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# Maintaining Aboriginal Identity, Language, and Culture in Modern Society

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Aboriginal people in Canada pose a serious question to the Canadian educational system: How should schools be structured and content developed and delivered to offer equitable outcomes for Aboriginal peoples in Canada? Aboriginal peoples articulated their goals for education in 1972, when the National Indian Brotherhood sought to take control of Indian education. These goals have not changed in the intervening years. Aboriginal parents still wish for their children to participate fully in Canadian society but also to develop their personal and community potential through a fully actualized linguistic and cultural identity and from within their own Aboriginal context.

There have been innovations in Aboriginal education in the past twenty-five years, both at the First Nations and at the provincial levels, but these reforms have not gone far enough. The existing curriculum has given Aboriginal people new knowledge to help them participate in Canadian society, but it has not empowered Aboriginal identity by promoting an understanding of Aboriginal worldviews, languages, and knowledge. The lack of a clear, comprehensive, and consistent policy about Aboriginal consciousness has resulted in modern educational acts that suppress these integral cultures and identities. Most public schools in Canada today do not have coherent plans about how teachers and students can know Aboriginal thought and apply it in current educational processes.

Educators have suggested that problems arise because the “style of learning” through which Aboriginal students are enculturated at home differs markedly from the teaching style of the classroom. Linguists have pointed out that these differences may lead to sociolinguistic interference when teachers and students do not recognize them. These theories, however, do not get to the root of the problem. Non-Aboriginal scholars have avoided the major evaluative issue, which I have previously called cognitive imperialism or cognitive assimilation.<sup>1</sup> Scholars within the United Nations have called it cultural racism.<sup>2</sup> Cognitive imperialism, also known

as cultural racism, is the imposition of one worldview on a people who have an alternative worldview, with the implication that the imposed worldview is superior to the alternative worldview.

The 1996 report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples reaffirms both the goals of Aboriginal parents for the education of their children and the gaps in the current educational system.<sup>3</sup> It explains how current educational policy is based on the false assumption of the cultural superiority of European worldviews, and it recommends ways to eradicate the many obstacles that stand in the way of the advancement of Aboriginal peoples in Canada today. The report attests to the need for the transformation of knowledge, curriculum, and schools. It recognizes that the current curriculum in Canada projects European knowledge as universal, normative, and ideal. It marginalizes or excludes Aboriginal cultures, voices, and ways of knowing. In this chapter, I will explore how Aboriginal identity, languages, and cultures can be maintained in the current educational system of Canada and what innovations are required to do this. I will also explore the challenges that lie ahead for educators in effecting an education that respects and nourishes Aboriginal languages, cultures, and identity.

It should be stressed that Aboriginal consciousness cannot be maintained without first challenging the assumptions of modern society. Confronting the difficulties in maintaining Aboriginal consciousness in modern thought may be too much for the current educational system, but language revival, maintenance, and development remain as a challenging task for Aboriginal peoples to undertake in their quest for decolonization and self-determination.

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### **Public School Education: Benign Fragmentation**

Most Canadians trust their educational system. Education is not only the arena in which academic and vocational skills are developed but also the arena in which culture, mores, and social values are transmitted to the student. The educational system, fostered by government and society, is the basis of Canadian cultural transmission. However, for children whose languages and cultures are different from mainstream immigrant expectations, this educational system is a form of cognitive imperialism.

The military, political, and economic subjugation of Aboriginal peoples has been well documented, as have social, cultural, and linguistic pressures and the ensuing detrimental consequences to First Nations communities, but no force has been more effective at oppressing First Nations cultures than the educational system. Under the subtle influence of cognitive imperialism, modern educational theory and practice have, in large part, destroyed or distorted the ways of life, histories, identities, cultures, and languages of Aboriginal peoples.

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Most Canadians, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, have long accepted some of the fundamental assumptions underlying modern public school education. We have assumed that education is a kind and necessary form of mind liberation that opens to the individual options and possibilities that ultimately have value for society as a whole. On the face of it, education appears beneficial to all people and intrinsic to the progress and development of modern technological society.

But public schooling has not been benign.<sup>4</sup> It has been used as a means to perpetuate damaging myths about Aboriginal cultures, languages, beliefs, and ways of life. It has also established Western science as a dominant mode of thought that distrusts diversity and jeopardizes us all as we move into the next century. After nearly a century of public schooling for tribal peoples in Canada, the most serious problem with the current system of education lies not in its failure to liberate the human potential among Aboriginal peoples but in its quest to limit thought to cognitive imperialistic policies and practices. This quest denies Aboriginal people access to and participation in the formulation of government policy, constrains the use and development of Aboriginal cultures in schools, and confines education to a narrow scientific view of the world that threatens the global future.

