

Modified School Years: An Important Issue of Local Control of Education

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An educational system that begins in September one year and extends to June the next year is an entirely non-Native construct. As more and more First Nations schools incorporate traditional teachings into their school curricula, the use of modified school years has become a necessity as the first step toward year-round schooling. I define a modified school year as a school year that begins before Labour Day in September and/or includes scheduled extended breaks other than Christmas and the conventional March break. The use of modified school years has allowed First Nations students the opportunity to contextualize the learning process through participation in traditional activities by following the rhythm of the seasons. The importance of modified school years cannot be overemphasized: certain events (e.g., migrations) occur only at specific times of the year; certain stories, legends, and ceremonies can be told or performed only at certain times; and specific skills can be acquired only at a specified time. In this article I present two contrasting cases that deal with the protection of the right to use modified school years in the Mushkegowuk Territory. Prior to the 1997-1998 school year, the elementary school calendar in Moose Factory reflected the traditional fall and spring harvests, and in Fort Albany the spring harvest. March breaks were not scheduled for either school. For the 1997-1998 school year in both Moose Factory and Fort Albany, school officials unilaterally decided to eliminate the spring break and reintroduce the conventional March break. After expending considerable time and resources (e.g., organizing a community survey), the Moose Cree Education Authority was able to have the spring break reinstated before the 1997-1998 school year began. In contrast to the case in Moose Factory, the spring break at St. Ann's School in Fort Albany was only reinstated less than two weeks before it was to begin. There was no community input in this case because the Mundo Peetabek Education Authority in Fort Albany did not exist at this time, having been dissolved because of political instability in the community. These two contrasting cases clearly illustrate the important roles that First Nations education authorities can play in voicing community concerns and protecting community rights. Local control of education is a right that must be constantly protected.

Introduction

Local control of education is the ultimate goal of First Nations people ... Regaining control of education is key to the advancement towards self-governance ... One important aspect of education which is vital to true local control is the curriculum— what and how the students will be taught. (Faries, 1997, p. 1)

Significant progress has been made in the last 25 years in Canada to improve the dismal state of First Nations education. The establishment of First Nations-administered educational institutions (Barnhardt, 1991; Brady, 1991), the establishment of First Nations counseling services and support groups (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Wright, 1998), the training of First Nations teachers in their own communities (Barnhardt), and the use of more culturally relevant curricula

(Feurer, 1993; Wilson & Wilson, 1995) have all been contributing factors. However, one important factor with respect to culturally relevant curricula has often been overlooked: *when* something will be taught and learned. This variable is just as important to any educational program that stresses cultural relevance as the *what* and *how* factors.

As more First Nations incorporate traditional teachings into their school curricula, taking into account when material will be covered gains greater significance. A standard school calendar is too restrictive to allow the inclusion of traditional teachings into the curricula. For example, specific legends and certain ceremonies can be discussed or performed only during certain seasons and specific times of the year (Butterfield, 1983; Tafoya, 1995); these times and seasons do not always coincide with the school calendar. Similarly, certain skills can be taught only at specific times of the year, such as the tying of smelts (Lipka, 1990). Moreover, when Elders act as resource people their rhythm is that of the seasons, not that of the school calendar (Couture, 1985; Taylor, Crago, & McAlpine, 1993). Elders have complained that in-classroom instruction is "a boring 'job' ... The context is wrong" (Larose, 1991, p. 89). The Elders' point is well taken as it is well established in psychology that knowledge is better remembered in the context in which it was originally learned (Godden & Baddeley, 1975; Norman, 1988). The importance of contextualizing a lesson is nicely illustrated by this example given by Tafoya:

I can't teach you about berrypicking right now because there are no berries to pick. But I can show you videotapes, filmstrips, and little rubber models of berries. This is different from the holistic experience of going out when the berries are ripe: the fragrances are there, and you hear the songs of the birds that are there at that particular time but are not there at this particular time. (p. 10)

Learning must sometimes take place in the natural setting to get the full effect of the educational experience.

