

**Educational Policy for First Nations in New Brunswick:
Continuing Linguistic Genocide and Educational Failure
or
Positive Linguistic Rights and Educational Success?**

By

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The needs in the area of Aboriginal education are enormous-- but not at all what is currently being done or contemplated. Drawing from the works of Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Lars Anders-Baer, Robert Dunbar, Ole Henrik Magga, Ida Nicolaisen, Milani Trask and many others in the matters of Indigenous education, language survival, and linguistic and human rights I would like to outline these needs by first providing some background.

1.) The State of Indigenous Languages in New Brunswick.

At this moment the Maliseet/Passamaquoddy and Mi'kmaq languages in New Brunswick are critically endangered. With no fluent child speakers and most fluent speakers over 60 years of age, Maliseet/ Passamaquoddy has been judged to have, at most, only about ten more years of viability,¹ and Mi'kmaq, which has very few child speakers (and mostly in Cape Breton), possibly another thirty years, unless drastic steps are taken soon. This situation, sadly, is not unique.² In Canada only three of more than 60 Indigenous languages are expected to survive this century,³ and worldwide as many as 90-95% of the world's languages, mostly Indigenous language, are heading for extinction by the end of this century. As in the case of environmental destruction, it has been judged to be a global phenomenon, but not one that is inevitable or necessary.⁴

2.) Linguicidal State Policies

¹ Bear Nicholas 1996.

² See Leavit 1998:380, MacEachern 1998.

³ Contento 1993, LaHache 1996:11-12, Fettes 1998.

⁴ Krauss 1992, Maffi 2001, Nettle & Romaine 2000, Magga et al 2005:3.

As the most knowledgeable scholars in the field will attest, the critical state of Indigenous languages in New Brunswick, as in the rest of the world, is not the result of natural processes, but the direct product of official government policies and practices that have been systematic and sustained over decades and generations.⁵ Two recent expert papers⁶, especially, offer the most insightful analyses not only into the destructive role of government policies in the extinction of Indigenous languages, but also into the role that linguistic destruction has played in the consistently poor academic success rates of Indigenous children and in the destruction of Indigenous nations, cultures and communities around the world. In an attempt to explain how these processes have occurred in New Brunswick, we draw heavily on points made in these expert papers.

The most fundamental crime, according to these analyses, is that children of Indigenous and linguistic minorities in almost every country of the world, including Canada, are required by law, thus given no alternative but to be schooled in the medium of a dominant language. And it is precisely because such an education actually produces dire consequences, both for the languages involved and for their speakers and forms of life, that such educational practices are increasingly being understood as a direct violation of fundamental international human rights instruments, including the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* of 1966,⁷ and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* of 1989.⁸ In the more recent expert paper by Anders-Baer et al (2008), the authors analyze the *UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (1948) and the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* of 1998 (ICC Statute) and conclude that the practice of subjecting Indigenous and minority language children to education in the medium of a dominant language may also be

⁵ Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:xxxi-xxxiii.

⁶ “Indigenous Children’s Education and Indigenous Languages” (2005) by Ole Henrik Magga, Ida Nicolaisen, Mililani Trask, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Dunbar, and “Forms of Education of Indigenous Children as Crimes against Humanity?” (2008) by Lars Anders-Baer, Robert Dunbar and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas.

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http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ceschr.htm

⁸ Magga et al 2005:9-11.

<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2csrc.htm>

punishable under these human rights instruments as a crime against humanity⁹. In the next few pages I summarize the chain of cause and destructive effects as laid out by these experts and others.

When schools for Indigenous and minority children are conducted in a dominant language, the mere fact of the physical separation of children from proficient adult speakers effectively denies these children the opportunity to become proficient in their mother-tongue. When these children do not become proficient in their mother-tongue, they are much less likely to use their language and to transfer it to the next generation. The consequence for Indigenous or minority languages is that once several generations are exposed to this form of education, their languages become underdeveloped, particularly in formal areas, precisely because they are not used in school. And since the speakers of the languages who are subjected to this form of education inevitably come to believe that their language has less value than the dominant language, they begin to use their own language in fewer contexts, and the dominant language in more contexts.¹⁰

According to Magga et al, this process is a subtractive one in which *“a new (dominant/majority) language is learned at the cost of the mother tongue which is displaced.... [it] subtracts from the child’s linguistic repertoire, instead of adding to it.”*¹¹ The process has also been appropriately identified as “linguistic genocide” or “linguicide”, and defined by Skutnabb-Kangas as *“killing a language without killing the speakers.”*¹²

3.) Subtractive/Linguicidal Education for Indigenous Peoples as the Primary Cause of Mental and Physical Harm, Educational Failure, and Social and Cultural Destruction

It is not only Indigenous and minority languages that suffer from this process. The speakers of these languages suffer also. Anders-Baer et al correlate the submersion¹³ of

⁹ Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:15-28.

¹⁰ Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:1-3.

¹¹ Magga et al 2005:3.

¹² Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:311-318. 362-374: See also Sutherland 2002.

¹³ See Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:582 for a definition of submersion education.

Indigenous and linguistic minority children in schools conducted in a dominant language to serious forms of mental harm, including “*social dislocation, psychological, cognitive, linguistic, and educational harm*,”¹⁴ which in turn play a central role in the low academic performance rates of Indigenous children, and ultimately in the social, economic, and political marginalization of such peoples worldwide. To quote again from Anders-Baer et al:

“...[T]his dominant language medium of education prevents access to education because of the linguistic, pedagogical and psychological barriers it creates. Without binding educational linguistic rights, especially a right to mainly mother tongue-medium (MTM) education in state schools, with good teaching of a dominant language as a second language, given by competent bilingual teachers, most indigenous peoples and minorities have to accept subtractive education where they learn a dominant language at the cost of the mother tongue which is displaced, and later often replaced by the dominant language.”¹⁵

By its very nature, subtractive language learning in education for Indigenous Peoples constitutes a fundamental attack on the cognitive capacities of Indigenous children, which in turn, may now be seen as the chief factor in the world-wide phenomenon of low educational achievement and high push-out rates among Indigenous children. And it is the growing body of evidence concerning these negative consequences of subtractive submersion education for Indigenous children that is now leading to the increasing stigmatization of such practices on the international level.¹⁶

The most common cause for this high push-out rate is that children of Indigenous or linguistic minorities tend to take only two years “*to achieve peer appropriate levels*” of conversational ability, but five or more years to achieve equivalent academic language skills. As Cummins has discovered, “*psychologists often failed to take account of the difference between these two aspects of proficiency when they tested minority students*” and consequently end up labeling students as “*‘learning disabled’ or ‘retarded’ on the basis of tests administered within one or two years of the students’ exposure to English in school.*”¹⁷ This finding has special relevance in explaining the low English proficiency found among Cree students after many years in English medium schools in northern

¹⁴ Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:2.