There are two different points at issue here. The first is the right of Aboriginal peoples to exercise their own culture; the second is the benefit that the Western world can derive from this culture. Western scholars are gradually realizing how important Aboriginal knowledge may be to the future survival of our world. Not only is it important that Aboriginal cultures are preserved and encouraged, but it is also important that they are recognized as the domain of Aboriginal peoples and not subverted by the dominant culture.

Two international conferences since the mid-1970s have drawn attention to the right of Aboriginal peoples to the preservation of their cultures in the face of cognitive imperialism. The World Conference on Indigenous People in 1978 "endorse[d] the right of Indigenous Peoples to maintain their traditional structure of economy and culture, including their own language."<sup>5</sup> In 1989, a United Nations seminar on the effects of racism and racial discrimination on the social and economic relations between Indigenous peoples and states concluded that global racism was taking on the new form of state theories of cultural, rather than biological, superiority, resulting in rejection of the legitimacy or viability of the values and institutions of Indigenous peoples.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, although the value of Indigenous culture is devalued by cognitive imperialism, the dominant society has a tendency to take elements of traditional Aboriginal knowledge out of context and claim them for itself. In 1993, the chairperson of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, Dr. Erica-Irene Daes, prepared a report condemning the widespread

and continued exploitation of traditional knowledge and culture by Eurocentric institutions and scholars.<sup>7</sup> She described this as the final stage of colonialism, following the exhaustion of Indigenous peoples' tangible assets. Daes argues for the urgency of taking international action to protect the dignity, privacy, and identity of Indigenous peoples without waiting for the adoption of the declaration. The principles laid out by the working group acknowledge that the heritage of an Indigenous people is a complete knowledge system with its own concepts of epistemology, philosophy, language, and scientific and logical validity that needs protection from Eurocentric exploitation. In the 1990s, designated by the United Nations as the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples, the Working Group on Indigenous Populations and related activities are developing an understanding of and a cure for cultural racism and are furthering the immediate, practical processes of cultural restoration in decolonized states.<sup>8</sup>

Confronting cultural racism in Canada is a difficult task because cultural racism cannot be contained to any one portion of the state. It is a systemic form of racism that cannot be dealt with in schools through classroom supplements or add-on courses. Confronting the problem requires a holistic understanding of modern thought and the purpose of education.

### **Curriculum, Colonialism, and Incoherence**

Although the notion of "one best educational system" has been largely discredited, the notion that there is "one best remedy" for our educational ills has not. Modern society is still looking for and frequently is offered simple cures for these ills, one-ingredient prescriptions that claim to be panaceas. But there is no cure-all, no educational antibiotic to be administered externally by injection into the state to cure the modern ills.

To understand how education in Canada continues to suppress or exterminate Aboriginal consciousness, one has to understand modern thought. The existing body of research, which normally provides reference points for new research, must be examined and reassessed. This is no small task. Few Canadians understand the relationship of modern thought to the educational system. Most educators assume that modern thought is an accurate description of reality, and this assumption is at the centre of the modern curriculum. Yet modern thought establishes an artificial and imaginary realm. The immigrants left their own societies and entered tribal Canada. In our Aboriginal homeland, they began to develop a society that they imagined into being through laws and regulations. The affirmation and continuation of this imaginary realm are supplied through the provincial educational system. This imagined immigrant society is distinctive from Aboriginal societies, whose customary rules are grounded in the laws of nature.

The purpose of education is to transmit culture to new generations. But culture remains elusive; it is implicitly summed up by skills and shared traditions. Since there is no agreement about transmitting culture, the real purpose of education is to affirm the political and social status quo. The task of education in Canada is to explain the immigrant's broad privileges and wealth in another's homeland. The curriculum has to justify immigrant privileges in Aboriginal America. In the past, the immigrants relied on the racism built into their political system to justify their privileges. Since the United Nations human rights declarations and covenants in the 1990s, these foundational standards have been universally rejected, and the necessary justification to sustain privilege has moved into the educational and cultural arenas.

In every educational circumstance, much of what is learned depends on the context in which it is learned. Within the context of public school education, one can identify a few basic preconceptions about reality that exercise an overwhelming influence over education in this country. The modern Canadian educational structure has its theoretical ambitions pinned to the development of a supposed science of history and society. This supposed science is based on false concepts of race and evolutionary thought; however, in the modern curriculum, these frameworks are taught as if Canadians were mere puppets of them and of the forces that generate and sustain them.

The supposed science of history and society presents humans as the product of an evolutionary or cultural logic on the one hand and of deep-seated, unalterable economic, organizational, or psychological constraints on the other. Educational institutions insist that abandoning this way of viewing the world would lead humans to theoretical nihilism and destroy the established social order. Educational theory does not argue that society can be remade or reimagined; instead, it postulates that, without recognizing this evolutionary logic and these practical constraints, humans and society will lose intellectual guidance. As a result, education must affirm the existing social order and its theory of control. Other forms of culture or social life are recognized in the curriculum as expressions of a different way of being human within the evolutionary logic or practical constraints.

