

Debates about Aboriginal sovereignty, nationalism and self-government  
(Post-colonial insight for success in self-government)

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Achievement through empowerment by increased critical  
awareness and meaningful participation of Canada's native people at the  
local community level.

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the difficulties surrounding the establishment of sovereignty at the local First Nation community level by building on the work of Paulo Freire (1970) and Edward Said (1979), as well as more recent debates surrounding aboriginal education and self-government (Battiste, 1998; Schissel, 2003; Snyder-Joy, 1994; Shewell, 2004). The example of the Restoration of Jurisdiction (ROJ) project of the Union of Ontario Indians is used to illustrate the potential impact of increased critical awareness and participation for natives at the community level.

This paper discusses the difficulties surrounding the establishment of sovereignty at the local First Nation community level. Building on the work of Paulo Freire (1970) and Edward Said (1979), as well as more recent debates surrounding Aboriginal education and self-government (Battiste, 1998; Schissel, 2003; Snyder-Joy, 1994; Shewell, 2004), I assert that without increased local empowerment of people within First Nation communities, the successes anticipated under the larger umbrella of sovereignty cannot be easily attained. I will consider the ideological framework of the Restoration of Jurisdiction (ROJ) project of the Union of Ontario Indians (UOI) to illustrate the potential impact of increased critical awareness and participation for natives at the community level.

### **Personal Background**

I am an Ojibwe woman painfully emerging, and moving away from an endemic inter-generational legacy of systemic abuse, cruelty and injustice derived from policy grounded in racist beliefs. Life under the auspices of oppressive education policies of the

federal government has been arduous; however, I attribute my personal and academic achievement to the resiliency and perseverance of my ancestors. Today, I speak with the voice of my ancestors who have gone before me. The message remains the same, however others can now hear and react to this message, as I now possess an audible voice. A healing process has begun and extends outwards to all nations. The collective experiences of my people have directly influenced my life philosophy, and my teaching experiences, and relationships with fellow social reformers. These experiences have renewed my confidence in the great potential of awareness via increased community participation and critical academia.

To best understand my world-view, one must come to know the history of my people, as told by my people. But before I begin to share, I heed the wisdom of Smith (1991) wherein she asserts that indigenous research, too, must follow process to avoid the creation of more biased and harmful information. I acknowledge my bias, as an aboriginal researcher, at the outset of this paper, and remain objective and committed to helping improve the quality of life for Canada's First Nation people. That being stated, I endeavour to share the history of my people that has consequently shaped my own life philosophy. To best understand, one must start at the beginning of a story of unending struggles for respect. Under federal Indian policy, my grandparents, as children, were forced to leave their families to attend federal Indian Residential school. This was true for most aboriginal people in Canada during the mid-nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century (Miller, 1996). In the same manner, my parents, as children, were forced to attend federal Indian Day school on the Indian reservation – an isolated place where the Indian Act stipulated that native people must be 'educated.' A generation later,

the policy changed again and my generation was uprooted and sent away to be integrated into the mainstream public school system. In general, these collective experiences have left a lasting legacy of pain and failure that native people continue to struggle with today.

My life-changing event came with sudden awareness when my plans for becoming a teacher were scorned by non-native administrators. The pain inside of me ebbing from generations of mistreatment and silencing surfaced and found an outlet in writing. I was slowly coming to voice in academia but this was very difficult as I was attempting to move into a place where I, as native person, was not wanted or where others thought I did not belong. This was evident within the academy and provincial curriculum through the employment of racialized attitudes, stereotypical viewpoints, and the use of foreign teaching methodologies and pedagogies.

My undergraduate experience was not much different. When I did dare to raise issues of social injustice concerning aboriginal issues, at the risk of socially isolating myself, I was met with hostility driven by fear, ignorance, and racism. It was mortifying to be indoctrinated into self-abandonment and disillusionment. What kept me from total defeat was my connection to my roots – my community, people, and culture. Daily, I visited with my grandparents and they strengthened me through their resilience. Together we shared stories and they encouraged me to speak about my frustrations and to share them with others. In addition to this, I worked with the Elders from our community who taught the Ojibwe language. They mentored me and showed me how powerful teachers are. They also demonstrated for me the great responsibility that comes with teaching. I worked with native children and helped them to see how beautiful they were and how much potential they possessed. In turn, I came to see myself in their reflections and began

to realise how I could make a significant difference to my Anishinabek people through research and writing. I was becoming a critical and transformative pedagogue and I was positively influencing and encouraging many around me. I finally came to an understanding of the degree of pain I suffered from being silenced. The pain and frustrations of the generations before me flowed from my pen as I spoke with the heart of my ancestors.

