

Aboriginal Educational Policy in Ontario (Canada): Professional and Moral Implications for Catholic Teachers

Lorenzo Cherubini, Ed.D.

Associate Professor, Faculty of Education

Brock University

1842 King Street East

Hamilton, Ontario L8K 1V7, Canada

Tel: 905-547-3555 E-mail: Lorenzo.cherubini@brocku.ca

Abstract

This paper presents the policy context of Ontario (Canada) education for Catholic teachers. The analysis suggests that a seminal policy related to Aboriginal education compels Catholic teachers to profound considerations of what it means to teach in the Catholic faith. More specifically, it suggests that the policy, when juxtaposed to the other policies and practices, force Catholic teachers to account for ideological and political implications related to their practice. It is argued that Catholic teachers are bound to analyze critically the tensions and complexities of Aboriginal students' epistemic realities and the profound socio-political implications that contribute to a new and different level of professional and moral responsibility.

Keywords: Educational policy, Catholic teachers, Indigenous students

1. Introduction

Catholic teachers are expected to embody the Gospel values in their pedagogy and practice that reflect the rich moral tradition of Catholic education (Institute for Catholic Education, 2007). Teachers who choose to educate in Catholic schools are committed to the Catholic faith and the mission of the Church under the example of Jesus Christ. In Ontario, Canada, the *Catholic Schools* (2007) document, published by the Institute for Catholic Education, states that teachers' continuous faith development includes "vocation, prayer life and Catholic church teachings" (p. 8). Further, the expectation remains that Catholic teachers effectively and meaningfully infuse dimensions of the Catholic faith into the standardized curriculum mandated by the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME). The Ontario curriculum, according to the Institute for Catholic Education, consists of generic documents that do not recognize the uniqueness of Catholic identity (1996). Catholic teachers thus are responsible for interpreting and authoring programs and curriculum to meaningfully engage Catholic students through theoretical, spiritual, and philosophical terrains. To add to these responsibilities, Catholic teachers are not immune to the measures of public accountability in Ontario that score and rate students and schools in grades three, six, and nine according to externally imposed large-scale assessments, thereby contributing to the expectations that Catholic students will favorably compare with their peers from the various coterminous boards of education.

While undoubtedly the above considerations are daunting responsibilities for Catholic teachers, the recent release of the OME's policy document related to Aboriginal education more than simply adds to this complexity. The *First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007) (the Framework) identifies Aboriginal students' unique learning needs, their socio-cultural and linguistic traditions, and the significance for schools and teachers to authentically represent these differences in their classroom practices. The Framework is in response to the over 50,000 Aboriginal students enrolled in public schools across Ontario representing a demographic shift from rural to urban centres (Framework, 2007). As has been the trend for over 50 years, Aboriginal students continue to rank amongst the lowest cohort of under-achieving students across the province. The resulting achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is influenced by socio-historical realities of colonial assimilation practices (Cajete, 1994).

1.1 Purpose of the Paper

By first presenting the contextual background of Ontario education policies and practices related to Catholic teachers, provincial curriculum, and public accountability, and second by establishing the theoretical context of the analysis, it is argued that the Framework policy compels Catholic teachers to profound considerations of what it means to teach in the Catholic faith since it requires an examination of broader curricular and pedagogic issues. Catholic teachers are expected to incorporate the Gospel values in all facets of the provincial curriculum, model Catholic values in their professional relationships, and endorse issues related to social justice. Considerations of the policy Framework, when juxtaposed to the other policies and practices, force Catholic teachers to account for ideological and political implications related to their practice. In the language of Paulo Freire's theory of

conscientization, Catholic teachers are bound to analyze critically the tensions and complexities of Aboriginal students' epistemic realities and the profound socio-political implications that contribute to a new and different level of professional and moral responsibility. This paper invites readers to consider how engagement in Freire's praxis may be necessary for Catholic teachers to negotiate the competing perspectives of provincial curriculum, educational policy, and their professional expectations as Catholic teachers.

