

Community-based Education for Indigenous Cultures

David Corson

Department of Theory and Policy Studies, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1V6

The recent tendency of governments to view their educational policies in terms of the market-place, with an implied preference for homogeneity and centralisation, has created further obstacles to the education of minority students generally, and indigenous students in particular. The paper presents and develops the notion of community-based education as a means of combating this tendency. Some examples of indigenous community-based education are examined, and there is a discussion both of its distinctive features and underlying principles, and its potential impact on the education of indigenous students.

Introduction: The Political Context for Indigenous Education

A key feature of today's world is a trend away from centralisation and toward diversity and devolution of control. In this new world, many more voices are being raised, including the voices of those who were once dispossessed. And these voices are bringing a surprisingly different range of messages to policy-makers and practitioners alike. These messages express human values that were once silenced by dominant ideologies and belief systems. Yet, in responding to these new voices now appearing at local levels, powerful forces beyond the local are still ignoring the messages that they raise. This is especially true of education, and it is true of education for indigenous peoples in particular. Even the trend towards devolving control to local schools has led to injustices on a grand scale in many countries.

Part of the problem is that education almost everywhere in the English-speaking world is set firmly within capitalist social relations. Seen on so grand a scale, this tight coupling of capitalism with all aspects of social life is a relatively recent development. This is because the pure, free-market, economic arrangements that are so essential to capitalism, were limited in their effects as long as capitalism was kept a little separate from government:

For forty years after the early 1930s the intellectual supporters of pure free-market economics were an isolated minority, apart from businessmen whose perspective always makes it difficult to recognize the best interests of their system as a whole, in proportion as it concentrates their minds on the best interests of their particular firm or industry. (Hobsbawm, 1989:334)

All this has changed in recent decades. Even government itself has been captured in many places by free-market views that are far less restrained than those that formerly applied.¹ Many present-day politicians, and the intellectuals who advise them, tend to believe that for governments to succeed the whole world is best viewed as a business and best interpreted in business terms. As a

result, citizens living in societies where this ideology is dominant are forced to live their lives within the ideology, whether they want to or not. This is because public policy and the world itself are saturated by the ideology.

In this limited and limiting world view, the dominant metaphor is that all human beings inhabit a marketplace where the quality of something is decided according to the price it can fetch, rather than according to any intrinsic and real qualities it might have. This trend is having a harmful impact on human social relations themselves, especially on the bonds that exist between people. These bonds today are valued more often by the standards of economic transactions than by the more lasting ties of culture or language. In turn, the unfortunate effect of all this is to project a respect for 'sameness' onto the social world, rather than a respect for the actual 'diversity' that the social world contains.

In spite of appearances to the contrary, then, these capitalist social relations are the most assimilationist cultural forces that the world has ever seen. This means that any diversity in provisions that the new diverse voices are winning is being taken away by the pressure towards assimilation that capitalism creates. In addition, this paradox occurs because capitalist social relations are also prospering under the new freedoms and the open message systems that are part of the postmodern condition. What does all this mean for indigenous education?

On the one hand, human diversity is being recognised at last in the new world of education. But on the other hand, people's real sociocultural identities have little value in the marketplace of that new world. As a consequence, wherever the values and interests of schools are linked tightly into that marketplace, students and teachers from indigenous backgrounds find that their interests are still missing from education. Aboriginal students still feel anonymous and distant from the school's goals. Furthermore, they feel powerless in the face of this anonymity. And the remoteness from the school of their families and communities worsens these feelings of alienation.

So rather than a route to freedom and self-fulfilment, the world of the school is still a place of daunting obstacles for people who are different from the majority of students in some way. Fortunately schools in many places are beginning at last to wrestle with these issues. In particular, they are beginning to see the relevance of local aboriginal communities for all the work that schools for indigenous students do. At the same time, indigenous peoples themselves are finding that community-based education has become central to cultural and linguistic revival.

Community-based Education

Policies of reform in indigenous education always involve the school's community in its work, not just to communicate the work of the school to parents, but to draw on the community's knowledge, expertise, and cultural practices to shape the work that schools do and make it relevant to the lived experience of children from aboriginal backgrounds. In doing this, it is sometimes necessary for schools to reduce the influence that other agencies outside the local community have over the school's operations. It is clear from studies of reform in diverse contexts² that community involvement is often frustrated when people from indigenous backgrounds find that all the major decisions are made by

remote officials, who do not share the culture of the place, and might not care very much about it.

