

EDITORIAL

Puzzles Surrounding Aboriginal Education

IAN WINCHESTER

University of Calgary

Aboriginal education is a topic of great importance to both aboriginal peoples, to the appropriate United Nations organizations and to governments in many places in the world and ought to be an important topic in our Faculties of Education. Many things have been tried and many approaches made. But generally these approaches are considered by all of the parties as failures.

If by aboriginal peoples one means the people that appear to have been the original occupants of a particular place or land area on earth, then many educational successes can be mentioned of course. The Scandinavian peoples including the Icelanders, the Norwegians, the Danes, the Swedes and the Finns are in this sense aboriginal peoples who are the first to have occupied their land masses continuously. And they all have splendid educational systems that serve their people well.

But of course they are not the aboriginal peoples that we generally worry about educationally. We are usually thinking of the Indians of the United States or the First Nations or the Inuit of Canada or the Aborigines of Australia, the Lapps or Sami of Norway, Finland and Sweden and many others. These are the ones that are usually seen as having been failed by the various attempts at offering them state sponsored education.

In all of these cases, unlike the situation in Scandinavia generally, though parallel to the situation faced by the Lapps or Sami, there is a surrounding population of dominant peoples and their culture in which they find themselves embedded. Survival in the old ways is neither possible nor desirable. So some kind of accommodation with the surrounding or embedding culture is necessary. And yet one does not want to lose one's own identity. One does not just want to become an American or Australian simpliciter, a Canadian or a Swede or Norwegian. One wants to remain a Navajo or a Cree or Blackfoot or an Inuit or a Sami. Yet at the same time one cannot manage at all in the United States as a Navajo without also mastering English and much of

the wider culture relating to work, to travel, to banking and to specialist education and business. The same is true in Australia and Canada for the Australian Aborigine, the Cree, the Blackfoot, the Cowichan, or the Huron.

Most aboriginal peoples now speak the common language of their parts of the world but are rapidly losing their original culture and language. There are those, of course, who maintain their culture and language through all manner of difficulties. The Roma or Gypsy people are perhaps the most striking instance. But in their case they have no accepted roots anywhere and nobody will have them unless they become assimilated. So they have their own dilemmas. In many places where they travelled historically, Sweden being one of them, they were never recorded by the parish priests who kept records of the entire Swedish population and were never eligible for education or health care as they were never "written" or registered. They were neither like the Sami a recognized people to whom the state owed something nor were they possible to assimilate as they could not be identified. In countries like Hungary they are now increasingly restive and often seeking asylum elsewhere as they are in increasing conflict with the state.

Here in Canada we have had church-run residential schools to which First Nations children could go and often were forced to go. The object was to bring them into the "mainstream" of the English language and culture. But the result, while often it did succeed in giving the young people the English language, was merely to remove them from their families and their own culture and linguistic roots. Sometimes, too, there were psychological and physical abuses of unspeakable kinds at the hands of the teachers.

For many years, perhaps as many as forty years in some jurisdictions, we have had band controlled or reserve controlled schools funded by the Federal Governments using provincial curriculum and provincially trained teachers, an increasing number of whom were aboriginal peoples. But these are generally considered failures too. Many children never go very far in school and often fail to pass common examinations that would lead to further education. Most of the children claim, when asked, to be bored with school or cannot see its relevance to their future lives.

A suggestion that is increasingly made is that the curriculum of these schools ought to be based equally or perhaps even primarily on the wisdom and knowledge of the aboriginal peoples themselves. Elders are

often considered among the First Nations and Inuit of Canada as the important living sources of native wisdom and knowledge and the suggestion is often made that they ought to play a central part in the devising of the curriculum of the schools for First Nations and Inuit.

Part of the puzzle for the establishing of such programs is determining what one might mean by aboriginal wisdom and knowledge. One supposes that wisdom particularly refers to human relations with another, with moral and ethical standards and values. Here one has considerable grounds for thinking that this was and is highly developed among the aboriginal peoples generally and certainly amount those in Canada. So there could be an extensive, Elder driven, curriculum here though how it would be implemented would take much thought on their part as it would not occur in the usual natural settings if schools were the continuing vehicle of education.

And one supposes that aboriginal knowledge relates to a whole host of "sciences" that were historically established by the native peoples surrounding things such as hunting and tracking, making the necessities of everyday life such as homes (teepees and igloos) and vehicles for travel (canoes, travoises), the working with or the training of dogs, and after the Spanish returned horses to North American, the breaking and the riding of horses. The acquisition and the preparation of food must also count as aboriginal sciences, as must the understanding of the weather and the changes of seasons, and the making of clothes appropriate to those seasons. The making of tools and weapons are very highly developed aboriginal sciences that have not been forgotten through they are certainly in abeyance with the advent of European dominance in North America. Mathematical sciences appear to be unknown among the aboriginal peoples north of Mexico in North American, but there may well be practices of discussion and argument that are parallel to the development of logic and rhetoric that could be of interest in a developed aboriginal curriculum and that could be used to complement and contrast with such discussions as they appear in Chinese, Indian and European traditions.

All of these things and many more will have to be worked patiently through if the suggestion that aboriginal knowledge and wisdom are to be embedded in the future education of the aboriginal peoples. One hopes that there is success in this so that the rest of us might benefit as well. How these important matters of wisdom and knowledge might be blended with that of the larger culture of Canada so that aboriginal success would include more aboriginal architects, physicians, teachers,

lawyers, business men, politicians and farmers, for example and indeed produce leaders in all of these fields, is one of the most pressing educational matters of our time.

*Ian Winchester
Editor*