The modern political theory of democracy, on the other hand, argues that humans can completely override these institutional arrangements. Modern experience in constitutional debates and in legislation with these arrangements shows that often these frameworks are put aside. Canadians think and act, incongruously and surprisingly, as if institutional arrangements or frameworks are not for real, as if they merely pretend to obey them while awaiting an opportunity to defy them. They can disrupt these established arrangements; they can replace them, if not all at once, then piece by piece.

Following the recent work done under the auspices of the United Nations, theorists of modern society in Canada have been forced to acknowledge that current social arrangements do not reflect a higher rational or practical necessity. Instead, modern political theory establishes immigrant society as a form of society that can be reinvented and reformulated at will. Modern educational theory is thus in a predicament. It is based on justifying and perpetuating the status quo, yet it has to acknowledge the recent shift in thinking that immigrant society is an invented society that can be recast. In defending immigrant society, it can no longer rely on discarded theories of racial or cultural superiority, but it cannot refer to an overarching set of objective values for justification either. Aboriginal societies reflect the patterns of nature; they are grounded in the world around them. In contrast to this grounding of Aboriginal society in an order outside itself, there exists no theory of Canadian immigrant society that reflects social order as an eternal pattern of human nature or social harmony. The contrast between the political theory of modern society and educational theory shows how fragile these arrangements and ideas are in daily life.

Schools affirm the status quo by talking of “training men and women the age needs.” Who determines what the age needs? If there are some sorts of people every age needs, then there should be permanence in education. This training helps to preserve class structures and selects the elite rather than sorting everyone out according to their innate capacities. This sorting also passes family or parental responsibility on to the state, leading to a disintegration of the family for the abstraction of the society.

What is apparent to Aboriginal peoples is the need for a serious and far-reaching examination of the assumptions inherent in modern educational theory. How these assumptions create the moral and intellectual foundations of modern society and culture has to be studied and written about by Aboriginal people to allow space for Aboriginal consciousness, language, and identity to flourish without ethnocentric or racist interpretation. The current educational shortcomings may or may not be in the curriculum, or in finance, or in testing, or in community involvement, but no one will ever know this – nor the changes necessary for improvement – without a deeper philosophical analysis of modern thought and educational practices.

### **Decolonizing Education and Cultural Restoration**

When most non-Aboriginal people think of why they would support the maintenance of Aboriginal consciousness and language in modern education, they view it as enabling Aboriginal students to compete successfully with non-Aboriginal students in the imagined immigrant society. Educators argue that school systems can maintain Aboriginal identity, culture,

and languages by making a conscious effort to teach the children how to act in the modern classroom. They do not know or understand the cognitive shock they would be forced to endure if Aboriginal consciousness and language were to be respected, affirmed, and encouraged to flourish in the modern classroom.

Cognitive imperialism is a form of cognitive manipulation used to disclaim other knowledge bases and values. Validated through one's knowledge base and empowered through public education, it has been the means by which whole groups of people have been denied existence and have had their wealth confiscated. Cognitive imperialism denies people their language and cultural integrity by maintaining the legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference.

As a result of cognitive imperialism, cultural minorities have been led to believe that their poverty and impotence are a result of their race. The modern solution to their despair has been to describe this causal connection in numerous reports. The gift of modern knowledge has been the ideology of oppression, which negates the process of knowledge as a process of inquiry to explore new solutions. This ideology seeks to change the consciousness of the oppressed, not change the situation that oppressed them.

Whether Aboriginal or black or other visible minority in Canada, a similarity in treatment and themes of denial and oppression have resounded in society and through educational practices. In her book *Invisibility in Academe*, Adrienne Rich describes the result: "When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing."<sup>9</sup>

In the Canadian educational system today, Aboriginal people continue to be invisible.<sup>10</sup> Occasional pictures in books are the only images of our participation in the educational world. The content of these books, however, does not represent our worldview. Aboriginal people have had to endure a "planting out" of our systems when students were boarded in white homes to learn proper behaviour and acceptable skills for working in lower-class occupations. They have had to submit to child sexual and psychological abuse and boarding schools from age five to sixteen. The cultural imperialistic curriculum in these schools has degraded and demoralized cultural minority students, assigned them to transitional classes, failed them, and then accused them of lacking motivation, attention, or spirit.

As we approach the twenty-first century, we need to take a look at where we have been and where we are going. First we must become painfully aware of what has happened to children and to Aboriginal people across Canada, and then we must seek to find ways to resolve those problems. We must find resources to enable all children to have the rights outlined

in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

Aboriginal languages are the basic media for the transmission and survival of Aboriginal consciousness, cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values. They provide distinctive perspectives on and understandings of the world, which educational research has ignored. The suppression or extermination of this consciousness in education through the destruction of Aboriginal languages is inconsistent with the modern constitutional rights of Aboriginal peoples.

