

CHAPTER IV



CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION

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Millions of people are denied their right to education because of poverty, marginalization, poor and ill-funded services, geographic isolation and conflicts. Indigenous peoples are particularly affected and, throughout the world, they suffer from lower levels of education than their non-indigenous counterparts.

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The situation of indigenous peoples is typically characterized by a lack of access to education in general, due to their geographic and politically marginalized status. Too often, education systems and curricula do not respect indigenous peoples' diverse cultures. There are too few teachers who speak their languages and their schools often lack basic materials. Educational materials that provide accurate and fair information on indigenous peoples and their ways of life are particularly rare. It is too common that "...educational programs fail to offer indigenous peoples the possibility of participating in decision-making, the design of curricula, the selection of teachers and teaching methods and the definition of standards."¹ The result is an education gap - indigenous students have lower enrolment rates, higher dropout rates and poorer educational outcomes than non-indigenous people in the same countries.

Education as a fundamental right

Education is recognized as both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights and fundamental freedoms, the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized peoples can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities. Education is increasingly recognized as one of the best long-term financial investments that States can make. Education of indigenous children contributes to both individual and community development, as well as to participation in society in its broadest sense. Education enables indigenous children to exercise and enjoy economic, social and cultural rights, and strengthens their ability to exercise civil rights in order to influence political policy processes for improved protection of human rights. The implementation of indigenous peoples' right to education is an essential means of achieving individual empowerment and self-determination. Education is also an important means for the enjoyment,

¹ King & Schielmann (2004), 19.

*maintenance and respect of indigenous cultures, languages, traditions and traditional knowledge... Education is the primary means ensuring indigenous peoples' individual and collective development; it is a precondition for indigenous peoples' ability to realize their right to self-determination, including their right to pursue their own economic, social and cultural development.*²

There are a number of international instruments that establish education as a fundamental human right. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and later, the World Declaration on Education for All (1990) and the Dakar Framework of Action (2000), all reiterate the commitment of the international community to providing quality education to all children, youth and adults.

Relating specifically to indigenous peoples in general, International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 169 (1989) on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples encourages state-funded education programmes at all levels to teach in indigenous languages and to produce media and educational materials in local languages.³ The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC 1989) stipulates that the child's own cultural identity, language and values be respected (Article 29.1c) and explicitly addresses the situation of indigenous children by stating, "a child... 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 practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language" (Article 30).

During the First International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples (1995-2004), the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 48/163 affirming progress at national and international levels toward broader enjoyment of the right to education by indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples themselves have, in various fora and on various occasions, emphasized the importance they place on education. The Coolangatta Statement (1999) recounts numerous international documents supporting indigenous peoples' right to education in indigenous languages and the teaching of indigenous cultural content, spirituality and policies of self-determination.⁴ More recently, and based on the findings of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people,⁵ the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) has recommended that states include indigenous community members in education policy-making and decisions, support indigenous knowledge and languages in primary and secondary schools, and help train additional indigenous people to manage and implement their own education systems.⁶

indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages

² Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples p. 4-5 & 25.

³ ILO Convention No. 169, articles 26 to 31.

⁴ The Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Education was issued by the World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education, held in Hilo, Hawai'i, 6 August 1999.

⁵ Stavenhagen (2005a), 19, para. 87.

⁶ UNPFII (2005).



Finally, and not least, the recently adopted Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) recognizes the importance of adequate education for indigenous peoples, especially in Article 14 which states that indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Articles 12 (1) and 13 (1) also emphasize education, recognizing indigenous peoples' right to manifest, practice, develop and teach spiritual and religious traditions customs and ceremonies and their right to revitalize, use develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures.⁷

The education gap

Despite the numerous international instruments that thus proclaim universal rights to education, indigenous peoples do not fully enjoy these rights, and an education gap between indigenous peoples and the rest of the population remains critical, worldwide.⁸

In most countries, indigenous children have low school enrolments, poor school performance, low literacy rates, high dropout rates, and lag behind other groups in terms of academic achievements nationally.⁹ Illiteracy, which is prevalent in indigenous communities is a direct result of educational exclusion in the form of poor access, low funding, culturally and linguistically inadequate education and ill-equipped instructors. Among the H'mong of Viet Nam, one of the most marginalized of the country's indigenous groups, 83 per cent of men and 97 per cent of women are illiterate;¹⁰ in many small communities in Southern Arnhem Land (Australia), up to 93 per cent of the population is illiterate.¹¹ In Ecuador, the illiteracy rate of indigenous peoples was 28 per cent in 2001, compared to the national rate of 13 per cent¹², while in Venezuela, the indigenous illiteracy rate (32 per cent) is five times higher than the non-indigenous illiteracy rate (6.4 per cent).¹³

Disparity in years of schooling among indigenous and non-indigenous populations

A sizeable gap persists between indigenous and non-indigenous years of schooling. (Average years of schooling, population 15 and older, latest available year)

Country	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Schooling gap in years
Bolivia	9.6	5.9	3.7
Ecuador	6.9	4.3	2.6
Guatemala	5.7	2.5	3.2
Mexico	7.9	4.6	3.3
Peru	8.7	6.4	2.3

Source: Hall and Patrinos (2006).

⁷ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

⁸ See Vinding (ed.) (2006), 13-16.