In the past it was assumed with respect to North American Native education that "school was the only place to learn (or to learn correctly) and that what occurred in the students' homes was 'nothing'" (Deyhle, 1983, p. 83). Adding further, Szasz (1983) states,

Our contemporary technological society has focused on schooling as if it were synonymous with education. It has ignored the fact that schooling is merely one aspect of education [in the FN traditional educational experience] ... training in all ... aspects of living ... were prerequisites for maturity ... survival ... From this perspective, education cannot be segmented, nor can it be compartmentalized. (p. 110)

Thus it is clear from a First Nations perspective that learning occurs throughout the year, not only during the school calendar year, and that learning does not occur only in the confines of a school, but also at home, in the bush, and so forth. All experiences are considered learning experiences.

In this article I examine problems that have arisen in the Mushkegowuk Territory with respect to the implementation of modified school years that better reflect First Nations traditional rhythms. In addition I present reasons why year-round schooling should be considered soon for First Nations schools in this region of northern Ontario, as well as in the rest of Canada.

The Mushkegowuk Territory

The Mushkegowuk Territory is located on the western shore of James Bay and the most southerly area of Hudson Bay, Canada. Approximately 10,000 First Nations Cree reside in this area in six First Nations communities (New Post, Moose Factory, Fort Albany, Kashechewan, Attawapiskat, and Peawanuck) and one town (Moosonee).

Land Use Practices

Recent studies documenting land use practices of First Nations people living in the Mushkegowuk Territory have illustrated the importance of traditional harvesting practices of the region for socioeconomic and cultural reasons (Thompson & Hutchinson, 1989; Berkes, Hughes, George, Preston, Cummins, & Turner, 1995; George, Berkes, & Preston, 1995). In particular the religious and cultural significance of harvesting Canada geese cannot be overemphasized. The spring harvest of Canada geese has been described as a celebration of life, the survival of the family unit through the harsh winter months (Hanson & Currie, 1957; Thompson & Hutchinson, 1989).

The affinity of First Nations people of the Mushkegowuk Territory for spring harvesting of waterfowl has not diminished over the years. Indeed Prevett, Lumsden, and Johnson (1983) and Thompson and Hutchinson (1989) have reported, respectively, that 93% and 84% of First Nations harvesters in the Mushkegowuk Territory participated in the spring waterfowl harvest. Also Berkes et al. (1995) report that 14,000 person days a year are spent harvesting waterfowl in the spring. Thus it is obvious that waterfowl harvesting in the spring remains an important cultural event in this region of Canada.

Moose Cree and Fort Albany First Nations

In this article I limit my discussion to two First Nations of the region because of their uniqueness: Moose Cree and Fort Albany First Nations. These First Nations are unique to the region in that they are not located on the mainland. Moose Cree First Nation is located on Moose Factory Island near the mouth of the Moose River, and Fort Albany First Nation is located on Sinclair Island (although some land on the mainland is "owned" by Fort Albany First Nation) near the mouth of the Albany River. Moose Factory Island is segregated into three major land-ownership designations: Moose Cree First Nation, federal, and provincial. Sinclair Island is segregated into two major land-ownership designations, Fort Albany First Nation and federal, whereas on the mainland the major land owners are Fort Albany First Nation, the federal, and provincial governments.

Moose Cree First Nation and Fort Albany First Nation are also unique relative to other First Nations of the region with respect to where their elementary schools are located. Moose Factory Ministik School is located on provincial land and is operated under the provincial authority of the Moose Factory Island District School Area Board (MFIDSAB). Through a tuition agreement between Moose Cree First Nation and MFIDSAB, approximately 70% of the students attending Moose Factory Ministik School are on-reserve members of Moose Cree First Nation (Moose Cree Education Authority [MCEA], 1997a). St Ann's school in Fort Albany is located on First Nations land on the mainland, whereas most members of Fort

Albany First Nation live on Sinclair Island. This school was once a Roman Catholic residential school, but is now administered by Fort Albany First Nation through the Mundo Peetabeck Education Authority (MPEA).