¹⁵ Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:3-4.

¹⁶ Magga et al 2004:3, 5-6, 8, Kosonen, Young & Malone 2007:6-7, Skutnabb-Kangas 2008c.

¹⁷ Cummins 1991:169-170.

Ontario¹⁸. It also explains the generally low academic performance among Indigenous or linguistic minority students elsewhere who, though relatively fluent in English, still do not acquire the necessary academic skills to succeed when submersed in dominant language schools from an early age. In being labeled early in their educational career as disabled or worse, they tend to be the students who, sooner or later, get pushed out of school.

There are now, also, very serious concerns that, while school completion rates are almost universally used as measures of the success of an education system, high rates do not necessarily mean benefits either for the individuals or their communities. In the first place, increased rates of school completion do not correlate with correspondingly high levels of academic proficiency, especially for monolingual Indigenous or minority language students. Indeed, evidence from the United States indicates that “...*mono-English-speaking American Indians’ longer stay in school does not translate into greater educational proficiency when compared to the reading, writing, and computational literacy found among bilinguals [who have been instructed in the medium of their mother tongue].*”¹⁹

Secondly, Magga et al have demonstrated how Indigenous children subjected to subtractive education, “*or at least their children, are effectively transferred [from their own group] to the dominant group linguistically and culturally*”²⁰, whether or not they are removed from their own community to attend school. The process has elsewhere been called “cognitive assimilation”²¹. But it is unequivocally assimilation since Indigenous children who manage to complete subtractive education programs must also assimilate to a considerable degree to the culture of the dominant society in order to succeed. As a result, the only real choices offered to Indigenous children in subtractive education are the choices of “failure”, or assimilation²². And since a high proportion of those who

¹⁸ Toohey 1985:97-99.

¹⁹ Brod & McQuiston 1998:152.

²⁰ Magga et al 2004:4. See also Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:5-10.

²¹ Battiste 1986. This process also parallels the mass society phenomenon known as “manufacturing consent. See Herman & Chomsky 1988 and Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:13.

²² Bear Nicholas 2001:10. See also Chisholm 1994, Curry 2004.

“fail” tend to remain in their communities, and since a high proportion of those who “succeed” tend either to move away or to remain as an assimilated element within their communities²³, there is no way that either consequence can be considered beneficial to Indigenous Peoples and communities. Indeed, the overall effect must be recognized as predominantly negative and destructive²⁴.

Since language is the foundation of culture, its destruction in individuals on a mass scale, inevitably leads to the disruption, even destruction, of whole communities and cultures. This process, now clearly caused by subtractive models of education, has even been called a “weapon of mass destruction”²⁵. Thus, linguistic genocide must be understood as central to the process of “cultural genocide”. Raphael Lemkin, the original author of the *UN Convention on the Crime and Punishment of Genocide* (1948) understood that the destruction of a people through the destruction of their linguistic, cultural, social, economic, spiritual, and political systems, was as fundamental to the meaning of genocide as the outright killing of members of a group²⁶.

Scholars have now also identified subtractive/linguicidal state education policies as a major causative factor in the physical harm suffered by Indigenous Peoples in disproportionately high rates of “*youth and adult criminality, alcoholism and drugs use, suicides, unemployment, negative health and housing conditions.*” While admitting that racism and discrimination are also important factors, Magga et al state that “*the use of the wrong teaching languages (and lack of indigenous content, methods and ethos in schools) is one of the most important factors, possibly the most decisive factor.*”²⁷

²³ At least part of this phenomenon can be explained by the lack of employment opportunities within Aboriginal communities and the total disconnect between the education of Indigenous Peoples and the needs of their communities.

²⁴ See also Rasmussen 2000, Kosonen, Young & Malone 2007:10-11. The only exception to this dismal picture may be the fact that those who have been pushed out of school tend to be those who have resisted assimilation and maintained their language, at least to some degree. As a result some analysts have gone so far as to suggest that resistance to education has been the chief factor in the survival of Indigenous languages to the present.

²⁵ Skutnabb-Kangas 2008b.

²⁶ Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:9-10, Chrisjohn et al 2002:238-239. See also New York Times 1999, Docker 2004, Costello 1988, Bear Nicholas 1999, Rasmussen 2000, and Skutnabb-Kangas 2008.

²⁷ Magga et al 2005:6-7.

4.) International Human Rights Instruments in the Matter of Linguistic Genocide

In the earlier expert paper Magga et al detail the ways in which the right to education in the medium of the mother-tongue is a fundamental human right, the ways in which states violate that right, and the negative educational consequences that arise from a subtractive/assimilative form of education. The paper analyses various international human rights instruments with respect to linguistic and educational rights. It begins with a quote from an important clause in *ILO Convention No. 169* defining the goal of education for Indigenous Peoples as follows:

*“The imparting of general knowledge and skills that will help children belonging to the peoples concerned to participate fully and on an equal footing in their own community and in the national community shall be the aim of education for these peoples.”*²⁸

In order for linguistic human rights to be respected, Skutnabb-Kangas has listed four additional requirements:

- 1 *“high levels of multilingualism;*
- 2 *a fair chance of achieving academically at school;*
- 3 *strong, positive multilingual and multicultural identity and positive attitudes towards self and others; and*
- 4 *a fair chance of awareness and competence building as prerequisites for working for a more equitable world, for oneself and one’s own group as well as others, locally and globally.”*²⁹

The reality is, however, that relatively few countries in the world actually strive for such goals, much less codify them in law, since most are still actively engaged in a destructive path of subtractive education leading to the negative educational, economic, social, psychological, and physical consequences now seen among Indigenous Peoples worldwide.

Magga et al also consider the *International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights* (ICESR) of 1966 which sets out four essential elements in the right to education—availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability. Focusing on the accessibility element the paper quotes Dr. Katarina Tomasevski, former UN Rapporteur and leading global expert on the right to education, who has said that *“mere access to educational institutions, difficult as it may be to achieve in practice, does not amount to*

²⁸ ILO Revised Convention (No. 169) concerning Indigenous and Tribal People in Independent Countries (1989) 28 I.L.M. 1382 (1989) in Magga et al 2004:2. See also deVarennes 1993b.

²⁹ Magga et al. 2004:2.

the right to education.”³⁰ Given that minority-language children generally do not perform as well as dominant language children in dominant language education programs, equal access to education is thus denied to the minority children on the basis of language, and this amounts to a violation of the terms of the ICESR. Indeed, Magga et al cite important court decisions declaring that education provided only in the dominant language amounts to a denial of the right to education for speakers of minority languages. In stating that “*there is no greater inequality than the equal treatment of unequals*” one court also mandated affirmative steps, including MTM education, to ensure equal access of minority language speakers to education³¹.

