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Amanda Gebhard
University of Toronto

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ARTICLE

Schools, Prisons and Aboriginal Youth: Making Connections

Amanda Gebhard

University of Toronto

Abstract

This article examines the school-to-prison nexus for Aboriginal youth in Canada. The author calls on educators to examine their complicity in the overrepresentation of Aboriginals in Canada's penal system, and suggests four overlapping areas that point to this need: the racist and colonial histories of law and education for Aboriginals; the disciplinary culture of schools; the lack of diversity in the Canadian teaching force, understood as a larger problem of systemic Whiteness; and the overuse of paradigms of cultural differences to explain Aboriginal under-education.

Introduction

Aboriginal^[1] peoples make up 3% of the Canadian population, yet represent 17% of the total inmate population (Correctional Service Canada, 2012). In the province of Saskatchewan, young Aboriginal men are more likely to go to prison than to finish high school (Therein, 2011). The issue of Aboriginal overrepresentation in Canada's penal system has been a mainstay in media reports, government publications, and scholarly research for the past several decades. The problem has received a considerable amount of attention in the areas of law and criminal justice, but is not usually considered an issue for educators and schools. Linkages made between education and incarceration for Aboriginal peoples rarely goes beyond citing the low levels of education amongst inmates, or making recommendations for improving the educational opportunities of those already incarcerated. Dominant discourses suggest that schooling is an attractive and available alternative (Simmons, 2005) to incarceration.

In the United States, the racial disproportions in the penal system amongst Black and Latino populations has prompted educational researchers to examine how schools are complicit in the movement of youth from schools to prisons. This area has come to be known as the *school-to-prison pipeline*, defined by Sander (2010) as "systemic setbacks that gradually shepherd students away from positive school connections and academic success and into increasing criminal activity" (p. 4). Scholars have documented school-based practices that increase the likelihood of future incarceration for students, including disciplinary measures, alternative education and streaming programs, and the shaping of select youth as needing surveillance and containment (Meiners, 2007). Raible and Irizarry (2010) point out that "given similar social dynamics . . . across the globe and the historic uses of schooling to manage minority populations, [Canadian researchers] should be able to contribute research that uncovers the connections between schooling . . . and the overrepresentation of minority populations in the penal system in their local contexts" (p. 1196).

As I shall argue, there are indeed under-examined links in the Canadian context between schooling for Aboriginals and incarceration. Simmons (2004, as cited in Meiners, 2007) contends that "linkages between schools and jails are less a pipeline, more a persistent nexus or a web of intertwined, punitive threads" (p. 32). The nexus metaphor "captures the historic, systemic, and multifaceted nature of the intersections of education and incarceration" (Meiners, 2007, p.32), and it is from this framework of understanding that I shall discuss the connections between schooling for Aboriginals and incarceration in this article. First, I provide the historical contexts of Aboriginal education and Aboriginals and the justice system. Second, I present three further areas I contend are part of the school-to-prison nexus for Aboriginal youth: systemic Whiteness within Canadian education, the disciplinary culture of schools, and lastly, the overuse of paradigms of cultural differences to explain Aboriginal under-education.

Historical Context

My concerns about law are similar to my concerns about education. Both the systems of law and education that we now live [under] have been forced upon us. Law and education are two of the central institutions of processes through which First Nations have been colonized and oppressed. There are similar patterns in both systems of order. (Mohawk scholar Patricia Monture-Angus, 1995, p. 80)