The high school on Moose Factory Island opened on September 1, 1997 and is located on First Nations land administered by the MCEA. Although no high school exists at present in Fort Albany, a combined elementary and secondary school is scheduled to be built on Sinclair Island early this millennium).

Methodology

I was approached by two community representatives (Billy Katapatuk, Board of Directors, MCEA and Councillor Moose Cree First Nation; Mike Metatawabin, Chief, Fort Albany First Nation) and asked to explore self-determination issues in their respective home communities. The request for Moose Factory was made with regard to Moose Factory Ministik School as previously documented (Tsuji, 1998). The request for Fort Albany was with respect to the documentation of the turbulent political years (late 1990s) for the community. Material used in the preparation of this article was given to me by Billy Katapatuk and Chief Mike Metatawabin. Additional data about the school schedule were supplied by personnel of the Mundo Peetabeck Education Authority. The issue was of great concern to me because of the disruption of school-based health programs that had existed for over a decade. School-based health care programs are scheduled at least three months in advance, so any scheduling difficulties can be disruptive.

Modified School Years

In this article a modified school year is defined as any school year that begins before Labour Day and/or includes an extended school holiday (≥ 5 school days) other than Christmas and the conventional March break. This definition was chosen because in Canada most non-Native schools begin their school year after the Labour Day weekend with extended school holidays being scheduled only at Christmas and in March.

Moose Cree First Nation

In the beginning only a scheduled March break was included in the Ministik school calendar; however, over the years a fall break was introduced. Finally a spring break replaced the March break in an effort to have the school calendar better reflect the traditional lifestyle of First Nation members who attended Moose Factory Ministik School (MCEA, 1997b). Thus prior to the 1997-1998 school year the elementary school calendar reflected the traditional fall and spring harvesting practices with a week of vacation both in October and in late April, but no March break (MCEA, 1997b). However, for the 1997-1998 school-calendar year, it was proposed that the traditional spring break in late April should be replaced by the more conventional March break. In a letter (Principal of Moose Factory Ministik School; Fleming, 1997a) to J. Beck (Director of MCEA) Fleming stated:

The consultation process with the Superintendent, area Principal's [sic], area School Councils and Ministik staff has resulted in an overwhelming request for and support of a school break for staff and student in mid-March. (p. 1)

Although this letter gives the illusion that all concerned groups had been consulted, this was not the case. At a community meeting of Moose Cree First Nation band members expressed dissatisfaction that the community had not been directly consulted about the elimination of the traditional spring break in April (MCEA, 1997b). As a result, a survey of the community was conducted that presented three options for the school year 1997-1998:

1. Fall break from October 6-13, March break from March 16-20, and no spring break;
2. Fall break from October 6-13, no March break, and spring break from April 10-20;
3. Fall break from October 6-13, March break from March 16-20, and spring break from April 10-20 (Fleming, 1997b).

Results of the survey gave overwhelming support for option 3 ($N=85$ votes) and little support for option 1 ($N=5$) and option 2 ($N=9$, Fleming, 1997b). However, a general lack of understanding of traditional harvesting practices in the Mushkegowuk territory was evident in the options posed by the survey. Respondents ($N=17$) noted that the proposed April break was scheduled much too early to allow for the harvesting of Canada geese (Fleming, 1997b); the optimal period for harvesting of geese in the spring has traditionally been in late April and early May. In addition other comments collected during the survey indicated that the fall harvesting season should have been removed from the school calendar before contemplating the elimination of the spring harvest. The importance of the fall harvest as a family event has diminished in recent years, although participation in the spring harvest is still an important family event. Comments from the survey included:

Take out the fall break and let them go to school for that week, but leave March break and spring break as it is. The majority of people do most of their hunting [waterfowl] now in the spring time then [sic] in the fall.

I would like to suggest the possibility of deleting the fall break ... Not too many parents take their children on a goose hunt anymore [in the fall] ... The practice of the fall hunt has declined over the past few years.

You can also take out the fall break, most of the people go out hunting in the spring. (Fleming, 1997b, pp. 1-2)

The option of having a March and spring break with no fall break was never presented as an alternative.