Considering the ICESR (para 1) requirement that education provide for “*the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential*” Magga et al declare that

“...it could be forcefully argued that only MTM education, at least in primary school is consistent with the provisions of Para 1, because any other form of education tends not to guarantee the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, nor does it enable children who are subject to non-MTM education to participate as effectively in society.”³²

Para 1(c) Art. 29 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* of 1989 (CRC) calls for “*respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values*” but according to Magga et al (2005)

“...it would seem clear that an education in a language other than the child’s mother tongue and which contains no recognition of that mother tongue is an education that is unlikely to contribute to respect for the child’s own cultural identity, language and values.”³³

The authors of the 2008 expert paper discussed here actually conclude their paper on a more hopeful note for Indigenous Peoples in their analysis of the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court of 17 July, 1998* (ICC Statute). They describe a number of clauses in this statute that could be readily interpreted to include subtractive forms of education as crimes against humanity. Its definition of “*persecution,*” alone, posits that

³⁰ Magga et al 2005:10.

³¹ Magga et al 2005:10 & 12 describing the cases of *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) and *Cyprus v. Turkey* (2001).

³² Magga et al 2005:13.

³³ Magga et al 2005:13.

“the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity to be a crime against humanity.” Since there are now several court decisions and numerous international human rights instruments which could be interpreted to include the right to MTM education as a human right³⁴, the authors conclude that *“[t]he concept of ‘crimes against humanity’ provides a good basis for an evolution that will ultimately lead to the stigmatization through law of subtractive educational practices and policies.”*³⁵ This reality gives rise to the expectation that sooner or later human rights instruments will begin to specify linguistic genocide as a crime, and begin to articulate positive linguistic rights related to MTM education³⁶. Thus, from a human rights stand-point, states would do well to begin reading the writing on the wall, and acquaint themselves with the relevant research and the growing body of law³⁷.

5.) Subtractive Education/Assimilation the Central Factor in High Push-out Rates for Indigenous Peoples in Canada (and New Brunswick)

Beyond a doubt, the almost universal practice of subtractive education in Canada must now be addressed as a central factor in the continuing high rate of educational failure among Inuit and First Nations children. Recently released statistics on school completion rates for Indigenous young people (2006) show that there has been no improvement in school completion rates in over a decade. In 1996 over sixty percent of Inuit and on-reserve First Nations youth age 21 to 24 had not completed school. In 2001 and 2006 the rates were precisely the same. In New Brunswick alone, the rate of school completion for on-reserve youth in 2006 was only slightly higher, with about 55 percent completing school in this province. This is still a disturbing and telling statistic when compared to the average school completion rate of 80 to 90 percent among non-Aboriginal youth across Canada.³⁸ It is “the gap” about which everyone is so concerned.

³⁴ See also Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:479-566, deVarennes 1993b.

³⁵ Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 200:17.

³⁶ Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:10.

³⁷ Skutnabb-Kangas 2009.

³⁸ CESC 2007, Mendelson 2008:1, Richards 2008: 3-4. See also Goar 2008, Friesen 2008, and Hambrook 2008.

While nearly everyone concludes from these statistics that something is fundamentally wrong with the system of education for Indigenous Peoples in Canada, the matter is much more complex. One concern, of course, is that young Aboriginal people are being pushed out of the only system to date that seems to offer any hope of economic betterment for the individual³⁹. The problem here is that none of the researchers or commentators to date has even considered the matter of subtractive education as the central factor in the high non-completion rates.

Another, and perhaps more troubling, concern is that even the so-called “successes” of Indigenous children in a dominant language school system do not actually bode entirely well for Indigenous forms of life and language. More often than not, success for Indigenous students in the present system, means assimilation to some degree or other. Considering proficiency in mother-tongue alone, many researchers have discovered an inverse correlation between level of education and level of mother-tongue efficiency, i.e., the higher the level of education, the lower the level of mother-tongue proficiency⁴⁰. Some have gone so far as to say that resistance to formal education may have been the single most important factor in the survival of Indigenous languages to the present. This fact should have begun to ring alarms well before now, but almost no one dares to consider what it might mean.

Mention the word “assimilation” to political and educational authorities and they will vehemently deny that it is the goal of the education system. The impression given is that whatever assimilation policies may have existed in the past, they no longer exist in the present, especially now that the residential schools have all been closed down⁴¹. But that was twenty years ago and the decline of Indigenous languages has proceeded more dramatically since then than ever before, and without residential schools. What can possibly be the explanation? Anders-Baer et al have pointed out rather frankly that Indigenous children in most countries today, including Canada, are still “*effectively transferred to the dominant group linguistically and culturally,*” in any schools where

³⁹ See Mendelson 2008, Richards 2008.

⁴⁰ Bear Nicholas 1996:5

⁴¹ Chrisjohn 1998.

education is conducted in the medium of the dominant language, where there is no reasonable alternative, and where “*parents do not have enough solid research-based knowledge about the long-term consequences of the ‘choices’.*”⁴² This would include most, if not all, schools in Canada, since education in a dominant language is effectively mandated by force of law in this country.

Unfortunately, this situation includes even First Nation communities in Canada where schools are, for the most part, still operated under the control of the federal department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), which effectively compels these schools to use dominant-language provincial curriculum materials and teachers trained in dominant language institutions. Anders-Baer et al are blunt about what is occurring:

*“Today’s indigenous and minority education is organized contrary to solid research evidence about how best to enable [indigenous] children to achieve academically in school. Dominant language medium education for indigenous children often curtails the development of the children’s capabilities, perpetuates poverty, and causes serious mental harm.”*⁴³

There is certainly no absence of hand-wringing for the failure of Aboriginal education on the part of educational organizations and authorities of all stripes in this country, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous⁴⁴. In New Brunswick, alone, there have been studies after studies, and new plans after new plans, but not one even mentions the need for MTM education⁴⁵. For the most part, however, educational and political authorities continue to promote solutions derived from assimilationist ideologies. Since it is these authorities who also have access to the resources to fund research, it explains why the research results generally manage to echo and support such solutions, while routinely ignoring or dismissing the large body of research into the role of linguistic genocide in education⁴⁶. And while some analyses may offer important suggestions, such as the need

⁴² Anders-Baer et al 2008:4.

⁴³ Anders-Baer et al 2008:4

⁴⁴ Dunville 2008.