As a native scholar, it is ironic that the western academy, which sets the tone for much of mainstream society's thinking, became a force of my liberation. From the institution, I learned how to write, think and follow in the traditions of western canon. This combined with the culture and lessons acquired from my own people, I learned how to love, forgive, share, and to move forward. It is a creative blending of these two worlds that has helped me to survive, and helped me understand how to approach and come to terms with injustice. I am committed to helping make the world a better place both for those who oppress and for those who persevere and survive. This thinking has sustained me throughout my research and continues to be a driving force in my doctoral research.

## **Introduction**

The assessment of the efforts to move toward increased native control and jurisdiction over matters of importance have unquestionably demonstrated that progress has been slow (Shewell, 2004; Senese, 1991). As a result, many native people still struggle with deplorable social ills within their communities from generation to generation. We can trace the beginnings of federal social policies designed to 'deal' with (assimilate) the 'Indian problem' to way back. For example, look at the 'Indian New

Deal' policy of the US during the early 1920s. Much time and many policies have come and gone, yet consider the state of many native communities today. (Senese, 1991). Considering a time span of close to a century, one would expect to see significant social, educational, and economic improvements for the native nations of Canada and the United States. However, this has not been the case. Native people in both Canada and the US remain one of the poorest and oppressed groups on a global scale.

Indigenous nations have struggled to re-create and retain the successes enjoyed prior to colonial rule via self-government. Progress in this area has been controversial and slow. Why has the development of increased self-government and ultimately sovereignty been slow in coming to fruition? Why have these endpoints been met with controversy? The answers to these questions rest with the degree of input, critical awareness, and empowerment of native people over control in all areas of life at the local level.

Several proposed explanations for the delayed development of native control over native affairs will be outlined in the paper to follow. These explanations provide the ROJ project with incentive to help native communities move ahead faster by actively encouraging capacity development and increased participation of all people at the community level.

### **Results of the literature in the field: Research, education, & self-government**

Literature in the field, (Agbo, 2002; Binda & Calliou, 2001; Senese, 1991) combined with insight from the preliminary work within my doctoral research, indicates that defining, identifying, and confronting ambiguous issues within self-government is paramount for achieving meaningful success in education for First Nation communities.

It is anticipated that this position will help narrow the gulf between ‘rhetoric’ and the ‘actuality’ of self-government initiatives. Does the literature in the field justify this paper’s position and related research? There has been much written about the intense social ills that First Nation people experience in Canada (Rupert, 1992; Kirkness, 1992, Battiste & Barman, 1995; Riley, 1993). Almost in direct relation to these findings are correlating studies that emphasis the need for strong self-government (Shewell, 2004; Senese, 1991; Bressette, 2000). However, there is not sufficient focus upon ‘how’ self-government will impact on people at the native community level. Needed are studies that endeavour to ascertain the degree of commitment, to and awareness and understanding of, self-government at the community level. Without the structured, organized, or informed input of all people, especially at the community level, native people are frequently left with the limiting option of simply replacing old colonial rule with more of the same, via their own people.

Although, after an assessment of the oppressive treatment of Canada’s native people, many understand the need for change, there is not sufficient focus upon the process of how to plan and prepare for self-government at the community level. The ROJ of the UOI understands this dilemma and has tried to increase participation at the community level via preparedness assessments and capacity development, but has experienced numerous challenges. Accordingly, this paper’s position is well justified in response to the overall deficit of sufficient literature that supports increased local community development and preparation for self-government through meaningful and informed participation. Ultimately, the lack of such research and limited general awareness, both for native peoples and those in mainstream society, helps to explain why

many native nations have not moved forward expediently in defining or accomplishing effective self-government at the local level.

### **History of the Native people in Canada**

Many aboriginal people in Canada have experienced difficulty in establishing positive and lasting relationships with others in mainstream society, and vice versa. This is a significant problem, as developing global communities require that all people come together, share perspectives, and engage in discourse that empowers and informs to facilitate social improvements, equity, and justice. This debilitating phenomenon is compounded by the fact that many from mainstream and native society willingly accept native withdrawal and non-participation as an acceptable norm. This deadlock stifles progress in all areas of Canadian society. This paper endeavours to explore systemic stumbling blocks and inequities that hinder the forging of positive relationships between aboriginal peoples, internally and externally, with mainstream society. I believe that aboriginal self government can be a powerful force to help shape new relationships in all areas of society.