The foundations of Aboriginal schooling were grounded in racist ideologies and based on the belief that Aboriginal

peoples were inferior to White settlers. From European contact on, the history of Aboriginal education can be divided into colonial periods (Bear Nicholas, 2001). The first period corresponds to the fur trade era, during which the aim of Aboriginal education was to “mold Aboriginals into an exploitable and subservient class within, yet apart from, colonial society” (Altbach & Kelly, 1978, in Bear Nicholas, 2001, p. 11). After the fall of New France in 1760, First Nations were dispossessed of their lands and dislocated by British settlers. After Confederation in 1867, the first Indian Act^[2] was passed, and the Department of Indian affairs established. Schools were under contract with the federal government not only to “civilize and Christianize Native peoples” (Bear Nicholas, 2001, p. 12), but also to transform them into citizens of the new nation. Comeau (2005) asserts that two explicit goals shaped this period: first, “the construction of the colonizer identity, and second, the protection of Canada and Canadian citizens from the threat of degeneracy said to be posed by racialized, classed and gendered Others” (p. 11). During this period, residential schools^[3] were established across Canada. Aboriginal children were forced by government officials to attend the schools, which were governed by strict models of discipline, and “. . . based on the utopian models of prisons that advocated hard labor, discipline, religion and solitary meditation” (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 36). The infamous objective of the Residential school system, stated by an unknown government official, was to *kill the Indian in the child*. Residential schools began closing in the 1940s because they had failed to assimilate Aboriginal children, and Aboriginal students were subsequently integrated into public schools—from which only a small number would graduate.

Today, education has yet to fulfill its promise for Aboriginal youth; although improvements have been made, high rates of school push-out and under-education are typical amongst Aboriginal students across Canada. Colonialism^[4] remains the “primary ideology underlying the education of Indigenous peoples in Canada today” (Bear Nicholas, 2001, p. 10).

Alongside systems of Education, White settlers also imposed new forms of law and order on Aboriginal communities. Aboriginals had their own traditions for maintaining peace in their communities before the arrival of Europeans, which were mostly replaced by Western ways of meting out punishment. Europeans justified colonial policy by casting Aboriginal peoples as uncivilized and unruly. Policies designed to restrict traditional Aboriginal lifestyles and land use were imposed, certain religious practices and ceremonies were outlawed, women were denied political participation, and treaties restricted Aboriginals to reserves. The Indian Act, now recognized as one of the most shameful colonialist dimensions of Canadian law and society (Samuelson & Monture-Angus, 2002), was imposed after Confederation in 1867. Under the act, Aboriginals were confined to reserves and Registered Indians could not vote until 1960. According to Doxtator (2011), “during the nineteenth century, no other group in Canada was as closely regulated or controlled. Regulations were passed in the Canadian Government to control Indians—where they could live, how they were governed, how they should make their living” (p. 34).

In the 1960s, the high numbers of Aboriginals in custody started to receive attention. A report released by the Canadian Corrections Association in 1967, entitled “Indians and the Law,” initiated some changes; specifically, sections of the Indian Act were determined as contrary to the Canadian Bill of Rights, and a special Aboriginal constable program was developed. Ever since, efforts to combat the problem of racial disproportions in the prison system have centered on the paradigm of cultural differences, and have included cross-cultural training, affirmative action recruitment, and Aboriginal liaison committees or positions (Samuelson & Monture-Angus, 2002, p. 167).

The imposition of the systems of the law and of education required the belief that Aboriginal peoples were inferior and degenerate. Interventions based on models of discipline were viewed as an appropriate means of *civilizing* Aboriginal peoples. While residential schools have all but closed down today, penitentiaries have replaced them as new forms of containment for Aboriginal peoples. In some cases, they are even built on the grounds of old residential schools, such as in the case of the Prince Albert Federal Penitentiary in the province of Saskatchewan, which sits on the site of a former residential school run by the Anglican Church. In a report prepared for the Canadian Bar Association, Aboriginal rights advocate Michael Jackson stated, “The prison has become for many young native people the contemporary equivalent of what the Indian residential school represented for their parents” (Jackson & Canadian Bar Association, 1988, p. 4).

While the above points of comparison between the education system and the justice system are significant, the connections between incarceration and Aboriginals are found on a deeper level. The next step lies in examining how the racist ideologies that formed the foundations of the education and the justice system for Aboriginals continue to govern schools today. Specifically, questioning whether schooling for Aboriginal youth shapes students as degenerate, unruly, and in need of discipline and containment is key. I turn now to discussing indicators that these ideologies continue to prevail in schools today.