Aboriginal languages are the means of communication for the full range of human experiences, and they are critical to the survival of the culture and political integrity of any people.<sup>11</sup> These languages are a direct and powerful means of understanding the legacy of tribal knowledge. They provide the deep and lasting cognitive bonds that affect all aspects of Aboriginal life. Through sharing a language, Aboriginal people create a shared belief in how the world works and what constitutes proper action. The sharing of these common ideals creates a collective cognitive experience for tribal societies that is understood as tribal epistemology.

Where Aboriginal knowledge survives, it is transmitted through Aboriginal language. There is clear and convincing evidence that student achievement and performance in school and pride in Aboriginal communities and heritages are directly tied to respect for and support of the students' Aboriginal languages.<sup>12</sup> Although it is clearly in the interests of the educational system to encourage the full academic and personal achievements of Aboriginal students, absolutely nothing has been done by the federal or provincial governments in Canada to remedy this educational problem. Nothing has been done to preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedoms of Aboriginal people to use, practise, and develop Aboriginal languages in Canada. Canadian lawmakers and educators have overlooked the right of Aboriginal languages to exist as a medium of instruction in the schools, failed to recognize the official status of Aboriginal languages for conducting Aboriginal business, and failed to encourage educational institutions to allow the same academic credit for proficiency in Aboriginal languages as for proficiency in foreign languages. In contrast, the United States<sup>13</sup> and the United Nations<sup>14</sup> have passed legislation recognizing the right of Aboriginal peoples to use their traditional languages.

Many Aboriginal students still speak their Aboriginal languages, but there are no courses and extremely limited materials for helping them to make the transition to the working languages of Canada. These students, labelled "at risk," are relegated to the lower levels of academic achievement, where most remain. Limited ability in English (or French) impedes the progress of many minority children throughout Canada.<sup>15</sup> Teaching English (or French) as a second language must be unilaterally implemented



in all schools where the students' language is different from the school's language.

Instead of requiring Aboriginal students to submit to a third language (French in English-speaking Canada and English in French-speaking Canada), they should have the opportunity to explore their first language in a provincially accredited course in elementary and secondary school, as well as to find appropriate ways to explore their understandings and expand their knowledge and usage of their second language of English or French. Being required to learn French or English as a third language, without a good handle on their first or second language, imposes yet another major hurdle that impedes Aboriginal students from achieving educational equity.

Books and materials in provincial public schools do not accurately depict the history and cultural diversity of Canada. Although some provinces have made great strides in correcting the blatant racism found in texts, the truth is still obscured in favour of a more rational and polished early existence in Canada. Beautiful images of Aboriginal peoples in Native regalia cannot be allowed to subvert the historical truths that publishers wish not to discuss. Polished texts obscure Aboriginal history, cultures, and languages while perpetuating the myth of an empty land in the New World that was ripe for discovery by European explorers. Kits and thematic units prepared by public education in some areas of Canada depict a prehistoric life of Aboriginal peoples, complete with teepees, skins, animal bones, rock tools, and arrowheads. Aboriginal peoples are depicted as primitives, gone after the arrival of the early settlers or working their way toward assimilation in urban areas.

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ebr Provincial public education has denied our people the right to speak to the issues of the past, to explain and understand the courses of action that we have had to take in these periods of adversity, and to be honoured for those choices. It is our heritage that we were given the right and the responsibility to pass on to our children. As yet, we have not been allowed the dignity to choose what is important to pass on through the public schools.

All First Nations and provincial schools require new teaching materials that depict, accurately and adequately, the culture, history, heritage, world-views, and philosophies of Aboriginal peoples. Currently, only a few schools are producing materials in Aboriginal languages: most Aboriginal language programs publish their own. Book companies are reluctant to publish language materials that reach only a small group of people; however, the need has been established in Canada for the reevaluation of curriculum content in the schools and for a concerted effort to integrate Aboriginal knowledge into it. We need to encourage book companies to enlist other language groups into their book productions. Encouraging

various Aboriginal communities to offer English texts so that they can decide if the content can be appropriately translated at a lower cost is an additional incentive to have materials in the Aboriginal languages.

Elders are the critical link to Aboriginal epistemology through the Aboriginal languages. The last vestiges of Aboriginal languages exist in pockets of the Aboriginal population. There they are secured by certain families in a collective community consciousness. By introducing language and cultural education in First Nations-operated schools, Aboriginal people are attempting to retain and sustain their languages, cultures, and tribal knowledge through the assistance of elders and a bare-bones curriculum development program.

