

Expert Mechanism Advice No.1 (2009) on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to Education

Cultural Heritage and Languages in Education

By Kontinonh:sta'ts – Mohawk Language Custodians

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We would like to thank the members of EMRIP for their report Advice No.1 (2009) on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to Education. The study is welcomed and can help guide Indigenous communities and states in language revitalization. However, it requires a strong commitment to provide the adequate resources for implementation in order to realize Indigenous peoples right to education.

In most cases, colonization and assimilation policies like the Indian Residential School System in Canada, have caused the erosion of Indigenous identity, in particular traditional knowledge and culture whose basic foundation is Indigenous languages.

The restoration of culture and the revitalization of languages are paramount to the reconciliation and the successful practice of self-determination for Indigenous peoples. Colonization targeted Indigenous women who traditionally passed on language, culture and identity. There still remains an enormous amount of work to restore the role of women and all the components for language, culture and identity. However, assimilation policies and colonization continue to be practiced jeopardizing Indigenous identity.

And while apologies are welcomed, they are not sufficient if there is no action to support the words. Unfortunately, Indigenous identity, language and culture often times become secondary to the enormous challenges of social problems that are rooted in colonial laws and policies.

Articles 13 and 14 of the UNDRIP specifically address the issues of language and its importance in the right to self-determination. Traditional knowledge is contained within Indigenous languages which is the vessel necessary to reinforce Indigenous customary laws and governance. For many Indigenous peoples the urgency to implement these articles is critical.

According to the Convention on Biodiversity, Indigenous languages are vital to the preservation of biodiversity as our languages are embedded with the traditional knowledge that understands and preserves the environment. The promotion of Indigenous knowledge is therefore needed to survive the impacts of climate change

What is urgently required for communities is to have adequate resources to conduct and promote education in their own Indigenous languages. The most important resources being elders and speakers along with traditional knowledge holders in language retention and the passing on of culture. The foundation of any identity is based language and culture and is a vital tool to combat assimilation.

As many studies have concluded the importance of education in Indigenous languages can only be accomplished when the political will and the resources support grass root efforts. But as time progresses, many Indigenous communities are losing their speakers who as many studies have shown are vital to language revitalization. It is these speakers the majority of whom are older and vital to the success of Indigenous controlled education. Indigenous languages are living entities, they cannot be learned in isolation but instead require daily use and recognition.

Terrlingua a non-profit organization whose focus is solely linguistic and cultural diversity has stated the following:

1. As with biological diversity, linguistic diversity is facing rapidly increasing threats that are causing a drastic loss of both languages and the knowledge of which they are carriers, including knowledge about the environment and sustainable resource use.
2. That the continued loss of linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity will have dangerous consequences for humans and the Earth.

During the writing of Canada's 1969 **White Paper Policy**¹, the then Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Elliot Trudeau stated to Aboriginal leaders: "*When you no longer speak your language or practice your culture and customs, then you will have become assimilated*".

[The National Association of Cultural Centers in Canada estimates that the federal government obliged with the fiduciary responsibility for the funding of Indigenous education, spends \$2/Indigenous child on Indigenous languages. As opposed to French or English where approximately \$2,000 plus/child is spent for Francophone children and approximately \$4,000 plus for English. The disparities are enormous and frustrating in an atmosphere whereby government has made no increase in funding for Aboriginal communities since 1996.²

"According to the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, parents of 60% of Aboriginal children in non-reserve areas believed it was very important or somewhat important for their children to speak and understand an Aboriginal language.³"]

The following issues are important to address if Indigenous children are to enjoy the right to education: they are the issue of violence against Indigenous women as they experience the highest rates of conjugal violence in most societies. We must be mindful that children living in homes where violence occurs have a far more difficult time to succeed. The other important issue is food security.

There have been countless studies that continue to provide necessary tools needed to support, promote and revitalize Indigenous languages and culture related to Indigenous peoples right to education. What is lacking is the implementation of these recommendations and the resources to fulfill them

We therefore recommend that the EMRIP continue to elaborate on their advice no. 1 on the right to education of Indigenous peoples and that Indigenous languages and culture remain primary components in the right and quality of education of Indigenous peoples.

¹ the 1969 White Paper. In 1969 the federal government introduced a White Paper that proposed to eliminate Indian status: http://www.historyofrights.com/events/white_paper.html , see also <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-white-paper-1969.html>

² Assembly of First Nations: the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples at 10 years: A report card, page 3

³ Canadian Social Trends Statistics Canada, by Mary Jane Norris— Catalogue No. 11-00, Page 6

