

World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education
Hilo, Hawai'i
August 6, 1999

THE COOLANGATTA STATEMENT

On Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Education

PREAMBLE

The Coolangatta Statement represents a collective voice of Indigenous peoples from around the world who support fundamental principles considered vital to achieving reform and transformation of education for Indigenous peoples.

The need for such an instrument is self-evident. Over the last 30 years, Indigenous peoples throughout the world have argued that they have been denied equity in non-Indigenous education systems which has failed to provide educational services that nurture the whole Indigenous person inclusive of scholarship, culture and spirituality. Most all Indigenous peoples, and in particular, those who have suffered the impact and effects of colonization, have struggled to access education that acknowledges, respects and promotes the right of Indigenous peoples to be indigenous--a right that embraces Indigenous peoples' language, culture, traditions, and spirituality. This includes the right to self-determination.

This Statement speaks to the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples as declared in Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, and to profess and practice their own religion, and to use their own language.

As an instrument which derives its vision and strength from Indigenous Nations and peoples, the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Education is and will remain a living document which addresses the educational rights of Indigenous peoples now and into the future.

I. INDIGENOUS EDUCATION: A GLOBAL OVERVIEW

1.1 There exists a proliferation of international charters, conventions and other instruments that recognize the basic human rights of all peoples, amongst which is the right to education. Some of these instruments have been analyzed in the preparation of this statement. These include:

Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination;
Discrimination (Employment & Occupation) Convention;
Convention Against Discrimination in Education;
Working Group on Indigenous Populations - Draft Declaration on Indigenous Rights;
Kari-Oca Indigenous Peoples Earth Charter.

1.2 Indigenous peoples acknowledge that select principles and articles from international human rights instruments provide some basis for recognizing the rights of Indigenous peoples to education.

1.2.1 For example, Article 26 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states:

- i. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
- ii. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nation for the maintenance of peace.
- iii. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

1.2.2 Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights further states:

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, and to profess and practice their own religion, and to use their own language.

1.3 Although the capacity for such instruments provides some basis for recognizing rights of Indigenous peoples, the 1999 WIPCE asserts that such instruments are limited in their capacity to recognize and protect the rights of Indigenous peoples. Human rights, by definition, are inalienable, inviolable and innate. The freedom to enjoy and indeed celebrate these rights has been, and continues to be, denied and obstructed for Indigenous peoples throughout the world.

Specific limitations include the extent to which these instruments:

- Protect the right of Indigenous peoples to equal access to education systems;
- Ensure that Indigenous parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children;
- Promote the right of Indigenous peoples to enjoy their own cultures in community with other members of their group;
- Provide conditions that are conducive to the use and maintenance of Indigenous languages.

1.3.1 Historically, Indigenous peoples have insisted upon the right of access to education. Invariably the nature, and consequently the outcome, of this education has been constructed through and measured by non-Indigenous standards, values and philosophies. Ultimately the purpose of this education has been to assimilate Indigenous peoples into non-Indigenous cultures and societies.

Volumes of studies, research and reports dealing with Indigenous peoples in non-Indigenous educational systems paint a familiar picture of failure and despair. When measured in non-Indigenous terms, the educational outcomes of Indigenous peoples are still far below that of non-Indigenous peoples. This fact exists not because Indigenous peoples are less intelligent, but because educational theories and practices are developed and controlled by non-Indigenous peoples. Thus, in more recent times, due to the involvement of Indigenous peoples, research shows that failure is indeed present, but that this failure is that of the system, not of Indigenous peoples.

In this context the so-called "dropout rates and failures" of Indigenous peoples within non-Indigenous educational systems must be viewed for what they really are-- rejection rates.

1.3.2 The rights of Indigenous peoples to access education--even when these rights are recognized in treaties and other instruments--are often interpreted to read that Indigenous peoples only want access to non-Indigenous education. Presumably it is considered that the core of Indigenous cultural values, standards and wisdom is abandoned or withering in the wilderness of Indigenous societies.

Yet, Indigenous peoples across the world are demanding and, in some cases, achieving the establishment of systems of education which reflect, respect and embrace Indigenous cultural values, philosophies and ideologies--the same values, philosophies and ideologies which shaped, nurtured and sustained Indigenous peoples for tens of thousands of years.

One of the greatest challenges confronting Indigenous peoples in the final year of the twentieth century is how to promote, protect and nurture Indigenous cultures in an ever-changing modern society. This is of particular concern for Indigenous peoples who are forced into cities and away from their homelands.

1.4 It is of concern to the 1999 WIPCE that many international instruments have a limited capacity to recognize the most fundamental human right of Indigenous peoples -- the right to be Indigenous. The right to be Indigenous involves the freedom of Indigenous peoples themselves to determine who is Indigenous; what it means to be Indigenous; and, how education relates to Indigenous cultures.

1.4.1 Recently a number of international documents prepared in response to the limited capacity of international human rights instruments recognize and protect the right of Indigenous peoples to be Indigenous. The 1999 WIPCE acknowledges and supports such documents, which include the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Kari-Oca Indigenous Peoples' Earth Charter.