2. Contextual Background

In order to establish a better understanding of the concepts discussed in this paper it is beneficial to provide a contextual background of educational policy and practice in Ontario, particularly as it relates to Catholic teachers.

2.1 Education in Ontario

With the exception of First Nations schools, public education is a provincial responsibility in Canada. Since 1985 with the passage of Bill 30, Catholic schools have been eligible for funding for grades 11 and 12 thereby resulting in the full integration of K to 12 schools into the Roman Catholic separate school system. This legislation created both possibilities and challenges for Ontario, the wealthiest province in what is an officially multicultural country (Bowman, 1991). The historical and political forces of this commitment to public education imply for the community of Catholic faith believers a vocation to the principles and practices of religious education (Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1987). Catholic education, in the Ontario context, has not necessarily focused completely on education in faith but on Catholic peoples' behavior according to the Gospel-vision (This Moment of Promise, 1989).

As the governmental department responsible for education the Ontario Ministry of Education's (OME) mandate is to prescribe curricula and implement the educational policies that are an outcome of the Ontario Legislature under the authority of the Education Act. The OME, by establishing curriculum policy, determines what teachers are required to teach and what students are required to learn in each of the respective grades and subjects. This process ensures a curriculum that is consistent across the province in all publicly-funded schools. In terms of defining the specific expectations and subject matter of each course, the OME publishes curriculum documents that articulate the knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire. Here too the curriculum documents establish consistent standards across Ontario (OME, 2010).

The OME and its provincial curriculum are legislated in all public and Catholic schools. The bridge between the OME and Catholic schools is represented by the Institute for Catholic Education (ICE). As an umbrella provincial body ICE was the creation of the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops in the mid-1980s. ICE,

Brings together, works with, and assists organizations that share responsibility for English Catholic education in their efforts to promote and maintain publicly-funded Catholic schools animated by the Gospel and reflecting the tenets of the Catholic faith. (ICE, 2010)

Among the organization's objectives as it relates to provincial curriculum is to coordinate material pertaining to Religious Education. Two documents published by ICE that are relevant to this discussion include, *Curriculum Matters* (1996) and *Our Catholic Schools*

(2007).

2.2 Curriculum Matters: A Resource for Catholic Educators

Curriculum Matters: A Resource for Catholic Educators (1996) suggests that all the partners in Catholic education share the responsibility to tailor provincial curriculum according to the unique characteristics of the Catholic faith tradition. It recognizes the limitations of the “one size fits all” curriculum authored by the OME, and argues that Catholic teachers must do more than simply include Catholic topics superfluously to mainstream curriculum. It further suggests that the Catholic faith is “the defining component in our educational identity” thereby marrying the values and beliefs of the Faith tradition to the enterprise of education (1996, p. 7). The relationship between faith, identity, and education serves as the premise for the following mandate: “Teachers need to accept that there is a Christian ministry component in their teaching and that their witness to the faith is important to the religious life of the school” (1996, p.8).

Furthermore, as a component of its philosophy of education, Catholic teachers and the Catholic community are obliged to consider how their Christian faith positively influences society at large. In aiming to address the whole student as believer and learner, Catholic educators engage students’ personal identity by fostering their intellectual, aesthetic, relational, and spiritual dimensions. In this light,

Learning occurs in a holistic fashion and the curriculum is described as an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary experience. Likewise, integration shifts or broadens the definition of curriculum to include the knowledge, values and skills that bring about a critical perspective on social and global issues. Curriculum functions in a transformative way, as a vehicle for personal and social change based on the principles of justice and the view of learner as agent of change. (1996, p. 25)

Catholic schools, thus, represent an ethic of life across the provincial curriculum to foster “the development of a community of conscience” (1996, p. 27).