⁴⁵ Hamilton 1991, N.B. Department of Education 1991, Denman & Associates 1994, New Brunswick Department of Education 1994, Garrow et al 1996, Dalley et al 1999, Provincial Aboriginal Education Committee 2005.. In a recent study on education in New Brunswick only one page out of forty is devoted to First Nations students in public schools. N.B. Department of Education 2007:34.

⁴⁶ Skutnabb-Kangas 1986:172. See for example Mendelson 2008, Richards 2008, Canadian Press 2008, Friesen 2008, *The Miramichi Leader* 2008. See also The Learning Partnership (www.thelearningpartnership.ca), The CD Howe Institute (www.cdhowe.org), The Fraser Institute

for Indigenous control and jurisdiction over education⁴⁷, the farthest most of them go in the matter of language survival is to emphasize only the need for more and better language teaching (core programs) in schools, in spite of the fact that not one speaker has been produced by language teaching in schools in New Brunswick. Most studies still overwhelmingly miss the most important ingredient-- MTM education, without which there will be neither language survival for Indigenous Peoples, nor any potential for educational success.⁴⁸

Considering the analyses provided in the expert papers cited here, it becomes quite obvious why so many current educational strategies, without MTM education, not only do not work, but also compound the problem. Included here are such strategies as increased emphases on literacy in English or French, cultural sensitivity training, Native language and culture classes in school, mentoring programs⁴⁹ and even a Native presence in school staff, school boards, and curriculum. Indeed, it is now quite clear that while such strategies are ostensibly offered in the interest of Aboriginal children, they are not only ineffective, but actually work to support assimilationist goals insofar as they serve to attract Indigenous children into what is essentially a destructive system for them. In other words, they are mere window-dressing that effectively conceals and promotes the real educational agenda of assimilation⁵⁰.

It does not help, either, that the mainstream press continues to advocate assimilationist educational policies. For example, one editorial printed in *The Daily Gleaner* (Fredericton) in February of this year⁵¹ showered praise on the public school education of First Nations children in this province, and advocated that no more schools be built on reserve, using as its argument a report that there had been some small gains in the test scores of Aboriginal children in public schools. Apart from failing to recognize the unethical practice of evaluating Aboriginal children with instruments designed for

(www.fraserinstitute.org).

⁴⁷ NIB/AFN 1988a & b, MacPherson 1991, McCue & Associates 1999.

⁴⁸ i.e., PAEC 2005.

⁴⁹ Friesen 2008b.

⁵⁰ Bear Nicholas 2001:18-19. See for example Friesen 2008 which praises the presence of Aboriginal elders in schools as one solution.

⁵¹ Carle 2008.

children of the dominant society⁵², this editorial displayed disturbing ignorance of research regarding the damage being done by school systems that forcibly impose a dominant language as the medium of instruction on Indigenous children.

Given the growing understanding of subtractive education as assimilation and genocide, it could also be said that *The Daily Gleaner* editorial openly promoted assimilation, and in so doing, violated yet another article of the Genocide Convention-- Article III(c) which declares “*Direct and public incitement to commit genocide*” to be punishable under the Genocide Convention. Since at least one strong response to the editorial was refused by *The Gleaner*, there was nothing published subsequently to challenge the assimilationist ideals advanced by the editorial. And, though most schools on-reserve also impose English as the primary medium of instruction (as the result of a variety of barriers and constraints to be discussed in Part II of this paper), these schools hold the best potential to offer parents a real alternative to the subtractive and assimilationist education that is standard practice in public schools⁵³.

6.) Canada (and New Brunswick) and International Human Rights Instruments

While Canada is not a signatory to such international human rights instruments as *ILO Convention #169* and the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)*⁵⁴, it is a signatory to the *International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights*, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and other instruments⁵⁵, which means that it is bound to uphold their terms, at least. As well, the fact that Canada is not a signatory to other instruments⁵⁶ does not mean that this country can continue to turn a blind eye to evolving international standards in the matter of linguistic genocide⁵⁷. Even now, Canada ignores such standards at its own peril, not only for the costs it incurs in inflicting harm on Indigenous Peoples, but for the hypocrisy it reveals in Canada’s very public stand of

⁵² Deyhle 1987, Greenfield 1997, Chrisjohn et al. 1997b.

⁵³ McCarty, Romero & Zepeda 2006.

⁵⁴ United Nations General Assembly, A/61/L.67.

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/indigenous/declaration.htm>

⁵⁵ See Skutnabb-Kangas 2008c.

⁵⁶ Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:493-496.

⁵⁷ deVarennes 1993:647-655 and 1993b.

posing with other western states “as some sort of a human rights police force in other parts of the world in the name of democracy.”⁵⁸ According to Skutnabb-Kangas, “Western States have created a myth of themselves as guardians of human rights in the world, including the myth that they respect all human rights themselves.”⁵⁹ That Canada, along with the US, Australia and New Zealand, was one of the only nations in the world to vote against the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007), is perhaps most telling. But what few people know is the extent to which this block of nations acted to scuttle the Declaration altogether, in the days before the UN vote⁶⁰.

Decades earlier, during the process of debating the original draft of the *United Nations Convention on the Crime and Punishment of Genocide* (1948)⁶¹, the states most actively promoting the assimilation of Indigenous Peoples, including Canada, the United States, and other western countries, succeeded in having that Convention significantly diluted⁶². Where both linguistic genocide and cultural genocide had been central to the original draft and intention of the Convention⁶³, these countries managed to block the inclusion of both terms altogether. All that remains now in the Convention is only the oblique reference to cultural genocide in Article 2(e) which declares “*Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group*” to be a crime of genocide⁶⁴.

There is no question that Canada, a signatory to the Genocide Convention, has violated several articles of the Convention, especially this very article [Article 2(e)], for having forcibly removed Aboriginal children from their families and communities and placing them in residential schools for nearly forty years after the passage of the Genocide Convention in 1948. (The last residential school was closed in 1986.)⁶⁵ Considering also

⁵⁸ Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:556

⁵⁹ Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:549-557.

⁶⁰ Indigenous People’s Caucus 12 November 2006.

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http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/p_genoci.htm

⁶² Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:316-318, Chrisjohn et al 238-239.

⁶³ Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:10-14.

⁶⁴ Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:316-318, Chrisjohn, et al, 2002, Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:10-13. See also Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:362-374.

⁶⁵ Chrisjohn et al. 2002:246.

the serious mental and physical harm Canada inflicts on Indigenous Peoples through its subtractive and assimilationist education practices, one would assume that it should also be punishable under the following articles of the Genocide Convention Articles—Article 2(b) “*Causing serious bodily or mental harm to a group*” and 2(c) “*Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.*”

However, this country has never been charged under any article of the Convention, primarily because of another change made in the Convention by western countries prior to its passage, a change which has effectively qualified and limited the conditions under which a crime of genocide can be punished. That significant change was the inclusion of words requiring that the enumerated crimes must be committed “*with intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group,*” in order to be punishable. As a result, it would be extremely difficult under the Convention to prosecute Canada either for having operated residential schools or for carrying out linguistic or cultural genocide in education, primarily because there is no proof that this country **intended** to destroy Aboriginal Peoples through residential schooling⁶⁶.

