

EDUCATION  
in the  
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES  
by  
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PRESENTED TO  
MACKENZIE VALLEY  
PIPELINE INQUIRY

1976

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of education in the Northwest Territories is the history of an imposed institution which is irrelevant to the majority of the people: the Dene and Inuit. From its inception, the southern-oriented education system has been characterized by administrative structures, policies and programmes which have placed native peoples today in an untenable position.

Three generations of students have experienced a type of formal education designed to eradicate their life styles and their cultural identities. Concurrently, the education system has attempted to bring about the assimilation of Dene and Inuit into the middle class, urbanized southern society.

This two-pronged attack on the lives and livelihoods of people is not unique. What has transpired in Northern Canada parallels the education - social development which is typical of colonial activities throughout the world. In the provinces of Canada, Indian and Métis peoples have experienced similar attempts to destroy their pride in their customs, traditions, attitudes and values for over two centuries.

What is unique in terms of the N.W.T. is the relatively brief history of the "white man's" education. There may still

be time to reverse the seemingly inevitable course of events which has typified native education activities. This Inquiry may provide the last opportunity to offer Dene and Inuit an alternative in terms of the influence and control they have the right to expect over their lives generally, and the education of their children, in particular.

The importance of this Inquiry cannot be exaggerated. Massive petroleum and related industrial developments, coupled with a potentially vast influx of non-native transient peoples, are imminent. Prior to the commencement of these activities, the right of native peoples to determine the quality of life they desire must be established. An integral aspect of that decision must be the determination of the type of education the Dene and Inuit desire for themselves and their children.

In support of these contentions a review of past and present education policies and practices, as these have had a direct impact on the lives of native peoples, is made. Based upon these observations, drawn from government sources, studies by professional educators, and the personal experience of the author while in the employment of the N.W.T. Department of Education (1969-1974), a proposed alternative course of action is submitted for the consideration of this Inquiry.



## I THE PAST

On April 1, 1969, responsibility for education in the Mackenzie District was transferred from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, Ottawa, to the Territorial Department of Education, Yellowknife.

The history of Northern education prior to 1969 has been summarized by an informed, experienced Northern educator, Dr. R.J. Carney, formerly principal of the Joseph Burr Tyrrell School in Fort Smith and Chief of School Programs with the N.W.T. Department of Education. Writing in the Department of Education periodical Arcturus (Vol. 1, No. 4, March, 1971), Dr. Carney made the following observations:

- A. For the first half of the 20th century government education activities in the Mackenzie District were of relatively little consequence. Although the Federal Government had the responsibility for schools and although subsidies were made available, essentially the operation of the schools was left to the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches.
- B. The curriculum taught in the schools consisted of catechism, reading, writing and arithmetic.

- C. The average period of school attendance was 3 years for boys and 4 years for girls.
- D. The policy of establishing residential schools, necessitating the removal of children from their homes for periods of up to ten months duration in a year, was an early, and on-going feature of the education system. Fort Providence, Hay River, Fort Resolution, Shingle Point and Aklavik were centres for schools and hostel accomodation. Day schools (i.e. non-residential schools) were located in Fort Simpson, Fort McPherson and Fort Smith.
- E. By the mid-1940's approximately one potential student in three was receiving some southern-type schooling. (a memorandum reviewed by the Territorial Council in 1944 indicated that the Alberta curriculum was being taught in most schools.)
- F. The first major recommendations for improvement of Northern education were made by Dr. A. Moore in his 1945 report to the Federal Government. Among the recommendations eventually implemented were those relating to: compulsory school attendance; certification of teachers; construction of composite high schools (combining academic and vocational training) and the centralization of education control in the hands of one government agency.

G. A "New Education Programme in the Northwest Territories" was announced in 1955 by the then Minister of Northern Affairs, Jean Lesage. This programme was designed to increase school and hostel construction.