'Community-based education' is different from 'community education' (see also Fettes, this volume). Jackie Daigle (1997) sees 'community-based education' as a form of social action within a community framework that extends beyond schools as institutions. It allows community members to become self-oriented participants in the creation of the learning environment that the school offers. This dynamic form of development contrasts with the less dynamic demands that 'community education' often makes. Although the point of community education is sometimes to question taken-for-granted structures that oppress people, it usually leaves these structures in place.

Community-based education begins with people and their immediate reality. Above all, it allows them to become meaningfully involved in shaping their own futures through the school and other agencies in their community.³ In fact, meaningful school reform often depends on this kind of participation, in which people renegotiate and reconstruct the ways in which a school relates to its community's interests. Usually community education is less concerned with changing formal structures and more concerned with studying them (Husen & Postlethwaite, 1994). In contrast, community-based education tries to put into practice many of the reforming educational ideas of Paulo Freire (1972), who urged people to become self-aware and active political subjects. He especially wanted to enable learners to become active participants in shaping their own education.

Freire's generative themes

In my teaching life, I have been much influenced by Freire's educational philosophy. In 1972, I began an adult literacy programme, for an Australian State, which was one of the country's first such programmes (Corson, 1977). Freire's (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was given to me then by a friend. In fact, it was the only text on adult literacy available to me at that time. Although Freire's ideas were difficult to re-apply from the slums and rural villages of Brazil and Chile to the affluent and very different Australian context, his work became a guiding philosophy for me. His ideas have been influential in my thinking and teaching ever since.

Freire's pedagogy gives priority to the use of dialogue as the essential accompaniment to literacy education. In this way, he saw literacy work as a way of giving voice to the oppressed, but also as a way of making them the controlling agents in their own lives. He asked adult literacy students, and other people of little power, to talk about 'generative themes' that they chose for themselves from their own experiences. These themes were based on things in their lives that troubled or delighted them. Later, the actual words that adult literacy students began to read and write were chosen from the words that cropped up in their generative themes.⁴

Freire's reasoning here was that no curriculum is neutral, especially one that is selected by people remote from the circumstances of learners themselves. A dialogic teaching approach gives the learners more control over their own curriculum. It allows them to become the teachers of their own experience and

culture, who choose and direct the themes that provide their own courses of study. Their literacy teachers are then able to use these themes as a basis for the literacy work that they do with students, who are motivated and interested by the relevance of the curriculum to their lives. When used over time, this pedagogy has certainly been empowering for oppressed groups of people.

At the same time, Freire's pedagogy always left room for a teacher or leader of some kind, who then acted as the empowered and empowering facilitator. My idea of 'emancipatory leadership' goes a little further, although it is quite consistent with Freire's philosophy (Corson, 1998). I am more concerned to see the 'empowered ones' withdraw functionally from the setting under certain conditions, especially from a setting that involves people whose culture the 'empowered ones' might not really understand, or cannot understand. Real community-based education then becomes possible.

Community-based Education and Language Revival

As mentioned, community-based education is much more suited to reforming indigenous education than simple community education. It certainly seems relevant to the needs and interests of diverse communities who want to free themselves from pressures to conform to unwanted, dominant, cultural structures. But community-based education, aimed at making schools more organic to their local culture, is still a new idea for mainstream education in many places. So it may be useful to look at ways in which community-based education can be used for another purpose.

There is a history of this sort of work in community efforts to promote minority language revival in many countries. Joshua Fishman (1990) outlines some strategies from several places that have helped to focus local community interest on reviving ancestral languages. Above all, to reverse language decline and promote minority language interests, Fishman stresses the need for good neighbourhood organisation. Clearly, community-based education can offer this sort of social support, while also encouraging self-help for families. All this can come from a range of activities that are begun by the school, or through its specialist services:

- providing home visits by social workers who are minority language speakers;
- organising parent groups and bilingual language exchange centres, which often become self-sufficient in place of formal support systems;
- having experienced parents teach other parents, not just the art of parenting but the place of that art within their own culture;
- bringing the activities of the school and the activities of the family closer together, especially through child care or playgroup arrangements that offer contact with adult specialists in tutoring, computers, dance, drama, writing, library research, athletics, and after-school jobs.

In Fishman's view, all the community activities mentioned in the last point have taken over the traditional role of the family as the major partner with the school. While these are areas of community education, they are also intense

settings for language use, for the communication of cultural attitudes, and for the revival of linguistic, cultural, managerial, and political skills.

