

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JOHN W. FRIESEN and VIRGINIA LYONS FRIESEN, *First Nations in the Twenty-First Century: Contemporary Educational Frontiers*. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 220 p., index.

Most of the current research about First Nations youth in Canada falls broadly into the field of education. This book complements the above by providing a good background to historical and contemporary issues relevant to First Nations people, and how these can best be addressed in educational systems and curricula. The Canadian plains region is emphasized, but examples are drawn from across Canada to provide a more holistic perspective. The authors are careful to ground their discussion in historical developments, and First Nations resistance to colonialism, from the 1800s to the present.

Overall, the book achieves its purpose of synthesizing information essential to educators today who are concerned with being at least somewhat informed about perspectives of First Nations peoples and how these can be addressed in the classroom. In primary and secondary public schools, issues relating to how First Nations continue to be affected by colonial and postcolonial treatment are only briefly, if at all, touched upon. This book is an important contribution in that, by informing prospective teachers, there is a chance that some of these issues can be dealt with in classrooms. However, with regards to postsecondary social science programs, the book provides no significant theoretical elaborations, which is unfortunate given the extensive body of research developed since the late 1960s involving marginalization, colonialism and neocolonialism, ethnicity, urbanization, community and so forth. Although all of these topics are touched upon in this book, and the material is interesting and sometimes provocative, it is also mainly descriptive.

One of the problems with this text is that most of the references cited are around thirty years old, many from the period just following the Federal government's "white paper" proposal introduced in 1969. This proposal was a blatant attempt at complete assimilation of First Nations peoples, initiating a widespread backlash of angry responses. Social scientists have noted the irony in that the "white paper" unintentionally served to galvanize First Nations peoples and contributed to the production of many assertive political writings that might otherwise not have existed. Although these are definitely worthy of mentioning in this text, they need to be clearly contextualized as belonging to this distinctive period. Throughout this book, numerous thirty year old references are too often combined with

only a few from the last decade, leaving it up to the reader to “position” them relative to each other, which I found to be distracting. Further, the reader may get the perception that First Nations concerns and priorities have remained static for thirty years.

The authors begin by providing a concise outline of positive and negative realities of First Nations peoples today, including the fact that many more Native people are successfully completing secondary and postsecondary educational programs. On the other hand, they point out that in most areas related to socioeconomics, health and so forth, First Nations persons continue to lag behind in comparison to mainstream Canadian society. These realities are followed by two chapters providing an historical background, emphasizing reasons for contemporary situations, and providing a rationale for the importance of educational achievement as a means of improving all aspects of Native life in the future. By organizing the books this way, the authors contextualize present-day realities in colonial and postcolonial circumstances, and effectively introduce the rest of the text, in which six education-related “frontiers” or challenges are elaborated upon. These “frontiers” include those of spirituality, eldership, language and self-identity, followed by chapters dealing specifically with addressing these through the final two “frontiers” of informed curriculum development and teaching.

This text incorporates an adequate synthesis of information gleaned from existing research on First Nations issues, and each chapter provides some insightful observations. For example, since spirituality permeates all aspects of First Nations cultures, it may well be a foundation of spirituality, introduced in the classroom and incorporating elders as traditional teachers, which would facilitate positive attitudes towards learning and educational success (117-118, 122). As well, the authors note that if educational systems are only effective for some Native people, it may be primarily the elite who are successful in achieving the knowledge and qualifications necessary to take over positions of authority, which are themselves colonial creations. In effect this would mean transference of patron status from non-Native to Native elites, while maintaining socio-culturally inappropriate power imbalances that affect the entire community – thereby replicating instead of reforming colonial systems (158).

The authors note that schools generally present information about First Nations as an “addendum” to a massive amount of Euro-Canadian material. Curriculum changes designed to bring knowledge of First Nations realities more to the forefront have often presented the Aboriginal “world” as antithetical to the Euro-Canadian one, rather than taking a synthesized approach (169-170). They advocate the need for a blended teaching in three main areas, including traditional languages, cultures and lifestyles; along with modern First Nations realities; as well as Euro-Canadian knowledge. All of these need to be presented in an informed manner so they are not portrayed as incompatible. This is obviously a difficult and complex issue, compounded by the fact that First Nations students make up only a small proportion of those in most classrooms. The authors advocate

using Aboriginal knowledge gleaned from local First Nations communities, parents and elders, in order to present alternative perspectives on issues already discussed in a standardized curriculum. In this way one of the tenets of teaching - that of providing multiple interpretations - would be enriched, offering greater understanding for all students, regardless of ethnic origin or background.

The book concludes by providing pragmatic ideas about teaching preparation, teacher education and teaching methods. A few main areas include gaining knowledge about First Nations history, cultures, parenting, community dynamics, and especially values that are central to Aboriginal students and may differ from some of those in Euro-Canadian society. Since universities are the central disseminators of much of this knowledge, prospective teachers can learn some of these things in Native Studies courses and libraries as long as this is complemented by liaisons with people from local First Nations communities. The authors make a strong argument that teaching among First Nations youth cannot be effective unless such understandings are gained at the community level, particularly for those teachers within such communities.

The last two chapters of this book are more effective in synthesizing information and meshing theoretical insight with practical advice. The authors have extensive experience in the area of curriculum revisions and teaching methods, and it shows here. Overall, this text is effective in suggesting avenues for further exploration for postsecondary educational programs and teachers who desire more in-depth knowledge about the needs of First Nations students. In some chapters the book would have been more useful by drawing upon more recent research, and presenting further information about urban First Nations realities, since roughly half of the Canadian Aboriginal people live at least part time in urban centers. However, a text of this sort adds to an important body of research mainly found in education-related journal articles, emphasizing the importance of First Nations youth to the future of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. This apparent tautology is not fully appreciated in the social sciences in general, where literature on youth remains decidedly secondary to that dealing with adults.

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