It is important to examine the present state of affairs of Canada's aboriginal community in relation to the postcolonial and concept-driven theories of Freire (1970) and Said (1979) which help to address issues of oppression and unequal power relations. This investigation is unique in that issues will be considered from a critical aboriginal perspective. The position of insider looking out provides valuable insight into the dynamics that significantly influence, shape, and sustain aboriginal society (Smith, 1991).

Central to this inquiry is a focus on identity. The legacy of poor inter-racial relationships premised upon federal legislation and oppressive institutions, for example the Indian Act and federal Indian education policies which allowed for the existence of the devastating Indian residential schools (Miller, 1996), continues to haunt native people today. In addition to heavy emphasis on re-establishing meaningful and healthy forms of self-identification, I postulate that jurisdictional and financial control over education, and all other areas of significance, inclusive of all stakeholders in decision making, will lead to clearer notions of native identity. Hence, meaningful involvement at the local level has the potential to strengthen and prepare aboriginal people for success within the larger social context. The need for and benefits of such have been well articulated by *the Indian Control of Indian Education* policy (National Indian Brotherhood (NIB), 1970). Emphasis on ‘empowerment’ and ‘ownership’ will ensure that native people are provided with the incentive to initiate relevant programs needed to facilitate the acquisition of skills and opportunities needed to become increasingly productive, functional, and contributing members of Canadian society.

Through education and empowerment, native people are provided with the opportunity to be heard and to challenge injustice according to the wisdom of the Elders and the traditions of a powerful heritage. The principle objective of my doctoral research is to raise awareness levels through education and, in so doing, raise confidence levels and increase the incidence and participation levels of skilled and professional aboriginal people within the Canadian and global workforce and academy.

## **The ROJ project of the Union of Ontario Indians**

The ROJ (Restoration of Jurisdiction) project is a response to the ongoing struggles that aboriginal people have experienced in relation to federal policy and systemic racism. The ROJ is committed to transferring control back to First Nation people through the establishment of increased community jurisdiction and control. This project, involving native people, is different from federal or other national level native incentives in that the project is not being imposed on the people at the community level. The ROJ is a project that is created and administered by native people with the direction of those at the local community level. Each community of the Union of Ontario Indians is working independently on understanding what self-government means. The next step is to bring these collective ideas together for the purposes of establishing a unified definition of self-government necessary to help establish a guiding framework for other developments associated with sovereignty.

The ROJ project is a vehicle that has potential to initiate formal dialogue surrounding the actualization of self-government in education and governance at the community level. I believe that this community approach to defining and establishing self-government is a more effective approach to facilitating the development of meaningful definitions and forms of self-government than work exclusive to the national level where mandates and programming transcend downward to local communities. Native nations have had more than enough exposure to unsuccessful top-down hierarchical approaches to administration. It is time to return to our roots and re-establish effective community-based self-rule that best reflects the interest of the people at the local community level. This call for increased decentralization does not minimize the

importance of effective native leadership at the native national level. Indeed, the Assembly of First Nations plays an important role at the national level in negotiations with the federal government. However, if every day people at the grassroots level are not consulted or provided with a meaningful role in the development and implementation of self-government, there will be less support, success and growth to sustain self-government initiatives. A deficiency in awareness and ownership of incentives correlate strongly, in general, with decreased participation and action (NcNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996). Without the support of the people at home, there will be little unified success at the national level.

*Niigan Zhaa-daa: Let's go forward* (2003), provides a refreshing overview of the objectives and community-oriented building processes involved within the ROJ project:

The objective of the self-government negotiation process, called the 'Restoration of Jurisdiction,' is to achieve recognition of the law-making authority of the Anishinabek First Nations. Without defining the inherent right to self-government, nor defining or affecting treaty and Aboriginal rights, Canada and the Anishinabek Nation have negotiated the Agreement-in-Principle with respect to the Exercise of Jurisdiction over Education. The AIP is not legally binding and requires Band Council Resolutions (BCRs) from each First Nation to approve it. Once approved, negotiation of a Final Agreement will begin using the AIP as the guide. If a Final Agreement can be reached and is ratified by a community vote in each First Nation the Anishinabek will have jurisdiction over the education of community members from junior kindergarten to grade 12. A new funding arrangement will be negotiated to finance the Anishinabek Education System. The AIP represents an opportunity to make 'Indian Control of Indian Education' (NIB, 1970) a reality. Our children are our future and the future depends on the effectiveness of our education system. (Niigan Zhaa-daa: Let's go forward, 2003)

Direct community involvement and participation is required by all communities who are part of the UOI and involved in the ROJ project. The effort to seek the input of as many individuals as possible has prompted the ROJ to seek and create indigenous knowledge in a variety of ways. For example, listening to people, sharing with people, and healing with people. This process has also lead to the development of workshops for capacity

development, and to raise the awareness level of self-government to better enable the people at the grassroots level to make informed decisions. As this approach to activism is action-oriented, it has already encouraged a general increase in participation in numerous areas of local community development and success.

