

Education in Aboriginal Communities: Dilemmas around Empowerment

Donald M. Taylor

Martha B. Crago

Lynn McAlpine

McGill University

Aboriginal communities are in the process of coping with various degrees of empowerment. Although educators tend to see empowerment as a solution to problems related to Aboriginal education, we discuss a number of fundamental dilemmas raised by empowerment. Specifically, we focus our discussion on decision making in Aboriginal communities, the goals of education, the culture of school, the language of instruction, Aboriginal content in course material, the training of Aboriginal teachers and the testing of Aboriginal students. It is our contention that dilemmas in these areas arise because empowerment has been introduced suddenly in the context of a long history of subjugation of Aboriginal peoples. Recognizing these realities will, we believe, avoid placing unrealistic expectations on the empowerment process, and convince both mainstream and Aboriginal educators that empowerment is not the end but rather the beginning of a fundamental societal challenge.

As social scientists conducting research in Aboriginal communities, our mandate is simple and straightforward—or is it? There are wide variations among and within Aboriginal communities especially as they concern the delicate juggling of two cultures, the heritage culture and mainstream society. Despite these variations, all Aboriginal communities are feeling some degree of empowerment. As social scientists conducting ongoing research in Aboriginal communities, our approach is to have the community define the empirical question, and then pursue it as dispassionately as possible with whatever our respective scientific methodologies have to offer. As a result, each of us has had the privilege of learning from, sharing with, and arguing about a series of fundamental questions about education that at times seem unresolvable. Whether the community is mainly Inuit or Indian, relatively urban or isolated, similar dilemmas present themselves in all their subtlety and complexity.

In this article, we wish to describe the parameters of these dilemmas, but not as they might be articulated in the social science literature. Rather, our aim is to define them as they are expressed by those who ponder such issues, be they Aboriginal or white, student or teacher, administrator or observer. At the center of all the dilemmas is one major theme: the implications of empowering Aboriginal people in terms of control over their own education. Aboriginal communities differ widely in their approach to the delicate balance of maintaining heritage culture on the one hand, and pursuing mainstream values on the other. Whatever a community's range of ideologies is in terms of this dual mandate, the way these realities play

themselves out once Aboriginal communities have control gives rise to a series of dilemmas. These arise particularly in the areas of decision making in Aboriginal education, goals of schooling in Aboriginal communities, culture of the school, language of instruction, Aboriginal content in the curriculum, teacher training, and the testing of Aboriginal students.

Decision Making in Aboriginal Education

That education in Aboriginal communities has historically been controlled by white decision makers has been well documented. In the last two decades this legacy of inappropriate administration has given way to increasing Aboriginal control (Stairs, 1988). Bands and communities have elected or appointed their own representatives to educational boards to serve as policy makers, and individuals have been appointed to high administrative positions in order to implement the boards' policies. Such structural changes are helping to establish Aboriginal control and autonomy.

These structural changes have the potential, of course, to threaten the established order and genuinely establish Aboriginal autonomy. But even with increased Aboriginal control, there are some genuine educational and indeed issues of autonomy to be raised. Aboriginal board members and high-level administrative personnel, no matter how wise, may have little or no experience or expertise in administrative, pedagogical, and educational practice. Yet they will be called on to make weighty decisions that will ultimately impact not only on a large staff of teachers and lower level administrators, but more importantly on the educational experience of children in these communities. In short, an inevitable consequence of the sudden introduction of Aboriginal autonomy is the reality that some inexperienced persons will be required to make significant decisions. In a sense, Aboriginal communities that are in the process of adjusting to local empowerment confront the problem of replacing one form of inexperience with another. Mainstream educators in Aboriginal communities usually lack experience in terms of the Aboriginal culture, whereas Aboriginal decision makers lack experience in the field of education.

The very need for Aboriginal decision makers to make decisions without the benefit of experience and expertise in formal education creates a second problem that is encountered frequently in any complex organization. Such Aboriginal decision makers, talented as they may be, are, because of their lack of experience, much more vulnerable to misinformation and manipulation, both from within and outside the Aboriginal community. That is, without the opportunity to develop a solid foundation in the workings of education, Aboriginal decision makers may be ill-equipped to counter the more politically based arguments of those who have vested interests.