The empowerment of local people comes about when community members make contact with the school through and around extension activities like those above, and are then drawn into the running and support of the school itself. To make this start to happen, there are three main things that teachers and schools have to do:

- give the process all the time it needs;
- do some careful school-based planning to make the process work;
- nurture the process by building commitment to it among other school staff.

In response, and over time, the local community takes on a new role. It begins to supplement and even displace the professionals from areas that are more properly the responsibility of people who have the same cultural interests as the children.

A transformational framework for community-based education

Because schools have existed in their present form for so long, many people tend to take them for granted. In other words, for most people the way schools are at the moment is the way schools should be. This means that even where a school and its community are willing to consider gradual but radical change, people are often unable to conceive of doing things very differently. To help address this problem, Jackie Daigle decided to look at communities that had already been through their own radical changes successfully.

The focus of Daigle's study was North American aboriginal communities who have transformed their school systems. Her interest was in the things that the schools actually changed and the processes that they used to do it. She designed the following conceptual framework for her study (Table 1). In this framework, the vertical axis (the italicised items) takes its categories from an earlier study.⁵ These categories are areas that need special reform measures when changing a school from the mainstream pattern to a more community-based institution. The arrows indicate the direction in which the transformation process should move.

The point of Daigle's framework is already clear from Table 1. To exemplify these transformations, the next section outlines some school transformation processes that are discussed more fully elsewhere (Corson, 1998).

Some Examples of Community-based Education for Indigenous Peoples

One of the best studies of community-based school reform that I know of is Stephen May's study of Richmond Road School in New Zealand (1994). Through community negotiation and professional education at Richmond Road, the principal reorganised the school completely. He created a flat and more egalitarian management system. By negotiation, as an indigenous educator himself, he lessened undesirable structural constraints, like those that prevent staff from aboriginal backgrounds from being hired, or aboriginal community members from having a strong voice in governance. The school's critical approach to policy development was underpinned by its commitment to a

Table 1 A conceptual framework for changing to community-based education

<i>governance approach structures:</i>	external structures	>	community-based internal structures
<i>programme/methods/goals/structures:</i>	consensus/integration	>	conflict/transformation
<i>philosophy of education:</i>	homogeneity	>	liberating
<i>school culture:</i>	assimilation/ dominant culture	>	bicultural/integration approach and preservation of aboriginal culture
<i>language:</i>	non-recognition of the minority language(s)	>	minority language preservation and revitalisation
<i>social, economic and political development:</i>	dependent on external structures	>	growth of self-reliance and self-sufficiency
<i>retention rates of minority students:</i>	low	>	higher
<i>community as a resource:</i>	exclusionary	>	inclusionary
<i>organisation:</i>	top-down	>	bottom-up
	formal	>	informal
	programmed	>	process-based
	institution-centred	>	locality-centred
	reactive	>	proactive

Source: Daigle, 1997

culturally pluralist, integrative, and process approach to education. Within this, certain values are considered prerequisite: difference is never equated with deficiency; cooperation is fostered, not competition; cultural respect is seen as essential to developing a pluralistic society; and the school's function is directed towards increasing a child's options rather than changing them (May, 1994: 162).

In this emancipatory setting, staff from indigenous backgrounds began to model relations of equal status. Racist words and phrases disappeared from the language of the school. The different language varieties used by the children became more valued. And the ideology of 'always treating children all the same' came to be seen as a racist value, rather than an expression of justice. In summary, as one graduate of the school observed, 'Now I guess I'm real proud I went to that school. I learnt a lot from that school. It's where I found my identity, my culture ... That school is one of the best' (May, 1994: 199).

Stephen May is not an aboriginal person himself, and nor am I. But authentic research on aboriginal education is increasingly becoming the sole domain of aboriginal researchers themselves. This is a most desirable trend and there are good reasons for it. They are suggested in the following words from Freire: 'the oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption' and

when revitalising their lives they need to choose models that are not those of the oppressors (1970: 39). Obviously the best-placed people for making that choice are indigenous people themselves who are familiar with the context and committed to the aboriginal culture's fundamental values.

As a First Nations person, Jackie Daigle considered community-based education in North American First Nations communities. In Canada, she is looking at a Cree school in Ontario. She also read about the Nisga'a community school in British Columbia. The Nisga'a nation implemented a community-based bilingual and bicultural programme in 1975, which is now an important model for communities elsewhere in Canada (McKay & McKay, 1987). The Nisga'a community-based reforms have led to higher school retention rates and a greater degree of biculturalism among the school system's graduates.