⁹ See Larsen, Peter Bille (2003), vii, 14-15; The Coolangatta Statement; Abu-Saad (2006), 128-140, and (2003), 103-120; Hays (2005), 27; Lasimbang (2005) 43; Hicks (2005), 9, 13-14; Freeman and Fox (2005), 34, 42-44, 50, 86; Mellor and Corrigan (2004), 2.

¹⁰ UNICEF (2003).

¹¹ The Age, (November 2005).

¹² UNESCO (2008), p. 96.

¹³ ECLAC/CEPAL (2006), 177.

Disparate secondary school graduation rates between indigenous and non-indigenous students

A gap exists between indigenous and non-indigenous rates of high school graduation. (Percentage of the population who graduated high school, latest available year)

Country	Total Population	Indigenous	Percentage Gap
Australia ^a	49	23	26
Canada ^b	65	37	28
New Zealand: Māori ^c	76.1	62.9	13.2
USA: Native American/ Alaska Natives ^d	80.4	70.9	9.5
USA: Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	80.4	78.3	2.1

Sources: ^aAustralian Bureau of Statistics (2008); ^bStewart, S.C. (2006); ^cNew Zealand Household Labour Force Survey (2008); ^dU.S. Census Bureau (2000).

In a recent ILO study on the MDGs,¹⁴ examples from different indigenous communities around the world showed that primary school enrolment rates in general were low; in the case of a Bolivian Andean community, rates were substantially lower (75 per cent) than the national average (97 per cent); in Cameroon, only 1.31 per cent of the indigenous Baka children in the District of Salapoumbé attended primary school. In 2000, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed “serious concern regarding the striking disparities in terms of access to education, attendance at primary and secondary levels and drop-out rates [suffered by] children belonging to scheduled castes and tribes [in India]”.¹⁵

Speaking an indigenous or non-official language is a clear marker of disadvantage in terms of schooling. In Mozambique, for example, 43 per cent of people aged between 16 and 49 who speak Portuguese have at least one grade of secondary schooling, while among speakers of Lomwe, Makhuwa, Sena and Tsonga, the rates are between 6 and 16 per cent. In Bolivia, 68 per cent of Spanish speakers aged 16 to 49 have completed some secondary education, while only a third or fewer of Aymara, Quechua and Guaraní speakers have done so.¹⁶ Indigenous girls tend to be more disadvantaged than indigenous boys. In Guatemala, only 54 per cent of indigenous girls are in school, compared with 71 per cent of indigenous boys. By age 16, only a quarter of indigenous girls are enrolled, compared with 45 per cent of boys.¹⁷

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¹⁴ Vinding (ed.) (2006).

¹⁵ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (2000).

¹⁶ UNESCO (2008), p. 96.

¹⁷ UNESCO (2008), p.104-105.



According to census data in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples' participation in formal education has narrowed in recent years. Nevertheless, there remains a significant gap. In 2006, 21 per cent of 15-year-old indigenous children in Australia were not participating in school education, compared with 5 per cent of non-indigenous children, while indigenous students were half as likely to complete year 12 of primary school education as their non-indigenous counterparts.¹⁸ In the United States, absences from school are higher among indigenous children than other groups.

Estimated probability of primary school dropout, Mexico, 2002 (per cent)

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	All
Male	51.8	25.0	28.2
Female	56.6	29.7	32.9
Rural	61.8	47.5	51.4
Urban	24.4	19.2	19.4

Source: Hall and Patrinos (2006).

High dropout rates are due to multiple causes: Parents cannot afford the out-of-pocket costs related to keeping their children in schools, especially in rural areas where children customarily participate in traditional agricultural activities and are valuable contributors to the household economy; they face numerous obstacles (language problems, discrimination, etc.) or, in the case of girls, because they have to help their mothers with domestic chores, take care of siblings or contribute to their families' income, or because they get married.

Probability of a 10-14-year-old child working, Guatemala, 2000 (per cent)

	School only	School and work	Work, no school	No work, no school
Indigenous	47	24	14	15
Non-Indigenous	69	14	8	9

Source: Based on table in Hall and Patrinos (2006), 124.

¹⁸ Steering Committee for the Review of Service Provision (2007).

Indigenous education in the United States: some highlights

During the 2005-2006 school year, there were 644,000 Native American and Alaska Natives in the public primary and secondary school system, or about 1 per cent of all public school students, whilst they make up 1.5 per cent of the total population. A larger percentage of Native American and Alaska Native eighth-graders (13-14 years old) were absent from school than any other segment of the population, and only Hispanic youth had higher dropout rates (21 per cent) than Native American and Alaska Native youth (15 per cent).

Native American and Alaska Native students in public schools are less likely to have access to a computer at home than any other group. The number of Native American and Alaska Natives enrolled in college has doubled in the past 30 years, while still lagging behind the total population.

In 2006, there were 32 tribally controlled colleges and universities attended by over 17,000 students. Educational outcomes remain deeply unequal, where Native American and Alaska Natives suffer from significantly higher unemployment rates (16 per cent in 2007) than others (3-12 per cent), whilst the median annual earnings in 2006 for 25- to 34-year-old Native Americans and Alaska Natives was \$27,000, compared to the general population's \$35,000.

Source: DeVoe, J.F., and Darling-Churchill, K.E. (2008) pp. iii-v.