The Disciplinary Culture of Schools

Discipline is deeply rooted in the history of education for Aboriginal peoples. Today, we must not assume that schools are void of their oppressive elements of the past. U.S.A research has demonstrated that “racial disparity in school discipline and achievement mirrors racially disproportionate minority confinement” (Raible & Irizarry, 2010, p. 1199), thus confirming Singer’s (1996) assertion (in Noguera, 2003) that “. . . those most frequently targeted for punishment in school often look—in terms of race, gender, and socioeconomic status—a lot like smaller versions of the adults who are most likely to be targeted for incarceration in society” p. 343). The overrepresentation of Aboriginals in custody is obvious, as are their low levels of educational achievement; both the former and the latter are well documented and have received a considerable amount of attention. Less clear are the ways in which Aboriginal students are disproportionately targeted for punishment in their schools, and how their treatment in schools is part of a process that sets them up for a future of imprisonment.

What *is* currently known, however, points to the need for further interrogation of these processes, along with how low educational achievement amongst Aboriginal youth has been interpreted. In one longitudinal study on serious and violent young offenders of Aboriginal descent in British Columbia (Corrado & Cohen, 2002), researchers found that large numbers of youth in custody had previously been disciplined at school: Out of 100 Aboriginal youth, 96 percent of the males and 85 percent of the females had previously been in trouble at school. And the documented behaviors were those that could result in suspension or expulsion: “The most common form of trouble for both genders of Aboriginal youth [were] physical fights with students, teachers and administrators, drug use, cheating, and truancy” (p. 21). The average onset of trouble at school was reported as 10 years of age for males, and 10.6 for females. At the time the youth committed their most current offence, only half of the youth were enrolled in school, and were two or three academic years behind their peers. The researchers conclude the Aboriginal youth show a low commitment to school, and they require education programs in custody that will “foster self-esteem, improve their overall reading and writing skills, and build a positive attitude and commitment to education” (p. 21).

The latter study suggests the Aboriginal youth in the study must improve their attitudes towards their educational experiences, and that they also demonstrated a low commitment to school. This may very well have been the case; however, the question that begs to be asked is, *Was the education system committed to them?* Another report, which formed part of a major literature review on Aboriginal education across Canada, suggests a negative response to this question. Two of Canada’s leading Indigenous Education scholars, Verna St. Denis and Eber Hampton (2002), noted (in Hesch, 2010) the following in their report on the current state of Education for Aboriginal students:

Racism was present and active at all levels of public and post-secondary education, including the Aboriginal teaching workforce. The racism experienced on an everyday basis took multiple forms, including verbal and psychological abuse, low expectations of teachers and administrators, marginalization and isolation within the school community, a denial of professional support and attention, the unfair and discriminatory practice of rules and procedures, and the denial of Aboriginal experience, human rights, and history. The several ways in which racism is denied is in itself constituted racist practice because the issue could not then be considered for its contribution(s) to lack of academic success. (St. Denis & Hampton [2002] in Hesch, 2010, p. 258).

Aboriginal student behavior at school cannot be understood in isolation of the above factors that St. Denis and Hampton (2002) outlined. Canadian researchers might learn from our neighbors to the south: Studies from the United States of America on racialized and non-dominant students have concluded that non-conformist behavior at school is performed with full knowledge that students’ “anti-social behavior will guarantee their failure in school, largely because they have already concluded that their education will not lead them to college or middle-class jobs in the future” (Noguera, 2003, p. 343). Noguera (2003) explains that the implicit contract for maintaining order in schools is least effective for “students who are not receiving the benefits of an education . . . Once they know that the rewards of an education . . . are not available to them, students have little incentive to comply with school rules” (p. 343). According to Watts and Everelles (2004), students marked by “race, class, or disability are always constructed as students who lack, who are therefore seen as dangerous, and of little value to the school system” (p. 292).