Community facilitators for the ROJ project are using a form of action research within aboriginal communities and have experienced increased participation, understanding, and contributions amongst First Nation community members (personal communication). Increased participation has led to an increase in dialogue and awareness (Restoration of Jurisdiction, 2002). The ROJ community facilitators take direction from the communities and this input accomplishes two things. One, community participation directs how individual First Nations will approach the goal of achieving increased jurisdiction over education and governance; and two, increased interaction works as a model for individual communities to follow in soliciting input from the community for increased participation. This research approach is working to create awareness of the need for increased and meaningful participation; however, I believe that people must be encouraged and provided with the opportunity, through researcher (or leader) modeling or facilitated skills acquisition, to critically reflect upon the many issues surrounding First Nation education and community government. This includes the process of critically examining personal beliefs and seeking out the reasons that encourage and sustain the persistence of oppressive thoughts. When people are encouraged to critically reflect upon issues and share, a dialogue is opened, and more ideas circulate. People move closer to defining and creating workable and relevant solutions to their problems. Action research facilitates awareness and consciousness-

raising, and helps research participants to better understand past and present circumstances (Robertson, 2000). Action research also stimulates people to move beyond merely talking about and identifying problems, to next steps of deciding what remains to be done next, and how. (Schwalbach, 2003)

### **The need for increased participation at the local level**

Significant changes to and within First Nation education have not occurred expediently. In fact, many of the same issues that my great grandfather struggled with surrounding education sadly remain today. This problem is compounded by many issues (Battiste & Barman, 1995) that effect overall participation and awareness levels within First Nation communities. Low participation rates and a reduced achievement in education, in many cases within First Nation communities, is a growing concern amongst aboriginal educators. As aboriginal communities confront the challenges of assuming control over their own education systems, it becomes imperative to consider what kind of schooling should be developed and offered, and how best the needs of First Nation children and their families can be met. The work of the ROJ emphasizes the benefits of an improved education system for aboriginal learners:

The reason for entering into and continuing with negotiations is to ensure governments recognize Indian control over Indian education. It is to secure the funding required by the First Nations to establish and maintain the Anishinabek education system. The long-term benefit to this new education system will be an improvement in the education level, retention levels, graduation rates and overall success of our Anishinabek students. (Restoration of Jurisdiction, 2004)

Action oriented research approaches to furthering the ideals of self-government will assist in the process of creating and proposing policy and practice initiatives that will strengthen First Nation education through increased participation of all levels.

## **Reflection upon the ROJ**

The Restoration of Jurisdiction project is committed to increasing the jurisdiction, through consciousness raising as a form of education, and participation, over education for First Nation people. However, it is not surprising that many ROJ field personnel encounter difficulties in trying to realise the objectives of the project in their work with people at the grassroots level. There is a long history of oppression to contend with that ROJ workers frequently encounter in their efforts for the advancement of increased self-government. Understandably, it is difficult to challenge pessimistic thinking and introduce 'new' thinking regarding education for many First Nation. Questions to be raised concerning this reality beg several questions. For example, 'how has past positivistic research contributed to the hopeless attitudes held by many native people?' 'How does this reality effect how ROJ workers, or other workers of other projects, will proceed or alter the project?' And, 'how has past negative experiences with federal Indian policy (ie. residential school) effected how receptive native people are to education?'

Past and present forms of communication and interactions between education stakeholders have been and, in many cases, remain ineffective. This is problematic as many native education systems involve an extension and application of mainstream (dominant culture) curriculum and philosophy into First Nation schools (Vallerand & Menard, 1984; Battiste, 1998). There are many individuals, including education professionals, who realize that the present system is not working for Anishinabek students (Danziger, 1992); however, there is limited access to avenues for intra-reserve/native community collaboration and discussions (information taken from my

personal experiences as a member of native Board of Education, 1998-2005). Presently, there exists no native teachers' union in place for the many native education professionals in Ontario. Hence, there is a great need for professional literature development to support First Nation education. Professional development for First Nation educators consists primarily of tapping into the professional development supplied by mainstream systems and public boards (Danziger, 1992). Since education stakeholders are not effectively collaborating with each other, there are unnecessary strains throughout many First Nation education systems and less impetus to work together.