Some First Nations schools have provided flexibility and openness to new ideas and have used Aboriginal pedagogy to bridge epistemologies. Taking schooling out into the bush and bringing elders into the classroom are two ways in which First Nations schools have enriched the knowledge not only of students but also of teachers.<sup>16</sup> This flexible approach helps to spread tribal knowledge, but it has sometimes been at a cost to some part of the compulsory public school curriculum. As one area is enriched, some other area of the regular school curriculum is affected. The result is that Aboriginal students sometimes do not have the same cumulative knowledge as their non-Aboriginal counterparts, just as the non-Aboriginal students do not have the cumulative knowledge of their Aboriginal counterparts.

To maintain its flexibility, community-controlled Aboriginal education must remain outside the arena of provincial administrative regulations. Another reason for this distance is to ensure that a central administration does not profit from the progressive ideas developed in such educational milieus. For instance, the acceptance of tribal knowledge by some scientists and scholars, including David Bohm, David Peat, David Suzuki, Rupert Ross, and others, and the elevation of tribal epistemologies in research and roundtables and think tanks will have the profound effect of pushing modern knowledge to new questions and ways of thinking about problems and solutions.<sup>17</sup> The ownership of these ideas must remain with Aboriginal people. We must nurture this growth, guide it with our elders and tribal scholars, and find ways to share tribal epistemology beyond history and culture.

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.

The public school curriculum is limiting the knowledge base of our children. They are being denied access to knowledge bases that they need to sustain themselves and the planet in the future. To deny that tribal epistemology exists and serves a lasting purpose is to deprive Aboriginal children of their inheritance, as well as to perpetuate the belief that different cultures have nothing to offer but exotic food and dance or a shallow first chapter in the story of what is to come. To allow tribal epistemology to die through the loss of the Aboriginal languages is to allow another world of knowledge to die, one that could help to sustain us. As Aboriginal peoples of this land, we have the knowledge to enable us to survive and flourish in our own homeland. Our stories of ancient times tell us how. Our languages provide those instructions.

With the recent development of First Nations schooling, we have once again resolved to involve the elders and our life ways in our development as human beings. We have begun by utilizing Aboriginal languages to teach the sacred knowledge of our ancestors. Our curriculum is based on the language, thematically taught, and aligned to the cycles, relationships, and rhythms of our existence. In this way, we are beginning to provide the balanced spectrum of education that we were denied under earlier federal policies of assimilation.

Western education has much to gain by viewing the world through the eyes and languages of Aboriginal peoples. The earth and its resources must be viewed through the lens of tribal knowledge if we are to understand how to protect the universe. Rituals and ceremonies that cleanse and heal, maintaining the balances, must be respected and honoured. Western science has promoted the development of modern society, which has initiated the best and worst of development from environmental and economic perspectives. Today we are faced with how we are to survive the global disasters created by our scientific ingenuity, as well as how we can bridge knowledge gaps created by the diversity of people and thought. Aboriginal languages and education can be the means to opening the paradigmatic doors of contemporary public education. Creating a balance between two worldviews is the great challenge facing modern educators.

### **Developing Legislation to Protect Constitutional Rights**

Because modern society has no idea about the worldview within Aboriginal consciousness, the best way to encourage inclusion of this worldview

in the modern curriculum is through a comprehensive federal act. Under the existing constitutional rights of Aboriginal people, the federal government must enact legislation to provide an adequate quantity and quality of educational services based on Aboriginal consciousness, as well as equal access for Aboriginal people to an education distinct from the needs of other groups or peoples in Canada.

While legislation appears to be an obvious solution to the problem, this course of action has not been proposed in the recommendations put forward by the Assembly of First Nations in *Toward Rebirth of First Nations Languages* or in the *House of Commons Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs Report* on Aboriginal literacy and empowerment. Both of these groups suggest consultation, task forces, and institutional arrangements, which I endorse. I also endorse the spirit and intent of their recommendations. Still, these consultations, task forces, and institutional arrangements must lead to a federal act implementing our existing rights in modern society. Such a federal act is a more permanent framework for understanding the problem and carrying out solutions.

Such an act should declare community-based education as an existing Aboriginal and treaty right that must be fully complied with and supported. A delivery system must be developed to facilitate the flow of service and program funds in the most direct and immediate manner to the local program level with a minimum of delay and administration. Such an act must recognize the viability of funding community-based educational institutions as conduits of all aspects of Aboriginal education.

Aboriginal languages are irreplaceable resources that require protection and support. In particular, Aboriginal languages require official status in Canada, constitutional recognition, and accompanying legislative protection. In addition, provincial and federal schools should provide credit within the school system for Aboriginal language study.