Surveillance of Aboriginal students in the school system leads into the subsequent section of this article, in which I aim to further complicate the issue of Aboriginal student discipline by examining systemic Whiteness in the education system; in particular, I focus on the lack of teacher diversity in Canadian schools. Thus far, I have contextualized the situation of Aboriginal education and Aboriginals in the justice system, and demonstrated that given these histories, which are connected to forms of race and class, it seems “more than plausible that we continue to reproduce versions of this surveillance today” (Meiners, 2007, p.49). Although it is likely that Aboriginal students are singled out disproportionately for their behavior at school, more studies are needed to interrogate racial disparities in school discipline.

Systemic Whiteness in Education

Historically, the role of white teachers and their relation to Aboriginal students...was abundantly clear; until 1969, the objective of education had been to suppress Aboriginal culture and languages in efforts to "improve" children with the goal of assimilation. (Harper, 2000, p. 134)

Several researchers have concerned themselves with the lack of diversity amongst the North American teaching force (e.g., Carr & Klassen, 1997; Gebhard & Hopson, 2012; Meiners, 2002); however, arguing that White teachers are part of the complex web that links schools and prisons is relatively novel. Meiners (2007) was the first to make connections between the Whiteness of the North American teaching force and the prison industrial complex. She calls on researchers to examine the contexts that shape the high numbers of White, female teachers in North American schools, and suggests that studying these contexts "... may offer new opportunities to view the nexus of relationships between schools and jails, and options to interrupt this movement" (p. 43). Following Meiners, Raible and Irizarry (2010) also make connections between White teachers and racial disproportionality in prisons. They contend that the majority of pre-service teachers try to preserve identities that "often revolve around conforming to traditional Western norms that maintain the status quo as opposed to challenging injustice and oppression" (p. 1196). When these identities remain unchallenged, the result can be "the hyper-surveillance of poor, deviant students of color that can lead to school exclusion and, as data have demonstrated, lead them on a pathway to prison" (Raible and Irizarry, 2010, p. 1200).

In this section I respond to Meiners (2007), and Raible and Irizarry (2010) by making the linkages between the homogeneity of our teaching force and the overrepresentation of Aboriginals in custody. The predominantly White teaching force is understood here as indicative of a larger issue, which is the operation of Whiteness within the Canadian education system. According to Carter (2000), "Whiteness functions as a hidden construction through which the privilege of being White shapes experience and in which race can be ignored and White normative culture go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (p. 25). The operation of Whiteness "gives enormous privilege to those whose histories, ethnic backgrounds, social class, family assumptions, and personal knowledge are in line with these dominant practices" (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 300).

While Canada's population is racially diverse, and there are numerous students of different racial backgrounds who look nothing like their teachers, I concentrate here on Aboriginal students because Aboriginal peoples are the most overrepresented racial group in our penal systems and because in my own Canadian prairie context, "Aboriginal peoples form the greatest critical mass to challenge normative practices of a dominant white culture. The 'other' is typically understood to be Aboriginal peoples, even though other visible minority groups also make the area their home" (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 297). I argue that although the homogeneity of the teaching force is but one factor in a complicated web of several—which interlock to support Aboriginal over-incarceration—it is significant nonetheless. My objective is not to argue a cause-and-effect relationship between teachers and Aboriginals in custody, but to demonstrate teachers' complicity in, or at the very least their connections to, the injustice. I recognize that by referring to White, female teachers as a single group, this is unfair to those who fit the description yet do not conform to the ideals of those teachers I describe in this section.