In summary, placing decision making in the hands of Aboriginal people is a development that is long overdue. What has to be appreciated, however, is that new dilemmas are created that will require patience and creativity to solve. This recognition is the necessary first step to understanding and responding to these tensions.

Goals of Schooling in Aboriginal Communities

A question that is frequently raised by educators in Aboriginal communities concerns the goals of schooling. The dilemma here is whether to educate children

with a view to assimilating to mainstream culture, or whether to concentrate education that prepares children for life in their home communities. If the home community is the focus, then much of the current educational content and practices make limited sense. If mainstream culture is to be emphasized, then the community must acknowledge that children will leave their home communities and not learn many of their families' ways and traditions. Many communities, of course, would like to find some combination of the two (Delpit, 1988). It is still not clear what model of schooling this would imply as there are as yet not enough role models to allow a community to make a confident decision about how to design and implement education with some form of dual cultural mandate.

Related to this dilemma are economic issues that go beyond schooling per se. The basic dilemma for communities is how to create a community-based job market so that children can relate their schooling to future employment in their community. Without attention to this problem at a systemic level, attempts at making education meaningful for the child are inherently difficult.

Culture of the School

For most mainstream North Americans, the notion that school somehow represents a "culture" would seem bizarre. After all, the values and patterns of interactions among students, and between students and teachers in the school are intuitively comfortable and understood. This is so for white, middle-class North Americans because the values and patterns of interaction found in the school are mirrors of those found in the home, in the world of work, and in the community as a whole.

However, in Aboriginal communities there is a profound discontinuity between the culture of school and that of the home and community (e.g., Crago, 1991; Duranti & Ochs, 1988; Erickson, 1987; Phillips, 1983; Tharp et al., 1984). The discontinuity is not a simple matter of the school representing mainstream culture and Aboriginal culture being predominant in the home and community. The discontinuity is compounded by the fact that many Aboriginal parents have not themselves had a school experience that remotely resembles what their children are experiencing. Thus parents may have a difficult time supporting their children's educational experience. Furthermore, white, middle-class North American cultural patterns of guiding children's performance in preliteracy activities (Heath, 1986) may not exist in Aboriginal homes, and consequently children may not be prepared to deal with the demands of schooling, although they are highly competent in meeting the demands placed on them by their homes and communities. Other examples of discontinuities between home and school socialization include punctuality, turn-taking, verbal testing of learning, and individual demonstration of knowledge.

These discontinuities are exacerbated in communities where the Aboriginal language is the language of the community. Aboriginal languages are traditionally oral and, therefore, whatever literacy skills adults have will probably be in English and are associated with school activities rather than as a means of communication among members of a community.

These discontinuities, whatever their magnitude, are intimately linked to the dilemmas involved with the goals of schooling. Should the culture of school be altered so that it is more continuous with Aboriginal culture? A more basic question: is it possible to transform the culture of the school? Even if the school were

staffed almost completely with Aboriginal teachers and administrators, does the very structure and infrastructure of formal education within which the school is subsumed not in and of itself compromise Aboriginal culture? For example, because of mainstream patterns, Aboriginal children spend five hours a day, five days a week, for 180 to 190 days of the year inside school, a routine that is totally out of synchronization with the rhythms of hunting, trapping, and fishing.

The other alternative is to recognize that the school represents the culture of mainstream society and indeed emphasizes mainstream values and patterns of interaction (Delpit, 1988). If these discontinuities were explicitly highlighted, Aboriginal children might come to be comfortable with mainstream culture through the school and thereby attain the ability to code switch between the required behaviors of home and school. Whether such duality is possible remains an empirical question. It may not be realistic to believe that the integrity of Aboriginal culture can be maintained if education is designed to represent mainstream values exclusively.

Language of Instruction

No issue is more controversial in the education of ethnolinguistic minorities than the appropriate language or languages of instruction. At polar opposites in this debate are those who vehemently support English only, and they are opposed equally strongly by those who argue for "English plus." The debate really centers on the wisdom of any form of bilingualism or use of a language other than English (or French) as a language of instruction. Even those who support some form of bilingualism argue about the merits of transitional or early exit bilingualism as compared with maintenance or late exit forms of bilingualism.