Though it is a signatory to the Genocide Convention, Canada has taken its defiance of the Convention one step further by excluding three out of five of its articles defining genocide-- Articles II(b) on causing bodily and mental harm, II(c) on inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction, and II(e) on forcibly transferring children of one group to another, from its own Criminal Code⁶⁷. It is clearly no coincidence that the excluded articles are the very ones which would be most applicable to Canada⁶⁸. Canada also omitted any reference to these definitions of genocide from its supposed apology of 2008 for residential schools, and it is that omission which makes this so-called apology decidedly not an apology.

⁶⁶ Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:14. Chrisjohn 2008 has pointed out that the only proof of the intent most certainly exists in Privy Council Records, but these are permanently closed to the public.

⁶⁷ Canadian Criminal Code, subsection 281.1(2) on Hate Propaganda, Department of Justice 1970.

⁶⁸ See Chrisjohn et al, 2008.

In spite of the weaknesses in the Genocide Convention and the various attempts of many states to evade charges under the Convention, it will become increasingly difficult for states to continue their subtractive and assimilationist educational practices since the link between the forcible imposition of education conducted in the medium of a dominant language and the dire consequences experienced by Indigenous Peoples is now indisputable. In other words, states will be unable to plead ignorance of these consequences much longer, and to, consequently, deny intent in the future⁶⁹. In the words of Anders-Baer et al, “...international human rights law has developed to the point where policies of assimilation are now at odds with relevant international standards”⁷⁰.

7.) MTM Education and the Benefits of Bilingualism

More than two dozen First Nations and Inuit communities across Canada are currently offering education to their students in the medium of the mother-tongue, with excellent results, as well⁷¹. Sadly, this number represents only a handful of the over 600 First Nations, Inuit and Metis communities where colonial languages are still used as the primary medium of instruction. What these communities are demonstrating, is something that was not easily demonstrated before-- that there are enormous educational and linguistic benefits to be gained from such programs.

Magga et al have described MTM education as follows:

“If indigenous and minority children are taught additively, with their own language as the main teaching language during minimally the first 6-8 years, while they also receive good teaching in a dominant language as a second language (preferably given by bilingual teachers), they have a very good chance of becoming high level bilinguals (or multilingual, if other languages are added later).”⁷²

⁶⁹ Poirier 1994, Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:8-9.

⁷⁰ Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:10.

⁷¹ Heimbecker 1997. See also Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Culture 2005:87-88, Bear Nicholas 2005, and transcripts of a Conference on Immersion Education held at St. Thomas University, October 2005 at www.educatorsforimmersion.com.

⁷² Magga et al 2005:7. See also Save the Children 2007:4-5.

And the benefits in this form of education are now being seen to accrue not only to endangered languages, but also to their speakers, their communities and cultures, as described in this quote from Colin Baker:

*“The evaluations of immersion bilingual education and heritage language education tend to favor ‘strong’ forms of bilingual education and heritage language education. Such studies indicate that such bilingual education not only results in bilingualism and biliteracy but also tends to heighten achievement across the curriculum. Strong forms of bilingual education tend to raise the standards and performance of the children. However, these results do not stop at individual achievement. In societal terms, there are benefits for the economy in strong forms of bilingual education.”*⁷³

According to Jim Cummins as early as 1984, these same principles apply even to minority students judged to be academically at risk: “[T]here is evidence that strong promotion of L1 [mother tongue] proficiency represents an effective way of developing a conceptual and academic foundation for acquiring English literacy [for all students].”⁷⁴

Such an understanding of the benefits of MTM education for all students has been emerging from hundreds of studies world-wide and for over thirty years⁷⁵. And overwhelmingly, the greatest educational benefits accrue to those students with the longest exposure (late-exit students) to MTM education. In a study comparing Spanish speaking minority students in English only, with early-exit MTM students, and late-exit MTM students, the results were contrary to what most people would have anticipated:

*The late-exit students got the best results [in mathematics and general achievement]. In addition, they were the only ones who had a chance to achieve native levels of English later on, whereas the other two groups were, after an initial boost, falling progressively further behind, and were judged as probably never being able to catch up to native English-speaking peers in English or general school achievement.”*⁷⁶

⁷³ Baker 2006:287. See also Genesee 1976 & 1987, Cummins 1984 & 1991, Linde & Lofgren 1988, Danesi 1988, Lindholm 1990, Lindholm & Aclan 1991 and 1989, Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:570-573, 600-612, 2005, Lauctus 2000, Thomas & Collier 2002, UNESCO 2003, Benson 2004, and Save the Children 2007:16-17 for educational benefits, and Skutnabb-Kangas 2000 & 2003, Nettle & Romaine 2000, and Maffi 2001, for the broader benefits in terms of peace, cultural and biological diversity, and sustainability to be derived from the maintenance of Indigenous languages.

⁷⁴ Cummins 1984:150-151.

⁷⁵ Magga et al 2005:4.

⁷⁶ Magga et al 2005:5 drawn from Ramirez et al 1991.

In their summary of another study, the largest longitudinal study ever undertaken, including all types of educational programs and 210,000 students, Magga et al state that

“[A]cross all the models, those students who reached the highest levels of both bilingualism and school achievement were the ones where the children’s mother tongue was the main medium of education for the most extended period of time.”⁷⁷

These studies hold astounding implications for the education of Indigenous children in Canada, especially in the current spate of hand-wringing over high push-out rates for Aboriginal students. More than anything, the studies demonstrate, beyond a doubt, that not only are there enormous educational benefits to be derived from late-exit MTM programs, but also that educators across the board in Canada have been looking in all the wrong directions for answers to address the dismal failures in the education of Indigenous children. Most often the answers have tended to blame the personal, individual and internal characteristics of the children, rather than the school, its agenda, or any other external circumstances, for the low academic performance and high push-out rates among Indigenous children. As a result, useless and often harmful solutions, such as psychometric testing, streaming, and extra tutoring in English or French, are generally prescribed as remedial measures ⁷⁸.

