

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

BERNARD SCHISSEL and TERRY WOTHERSPOON. *The Legacy of School For Aboriginal People. Education, Oppression, and Emancipation.* Don Mills ON, Oxford University Press. 2003 + 149 p.

Education has proven something of a paradox for indigenous peoples. To one side, indigenous peoples have embraced education as an emancipatory way to improve their social and economic conditions without denying their indigeneity. To the other side, exposure to mainstream education has had the effect of marginalization, alienation, or oppression. Not surprisingly, access to education has long proven a focal point of indigenous peoples' struggles for control over their lives and life-chances. Or, as Roger Maaka and I have argued elsewhere, indigenous peoples have long taken advantage of indigenous education, not in the assimilationist ways envisaged by central authorities, but as a taonga (Maori for "treasure") in advancing indigenous peoples' interests.

This paradoxicality underscores the major theme of an excellent book by Schissels and Wotherspoon whose subtitle says it all: Education, Oppression, and Emancipation. The authors argue that education was (and is) expected to assist in fostering the personal identity and social success of aboriginal students. Yet aboriginal aspirations for improving prospects have been derailed by the very structures that were intended to assist. Whereas residential schools may have deliberately set out to "kill the Indian in the child," a contemporary system designed for the mainstream is no less hegemonic. A legacy of both systemic and deliberate disempowerment underpins the underachievement of aboriginal students compared to non aboriginal students. Nevertheless, the authors conclude, there is hope for severely stressed aboriginal students, with the establishment of experimental schools that combine academic achievement with traditional culture and spiritual teachings.

In terms of context, this book revolves around response to five questions: First, how are aboriginal peoples coping with education in terms of participation and outcomes? Second, what historical and social factors account for the educational gaps? Third, what factors do aboriginal students define as strengths and limitations of their schooling? Fourth, how relevant is schooling within the broader experiences and expectations of aboriginal youth? Fifth, what prospects lie ahead in rethinking aboriginal education? The first chapter sets the stage by outlining the promise and perils of schooling and aboriginal education. The second chapter examines various theories to explain aboriginal education gaps, with the authors

inclined toward a critically informed political economy perspective. Chapter three describes the nature and legacy of residential school system. In chapter four, aboriginal youth in four exceptional Saskatchewan schools discuss their concerns, expectations, and aspirations. Aboriginal youth have generally positive attitudes toward schooling and education, but are concerned about racism and prejudice as barriers to success. Chapters five and six explore steps toward improving aboriginal education.

The contents of this book are based on a larger study that the authors—two non aboriginal sociologists from the University of Saskatchewan—conducted for the Aboriginal Education Research Network under the auspices of Saskatchewan's Department of Education. Depth and authenticity are secured through research that combines aboriginal youth interviews and focus groups ("talking circles") with access to secondary analysis. The book itself is very reader-friendly: Students, in particular, should appreciate add-ons such as review questions for critical thinking, annotated web sites, recommended readings, extensive reference list, bold-faced terms, and excellent summaries at the end of each chapter.

This book is a cinch to recommend. From start to finish, it is thoughtfully articulate and critically informed, with a level of organization and argument that secures its status as an invaluable resource book. To be sure, there is little that is new for those who already are familiar with the authors' other publications. Moreover, their claim of a paradigm shift in aboriginal education may be a bit premature. A brief perusal of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1981) will indicate striking parallels and precedents. Even without a paradigm shift, however, the book will have done yeoman-like service in proposing to indigenize a system by making it more responsive, inclusive, and "culturally safe."

Augie Fleras *University of Waterloo*

© Canadian Sociological Association/La Société canadienne de sociologie