2.3 Our Catholic Schools: Nurturing the Spirit of Faith and Learning

Our Catholic Schools: Nurturing the Spirit of Faith and Learning (2007) is an outcome of ICE’s intent to solicit the views and perspectives of the various Catholic school board constituents in Ontario. The publication recognizes the socio-political pressures that adversely affect Ontario’s Catholic schools. Among its findings was a focus on Catholic schools as institutions that foster students’ learning about social justice and community awareness. Many boards of education,

Reported the teaching of Catholic social justice values and service to others [as] a very distinctive component of Catholic education. The work that students in the pursuit of social justice [invest] to promote the kingdom of God on earth is what truly sets Catholic schools apart from the secular education system. Community service is a Catholic tradition. There is a real commitment to serving others, especially those less fortunate. (2007, p. 4)

A different finding elaborated upon the instrumental role of Catholic schools towards shaping students’ historical and spiritual values through the Faith traditions. School communities

significantly valued the traditions and history of Catholic education: “Catholic schools are steeped in a rich moral tradition that guides children in their decision-making” (2007, p. 6). Just as significantly, the document identifies the negative influence of the OME’s literacy and numeracy initiatives. It is critical of a rigorous provincial curriculum that prioritizes results in literacy and numeracy and thus undermines a focus on Religious Education since teachers are distracted by the pressure of public accountability to improve students’ scores on the provincial large-scale assessments.

2.4 First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework

The *First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007) document is situated in a historical context. Aboriginal peoples in Canada were granted Constitutional rights to an education system operated by the federal government in exchange for various land entitlements over 200 years ago. Well into the 1950s and in a few instances the 1990s Aboriginal children attended residential schools that were the responsibility of the Anglican, Presbyterian, United, and Roman Catholic Churches of Canada (Lobo & Talbot, 2001). The Churches’ mandate was to assimilate Aboriginal children into western and Eurocentric culture by eroding Aboriginal linguistic, spiritual, and cultural traditions. The fact that these residential schools were laden with cases of physical and sexual abuse is now well-documented (Haig-Brown, 1989; Walker, 2000). The acts of cultural genocide experienced by Aboriginal children separated from their families at the will of their religiously-driven teachers contributed to the extinction of Aboriginal communities’ epistemic values and learning traditions that continue to indirectly perpetuate Aboriginal student achievement (Battiste, 2000; 2002; Chansonneuve, 2005).

The *First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007) underscores the OME’s commitment to close the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students enrolled in publicly-funded schools. In it, the Framework describes the goals and strategies that school board administrators, principals, and teachers will employ to address and engage Aboriginal students’ unique cultural and epistemic learning traditions. It informs parents, students and taxpayers that teachers will develop and implement more inclusive and culturally-significant learning experiences for Aboriginal students in attempt to further engage them in their studies and to improve their performance on the provincial standardized tests. The Framework further discusses the importance of raising teachers’ awareness of Aboriginal history, cultures, and traditions in order for them to create inclusive and authentic learning environments in their classrooms that will foster Aboriginal student success. The OME identifies the de-habilitating historical injustices afflicted upon Aboriginal peoples as the impetus for improving their academic achievement:

The strategies outlined in this framework are based on a holistic and integrated approach to improving Aboriginal student outcomes. The overriding issues affecting Aboriginal student achievement are a lack of awareness among teachers of the particular learning styles of Aboriginal students, and a lack of understanding within schools and school boards of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit cultures, histories, and perspectives...It is also important for educators to understand the First Nations perspective on the school system, which has been strongly affected by residential

school experiences and has resulted in intergenerational mistrust of the education system. (Policy Framework, 2007, p. 6)

The significance of incorporating culturally-appropriate pedagogical practices that are embedded in teacher's approaches is discussed in the Framework. Teachers are commissioned, by the language of the policy document, to sustain coherent learning strategies that are contextually applicable to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. By respecting and making inclusive Aboriginal student epistemic preferences, the Framework suggests that Aboriginal communities and community leaders will be more willing to become involved in public schools and classrooms. One of the policy Framework principles declares the OME's commitment to "create and nurture an academic environment for every First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students that promotes the development of a positive personal and cultural identity, as well as a sense of belonging to both Aboriginal and wider communities" (p. 9). By establishing inclusive bi-epistemic classrooms that foster Aboriginal student identity building, the Framework declares that Aboriginal children, youth, and communities will experience improved educational outcomes.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Catholic Teachers and Education