Indeed, the expert papers discussed here have received virtually no attention at all, nor has there been any mention of the works of Anders-Baer, Dunbar, Skutnabb-Kangas and Magga et al in the latest flurry of proposals for improving the education of Indigenous children in Canada⁷⁹. Yet, the knowledge of enormous benefits to be gained from MTM education has been around in Canada as early as the 1970s⁸⁰. Almost two decades ago, for example, a study by the Standing Committee on Indian Affairs declared that

“Research has shown rather conclusively that mother-tongue language development can enhance second language acquisition: in other words, that literacy skills first learned in the mother tongue are transferable to second languages.”⁸¹

And a 1994 study of literacy issued by the Assembly of First Nations also asserted that

⁷⁷ Magga et al 2005:5 drawn from Thomas & Collier 2002.

⁷⁸ Skutnabb-Kangas 1986, Magga et al 2005:8.

⁷⁹ See for example Mendelson 2008. See also Skutnabb-Kangas 2004:10

⁸⁰ Lambert & Tucker 1972.

⁸¹ Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs 1990:5.

*“Studies completed by UNESCO have demonstrated that learning in the official languages was more successful if literacy was established in the mother tongue first. Learning First Nations mother tongue literacy is the most important factor towards attaining individual/collective empowerment”*⁸²

8.) The Barriers:

a. Assimilationist and Racist Ideologies

Though the positive links between MTM education, academic success, and enhanced bilingualism have been known for some time, almost nothing has been done by governments at any level in Canada to develop and implement MTM education. In a portion of her work subtitled *“Schooling can be deadly”*, Katarina Tomasevski, has described what needs to be done for states to begin respecting the rights of linguistic minorities. She declares that it *“requires the identification and abolition of contrary practices,”* which she admits are daunting projects for two reasons:

*“One important reason is the assumption that getting children into schools is the end rather than a means of education, and an even more dangerous assumption is that any schooling is good for children.”*⁸³

It is now known, thanks to the exhaustive work of such scholars as Tomasevski, Magga, Anders-Baer, Dunbar and Skutnabb-Kangas, and others, that dominant language schooling for Indigenous children is, indeed, deadly to the health and safety of Indigenous children, their communities and their nations. It is now known, also, that MTM education is the only solution to reversing the damage being done by subtractive education practices. The problem, however, is not only to disabuse parents and politicians of the erroneous assumptions pointed out by Tomasevski, but also to recognize and address the underlying reasons for these assumptions.

In an attempt to understand why residential schools were established in Canada Chrisjohn and Young have posited an explanation that goes a long way to explain why so little has been done on the side of MTM education in Canada. They state that the answer is to be found in the material need on the part of the dominant society for Indigenous Peoples to be assimilated, if only to

⁸² Assembly of First Nations 1994:6.

⁸³ Tomasevski 2004: para 50, as quoted by Magga et al 2005:14. See also Tomasevski 2001.

“cover up the wholesale theft of North America from Aboriginal Peoples, to avoid having to compensate those whose property was stolen, to obviate the need to treat fairly with those owning property to be stolen in the future, and to obliterate the chain linking specific genocidal actions taken against Aboriginal Peoples (such as the actions that occurred in residential schools) to the legal, political, economic, and social elite that conceived and implemented genocide.”⁸⁴

In the 1870s killing was no longer considered to be an acceptable means for getting rid of Indians, but assimilation was, and it continued as an open policy in residential and day schools until the 1960s. That Canada still denies Aboriginal claims to stolen lands is what perpetuates the ideologies of racism and assimilation today. And it is out of these ideologies that a particular class of popular educational theories has arisen. Known as deficit theories, they posit that something is defective in the Indigenous child, his or her language, culture, community, family, or so-called “race”, rather than in the education system or the larger society. Central to deficit theory is the belief that there are presumed genetic differences (particular genes) in Aboriginal children that explain supposed Aboriginal learning styles⁸⁵, and that supposedly predispose Aboriginals to all sorts of “problematic” behaviors, including learning disorders, behavioral disorders, suicide, alcoholism, and so on.

It is these defects or differences supposedly residing within Indigenous children that are then cited to explain the low academic performance and high “*drop-out*” rates for Aboriginal children in English-medium schools. And it is from these presumed explanations that “*remedies*” are devised and pursued to improve the academic performance and school completion rates for Aboriginal children⁸⁶. It is the reason that most educational strategies are aimed at compensating for the supposed defects or differences. Hence the standard solution to improving English skills is still to provide more intensive English at an earlier age, while proclaiming and mandating “respect” for Aboriginal cultures and languages⁸⁷. Other compensatory policies declare that the so-called solution to supposed “learning disorders” and low academic performance in

⁸⁴ Chrisjohn & Young 1997:56.

⁸⁵ Leavitt & Merasty 1994.

⁸⁶ See Perley 1997 & 1999.

⁸⁷ i.e., the early childhood Programs which are conducted in almost all communities in New Brunswick in English.

English is to provide more and more testing, tracking, support workers, teacher-aides and tutors in English. The educational solution to Aboriginal unemployment is presumed to be more psychometric testing⁸⁸, career counseling, and streaming of students into vocations earlier and earlier; while the supposed solutions to behavioral disorders and/or “difficulties” in adjusting to school are more and more psychologists and social workers, more “culturally-appropriate” and more colorful curriculum (since Aboriginal children supposedly cannot learn from black and white texts), more Aboriginal people in the schools, better core language teaching, and more pressure on parents and communities to get involved and support these solutions⁸⁹. In effect, the so-called “*New Paths in First Nations Education*”⁹⁰ are simply more of the same old path “solutions” that have been recommended since the early 1970s⁹¹, and they are still founded on racist and assimilationist assumptions.

As long as the material need remains to keep Indigenous Peoples dispossessed, efforts will persist to control them and their education⁹² with educational experts continuing to focus on genetic or internal and individual explanations for the educational “*problems*” of Aboriginal youth, and the corresponding solutions that arise from racist assumptions and explanations. Why? Because the dominant society has the wealth and power to promote ideologies that maintain such explanations⁹³. Thus, government funding tends to flow readily as sort of a reward to those researchers, organizations, and universities that tend to advocate such solutions⁹⁴. That these researchers and organizations then manage to get elevated to special advisory status or high positions within governments demonstrates quite succinctly how particular assimilationist ideologies persist and get to dominate both government and public opinion on education. It also explains why even Indigenous educators come to believe in and advocate for the same solutions.

⁸⁸ i.e. Stafford 2005

⁸⁹ Skutnabb-Kangas 1986:166-167 and 1988:32-36, Phillipson 1992, and Gonzalez with Melis 2000. See also

⁹⁰ Provincial Aboriginal Education Committee n.d.

⁹¹ i.e., National Indian Brotherhood 1972, Union of New Brunswick Indians 1972.

⁹² Wotherspoon, T., 1991.

⁹³ Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:378-462.

⁹⁴ Skutnabb-Kangas 1990.