The state of Aboriginal education in Australia

Despite the improvements in school completion within the indigenous population, indigenous people aged 15 years and over were still half as likely as non-indigenous Australians to have completed school to year 12 in 2006 (23 per cent, compared with 49 per cent). They were also twice as likely to have left school at year 9 or below (34 per cent, compared with 16 per cent). In 2006, around 10,400 young indigenous adults aged 18-24 years (22 per cent) had left school at year 9 or below, compared with 58,100 non-indigenous young people in the same age group (4 per cent). These relative differences have remained unchanged since 2001.^a

Indigenous people living in rural or remote areas of Australia were less likely than those in urban areas to have completed year 12. In 2006, 31 per cent of indigenous people living in major cities had completed school to this level, compared with 22 per cent in regional areas and 14 per cent in remote areas. With the exception of Queensland, this was reflected across the states and territories, with the Australian Capital Territory (46 per cent) having the largest proportion of indigenous people who had completed year 12, and the Northern Territory the lowest (10 per cent).^a

While 93 per cent of all Australian students and 83 per cent of Aboriginal students achieved year 3 reading benchmarks, only 20 per cent of indigenous students in remote Northern Territory schools met the standard.^b

By year 5, 89 per cent of all students and 70 per cent of Aboriginal students nationally achieved the reading benchmark, compared with only 21 per cent of Aboriginal students in remote parts of the NT.^b

Sources: ^aAustralian Bureau of Statistics (2008); ^bStorry, K. (2006)



Why they drop out...

Añú girl, aged 11, from Lagoon Sinamaica (Venezuela):

"I went from first to third grade... but gave up going to school some two months ago because I was working, fetching water, helping my mother, and therefore the teacher took me off the list".

Warao woman, Grade 6 teacher, aged 21, from Nabasanuka (Venezuela):

"They drop out because they get tired of repeating classes... when they repeat, they get discouraged and don't come back".

Source: ECLAC/CEPAL (2006), 182.

Age-Grade Distortion, Guatemala, 2000

(Percentage of students more than one year behind the appropriate grade for their age)

Grade	Indigenous	Non-indigenous
Third	79	75
Fourth	71	63
Fifth	59	54
Sixth	59	50

Source: Hall and Patrinos (2006).

Even in countries where the general level of schooling among indigenous peoples has increased, such as, for instance, several Latin American countries and Canada, the quality gap in schooling persists, resulting in poor education outcomes for indigenous peoples (Table 4.6).¹⁹

¹⁹ ILO/PRO169/IPEC (2006).

Primary education in Latin America (10 countries)

Percentage of population aged 15 to 19 having completed primary education, by ethnicity and sex and gender ratio, based on census data (2000-2002)

Countries and date of census	Percentage of youth aged 15 to 19 that completed primary school						Gender ratio (per 100)	
	Indigenous			Non-Indigenous			Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women		
Bolivia 2001	73.7	79.5	68.4	86.4	86.6	86.3	116.2	100.3
Brazil 2000	63.7	63.0	64.4	78.6	74.6	82.9	97.8	89.9
Chile 2002	93.3	92.5	94.0	95.5	95.1	96.1	98.4	99.0
Costa Rica 2000	55.7	56.1	55.2	86.3	84.5	88.0	101.6	96.1
Ecuador 2001	70.2	74.1	66.7	74.2	72.3	76.2	111.1	94.8
Guatemala 2002	36.3	42.9	30.0	68.7	64.6	72.7	142.9	88.9
Honduras 2001	45.1	42.8	47.6	81.6	77.4	85.6	89.8	90.5
México 2000	68.7	72.4	65.0	90.0	89.7	90.2	111.3	99.4
Panamá 2000	55.8	61.2	50.2	93.3	92.0	94.7	121.8	97.1
Paraguay 2002	21.4	25.6	16.8	82.8	82.0	83.7	151.9	97.9

Source: ECLAC/CEPAL (2006), 61.

Most states focus on access to primary and basic education while under-emphasizing secondary, technical and university education. In countries such as the United States and Canada, where indigenous high school graduation rates are similar to that of non-indigenous groups, indigenous students are often less well-prepared for college and are less well-represented in professional and academic fields.²⁰ This is clearly illustrated by looking at college enrolment numbers, where in 2001, 3.7 per cent of the Native American and Alaska Native population was enrolled in college in the United States, in comparison to 5.6 per cent of the total population. When looking only at graduate students, the difference is greater yet.²¹ A similar trend is also visible in Nepal, where indigenous peoples' literacy rates are as high, if not higher than, those of the non-indigenous population, whilst indigenous graduates and post-graduates are only 8.5 per cent of all graduates and post-graduates, yet they constitute 32.7 per cent of the total population.²²

²⁰ Taylor and Kalt (2005), 40-43; Greene and Forster (2003), 11-14; Institute of Higher Education Policy (1999), A-2; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (2003), 3-4.

²¹ In 2001, there were 11,200 Native Americans and Alaska Natives enrolled in graduate studies, or 0.26 per cent of the Native American and Alaskan Native population in the United States, while graduate students made up 0.69 per cent of the total population of the country, making them 2.7 times less likely to be graduate students. Taken from United States Census Bureau (2008) American Indian, Alaska Native Tables from the Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2004-2005. Accessed on 24 November 2008, at <http://www.census.gov/statab/www/sa04aian.pdf>

²² UNDP (2004), 63.