The roles and obligations of Catholic teachers has been a topic of increased interest in not only Canada, but across the United States of America and Europe as well. In the United States, as an example, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1972) underscored that Catholics are agents of social justice and teachers are commissioned to engage students beyond the prescribed curriculum (Stewart, 2008). Catholic schools and the educators employed by them are considered extensions of the Church (Campbell, 2001; Dee, 2003). In fact, according to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1998), the social justice beliefs of Catholic education is understood as its defining characteristic. In Britain, as another example, Catholic schools and teachers reflect the Church's expectations that spiritual and moral traditions are inseparable (Catholic Bishops Conference, 1995). Catholic teachers, like the students attending Catholic schools, are expected to practice personal and professional qualities based on a moral code that permeates the entire school culture (OFSTED, 1995). Similarly, the Scottish Catholic Education Service is committed to ensuring that Catholic teachers have the knowledge, understanding and belief in the mandate of the Catholic Church and its philosophy of education (Coll, 2007). The Bishop's Conference (2001) identified a fundamental characteristic of this philosophy as developing the conscience of students to embody care for their fellow human beings and service to others. Although there is no doubt that teachers across various cultural and geographical boundaries are expected to contribute to students' formative development and prepare them to be active citizens (Schuitema, ten Dam & Veugelers, 2007; van der Zee & de Jong, 2009), there is a distinction in the literature that Catholic teachers are expected to espouse Gospel values and Church traditions to inspire learners, act morally, and promote the virtues of social justice and social responsibility (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The commitment to social justice and the expectation that Catholic teachers will practice

according to the moral and spiritual beliefs inherent in Catholic Church traditions resonates in the Ontario context as well. According to the Ontario Council of Catholic Bishops (1989), Catholic teachers live-out their Gospel vision and contribute to the greater good of society. In a separate document entitled, *Religious Education*, the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops (2006) call for religious educators to foster the Catholic identity of students and to work towards strengthening their relationship to their faith tradition. It states that religious education,

Is also designed to assist in the process of ethical and moral formation within a culture that all too often fails to recognize the call of God upon men and women, the fundamental dignity of the human person and the existence of absolute ethical norms. (2006, p. 2)

The Council suggests that by imparting Catholic values to students, Catholic teachers assume the ministry of catechist within their teaching profession. As transmitters of the faith Catholic teachers model what it means to be a follower of Christ and a witness to the Gospel. Furthermore,

The aim of all catechesis is the transmission of faith. It seeks to foster our students' faith, so that it may be living, conscious and active as they examine how, as Catholics they may follow Christ more closely and so embrace the truth, contribute to the good, and build a more just society with and for others. (2006, p. 4)

Catholic teachers are expected to assist students in discerning Catholic values in Canada's pluralistic society:

In the face of this situation, it is imperative that students be given the means with which to make sound moral choices and judgments in both personal and social spheres of life. Critical thinking and analytical skills assist in the efforts to integrate a Catholic worldview into decisions concerning such moral issues as respect for life, poverty, violence, racism, stewardship, and care for nature. (2006, p. 9)

It is imperative upon Catholic teachers to nurture students' attitudes consistently with Church teachings and their own moral and professional development as agents of change and people of service.

Further to the various expectations of Catholic teachers across national and international contexts, the literature also discusses how the interrelated expectations and educational policies impact upon both *what* teachers do but also *who* they are (Ball, 2003; Gommers & Hermans, 2003). This is in line with the research that suggests student-teacher's career choice is based on the fact that teaching is socially-meaningful given the potentially positive influence upon students (Younger et al., 2004). Some researchers identify the inner life of the teacher as having direct bearing upon their practice and effectiveness (Dadds, 1997; Mills et al., 2004). For Catholic teachers, the fact that their loyalty to the moral objectives of Catholic schools is complemented in the professional culture of their schools serves to affirm their sense of vocation to the profession (Hackney, 1998; Moore, 2000).