It is the prevalence and power of assimilationist ideology that explains best why MTM education for Indigenous People in Canada faces such opposition. What is perhaps most threatening about MTM education is that it represents a critique of the present subtractive and assimilationist education into which so many (even Indigenous) people have invested so much energy and faith. At the same time, it is difficult to understand why anyone would stand against anything promising an opportunity for Indigenous Peoples to succeed in education AND to maintain their languages. It is, unfortunately, a case where the deadly internal logic and power of assimilationist ideology outweighs the rationality of the educational arguments explored here, in spite of pious denials on the part of most Canadian educators and policy-makers.

The challenge now is to shine a light on this hypocrisy, to recognize the fundamental racism that lies behind current educational policies for Indigenous Peoples, and to recognize that they are decidedly NOT in the best interest of Indigenous children. In short, for the option of MTM education to be realized in any comprehensive way will require a frank critique of the education system for Aboriginal peoples so that assimilationist policies and practices may be identified, rooted out, and replaced.

b. Indoctrination of Indigenous Peoples into Dominant Society Ideologies

First Nations, on the other hand, have suffered profound ideological and material consequences as a result of colonial state policies in education that have been imposed on them since well before the founding of Canada. These consequences stand now as enormous barriers, themselves, to the establishment of MTM programs in most First Nations. On the ideological front, state-run education systems have played a fundamental role in indoctrinating all Canadians into the political and economic ideologies of the state⁹⁵, chief among which is the belief in monolingual proficiency in the dominant language as “*a passport to social and economic advantage*”⁹⁶. As former Anthropology Professor Richard Costello has argued in relation to the Mi’kmaq:

⁹⁵ Apple 1982. Delpit 1988. Most of the obstacles listed in Brod & McQuiston 1997:153 relate to the consequences of this indoctrination.

⁹⁶ Nettle & Romaine 2000:138.

“Today, Canadian government policy encourages young Micmac to participate in a system of state-supported universal education. The outcome of this experience is not only literacy in English or French, but also a political indoctrination in support of the ideals of parliamentary democracy and capitalist free-enterprise.”⁹⁷

For Indigenous students in state-run schools, this indoctrination amounts to another form of cultural genocide since the social, economic, political and spiritual values of the dominant society imposed on them are generally not only alien to, but also destructive of, Indigenous forms of life. And the destruction is particularly effective when Indigenous students are educated solely in the dominant language.⁹⁸

Since educational and political leadership in First Nations communities generally falls to a small group of elites who are most educated, knowledgeable (and indoctrinated) in the workings and values of the dominant society, those alien values are often replicated in the myriad of decisions that First Nations leaders get to make by virtue of their elected or appointed positions. Central to most values internalized by colonized peoples is a high value placed on literacy in the dominant language, which is generally based on two mistaken beliefs-- that Indigenous languages have no practical value and actually stand in the way of modernization, and that monolingualism in a dominant language is a valid goal.⁹⁹ Much of this indoctrination of Indigenous Peoples in Canada rests on a whole host of erroneous beliefs (fallacies) about learning and teaching English. As listed by Robert Phillipson, they include the fallacies that:

*“English is best taught monolingually
The ideal teacher of English is a native [English] speaker
The earlier English is taught, the better the results
The more English is taught, the better the results
If other languages are used much, standards of English will drop.”¹⁰⁰*

None of these beliefs about English and English learning are true, yet when political and educational decisions include the choice of English as the language of instruction, or the hiring of monolingual English-speaking teachers, the process of replicating assimilationist ideologies within Indigenous communities can be seen quite clearly¹⁰¹.

⁹⁷ Costello 1988:9. See also Bear Nicholas 1997, New York Times 1999.

⁹⁸ See for example Temple 1988 and Rasmussen 2000.

⁹⁹ Phillipson 1988:349, Brod & McQuiston 1998.

¹⁰⁰ Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 1986, Phillipson 1992:185, Skutnabb-Kangas 200:575-578.

¹⁰¹ See Costello 1988:8-9, Taylor, Crago & McAlpine 1993:7-9, and Bear Nicholas 2001:22-24.

This process, also known as “self-colonization” or “neocolonialism,” presents a difficult challenge to Indigenous communities, but it is one which must be understood and addressed without demonizing decisions made (and decision-makers) in the past so that MTM education can be implemented without seriously dividing communities¹⁰².

As well, ideologically-based policies rooted in assimilationist values are still imposed from the outside. They can be seen in any number of arenas impacting negatively on Indigenous languages:

- 1.** in the requirements of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) that mandate the use of provincial (English or French language) curriculum in First Nations schools¹⁰³, and the hiring of teachers trained and certified by English or French teacher-training institutions;
- 2.** in the pressure being placed on First Nations schools to integrate their education programs more closely with provincial education programs, and to allow the Provincial Department of Education a greater role in on-reserve schools, as in the case of the recently proposed education agreement between the Province of New Brunswick and First Nations¹⁰⁴;
- 3.** In the national policy which separates language funding from education funding for First Nations, with Heritage Canada (HC) being the sole purveyor of the former, and INAC being solely responsible for the latter. Indeed, official policies actually disallow language monies allocated by Heritage Canada from being used in schools. Hence, a recent study of Aboriginal languages in Canada funded by Heritage Canada directed no attention to the research considered in this paper, and gave no special attention to the critical importance of MTM education in the matter of linguistic survival¹⁰⁵. The separation of funding at the state level has also had an effect on the structure of Aboriginal organizations to the point where education and language are treated as two separate entities, often by separate organizations, with no incentives to consider both language and education as intricately bound together;

¹⁰² Altbach 1971, Senese 1991, Bear Nicholas 2001:22-24.

¹⁰³ LaHache 1996:10.

¹⁰⁴ i.e., Goals 3.4 and 6 in New Paths in First Nation Education which call for more collaboration and an alignment of learning outcomes between Band operated schools and provincial schools.

¹⁰⁵ Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures 2005.

4. In the ready availability of funding for dominant language pre-school programs for Indigenous children both off and on reserve, without priority for MTM education, and without extra resources for schools embarking on MTM programs of instruction.

c. Poverty and Lack of Sufficient Funding

Foremost on the material front is the reality that Indigenous languages in Canada, like most of the world's threatened languages, are spoken by the poorest populations. Individuals in such communities, hence, see fluency in the dominant language as a passport out of their poverty, and for them this is a rational choice. The problem is that the destruction of Indigenous languages is also a rational choice on the part of the developing world, which views Indigenous languages and forms of life as major barriers to accessing resources for the world's elites. According to Nettle and Romaine

“Developing-world elites often have more of an interest in forcing peripheral regions into the mainstream economy—so that they can be controlled, and so that their resources and labor can be turned into cash for the mainstream elite—than those regions have in coming in voluntarily.”