Formal school systems

Indigenous communities are frequently perceived as disappearing social and cultural forms that are no longer viable and which must be rescued by outside forces through formal education and economic and social development. However, as the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms stated in his report on Indigenous Peoples and Education Systems:

The systems of formal education historically provided by the State or religious or private groups have been a two-edged sword for indigenous peoples. On the one hand, they have often enabled indigenous children and youth to acquire knowledge and skills that will allow them to move ahead in life and connect with the broader world. On the other hand, formal education, especially when its programmes, curricula and teaching methods come from other societies that are removed from indigenous cultures, has also been a means of forcibly changing, and in some cases, destroying, indigenous cultures.²³

a majority of indigenous children do not enjoy access to education that is specifically designed for their needs, taught in their languages or that reflects their world views

Policymakers have long been aware of the formative socializing qualities of education. During the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, this knowledge informed decisions in many countries, such as Canada, Australia and the United States, where formal education in missionary and many boarding and residential schools separated children from families. This left a legacy of what is referred to in these countries as the “lost” or “stolen” generations.

Although reliable data are not available on a global scale, it is nevertheless clear that a majority of indigenous children do not enjoy access to education that is specifically designed for their needs, taught in their languages or that reflects their world views. In many indigenous communities, education is inseparable from culture, economy, family and survival.²⁴

Most formal education systems do not employ community-based or indigenous approaches such as elders passing on traditional knowledge, or parents and other community members teaching children about the environment and their relationship with it.

Indigenous education in San communities (Southern Africa)

San communities in Southern Africa have been able to survive in a harsh environment for generations depending upon their intimate knowledge of the environment and the animals that live in it. Such survival skills are not

²³ Stavenhagen (2005a), 7, para. 15.

²⁴ Hicks (2005), 9.

innate; they are learned, passed down from generation to generation in very specific ways. Generations of San children have had to learn the skills and flexibility necessary to survive in their particular circumstances. San children have also had to learn the appropriate behaviours to be accepted within their community. We can thus understand San communities as educating their children.

Source: Hays, Jennifer (2004), 243.

On the contrary, national school curricula tend to have very little (if any) focus on indigenous peoples, their issues and histories. Some national curricula even reinforce negative stereotypes, portraying indigenous peoples as underdeveloped, childlike or uncivilized, in contrast to the population of the modern, developed, mature nation-state.²⁵

Formal schools teach specific, defined curricula such as national history, culture, etc., which serve the purpose not only of providing information to students, but also of socializing them, teaching them how to be citizens and ultimately incorporating them into the national society. By learning topics such as history, sociology, geography and even biology or chemistry, school children are introduced to a national discourse that emphasizes specific identities, histories and a sense of place in the world.

schools with predominantly indigenous students are more likely to cancel classes, hire less-qualified teachers, and be understaffed

By excluding indigenous issues from school curricula, many formal education systems ignore indigenous peoples, their cultures and practices. But when indigenous school children are introduced only to the national discourse at the expense of their native discourse, they are in danger of losing part of their identity, their connection with their parents and predecessors and, ultimately, of being caught in a no man's land whereby they lose an important aspect of their identity while not fully becoming a part of the dominant national society. This makes indigenous school children less inclined to pursue their studies. Indeed, indigenous communities often resist state-provided education that does not show respect for their traditional knowledge, values and livelihoods.²⁶

Difficulties encountered while delivering formal education to indigenous communities include lack of respect for indigenous languages and culture, interference in internal community affairs, inadequately trained teachers and the irrelevance of teaching curricula.²⁷ Education services in indigenous areas are, furthermore, usually under-funded, of low quality and poorly equipped. Poor and indigenous children therefore often attend the worst schools, are served by the least educated teachers, and have too few and often outdated textbooks

²⁵ Stavenhagen (2005b), 4-7; Larsen (2003), vii and 14-15.

²⁶ Larsen (2003), 17-18.

²⁷ Kroijer (2005), 17.



and other teaching materials.²⁸ In the United States, for example, according to the 2001 Bureau of Indian Affairs budget report, many schools on Native American reservations were structurally unsound and/or of insufficient size to accommodate the student population.²⁹

Schools with predominantly indigenous students are more likely to cancel classes, hire less-qualified teachers, and be understaffed. The lack of qualified teachers is often due to the low priority given to their training and to inadequate salaries. They are also not sufficiently supported and sometimes abandon their posts. There is relatively little parent, community or school board involvement, and underfunding and poor facilities inhibit the development of strong school programmes for indigenous children.³⁰

indigenous girls, in particular, experience difficult problems related to unfriendly school environments

Indigenous children, moreover, are more likely to arrive at school hungry, ill and tired;³¹ they are often bullied, and the use of corporal punishment is still widespread. Ethnic and cultural discrimination at schools are major obstacles to equal access to education, causing poor performance and higher dropout rates. Indigenous girls in particular, experience difficult problems related to unfriendly school environments, gender discrimination, school-based violence and sometimes sexual abuse, all of which contribute to high dropout rates.

Participation in formal schooling can also be more difficult for indigenous students who participate in subsistence hunting and gathering economies and uphold egalitarian ethics and preferences for non-hierarchical social organization. In a community that values equality and non-competitive approaches to learning, those who succeed in a system based upon hierarchy and competition have, at some point, had to contradict the cultural values of their upbringing.³² Some nomadic indigenous communities see formal education as weakening traditional knowledge, threatening economic livelihoods and disrupting the institutional foundations of identity.³³

The remoteness of many indigenous communities is one of the main reasons for the gap in schooling between indigenous and non-indigenous people. Many remote schools lack qualified teachers, and especially indigenous teachers who speak indigenous languages and can serve as role models for the younger generations. In some cases, only primary education is available locally, after which children must leave their communities for boarding schools, which are often run by missionaries.³⁴

Boarding schools are costly for families for multiple reasons. Indigenous children in boarding schools often suffer from discrimination, misunderstanding

²⁸ ILO/PRO169/IPEC (2006), 22.