In summary, the history of Northern education followed the familiar colonizing format: facilities (schools and hostels); equipment (books and related materials); teachers (certified to meet the standards of the dominant, non-native society); curricula (developed for the non-native society); and laws (compulsory attendance and length of school year) were superimposed over the traditional lifestyles and habits of the native peoples. No attempts were made to conduct preliminary research into such basic education questions as the linguistic characteristics of the languages, nor was consultation with the Dene and Inuit considered to be of importance. It was assumed that the education system developed for the non-native southern society was adequate for the North as well. The widely held belief which influenced education planning at the time was expressed in a Federal Government statement to the Territorial Council in 1937.

"Within another 100 years (the year 2037) they (i.e. native peoples) will be completely absorbed into the white race and retain of their past history but the vaguest memory," (Carney, R.J., *Arcturus*, vol. 1, no. 4, March 1971)

The role of the school as the agent of cultural assimilation was recognized by the education authorities.

## II THE PRESENT

In fairness, the perceptions afforded by hindsight permit a degree of toleration. When viewed within the historical context of the times it would have been both unusual and unexpected if education had followed an appreciably different course of action.

However, in terms of what has taken place from 1969 to the present, charitable explanations and toleration are not possible. Rather than attempting to learn from the failures of the past (both within and without the North), the education authorities have proceeded to extend their control and reinforce their traditional policies. In one respect alone has there been an appreciable change in the approach to native education. Unlike their predecessors (e.g. 1937) the governing authorities today do not openly express the assimilation philosophy which is implicit in their intentions. Political techniques have been refined. The day-to-day realities of classroom experience are obscured through a variety of token, superficial measures which distort and misrepresent the system as it is in practice. Inuit and Dene are being used as pawns in a game over which they have neither influence nor control. (The accuracy of this analogy was vividly brought home to the writer in 1972. Representatives of Canadian Arctic Gas Study Limited proposed the development of a multi-media

kit which would be donated to every school in the Mackenzie District. Included in the kit was a filmstrip-cassette tape portraying the construction of the proposed gas pipeline. The original script, upon which the filmstrip was to be based, revealed clearly the intent of C.A.G.S.L. The children in Northern schools were to be the medium through which the pipeline consortium conveyed their specific message to the parents.)

It is the absence of native influence on, and control over, their lives and the education of their children which is the critical factor. Now, as in the past, the native students constitute the majority of the school enrollment. This fact alone makes the Northwest Territories the unique education jurisdiction in Canada. Logically, it might be expected that proportionate recognition of Dene and Inuit concerns would be reflected in the education system. This has not happened. If no one is paying attention presently to their needs and interests, what hope is there for the future given the consequences inherent in the proposed industrial developments?

In support of the foregoing, the following evidence is presented.

1. The Lessons of Past Failures: With the establishment of the Territorial Department of Education in 1969 a remarkable opportunity to re-direct and revamp the

education system was presented. By that time a growing national and international understanding of the deficiencies in traditional native education practices had accumulated to the point where it was feasible to think in terms of alternative approaches.

- A. The Hawthorne Survey of the Indians of Canada, 1969 documented many of the major inadequacies.

"In sum the atmosphere of the school, the routines, the rewards, and the expectations provide a critically different experience for the native child than the non-native. Discontinuity of socialization, repeated failure, discrimination and lack of significance of the educational process in the life of the native child results in diminishing motivation, increasing negativism, poor self-images and low levels of aspirations." (Carney, R.J. Ibid)

- B. Internationally, at the First International Conference on Cross-Cultural Education in the Circumpolar Regions held in Montreal in August of 1969, the fundamental weakness in common learning programmes and materials (i.e. the curriculum for native students) was recognized.

"It has become increasingly obvious that existing education programs are designed primarily to accomodate the language, cultural values, economic system, and general interest of the dominant groups from the south." (Report of the First International Conference on Cross-Cultural Education in the Circumpolar Regions, Montreal, 1972, p.i.)