Experience has shown, however, that it is not enough to formulate policy that recognizes the viability of community-based educational institutions for Aboriginal people in an act. Funding and administrative policies must ensure that weighing criteria exist for preserving and developing Aboriginal consciousness and languages in those educational institutions. There are more than enough modern thought-based schools and classrooms in Canada; the problem is to create an Aboriginal language-based curriculum. No politician, administrator, or educator should be able to destroy Aboriginal consciousness or language because of other priorities. Thus, explicit funding and policies must ensure that First Nations politicians or administrators cannot confiscate funding designated for the preservation of Aboriginal consciousness or languages for other temporal schemes. This is the lesson of our history with education.

Aboriginal communities should be encouraged to assume full control of

their education with adequate resources and funding to create an educational system that will develop Aboriginal consciousness through the development of Aboriginal language, culture, and identity. Where Aboriginal communities have instituted language policies in educational systems, these policies should be recognized and acknowledged by the federal government, and financial resources should be available to develop these policies and link these systems to other agencies and services that permit the development of languages.

Such an act must establish guidelines and funding incentives that will ensure that preserving and developing Aboriginal consciousness and languages is not viewed as a lesser part of the curriculum. Literacy is a Canadian resource that Aboriginal students must develop in their own languages before they are required to learn English. Funds must be provided to make Aboriginal literacy viable for schools to incorporate into their early childhood educational programs, in particular in the development of books and materials in the Aboriginal languages.

The act should encourage and require grantees to set aside a certain percentage of grant funds for in-service training and staff development programs on Aboriginal consciousness and languages to understand the scope and implication of the differences from modern thought. The existing network of provincial programs must be revamped to target program monies into enhancing Aboriginal consciousness and languages in all levels of the curriculum. The federal government should provide adequate resources to First Nations to ensure the development of language structures, curriculum materials, First Nations language teachers, resource centres, and immersion programs.

A network of regional curriculum centres for Aboriginal languages is justifiable. The regional centres would offer support for curriculum development with the assistance of local language informants and elders. Curriculum centres should be developed on a regional base suited to Aboriginal people so that they do not have to leave their communities for extended periods of time. Centres should be able to evaluate the established curriculum and work out solutions. The centres would offer curriculum developers and educational resources for the development of books by Aboriginal thinkers, as well as offer printing services at a reasonable rate. Some books may be accepted by other language groups in the region or nationally and, where appropriate, could be translated and printed, offering advantages such as lower rates due to the large number of books printed.

These centres should fund writing workshops and support writers who embrace Aboriginal thought and knowledge and apply it to methods of teaching. They should support and fund the research and writing of Aboriginal pedagogy and language curriculum and teaching. They should raise

the consciousness of the Canadian public about the positive value to all society of inclusive education as opposed to the current exclusionary model. They should provide information to communities about the stages of language loss and the restorative process that they may use to guide the growth of a healthy language base. These centres should develop and/or encourage curriculum advisory boards or committees composed of elders in the community who will guide the development of curriculum and the development of language research for educational purposes.

Such an act must waive the requirement for teaching credentials and overcome other barriers to the employment of Aboriginal elders who speak their Aboriginal languages in federal or provincial schools. Elders in Aboriginal communities are the custodians of endangered Aboriginal languages, and they must have dignity and an acknowledgment of the value of their services. Elders require the support of other elders and flexibility in timing and scheduling. They should be provided with these necessary amenities.

It seems obvious that elders and others who can pass on Aboriginal identity, languages, and culture should be directly involved in the modern educational system. Yet seldom has any government confronted the educational biases in modern thought or educational practice that exclude them from this role. A modern legislative solution to this problem is found in the *Native American Language Act*.<sup>18</sup> Section 104(s) declares that it is the policy of the United States to “allow exceptions to teacher certification requirements for Federal programs, and programs funded in whole or in part by the Federal Government, for instruction in Native American languages when such teacher certification requirements hinder the employment of qualified teachers who teach in Native American languages, and to encourage State and territorial governments to make similar exceptions.”

Aboriginal languages cannot be isolated in the way that politics or economics can be isolated in modern thought. Advocates of cultural studies argue that no person from another worldview can learn about other cultures except by being there and listening. (This is called “fieldwork.”) Languages are said to be learned, not genetically encoded. Learning any language requires time and patience – one cannot simply use one’s imagination to invent other cultural worlds, methods, and perceptions. Human imagination is as culturally formed as are distinctive ways of weaving, performing a ritual, raising children, grieving, or healing. All these activities are specific to certain forms of life.

In this era, discussion of limited funding is merely another way to avoid implementing constitutional rights and human rights. Yet without funding, the future costs for developing a curriculum that includes Aboriginal knowledge and languages are horrific. A base formula must be established

to offer stable funding for Aboriginal education – funding at a level equal to provincial standards. The finances should be derived by implementing a procedure that identifies tax revenue already collected at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels, including money that normally flows into the existing tax revenue from treaty entitlements to the Crown, Aboriginal resources, and Aboriginal economic development activities.