²⁹ UNICEF (2003).

³⁰ Pavel et al. (1997), 41-48; St. Germaine (1995); US General Accounting Office (1997), 2.

³¹ ILO/PRO 169/IPEC (2006), 22; Hicks (2005).

³² Hays (2004), 242.

³³ Kaunga (2005), 37-41; Hays and Siegruhn (2005), 27.

³⁴ UNICEF (2003).

of their indigenous culture, lack of support and, in some cases, even physical and sexual exploitation. Sometimes indigenous children are not allowed to follow their cultural practices, such as wearing traditional dress and hairstyles. Indigenous children are often discouraged from speaking their native languages if not forbidden altogether. Students often feel unwelcome in the school towns; they long for their own village schools and often face emotional difficulties in a foreign learning environment that offers little support.³⁵ The very idea of separating parents and children is foreign to many indigenous peoples. If separation happens, indigenous children are often unable to adjust, suffer from alienation and drop out.

Boarding schools and other practices have often been aimed at assimilating indigenous children into the dominant culture and society. These policies were partly based on a racist notion that indigenous cultures were inferior and that indigenous children would benefit from being assimilated into the dominant culture, language and society. These assimilationist policies uprooted children from their heritage, tore families apart and decimated whole communities. The victims of these policies were left without a sense of belonging; outsiders in both the dominant society and their own indigenous societies. In recent years, the damage boarding schools have done to indigenous peoples' cultures has been recognized, including by the governments of Canada, the United States and Australia.³⁶

On the positive side, formal education has made it possible for some indigenous leaders and civil society organizations representing indigenous peoples to gain access to the state. Formal education has also helped to improve the status of indigenous women, enabling them to become more active participants in decision making that affects their lives.

Education in boarding schools may also work in some countries and not in others. If students are separated from their communities in order to attend boarding schools, vocational schools or universities, then emphasis on affirming identity and cultural community with other indigenous students may help to ameliorate the conditions of isolation. Community centres, active student organizations and cultural events, as well as indigenous issue policy discussions and curricula, can foster student leadership, knowledge, retention and training.³⁷

Barriers to education for indigenous children

Most indigenous communities see education as very important, even crucial, for improving their overall situation.³⁸ However, indigenous children face a number of obstacles to participating in formal education systems. Some of these obstacles have to do with their marginalized situation; others are the direct result of national policies.

Poverty, discrimination and marginalization are the leading causes of low educational performance which further exacerbate indigenous children's vulnerable status. From the moment they are born and throughout their lives, indigenous children are particularly exposed to the effects of marginalization. They are less likely to receive adequate health care because they are often not registered at birth or, in some cases, are denied citizenship by the national state in which they live; they may thus have problems accessing education and other public services.

³⁵ Hays and Siegruhn (2005), 31-32.

³⁶ Official apologies have recently been made by the Government of Australia (February 2008) and by the Government of Canada (June 2008).

³⁷ Champagne (2001), 21-28; Champagne and Stauss (eds.) (2002).

³⁸ Vinding (ed.) (2006), 16.



Indigenous children and the right to birth registration and nationality

Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that a child be registered immediately after birth. It also recognizes the child's right to acquire a nationality. Many indigenous people have neither. "When a child's birth goes unregistered, that child is less likely to enjoy his or her rights and to benefit from the protection accorded by the state in which he or she was born. Furthermore, the unregistered child may go unnoticed when his or her rights are violated. Later in life, he or she will be unable to vote or stand for election..." These children are also at risk of falling victim to child trafficking and are often easy prey for those who exploit their vulnerability recruiting them as street beggars, domestic servants in slave-like arrangements, or as child soldiers.

Source: UNICEF (2003), 9.

Lack of public funding, too few primary schools, too few teachers, inadequate curricula and high costs for parents all contribute to an insurmountable obstacle for many indigenous students. These problems are particularly acute in rural areas that suffer from poor infrastructure and where schools are often located at considerable distances from the community centres and are poorly equipped and understaffed.³⁹

bilingual education is widely recognized as a superior alternative for indigenous students, and bilingual and multi-lingual students have frequently been shown to perform better than monolingual indigenous students

Despite increasing awareness and efforts on the part of governments and civil society, indigenous students and their parents often have to face deeply-rooted discrimination and prejudice, making the school environment unfriendly and uncomfortable. School children also often have to cope with abuse at the hands of school authorities and other students; mainstream cultures frequently have little understanding of the values, cultures and histories of indigenous peoples. In many countries, the issue of the school uniform versus traditional dress is often a contentious one;⁴⁰ other issues may have to do with cultural practices (for example, hunting trips or religious rites), which are not taken into consideration by school authorities.

Many indigenous peoples' economies are based on modes of subsistence whereby the whole family is required to work at certain times of the year, making children's labour contributions essential. This, too, is seldom recognized by educational authorities, leading to yet another clash of interests that contributes to dropout rates.

One of the most common requests from indigenous parents is that their children be taught in their own language.⁴¹ Bilingual education is widely recognized as a

³⁹ Lasimbang (2005), 43.

⁴⁰ Vinding (ed.) (2006), 14.