1.4.2 The Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as revised by the members of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations in July 1993, asserts: Indigenous peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political statutes and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. (Article 3)

Indigenous peoples have the right to participate fully, if they so wish, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the state, while maintaining their distinct political, economical, social and cultural characteristics, as well as their legal systems. (Article 4)

The draft declaration goes on to add:

Indigenous peoples have the right to all levels and forms of education. They also have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own language. (Article 14)

Indigenous peoples have the right to have the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations appropriately reflected in all forms of education and public information. States shall take effective measures, in consultation with Indigenous peoples, in eliminating prejudice and to promote tolerance, understanding and good relations. (Article 15)

1.4.3 The Kari-Oca Declaration entitled "Indigenous Peoples' Earth Charter" (formulated in Brazil in May 1993) includes the following statements on Indigenous education:

Indigenous peoples should have the right to their own knowledge, languages and culturally appropriate education, including bicultural and bilingual education.

Through recognizing both formal and informal ways the participation of family and community is guaranteed.

Indigenous peoples must have the necessary resources and control over their own education systems. Elders must be recognized and respected as teachers of the young people. Indigenous wisdom must be recognized and encouraged.

The use of existing Indigenous languages is our right. These languages must be protected. At local, national, and international levels, governments must commit funds to new and existing resources to education and training for Indigenous peoples to achieve their sustainable development, to contribute and to participate in sustainable and equitable development at all levels. Particular attention should be given to Indigenous women, children and youth.

The United Nations should promote research into Indigenous knowledge and develop a network of Indigenous sciences. As creators and carriers of civilizations which have given and continue to share knowledge, experience and values with humanity, we require that our right to intellectual and cultural properties be guaranteed and that the mechanism for each implementation be in favor of our people and studies in depth be implemented.

1.5 Evident from recent international documents on the Rights of Indigenous peoples, the right to be indigenous is an essential prerequisite to developing and maintaining culturally appropriate and sustainable education for Indigenous peoples.

Also evident, the educational struggles of Indigenous peoples of the world involve more than the struggle for access to and participation in both non-Indigenous education systems and culturally appropriate education. The educational struggles of Indigenous peoples are fundamentally and unequivocally concerned with the right of Indigenous peoples to be indigenous.

1.6 Youth and the young have a special place and responsibility in the struggle to nurture and protect Indigenous cultures. It is to them that truth and wisdom is bequeathed. When Indigenous youth and the young are separated from their cultural base and communities, Indigenous cultures and peoples are threatened with cultural extinction.

1.6.1 The forced removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities was a favored policy and practice of colonial powers throughout the world. The pain and emotional scars that are the legacy of this insidious form of cultural genocide continues to torment many of today's Indigenous peoples.

1.6.2 Acknowledging and respecting their role and responsibilities, delegates from the World Indigenous Youth Conference held in Darwin, Australia in July 1993, declared:

We, Indigenous youth, believe we must maintain our right to self-determination. Our people have the right to decide our own forms of government, the use of our lands, to one day raise and educate our children in our own cultural identities without interference.

We, Indigenous youth must have the freedom to learn our true histories. We make a call to our elders to open the way for us to learn about our heritages--to help us reclaim our past, so that we may claim our future.

We, Indigenous youth, recognize our languages as an important link to maintaining our cultures. Indigenous languages must be maintained at a local level.

1.7 The 1999 WIPCE recognizes an existence of a commonality of purpose and desire amongst the Indigenous peoples of the world for education. It further recognizes that this commonality involves a shared belief that education must be scholarly and empowering whilst at the same time the processes of education must be embedded in Indigenous culture and wisdom.

1.7.1. Meaningful, empowering and culturally sustainable education for Indigenous peoples will be possible only when Indigenous peoples have the control (a fundamental right) and the resources (an inarguable responsibility of States/governments) to develop educational theories, curriculum and practices that are indigenous and are able to determine the environment within which this education can best occur.

1.7.2 Indigenous self-determination involves choice and diversity. If an Indigenous person chooses to access an Indigenous education system, then this is a choice, which must be respected. If an Indigenous person chooses to access non-Indigenous education, then this choice must also be respected. If an Indigenous person chooses to access both non-Indigenous and Indigenous systems of education, then this choice too must be respected. Not to do so is in itself a violation of a basic human right.

II. RIGHTS IN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

2.1 The right to be Indigenous is the most fundamental and important of all Human Rights.

2.2 The right to be Indigenous is a precursor to self-determination. The right to self-determination and the achievement of other inherent rights and freedoms for Indigenous peoples is inextricably connected to the physical and spiritual phenomenon of what most call "the earth." The sense of connectedness and belonging to Mother Earth is similar to the special bonds that unite parent and child. As a child's hopes and securities, aspirations and comforts are fundamental to its relationships with its parents, so too are Indigenous peoples' hopes and securities, aspirations and comforts fundamental in their relationship to Mother Earth.