However, Catholic teachers' moral agency and commitment to the vocation of teaching is, according to some, limited by Ontario educational policy and the strict language of curricular structures and heightened public accountability (Schweisfurth, 2006). The focus on global competitiveness in Ontario over the last 25 years has embedded the language of student

expectations, and not course aims, into the same curriculum that mirrors policies related to provincial testing. Ontario Catholic teachers are presented with the challenge of adhering to provincial curricular expectations, satisfying the public ranking of schools according to standardized test scores, and abiding by their moral obligation to honor student dignity, evangelize according to faith traditions, and engage students' moral agency to causes of social justice (Shimabukuro, 2000).

3.2 Theory of Conscientization

Paulo Freire's educational theory that discusses approaches to teaching seems particularly applicable to this analysis. Freire (1970; 1985) suggested that teachers must consider the contemporary circumstances that shape their profession and lives in order to meaningfully examine the conditions that influence their actions. According to Freire, this involves critical thought (see McLaren & Leonard, 1993). In many respects such critical reflection naturally marries teachers' practice and theory to educational policy. It invites each individual teacher to conceptualize their own expressive and methodical educational interpretations based on personal experiences, traditions, and values. For Freire, this process of critical thought is complete when the individual engages in a dialogue with others in order to arrive at a better understanding of the respective conditions and circumstances. As Freire and Macedo (1995) stated they,

Never advocate either a theoretic elitism or a practice ungrounded in theory, but the unity between theory and practice. In order to achieve this unity, one must have an epistemological curiosity – a curiosity that is often missing in dialogue as conversation. (p. 379)

It is a process that is fueled by Freire's belief that each individual is capable of critically examining their circumstances and is obligated to do so through dialogue with others who experience the same circumstances. Freire's theory of conscientization, understood as the critical understanding of how individuals arrive at new realizations of the complexity inherent within social, political and epistemic relationships, may be an imperative course of action for Catholic teachers to prepare themselves for what is later described as a new and different level of professional and moral responsibility.

Consider as well Freire's understanding of praxis that calls for individuals to reflect upon their environment in order to take the respective actions to transform it (Freire, 2000). Such praxis allows the individual to perceive their realities, understand the circumstances, and in response assume a degree of action. Borrowing from Freire's criticism of the *banking model* of education wherein the teacher makes deposits of disconnected facts that the students memorize and repeat, is a line of thought that has particular significance to this inquiry. As Freire (2000) stated, "knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 72). In this view, reality is understood as an individual's activity in both the present and historical conditions of the world wherein these activities are situated. As conscious beings, individuals can make their own decisions given their relations to the environment and people around them. Freire (2000) qualifies that individuals can only be truly critical if they are committed to engaging in the praxis of

reflection:

Action encompasses a critical reflection which increasingly organizes their thinking and thus leads them to move from a purely naïve knowledge of reality to a higher level, one which enables them to perceive the causes of reality. (p. 131)

In this view, Freire advocates for individuals to assume a critical consciousness to consider reality.

4. Discussion

The responsibility of being a public school teacher in Ontario includes delivering the mandated provincial curriculum and being responsive to student achievement, including large-scale assessments. However, the responsibility of being a Catholic teacher in Ontario not only includes the professional imperative to authentically incorporate Catholic faith traditions in the curricular units of study and in pedagogy, but also that teachers abide by the moral imperative to embody Catholic values in their relationships with colleagues, students, communities, and the Church, and to foster issues of social justice. To compound the complexity for Catholic teachers, the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Framework* summons teachers to juxtapose provincial policies and Catholic practices in a broader epistemic consideration. To meaningfully respond to the mandate of the Framework, Catholic teachers must critically analyze ideological and political considerations of their practice – a process that is reflective of Freire’s theory of conscientization. By reflecting upon the implications of the Framework, Catholic teachers will be better positioned to take the necessary action required for this new and different level of professional and moral responsibility.