⁴¹ ILO/PRO169/IPEC (2006), 16.

superior alternative for indigenous students, and bilingual and multi-lingual students have frequently been shown to perform better than monolingual indigenous students. Nevertheless, limited resources are devoted to building and expanding existing bilingual and intercultural programmes.⁴²

The lack of mother-tongue education, cultural differences between home and school, and work obligations are all factors that keep students away from school. The situation is further exacerbated by monolingual education systems, educational materials that are inadequate to the needs and realities of indigenous children, and teaching that is conducted by non-indigenous teachers.

Even under some of the best circumstances, in which physical isolation, school funding and language are not obstacles, there still often remain challenges. Indigenous students frequently find that the education they are offered by the state promotes individualism and a competitive atmosphere, rather than communal ways of life and cooperation. They are not taught relevant survival and work skills suitable for indigenous economies, and they often return to their communities with a formal education that is irrelevant or unsuitable for their needs. They therefore have limited employment prospects in the indigenous economies; instead, they are forced to seek employment in the national economy, leading to a vicious cycle of social fragmentation, brain drain and a lack of development,⁴³ especially because the jobs and salaries available to them often will not match their educational achievements. In most countries with indigenous populations, there persists a gap in education and labour market earnings between indigenous and non-indigenous people. The earning gap tends to increase at the higher education levels. This inequality in earnings threatens to discourage indigenous peoples from investing in education and reduces their chances of escaping the cycle of poverty.

Education and gaps in labour earnings

The highest gap in earnings for each additional year of schooling between indigenous and non-indigenous people in Latin America exists in Bolivia. In México, the returns from schooling were higher for non-indigenous than for indigenous peoples at every level except post-secondary—the gap being driven by a decline in the relative earnings of the three population groups that are the most likely to benefit from education gains: young workers, those who have completed secondary education, and those who are employed in the non-agricultural sector. According to the Living Conditions Survey conducted in Ecuador in 1998, the gap in labour earnings increased with education, affecting mostly indigenous skilled workers and professionals. Indigenous people received an earnings gain of 9 per cent from completed higher education, compared to an earnings gain of 15 per cent for non-indigenous people.

Source: Hall and Patrinos (2005)

Culture, community and indigenous education: searching for alternatives

Throughout the world, formal school systems have not provided educational opportunities to indigenous students that adequately prepare them for a life in the wider national society while at the same time fostering and strengthening indigenous cultures, community, interests and goals. Recognizing this, many indigenous

⁴² Bando et al. (2005), 1, 24.

⁴³ Kaunga (2005), 38-40; Larsen (2003). vii, 14-15.



communities have demanded greater access and control over their education. Indigenous communities, education scholars and state education policymakers are seeking solutions to provide indigenous students with the skills and knowledge they need to confront the issues of the twenty-first century.

Rural Development Program of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

Indigenous people constitute 100 per cent of the M.A. graduates and over 90 per cent of the B.A. graduates of University of Alaska Fairbanks Rural Development Program, which allows students to pursue their degrees while living and working in their home villages. The program is designed to educate a new generation of community leaders for rural Alaska. Graduates typically take positions with tribal and municipal governments, Native corporations, fisheries, tourism and other private businesses, regional health corporations or non-profits, and state/federal agencies. Students gain understanding of Alaska's relationship to the global economy and an appreciation for sustainable development strategies. They also learn specific tools essential for community leadership, including business plan and grant proposal writing, cultural documentation, project management and evaluation techniques. They learn about land/renewable resources, rural health, community visioning and planning processes, and tribal and local government administration. Graduate students gain a broader theoretical understanding of development processes in Alaska and the circumpolar north.

Source: Rural Development News (2006).

The goal for indigenous education is not only to recover culture and strengthen communities and identities, but also to acquire economic and political skills to successfully manage local indigenous affairs and economies within national and international contexts.⁴⁴ The burden of providing an array of multicultural skills and knowledge is heavy and will challenge contemporary conceptions and understanding of both state education systems and indigenous communities.

Language renewal

One way in which indigenous communities have started to recover education and culture is through language renewal and teaching in the mother tongue. Preserving the indigenous language is a means of preserving culture and strengthening identity.⁴⁵ In indigenous communities, where most children speak their mother tongue, many prefer school education to be taught in that language, preferably from kindergarten through grade 12. Few communities, however, have the resources to achieve this goal.⁴⁶ A major obstacle is the lack of bilingual teachers. The importance of capacity building thus cannot be overstated. The only way to provide adequate education for indigenous children in a bilingual environment is to prepare indigenous and non-indigenous teachers for the challenge of working in such an indigenous bilingual school environment.

National languages should not be ignored, but indigenous languages must be encouraged and preserved. Students should be given the opportunity of bilingual or multilingual capability and not made to choose one language over

⁴⁴ Glover, Anne (1994), 13, 16-17.

⁴⁵ See Assembly of First Nations (Canada) (2006); Larsen (2003), 29-33.

⁴⁶ Hays and Siegruhn (2005), 27-29; Hicks (2005), 9.

another.⁴⁷ Students with multiple language skills will be better adjusted, not having been subject to repression of their mother tongue. Furthermore, they enjoy significant cultural and intellectual advantages.

Progress in bilingual education in Bolivia

Important initiatives have been undertaken to ensure indigenous children's rights to education in Bolivia. In 1990, the Ministry of Education launched the Bilingual Intercultural Education Project for 114 rural primary schools with three majority indigenous languages: Quechua, Aymara and Guarani. The project developed into a national policy including more than ten ethno-linguistic groups.