The MCEA supported the community's desire to have a March and spring break for the 1997-1998 school year at Ministik school by passing Motion #1997-05-084 on May 22, 1997 (MCEA, 1997c, regular meeting), and MFIDSAB approved the new school calendar June 12, 1997 (McMartin, 1997). To compensate for the loss of classroom instruction time because of the five extra days needed for the spring break, the school day was lengthened. Classes were scheduled to begin at 8:45 a.m. (compare the usual time of 8:55 a.m.) and after lunch at 1:15 p.m. (compare the usual time of 1:20 p.m., Fleming, 1997b). Nevertheless, the initial irregularities in the setting of the school calendar by MFIDSAB were noted by J. Beck in a letter to D. Fleming (Beck, 1997):

I reiterate my concern and that of the community regarding the procedure by which the Board [MFIDSAB] has undertaken in this case. Mr. John McMarten [sic] [Superintendent of Education MFIDSAB] stated that the Board was not clear regarding the process, however this is clearly outlined in the Tuition Agreement. Had the process been followed the Education Authority would not have had to survey parents in the community [for MFIDSAB], this is the responsibility of the School [Moose Factory Ministik]. It is issues such as this that define who has "Local Control of Education," with seventy percent of the student clientele it is the driving force of the First Nation toward acquiring Lot 1 [the designation for the parcel of land upon which Moose Factory Ministik School is built] and Moose Factory Ministik School. (p. 1)

Thus the traditionally important spring break was reinstated in the 1997-1998 school calendar only after considerable time and resources had been allocated to this task by MCEA on the behalf of the community.

It should also be noted that during this time MCEA and MFIDSAB were involved in another issue of local control of education, that of "reverse tuition agreements." I present some background information to aid full understanding of this issue. On Moose Factory Island (as well as all other First Nations), Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) provides funding only for on-reserve band members at the primary and secondary school levels of education. Off-reserve band members receive no educational funding from INAC because their educational needs fall under the jurisdiction of local provincial school boards such as MFIDSAB. Previously no educational facilities existed on reserve for children (except for special religious schools) in Moose Factory; thus in the past the organization now known as the MCEA had to purchase educational services from MFIDSAB. However, once the First Nation composite school was established on reserve, students in upper grades were allowed to attend the new school. In contrast, off-reserve members could not attend the new First Nation school unless they paid for their education themselves (i.e., these students would receive no INAC funding). MCEA proposed a reverse tuition agreement whereby MFIDSAB (and other provincial school boards) could purchase educational services from Moose Cree First Nation for off-reserve band members. This arrangement would in practice remove the segregative nature of the on-reserve and off-reserve designation. The MCEA was unable to implement this plan because MFIDSAB (and another school board) questioned the quality of education at the First Nation-operated school. This issue later proved to be a nonfactor; the real issue was local control of education (Tsuji, 1998).

Fort Albany First Nation

After the residential school period of St Ann's School, but before the 1983-1984 school year, St. Ann's School calendar did not include a spring break, only a March break (Table 1). Between the school years 1983-1984 and 1996-1997 the March break was replaced by a scheduled spring break. In general this traditional break would begin in the middle of April and extend to late April or early May (Table 1). The spring break was introduced to allow children and their families time to practice their traditional lifestyle. Spring breaks have been the only scheduled extended school breaks at St. Ann's except for the fall breaks scheduled unilaterally by two St. Ann's principals for the 1995-1996 and 1997-1998 school years (Table 1).

The principal of St. Ann's School during the 1995-1996 school year was of Native ancestry and originally from Moosonee. She unilaterally introduced for the first time a fall break (Table 1). Although the reasoning behind this action is unknown, it has been suggested that the fall break was introduced to coincide with the fall break of Moosonee area schools. Fall breaks had not been scheduled prior to the 1995-1996 school year at St. Ann's because although the fall harvest of waterfall is still culturally important, it is not as important as the spring harvest. If fall breaks were added to the school calendar in addition to traditional spring breaks, the reduction in classroom instruction time would be substantial. Moreover, time lost from classroom instruction is especially relevant at St. Ann's School because annual classroom instruction time cannot be accurately predicted. Break-up or flooding events can occur in the fall and/or the spring, separating the school from the island First Nation community it services (Table 1). For example, students did not attend school from May 14 to May 27, 1996 due to break-up and flooding concerns (Table 1). The school year 1995-1996 was one of political turmoil and unrest, with the principal leaving after only one year.

