

Conclusion:

Learning from Indigenous Perspectives

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There are a number of themes running throughout the different chapters of this book. In this section I would like to draw on some of these themes to argue that Indigenous perspectives on (education for) well-being can, and should, be intentionally integrated into what is currently the mainstream, i.e. European-settler discourse on (education for) well-being.

Before I argue for this thesis, I want to clarify in what sense I mean “integrating into mainstream discourse on (education for) well-being.” “Integrating” often implies – conceptually and practically – a dilution, even dissolution, of the original perspectives, and scholars rightly warn of “cultural (mis-)appropriation” (e.g., Cameron, 2005; Young & Brunk, 2009). I like to draw on the metaphor of a woven blanket to illustrate in what sense I talk about “integration into mainstream discourse.” For what follows, I want to emphasize three features of this metaphor. First, “integration” (weaving together) means that after the weaving together, the threads are recognized and recognizable as independent threads – it is the very quality and strength of the *individual* threads themselves and of the way in which they are inter-woven that are essential to the overall quality and strength of the blanket. The usefulness of this feature of the metaphor finds its support in complex living systems research, where it is found that complex dynamic systems – like social systems – are more resilient to (existential) disturbances to the system if the system has more diverse, rather than assimilated, sub-systems (e.g., Norbert, Wilson, Walker, & Ostrom, 2008). The second feature of the metaphor I want to emphasize is that the artful weaving together of the different threads contributes to the quality and strength of the woven blanket overall. Finally, the third feature is that one type of thread (here: Indigenous perspectives on (education for) well-being) supports the strength of other types of threads (here: the European-settler perspectives) as part of the woven blanket overall.

It is in particular this last feature that I want to expand on in this conclusion. I want to do so as a non-Indigenous person, who is concerned for, and with, (education for) the capacity of all those living now on the traditional Indigenous territories that make up what is internationally referred to as Canada, to live a flourishing life. My understanding of the current mainstream discourse on (education for) well-being is such that – to stay in the metaphor – this discourse has been weaving a blanket (European-settler well-being discourses) that is lacking in strength and that is in dire need of strengthening *because* it does not involve the strength of Indigenous perspectives on (education for) well-being. While it is not my place to speak uninvited to the reverse, I have come to understand the importance of Indigenous perspectives on (education for) well-being for the quality of the mainstream discourses on well-being in Canada more generally. An “Indigenization” of mainstream Canadian institutions, like schools and universities, and of Canadian society more generally, thus, should also be envisioned as a process to benefit the quality of life of the European-settler side of



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the (treaty) relationship. As Battiste (2000) writes, in her argument for the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge into school and university curricula:

The real justification for including Aboriginal knowledge in the modern curriculum is not so that Aboriginal students can compete with non-Aboriginal students in an imagined world. It is, rather, that immigrant society is sorely in need of what Aboriginal knowledge has to offer. We are witnessing throughout the world the weaknesses in knowledge based on science and technology. It is costing us our air, our water, our earth; our very lives are at stake. No longer are we able to turn to science to rid us of the mistakes of the past or to clean up our planet for the future of our children. Our children's future planet is not secure, and we have contributed to its insecurity by using the knowledge and skills that we received in public schools. Not only have we found that we need to make new decisions about our lifestyles to maintain the planet, but we are also becoming increasingly aware that the limitations of modern knowledge have placed our collective survival in jeopardy. (pp. 201-202)

In the following, I argue along the same lines that the integration of Indigenous perspectives on (education for) well-being into the weaving of a more relational mainstream blanket *can and should* influence the quality and strength of a such woven blanket.¹ In other words, I will argue that and how these Indigenous perspectives – as, for instance, represented in the chapters in this book – complement, often expand on, and sometimes challenge prominent European-settler discourses on (education for) well-being.

