

**BOOK REVIEW**

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit</b>
<b>Author:</b>	<b>Marie Battiste</b>
<b>Publisher:</b>	<b>Purich Publishing Limited, Saskatoon, SK</b>
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<b>Reviewed by:</b>	<b>Jennifer Brant, PhD Student</b>

As an emerging Indigenous scholar completing a mainstream doctoral program, I was immediately drawn to the work of Marie Battiste. Her work inspires my commitment to approach my degree as a decolonizing journey that nourishes my own learning spirit. Battiste (1998) captures the paradox of mainstream education as it is experienced by Aboriginal students. As she pointed out while Aboriginal students are looking to liberate themselves and their communities through education, they are faced with a strenuous curriculum that does not “mirror” them. As a result, students experience a “fragmented existence” (p. 24). This has indeed been my experience. Her recent book, *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit* expresses the tensions Indigenous learners face in all levels of mainstream education. These are the very tensions I personally experienced throughout the entirety of my educational experience as I have attempted to secure my own space and sense of place as a student and now aspiring professor.

Battiste crafts her book by sharing her educational narrative and perspectives as a Mi'kmaq student and educator. The inspiration for Battiste's research towards decolonizing education has been refined through her years of work as an educator, administrator and Indigenous scholar. Moved by her graduate students, she recalls a comment made by Cree scholar Willie Ermine: “This course should be called Decolonizing Education, not Decolonizing Aboriginal Education. The whole system needs to be changed!” (p. 13). In response, she expresses her commitment to addressing the immediate need for systemic change. As she articulates, her “research and discursive arrow” is aimed “not at teachers or their methods, but largely at the federal and provincial systems and the policy choices and the inequities coming from them” (p. 14). Indeed the grand scale systemic change that her work advocates must funnel through such a top down approach. It is an approach, however, that concerns all within the educational milieu:

For every educator, our responsibility is making a commitment to both unlearn and learn—to unlearn racism and superiority in all its manifestations, while examining our own social constructions in our judgements and learn new ways of knowing, valuing others, accepting diversity, and making equity and inclusion foundations for all learners. (p. 166)

In this spirit, she threads expressions of sentiment in which all educators are connected. Noting that “education is the belief in possibilities” and “every school is either a site of reproduction or a site of change” Battiste captures the essence of the transformative role of education within Canadian society. Such statements prompt me to reflect on my own teaching philosophy. I hope

that the hearts of all readers will also be touched and they too will reflect on the influence of their own teaching practices.

As Rita Bouvier writes in the foreword:

The book represents a formal shift of thinking and writing from a modernistic, expository prose of grand western narratives to a more storytelling manner as a way of uncovering—revealing—a nuanced and balanced perspective of a colonized history and, through it, unmasking the faulty logics of knowing grounded in objectivity and Eurocentric theorizing that have undermined Indigenous peoples’ knowledge systems. (p. 11)

Battiste’s “storytelling manner” provides a textured analysis and discussion of the multilayered and multipronged components embodied within the discourse on Indigenous education and the need to decolonize the education system in its entirety. Woven throughout the book are the varied issues that, pieced together in a sequential and systematic order, facilitate a deeper understanding of the work that needs to be done as we move towards an expressed vision of decolonizing education. This vision positions “decolonization as a process that belongs to everyone” (p. 9). It is a must-read for all administrators and educators, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, especially those who are involved in educational policy. As Battiste so eloquently articulates “the decolonization of education is not just about changing a system for Indigenous peoples, but for everyone. We all benefit by it” (p. 22).

This book is timely as it serves as a foundation for understanding the historical policies of Aboriginal education and offers insights for an informed critique of the recently proposed First Nations Education Act. Her balanced approach to presenting a vision of decolonizing education is also evident in the clarity she brings to the issues confronted by the Idle No More movement. Embedded within the movement is the need for Indigenous identity to hold rightful space within Canadian society. It is this sense of identity that has been repressed historically through assimilationist education policy, and is currently repressed in less subtle ways through cognitive imperialism whereby “Eurocentric knowledge operates as if it is a depoliticized process of intellectual refinement” (p. 105).