The student-to-Aboriginal-teacher ratio is low in provinces across Canada. In the province of Saskatchewan, while 16.5% of the student population is self-declared of Aboriginal descent, this is the same for only 6.4% of the teaching population—resulting in a ratio of 271 Aboriginal students for every one Aboriginal teacher (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009). This means that Aboriginal students have a small chance of ever being taught by someone of similar ancestry. In one study conducted in an inner-city Winnipeg high school, 96% of Aboriginal student respondents said that there should be more Aboriginal teachers (Silver, Mallette, Greene & Simard 2002). When students were asked why they believed there should be more Aboriginal teachers, amongst the responses were "To make Aboriginal students feel more comfortable/It would probably make a big difference/So they can actually understand where some students are coming from," and "Able to relate to me because they are from the same background" (p. 16). In the same study, when students were asked if they feel that teachers at their school understand Aboriginal students, over three in four said no, and expressed the impossibility of their teachers understanding their lives. One student responded, "Socially, I don't think most teachers know how it is to grow up on a reserve or grow up poor," and another said, "They do not understand us because they are white" (p. 16). One student felt that "Teachers make no conscious attempt to learn about Aboriginal culture" (p. 16). These students' perceptions of their teachers are significant; they point to the divide between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, which indeed is felt by Aboriginal students in their schools.

In the Canadian Prairie Provinces, it is common for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities to be divided; thus, it is likely that the only contact that many White teachers have with Aboriginals is inside of their classrooms. Noguera (1995)

explains the danger of teachers being unfamiliar with the places and the ways in which their students live their lives outside of school walls:

[Teachers] often fill the knowledge void with stereotypes based upon what they read or see in the media, or what they pick up indirectly from stories told to them by children . . . Many teachers, like others who live outside of poor urban communities, tend to hold negative views toward these areas, views that are rooted in a fear of violence and in media representations of the people who reside in the inner city as less than civilized. This fear invariably influences the interaction between teachers and administrators and their students. (p. 204)

Outside of their classrooms, teachers (not unlike anyone else) are inundated with negative portrayals of Aboriginal peoples in the media. According to Joyce Green, a researcher on Aboriginal-settler relations, “Aboriginals exist for the media only as practitioners of violence or political opposition, as marketing stereotypes, or as bearers of social pathologies” (Green, 2011, p. 237). It is not unreasonable to suggest that teachers who cannot relate to the lives of their students may enter their classrooms with negative assumptions about Aboriginal peoples; Noguera (1995) contends that “numerous studies on teacher expectations have shown that race, class and gender have considerable influence over the assumptions, conscious and unconscious, that teachers hold toward students” (p. 203).

Indeed, critical educational researchers have consistently demonstrated that White, female teachers do not enter their classrooms equipped with critical understandings about race and equality (e.g., Harper, 2004; Schick, 2002; Carr & Klassen, 1997). On the contrary, they often display meritocratic and individualistic assumptions about themselves and the students they teach (Gebhard, 2008). Finney and Orr (1995) found that the majority of a group of White, pre-service teachers were ignorant of the history of abuse and subjugation of Aboriginal peoples by White Europeans; the teachers were unable to think “contextually about school achievement and meritocracy...and tended to view others as responsible for their own fates in a morally neutral and open, un-stratified society” (p. 329). Comments similar to the following were common in the study’s findings: “Is their [Aboriginals’] reason for returning to a life of crime because they lack self-confidence because of the reputation they have? Why don’t they try harder?” (p. 329).

Carol Schick’s (2002) research demonstrates that White pre-service teachers often resist equity-based courses that aim to dismantle oppressive assumptions like those described above. Her interpretation is that these courses pose some kind of threat; initiatives such as anti-racist and multicultural education are threatening to the “heroic tales of successful occupation by white settlers” (p. 105) of these students’ ancestors. Schick’s (2002) research also points to the importance of examining the historicity of the White, female teaching force, which Meiners (2007) insists can shed new light on the connections between schools and prisons. The dominant assumptions White settlers have about Aboriginal peoples are not ahistorical, nor is the logic that has led to the predominance of White, female teachers in the teaching force. In the beginning of mass public schooling, Canadian historians documented that “. . . women were the ideal bodies to reproduce patriarchal values and colonial epistemologies, but not to challenge these frameworks” (Meiners, 2007, p. 46). White females were entrusted with the role of executing class-based surveillance and monitoring, and they were considered as unthreatening and cheap mechanisms to execute the work (Meiners, 2007). Along with the economic advantages of employing women, state leaders argued, “women teachers, like ideal mothers, would be morally pure and gentle guardians for young children” (Placier, 2011, p. 249).