For the 1996-1997 school year, a former principal from a Moosonee school-area school was hired. During his first year at St. Ann's no changes to the typical school calendar were made, that is, there were no scheduled fall and/or March breaks in addition to the spring break. However, during his second year (1997-1998) the principal added unilaterally to the school calendar both a fall and March break while eliminating the spring break (Table 1). The spring break was not reinstated until just before it was to begin. In a letter to parents and guardians dated April 16, 1998, the principal stated that:

We consider the cultural activities next week as an integral part of the children's education and therefore we have decided to designate April (20-24) as a "Grants Days Week." Basically this means that all of our students will be considered as been present in school by recording a "G" besides their names throughout all of next week. (Heaney, 1998, p. 1)

It should be noted that this announcement was made at the last minute. Even teachers were not informed of the spring break until a memorandum from the Education Administrator was circulated on April 7, 1998 stating:

Please be advised that all teaching staff are to participate with the school, parents and students during the Cultural Week event. Normally, it is a spring hunting event and should be exercised as any other school calendar year with MPEA. (Education Administrator, 1998, p. 1)

A point that must be emphasized is that the principal was only able to change the 1997-1998 school calendar unilaterally because the MPEA had been dissolved by the newly elected Chief and Council (at the time) during the summer of 1996. Only the Education Administrator's position for the MPEA was left untouched. From the summer of 1996 to the summer of 1998 (a full two-year term), the political situation in Fort Albany First Nation was unstable, with two Chiefs and Councils claiming to be in power. As a result, the MPEA did not exist until after a new Chief and Council were elected in July 1998. In general it has been reported that the responsibility for educational matters in First Nations of Northwestern Ontario are often poorly demarcated between education authorities and their respective chiefs and councils (Brady, 1991). It follows that in periods of political turmoil education

Table 1.

Calendar year, school year (day/month/year), scheduled extended school breaks (fall, March, spring), and missed time due to break-up/flooding of the Albany River for St. Ann's School of Fort Albany First Nation.

Calendar Year	School Year	Fall	Breaks March	Spring	Break-up/flooding
1982-83	13/09/82- 27/06/83		03/03/83- 05/03/83		
1983-84	05/09/83- 28/06/84			18/04/84- 30/04/84	
1984-85	06/09/84- 26/06/85			26/04/85- 03/05/85	
1985-86	02/09/85- 25/06/86			21/04/86- 28/04/86	
1986-87	25/08/86- 27/06/87			17/04/87- 05/05/87	
1987-88	31/08/87- 27/06/88			18/04/88- 25/04/88	02/05/88- 25/05/88
1988-89	01/09/88- 28/06/89			17/04/89- 31/04/89	
1989-90	01/09/89- 28/06/90			23/04/90- 04/05/90	07/05/90- 21/05/90
1990-91*					
1991-92	26/08/91- 25/06/92	01/05/92		16/04/92-	11/05/92- 10/06/92
1992-93	01/09/92- 25/06/93			16/04/93- 07/05/93	10/05/93- 21/05/93
1993-94	23/08/93- 24/06/94	15/11/93- 12/12/93 ¹		25/04/94- 06/05/94	
					02/05/94- 15/05/94
1994-95	22/08/94- 21/06/95			14/04/95- 03/05/95	
1995-96	28/08/95- 27/06/96	02/10/95- 06/10/95 ²		19/04/96- 03/05/96	14/05/96- 27/05/96
1996-97	03/09/96- 27/06/97			14/04/97- 30/04/97	01/05/97- 16/05/97
1997-98	25/08/97- 24/06/98	14/10/97- 20/10/97 ³	16/03/98- 20/03/98	20/04/98- 24/04/98 ⁴	

Source of information: attendance sheets, school calendars, and memoranda.

