

Educational Sovereignty: Implementing Self-Determined Learning Models to Transform Indigenous Communities

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Abstract

This paper investigates the crucial importance of Indigenous teaching methods in maintaining and passing down cultural identity through generations. Grounded in the belief that "we teach as we were taught," it analyzes how traditional knowledge systems, oral narratives, communal education, and land-based learning act as essential foundations of Indigenous education. Unlike typical Western educational models, Indigenous pedagogy is inherently connected to relationships, storytelling, and lived experiences, promoting a holistic learning approach that includes spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual aspects. Through case studies and interviews with Indigenous educators and community leaders, this research emphasizes the strength of Indigenous teaching practices and their success in protecting language, customs, and worldviews. The paper advocates for the acknowledgment and incorporation of Indigenous pedagogical approaches in modern education systems as a means of fostering cultural revitalization and self-determination. Ultimately, it asserts that valuing the teaching methods of ancestors not only preserves cultural identity but also empowers future generations to flourish with a profound sense of belonging and purpose. Indigenous education differs from conventional Western schooling, as it involves not just the transfer of academic knowledge but also the preservation of cultural identity. The learning process is rooted in the experiences of the community, with contributions from elders, family, and peers. Consequently, the distinctions between teachers and students are often blurred, and education takes place in informal, egalitarian environments. This approach strengthens collective identity and community resilience, enabling cultural practices like language, spirituality, and art to thrive in ways that are deeply integrated into the everyday lives of the community.

Keywords: Educational Sovereignty, cultural identity, traditional knowledge, land based learning, storytelling, holistic learning.

1. Introduction

Due to colonial interventions aimed at assimilating Indigenous peoples into dominant cultures, Indigenous groups around the world have been marginalised in education for millennia. Indigenous languages, pedagogies, and knowledge systems were frequently ignored by these efforts. Many Indigenous communities are responding by claiming educational sovereignty, which is the authority to control their own education in accordance with their goals and cultural identity. By empowering Indigenous peoples to design their own education, self-determined learning methods subvert colonial assumptions. Indigenous epistemologies, generational knowledge transfer, and culturally grounded curriculum are given priority in these frameworks. In this essay, different self-determined learning models are examined, their transformative potential is assessed, and the framework of educational sovereignty is examined.

The Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) typically refers to the vast, diverse source of wisdom, interpretations, and understandings of the local ecosystems developed through observation, experimentation, and long-term interactions with the natural environments by the Indigenous communities. As the world strives to address emerging health and environmental challenges, the global academic fraternity is leaning towards the unique insights, perspectives, and methodologies adopted by the Indigenous people to complement scientific knowledge and

technological advancements with inclusive learning that promotes cultural diversity and equity in education (Banerjee, 2022; Bruchac, 2014; Jima, 2022).

The maxim "We teach as we were taught" has particular relevance in indigenous contexts since education is a highly relational, intergenerational, and tradition-based activity. Indigenous education is not limited to official institutions, textbooks, or schools; it takes place in homes, on the land, at ceremonies, and in the cadence of daily life. It entails the dissemination of survival skills, ecological knowledge, cosmologies, stories, languages, and cultural values. In order to break this continuity, colonial systems have long attempted to impose foreign curriculum, frequently displacing indigenous identities in the process.

In addition to being a pedagogical alternative, indigenous pedagogy is examined in this research as an essential tool for cultural preservation. It investigates how indigenous teaching practices help to establish communal ideals, solidify identity, and get the next generation ready to continue family traditions. Through an examination of educational procedures across multiple indigenous groups and an analysis of their philosophical foundations, this study seeks to validate the significance of conserving these knowledge systems amidst cultural destruction.

1.1 Educational Sovereignty

Indigenous communities' innate right and power to create, manage, and oversee their own educational institutions in ways that are representative of their distinct cultural values, knowledge systems, languages, and worldviews is known as educational sovereignty. It is a type of educational self-determination that guarantees that learning procedures are based on the customs and goals of the community rather than being imposed by outside, frequently colonial system.

Essentially, Indigenous peoples are empowered by educational sovereignty to:

- Maintain and revive their cultural customs and languages.
- Create curriculum that honour Indigenous concepts and histories.
- Oversee educational establishments in their localities.
- Encourage immersive, all-encompassing learning using Indigenous pedagogies.

1.2 Defining indigenous pedagogy

Indigenous communities have their own ways of teaching and passing down knowledge to subsequent generations, which forms an 'Indigenous pedagogy' framework. Unlike Western systems of education, this model is more fluid, integrated, sensitive to the environment, and often follows a non-sequential path. Rather, it is a collection of practices that are shaped by particular cultures, histories, and places. Nevertheless, Indigenous pedagogies from different parts of the world share some common unifying features.

Some of its core characteristics include:

2. Oral Tradition and Storytelling

Stories are more than just amusement; they are also stores of wisdom, knowledge, and spiritual lessons. They contain laws, genealogy, histories, environmental information, and moral teachings. Children are taught their people's ideals and worldviews through storytelling.