This tax revenue has never been considered as having emanated from Aboriginal or treaty rights or from Indian reserves and communities, which in fact contribute a major portion of tax revenue to governments. After the federal government has identified and isolated dollars from a tax study and estimates have been made of these dollars, the monies may be supplemented by federal appropriations.

The act should encourage Aboriginal youth to obtain technical and professional levels of education once they have had the chance to learn the history of their own nations. When they perceive that education can have a positive impact on their own lives and those of their people; when there are Aboriginal role models who reflect the best values of their nations and who nurture culture and language development in their communities; and when good economic opportunities are created so that they can remain in their communities – all this can reflect on the existing body of Aboriginal knowledge. Still, each one of these solutions requires major changes.

Little classroom research has been done on the effects of teaching students about their culture, history, and languages, as well as about oppression, racism, and differences in worldviews, but consciousness-raising classes and courses at the elementary and junior high school levels, and at the college and university levels, have brought to the surface new hopes and dreams and have raised the aspirations and educational successes of Aboriginal students. Our people are slowly coming to understand that poverty and oppression are not their fault and are not the result of their faulty language, consciousness, or culture. They have begun to understand that poverty and oppression are tools created by modern society to maintain the status quo and to foster and legitimize racism and class divisions. As band schools offer courses in Aboriginal language and thought, and as economic opportunities are made available to Aboriginal peoples on reserves through education, racism and its residual effects in the non-Native community and family are being exposed.

First Nations government is a critical element in this development. First Nations must institute policies of hiring Aboriginal people whose first language is an Indigenous language and who will encourage its function and use in the workplace. If a language has little function in the daily lives of people, it will die. Leaders of the First Nations must inspire the youth to acquire an education so that they can benefit from increased

responsibilities. The leaders must also inspire the youth to develop their skills for the nation and their valued language and culture. The First Nations must allow their own educated Aboriginal people to assume responsible positions in their community development, positions that nurture respect and honour, instead of passing these jobs to non-Aboriginal people or to family members with lesser qualifications. The strength of tribalism lies in our collective values, which must be fostered toward a collective consciousness as opposed to individual gain. Schools and community leaders must seek to nurture among the youth these traditional attitudes of collective community as they seek to develop their nation's growth. As the collective gains, so also do its parts. Collective healing in our community of the pains of the past and present will shape the attitudes of the youth. They must understand their past and the context of their present to embark on a new vision of the future.

#### Notes

- 1 Marie Battiste, "Micmac Literacy and Cognitive Assimilation," in J. Barman, Y. Hébert, and D. McCaskill, eds., *Indian Education in Canada: The Legacy* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986).
- 2 Report of the United Nations Seminar on the Effects of Racism and Racial Discrimination on the Social and Economic Relations between Indigenous Peoples and States. Commission on Human Rights, 45th Sess., UN Doc. E/CN.4/1989/22 (1989).
- 3 *Gathering Strength*, report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, vol. 3 (Ottawa: Canada Communications Group, 1996).
- 4 See, for example, Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).
- 5 See R. Barsh, "United Nations Seminar on Indigenous Peoples and States" (1989) 83(3) *Am. J. Internat'l L.* 599.
- 6 Battiste, "Micmac Literacy and Cognitive Assimilation."
- 7 Study of the Protection of the Cultural and Intellectual Property of Indigenous Peoples, UN Doc. E/CN.4/Sub.2/1993/28.
- 8 G.A. Res. 48/163, UN GAOR, 48th Sess., Agenda item 114(b), UN Doc. A/RES/48/163 (1994). See also Commission on Human Rights Resolution 1994/26 (March 4, 1994).
- 9 Adrienne Rich, "Invisibility in Academe," cited in Renate Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), ix.
- 10 House of Commons Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, *You Took My Talk: Aboriginal Literacy and Empowerment* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1990), 29-35.
- 11 This is one of the findings of the United States Congress in *Native American Language Act*, P.L. 101-477, section 102(9) (1990).
- 12 Assembly of First Nations, *Towards Rebirth of First Nations Languages* (Ottawa: AFN, 1992); *You Took My Talk* (see note 10); Assembly of First Nations, *Towards Linguistic Justice for First Nations* (Ottawa: AFN, 1990); and Assembly of First Nations, *Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of Our Future* (Ottawa: AFN, 1988).
- 13 *Native American Language Act*, P.L. 101-477, section 102(9) (1990).
- 14 Since Canada ratified the UN Human Rights Convention in 1976, Aboriginal people as linguistic minorities within Canada were supposed to enjoy freedom from discrimination and have the right to enjoy their own culture and to use their own language (GA Res. 2200a, 21 UN GAOR Supp. [No. 16] 49, UN Doc. A/6546 at 56). This right has never been translated into federal law or policy. The most recent UN statement is in International Labor Organization Convention 169, the *Indigenous and Tribal People Convention* 1989, articles 26, 27, 28. This convention has not been ratified by Canada.



