

Linguistic and Cultural Human Rights for Indigenous Peoples in Education

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Abstract : Indigenous peoples can generally be described as the original or first peoples of a land prior to colonization. While there is no single definition of indigenous peoples, the United Nations has developed a general understanding based on self-identification and historical continuity with pre-colonial societies. Indigenous peoples are often traditional holders of unique languages, knowledge systems and beliefs who possess valuable knowledge and practices which support sustainable management of natural resources. They often have social, economic, political systems, languages and cultures, which are distinct from dominant groups in the society or state where they live. They generally resist attempts by the dominant culture at assimilation and endeavour to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities. In 2007, the United Nations General Assembly passed a declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples, known as UNDRIP. It (in addition to other international instruments such as ILO 169), sets out far-reaching guidelines, which - among other things - attempt to protect and promote indigenous languages and cultures. Paragraphs 13 and 14 of the declaration state the following regarding language, culture and education: Article 13, Paragraph 1: Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit for future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems, and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons. Article 14, Paragraph I: Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. These two paragraphs call for the right of self-determination in education. Paragraph 13 gives indigenous peoples the right to control the content of their teaching, while Paragraph 14 states that the teaching of this content should be based on methods of teaching and learning which are appropriate to indigenous peoples. This paper reviews an approach to furthering linguistic and cultural human rights for indigenous peoples in education, which supports UNDRIP. It has been employed in countries in Asia and the Pacific, including the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Far East Russia and Nepal. It is based on bottom-up community-based initiatives where students, teachers and local knowledge holders come together to produce classroom materials in their own languages that reflect their traditional beliefs and value systems. They may include such things as knowledge about herbal medicines and traditional healing practices, local history, numerical systems, weights and measures, astronomy and navigation, canoe building, weaving and mat making, life rituals, feasts, festivals, songs, poems, etc. Many of these materials can then be mainstreamed into math, science language arts and social studies classes.

Keywords : Indigenous peoples, linguistic and cultural human rights, materials development, teacher training, traditional knowledge

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