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Indigenous Education: addressing current issues and developments

STEPHEN MAY & SHEILA AIKMAN

This special issue of *Comparative Education* focuses on current issues and developments in both the theory and practice of indigenous education from around the world. It draws together indigenous and non-indigenous authors who are recognised as leading authorities in the field of indigenous education, by indigenous and non-indigenous peoples alike, and explores a range of widely differing national contexts where indigenous educational initiatives are being pursued.

The papers comprise a combination of ‘traditional’ academic articles, more informal commentary, and autobiographical statements. This departure from usual academic conventions was not taken lightly. It arises from a direct concern to include the actual *voices* of indigenous writers, alongside a specific attempt to *situate* western academic discourse, and its conventions, *as only one of a number of epistemological traditions*, albeit an extremely powerful and influential one. This is not an attempt to delegitimise or ‘dumb down’ academic enquiry, but it is an attempt to problematise its often unquestioned normative ascendancy and use. Indeed, the hegemonic construction and imposition of western knowledge and the concomitant delegitimation of indigenous knowledges, particularly via education, is a central concern of all of the authors represented here, as well as a consistent feature in wider debates on indigenous education and indigenous political entitlements.

In this latter respect, while all the authors are concerned with formal education for indigenous peoples, the primary focus of this issue, their discussions are also inevitably situated in relation to larger indigenous struggles for democracy, social justice and self-determination, of which they form a part. These struggles relate, in turn, to the consistent social, political and educational minoritisation and marginalisation, even evisceration, of indigenous peoples, along with their languages and cultures, as the result of (predominantly European) colonisation.

Given this historical background of colonisation, and the ongoing reticence of many nation-states to recognise its legacy, indigenous peoples could be forgiven for opting for resigned acquiescence. But this has not been the case; quite the reverse, in fact. In the increasingly prominent articulation of minority rights worldwide, indigenous peoples have been at the forefront in arguing for better treatment, recognition of, and restitution for historical injustices and, more broadly, the recognition of greater *self-determination* or *autonomy* within nation-states. Where nation-states have ignored, or derided their claims, indigenous peoples have turned instead to supranational organisations, and international law, with surprisingly successful results (see Kymlicka, 1999; Feldman, 2001; May, 2001, ch. 8; IWGIA, 2002, Part 2).

In this respect, the definition of what constitutes an indigenous people becomes important. Such definitions are not entirely unproblematic and indigenous peoples themselves, like all broad groupings, exhibit a range of significant inter- and intragroup differences, as can be seen clearly in the articles which follow. These caveats notwithstanding, the International

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Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention 169 (Article 1.1), formulated in 1989, may serve as a useful point of reference:

- a) tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations;
- b) peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions.

Lest objectivist definitions be accorded too much weight, however, Article 1.2 adds the rider that 'self-identification as indigenous or tribal shall be regarded as a fundamental criterion for determining the groups to which the provisions of this Convention apply'.

The ILO Convention 169 is also significant for another reason. It replaces an earlier Convention (107), drawn up in 1957, which exhibited a much more paternalistic approach to indigenous peoples. These differences are reflected in both the wording and the general intent of the two conventions. With regard to wording, for example, Convention 107 (a) uses the phrase 'tribal populations' whereas 169 (a) employs 'tribal peoples'. This is significant, given the connotations of the term 'peoples' in international law (see below). Convention 169 (a) also states that the social, cultural and economic conditions of tribal groups are *distinguished* from other sections of the national community whereas 107 (a) employs the more pejorative phrase 'at a less advanced stage'. Likewise, where Convention 169 (b) states that indigenous peoples 'retain some of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions', 107 (b) specifically equates these institutions with premodern practices and contrasts them with 'the [modern] institutions of the nation to which they belong'. These differences are not simply semantic ones. More broadly, Convention 107 clearly views indigenous culture as a temporary obstacle to modernisation. As such, it is as much concerned with the assimilation of indigenous peoples as with their protection. In contrast, Convention 169 reflects a far more positive view of indigenous cultures and is specifically anti-assimilationist in intent (see Thornberry, 1991, p. 18; de Varennes, 1996, pp. 252–253). As Thornberry summarises it:

There is a remarkable shift in perception between the ILO conventions of 1957 and 1989. In reading the earlier Convention, it is impossible to avoid the feeling that [indigenous] peoples were regarded as a relic of the past to be 'developed' or 'integrated' out of existence. The Convention of 1989, on the other hand, is a radical document that recognises the presence of indigenous peoples, their historicity and cultural indelibility. It evinces respect for their societies, their characteristic modes of existence and holistic social constructs, and is characterized by the affirmation of *collective as well as individual rights*. (2002, pp. 250–251; emphasis in original)

The distinctions between the two ILO Conventions illustrate the different status that has gradually come to be accorded to indigenous peoples in international law over the intervening 40 year period, and subsequently to the present day (see Anaya, 1996, for a full review). Central to these arguments is the principle that indigenous groups are not simply one of a number of ethnic minority groups, competing for the limited resources of the nation-state, and therefore entirely subject to its largesse, but are *peoples*, with the associated rights of self-determination attributable to the latter under international law. This argument has been

articulated by such organisations as the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP) and the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP), the latter being established in 1982 as part of the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. The work of the WGIP has been particularly influential here and has contributed to a growing tendency to regard indigenous peoples 'as a separate issue [from other minority groups] in international and constitutional law' (Thornberry, 1991, p. 6; see also Thornberry, 2002).