*Data for this year were not available.

¹Rare fall break-up of the river and flood warning.

²Fall break introduced unilaterally by new principal.

³Fall break introduced unilaterally by new principal.

⁴Spring break was not scheduled in the school calendar. Memorandum dated April 7, 1998.

authorities cannot fill the power vacuum in the educational field, being restricted in what might be achieved until stability is restored.

In contrast to the orderly scenario that unfolded in Moose Factory under the guidance of the MCEA, the spring break at St. Ann's School was only reinstated during the school year, at the last minute, and without the leadership of the MPEA, which did not exist at the time. The function of First Nations education authorities in voicing First Nations community concerns and protection of community rights cannot be overstated. Vigilance on the part of First Nations education authorities is the key word.

The Future

A general trend in First Nations education in the Mushkegowuk Territory (Sutherland, 1997), as well as across North America (Zwick & Miller, 1996), has been the introduction of outdoor and traditional activities to school curricula. Community approval for these types of changes have been documented. In a formal survey of Moose Cree First Nation members concerning the curriculum framework for the new high school on Moose Factory Island, strong support was given by the community for the introduction of a curriculum that stressed Native values and beliefs. Elaborating further, graded responses (i.e., very important, somewhat important, not important) from the community survey indicated that certain aspects of the proposed Native curriculum were considered very important. For example, 80% of the people surveyed ($N=189$) felt that "*year round schooling according to our cultural activities should be implemented*" with only 14% ($N=32$) feeling that year-round education was not important (Faries, 1997, p. 29), and 86% of the members ($N=203$) believed that "*Native awareness programs should be taught year round*" with only 11% ($N=25$) believing the converse (p. 32).

I also believe that year-round schooling is a necessity for a truly Native curriculum. One should not dichotomize what is learned in school from what is learned at home and in the bush. Every experience should be viewed as a learning experience. As pointed out by a Moose Cree First Nation band member during the community survey,

Learning is a lifelong process—school is only one way to get this education. Learning about life and to take care of yourself and others and the community should be emphasized. I learned my own language before I learned anything else. A person should be taught everything about this world. (Faries, 1997, p. 52)

In addition, a truly Native curriculum must be contextualized. Data collected during the Moose Cree First Nation community survey indicate that "People felt that ... traditional skills should be taught in the natural setting, the bush and not only in the classrooms as they are not the proper setting" (p. 13).

Year-round schooling is needed if a school program hopes to contextualize traditional activities fully, that is, education at the appropriate time, in the natural setting, in the Native language, and by the proper people (e.g., Elders). Certain events such as migrations do not always coincide with the school year, certain stories and legends can be told only at certain times, certain ceremonies can be performed only at specific times, and certain concepts cannot be accurately translated into the English language.

The use of modified school years by First Nations schools is the first step necessary before year-round schooling can be realized. The "standard" school year is a non-Native construct. Modified school years allow the school-year calendar to reflect better the natural rhythm of the seasons and the traditional lifestyle. It should be mentioned that modified school years have been used widely by other First Nations schools nationwide. For example, in the eastern James Bay region of northern Quebec,

The school calendar is beginning to reflect the commitment of the Cree Way approach to fostering the traditional trapping experience. Summer vacations have been shortened to allow students to accompany their family on the goose hunt for two weeks in the fall and for one week in the spring, to participate in traditional hunting and ceremonial activities ... accompany their elders into the bush and learn the traditional ways. (Feurer, 1992, p. 92)

Moving toward year-round schooling is an important step toward true local control of education.

Finally, the establishment in the Mushkegowuk Territory of the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program, a collaborative effort between Kiskinohamakywi Weechehitowin (the regional First Nations education body consisting of all First Nations Education Authorities) and Queen's University, has provided the region with qualified, locally trained First Nations teachers. Because these newly graduated teachers are not culturally programmed to follow the standard school calendar year, a school calendar year that takes into account the rhythm of all traditional activities may become a reality.

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