2.1 Intergenerational Learning

An essential part in indigenous education is played by elders. They mentor young people patiently and wisely as community historians and knowledge keepers. They foster ethical, spiritual, and emotional growth in addition to academic ones.

2.2 Land-based learning

The land is an active teacher compared to a passive accompaniment. Learning occurs through interaction with the environment, seasonal cycles, animals, and plants, as acknowledged by indigenous pedagogy. Cultural values and ecological understanding get strengthened by these relationships.

2.3 Community-Based Approach

Education is not an isolated endeavour carried out by educators. It is a collective obligation. An extended network of parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and community members raise and educate children, each providing unique expertise and direction.

2.4 Monitorial system

During the colonial era, the Monitorial System—also called the Bell-Lancaster Method—was implemented as an affordable mass education strategy. Under the supervision of a single teacher, it employed student "monitors" to educate classmates, placing a strong emphasis on repetition, order, obedience, and memorisation. The approach was in stark contrast to and disrupted traditional Indigenous pedagogical systems that prioritised holistic, relational, and land-based learning, even though it might have seemed progressive, particularly in the context of under-resourced settings.

3. Education and Cultural Identity

People's perceptions of themselves and their role in the world are shaped by their education. Culturally affirming schooling is essential for indigenous peoples, whose identities have historically been weakened by colonial administrations. In addition to studying facts, students that get instruction utilising indigenous pedagogies also learn about themselves.

3.1 Cultural Alienation through Colonial Education

Systems of education in colonial countries have frequently used as assimilation tools. In many instances, they separated children from their cultural roots by purposefully suppressing indigenous languages and knowledge systems. The implementation of residential and boarding schools throughout continents, which aimed to "civilise" indigenous children by removing their identities, was especially harmful. Such detachment can lead to low self-esteem, identity uncertainty, intergenerational trauma, and community fragmentation, among other psychological and social repercussions. Thus, reclaiming indigenous teaching practices is a kind of resistance and healing.

3.2 Affirmation of Identity through Traditional Education

By contrast, youngsters feel empowered and validated when they learn in a way that is consistent with their cultural worldview. They have a greater sense of pride, accountability, and community as they get older. Cultural identification turns into a source of strength rather than shame. Beyond merely imparting knowledge, traditional Indigenous education affirms the learner's identity in connection to their community, land, ancestors, and future generations. In contrast to standardised education, which frequently enforces external standards, traditional education promotes cultural pride, self-awareness, and dignity.

4. Case Studies: Reviving Indigenous Pedagogies

4.1 The Māori of Aotearoa (New Zealand)

The Māori people have made great progress in taking back control of their education. An important turning point was the creation of Kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori immersion schools) in the 1980s. Māori parents founded these schools in an effort to provide their kids with an education that would foster their identity, language, and culture. The Māori language (te reo Māori) and Māori values (whānau, manaakitanga, tikanga) are at the heart of the curriculum. Students interact with local history, oral traditions, the environment, and seniors in the community. Kura Kaupapa Māori graduates preserve a solid cultural basis while performing on par with or better than their counterparts in mainstream school, according to evaluations.

4.2 The Navajo Nation, United States

Efforts to incorporate Diné traditional values into schooling have accelerated on the Navajo Nation. Sacred stories, clan-based teachings, traditional rites, and Diné Bizaad (Navajo language) are now included in school curricula. The Diné Education Philosophy, for example, bases education on the four cardinal directions, each of which represents

a period of life and a moral precept. Youth are also reconnected with ancestral practices through programs that prioritise land-based education, such as traditional farming or weaving. By making education more relevant, these programs not only pass along cultural information but also address concerns of youth disengagement and dropout rates.

4.3 The Sami in Northern Europe

The educational systems created by the Sami people of Finland, Sweden, and Norway also pay homage to their cultural past. Bilingual education in Sami and national languages is a feature of Sami schools, and traditional livelihoods such as fishing, handicrafts (duodji), and reindeer herding are frequently covered in the curriculum. Particularly as climate change impacts traditional practices, land-based education is essential. Teaching kids about weather patterns, migration routes, and sustainable resource usage is important for cultural continuity as much as survival. However, Sami schools continue to experience underfunding and legislative neglect in spite of legal recognition.

5. Philosophical Foundations of Indigenous Education

At the heart of indigenous pedagogy are philosophical perspectives that challenge the dominant paradigms of Western education. These include:

5.1 Relationality

Indigenous knowledge systems place a strong emphasis on the interconnection of all living things, including humans, the land, ancestors, and the spiritual realm. Knowledge is not individualistic; it is relational. Understanding one's roles within a network of interactions is the essence of learning.

5.2 Holism

Learning is blended rather than divided into several subjects. Together, the intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual facets of knowledge are discussed. For instance, plant biology, seasonal timing, spiritual offerings, and community customs could all be covered in a farming class.

5.3 Reciprocity

Learning is a reciprocal path. Humans learn from animals and the soil, teachers learn from students, and young people learn from elders. Every encounter is infused with the idea of respect, and knowledge is viewed as a gift rather than a commodity.

