

**Review of *First Nations in the twenty-first century: Contemporary educational frontiers***

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John W. Friesen and Virginia Lyons Friesen. (2005). *First Nations in the Twenty-First Century: Contemporary Educational Frontiers*. Calgary, AB: Detselig Enterprises Ltd. 224 pages. ISBN: 1-55059-293-9 (paperback).

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A sense of apprehension immediately exists anytime an Aboriginal person picks up a book about Aboriginal issues written by non-Native authors. Friesen and Friesen do not position their authority to write on such issues until the end of the book where an affiliation to the University of Calgary is revealed but there is no mention of a First Nations affiliation or connection.<sup>1</sup>

The authors state the primary aim of the book is to highlight several key educational frontiers identified by Indigenous leaders and educators who wish to define and resolve these issues on their own terms (p. 8), a risky undertaking for non-Native authors, to say the least. Early in the book the authors set up an 'us/them' (First Nations/non-First Nations) dichotomy, indicating that their principally intended audience is for non-Native Canadians, relieving them of some of the pressure of potential ridicule from First Nations readers.

The authors provide a good overview of Canada's colonial history in relation to Aboriginal peoples, presenting an important and sometimes missing contextual backdrop for the discussion of contemporary Aboriginal education for the mainstream reader. They overview First Nations history since the European invasion and the mass immigration of the last few centuries touching on issues such as the Bering Strait controversy; the fur trade; the introduction of horses, guns, and disease; the effects of the completion of the railroad; the formation of treaties and reserves; concepts of self-government; and the historical development of church-run schools. They also mention and briefly explain such pivotal publications as 'the White paper', 'the Red paper', the Hawthorn report, the Meech Lake Accord, and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People.

Besides the several-century long, brief history of First Nations issues, the most important contribution of this book is arguably its centralizing

of the issue of spirituality in Aboriginal education. An important acknowledgment of First Peoples' traditional approach to education through spirituality and worldview (which is inextricable) and European attempts to educate Aboriginal children through their own imported religions, is offered. By starting the discussion of Indigenous education with the history of state-endorsed, church-run schools for Aboriginal children in Canada, they immediately solidify the link of Aboriginal schooling to religion and spirituality. An in-depth and sophisticated analysis of similarities, differences, and relevant historical events between First Nations spirituality and Christianity is the main strength of this book. The authors go on to argue that one of the main reasons schools are failing Aboriginal children is a lack of spirituality and connection to their own worldview in the classroom (p. 172). This may well be the link mainstream educators and policy makers are missing. This argument, however, is ironically followed by the apparent Christian bias of the authors, as they exclaim their horror that Christmas is no longer welcome in Canadian classrooms (p. 172).

Although the authors' views are often quite balanced, they do lean towards more conservative and mainstream points of view which can reinforce the perpetuation of stereotypes and common misconception that First Nations people drain the system and live on the generosity of taxpaying citizens. For example they claim that, "Most reserve income... is generated off-reserve by nonNatives" (p. 25). Normalizing and justifying such views can be dangerous for all Aboriginal citizens, let alone school-aged children whom Friesen and Friesen are presumably out to protect. The authors close several chapters by encouraging the public to become better informed and influence government to take more responsibility, but then continue with their contradictions and put the responsibility to initiate and carry out change entirely back on Aboriginal people (p. 91, p. 149, p. 150). Although this is a refreshingly non-patronizing stance, it also dangerously implies the alleviation of responsibility on the mainstream public of their role in addressing the damage they and their forbearers were a part of instilling on Aboriginal people

Other than a short chapter near the beginning of the book that introduces the Aboriginal schooling run by the churches, the writers do

not exclusively focus on elements of education until the last quarter of the book. Although readers might view a large part of the book to be off-track from the discussion of education, Friesen and Friesen respectfully honour the wholistic worldview of Aboriginal people by tackling many facets of First Nations realities rather than immediately narrowing on one aspect, namely formal education.

The direct aspects of education the authors tackle are curricular reform and teaching strategies. They offer practical tips to educators, some of which may be helpful but others of which are over-generalizing and stereotypical such as 'children may not share the same sense of time' or 'may not look their teachers in the eye' (p.195). The tips provided are best taken with a dose of critical thinking and would most likely be useful to those with little-to-no prior experience or knowledge of First Nations communities. In addition, the tips provided are more specifically relevant to those working on-reserve in rural or remote areas as opposed to the urban situation, which is vastly different.

The authors exhibit many contradictions in their arguments, where the reader is left to wonder if they are trying to please too many different audiences or if they are unclear themselves on their stand on certain issues. For example, they are both advocates for and then later somewhat dismissive of subjects such as oral tradition (p. 42, p. 45) and maintenance of Aboriginal languages (p.148, pp. 176-177). However, many of their arguments are backed with relevant literature and draw on respected, contemporary First Nations authorities on education (Battiste & Barman; 1995; Binda & Calliou, 2001; Brant Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000; Haig-Brown, 1988; Long & Dickason, 2000).

This book would be most useful to those who were very new to First Nations issues combined with an interest in issues pertaining to Aboriginal education. Some readers may be attracted to this book over those written by First Nations educators because it could be perceived as less intimidating or more palatable for those unfamiliar with First Nations issues and want an "in" that will not be too jarring for an initial look. Anyone interested in Aboriginal education, who has not considered the important contribution that First Nations spirituality could make, may also want to consider reviewing this text. However, accessing some of the classic Aboriginal education texts (referenced

above) written by Aboriginal scholars themselves is strongly encouraged to provide perspective and balance to this text. Although some of these First Nations authors may have a personal bias of their own, it would be important to balance the views in this book with an exploration of the academic literature produced by the contemporary leading First Nations education scholars. Due to the ambitious nature and broad undertakings of this book, it has the danger of reading a bit thin. It does, however, provide a comprehensive overview and an abundance of references to orient the new reader to First Nations history, contemporary issues, and discussions of education.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In one of their previous publications, Friesen and Friesen (2002), reveal their near 15-year work history with the Stoney people in southern Alberta as Minister of the United Church and Director of Christian Education respectively.

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