Since First Nation communities desire an increase in jurisdiction over education, First Nation people at the local level must work to understand the potential of this desired devolution of power and control. All education stakeholders must develop an understanding of the implications of self-government project objectives, and how the outcome(s) will benefit both First Nation and mainstream societies. This step forward is possible following the philosophical framework of the ROJ project where it is believed that native people already possess the solutions to our own problems. However, before this can happen, education stakeholders need to explore new concepts of education and new constructions of schooling more suitable and culturally relevant to aboriginal students (Cleary & Peacock, 1998). The ROJ can be a stimulating example for the collective First Nations as they move closer to emancipatory objectives through critical reflections and evaluations. These processes are needed to justify and develop schools that will truly help young aboriginal students and their families and communities to succeed.

## **National trends**

There is no question that Canada's First Nation people have and continue to be aware of various forms of oppression, such as federal and other forms of government control. Although this is true to some degree, it is not clear as to what degree native people come to reflect upon oppression at various levels of consciousness within their own communities and individual lives. This is by no means any statement of disrespect. On the contrary, I give significant credit to the intelligence, creativity, and resilience of Canada's native people for responding to oppression sufficiently so as to survive as distinct nations into present day.

The notion of the importance of consciousness raising is strengthened through the emancipatory works of Freire (1970) wherein he questions the degree of awareness or critical consciousness that many oppressed people possess, and the circumstances, such as limiting governing structures, which actively prevent people from full emancipation. In the assessment of the effectiveness of self-government, the question of sovereignty comes to the forefront.

## **Defining Sovereignty**

Sovereignty is defined as independent rule. Native people in Canada assert their right to sovereignty through the creation of treaties with other foreign sovereign nations. To realize a meaningful concept of sovereignty, native peoples all across Canada and the United States have been trying to obtain self-government or self-determination in some fashion. Many native groups, and even the federal government, struggle with developing, defining and accepting a universal definition for self-government. This difficulty in

defining self-government itself has been a major problem in the ongoing controversy over the larger concept of aboriginal sovereignty in Canada.

### **Hope through education & reform: A post-colonial solution**

The theoretical frameworks and concepts subscribed to within this paper reflect the past and present experiences of many members of marginalized groups, as post-colonial approaches allow the marginalized or disempowered to challenge unchallenged hegemony. Education has proven to be an area where significant change occurs. This was certainly the experience of Freire (1970) when education, brought to the peasantry via literacy, aided in various forms of emancipation and opportunity. Similarly, for native people, the effect of creating our own indigenous knowledge through research (Smith, 1991) and awareness is empowering. Indigenous knowledge creation and education has the potential for re-claiming and re-establishing aboriginal identity; legitimizing the authority of the native nations; and unity creation.

Education aids in the development of increased self-government initiatives. There are numerous positive outcomes for mainstream society because of increased awareness and education of issues that pertain to native people. For example, when non-native people come to obtain increased understanding of these issues, we can anticipate improved understanding, communication, relationships, and networking. As an instructor of a university course titled, *Teaching First Nation Students*, I have witnessed how education and awareness raising, for all people (Cleary & Peacock, 1998) can make a tremendously positive impact on classroom practices and on society in general. The success achieved in demystifying native culture makes sense, according to the theory of

Said (1979), as how we come to see the ‘other’ directly relates to how we see ourselves. Thus, to accurately understand the other, we need to understand, challenge, and test the concepts that we hold of ourselves, and of others. According to both Freire and Said, this practice of education, reflection, and increased awareness is part of how the oppressor and the oppressed comes to understand the self, and through such revelation, comes the possibility of and motivation for positive change.

Said’s (1979) theory of ‘Orientalism’ is helpful as it encourages people to reflect upon the power of western domination that has, so effectively, marginalised and ‘othered’ so many groups of people. Natives in Canada are a prime example of a group that has been systemically ‘orientalized.’ The concept-driven approaches of Freire strive for consciousness of these issues and social-justice through action. Both Said and Freire believe that the oppressed are indeed the people who must initiate change through awareness and then re-education. Without critical awareness and action, there can be no change. These very sentiments may well prove to be a most illuminating point of this paper.

### **Edward Said’s *Orientalism***

The objective of Said’s *Orientalism* is coming to know the true ‘Oriental.’