Our purpose here is not to debate the merits of these varieties of bilingual education. This has been done eloquently and passionately by others (see, e.g., Crawford, 1989; Cummins, 1989; Genessee, 1987; Hakuta, 1986; Lambert & Tucker, 1972; Taylor, 1990). Our concern here is the dilemma that arises when any Aboriginal language is used to any extent as a language of instruction. The first challenge is to find Aboriginal people who can speak the language. In some communities the Aboriginal language is all but lost, and even where the language flourishes, finding speakers who are sufficiently fluent to serve as models is often difficult. Even if such people can be found, they must be trained to teach. As if that were not challenge enough, most often the fluent speakers of the Aboriginal language are the highly respected elders in the community. Convincing such important and valued community members to train as teachers in a modern school system is usually unrealistic.

A second dilemma surrounding the language of instruction issue is important beliefs that people have about the nature of language itself. The first firmly entrenched belief is that if an Aboriginal language is prevalent in a community it is inconceivable to people that the language might disappear in the future. As a consequence the perception is that there is really no need for the school to reinforce the use of the Aboriginal language. Of course, such a belief flies in the face of clear evidence that minority group languages are extremely precarious and can disappear within a single generation. But believing that one's language is forever is completely reasonable because impersonal statistics about language loss in faraway places are not nearly as compelling as the reality of the language practices of oneself, one's family, and one's community.

The second belief held by many is that each person has a fixed capacity for language. Thus the more time a person spends learning and using his or her first language, the less competent he or she will become in his or her second language. Because the school is often perceived as the institution designed to prepare young people for participation in mainstream society, people believe the school should focus exclusively on the mainstream language, because any use of the Aboriginal language would only detract from students' skills in the language of the mainstream.

People have difficulty, then, comprehending the nonintuitive reality that the acquisition of one language actually aids in the acquisition of the second language and vice versa. Thus Aboriginal communities not only face practical dilemmas when contemplating the use of the heritage language as a medium of instruction, they must contend with a set of widely held beliefs about language that make it difficult to implement any form of bilingual education.

A related issue concerns the role literacy in the Aboriginal language should play in the formal schooling process. Aboriginal languages are often oral; thus some people oppose the preservation of an oral tradition through a written form. Even when there is acceptance of Aboriginal literacy as a goal of schooling, many practical and pedagogical problems present themselves (McAlpine, 1992). Two such problems include creating an agreed-upon orthography and making reading in the Aboriginal language a socially valued exercise. Thus the dilemma in each community is whether literacy in the Aboriginal language may be seen as a marginal activity or, alternatively, as a vehicle for the individual and collective revitalization of identity.

Aboriginal Content

Most instructional materials in Aboriginal schools come from mainstream publishers (Madsen, 1990). Nevertheless, Aboriginal communities often recognize that their schools cannot be constructive social forces if the goals and content of their programs represent only mainstream culture (Matthew, 1990). Thus teachers and school administrators make attempts to integrate features of community and traditional life into the school setting. For example, traditional crafts and artwork are hung in hallways, children are taken camping, culture can become a subject area in the curriculum, and traditional miniature versions of tents have sometimes replaced play-houses in kindergartens. Nevertheless, if one believes the report that 90-95% of children's learning time in school is spent in interaction with instructional materials (Tully, 1985), then the difficulty for Aboriginal children is that they are unable to see a representation of themselves and their communities in these materials. The content does not reflect in any way, or build on, their life experiences.

The dilemma for communities is how on limited budgets, with limited time, and limited expertise with instructional design and curriculum development, to create effective instructional materials. This forces Aboriginal educational systems into making a choice between untested materials and those developed and validated by experts, but that remain culturally inappropriate. If the decision is to create culturally relevant materials a number of practical problems arise. First, the only personnel capable of generating culturally appropriate materials are the few trained Aboriginal teachers who are already overburdened with teaching responsibilities. Second, the need for appropriate materials is so great that administrators

demand and expect that they be generated quickly, and that they be effective immediately. Rarely are new programs based on a different cultural philosophy given the chance to be fully understood by teachers and their implementation adjusted on the basis of feedback from teachers in actual teaching situations.