Consequently, a mythical representation of a teacher emerged during the time of British imperialism, the *White Lady Bountiful*. The term “Lady Bountiful” was first coined by Honor Ford Smith, and borrowed by Harper and Cavanagh (1994), Canadian researchers who questioned the White Lady Bountiful identification within the multicultural classroom. Ford Smith (1993, in Harper & Cavanagh, 1994) describes the “White lady Bountiful”:

[The White Lady Bountiful] was seen as having a unique duty to bring civilization to the “uncivilized.” In the early 1800s, her role was to educate British working-class women in religion, morality and hygiene. Exported to the colonies, the ideal of femininity became the White woman, an embodiment of chastity and purity who acted as a “civilizing” force. According to Honor Ford Smith, this image and role carries *sic* with it the imperative “to know” and the incredible arrogance of that imperative. Lady Bountiful, to be bountiful, must know and feel what is wrong and be able to fix it. She needs to be at the center but at the same time her needs—her own “self”—remain absent. Her ability to act as the civilizing force, to be the white teacher-mother in the service of the Empire, is dependent upon her need to be at the center, knowing and helping her charges. If Lady Bountiful doesn’t know, can’t feel, can’t be in control, then she will feel guilt as well as the fear that she is unmotherly or unladylike or unchristian. (p. 28)

Meiners (2002) argues that the persistence of the White lady Bountiful in her teacher education programs makes it “difficult to address white supremacy, hetero-normativity and social class issues”(p. 85). Time and again, Meiners has

noticed the similarities amongst the students she teaches. As they introduce themselves to the group,

The majority of the students in [her] classes begin to evoke the same figure. This lady . . . has always loved children. She is gracious, nurturing, often soft-spoken and is usually married or engaged . . . For her, teaching is a calling or a vocation, and she has always known that she wanted to be a teacher . . . Sometimes, a redemptive narrative circulates: she has always had the desire to save underprivileged children (p. 89).

As aforementioned, in Meiner's book, *The Right to be Hostile: Schools, Prisons and the Making of Public Enemies* (2007), she further problematizes the White Lady Bountiful archetype. Meiners argues she is an "often unacknowledged, [yet a] prevalent and persistent icon with significant consequences related to the linkages between schools and jails" (p. 46). Evidence suggests the White Lady Bountiful does not exist only within U.S. borders, and that in the Canadian context, it is the racialized Aboriginal student who may very well be the underprivileged child she dreams about saving. Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) argue the discourses of learning and virtue, of family involvement, and of the dedicated teacher with missionary zeal continue to frame compulsory education. One Saskatchewan study found that White, female pre-service teachers not only felt naturally suited to the teaching profession, but that several of them romanticized their future roles as teachers by imagining themselves saving children (Schick, 2000). Similar interpretations can be drawn from a previous study by Finney & Orr (1995) of pre-service teachers in a course on cross-cultural understandings. While critical thinking and consciousness-raising were the goals of the instructor, these were found to be lacking at the end of the course. One student reported the following:

Although I have a better understanding of some of the Aboriginal philosophies, I would still like to help some of the [Aboriginals] create better hygiene practices for their children . . . I felt very sad and disgusted when I was shopping the other day and I saw a little native girl running around the store wearing no shoes or warm clothes . . . My heart wanted to help that little girl by taking her away from that situation and caring for her myself. My initial thought was, why don't these people look after their children? (Finney & Orr, 1995, p. 327)

The above savior-like mentality is a discourse that is dependent on the construction of Aboriginal peoples as inferior. In the above example, instead of engaging in a critical reflection on why the Aboriginal child has no shoes, the teacher blames the parents and imagines saving the Aboriginal child from her parents and culture. Even though Aboriginals are an oppressed group, and non-Aboriginals can become their allies, support for Aboriginals must be grounded in notions of equality, and not superiority. When support is racially motivated by feelings of superiority, Aboriginals are kept locked in subordinate positions and the colonizer's attempts are glorified.