C. On an even wider scale, the U.N.E.S.C.O. Report of the International Commission of the Development of Education (1973) examined education practices on a global basis. One of the U.N.E.S.C.O. observations had a direct bearing on the mistake that was (and is) being perpetuated in Northern education. Making provision for equal access to education (i.e. building, equipping and staffing schools) is not identical to providing equal education opportunity. (e.g. Fort Simpson students and their counterparts in Taber, Alberta have comparable access to education facilities, programmes, and teachers. These items by themselves do not provide equal education opportunities given the contrasts in cultures, languages, social and physical environments.)

"Equal opportunity for all does not mean nominal equality, the same treatment for everyone, as many still believe today; it means making certain that each individual receives a suitable education at a pace and through methods adapted to his particular person." (Learning To Be, U.N.E.S.C.O., 1973, p.75)

It is in this rejection of Dene and Inuit as "persons", with their own specific education aspirations and needs, that the present system is deficient.

2. Misrepresentation:

- A. The Survey of Education, a Department of Education study of Northern education (1972) is indicative of the gap separating fact from fancy. A reading of the 293 recommendations for improvement in education would suggest that Northern residents generally, and native peoples specifically, either are, or will be well served. (The content of this document prompted an article in the Northian magazine, University of Saskatchewan entitled, "The N.W.T. May Lead The Nation". Time magazine, (February 4, 1974) referred to the fact that "Northern education was being piloted through a 180° turn".) Inuit and Dene have been seriously misled by official documents of this type. Following the public release of the Survey, its comprehensive blueprint for development has been forgotten.
- B. A similar fate characterized the letter of March 17, 1972, which was sent to the entire education staff. Eight priority items were isolated for action effective in September of that year. The changes have not been made.
- C. One item from the letter deserves elaboration:
- "The use of Department of Education Curriculum Handbooks as the basis of the learning programs in every school was specified." (Director of Education, March 17, 1972)



Between 1971 and 1973 two handbooks, prepared by the Curriculum Division of the Department of Education, were authorized by the Commissioner of the N.W.T. for use in the schools. In his statements before the Standing Committee of the House of Commons on Indian Affairs and Northern Development (March, 1973), the Honourable Jean Chretien commented on this development:

The Northern curriculum is an attempt to create a new multi-cultural milieu in the classroom. We are all hoping it will improve Northern education immensely. It is a unique venture in education.

The possibility of any improvement occurring has been emasculated. Once the public relations value (e.g. the National Council of Teachers of English in 1974 recommended the N.W.T. Elementary Handbook as the best in its field in North America) had been used to advantage, the actual implementation of the multi-cultural programs has been dismissed. The Alberta curriculum remains the bench-mark for Northern education.

- D. Other parallel examples can be found in public addresses (e.g. Boreal Circle Speech of the Director of Education, 1974) and official government correspondence (e.g.

letter of February 6, 1974 regarding "failure" in the classrooms). Whether studied individually, or collectively these items convey one message, the administration of Northern education apparently is in progressive, competent hands. The conclusion can easily be drawn that of all the myriad available social programs, education is the one of least public concern. Closer inspection will indicate otherwise.

3. Token Approaches: The Annual Reports of the Commissioner of the N.W.T. provide some information on the operation of government departments. The financial expenditures deserve attention, especially in terms of the following categories:

- A. Cultures and Languages: The above mentioned Survey, Handbooks, correspondence, repeatedly pay homage to the need for learning programs relevant to the languages and cultures of Northern students. In the budget an amount of money is set aside for this purpose. From 1969 to the present that amount has been \$15.00 per year per student. (This is referred to as "the cultural inclusion" grant, a term which unwittingly portrays the relative importance of Dene and Inuit cultures as perceived by the administration.) It is striking to contrast

the \$15.00 with the approximately \$1,700.00 per student per year which has been spent on assimilating the child into the white, southern system.