Learning from Indigenous Perspectives

One of the main approaches to well-being in the Western discourse is the one linking well-being to virtues (e.g., Anscombe, 1958; MacIntyre, 1984). This discourse is generally grounded in the academic discipline of philosophy and, in one way or another, goes back about 2500 years to Aristotle's virtue ethics (Aristotle, trans. 1976). Simplified, one can say that this approach suggests that in order to live well, one needs to live a virtuous life, that is, one needs to live in accordance with the virtues. The discourse is then generally about what "living virtuously" means and what kind of virtues are there to be considered. For instance, Aristotle (trans. 1976, p. 104) considers the following qualities to be moral virtues: courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, magnanimity, proper ambition, patience, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness, modesty, and righteous indignation.

This link between living a virtuous life and well-being can also be found in Indigenous traditions: Anishinaabe (Bell, Chapter 1)²; Cree (e.g., Greidanus & Johnson, Chapter 7; Hart, 2002); and Inupiat Inuit (Topkok & Green, Chapter 11). Bell (Chapter 1) characterizes this link as follows (see also Deer & Falkenberg, Introductory Chapter):

¹ I am sensitive to the distinct meanings of "inclusion" (Battiste) and "integration" (Falkenberg), so I do not want to make the claim here that Battiste and I are necessarily talking about the same vision; but I do sense that with my qualification of the meaning of the term "integration" to the metaphor of the woven blanket there is some affinity of notions.

² Any chapter reference refers to chapters in this book.

Living a good life, or following the good red road, or doing things in a good way requires a great deal of energy from a person, and results in many rewards. The word *good* should not be taken lightly when considered from an Anishinaabe perspective. *The good way* means fostering the child's development using the seven sacred values of honesty, wisdom, love, respect, bravery, humility, and truth, which result in great things for the person receiving the teachings. For many people it takes a whole lifetime to learn how to live according to these values, from an Anishinaabe worldview. This is why Elders are often respected for their wisdom; they have come to know sharing, humility, kindness, caring, strength, and respect. Again, these words cannot be taken lightly. Each one involves a great deal of work on the part of the person to come to a true understanding of what these words and life ways really mean. (Bell, Chapter 1, p. 14)

In several ways, this Indigenous perspective on (education for) well-being can, and should, complement and expand on the European-settler discourse on the role of virtues for (education for) well-being. First, it complements the discourse by siding with the arguments for a central role of virtues for conceptualizing well-being and for virtues education. In many Western approaches to well-being, virtues do not play any role (for an overview, see Falkenberg, 2014); the character and virtues approach within positive psychology (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004) is an exception to that rule. In the context of schooling in North America, virtues education is generally referred to as "character education" (e.g., Lickona, 1991; Ryan & McLean, 1987), a specific and wide-spread version of which has been strongly criticised as "a particular style of moral *training*, one that reflects *particular* values as well as *particular* assumptions about the nature of children and about how people learn" (Kohn, 1997, p. 154; emphasis added; see also Noddings, 2002). Indigenous perspectives on the role of virtues for well-being can greatly *enrich* the discourse for a possibly more acceptable version of virtue education in schools. Indigenous perspectives on virtue education would clearly *expand* on the European-settler discourse on virtues education by emphasizing, as Bell (Chapter 1) suggests in the above quotation, that "for many people it takes a whole lifetime to learn how to live according to these values" (p. 14). In the European-settler discourse, virtues education is, if addressed at all, limited to school education; the adult education literature is lacking any substantial discussion of a role of virtues in adult education.

The literature on deep ecology (e.g., Drengson & Inoue, 1995) and other approaches to ecopsychology (e.g., Kahn & Hasbach, 2012b; Pickering, 2007) emphasizes the importance of "nature for our physical and psychological well-being" (Kahn & Hasbach, 2012a, p. 1). Ecopsychology, however, is an approach to well-being more on the periphery of the European-settler discourse on well-being, which itself rarely considers a link between human well-being and the state of the natural environment. For instance, the capabilities approach to well-being gives an important role to relationship that humans have with other species and the "world of nature" more generally (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 34), while the mainstream positive psychology approach to well-being (e.g., Lopez & Snyder, 2009) does not do so at all. It is here where Indigenous perspectives on well-being *complement* the ecopsychological approach to well-being and *challenge* the mainstream European-settler discourse on well-being by emphasizing "a spiritual connection with nature and Mother Earth (Lafleur, Chapter 10, p. 160), "the concept of Mother Earth as elder and teacher" (p. 170), and the "the worldview that connects us to recognize our well-being is connected to the well-being of *Shkagamik-kwe* [Mother Earth]" (p. 161). Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis (2009), growing up in a European-settler culture and professionally immersing himself into Indigenous cultures, describes

the challenge that Indigenous perspectives on the role of forests pose to mainstream European-settler perspectives as follows:

As a young man I was raised on the coast of British Columbia to believe that the rainforests existed to be cut. This was the essence of the ideology of scientific forestry that I studied in school and practised in the woods as a logger. . . .