4.1 Implications for Catholic Teachers

To begin, the OME Framework acknowledges on behalf of all Ontario educators the historical inequities that have burdened Aboriginal peoples’ educational experiences in Ontario. The Framework implies that public school educators are well-intentioned in terms of their willingness to address Aboriginal student needs, but are in some cases generally unaware of the socio-historical and epistemic consequences of imperial assimilation practices. The Framework can to some extent be perceived as a collective commitment of all Ontario teachers to authentically represent Aboriginal ways of knowing and identity through intercultural sharing in the classroom (Castellano, 2000). Given the complexities of infusing Faith dimensions into mainstream curriculum and the pressures of public accountability to raise students’ assessment scores, the Framework further challenges Catholic teachers to engage in thoughtful analysis of their practice by consciously and critically reflecting upon how they will account for Aboriginal students’ learning preferences and appeal to their distinct needs. For teachers to sensitively implement their learned understandings of Aboriginal epistemologies in their pedagogy, they must be willing to reflect critically upon what may be in some instances unexamined epistemic learning paradigms. Teachers are compelled to reflect upon what Battiste (2005) refers to as, “the failures, dilemmas, and contradictions inherent in past and current educational policy and practice for First Nations students” (p. 3). Such reflection can in fact be the key conduit to

transfer thought into action, particularly if it involves a re-conceptualizing of teaching from the perspective of Aboriginal epistemologies.

This analysis suggests that the process of interrogating one's thoughts and engaging in critical discourse with others will accentuate teachers' awareness of the existing prejudices of a Eurocentric mainstream education system. To implement culturally-responsive Aboriginal practices and social customs into the classroom in the absence of a sincere understanding of the ideological and political implications of Aboriginal education risks only to further marginalize Aboriginal students from their mainstream peers (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh & Teddy, 2007). According to Freire, the ability to challenge and understand difficult value issues related to different peoples' worldviews must begin in reflective thought and constructive dialogue. For teachers to understand what it means to be critically different they must acquire a cogent understanding of the nature of enquiries innate to Aboriginal students and their communities, including "a deeper understanding of what Aboriginal children bring to school – their language, worldview, values, identity" (Cahill & Collard, 2003, p. 214). Through the praxis of reflection and action Catholic teachers may be in a better position to strengthen Aboriginal students' self-identity and self-esteem (McRae et al., 2008). From this platform the author uncategorically agrees with Cahill & Collard (2003) who concluded from their research aimed at enhancing the teaching of Australian Aboriginal students that,

Trying to influence what teachers believe is a whole lot more important than influencing what they do, because the things teachers believe affect everything they do. Beliefs impact not only on conscious, planning decisions such [the] selection of strategies and resources, but also on the spontaneous and incidental responses to the things students say and do. (p. 218)

Given that teaching and learning is often conflict-ridden and value-laden work, Freire's theory of praxis may never have been as significant for Catholic teachers.

Consider further, however, the expectation that Catholic teachers have responded to a higher calling in assuming their vocation as educators. In this vocation rests implications to embed in practice and action the Catholic Church's moral teachings that, according to the *Curriculum Matters* document, Catholic teachers and students are expected to "develop a trust in their own discernment as moral agents" (p. 20). It may be safe to assume, then, that gone are the days of Plato's philosopher kings who imposed direction on teachers to fulfill prescribed tasks and activities for the sake of social control. As moral agents who have the potential to reason normatively about matters related to values, justice, identity and power, it is being argued that genuine engagement in Freire's praxis is necessary for Catholic teachers to negotiate the competing perspectives and complexities of mastering provincial curriculum and standards of educational accountability in light of Catholic teacher expectations and Aboriginal educational policy.