Chapters 2 and 3 set the historical, colonial and political context for understanding educational policy from an Indigenous vantage point. Chapter 2 describes the legacy of forced assimilation through education prompting readers to:

Imagine the consequence of a powerful ideology that positions one group as superior and gives away First Nations peoples’ lands and resources and invites churches and other administrative agents to inhabit their homeland, while negating their very existence and finally removing them from the Canadian landscape to lands no one wants. Imagine how uncertain a person whose success is only achieved by a complete makeover of themselves, by their need to English and the polished rules and habits that go with that identity. They are thrust into a society that does not want them to show too much success or too much Indian identity, losing their connections to their land, family, and community when they have to move away as there is no work in their homeland. Assimilation. (p. 23).

Most Indigenous readers do not have to imagine this, as Battiste’s description captures our realities along with the experiences of our parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. It is

a reality that we know intimately. It did not end when the last residential school closed in 1996, as Battiste reminds us, but remains a reality that we are continually faced with as the cognitive imperialism, that Battiste defines, permeates and dominates the entire education system. As a mother of two boys in elementary school, it is a reality that I struggle with every day as they come home and literally learn how to read and write in English right in front of me. Their daily assigned homework includes interactive e-books on Raz-Kids, an online learning system. With my youngest in Grade 1 and just learning how to read, I feel a deep rooted sense of helplessness as an emerging voice inside of me asks why they are not learning how to read and write in Kanien'kéha (the Mohawk language). The answer, documented throughout Battiste's book, is found in the understanding of the ways in which our languages were repressed and forbidden. Regaining these languages is part of Battiste's call for trans-systemic reconciliation including the reclamation of identity, ways of knowing and being, and the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems within and throughout all levels of the education system. This call is refined in Chapter 4, "Creating the Indigenous Renaissance." In this chapter Battiste grounds the Indigenous renaissance in education within the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and draws attention to the work that is being done globally to advance Indigenous knowledge systems within the academy. For other Indigenous readers who have not yet come to terms with their colonial past, the above statement can plant seeds encouraging them to work through layers of colonial debris. In this way, new growth will bring about decolonizing understandings of their own families, communities, and educational experiences.

For non-Indigenous readers, the call to imagine "the experience of Aboriginal peoples in Canada" (p. 23) serves as a point of creating ethical space for decolonization as described in Chapter 5. The need to confront and eliminate racism is expressed in Chapter 6, where Battiste acknowledges the difficulty associated with talking about race and racism as it challenges the grand narrative of Canada as a fair and just society. She writes, "Whiteness and privilege are less evident to those who swim in the sea of whiteness and dominance. Confronting racism, then, is confronting racial superiority and its legacy, not only in history but also in contemporary experience" (p. 125). Chapter 7 identifies the need to eliminate the cognitive imperialism of Eurocentrism, which Battiste advises is based on racism. She describes cognitive imperialism as "a form of manipulation used in Eurocentric educational systems" that is "built on damaging assumptions and imperialist knowledge" (p. 161). Coming full circle, Battiste provides clarity and context to the assimilatory nature of the Canadian education system, while also offering practical recommendations for constitutional reconciliation and possibilities for educational transformation in the final two chapters.

Battiste identifies the multiple layers of challenges inherent in decolonizing education. She also presents an informed critique, noting the harmful impacts of cognitive imperialism. By offering viable path towards constitutional reconciliation, and transformation, her work not only provides a deeper lens of the need for change but offers a significant push and inspiration toward action. As the title suggests, action towards decolonizing education is about nourishing the learning spirit. For Indigenous learners, this is about embedding their worldviews within all facets of education including the humanities and the sciences. By suggesting that "Canadian educational institutions should view Elders, [and] knowledge keepers... as educational treasures" (p. 185), Battiste offers valuable contributions for the integration of Indigenous knowledges and spirituality.

Overall, *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit* is deeply rich, insightful and provocative and offers a valuable and timely contribution to the advancement of educational

reform. It is a book that must be widely read for, as Battiste asserts, “It is a subject that every citizen of Canada should know, because every citizen in Canada is connected to it” (p. 23).

### References

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