This cultural perspective was profoundly different from that of the First Nations, those living on Vancouver Island at the time of European contact, and those still there. If I was sent into the forest to cut it down, a Kwakwaka'wakw youth of similar age was traditionally dispatched during his Hamatsa initiation into those same forests to confront Huxwhukw and the Crooked Beak of Heaven, cannibal spirits living at the north end of the world, all with the goal of returning triumphant to the potlatch that his individual spiritual discipline and fortitude might revitalize his entire people with the energy of the wild. (pp. 121-122)

A similar *challenge* to the mainstream European-settler discourse on well-being is posed by Indigenous perspectives on well-being through the latter's emphasis on the importance on place:

Land has always been a defining element of Aboriginal culture. Land contains the language, the stories, and the histories of a people. It provides water, air, shelter, and food. Land participates in the ceremonies and the songs. And land is home. Not in an abstract way. (King, 2012, p. 218)

In her book contribution, Lafleur (Chapter 10, pp. 162, 163) describes territory and place as the base for *Anishinaabek* identity, and the First Nations', Métis, and Inuit learning models introduced by Bouvier, Battiste, and Laughlin (Chapter 2) identify learning as place-based: "The land and the ecology come with responsibilities of stewardship and care, as well as a knowledge of what needs to be done in each season" (p. 32). This focus on the role of place for well-being *expands* the community-based view that can be found in some European-settler discourses on well-being (e.g., Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2007).

Another aspect of Indigenous perspectives on well-being that *expands* and even *challenges* the European-settler discourse on well-being is the role given to older people ("elders") in conceptualizing well-being. Bell (Chapter 1), Deer (Chapter 5), and Lafleur (Chapter 10) all draw for their studies on well-being on community elders in their respective inquiry into Indigenous perspectives on (education for) well-being. This approach is grounded in a view of the status of elders in connection with well-being and well-becoming, as for instance Bell (Chapter 1) illustrates:

For many people it takes a whole lifetime to learn how to live according to these values, from an Anishinaabe worldview. This is why Elders are often respected for their wisdom; they have come to know sharing, humility, kindness, caring, strength, and respect. (p. 14)

As an Elder, the individual has the opportunity to be a beacon for others. (p. 13)

Two additional features of the approaches in these three chapters are important in light of their contrast to many European-settler approaches to well-being. First, elders are not research "subjects" that provide data to the researcher, who in turn interpret the data as they see fit to arrive at their (the researchers') understanding of well-being, but rather elders serve as "informants" who share with the

researcher their (the elders’) understanding of well-being. Second, all elders consulted in each study are from the same cultural community, who speak of the concept of well-being in their particular cultural tradition only, without any claim about the understanding of well-being in any other culture or tradition.

These three features are in stark contrast to a number of prominent European-settler approaches to well-being. The positive psychology approach to well-being might serve here as an example. First, in positive psychology – as is more generally reflected in the European-settler discourse on the role and status of scholarly research – the view is taken that it is the research undertaken in this field of study that is to guide and inform the general population or culture in living a flourishing life. Christopher Peterson, one of the early and prominent proponents of positive psychology, expresses this as follows:

The task of positive psychology is to provide the most objective facts possible about the phenomena it studies so that everyday people and society as a whole can make an informed decision about what goals to pursue in what circumstances. (Peterson, 2006, p. 16)