It could be argued that additional "cultural" funds are used to publish Northern textbooks. This is true in the sense that between 1969 and 1974 over 100 items were developed and published for use in the elementary classrooms, in particular. A 1975 government publication, English One, illustrates the actual importance of these materials today. A survey of the reading books used in the Mackenzie District revealed that children are being subjected to materials similar to those of previous generations: books from Toronto, Chicago, New York. The items reflecting their heritages and their languages remain on the shelf.

- B. Nutrition: The Survey of Education drew attention to the need for hot lunch programmes and food supplements generally. The need to assess the nutritional requirements of children is a fact of life in many settlements. Research on this topic is badly needed. Equally, policy directives and

administrative procedures must be established. From 1969-74 6¢ per child per day was included in the budget for food programmes. The amount of money speaks for itself. Whether or not the six cents was spent on food or floor wax cannot be determined since no direction was forthcoming.

- C. Teaching Staff: In education generally there has been agreement that a prerequisite to an effective multi-cultural programme is a native, bilingual teaching staff. In the N.W.T. a Teacher Education Programme designed to prepare such a staff has been in operation since 1968. The effectiveness of the programme has been distinctly limited. 1974 can be used as a typical year for comparison purposes keeping in mind that in excess of 600 teachers are required to staff the schools. In that year it was "expected" (by the Department of Education) that 15 graduates of the programme would enter the classrooms. In effect the 15 teachers would represent less than 3% of the total complement of Northern teachers. Viewed another way, the anticipated graduates would fill only 8% of the teaching vacancies in an average year. (The remaining 92% of the vacancies would be filled by recruits from the south.) From the commencement of the programme to the present, on the average, sufficient students have graduated to fill 1% of the teaching positions.

- D. Higher Education: Substantial finances are available to assist "northern students" to attend universities. Using 1972-73 as a representative year, \$274,200.00 was spent on Higher Education Grants. The money was used to assist 135 university students. 4% of the recipients were native students (5 Dene and 1 Inuit). In the same year 10 bursaries were allotted also. One Dene student was awarded a bursary. Not only do these percentages indicate the degree of success native students are experiencing in the schools, but they also reflect the motives of the political-social system itself. Higher Education Grants and Bursaries are employed primarily as inducements for attracting non-native peoples to the N.W.T.
- E. Financing Northern Education: The conventional explanation given when the failures of Northern education are detailed centres on money. Provide additional funds and the Teacher Education Programme will be expanded. Through industrial development government revenue will grow and hungry children will disappear. There is no rational basis for these propositions. The question is not one of availability (in excess of \$40,000,000.00 is now spent on education), but how the money is expended.

In large measure the finances are used to establish and reinforce the colonial system with fractional measures appended to make the system "Northern". It is an "adding-on" process and not a process that builds on the cultural-language characteristics of Dene and Inuit and extends from their environment to the larger national and international societies. The percentage increase in the cost of administration over the 3 year period 1971-74 indicates the priorities of the system in this regard. The 45.5% increase in expenditures on administrative control of education can be contrasted with the 13.8% increase for improving education at the settlement level.

4.

Education Control: Total control is vested in the Government of the N.W.T. with two exceptions: the Yellowknife Public and Separate School Boards have powers similar to those of their southern counterparts. Both Boards are themselves in the exclusive control of non-native peoples. (The Rae-Edzo School Society might appear to be a valid exercise in local control for the Dogrib community. In practice, the agreement between the government and the Society permits the Commissioner to cancel the agreement on 24 hours notice.)

