

Cross-Cultural Education In The North

ERIC GOURDEAU¹

An International Conference on Cross-Cultural Education in the North was held in Montreal from 18 to 21 August 1969. A hundred and fifty specialists in northern human disciplines participated; each was invited in his private capacity. Whereas a few of them came from France and South America, the majority were from one or other of the following circumpolar countries: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, the United States and USSR.

The Conference took the form of a three-dimensional discussion of urgent questions concerning the modern education of northern autochthonous peoples. At an international level, the objectives and methods of education were compared with those of other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, economics, administration, in the light of human development in the North.

The Montreal gatherings were the outcome of a year and a half of preparation initiated by the University of Alaska, joined later by The Arctic Institute of North America. The pre-Conference effort climaxed in the production of twenty reference background papers authored by Canadian, French, Russian, Scandinavian and United States experts, and by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization. These papers were circulated to participants and observers in advance of the Conference, and their content was intended to constitute a kind of common denominator of knowledge and preoccupation for the workshop discussions at the Conference itself. Cultural, administrative, economic and pedagogical situations were the topics dealt with in the background papers.

In recent years there has been a growing concern for the welfare of national minorities in the northern parts of the various circumpolar countries. These minorities represent a total population of a little over half a million, including 150,000 Yakuts in USSR; 87,000 Eskimos in Canada, Denmark, U.S.A. (Alaska) and USSR; 36,000 northern Indians in Canada, U.S.A. (Alaska), and USSR; and 35,000 Lapps in Finland, Norway, Sweden and USSR. In spite of their small number they are often the sole occupants of very vast territories, and this phenomenon has contributed to the *laissez-faire* attitude of the various national governments of the circumpolar countries until the last few decades.

With the discoveries of northern riches and the demographic explosion of northern autochthonous populations (net annual increase averaging around 3 per cent), the governments have established school systems aimed at promoting modern education among the national minorities of the North. It has been felt in many areas that this new education offered to the autochthonous peoples has by and large failed to bring the results that had been expected. The indigenous people

¹Technical Coordinator, Conference on Cross-Cultural Education in the North.

have not really adhered to the new systems and there is a very significant rate of drop-outs from schools. USSR seems to be an exception, for an increasing number of its northern students are going on to advanced studies. Within the last ten years 160 northern students of national minorities have graduated as doctors in medicine, 600 as school teachers, and so on. It must be added that the Danish educational system in Greenland has also shown some interesting results, especially with regard to the training of indigenous teachers.

Following are some of the main points brought to the fore by the pre-Conference papers.

Although the northern autochthonous people have lost, through their contacts with outsiders, some of the fundamental traits of their culture, they have not agreed to be assimilated and are now trying to define a group identity that their minority status makes it difficult to attain; in the matter of economy, they integrate into the streams of their own territory's development with difficulty, and their participation in the exploitation of national resources seems inadequate; as for the administrative situation, especially in North America, northern aborigines do not participate in the administration of a regime that has been designed theoretically to promote their welfare but in which they have not had any say. This regime is administered by complex and highly hierarchized bureaucracies. The autochthonous people show a tendency to take advantage only of what is brought to them by that regime, and to remain passive.

Such apathy is felt to be the result of many factors which are not easy to determine, but the pre-Conference papers all recognized that the kind of education imposed on the northern indigenous people was most significant.

The preparation that Eskimo, Indian, Lapp and other children of national northern minorities have received seems so far to have been inadequate; very often the objectives have been poorly defined and, even when they have been clearly set up, the school systems have sometimes adopted questionable methods to reach them. Content, methods and teachers prepared according to "southern" situations and populations, almost without exception, have been introduced to the North where human and physical environments are quite different. The process of education has been largely based on principles which have proved to be in opposition to some basic criteria of modern pedagogy.

Some exceptions have been noted in the different papers, especially related to the situation of northern national minorities of the USSR, where considerable effort has been made in the last thirty years to base teaching upon the "known" world, and where also the school seems to have been envisaged as a contribution to the social and economic organization of the community.

Dark as it may be, the situation may now have come to a turning point for the better, according to some new trends revealed in the papers. In many quarters northern educators seem to be on the way to reaping the advantages of working professionally in close relation with tenants of other human disciplines interested in northern questions. Anthropologists, sociologists and economists have conducted within the last few decades investigations and observational work which throw a new light upon the priorities and methods that should be adopted if northern education is to be efficient and successful. These priorities and

methods should take into serious consideration the actual situation and ensure that future plans for the education of northern autochthonous populations are built on more realistic grounds than heretofore.

Educators and administrators can now have access to objective data the interpretation of which should permit in the very near future a substantial review and redesign of the main objectives and methods of northern education. New ideas seem to be emerging which, if they materialize, will do away with the professional educator's ivory tower and bring him down to earth to work with the northern autochthonous people.

It was in the light of this new approach that the Conference discussions were held and the participants, sharing their experiences, considered the following issues and attempted to set up guidelines for future action:

The Family and Education
Education of Children
Education of Youth and Adults
Staff Development
Courses of Studies
Methods and Technology

Here are, in brief, some of the conclusions of the deliberations:

The Family and Education

Participants agreed that there exists a gulf between autochthonous families and the schools frequented by their children. It varies from one country to another but the problem seems to be largely common to most of the circumpolar countries and seems to be related to the sentiment that school education does not equip the student to earn his livelihood. On the one hand students are partially and fruitlessly prepared to occupy posts which continue in fact to be filled by outsiders; on the other hand school does not prepare them to assume traditional occupations and most frequently even contributes to drawing students away from them. In the North education has to be re-evaluated in view of the socio-economic life of the society; it is a most important prerequisite that families adopt a positive and confident attitude towards school. At present the aborigines cannot, in very many cases, attribute to education any improvement in their conditions.

