have also been proposed. These might be more feasible for S-LPs than extensive observations in homes and communities and can build on basic interviewing skills learned as part of clinical training. Henze and Hauser (1999), for example, suggest open-ended interviews of parents and family visits for learning about families’ “funds of knowledge”, a term originally coined by Moll to describe the knowledge and skills community members have and deem important to their “personal and cultural survival and well-being” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2001, p. 12).

Family stories have also been gathered in research projects and recommended as a means of deepening home-school relationships. In Hones (2000), preservice and in-service teachers wrote autobiographical stories of their own connections to language, culture, family, and education, and then connected them with stories shared voluntarily by immigrant families. As part of their research, Edwards and Turner (2010) used a semi-structured interview to elicit “parent stories” from African-American mothers about their child’s experiences at school, with previous teachers, and with literacy (the interview questions are provided).

Although not designed specifically with Aboriginal people in mind, the approaches for establishing dialogue as suggested in the educational literature can be adapted by S-LPs in consultation with the people in the communities in which they work. An example is Zeidler’s (2011) informal interviews of women of the Lil’wat Nation in British Columbia. In answer to just two questions (indicating that questions need not be numerous but, rather, important to

the interviewees), participants elaborated on the qualities and approaches they valued in professionals new to the community, including but not limited to an authentic interest in the place and the people.

Case studies reported in the research literature in education might also be used as a means for practitioners to reflect on other cultures and bring their own views and assumptions to light. For example, Cleghorn and Prochner (2010) used ethnographic methods to study three early childhood settings: an Aboriginal Head Start setting in a First Nations community in Canada, and preschools located in semi-rural towns in South Africa and India. The authors describe the curriculum, social relationships, materials, and organization of space and time in each setting, and consider how these features relate to local perspectives on what is good for children, as well as to “western-centric” (p. 127) views, reflected in government policy on education and language.

Case studies like these could be used to stimulate discussion amongst S-LPs ‘in training’ or undertaking professional development, or could serve as a starting point for dialogue between S-LPs and Aboriginal parents or educators about what each deems important in terms of children’s development and education.

In summary, observations, interviews, autobiographical stories, and case studies have been suggested to raise educators’ awareness of their own perspectives and biases, allow educators to get to know families and communities and identify their resources and strengths, and develop relationships and trust. The assumption is that gains in these areas will contribute to culturally responsive instruction. With respect to clinical practice, the reasoning is similar; as S-LPs and audiologists expand their knowledge and engage in dialogue with Aboriginal people, they will be better placed to develop culturally responsive assessments and interventions. Theorists and practitioners in both education and health care, however, have suggested that the current emphasis on culture responsiveness needs to be complemented by a deeper understanding of how social and economic factors shape a wide range of outcomes for all children.

### Going Beyond Cultural Responsiveness

While Aboriginal people are strong and resilient, and diverse in terms of socioeconomic status, they also, on average, have fewer employment opportunities and are living in greater poverty overall in comparison with other Canadians (Kay-Raining Bird, 2011; Wilson & Macdonald, 2010). Poverty and its correlates (substandard

housing, lower education levels, higher rates of particular health conditions, greater exposure to environmental contaminants, higher substance abuse etc.) undermine the well-being of Aboriginal children living on and off reserve in both remote and urban environments (Ball, 2008; Campaign 2000, 2011; Canadian Council on Social Development, 2006).

St. Denis (2007) suggests that disparities like these call for an analysis of how race is related to the history and contemporary situations of Aboriginal people. Proponents of such an analysis, and of anti-racist approaches more generally, agree that race is a socially-constructed (not biological) category but nevertheless “real” in that it operates in societies, and is used both to create and justify exclusion of various sorts (i.e., social, political, and economic). From an anti-racist perspective, the conditions faced by Aboriginal people today are a consequence of the racism inherent to colonisation and subsequent institutional racism (examples include the residential school system; the current overrepresentation of Aboriginal youth in the criminal justice system noted by Latimer and Casey Foss, 2004; and the recently documented underfunding of Aboriginal schools). The conditions also reflect neoliberal economic policies that result in disproportional poverty and insecure incomes (associated with increased precarity of work) for Aboriginal people, along with other ‘racialized’ groups (Patyckuk, 2011).

Anti-oppressive approaches in education also involve an examination of race, but focus more heavily on interlocking aspects of oppression (e.g., how racism, classism, sexism, etc. interact) (see Naseem, 2011 for an overview). The nuances of each approach and the significant differences between them lie outside the scope of the present paper, but might be seen as roughly aligned with the tenets of *social justice*, defined by Nieto and Bode (2007) as a philosophy and actions that promote a more equal distribution of social and economic resources and “embody treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity” (p. 12).

Anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and social justice education is not just for children or adolescents. University instructors draw on related philosophies and theories to examine social and economic inequalities with adult students, and to explore how these disparities are expressed at different levels, ranging from the global to the micro level of everyday interactions. Kumugai and Lypson (2009), for example, reported several strategies they used to help medical students develop “a reflective awareness of... power and privilege and the inequities that are embedded in social

relationships" (p. 783). University teachers in social work report similar goals, and additionally address ways of working with the resistance or discomfort that even adult students can experience when discussing issues of privilege and oppression (Nicotera & Kang, 2009; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Wong, 2004).

Issues of race, oppression, power, and privilege have also been raised in the communication disorders literature. In a novel course for S-LP and audiology students alluded to earlier (and described at length in Bernhardt et al., 2011), instructors sparked discussion about racism partly by using documentaries, including a publicly available one on residential schooling (Legacy of Hope Foundation, cited in Bernhardt et al., 2011) and another on First Nations university students' experiences with racism<sup>1</sup>. The students in the course also keep private journals or used visual or performing arts to express their feelings, thoughts, and questions related to learning about "cultural identities, colonialism, racism and race-based privilege" (p. 183), and reflect on the potential impact of these on service provision.

Ball has also introduced to the communication disorders literature the notion of "cultural safety". The concept, initially proposed by Ramsden, a Maori nurse in New Zealand, is now being applied to a range of health services in Aboriginal communities in Canada (Health Council of Canada, 2012). As Ball (n.d.) explains, cultural safety is about what service recipients think and feel about service encounters: whether they feel "respected and assisted in having their cultural location, values, and preferences taken into account" (p. 1), or, conversely, unsafe or harmed. Other authors define cultural safety similarly and identify variables contributing to it as awareness on the part of service providers of power dynamics in service encounters, informed by an awareness of the unequal distribution of power and resources on a larger scale (Anderson et al., 2003; Health Council of Canada, 2012; National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2006).

### Conclusion

As this brief review reveals, there are multiple perspectives within the educational field about what it means to be culturally responsive and what is needed to support positive outcomes for Aboriginal children. Recurring responses to 'what adults in the field should be doing' include making significant changes to curricula and pedagogy, developing knowledge about and relationships with families, and learning about how social and economic inequities arise and affect Aboriginal people's and all of our lives. These responses converge with those

found in the communication sciences and disorders literature.

The review, as anticipated, does not point to a single set of actions that S-LPs should take in working with Aboriginal children and families. School curriculum changes, discussed in the first section of the paper, are typically not made by either educators or S-LPs, but S-LPs can play a role by contributing their knowledge about language and literacy to early childhood and later educational programs. Aboriginal Head Start (AHS), described by Ball (2008) as "one exception to an otherwise sluggish effort to ensure Aboriginal children have the same quality of life as other children in Canada" (p. 30), and named as a promising practice in health care for Aboriginal mothers and young children (Health Council of Canada, 2011), is likely a good starting point. While the program is still only available to a minority of Aboriginal children, existing centres might allow S-LPs to collaborate with educators in providing global support for language development and learning (in lieu of individual, pull-out interventions). When curricula for older children has been adjusted to be somewhat 'culturally responsive', S-LPs could adopt a curriculum-based intervention approach, thus incorporating curricular content and objectives into language therapy. S-LPs could also benefit from exploring further the pedagogical practices that have been recommended in the literature on Aboriginal education, while being careful not to assume that all Aboriginal children share a single learning style.

The literature offered a number of suggestions and examples of ways that educators and clinicians alike can reflect on their own views and come to better know the communities and families they are working with. These need no additional summary, but the cited papers and book chapters should serve as resources.

Finally, the review revealed that social and economic inequities affecting Aboriginal people are widely discussed in the literature from education and health care, though the terminology varies across the two sectors, and the theoretical bent varies considerably by author. A greater understanding of these inequities and their causes can be fostered by university level courses like the one developed by Bernhardt and colleagues, as well as introductory, cross-disciplinary courses in First Peoples Studies (e.g., <http://scpa-eapc.concordia.ca/en/undergraduate-programs/major-in-first-peoples-studies/>). Of course, there are also independent acts: reading, watching documentaries, attending talks, discussing with friends, analysing media, becoming involved with Aboriginal organizations or activists. These activities, along with the

others proposed, can help us all become more critical thinkers. They will also prompt us to stand - not only as S-LPs or educators, but as citizens - for economic, social, and health care policies that respect the rights of Aboriginal children and their families, and foster social and economic justice at large.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>The authors additionally produced a number of digital videos especially for the course. These address speech-language and audiological services in First Nations and Inuit communities (particularly rural ones) and include 'case scenarios' and interviews with First Nations service providers (Bernhardt, 2012, personal communication). Some of the videos might be made available for training purposes. Requests should be directed to Bernhardt.

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