The most fundamental concern here is that poor Indigenous populations are rarely informed of these objectives on the part of powerful economic elites. Indeed, the intense struggle over natural resources in New Brunswick goes a long way toward explaining the mounting pressure on First Nations in New Brunswick to give in to provincial pressure for increasing control over their communities and nations. The transfer of child welfare programs to the Province is one recent example, and now First Nations are faced with the enticing offer of more funding for education on reserve in return for granting the Province increased involvement in and control over education on reserve¹⁰⁶.

For Aboriginal Peoples to resist this pressure for external control over their affairs they must make it a priority to come to an understanding of the power relations between their peoples and the dominant society. Only in this way will the pressure to become monolingual English speakers be understood as a central strategy of the powerful elites to gain power and control over their lives. Indigenous Peoples are generally asked to choose *“either to learn English and give up mother-tongue, or remain poor.”* But this

¹⁰⁶ i.e., New Brunswick Enhanced Education Agreement 2008

“either-or choice is not a free choice when relatively poor and weak linguistic minorities are given no option but a mandatory subtractive education in order to learn English, as it is for Indigenous children in New Brunswick and most of Canada. The reality is that it does not need to be an either/or choice¹⁰⁷. As Nettle and Romaine have stated:

“Attempts to ‘modernize’ people by force are thus at best misguided, and at worst conceal other agendas. We accept that the modern world economy will require many more people to use English and the other global languages, but this does not mean that they have to lose their mother tongues if they choose not to do so. It is not an either-or choice.”¹⁰⁸

Considering what is now known about the many benefits of bilingualism and MTM education (enhanced proficiency in MT and a dominant language, as well as improved opportunity for school completion and economic benefit) we must now recognize that in place of the “either-or” choice, the goal for Indigenous Peoples must be presented as ‘both-and’, both mother-tongue AND collective community development. “*Good development,*” according to Nettle and Romaine, “*involves local community involvement, control, and accountability. It also involves—perhaps may even be defined as—giving local people real choice.*”¹⁰⁹ Unfortunately, local First Nations people have not been involved at all in the development of educational policies in New Brunswick.

On the material front there is also the reality that most schools on reserve receive from the Federal Government, on average, as much as one-quarter to one-third less funding per capita than public schools¹¹⁰. And it is this reality that makes the possibility of developing a strong MTM program almost insurmountable since such a program would easily require considerably more funding per capita (at least initially) than what is currently allocated even to public schools. While this disparity creates a serious material handicap for First Nations communities, it is impossible to explain away except in ideological terms since INAC, which is responsible for the education of First Nations children on-reserve, continues to champion old solutions and studiously resists providing sufficient funding or support to communities seeking to establish MTM education. Furthermore, the underfunding of First Nations schools has been quite effective in the

¹⁰⁷ See Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:291-471 (esp. p. 371) for a comprehensive articulation of these issues.

¹⁰⁸ Nettle & Romaine 2000:147.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ AFN 1991, LaHache 1996:10, McCue 1999:30-34, Burns 2001, Friesen 2008, Ivison 2008.

assimilationist goal of driving Indigenous children living on reserve into provincial (and dominant language) education systems for decades.

In the absence of solid MTM programs, Indigenous languages are being extinguished at rapidly accelerating rates, while indicators of Aboriginal over-representation in educational failure, substance abuse, prisons, disease, and poverty rates are increasing exponentially, much to the shame of Canada. Meanwhile, Indigenous children who never had the opportunity to become proficient in their own languages are becoming more and more vulnerable to a whole host of assaults on their forms of life in state-run schools, including the blatant imposition of invented traditions and alien ideologies, from “The Medicine Wheel”¹¹¹ to mass-market consumerism and entrepreneurialism¹¹². And deprived of the ability to communicate in their language, these children no longer have the necessary cultural/linguistic lenses through which to evaluate what is being taught to them in the name of their own culture, nor do they have the ability to verify such teachings with grandparents and other elders in the medium of their own language. Worst of all, what is fraudulently posed as “traditional culture” or a harmless add-on, as in the case of entrepreneurialism, serves to not only to displace cultural values, but also to destroy them¹¹³.

Conclusion

With barely a decade left before the Maliseet/Passamaquoddy language will no longer be viable, the Maliseet people are now facing a desperate struggle against time. And the Mi’kmaq language is not that far behind. The matter is urgent. The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at the United Nations recognizes the urgency, not only for Maliseet/Passamaquoddy, but also for 90-95% of the world’s (mostly Indigenous) critically endangered languages, which are expected to disappear in this century unless drastic action is taken immediately. (See excerpts from the 2008 recommendations of the

¹¹¹ See Bear Nicholas 2008:26 citing among others, Kehoe 1990:200. See also Workshop titled “Circle of Understanding” to which Superintendents, Directors of Education and the Educational Services Division, were invited, May 11-12, 2006, which addressed, among other things, “*an application of the Medicine Wheel to counseling, guidance and student services.*”

¹¹² See Delpit 1988, Bear Nicholas 2007:26-27.

¹¹³ See Temple 1988, Rasmussen 2000.

Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in the Appendix below for its emphasis on MTM education and related strategies.) Unfortunately, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is able only to make recommendations since the normal process of bringing international legislation even to a vote often takes decades. Maliseet/Passamaquoddy simply does not have that kind of time. Action is needed now on the part of state parties, both Federal and Provincial authorities, who have an obligation both to provide the best education possible and to respect international linguistic rights standards for Indigenous Peoples. Clearly, the project of providing the option of MTM education to all who would want it cannot be achieved without the involvement of all parties concerned. In Part II of this paper we consider what is most needed for MTM to be provided as an option to all parents who would choose it for their children.

Appendix:

Some excerpts from the Report of the international expert group meeting on Indigenous languages 21 January 2008, United Nations Economic and Social Council, Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, E/C.19/2008/3:

- (h) Develop quality indigenous education policies, guaranteeing the right to mother tongue education, with the participation of indigenous peoples in all levels of planning and implementation, respecting the principle of free, prior and informed consent;
- (i) Support the creation of indigenous universities, language departments in universities and other degree programmes to promote indigenous languages as a vehicle and expression of intangible culture, traditions and expressions;
- (j) Protect and promote indigenous languages by supporting indigenous use of current and emerging multimedia technology, establishing quota systems or similar mechanisms that ensure adequate representation of indigenous languages in public- and private-owned media by providing funding for the publication of indigenous literature, and by promoting the use of indigenous symbols and signs in the public sphere;
- (k) Guarantee the right to mother tongue education for indigenous children, regardless of the number of its speakers and ensure the teaching of those languages to indigenous children who do not know them;

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