Training Aboriginal Teachers

The way all these tensions are resolved will have important implications for the training of Aboriginal teachers (McAlpine, Cross, Whiteduck, & Wolforth, 1990). But independent of cultural philosophy, be it Aboriginal-oriented or mainstream-oriented, fundamental issues arise. To begin with, potential Aboriginal teachers may not meet the usual university entry requirements. Moreover, potential Aboriginal teachers may have family or traditional responsibilities that preclude them from leaving their communities for the extended periods of time normally required by modern urban universities. Finally, Aboriginal teachers are in such demand in some communities that they cannot be freed for full-time studies.

As a result, a number of institutions across Canada have developed a variety of innovative teacher training programs, including university supported programs, where varying degrees of the instruction are delivered in Aboriginal communities, sometimes in the Aboriginal language (Stairs, 1988).

Exciting as these innovative alternatives are, they result in endless institutional and community debates about the uniformity of academic standards. The effect of these debates may be to alienate Aboriginal teachers and, over time, have them come to believe that as teachers they are second-rate at best. Such lack of self-confidence is hardly conducive to these teachers providing Aboriginal students with the support that they so badly need.

In communities where the Aboriginal language is used as a medium of instruction, this lack of confidence among Aboriginal teachers surfaces in interesting ways. There are relatively few Aboriginal teachers and they are highly valued because of their ability to teach in the Aboriginal language. However, the legitimacy of teacher training for Aboriginal teachers can become clouded with innuendo with the result that they may not feel like "real" or "legitimate" teachers. The result may be that they feel less than a "real" teacher whenever they teach in the Aboriginal language. Real status for these teachers comes when they have the opportunity to teach in English or French. The reverse is also true in cases where the first language of the Aboriginal teachers is English. These particular teachers may feel inadequate because of their inability to instruct in the Aboriginal language. These issues of language of instruction need sensitive handling in teacher training programs.

Another issue for Aboriginal teacher education programs is how to prepare trainees to be agents of societal and educational change. In general, teachers are members of tightly woven family and community networks while through their jobs they may be called upon to be agents of societal and educational change that contravene the values of their families. For instance, certain school boards have made the decision to educate in the Aboriginal language even though many parents are not in agreement with such a decision. In such situations, the teacher needs to know how to mediate the needs and desires of the community's educational system on the one hand, and the values and desires of the parents on the other.

Testing Aboriginal Students

Aboriginal students in North America tend to perform poorly on standardized tests and on achievement tests developed in the context of mainstream education. The cultural biases inherent in such tests have been well documented. There is a general awareness among mainstream educators that test results are not a useful assessment tool for a variety of cultural groups.

Our purpose here is not to review the vast literature on the factors associated with test performance, but rather to raise important practical issues that arise in the context of testing in Aboriginal communities. First, teachers and educators in Aboriginal communities need, and want, to assess the performance of their children. They are, correctly, opposed to using culturally biased tests for such assessments.

One solution is to develop totally new tests that are sensitive to the realities of the particular Aboriginal community. This means tests that are consistent with the cultural realities of the community and may, for example, involve tests that emphasize oral rather than written skills, or perceptual rather than verbal ability, or comprehension rather than expression. As well, these tests would have to be consistent with the curriculum aims of education in the community. Such an approach solves the problem of cultural bias, but at some point Aboriginal educators may want to know how their students are performing relative to mainstream students, not out of a need to use mainstream students as a standard, but in order to have a broader basis from which to understand the intellectual development of students in the community.

A second approach is to translate carefully standardized tests into the Aboriginal language of the community. The problem is that even with back-translation methods, the translated version is usually awkward compared with the original. Moreover, the cultural context of the original language still predominates, and there are no longer any relevant norms against which to judge the internal validity of the test.