...the orient and the orientals are considered by Orientalism as an ‘object of study, stamped with otherness – as all that is different, whether it be ‘subject’ or ‘object’ – but a constitutive otherness, of an essentialist character ... This ‘object’ of study will be, as is customary, passive, non-participating, endowed with a ‘historical’ subjectivity, above all, non-active, non-autonomous, non-sovereign with regard to itself: the only Orient or Oriental or ‘subject’ which could be admitted, at the extreme limit, is the alienated being, philosophically, that is, other than itself in relationship to itself, posed, understood, defined – and acted-by others” (Said, p. 97).

Many have come to understand the ‘Orient’ or the marginalized other as a “living tableau of queerness” (Said, p. 103). Said saw the need to break down this narrow paradigm of understanding and challenge orientalism and liberate people from limiting and oppressive mindsets. I believe, based upon my past personal and academic experiences, that such liberation is also necessary within First Nation communities at the local level. According to Said, a “political vision of reality ...[present within numerous social structures]... promotes [and strengthens] the difference between the familiar and the strange” (Said, p. 43). Said explains how orientalism works to distance the powerful dominant group from the powerless and marginalized. Unfortunately, this concept is true of both internal and external forces of control of local native life at the community level.

An adequate understanding of this concept of hierarchy and unequal power relations is necessary for one to be able to comprehend the didactic relationship between federal government (and mainstream society) and native people in Canada. Hence, Said’s notion of orientalism exposes oppression and cultural domination for the benefit of all people, whether they be oppressors or the oppressed. Said’s revolutionary theory of orientalism illustrates the dangers and temptations associated with uncritically employing and abiding within oppressive social structures and discourses. There is a real danger in ignorance and such provides impetus for the development of a critical perspective and response at the collective community level.

### **Paulo Freire’s consciousness raising**

In addition to the theory of Said (1979), there is inspiration to be found in the works of Freire (1970, 1973, & 1974) as such strives for “conscientization” or awareness

and social-justice through action. Paulo Freire was born in Brazil on September 19, 1921 (Freire, 1970, p. 30). His difficult life experiences, hunger and poverty, deeply influenced his life work. His experiences reveal the interconnection between social class, knowledge, and privilege. Freire lived among the poor and therefore gained a deep understanding of the challenges and significant socio-economic influences that negatively impacted the lives of the oppressed.

Similar to Said's theory, Freire's response to oppression follows a post-colonial tradition. Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* sheds light on areas of oppression that exists within the lives of many people today. The concepts located within Freirean ideology encourage oppressed people to critically and actively reflect upon their reality(ies) in order to transform such. Freire's theory is action-based which commands active participation of all stakeholders. The basis of his ideology and pedagogy rest in his belief in the dialectical nature of the world. For Freire, the dialectical nature of the world demands that people be actively engaged in critically investigating the truths of their worlds (Witham, 1982, p. 93). Examples of this progressive philosophy can be seen through Freire's pedagogy of literacy education where learners not only read the word, but also read the world: a dialectical approach. Such action involves the development of critical consciousness, where oppressed people come to question the nature of their historical and social situations. Critical consciousness moves oppressed groups closer to the opportunity of creating and participating within a true participation-driven democracy.

Freirean epistemology functions to challenge the unchallenged. This is similar to Weiler's (1991) notion of "shattering ...western metanarratives"(p. 23). The creation and

validation of narratives, stories, or perspectives that disrupt the ‘grand narrative’ or the mainstream ‘world-view’ ideology is at the center of Freire and Said’s post-colonial approaches. Social justice is central to these approaches, and has therefore has become an important objective of the ROJ is efforts to create equality and success in educational and self-government initiatives at the local First Nation level.

### **Critical Consciousness & Awareness**

“It has been estimated that around 60,000 books dealing with the Near Orient were written between 1800 and 1950; there is no remotely comparable figure for Oriental books about the West. As a cultural apparatus, Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgement, will-to-truth, and knowledge. The Orient existed for the West, or so it seemed to countless Orientalist, whose attitude to what they worked on was either paternalistic or candidly condescending...” (Said, 1979, p. 204).

From this statement, we learn that change can only come after awareness of the degree and perpetuation of oppression and empowerment – after we theorize our oppression and move toward action. Critical or consciousness awareness is central to the theory-informed approaches of Said and Freire and the ROJ project. Critical consciousness is achieved when one develops a critical awareness of the contradictions of the world and then strives to overcome through action premised upon new understandings (Witham, p. 92). Critical awareness or consciousness is more than becoming aware; it is about action and active participation of all stakeholders in defining the order of our worlds. ‘Conscientization’ is the liberating process through which people critically understand their reality, establish praxis (a dialectical interaction of action and reflection), and thereby begin to ‘humanize’ themselves (or become critically aware of their socially-constructed unequal human existence) (Freire, 1970, p. 44).