As in other places, aboriginal communities in the United States also have a record of success in running their own schools. These include schools administered by the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Cherokee and Navajo nations. To link her studies in Canada with the United States, Daigle is also studying Rough Rock Navajo demonstration school which has operated in Arizona since 1986. Terri McCarty (1989; see also McCarty & Watahomigie, this volume) describes it as the first US aboriginal school with its own locally elected board, and the first to incorporate a systematic use of the aboriginal language and culture. This change led directly to the following broad indicators of success:

- higher retention rates;
- higher levels of cultural maintenance;
- promotion of bicultural competence
- more community involvement in the educational effort.

The community-based example offered by Rough Rock school has been taken up elsewhere, notably in another rural Navajo school district. Rock Point is a community school which began a process of parental involvement and community control (Holm & Holm, 1990). At Rock Point, the Navajo language and the local culture are the basis of the curriculum, and the school board itself is drawn from the aboriginal community. The board tries to represent the interests of the community as a whole, even when this seems to threaten important sectional interests. Four key groups within the school have been empowered by the devolution of power: the board itself, the school staff, the parents, and the students. From the outset, each group had to overcome the relative disempowerment that they felt in relation to outside powers and to one another.

In order to give legitimacy to their own management, the Rock Point board insisted on high financial and ethical standards right from their earliest meetings. In fact, outside agencies were so impressed with their management, they even found it difficult to believe that the board itself was really running the school. Similarly the Rock Point teaching staff had a sense of empowerment. They grew in confidence when it became clear from all the visitors attracted to the school that they were seen as very competent in what they were doing. And their belief in their own expertise grew because the quality of the vision that they themselves had, of what good Navajo education should be like, was obviously respected by outsiders.

Also the Rock Point parents felt freed from the pressures to conform to the

dominant culture because their own first language became the language of the school, giving them genuine access to the instructional and governance process. They also had open access to board meetings. A Parent Evaluation Committee studied the school's operations three or four times a year, and reported to the board and the staff on its findings. Parents were also the first to be used as consultants on curriculum content, and the school regularly hired them as instructors and support staff. Parent Conferences were held twice yearly for each class. For these meetings, parents observed classes in the mornings and met with teachers in the afternoon, usually with their own children present. This last practice led to a very high level of parental participation in the parent-teacher conferences. In the early 1980s it reached more than 85%.

Finally the Navajo students themselves were empowered through their social and academic success, through their progressive mastery of a curriculum based largely in their own traditional knowledge, and through the value that Rock Point placed on their 'Navajo-ness': on their traditional knowledge. By changing its organisational structures and practices, Rock Point became much more organic to its local community, but also much more successful as a school.

Conclusion: Addressing Some Unanswered Questions

There are three important questions that still needed addressing:

- Why should school administrators and teachers, who are already empowered by the conventions of their work, want to surrender a good deal of that power by supporting community-based education?
- Why is participatory decision-making so valuable a part of all this?
- How does community-based education contribute to the emancipation of indigenous peoples?

Looking at all three questions, it is important to stress that in almost every present-day setting, school administrators and teachers from the dominant culture are being asked to make decisions about complex cultural matters for which they have little training or expertise. Usually they have no preparation in intercultural and minority relations. Often they have few insights into the interests and values of many of those affected by their decisions. Sometimes they know nothing about the traditional knowledge and values of the indigenous people themselves. So instead of running schools 'effectively', administrators and teachers are often ignorant of the real effects of what they are doing. As a result, their schools can easily become 'islands of isolation' in the very communities that they are meant to serve.

Schools collaboratively managed, using policies that are continually revised, based only on the best available evidence about changing circumstances, are more likely to be places of staff and community participation and commitment. This is because real community and staff participation has to be solicited in order to get at that evidence. But this sort of participation is both an end in itself and a way of producing other ends. When people come together to plan something, there is obvious value for them in the feedback, skill development, social interaction, and knowledge growth that they receive. But more than this,

participation usually fosters a commitment in people to the results or product of their participation, if those results seem reasonable to them.

Through the diversity of input that wide community-based participation promotes, the school also tends to escape from having its procedures and styles of operation modelled only on dominant and outdated points of view. These are often filled with error and are narrow in range. And there are also political gains to be made from all this when dealing with wider social formations. What are these gains?

By implementing collaborative management by its staff and community, a school limits the degree to which wider social systems can unhelpfully constrain action within it. In other words, collaborative management lessens the extent to which wider social formations, like the relationships that exist between schools, the economy, and the state, create the ideological framework that constrains discourses of power and initiative within them (Corson, 1995). Working collaboratively, school policy makers can challenge and mould those same constraining relationships to advance the interests of the community, along with the school itself. And when challenged in this way, unjust social formations can also be transformed, perhaps lessening their undesirable impact elsewhere in society.