2.2.1 Non-Indigenous peoples and their representative governments must accept this parent relationship with Mother Earth that characterizes Indigenous cultures. This relationship enables Indigenous peoples to negotiate, use and maintain the land, and to build and rebuild the social structures needed for cultural survival.

2.2.2 There are no single, simple or common answers to the question of Indigenous self-determination. Only Indigenous peoples who are spiritually focused and land-based.

2.2.3 The provision and application of material and political responses by Nation States to the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, governance and control over Indigenous life and futures must cease.

2.2.4 Self-determination in Indigenous education embodies the right of Indigenous people:

To control/govern Indigenous education systems;

To establish schools and other learning facilities that recognize, respect and promote Indigenous values, philosophies and ideologies;

To develop and implement culturally inclusive curricula;

To utilize the essential wisdom of Indigenous elders in the education process;

To establish the criterion for educational evaluation and assessment;

To define and identify standards for the gifted and talented;

To promote the use of Indigenous languages in education;

To establish the parameters and ethics within which Indigenous education research should be conducted;

To design and deliver culturally appropriate and sensitive teacher training programs;

To participate in teacher certification and selection;

To develop criterion for the registration and operation of schools and other learning facilities; and,

To choose the nature and scope of education without prejudice.

2.3 Indigenous peoples have strong feelings and thoughts about landforms, the very basis of their cultural identity. Land gives life to language and culture.

2.3.1 Indigenous languages in all forms are legitimate and valid means of communication for Indigenous peoples.

2.3.2 Language is a social construct; it is a blueprint for thought, behavior, social and cultural interaction and self-expression.

2.3.3 Language is the medium for transmitting culture from the past to the present and into the future. Acknowledging that many Indigenous languages have been destroyed, the 1999 WIPCE asserts that Indigenous languages are the best way to teach Indigenous knowledge and values.

2.3.4 Languages are the foundations for the liberation of thoughts that provide direction for social, political and economic change and development.

2.3.5 The survival and revival of Indigenous languages is imperative for the protection, transmission, maintenance and preservation of Indigenous knowledge, cultural values, and wisdom.

2.4 Pedagogy is the interrelationship between learning styles and teaching methods. There are pedagogical principles shared by all Indigenous peoples, but there are also those that are characteristic to the specific cultures, languages, environment and circumstances of Indigenous peoples across the world. Indigenous peoples and cultures are not homogenous.

2.4.1 Indigenous pedagogical principles are holistic, connected, valid, cultural, value-based, thematic and experiential. They promote and reward cooperative learning and the unified co-operation of learner and teacher in a single educational enterprise. They describe who teaches, as well as, how and when teaching occurs. Indigenous pedagogical principles, unlike western paradigms, recognize the important role of non-verbal communication in the learning-teaching process.

2.4.2 Indigenous learning is clothed in the medium of spirituality. Notions of well being/wellness and ethos are important in the process of learning.

2.4.3 The teacher is a facilitator of learning, one who promotes achievement and success. In this context culturally appropriate environments are employed to reinforce knowledge being imparted to the learner, reaffirming the learner's significant place in the world.

2.4.4 The involvement of community in all pedagogical processes is valued.

2.5 Indigenous peoples at the local level must determine how and to what degree non-Indigenous peoples are involved in Indigenous education. Once this role is determined it is the responsibility of non-Indigenous peoples to respect and adhere to the wishes of the local community.

2.5.1 Non-Indigenous peoples come from a different cultural background. Since Indigenous education is centered in Indigenous culture, non-Indigenous people must only be involved in the process of achieving educational objectives as determined by Indigenous peoples. Non-Indigenous peoples should not involve themselves in the processes of Indigenous decision-making.

2.5.2 Non-Indigenous peoples through the various levels of government and bureaucracy have an over-riding responsibility to accept and uphold the educational rights of Indigenous peoples and to know that these rights and freedoms are non-negotiable.

III. CONCLUSION

- 3.1 Indigenous peoples throughout the world survive policies and practices ranging from extermination and genocide to protection and assimilation. Perhaps more than any other feat, survival is the greatest of all Indigenous peoples' achievements.
- 3.2 Indigenous peoples have the right to be Indigenous. They cannot exist as images and reflections of a non-Indigenous society.
- 3.3 Indigenous education, as a medium for both personal development and intellectual empowerment, is critical for the continuance and celebration of Indigenous cultures.
- 3.4 To be Indigenous is both a privilege and a birthright. It is therefore the responsibility of all Indigenous peoples to ensure that their respective cultures, philosophies and ideologies remain strong and continue to grow.
- 3.5 We, the Indigenous peoples of the world, assert our inherent right to self-determination in all matters. Self-determination is about making informed choices and decisions and creating appropriate structures for the transmission of culture, knowledge and wisdom for the benefit of each of our respective cultures. Education for our communities and each individual is central to the preservation of our cultures and for the development of the skills and expertise we need in order to be a vital part of the twenty-first century.