Native peoples are ignored. They are neither consulted, nor are they expected to be involved in the decisions affecting themselves, or their children. Dene and Inuit, acting through school advisory committees only can voice opinions, specifically with respect to the "cultural inclusion" programme. Their opinions need not be considered, or heeded. (e.g. a 1973 request for a doubling of the \$15.00 cultural grant by Inuit peoples remains unfulfilled.) Native peoples continue to be regarded as essentially the wards of the state. The paternalistic, non-native administrators will determine the measure of local control to be permitted on the basis of the "readiness" of the Dene and Inuit. Nowhere is the intent of the administration more clearly displayed than in the proposed Ordinance Respecting Education in the N.W.T. This legislation makes a mockery of the liberal, humanitarian image the education system seeks to convey. The Ordinance relegates Dene and Inuit to the role of second class citizens in their own land. Their languages and cultures are of marginal importance in the overall pursuit of southern education standards. Control of their schools has been linked to the concept of "ratepayers", which not only is a denial of historic rights to a free education, but is inconsistent with education

developments elsewhere in Canada. The fact that the Ordinance has been developed without consultation with native peoples in their languages may come as no surprise. It is consistent with the historic record. The fact that the bureaucracy's actions are in disregard of the recommendation of the Legislative Committee of the Territorial Council (October 1974) does suggest effectively where political control actually lies.

It can be assumed that the preparation and implementation of the Ordinance is one more major attempt to retain and solidify the authoritarian power of the minority controlled colonial agency. It is within the realm of possibility that behind these actions resides the unspoken hope that following the construction of the proposed pipeline, and related developments, the concerns of Dene and Inuit will have disappeared. Native peoples will have been both submerged and suppressed in the ensuing economic and political events.



### III THE FUTURE

There is an alternative. Employing available research evidence, and drawing upon personal experience, fundamental changes can be made which will improve the quality of Northern education. Five critical factors have been isolated for attention with reference being made to the appropriate sources of information.

1. Basic Literacy: Literacy is a right taken for granted in society. In Canada, English and French are the official languages of the dominant society. Inability to communicate effectively in one or both of these languages denies the opportunity to participate in the life of that society. In the North, Dene and Inuit have preserved their knowledge of Athapaskan and Inuktitut languages. Education efforts, to date have resulted in the production of students who are illiterate in two languages, their mother tongue and one of the official languages (commonly English). Research and programme development information available through U.N.E.S.C.O., University of Alaska, University of New Mexico, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and the University of Saskatchewan could be brought to bear immediately on this priority concern.

2. How Children Learn: Within and without Canada  
substantial research has been conducted on this problem. Learning methodology appropriate to a multi-cultural, multi-lingual population is of primary importance. The study of Children and Their Primary Schools (London, 1967) reviewed thirty years of education developments, many of which have significance for the N.W.T. The Arctic Institute of North America, through applied research (Man In The North 1971-72), demonstrated practical approaches to this question. The experiences of the Navaho-controlled school at Rough Rock, Arizona and the educational developments on the Six Nations Reserve (Brantford, Ont.) validates the premise that languages, cultures and the manner in which children learn are inseparable.
  
3. What Children Learn: Determining the content of the curriculum is less difficult than might be expected. It is a matter of combining the views of the Dene and Inuit with the best available information from wherever it can be located. Within Canada, the Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives in the Schools of Ontario (1968) and similar Commission Reports from Nova Scotia and Alberta, provide practical

guidance on how people can become involved in determining the quality of education they desire. A similar study of native considerations is required in the N.W.T. (In 1970, 1971 the Territorial budget included funds for an independent commission of inquiry on Northern education. No study has been conducted.)

4. What Are The Crucial Factors Influencing Education:

The influence of the home environment (ie. languages, cultural characteristics, socio-economic factors) is the major determinant of education success. This conclusion was reached through a study of American education by James Coleman and his associates, as reported in Equality of Education Opportunity, 1966. (Further research by Christopher Jencks (1972) reinforced the substance of Coleman's report.) Related studies using similar research techniques are needed now in the North. What happens in the schools cannot be divorced from the more encompassing social questions which industrial development implies. Will the effects of a major transformation in the living habits and life styles of native peoples transcend the influence of the schools and education services generally? Answers are urgently needed.