4.2 Implications of OME Curriculum and School Practices

Assuming a commitment to matters of social justice, Catholic teachers as moral agents seem to be duty-bound to question the assumptions and biases inherent in mainstream provincial curricular and institutional practices in terms of the profound consequences on Aboriginal students and communities. Ideologically and historically, Aboriginal student epistemology

has not been represented in provincial standardized curriculum. For decades Aboriginal students have represented some of the lowest graduation rates across the province and country largely attributable to having their social, cultural, spiritual, linguistic and epistemic identities under-valued and excluded from provincial curriculum (Herbert, 2000). Aboriginal students' experiences and learning preferences have been disconnected from mainstream values and pedagogical practices (Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000). As moral agents, therefore, have Catholic teachers not been put in a position to take up the cause of the marginalized and engage critically with the incongruity in curricular and school practices to develop a more invitational and authentic educational praxis with Aboriginal communities? This is not to suggest that mainstream Catholic teachers should attempt to appropriate the experiences and wills of Aboriginal students and their communities; however, it seems that their vocation as Catholic teachers compels them to perceive reality from the perspective of the marginalized and not from political centers of power and privilege. By acquiring an understanding of the consciousness of the marginalized, perhaps, Catholic teachers will be able to understand the Aboriginal student experience in mainstream schools. More pragmatically, thus, Catholic teachers must be willing to examine critically, reflect thoughtfully, and dialogue constructively with colleagues and Church leaders at every level about the structures, curriculum, and institutional practices that are informed by public policy in this province. Teachers must recognize the significance of their moral obligation, and embrace the challenge of interrogating their own subjective interpretations of educational practice, student diversity, and faith traditions. Freire's model of praxis may be a most suitable vehicle to engage teachers in critical thought and subsequent action. Catholic teachers seem to be positioned in the policy Framework to become enlightened to the historical oppression of Aboriginal students and communities in school, and to the nature of present-day curriculum and practice that continues to marginalize against them. In fact, to continue practicing Euro-Canadian pedagogy driven by a western-influenced curriculum is equivalent to, according to some scholars,

Cognitive imperialism – a form of mind control, manipulation, and propaganda that serves elites in the nation [and stagnates] the reform required to achieve respectful and productive liberation for Aboriginal peoples from the educational apparatuses of colonialism. (Battiste, Bell & Findlay, 2002, p. 83)

A critical examination of these ideological and political implications also leads quite inevitably to Catholic teachers investing their conscious attention to heightening the awareness of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students to the long and dark history of intervention by the Catholic church that was imposed upon First Nation children and families. One can assume that as moral agents, Catholic teachers will have to program explanations for the evangelical aims of the Catholic Church that sought to assimilate Aboriginal cultures in direct spiritual traditions:

The decades in which parents were forcibly separated from their children resulted in the loss of the child-rearing skills of their ancestors. Many Native children were removed from their homes and dropped namelessly, and often untraceably, into non-Native middle-class homes. While giving new privileges to these children, most of the well-meaning parents were unable to satisfy the inevitable needs of Native

young people to connect with their past. (Bruce, 2003, p. 236)

Catholic teachers, through praxis, will have to prepare for the outcomes of the aforementioned implications that inevitably will cross into ideological, political, and moral spheres. On a practical level, Aboriginal parents, Elders, Faith Keepers and community leaders should be invited in collaborative discussions with mainstream teachers and school board administrators in order to ensure their authentic voice in the decision-making process (McCarty, Romero-Little & Zepeda, 2006). It may be prudent for school board officials to collaborate closely with Aboriginal Advisory Groups to assist in the implementation of the Framework's objectives.

5. Conclusion

In closing, Catholic teachers in Ontario are presented with a grand challenge. According to the legislation, they are required to teach provincial curriculum, abide by educational policy and account for Aboriginal students' learning needs and preferences in part to ensure student learning. The aforementioned challenge is not of course exclusive to Catholic teachers but in fact relevant to all educators of marginalized students practicing under the dictates of mainstream societies. This paper has invited all educators who may share this predicament to consider how engagement in Freire's praxis may be instrumental in negotiating these competing perspectives. As Catholic teachers, their vocation to teaching implies a moral imperative to be active agents of change in matters related to social justice. Freire's theory of conscientization may in fact be the most effective process for Catholic teachers to negotiate the political and ideological complexities of a Eurocentric curriculum in light of historically marginalized Aboriginal peoples. Through praxis, Catholic teachers may better understand not only *what* they do, but *who* they are.

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