Another reason for the separation between family and school is that, right from the beginning, the parents are unable to help their children or even to be actively interested in what they are learning, where the imposition of a new language is by and large the only objective of the teaching; relations between parents and their young children are not increased or enriched by the school. School and family become two different worlds for child and parents alike, and the apparent rejection of the mother tongue by the school can even provoke more confusion in the child's brain concerning the value of his whole "national" identity. In USSR the mother tongue is used as the teaching language in the early grades; in Greenland this is done as much as possible; in Scandinavia the same

system is evolving out of a situation where the school authorities have tried for years to impose on the Lapps the language of the majority. In Alaska and northern Canada (except for Eskimo classes in Quebec, where teaching in the early grades is conducted in the Eskimo language) the teaching language is that of the dominant society. The participants at the Conference agreed that using the mother tongue as the teaching language in the early school grades would provide a means of lessening the gap between education and the family.

But the autochthonous family of the north should also have a real role to play in the system of education. An endeavour becomes important and valuable to one the more one is significantly involved in it. Parents should participate in school committees, have their say in the planning and timing of the programmes offered to their children. To a certain extent, and with success, this is done in Greenland, Scandinavia and USSR. In Alaska and northern Canada tentative efforts have of late been made in that direction.

The great obstacle to involving the parents in the process of education was considered in the past to have been lack of preparation. But in many respects rationalizing in this way could have perpetuated the vicious circle which otherwise might have been broken. For instance if guidelines were given to these autochthonous people they could be called to sit on school committees, and ways could be found to help them assume their new responsibilities. While such an approach could be gradual, it should be continual and aimed at complete involvement of the family; this would seem to be a highly desirable means of bringing education and the family together in the North.

Education of Children

In discussing this subject emphasis was again placed on the importance of using the mother tongue in the first school grades. Whereas the intellectual curiosity of a child of six, seven or eight constitutes the most active asset in his acquisition of knowledge, to prevent its free expression can lead to disastrous and maybe irremediable consequences from both psychological and pedagogical viewpoints. In his very first years at school the child builds his own conception of the usefulness to himself of formal education and, should he get more or less disgusted at this early stage, this could have an important bearing on his future as a student.

Of course using the mother tongue as the teaching language in the first school grades involves great technical difficulties, including the training of indigenous teachers, revising the requirements, etc., but the general consensus among the participants seemed to be that all possible efforts should be made to realize that goal.

They also insisted on the crucial importance of pre-elementary schooling to smooth the period of transition from the family world to the new world of formal education; a new world that is patterned after the culture of the majority. The cross-cultural phenomenon has to develop gradually right from the start of schooling.

Education of Youth and Adults

In all parts of the universe crises of authority tend to create or to express conflicts between generations. To a certain degree the same pattern is seen within the northern national societies, and it is furthermore coupled with a crisis of group identity. This problem could be at the centre of a tragic situation created by the high rate, in most places, of dropouts in the case of northern autochthonous student youth. This is one of the many problems which, it was felt, required serious research with an interdisciplinary approach.

In every circumpolar country adult education is being extended to the North. The conferees generally agreed that training in community enterprises such as cooperatives often presented the best chances of success.

Staff Development

Among the suggestions made to cope with the situation created by the rate of turn-over of teachers and their lack of preparation, it was unanimously recommended that teachers from "outside" should urgently receive special training that would initiate them to the cross-cultural questions and problems, and that they would be supported in their work by direct contacts and counselling as opposed to remote control. The development of autochthonous teachers should also constitute a priority.

Courses of Studies

While the courses of studies should ultimately lead the northern students to the same professions that are accessible to other citizens the programmes, especially at the elementary level, should take into account the northern environment and the total ecology of this very special *milieu*. The teachers should contribute to building these programmes, as should the population itself through representatives. The programmes should put in evidence the national culture and contribute to its expression and enrichment.

Methods and Technology

Radio, television, satellites, it was stressed, should be used more and more in the future to bring to the North educational programmes of the best possible quality. The use of films and of local photography were also mentioned as a first class means of encouraging active participation of the students in the discovery of their *milieu* and furthering their skills.

Coordinated research was said to be of absolute necessity, at the national level, and highly desirable at the international level.

The Conference is now over. Will it have been an isolated event or could it mean the advent of further international and interdisciplinary effort in cross-cultural education? This should be known after the forthcoming meeting of the ten-member Steering Committee which directed the action before and during the Conference and is now preparing the proceedings for publication before the end of the year.

But surely the participants have already expressed the hope that the Conference would have a tomorrow; that future gatherings would materialize; that coordination of research and the setting up of a structure designed to facilitate exchange of opinions and experience would result.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The University of Alaska and the Arctic Institute gratefully acknowledge the support received for the August 1969 Conference. The majority of the finances needed were provided by the Ford Foundation, New York; the Canada Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Department of the Interior, United States, provided supplementary funds. The Government of Quebec graciously contributed the services of the Technical Coordinator, full time for a year prior to and during the Conference and, since then, extended his work until the completion of the proceedings. The Government of the RSFSR contributed travel expenses for a number of Soviet delegates as did UNESCO for their representative.