Premised upon the results of the numerous interviews of native people on the subject of self-government and achievement, I anticipate that awareness of internal and external forces of oppression on native people at the community level has the potential to facilitate much in the way transformative action through increased and meaningful community participation. According to the ROJ project, this objective can be accomplished through increased control and jurisdiction over education.

Liberation requires conscientization. Greene (1988) believes that “when people cannot name alternatives, imagine a better state of things, share with others a project of change, they are likely to remain anchored or submerged, even as they proudly assert their autonomy”(p. 9). Based upon my intimate experiences of life both on and off the native reservation, I believe that this has been the case for many native people in Canada under restrictive external and internal colonial rule. Nielsen (1992) reinforces this position when he asserts that ‘false consciousness’ is a state of false reality, and the persistence of this has led to many forms of disillusionment at the community level. If unchecked, false consciousness prevents the oppressed from understanding their reality (p. 280). False consciousness manifests itself in numerous forms, however, a most destructive form frequently persists through unchecked and unchallenged home rule at the community level where oppressive structures weaken the opportunity for community enlightenment and involvement.

Obviously, change is difficult to accomplish in the absence of knowing ‘how’ or ‘what’ to change. Consider the example of a fish in water. Is a fish aware of the fact that it is surrounded by water? (Likewise, do oppressed people know that they are oppressed?) Or, because the fish was hatched in water, grew up in water, is always and

has always been in water and is therefore not aware of the ever-present existence of water, prevented from the impetus to question water? When people are born into oppression, live with oppression from generation to generation, and unconsciously validate and maintain oppression by not questioning it, oppression persists. Native peoples in Canada and the oppressed worldwide, continue to be faced with this problem everyday. However, there is hope with the increase of research that strives to create a new level or heightened sense of awareness or paradigm that will help challenge hegemony through action.

Critical consciousness is an active process, endorsed by Said and Freire. It does not come to pass by analyzing the problematic situation in isolation. Rather, transformation comes via action as we begin to assess the impact of all negating forces on our life. Dialogue acts as a means for “fostering critical consciousness about social reality, [which is] an understanding based on knowledge of how people and issues are historically and politically situated” (Sohng, 1995, p. 7). Change is possible when people become aware of and begin to emerge from their false consciousness, just as “the peasant begins to get courage to overcome his dependence when he realizes that he is [indeed] dependent” (Freire, 1970, p. 61).

There is reason to be encouraged by the potential for native people to become critically aware of internal and external forces of oppression through the application of critical frameworks, which include counter-hegemonic ideology, objective problem-posing, and solution-focused approaches that emphasize critical consciousness, dialogue, and engaged participation.

## **The struggles of Self-government**

There are additional reasons that help to explain the slow development of self-government objectives of native peoples. One significant reason for the lack of enthusiasm for self-government by some native people is due to a well justified fear of the unknown combined with a fear of loss. Senese (1991) termed this warranted fear “termination psychosis” as Native people have struggled from generation to generation trying to protect their treaty rights from the continual recoiling of responsibility of the federal government. In addition to this, some native people experience difficulties in working within their own local governments and institutions who choose to utilize, perhaps unconsciously, the paternalistic and colonial leadership styles and hegemonic practices employed historically by the federal government and colonial ideology. The impact of such internalized oppression has resulted in community disillusion on a broad scale.

Natives were systematically prevented from realizing their full and independent potential as a result of federal Indian education policy. An analysis of the results of the thorough documentation of Senese (1991) reveals that federal Indian “educational planning was never a serious critical response to economic prerogatives” (p. 20). In fact, educational initiatives for native people were used to help assimilate native people into mainstream culture. The devastation that ensued as a result of the federal Indian education or social control policy was disastrous (Miller, 1996; Whattam, 2003). This is especially obvious when one considers the lasting and negative impact of Indian Residential school, of which my grandparents were survivors. The impact of the negative legacy left from these educational institutions is still felt strongly today.

The response to internal and external forms of oppression was and, likewise in many cases, remains a lack of participation in the decision making of native people. Resultantly, it has been difficult to enlist the full participation of many First Nations community members to solve their own problems as many are coming from a long history of oppression where participation and control was not encouraged or permitted. Freire would agree that many oppressed people do not fully realize the extent to what they are oppressed. Senese (1991) reflects upon this problem and is not surprised by disillusionment manifested via policy and programs designed to operate without local control and input. He asserts that “...Indians are no different from any other people, in that they respond to the extent they are participating in something” (p. 51). This statement helps to sum up the reasons contributing to a wide scale lack of participation of native people in the control over their own affairs.