The culmination of these developments thus far has perhaps been the (1993) United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a document that clearly outlines the key legal and political demands of indigenous peoples. Article 8 of the Declaration states, for example: 'Indigenous peoples have the collective and individual right to maintain and develop their distinct identities and characteristics, including the right to identify themselves as indigenous and to be recognised as such'. Article 3 is even more unequivocal: 'Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development'.

As part of these wider arguments for indigenous self-determination and/or greater political autonomy, indigenous peoples have often focused on the particular issues of language and education. In this respect, Articles 14 and 15 of the (1993) Draft Declaration of Indigenous Peoples are most pertinent:

14. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

States shall take *effective* measures, whenever any right of indigenous peoples may be threatened, to ensure this right is protected ...

15. ... All 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.

Indigenous children living outside their communities have the right to be provided access to education in their own language and culture.

States shall take effective measures to provide appropriate resources for these purposes. (our emphases)

The clear desire of indigenous peoples for greater linguistic and educational *control* apparent here is, in turn, a product of colonial histories of cultural and linguistic proscription, particularly within education, that must be regarded as being at the most extreme end of such practices. The result, not surprisingly, has been not only the loss of indigenous languages over time but also a long history of educational 'failure' for indigenous students within education (see, especially, Bishop, Cahill & Collard, McCarty, this issue). Given this history, it is thus also not surprising that education has now come to be seen as a key arena in which indigenous peoples can reclaim and revalue their languages and cultures and, in so doing, improve the educational success of indigenous students. As a result, we have seen over the last 20–30 years the emergence of numerous indigenous community-based, or 'bottom-up' educational initiatives where indigenous community control and a central role for indigenous languages and cultures are prominent features (see McCarty & Zepeda, 1995; Aikman, 1999; Henze & Davis, 1999; May, 1999). While still in many cases small-scale, and while still facing considerable odds, these initiatives *are* beginning to have a positive effect on the specific educational futures of indigenous students and, more broadly, the retention of indigenous

language and cultures. In the process, the normalisation and valorisation of European languages and cultures, and their representation within education, are being critiqued and contested. In particular, indigenous language education proponents argue that the long historical dominance of European norms and values in schooling has nothing to do with their greater intrinsic value or use, but rather with the exercise and legitimisation of unequal power relations which privilege such languages and cultural practices over all others, indigenous ones in particular.

That said, there is clearly potential in these arguments for the reinforcement of a static and reified view of (indigenous) languages and cultures, and their unhelpful juxtaposition with dominant 'European' cultural and linguistic practices (see Fettes, 1999; Hornberger & King, 1999; Freeland, Sarangapani, this issue). But emergent practice has tended to demonstrate a more contextual, relational approach—one that incorporates a dynamic and ongoing process of 'cultural negotiation', rather than a simple return to, or retrenchment of past practices. As Alice Feldman observes of the international indigenous movement, for example:

In international contexts, indigenous peoples have sought to articulate a unifying and politically operational identity emanating from their shared experiences of colonialism and goals of self-determination, as well as the diversity of their localized experiences and immediate needs. They have drawn upon cultural traditions, both intact and fragmented, to construct and empower an overarching 'indigeness' that is simultaneously hybrid. Recognition of their identity as peoples and nations who have legitimate claims to the rights and means of sovereignty and self-determination constitutes the foundation of this collective consciousness and the claims it animates, and serves as a central vehicle for change. (2001, pp. 149–150)

The contributions to this special issue share and explore these wider concerns, along with the tensions that are invariably attendant upon them. While addressing widely different contexts, and incorporating different written conventions, they cohere around the recognition and expression of indigenous peoples' strong sense of individual and collective identity, the (often complex) dialectic between the local and the global, and the (often productive) tensions attendant upon articulating particular indigenous identities in the face of other complementary, and sometimes competing, ones. In all the papers in this issue, they attempt to explore how a commitment to indigenous self-determination can be (and is) expressed via education. They also do so in ways that are congruent with current wider global agendas and national preoccupations for education which are focusing increasingly on the development of individual capabilities and the strengthening of democratic spaces and practices (see, for example, the emphasis in the Dakar Framework for Education For All on quality of education and meeting the needs of marginalised groups).

These developments in indigenous education can thus contribute valuable insights and understandings to this agenda, based on indigenous peoples' ongoing struggles for relevant, qualitative and self-determined education. In short, indigenous educators, faced for several generations with inequitable and racialised education policies, have developed innovative approaches to combating social and economic marginalisation, and reinforcing indigenous identity and values in contexts of rapid social change—approaches that are crucially important in themselves but may well also have much wider currency.