Research is beginning to confirm the real value of community-based education (Comer, 1984; Corson, 1999; Corson & Lemay, 1996; Cummins, 1986; 1996; Garcia & Otheguy, 1987; Greenberg, 1989; Haynes *et al.*, 1989; Rasinski & Fredericks, 1989). For example, there is evidence to support claims like the following:

- active parent involvement in decision-making brings children from class or cultural minorities closer to their teachers, who usually come from the dominant class and culture;
- aboriginal parents themselves grow in confidence and develop a sense of their own efficacy which impacts positively on their own children's learning;
- the harmful stereotypes that dominant-culture teachers often develop about aboriginal pupils and their families fall away as teachers begin to collaborate with parents;
- local aboriginal communities grow in self-respect and acquire genuine political influence at the same time as they take greater responsibility for their schools.

To make all these things start to happen, a school's environment needs to have most of the following characteristics (National Coalition, 1992; Corson, 1998):

- two-way communication between home and school;
- written policies that legitimise community involvement;
- collegial and collaborative relations among staff and among parents;
- unstinting willingness to share leadership with the community;
- involvement of the community in all phases of planning and implementation;
- daily commitment to maintaining community involvement over the long term;
- local political leadership that eases links between staff and community;

- administrative support and funding to carry out community involvement;
- on-going training for staff and community to strengthen the partnership.

Where an aboriginal community itself has a major hand in policy-making and in the education process, the entire programme of schooling is directed towards elevating the status of the community and questioning the role of schooling in that process. As mentioned already, minority language questions become subsumed under much more important issues, among which language is only an all-pervading but sometimes distracting factor. How does this happen?

When their own cultural values influence the organisation of a school, the aboriginal members of that community become the experts. They become the advisers and real controllers of the education programme. Their values shape educational outcomes. Local political mobilisation with real purpose can begin to occur. Community attitudes are laid bare and discussed. Local people receive formal training as teaching assistants. Parents participate in the other activities of the school to a greater degree and they acquire new skills. All of these things contribute to lifting the status of local aboriginal groups. Political consciousness awakens where perhaps previously there was none. And the indigenous languages become available as recognised political voices at the same time as the people's political will begins to assert itself.

Let me end by setting out certain key assumptions that I make about the peculiar organisations that modern schools are:

- they are not closed systems (i.e. they are not isolated from wider sociocultural influences);
- power relations, ideologies, and systems of cultural oppression impact directly upon schools and classrooms all the time, whether we want them to or not;
- without community consultation and involvement in planning, schools will always yield to outside pressures to conform to the dominant culture, so that important cultural values weaken and die;
- schools can be changed: they can become more organic to their local indigenous communities if those communities insist on inserting their own values into the school's organisation, management, pedagogy, curriculum, and modes of evaluation.

Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to Professor David Corson, Department of Theory and Policy Studies, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1V6 (dcorson@oise.utoronto.ca).

Notes

1. These views are sometimes called 'New Right' and they have been very successful in political terms. Their beginnings can be traced from the new government that replaced a government overthrown in a *coup d'état* in Australia in 1975. They were developed further in the Thatcher-style governments in Britain from 1979 to 1997, during the Reagan and Bush eras in the United States, and similar adventures in Canada and New Zealand. The attractiveness and the success of these policies can be seen from the way that even governments led by political parties that are traditionally more to

- the left, have since followed similar policies in all the above-mentioned countries, beginning again in Australia in the early 1980s and continuing elsewhere in the 1980s and into the late 1990s.
2. For community-based reforms to indigenous schooling in 10 countries and regions, see Cummins and Corson (1997).
 3. See Munoz and Garcia-Blanco (1989, 1990).
 4. Freire's favourite example of a 'generative theme' was the word 'FAVELA' or slum in Brazilian Portuguese. By breaking words like this into their parts ('FA-', '-VE-' and '-LA') students of adult literacy in the Portuguese language were gradually encouraged to master all the syllabic parts that make up the language's vocabulary. But they were also talking about these themes at the same time, and this is what made the pedagogy both humanistic and revolutionary. Freire's approach was remarkably successful in giving people literacy, and it was also very successful in making them critical of the economic, social, and political environments in which they lived.
 5. The earlier study was done by Canada's Assembly of First Nations (1988).

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