Summary and Conclusions

Empowerment of Aboriginal peoples, especially in the field of education, has become a "politically correct" way of thinking. Sadly, most educators and politicians see empowerment as the *end* of an important process designed to allow Aboriginal peoples control over their educational destiny. Our point is that empowerment is only the *beginning* of the process. Empowerment does not arise in a vacuum. It is implemented in the context of a long history of subjugation of Aboriginal peoples, and hence sudden empowerment generates a whole series of dilemmas for Aboriginal communities. Recognizing these realities will, we believe, avoid placing unrealistic expectations on the empowerment process and convince both mainstream and Aboriginal educators that empowerment is but the beginning of a fundamental societal challenge.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to express their deep appreciation to Doris Winkler, Kativik School Board, for patiently sharing with us over several years her vast experience, insights, and vision regarding education in Aboriginal communities. The preparation of this manuscript was supported in part by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

References

- Crago, M.B. (1991). The sociocultural interface of communicative interaction and L2 acquisition in Inuit of Northern Quebec. *TESOL Quarterly* 26, 487-505.
- Crawford, J. (1989). *Bilingual education: History, policies, theory and practice*. Trenton, NJ: Crane.
- Cummins, J. (1989). *Empowering minority students*. Sacramento, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Delpit, L.D. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(2), 78-95.
- Duranti, A., & Ochs, E. (1988). Literacy instruction in a Samoan village. In E. Ochs (Ed.), *Culture and language development: Language acquisition and language socialization in a Samoan village*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Erickson, F. (1987). Transformation and school success: The politics and culture of educational achievement. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 18, 335-357.
- Genesee, F. (1987). *Learning through two languages: Studies of immersion and bilingual education*. Cambridge: Newbury House.
- Hakuta, K. (1986). *Mirror of language: The debate of bilingualism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heath, S.B. (1986). What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and at school. In B. Schieffelin & E. Ochs (Eds.), *Language socialization across cultures* (pp. 97-124). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lambert, W.E. & Tucker, G.R. (1972). *Bilingual education of children: St. Lambert experiment*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Madsen, E. (1990). The symbolism associated with dominant society schools in Native American communities: An Alaskan example. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 17(2), 43-53.
- Matthew, N. (1990). Jurisdiction and control in First Nations' school evaluation. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 17(2), 96-113.
- McAlpine, L. (1992). Language, literacy and education: the empowerment of Aboriginal children. *Canadian Children*, 17, 17-30.
- McAlpine, L., Cross, E., Whiteduck, G. & Wolforth, J. (1990). Defining Aboriginal teacher education programs through two pairs of eyes. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 17(2), 82-87.
- Phillips, S.U. (1983). *The invisible culture: Communication in classroom and community on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation*. New York: Longman.
- Stairs, A. (1988). Beyond cultural inclusion: An Inuit example of indigenous educational development. In T. Skutnabb-Kangas & J. Cummins (Eds.), *Minority education: From shame to struggle*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Taylor, D.M. (1990). *Carving a new Inuit identity: The role of language in the education of Inuit children in Arctic Quebec*. Montreal: Kativik School Board.
- Tharp, R.G., Jordan, C., Speidel, G.E., Hu-Pei Au, K., Klein, T. W., Calkins, R.P., Sloat, K.C.M., & Gallimore, R. (1984). Product and process in applied developmental research: Education and the children of a minority. In M.E. Lamb, A.L. Brown, & B. Rogoff (Eds.), *Advances in developmental psychology* (vol. 3, pp. 91-144). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Tully, M.A. (1985). A descriptive study of the intent of state level textbook adoption procedures. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analyses*, 7(3), 289-308.

TEACHING EDUCATION

Enhancing the Quality of Teaching

Teaching Education provides thoughtful, helpful reading for those committed to the education of teachers.

"Teaching Education's articles provide insight into the way well-known professors teach classes in a variety of subfields of education. This is available no where else. **Teaching Education** is an indispensable resource for thinking about the educational futures that we create and that we might create."

William H. Schubert
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

"The pictures, history, and text of **Teaching Education** all combine to give the reader encounters with educators. After I have read an issue I feel I have come to know persons and their ideas rather than only their ideas."

Louise M. Berman
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Make checks payable
in US dollars to
Teaching Education and mail to:

Teaching Education
Wardlaw 231
University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC 29208
Ph. 803-77-6301
Fx. 803-77-3068

Contents printed on recycled paper ♻️



Subscriptions

| 1992 Prices | Student | Individual | Institutional |
|-------------|---------|------------|---------------|
| 1 Year | \$10 | \$20 | \$30 |
| 3 Year | — | \$50 | \$75 |

NAME _____

INSTITUTION _____

STREET _____

CITY _____

STATE ZIP _____

COUNTRY _____

Canadian and Mexican residents add \$4/year, other overseas add \$6/year for air mail charges.