Emergent Themes

A number of key themes emerge from the contributions to this special issue. There is the central paradox surrounding, on the one hand, the role of formal education and schooling as

an institution that has contributed significantly to the loss of indigenous identity, control and self-determination. Schooling has been explicitly and implicitly a site of rejection of indigenous knowledge and language, it has been used as a means of assimilating and integrating indigenous peoples into a 'national' society and identity at the cost of their indigenous identity and social practices (see Bishop, McCarty, Trapnell, this issue). Indigenous peoples, on the other hand, also clearly want access to formal education—and why shouldn't/wouldn't they? Sarangapani, through an examination of the nature of indigenous knowledge and learning in relation to the Baiga of Central India, illustrates how complex the bringing together of formal schooling and indigenous knowledge and learning can be and questions the power and status of different knowledges and languages, as well as the oral/written divide between much indigenous learning and formal schooling.

Achieving acceptance and recognition for indigenous alternatives to state-run formal schooling is a slow and difficult path—such initiatives have to overcome national policies aimed at assimilation and homogenisation, as well as trends towards standardisation which smother innovation and diversity for the sake of accountability and supposed 'equality'. The papers illustrate from a range of perspectives that equality for indigenous students simply cannot be achieved through homogenisation and a one-size-fits-all approach to schooling. As Bishop argues, in relation to the indigenous Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand, educational approaches must recognise, centrally, the role of hegemonic discourses and their debilitating effects on indigenous students, and actively reformulate these along more inclusive and egalitarian lines. McCarty likewise argues that a rights-based approach must be also a social justice approach to avoid new polarisations based on wealth and status.

In order to overcome the difficulties attendant upon the homogenising and culturally and linguistically eradicating influences of formal education, Todal charts the collaborations and cross border cooperations of which the Sámi have been part in their struggle for control over their children's formal education in Norway. This also reflects clearly how indigenous peoples are part of both global and regional social movements for the recognition and implementation of language rights and cultural rights. Sueyo's educational biography likewise underlines the importance of alliances, in particular his people's indigenous federation, and the strength of working together for common goals.

Working with government, either directly or through lobbying and influencing policy-making, is another strategy for indigenous educators and indigenous organisations. Trapnell illustrates the tensions and the unrelenting lobbying needed to ensure political space for the continuing development of indigenous intercultural bilingual education in Peru, with particular reference to teacher education. While government accreditation is crucial for the sustainability of indigenous schooling, ensuring financial commitment in the medium and long term is a continual struggle (see also McCarty and Freeland, this issue).

Establishing an indigenous education programme for cultural and linguistic maintenance is a huge achievement (whatever shape it takes) but, as McCarty illustrates through a survey of indigenous language immersion programmes in the US, it takes at least a modicum of local control for the language and cultural revitalisation process to take root and flourish. Community and family participation and complementary initiatives outside the school are necessary to ensure that language rejuvenation is not confined to young people in the school but becomes part of a broader change in society whereby the indigenous languages are used, accepted and spoken with pride.

All the authors in this special issue subscribe to what has been called a 'bottom-up language planning process' (see Hornberger, 1997), where there is local decision-making, control and participation. But this also entails top-down recognition of this process. It calls for a new set of relations between the indigenous and non-indigenous student, and between

the indigenous and non-indigenous educator/planner/policy maker. Cahill and Collard's article, which outlines the development of effective educational programmes for Aboriginal children in Western Australia, is a frank engagement with the political complexities of the dialogue and negotiation (even disagreement) needed to achieve the kind of new intercultural understandings necessary for indigenous education to achieve its aims.

In different sociocultural and historical contexts the struggle for indigenous-controlled education is played out in different ways according to the political possibilities specific to each context. The issues are similar but ways of confronting and addressing them can differ. Freeland argues, from a set of compelling data on indigenous bilingual education initiatives in Nicaragua, that in a complex global society we need a new starting point. The old national dichotomies of indigenous and non-indigenous have divided and discriminated against indigenous peoples and, under scrutiny, the new educational orthodoxies of accountability and equality, together with measurability, appear to challenge indigenous peoples' cultural, linguistic and human rights. Freeland illustrates how new and complex analyses are needed for complex global times but these analyses must take diversity as a starting point and put diversity at their centre. Bishop also addresses this theme, but from a different direction—arguing that different pedagogical approaches are needed in order to recognise, value and incorporate the widely differing cultural and linguistic knowledges of students, particularly (but not solely) indigenous ones.

Conclusion

The critical discussion of and engagement with these various themes throughout this special issue contributes, we believe, to the construction of new knowledge and new educational practices in indigenous education. In doing so, all the contributors illustrate clearly the need for new analysis that starts from the diverse, the complex and the very concrete (and real, lived) experiences of indigenous peoples around the globe. Such analysis also continues crucially, however, to recognise that these individual and collective experiences are inevitably framed, and constrained, by wider historical and ongoing relations of systemic (and systematic) inequality towards indigenous peoples. This analysis of indigenous education, as the papers show, thus provides insights, understanding and ideas for *all* educators concerned with a critical approach to curriculum, pedagogy and learning.

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