

Indigenous Education in Global Contexts

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The first question to be asked about indigenous education is what do indigenous peoples want? One can find contradictory answers as people can want to hold on to their traditional culture, especially their native language, and at the same time want their children to have access to jobs that require the most up-to-date instruction in mathematics and science as well as the ability to speak, read and write well a national language. The second question is why can't they do both? In the United States the National Indian Education Association (<http://niea.org>) reflects the national-language-plus view of many Indigenous people worldwide who want their children to retain their native languages and cultures while receiving the best education possible versus what is in the United States becoming an increasingly English-only approach to education.

Indigenous people are often given a message by dominant cultures that the indigenous cultures and languages are "savage" and of no value in the modern world and should be forgotten. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, John J. Miller (2002, p. W13) declared that the increasing pace of language death is "a trend that is arguably worth celebrating [because] age-old obstacles to communication are collapsing" and "primitive" societies are being brought into the modern world. However, Joshua Fishman (1991) and other express an opposite view. For Fishman indigenous language revitalization "should be at the forefront of returning communities, neighborhoods and families to the values, norms and behaviors that have preferential and historical validity for them" (p. 410). He argues that all local cultures should be viewed "as things of beauty, as encapsulations of human values which deserve to be fostered and assisted" (p. 33).

While some indigenous peoples have successfully

assimilated into dominant cultures, many others have been caught in between with a resulting social breakdown. The history of Indian residential (boarding) schools in Canada, the United States, and Australia, including Australia's "stolen generation," is one of considerable pain suffered by indigenous youth who seldom got a really good education despite their sacrifices (Reyhner and Eder 2004). Many indigenous people and their allies see the way to heal these wounds inflicted by colonialism's devaluing of indigenous knowledge is through indigenous language revitalization and community-, place-, and culture-based education (May 1999) that balances a one-size-fits-all national curriculum with local learning.

Colonial educational policies towards assimilating indigenous peoples into dominant national cultures have more to do with blatant ethnocentrism and Social Darwinism than with any real educational and economic advantages for them. Colonial assimilationist education was and continues to be a basic violation of human rights. After to the horrors of World War II and its Nazi atrocities, the victors and other countries came together in 1945 to form the United Nations (UN) in order to promote peace and human rights. In its founding charter (UN 1945) its purposes included developing "friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace." In 1948 the UN's General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its Article 26 states that "everyone has the right to education" and that "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms." The General Assembly called upon all member countries to publicize this declaration and "to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read and

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expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions,” a call often ignored by the United States and other countries.

In 1966 the UN adopted an International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that went into force in 1976. Article 1 states, “All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.” The UN’s Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly Resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 entered into force in 1990. In Section 1, of Article 29:

States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:

(b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations

(c) The development of respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own.

Article 30 states:

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own religion.

The United States and Somalia are the only UN-member countries which have not ratified this Covenant to date.

UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali wrote in his foreword to the 1994 book *Voice of Indigenous Peoples: Native People Address the United Nations* that half the world’s languages stopped being spoken in the twentieth century and,

The modern world will therefore prove to have been a great destroyer of languages, traditions, and cultures. The latter are being drowned by the flood of mass communications, the instruments of which all too often remain in the service of a handful of cultures. Today, cultures which do not have powerful media are threatened with extinction.

We must not stand idly by and watch that happen. Diversity is another name for the world. What would the world be like if there were no differences? What would the world be like if there were only one language? . . .

Allowing native languages, cultures, and different traditions to perish through “nonassistance to endangered cultures” must henceforth be considered a basic violation of human rights. An inadmissible violation. We might even say that there can be no human rights unless cultural authenticity is preserved. (1994, p. 9)

The UN declared 1993 to be the “International Year of the World’s Indigenous People.” More than a decade after Boutros-Ghali’s call for the protection of Indigenous rights the UN adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on 13 September 2007 on a vote of 143 to 4 with only Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States opposing. Article 2 affirmed that “Indigenous peoples have the right of self-determination,” Article 8 that “indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subject to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture,” Article 13 “the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons,” and Article 14 “the right to establish and control their education systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.”

The UN’s General Assembly declared 2008 the International Year of Languages. UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura (2008) affirmed, “Languages are indeed essential to the identity of groups and

individuals and to their peaceful coexistence. They constitute a strategic factor of progress towards sustainable development and a harmonious relationship between the global and local context” and that the ninth International Mother Language Day (21 February 2008) “will have a special significance and provide a particularly appropriate deadline for the introduction of initiatives to promote languages.”

In colonized countries where the indigenous populations remained a numerical majority, as in many places in Africa and Asia, the indigenous populations have been able to regain their sovereignty through self-determination. However, where they became a relatively small minority, as in the four countries voting against the 2007 Declaration, they remain in many ways second-class citizens. As Tove Skunabb-Kangas (2008, p. 492) concluded, “many governments applaud . . . human rights, as long as they can define them in their own way, according to their own cultural norms.” She noted that the United States as of May 1998 had only ratified 15 of 52 universal human rights instruments, which puts it well down on a list, accompanied by Somalia and just below Saudi Arabia, that is led by Norway with 46 ratifications.

The United States is moving away from human rights (e.g., Roth 2000), including repressing the use of non-English languages. For example, more and more states are making English their “official language.” Thirty states now have some type of “Official English” law, with almost half of them passed since 1990 (U.S. English, Inc. 2009). While these laws can boil down to what can amount to empty rhetoric, California, Arizona, and Massachusetts have also passed by popular vote “English for the Children” laws that pretty much require English-only instruction in public schools whatever their parents’ wishes.

In the United States the ideals expressed by the United Nations and the rising U.S. Civil Rights Movement led to a legislative shift from the racist immigration and assimilationist educational policies of the 1950s. However, today there is a shift back with the renewed interest in Official English and English-only laws in the US, mainly in response to a recent upsurge in immigration from Spanish speaking countries. Some

of these state “Official English” laws and constitutional amendments have been struck down by the courts, but this would all change if a recently proposed U.S. Constitutional Amendment was adopted making English the official language of the United States. The proponents point to the fact that many other countries of the world have official language laws, which, however, often negatively affect their linguistic and cultural minorities. While often not the target in the US, indigenous people suffer collateral damage from these laws as they seek the basic human right to maintain and/or recover their heritage.

While democracy is an admirable form of government, too often in them majorities tyrannize minorities in a variety of ways from making them second class citizens with a second class education to forcing them through schooling to adopt the ways of the majority. In keeping with repeated United Nations declarations and conventions defining basic human rights, democracies need to recognize the rights of indigenous peoples to maintain their cultures and languages. We should have National Language Plus, not English or some other National-Language-Only policies.

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Note

Some of this article is adapted from the author's article "Promoting Human Rights through Indigenous Language Revitalization" published in the *Intercultural Human Rights Law Review* (Vol. 3, pp. 151–189) in 2008.