Mother-tongue teaching starts with the first grade and continues throughout primary education, while Spanish is introduced gradually. The key strategies of the project were linguistic standardization to develop written forms of the indigenous languages involved, training of national human resources for the administration of the programs in the framework of the project, participation of parents, and coordination of efforts among the State, NGOs, and indigenous organizations. The latter remained actively involved throughout all stages of the project, from planning to evaluation.

The outcomes of the project included higher performance in reading and writing in the early years, better academic averages overall, greater self-esteem, better performance on the part of girls, and less disciplinary action in schools. The number of schools involved in the project increased because of demand from parents and communities.

Sources: UNICEF (2003) and d'Emilio (2001).

increasingly, states and local authorities are recognizing that indigenous peoples want and should participate in running their schools, developing education policies and creating curricula

Self-determination in education

In addition to bilingual schools, indigenous communities and parents are increasingly demanding and taking greater control of their children's schooling.⁴⁸ One of the most important and most debated rights that indigenous peoples demand is the right to self-determination. Although self-determination is frequently associated with access to lands, territories and natural resources, it is also extremely relevant to indigenous peoples' education. Throughout the world, indigenous peoples have experienced education as an outside influence, something that has been imposed on them without consulting them or seeking their consent. From boarding schools to missionaries to state-run education

⁴⁷ Stavenhagen (2005a), 19-20.

⁴⁸ See May (1999); Pavel et al. (1997), 6; The Coolangatta Statement.



centres, indigenous peoples have had very little influence over the formal education system. Increasingly, states and local authorities are recognizing that indigenous peoples want to and should participate in running their schools, developing education policies and creating curricula. States must support the needs and desires of indigenous communities to assume greater management and responsibility for the education of their children.⁴⁹

In different parts of the world, indigenous peoples are already managing their own schools. However, few community-based indigenous education projects have independent resources and most require outside financial help. Many community-based indigenous schools depend on foreign aid or private non-profit funds, and formal school systems have been less willing to adapt to the new education directions sought by indigenous communities. Dependency on external funding is a major weakness in many community-based and bilingual education programmes. States should develop strong ties to and provide support for the educational innovations sought by indigenous communities.⁵⁰

An indigenous curriculum

Another demand that is often expressed by indigenous parents is that of having culturally-adapted and more practical and vocational-oriented school curricula that take the needs of the community into consideration.⁵¹ Education should reproduce indigenous cultures for indigenous communities, and sustain indigenous identity rather than replace it.⁵²

“What and when will I reap?”

In Kenya, a legal framework has been established to provide free and compulsory education for all children. However, there is no comprehensive strategy that ensures that the curriculum and the education system are relevant to the livelihood situation of pastoralists and hunter-gatherers. One of the issues of concern is therefore how the education system can benefit the pastoral community—or as one of the parents put it: “If I put my child in school, what and when will I reap”? Another comment was that school-educated children often detach themselves from their traditional lifestyle: “If, after finishing school, they remain unemployed, they end up belonging to nowhere”.

Source: ILO/PRO169/IPEC (2006), 24.

Self-government, community-based initiatives and a strengthening of language, culture and values are all goals for indigenous education. Sophisticated presentations of indigenous history, culture and policy, as well as human and indigenous rights, will produce students and citizens who are knowledgeable and more capable of protecting culture and community interests.⁵³

Indigenous students and communities need information and conceptual tools to defend and pursue their interests within the context of the state and international community. Inclusion of elders in the teaching and teacher-

⁴⁹ Hays and Siegruhn (2005), 32.

⁵⁰ Kaunga (2005), 41; Lasimbang (2005), 46.

⁵¹ Vinding (ed.) (2006), 16.

⁵² Simon and Tuhiwai Smith (2001), 308-09; Abu-Saad (2006), 127.

⁵³ Krøijer (2005), 17-20; Larsen (2003), 33; Hays and Siegruhn (2005), 27; Fettes (1998), 250-271; Stairs (1994), 154-171; Vagner (2005) 24; The Coolangatta Statement.

training processes, including discussions of indigenous wisdom and spirituality, will help create well-informed indigenous students and teachers.⁵⁴

Non-formal education systems

Schools need to work within the cultural and economic cycles of indigenous communities and adapt to specific situations. Adjusting school timetables and term schedules to the local work calendar is seen as one way of facilitating children's access to school education. But there are other ways, too. A number of countries in Latin America, for instance, have reacted to the low enrolment and high dropout rates of indigenous children by promoting flexible school projects in rural communities through education clusters or multigrade teaching (such as the *Nueva Escuela Unitaria* in Colombia, Guatemala and other Latin American countries), where children of different ages share a classroom. These projects, which have promoted bilingual learning, community and family involvement, and adequately trained teachers, are shown to have retained more students, improved achievement and increased parental satisfaction.⁵⁵

Helping indigenous children who live in remote areas to receive an education is another challenge that indigenous communities have taken up, and several models have been applied, including the use of radio and mobile schools.

Providing education in remote areas

In the Nenets Autonomous Region of the Russian Federation, indigenous people maintain a nomadic lifestyle by following reindeer herds. They spend winters in the forests and summers on the coast of the Barents Sea. A nomadic school was founded in 1996 in the Bolshezemelskaya tundra region to provide education for Nenets children in their communities. Nenets-speaking teachers come to the town of Anderma and travel from there to herder communities, either by snowmobiles or with reindeer herds. Classes are held in tents, and the ages of students range from eight to 40 years.

In Thailand, mobile teachers travel to isolated communities by motorbike or on horseback. Namibia has adopted mobile "field schools" aimed at Himba children in the northwest remote areas of the country.