In a school setting, the construction of the Aboriginal child as in need or at risk is also dependent on the construction of the White settler as the benevolent savior. Bailey and Betts (2009) are two White teachers who recognize the problem of teachers' clinging to their notions of *goodness*. They struggle with trying to understand how their belief in their own good intentions may contribute to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal students in special education programs:

There is no doubt in our mind that we are working with the best of intentions. We are not setting out to further disadvantage those who come to us from already established positions of disadvantage . . . We are doing the best we can with the impoverished backgrounds, different cultures, stressed families . . . What gets in our way is lack of imagination. We assume that the way that we do things is *the* way to do things . . . We see ourselves as educated people who are neither racist nor biased, and who are working in a good system, but with damaged and/or deficient people - this story concludes that systemic changes are not required." (Bailey & Betts, p. 81).

The difficulty of turning the gaze on teachers is that most teachers truly do have the best of intentions for their students in mind, as exemplified by Bailey and Betts (2009). The question, however, is how teachers might come to understand how their practices stem from racist ideologies that have evolved from Canada's colonial past. When teachers, no matter their race or gender, identify with the archetype of the White lady bountiful, it is very unlikely that they will challenge systemic racism in their school environments that set up Aboriginal students for failure. More often, schools use explanations of cultural differences to explain educational gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. This point brings me to the final section of this article, in which I shall briefly argue that schools' refusal to examine systemic issues as the cause of Aboriginal push-out and low rates of school completion—and instead employ paradigms of cultural differences—thwarts the educational experiences of Aboriginal youth, and is therefore another factor in the school-to-prison nexus.

Celebration . . . not Racism

national response to the failure of schools to educate Aboriginal students” (Schick, 2009, p. 117). Discourses of cultural difference are the principal ways by which schools attempt to explain Aboriginal under-education, and also by which schools attempt to address the issue. Thus, cultural differences are commonly cited as both the problem and the solution, and engaging in culturally relevant curriculum has come to signify *good teaching* (Schick, 2009); one White teacher of Aboriginal students asserts: “What white teachers really need is intensive professional development to help us learn to teach children living in a culture we do not understand” (Starnes, 2003, p. 170). For those confused as to why this seemingly sensible approach would be contested, Schick (2009) explains:

The question is not whether classrooms should be culturally relevant, non-relevant or irrelevant, but whether this culturally relevant approach is *sufficient* to overcome and unsettle the social positioning and “commonsense” assumptions of white people who would be effective teachers. Promoting cultural relevance as a solution to inequality is problematic when this approach presupposes and reproduces an innocent white teacher whose task is to supply those qualities that marginalized students are said to lack. (p. 115)

Critical race scholar Sherene Razack (1998) is equally sceptical of the cultural differences approach, and demonstrates how it plays a role in maintaining a predominantly White teaching force:

The adoption of apparently helpful cross-cultural strategies does little to ensure that white teachers will view their [racialized] pupils as capable of the same level of achievement and range of desires as their white students. Further, teachers are not pressed to examine whether the behaviour that is called cultural, for example passivity with authority figures, is in fact a response to an alienating and racist environment . . . If white teachers can learn the appropriate cultural rules, we need not hire [racialized] teachers, and we need not address racism. (pp. 9-10)

Kanu (2011) insists that the consistency in which success amongst Aboriginal students has been explained by the discontinuities between the cultural patterns of those of the students and those of the school, points to culturally relevant curricula as an obvious answer. On the contrary, I suggest that this consistency is perhaps due to a systemic refusal of schools to turn the gaze inward. From the perspectives of Aboriginal people today, land claims, sovereignty, ending violence, and rebuilding devastated structures are of utmost importance. Teaching superficial understandings of Aboriginal *culture* is an effective means of ignoring what is really important to Aboriginal peoples today. A curriculum that continues to focus on the celebration of cultural differences is a curriculum that, in its refusal to acknowledge systemic racism, is complicit in the movement of Aboriginal students from classrooms to prisons.