6. Challenges to the Preservation of Indigenous Pedagogy

Despite growing awareness, numerous challenges continue to hinder the full revitalization of indigenous educational practices.

6.1 Structural Barriers

Standardised curricula are frequently given priority in government initiatives, leaving little space for locally created or culturally unique models. Instruction in indigenous languages or land-based learning may not be supported by funding channels.

6.2 Language Loss

Language is a vessel for worldview. The loss of indigenous languages significantly hampers the transmission of cultural knowledge. While revitalization efforts are underway in many communities, decades of language suppression have left generational gaps.

6.3 Lack of Teacher Training

There is often a shortage of indigenous teachers trained in both traditional knowledge and formal pedagogy. Without proper support, well-intentioned educators may struggle to implement culturally responsive curricula effectively. The majority of teacher preparation programs created during colonial rule were Eurocentric and placed little

to no focus on Indigenous knowledge, teaching, and learning practices. Consequently, training materials that respected and included their particular educational frameworks were few for Indigenous people. The lack of trained Indigenous teachers affected the quality of education, resulting in:

- Loss of cultural knowledge over generations.
- Inadequate methods to teach both traditional skills and contemporary subjects.
- Alienation of Indigenous youth from their heritage due to poorly adapted teaching strategies.

6.4 Cultural Misappropriation

As interest in indigenous knowledge grows, there is also a risk of appropriation. When indigenous methods are used without proper context, consultation, or respect, they can be distorted and commodified, leading to further cultural harm.

7. Strategies for Revitalization and Integration

Revitalizing indigenous pedagogy requires a multi-pronged approach that involves communities, governments, and educational institutions.

7.1 Community Leadership and Autonomy

Indigenous communities must have control over the education of their children. Community-led schools, immersion programs, and culturally grounded curricula should be funded and supported without conditions that dilute their authenticity.

7.2 Policy Reforms

National governments must recognize indigenous pedagogies as legitimate and integrate them into broader educational frameworks. This includes revising teacher training programs, diversifying curricula, and ensuring indigenous languages are officially supported.

7.3 Intergenerational Initiatives

Programs that pair youth with elders, such as storytelling circles, mentorship schemes, and seasonal land camps, can foster knowledge transmission and strengthen intergenerational ties.

7.4 Partnerships and Research

Collaborations between indigenous communities and universities can help document, protect, and evolve pedagogical practices. However, such partnerships must be based on principles of respect, consent, and community benefit.

8. Conclusion

Reclaiming Indigenous rights, knowledge, and identity via education is the goal of educational sovereignty, which is more than just an idea. Native languages, customs, and teaching methods have been suppressed by colonial educational systems for centuries, marginalising Indigenous ideas. By using self-determined learning models, on the other hand, Indigenous communities can regain authority over what, how, and why they teach and learn, resulting in an educational system that is firmly anchored in both their modern reality and cultural history.

These strategies ensure that Indigenous ways of thinking are maintained and reinforced by promoting intergenerational knowledge transfer, cultural continuity, and language revitalisation. The social and psychological effects of colonisation are also addressed by educational sovereignty, which gives Indigenous adolescents agency, pride, and self-worth while preparing them with both traditional knowledge and contemporary skills to succeed in a complex environment. Additionally, community empowerment and self-governance are inextricably linked to educational sovereignty. It gives Indigenous peoples the power to create curricula that reflect their ecological, social, and spiritual values, train their own instructors, and influence their own educational policy. This autonomy positions education as a

tool for resilience, empowerment, and healing while also supporting the more general objectives of social justice, decolonisation, and sustainable development.

The phrase "*We teach as we were taught*" is not only a cultural truism—it is a testament to the resilience of indigenous peoples who have held on to their ways of knowing despite centuries of suppression. Indigenous pedagogy is more than education; it is a lifeline for identity, a guide for living, and a strategy for survival.

In an era of climate uncertainty, social fragmentation, and educational inequity, indigenous teaching methods offer profound lessons in sustainability, empathy, and community. Embracing these methods does not mean turning away from progress; rather, it means re-rooting in wisdom that has long sustained human life in harmony with the earth. As global citizens and educators, we must listen to indigenous voices, support their educational sovereignty, and work toward systems that honor cultural diversity. For it is through such efforts that we ensure not only the preservation of indigenous identity, but the enrichment of our shared humanity.

The revitalisation and incorporation of traditional teaching practices within formal and informal educational frameworks is closely linked to the survival of Indigenous identities, as this research demonstrates. By preserving their pedagogical traditions, Indigenous cultures have demonstrated incredible endurance in the face of centuries of colonisation, forced assimilation, and educational marginalisation. However, institutional acknowledgement, support, and application of these Indigenous modes of knowing and teaching are necessary for their actual preservation and empowerment.

In a nutshell, using Indigenous pedagogy to preserve cultural identity is a visionary act that guarantees future generations will carry on the knowledge, pride, and strength of their forebears. It is not only about protecting the past. We reaffirm Indigenous peoples' right to define, express, and maintain their culture by respecting and incorporating Indigenous pedagogies into educational systems.

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