

Reconciliation, Justice, and Indigenous Education

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John Hopkins proposes to “examine critically the meaning of justice that implicitly informs the inclusive discourse characterizing IEFA.” For Hopkins, the meaning of justice includes the aims of reconciliation and inclusion. The primary aim of my response will be to question and challenge this understanding of justice as it applies to Indigenous education.

JUSTICE AND INCLUSION

According to Will Kymlicka, justice for minority national groups, including Indigenous peoples, is fundamentally a matter of addressing Indigenous demands for self-government and political sovereignty.¹ Here the demand for justice is a demand for separation from the nation-state rather than for inclusion within it; in other words, the desire of the minority national group is precisely to *avoid* greater integration and inclusion in the society of the majority nation-state.

Importantly, a key part of the demand for political sovereignty on the part of Indigenous groups is often a demand for control over their own tribal schools. As such, Indigenous people need not seek justice through greater representation in the curriculum, pedagogy, and school ethos of the “mainstream” public school system of the nation-state. In precisely this respect, it might seem that legislation such as Montana’s new *Indian Education For All* (IEFA) legislation is ill-suited for addressing historical and contemporary injustices toward Indigenous groups.

Typically minority national groups seek to assert greater control of their own schools and school systems, so that they can determine their own curricula and pedagogical practices, design their own institutions, and so forth. Notably, this aspiration may entail schools that are exclusively for Indigenous students. Nevertheless, even if demands for separate Indigenous schools do not explicitly bar access to non-Indigenous students, geographical realities may be such that no or very few non-Indigenous students will be likely to attend.² As such, Indigenous schools will be *de facto* restricted to Indigenous students.

In any case, the overall shape of educational justice when conceived along these lines leads in the direction of advancing separate and specialized Indigenous education rather than seeking greater inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in the mainstream curriculum alongside those of other ethnic, racial, and religious groups.

If the model of justice outlined above is accepted, then Indigenous people stand (or should stand) in a “nation to nation” relationship with their colonizers. Correspondingly, according to this conception of justice, why should the discussions be about how to implement Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum of mainstream schools rather than about how to create better (or perhaps more “authentic”) Indigenous schools? In short, it is far from clear why, from the perspective of justice, the “authentic conversations” about Indigenous education should have much at all

to do with matters of inclusion in mainstream schools, rather than with conversations about how to facilitate better *separate* and *exclusive* schools for Indigenous nations — at least when such schools would accord more closely to Indigenous demands for political sovereignty?

I take it that these questions apply more broadly than to Hopkins's focus on the specific case of Montana's IEFA legislation. Nevertheless, in the present context, the question can be phrased as follows: Why should the conversation about Indigenous education be about how to best implement policies like IEFA at all? Perhaps the IEFA model is itself the problem; more specifically, the aspiration to inclusiveness that underwrites IEFA may be more accurately understood as a form of renewed, if indirect and unintentional, assimilationist educational and political agendas of colonial nation-states, rather than part of a just solution to the demands of historically disadvantaged groups.

In the limited space of a short response, my claim here is not that "inclusive" approaches to Indigenous education are necessarily unjust. Rather, my main point is that the question of what constitutes "justice" in the case of Indigenous groups is contentious in ways that call into question the justice of inclusive approaches as represented by IEFA. As such, before one can begin to assess such policies from the perspective of justice, one must first address more systematically questions about what justice means in the case of Indigenous groups. If justice is interpreted as a matter of political sovereignty, as Kymlicka argues, then no matter how "authentically" policies such as IEFA are applied in practice, they would constitute an unjust approach to Indigenous education. If justice is not primarily a matter of achieving political sovereignty, then we would need to know in more detail what is the alternative conception of justice that applies in this case, what is the justification for it, and in particular what reasons would Indigenous peoples have for accepting such a conception of justice instead of an alternative conception that prioritizes claims of minority national autonomy?