A lack of participation leads to a lack of general awareness and consciousness raising. This is why all leaders (Elders, chiefs, elected officials, teachers, administrators, and parents) must encourage all people, young and old, to look at areas of difficulty collectively for common and recurring themes.

At this point, it may be helpful to argue that some First Nations have not accomplished self-government in a wider sense because they have been busied in too many areas of uncoordinated preservation projects simultaneously. For example, many natives have been busy working toward efforts for culture and language preservation; efforts to quell internal factions; and efforts to protect treaty rights from ongoing debates of the federal government regarding its fiduciary responsibility to natives as outlines in the treaties. This is especially true in the area of health. It may be argued that these

consuming external attacks, and internal sources of ongoing strife, has worked to distract from the collective development of organized efforts at the native community level to define self-government and set relevant goals that actively involve the entire community in a meaningful way. Certainly the lack of a commonly defined and accepted definition of self-government has not helped.

## **Conclusion**

Senese (1991) and Shewell (2004) have reflected extensively upon barriers to native progress. In his book, *On the Theory of Social Change*, Hagen (1962) developed an interdisciplinary thesis of effective development by examining “the factors, which cause a traditional society to become one in which economic growth is occurring. His analysis led him to conclude that traditional societies could not progress through the mere imitation of western structures. Rather, a climate must be formed in which traditional societies [such as Canada’s First Nations] can participate and subsequently create the conditions for economic change” (Senese, p. 45).

Hagen’s creation of the notion of ‘climate’ can only become a reality through the creation of increased critical awareness and participation of native peoples themselves in authoring their goals and objectives. He advocated for the development of an environment in which the underdeveloped society could create its own conditions for change, rather than have change imposed upon them, or the limiting option of merely providing opportunities supported by mainstream society for imitation by native people. Accordingly, Hagen emphasized that “the maintenance of traditional culture...[is] a seedbed for the roots of chance” (Senese, p. 46). This point has been revolutionary, to the

extent that we have the ROJ project endeavouring to provide native communities with locally-created strategies to gain control of and preserve their culture in meaningful and relevant ways.

Critical awareness remains a significant part of success for the development of self-government. Critical education provides an opportunity for people to see their realities in a different light. Throughout this paper, there has been much reflection upon the various sources and origins of oppression. Schools and certain education policies have been devastating forms of oppression in both Canada and the United States. Schools have been, and, in many cases, continue to operate as sites of oppression as they have been shown to perpetuate the present socio-economic structure in favour of the privileged (McCarthy, 1998). An oppression-based education system can be viewed as a major contributor of student and community alienation (Schissel, 2003; Brady, 1996; Mackay & Myles, 1989). In addition, students also must contend with rigid hierarchies within the school, and ‘banking-model’ concepts of education. In the banking model, people are deprived of the development of critical discernment and prevented from intervening in the world as transformers (Freire, 1970, p. 73).

The banking-model education system is similar to Lockean developmental theory (Crain, 2000, p. 6) where the learner relies upon another for legitimization and knowledge. To combat this, Freire believes in ‘problem-posing’ education where people are “put into a critical confrontation with their own problems [through awareness] and are allowed [encouraged] to be responsible for any resultant change (Freire, 1974, p. 87). Therefore, having ‘control’ over the situation is, indeed, the only way to have success and ownership within the situation.

According to the critical education theory of Freire, conformity to pre-established notions or universal truths is reinforced in schools making oppression the hidden socialized objective of major social institutions (Freire, 1970, p. 155). Despite this education remains central to both Freire's and Said's notion of liberation. According to Freire and Said, and the objectives of the ROJ, native people must be fully engaged with all stages of decision making. This means that all community members must be provided with skills needed to help make informed decisions; all must be actively encouraged and enabled to participate within the day to day control over their own lives; and all must begin to become active participants within the experience of freedom. This process means that all people, especially the oppressed, "deal critically and creatively with reality and discover [or rediscover] how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Freire, 1970, p. 34). By establishing and practicing "freedom as praxis," the oppressed come into a new awareness and identity that empowers and makes liberation a reality. The philosophy, objectives, and operating practices of the ROJ can provide many native people with the incentive to take control of their own lives as active participants and authors of their own realities.

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