Final Thoughts

The overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada’s penal system is a complex problem that does not lend itself to one straightforward explanation. A large number of factors are involved, and in most cases, it is impossible to determine what leads any person to commit a crime or become incarcerated. Borrowing from Meiners (2007), educators are too often “used as scapegoats for cultural and economic problems” (p. 186), and it is unrealistic to place the blame on schools and teachers alone. Yet schools are powerful forces that exert considerable influences on the lives of youth—influences that are both positive *and* negative. In order for education to be viewed as an attractive and available alternative to incarceration, the carceral elements must be removed from our schools (Simmons, 2005).

Education is often championed as a great equalizer for Aboriginal youth; however, in order for this to hold true, schools must first become places of resistance to a punitive society. Schools must not be places where racialized youth are shaped as unruly and in need of White saviours, and educators must examine the underlying racist motivations of naturalized and taken-for-granted policies and practices governing schools in order to resist their complicity in the school-to-prison nexus for Aboriginal youth. Perhaps the greatest challenge in education for Aboriginal peoples today is that it must work to dismantle the racist foundations on which it was built, a difficult yet urgent task. Teachers must “interrogate their inherited professional roles in the ongoing surveillance, discipline and management of youth . . . who belong to socio-economic and racial sub-groups that have been deemed problematic and ‘undesirable’” (Raible & Irizarry, 2010, p. 1197).

Although the over-incarceration of Aboriginal peoples is a complex problem, it is not an unassailable reality. It is something that requires the cooperation and complicity of countless people; learning how we are *all* invited to participate in the colonial project of Aboriginal over-incarceration—and then refusing to do so—is perhaps the first step in unmaking the school-to-prison nexus for Aboriginal youth in Canada.

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Notes

[1] For the purpose of this paper, the term *Aboriginal* is meant to encompass people categorized as non-status or status Inuit, Metis, and First Nations. (A status Indian is recognized and registered under the *Indian Act*, and a non-status Indian is a person who considers himself or herself to be First Nation, but cannot prove their status or have lost their status; First Nations refers to Aboriginals who are neither Inuit nor Metis). While recognizing that one term cannot encapsulate the diversity found within Aboriginal cultures and languages, I will follow the direction of the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples and use the term Aboriginal peoples. When I quote or paraphrase authors, different terms may be used in order to respect the right of people to name themselves. Also, terms may vary depending on the historical period, geographical context, or tribal group in question.

[2] The Indian Act is “legislation that has intruded on the lives and cultures of status Indians more than any other law. Though amended repeatedly, the act’s fundamental provisions have scarcely changed. They give the state powers that range from defining how one is born or naturalized into ‘Indian’ status to administering the estate of an Aboriginal person after death” (Henry, Tator, Mattis & Rees, 1998, p. 130).

[3] According to Cannon and Sunseri (2011), residential schooling was “a colonial system of schooling enforced on Indigenous nations aimed at effecting cultural genocide and assimilation on children . . . The residential school experience is characterized by forced removal from families; systemic and ritualized physical and sexual assault; spiritual, psychological and emotional abuse; and malnutrition, inhumane living conditions, death, and murder” (p. 278).

[4] “Colonialism is not only about material accumulation but requires the production of ideologies that justify the theft and violent practices at its root” (Said, 1979; Said, 1994, in Cannon & Sunseri, 2011, p. 275).