RECONCILIATION AND DEMOCRACY

Nevertheless, achieving reconciliation between Indigenous populations and majority nations is a *prima facie* desirable goal, so this is a question I would like to pursue in the remainder of this response. First, it seems to me that Hopkins's reference to Bashir Bashir's three principles of reconciliation has a lot to recommend it, and so I think Hopkins makes a good contribution in emphasizing the need for reconciliatory efforts by colonizing nations to forthrightly acknowledge historical injustices, to take responsibility for them, and to work earnestly to repair them. Nevertheless, I want to press two questions arising from Hopkins's interesting discussion of reconciliation. These questions arise in relation to inferences Hopkins makes about what follows if we accept, as I do, that reconciliation is an ethically desirable goal. Specifically, if we accept the premise that reconciliation is needed for justice, I suggest that the inference from the goal of reconciliation to mechanisms based on deliberately democratic dialogue and culturally authentic curricula are nevertheless doubtful.

Here is the first question: if recognizing, taking responsibility for, and seeking to repair historical oppression and injustice is the key concern, then it is not clear to me why the primary emphasis should be placed on fostering more authentic understandings of Indigenous cultural traditions. I do not mean that culturally authentic and responsive education should be abandoned. There are many reasons for fostering authentic rather than inauthentic or superficial or distorted cultural perspectives. For one thing, such understanding seems to be a crucial basis for mutual respect. But I do wonder whether authentic cultural understanding, whatever that might mean, is all that crucial to the project of rectifying past injustices that are at the heart of Bashir's and Hopkins's conception of reconciliation. Indeed, it seems at least possible if not likely that a more effective way of encouraging policy makers, legislators, and students from colonizing nations to participate in authentic reconciliatory efforts might emphasize, at least initially, developing an understanding of how nationalist movements in general — not only those at home — have developed in ways that have led to ongoing patterns of injustice, marginalization, poverty, poor health, and alienation, for example. These patterns can be discerned in studying many different ways without directly studying local patterns of oppression of Indigenous populations at all.³ Again, I am not arguing against fostering authentic cultural understanding, simply questioning whether making such a goal central to Indigenous education is central to reconciliatory efforts.

Here is my second question: Hopkins's emphasis on deliberative democracy as part of a "forward looking" process of reconciliation is questionable. If dialogue about reconciliation is to be undertaken in recognition and acceptance of the politically sovereign status of Indigenous people, then deliberative democracy seems like an inapt model to adopt for advancing such dialogue. Deliberative democracy is normally understood as a process of collective deliberation based on relations of reciprocity among free and equal people who are citizens of a shared political community. But a recognition of the aspiration to political sovereignty means that no such shared political community can be assumed and that the participants in dialogue are fundamentally citizens of different politically sovereign communities.⁴ Furthermore, as critics of the deliberative model of democratic citizenship have suggested, the disadvantages that members of minority groups inevitably face in deliberative settings means that unjust and oppressive outcomes are likely in practice.⁵ The key point is that even if the process of reconciliation takes seriously the history of oppression and great harm done to Indigenous people, as it certainly should, there are strong reasons for great caution before employing a deliberatively democratic model as the means by which the achievement of reconciliation is sought.

The upshot of these reflections is that Hopkins's central assumption in his essay — that justice for Indigenous peoples is (primarily or exclusively) a matter of seeking fair and justice *inclusion* — needs to be revisited and, I suspect, either jettisoned or radically revised before an adequate account of the role of reconciliation within a conception of Justice and Indigenous education can be developed.

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1. Will Kymlicka has developed these ideas in several books, most notably, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
 2. Kevin McDonough, "Can the Liberal State Support Cultural Identity Schools?," *American Journal of Education* 106 (1998): 489.
 3. For an argument to this effect, see Kevin McDonough and Andree-Anne Cormier, "Beyond Patriotic Education: Locating the Place of Nationalism in the Public School Curriculum," in *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* (forthcoming).
 4. Kevin McDonough, "Multinational Civic Education," in *Citizenship and Education in Liberal-Democratic Societies: Teaching for Collective Identities and Cosmopolitan Values*, ed. Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 351–385.
 5. Meira Levinson, "Challenging Deliberation," *Theory and Research in Education* 1, no. 1 (2003): 23–49.