- 15 See Mary Heit and Heather Blair, "Language Needs and Characteristics of Saskatchewan Students: Implications for Educators," and Catherine Littlejohn and Shirley Fredeen, "Indian Language Programs in Saskatchewan: A Survey," in Sonia Morris, Keith MacLeod, and Marcel Danesi, eds., *Aboriginal Languages and Education: The Canadian Experience* (Oakville, ON: Mosaic Press, 1995).
- 16 See Agnes Grant, "The Challenge for Universities," in Marie Battiste and Jean Barman, eds., *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995).
- 17 See David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); David Peat, *Lighting the Seventh Fire: The Spiritual Ways, Healing, and Science of the Native American* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1994); and David Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 1997).
- 18 This federal act by the United States is part of the *Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act*, Public Law 101-477.

## 16

# Protecting and Respecting Indigenous Knowledge

*Graham Hingangaroa Smith*

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During the 1996 International Summer Institute at the University of Saskatchewan, I listened intently to the speakers and discussions and then organized my thoughts in order to respond interactively with issues previously raised. While the topic addressed at the institute generally kept faith with the theme of respecting and protecting Indigenous knowledge, I deliberately broadened my presentation to reflect upon some of the critical issues that had been raised by different speakers in the institute. This chapter closely reflects the original contribution made at the institute, which was presented in the traditional Maori form of oral presentation, *whaikoreo*. The appropriate *mihi* ritual introduction was performed, the words were spoken from the heart, the “truth” spoken by the speaker was laid out before the people for validation, the speech was delivered orally, and it was concluded with a traditional *waiata* or song. The presentation has been altered minimally to conform to printed conventions.

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In this chapter, I will attempt to do three things. First, I want to deal with the protection of Indigenous knowledge within the context of the institute: that is, I want to respond to some specific challenges that came from voices gathered at the institute. Second, I want to explore what I call the “new formations of colonization” and look at one example in particular: the way in which Indigenous knowledge has become “commodified” as a result of the development of an emphasis on free-market economic forces. Third, I want to relate some of the specific strategies of resistance that are being developed within our context in New Zealand. In particular, I would like to describe the Maori case study as a possible example for other Indigenous communities to consider. I offer this example not to assert the definitive answer to the problems raised by colonization but to offer insights into what is and what is not working for us. You, of course, must decide for yourselves what is relevant and useful for your own situations. The key thing that I hope will interest people is the transformative

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processes we chose to adopt. This particular discussion is not so much about the structure of our interventions as it is about the processes we used to put those interventions in place. This, I think, is one of the ironies of Indigenous struggle: it is the actual process of struggle that makes us strong and committed and that helps us to consolidate why we are struggling. That is, struggle constantly forces us to identify and review what we stand for and what we stand against.

### **Seven Challenges Raised by the Summer Institute**

The first challenge I want to respond to is what I call the challenge to Indigenous people to engage in positive, proactive initiatives rather than resorting to reactive modes of action. This proactive type of action can be illustrated in the tensions within the following dichotomies: the difference between having a fence at the top of the cliff and an ambulance at the bottom; the difference between prevention and cure; the difference between seeing oneself as responsible for Indigenous problems as opposed to understanding the wider societal structures; the difference between biological explanations and sociological explanations with respect to social and cultural differences. I am not suggesting that these positions are always absolute opposites; however, my view is that we Indigenous peoples should be concerned with accentuating preemptive and proactive actions rather than being sidetracked into being overly concerned with reactive responses. In Freire's terminology, we must "name the world for ourselves." While we should acknowledge that there are multiple sites where the struggle against oppression and exploitation might be taken up, Indigenous peoples must set the agenda for change themselves, not simply react to an agenda that has been laid out for us by others. With respect, I have felt a little uncomfortable with some of the discussion that has taken place at this institute when it has clearly come from a reactive mode of thinking. I would encourage the members of this institute to reflect carefully on the difference between being proactive and being reactive.

I would like to revisit some of the points made by Poka Laenui, who argued for the development and adoption of five steps of decolonization. My concern with this focus is that we might again be spending too much time in a reactive mode. The point here is the extent to which we are drawn into engaging with and justifying ourselves to the dominant society. I believe that such a process puts the colonizer at the centre, and thereby we become co-opted into reproducing (albeit unintentionally) our own oppression. While there is an important place for critical deconstruction of colonization (and I do not wish to diminish the powerful and valuable words offered by Poka Laenui), my concern is to concentrate our limited energies and resources on what it is that we want.

This latter point can be illustrated from the context out of which I've