As a cursory look through *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Lopez & Snyder, 2009) illustrates, positive psychology studies its phenomena generally using inferential statistics methods, which consider study participants as interchangeable subjects (within the selected sample parameters). Second, as is common in European-settler research traditions, the development of the theoretical framework – for instance the conceptualizing of “well-being” – is a matter of assumptions made by the respective researcher and can change quite radically if the researcher changes their assumptions. Martin Seligman’s change of his concept of well-being provides a telling example of this phenomenon (see Seligman, 2011). Third, among positive psychologists there is “one camp [which] proposes that some strengths [relevant to well-being] exist universally across cultures” (Pedrotti, Edwards, & Lopez, 2009, p. 50); and in their critical analysis of the epistemological assumptions generally made in positive psychology, Christopher and Hickinbottom (2008) content “that positive psychology is doomed to being narrow and ethnocentric as long as its researchers remain unaware of the cultural assumptions underlying their work” (p. 565).

In terms of (school) education, Indigenous perspectives on education for well-being challenge European-settler approaches to education in two ways. They do so, first, by giving well-being a central role among the purposes of education, while provincial school education does not do so.³ For instance, well-being has been explicitly listed as a goal for education in two of the three Indigenous life-long learning models introduced by Bouvier et al. (Chapter 2, pp. 29-31). The virtue-based education approach discussed in several of the chapters (e.g., chapters 1, 2, and 11, and in the Introductory Chapter) also makes explicit reference to well-being (living a virtuous life) as a core purpose of education. Second, the Indigenous perspectives on education for well-being challenge European-settler approaches to (school) education by suggesting a *holistic* perspective on education grounded in a holistic concept of well-being approach to the purpose of (school) education (e.g., chapters 6, 7, and 11).

³ An exception is Ontario’s recent Well-Being Strategy (Government of Ontario, 2016), which identifies “promoting [student] well-being” as one of the government’s four “renewed goals for [school] education” (Government of Ontario, 2014, p. 3).

Weaving a Blanket for Living Sustainably Flourishing Lives

A few years ago my past research interests merged into an overarching focus: sustainable well-being and the role of education in helping people live well – that is, to live a sustainably flourishing life. The more I engaged with the Western scholarship on well-being in quite different disciplines – a scholarship that has tremendously ballooned over the last two decades (Falkenberg, 2014) – the more I came to understand that, and particularly why, the dominant perspectives on purpose and practice of living in the West is so counterproductive to people’s well-being and their living a sustainably flourishing life.⁴ It was not that I had not already been aware of the destructive effect of a solely profit-oriented corporate capitalism on the living conditions of humans and other living beings and, at least as importantly, on the life orientation of those living in Western and Western-oriented societies. The engagement with the literature on well-being brought into sharper focus what to be concerned *for* and not just what to be *against*.

From the beginning of this new professional and personal phase of my life, Indigenous perspectives on living “the good life” (Bell, Chapter 1) – and more generally, the Perennial Philosophies of traditional societies (Jaspers, 1953; Miller, 2007) – were an integral part of my thinking about education for well-being. (This book project resulted from this thinking, and I am so grateful to Frank Deer that he was willing to develop the project with me.) I learned how much traditional Indigenous teachings align with what the European-settler well-being literature generally suggests are more promising approaches to living a sustainably flourishing life. I understood that non-Indigenous people, like myself, need to learn from Indigenous traditions and the knowledge keepers of those traditions about living sustainably flourishing lives – as the subtitles of two books I read suggest: “What can we learn from traditional societies?” (Diamond, 2012) and “Why ancient wisdom matters in the modern world (Davis, 2009). Indigenizing Canadian society in general, and the education systems in particular, seems to me to have to include this understanding. From my non-Indigenous perspective, providing space for, and learning from, Indigenous traditional understandings and practices of living a sustainably flourishing life will strengthen all inter-woven threads of the blanket – and I see the chapter contributions in this book having the potential of doing exactly that.

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⁴ For instance, the consumer and materialism-oriented economic systems of the West – which are now spreading around the world – undermine our psychological and social well-being (e.g., Jackson, 2008; Kasser, 2002; Schwartz, 2001) and the ecological systems upon which human and other life forms depend for survival (e.g., Jackson, 2009; Schor, 2010; Victor, 2008).

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