In Peru, teachers coordinate seven to 10 informal preschools, each of which is supervised by a young educated member of the community. Support is provided by daily radio broadcasts that review learning activities.

In Alaska, 155 new high schools, most of them in remote rural communities, have been built and staffed since 1974. These schools have made secondary education without leaving home a possibility. As a result, the percentage of 18- to 25-year-old Alaska Natives with high school diplomas rose from 48 per cent in 1980 to 73 per cent in 2000, and over the same period, the number of Natives who went to college tripled.

Sources: UNICEF (2003) and *The Indigenous World 2005* (2005), 68.

⁵⁴ Vagner (2005), 24; Abu-Saad (2006), 142-44.

⁵⁵ Kline (2002).



Challenges

Although increased self-determination and local control is an indispensable element for improving indigenous peoples' education, it is not enough. This has been demonstrated in the United States and Canada where efforts toward local community control and multicultural education have not provided indigenous communities with the results desired in terms of performance or graduation rates.⁵⁶ Education cannot be separated from economic, social and political realities and in the absence of sustainable economic growth and improved social conditions, increased political autonomy can not bring about improved education results for indigenous peoples. This is especially true when continuing multi-generational poverty and trauma constrain educational participation and achievement. Severe poverty and exclusion also often contribute to multi-generational trauma, resulting in cycles of crime, high rates of suicide, alcoholism, domestic abuse and other social problems that inhibit school attendance and achievement and result in continuing limited economic opportunities.⁵⁷

in the absence of sustainable economic growth and improved social conditions, increased political autonomy can not bring about improved education results for indigenous peoples

In other words, these issues are all interdependent. Poor education contributes to poverty and is also a direct result of poverty. Marginalization contributes to poor education and poverty. Poverty contributes to a poor study environment and less material support for education, and for many indigenous peoples, there is little return from education and thus little incentive for students to stay in school.

For many students, education will be valuable only if it provides skills and opportunities that assist the student and community to build a stronger local economy while preserving community, culture and autonomy. Local economic development may, in turn, encourage more indigenous students to return home.

Traditional education alone does not sufficiently prepare students for participation and competition within the national and global economy. Although indigenous students can benefit from the dominant education system, this does not mean that they should reject their communities and cultures for mainstream life, but rather that students need skills and knowledge to enable them to work in indigenous and non-indigenous economies and contexts. This is essential for individual indigenous students if they are to become active participants in their own communities and economies, and it is equally a collective right, essential for the sustainability of indigenous people's communities.⁵⁸

Frequently, indigenous graduates are faced with the situation of having to choose between returning to their communities or pursuing their careers in the dominant society. There are too few opportunities to use their skills within their communities, either due to a lack of development there, or because their skills are inadequate for life in their community. An education system that meets the

⁵⁶ Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (2003), 3-4.

⁵⁷ Danieli (1998), 307-402; Braveheart and Debrun (1998), 56-78.

⁵⁸ Hays and Siegruhn (2005), 27; Tshireletso (1997), 173-188; Le Roux (1999).

needs of indigenous peoples has to provide them with the opportunity to develop skills that are useful to them and allow them to pursue the life they choose.⁵⁹

Educated but unemployed students and students who are trained to reject their indigenous economy and culture are of little value to indigenous communities.⁶⁰ It is essential that the knowledge gained from formal education can be translated into knowledge that is relevant to indigenous communities and that it promotes respect and understanding of indigenous culture, even if some indigenous students choose to live within broader economy.⁶¹

Concluding Remarks

Conditions of extreme poverty, exclusion and isolation are severe barriers to sustainable and multicultural indigenous education programmes. The recent move toward community-based education and local control has not, and probably will not close the gap with the non-indigenous population in terms of access to education and educational performance in the foreseeable future. There is, however, a growing awareness at international and national levels of the pressing need to support indigenous peoples' right to education—not only as a moral imperative and legal obligation, but also within the framework of inclusive and sustainable development that strengthens both individual students and whole societies, the latter benefiting from the presence of a strong, proud and well-educated indigenous population.

students need skills and knowledge to enable them to work in indigenous and non-indigenous economies and contexts

Sustained economic development and greater political and cultural autonomy may enhance the chances for improving the education outcomes of indigenous students. However, community-based education and language programs need adequate funding and support from states. States can provide education resources and universities can assist in curriculum development, but indigenous education will require partnership between indigenous communities and state education structures and policymakers.

States need to support the cultural, economic and educational autonomy sought by indigenous peoples.⁶² Education opportunities should affirm the history, culture and identities of indigenous peoples and provide opportunities for employment and work within both mainstream market economies and the mode of economy preferred by indigenous communities.

Indigenous students should be prepared and able to make choices to work in indigenous, non-indigenous or mixed economies. Such multi-culturally educated indigenous students will have the capability to participate in state institutions

⁵⁹ Hays and Siegruhn (2005), 32.

⁶⁰ Stavenhagen, (2005), 18; Kaunga (2005), 40-41.

⁶¹ The Coolangatta Statement; Glover (1994), 13; Champagne (2006), 147-168.

⁶² For a list of recommendations from the Special Rapporteur to states, indigenous communities and the international community for improving indigenous education, see Stavenhagen (2005a) and (2005b).



and civil society while not rejecting their identities and indigenous communities, nor rejecting the State and its mainstream culture(s). Indigenous education should provide a pathway to greater cultural, economic and political autonomy for indigenous peoples, but should also set the stage for participation and consensual commitment on the part of states and international institutions.

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