

# Medium of Instruction and Education/Literacy Rates of Indigenous Peoples in Canada

What International Research is Saying

By Andrea Bear Nicholas

Chair in Native Studies, STU

# Primary Sources

- Anders-Baer, Lars, Robert Dunbar, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, and Ole Henrik Magga, 2008. **“Forms of Education of Indigenous Children as Crimes Against Humanity?”** Expert paper written for the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues(PFII) , New York: PFII. [In PFII’ system:  
[http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/E\\_C19\\_2008\\_7.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/E_C19_2008_7.pdf)
- Magga, Ole Henrik, Ida Nicolaisen, Mililani Trask, Robert Dunbar and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, 2004. **“Indigenous Children’s Education and Indigenous Languages.”** Expert Paper written for the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. New York: United Nations.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove,, 2000. *Linguistic Genocide in Education—Or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* Mahwah, NJ and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

# The Relationship of Medium of Education to Educational Success

- “...[T]his dominant language medium of education prevents access to education because of the linguistic, pedagogical and psychological barriers it creates. Without binding educational linguistic rights, especially a right to mainly mother tongue-medium (MTM) education in state schools, with good teaching of a dominant language as a second language, given by competent bilingual teachers, most indigenous peoples and minorities have to accept subtractive education where they learn a dominant language at the cost of the mother tongue which is displaced, and later often replaced by the dominant language.” [\[1\]](#)
- [\[1\]](#) Anders-Baer 2008:3-4.

# The most common cause for the high push-out rates of First Nations children

- Indigenous children tend to take only two years “*to achieve peer appropriate levels*” of conversational ability, according to Jim Cummins, the foremost Canadian scholar in issues of bilingualism and language survival, but five or more years to achieve equivalent academic language skills. As he has pointed out, “*psychologists often failed to take account of the difference between these two aspects of proficiency when they tested minority students*” and consequently end up labeling students as “*‘learning disabled’ or ‘retarded’ on the basis of tests administered within one or two years of the students’ exposure to English in school.*”[\[1\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Cummins 1991:169-170.

# High School completion rates not an accurate measure of academic Success or Literacy

- “Increased rates of school completion do not correlate with correspondingly high levels of academic proficiency, especially for monolingual Indigenous or minority language students. Indeed, evidence from the United States indicates that “...*mono-English-speaking American Indians’ longer stay in school does not translate into greater educational proficiency when compared to the reading, writing, and computational literacy found among bilinguals [who have been instructed in the medium of their mother tongue].*” [\[1\]](#) This is perhaps the most significant fact underlying the thesis of this paper.
- [\[1\]](#) Brod & McQuiston 1998:152.

# The Imposition of Dominant Language Education on First Nations Children is the direct consequence of State Policies which do harm to First Nations Languages:

- “...[T]his dominant language medium of education prevents access to education because of the linguistic, pedagogical and psychological barriers it creates. Without binding educational linguistic rights, especially a right to mainly mother tongue-medium (MTM) education in state schools, with good teaching of a dominant language as a second language, given by competent bilingual teachers, most indigenous peoples and minorities have to accept subtractive education where they learn a dominant language at the cost of the mother tongue which is displaced, and later often replaced by the dominant language.” [\[1\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Anders-Baer et al 2008:3-4.

# They do harm to First Nations Children

- According to Magga et al, this process is a subtractive one in which “*a new (dominant/majority) language is learned at the cost of the mother tongue which is displaced... [in effect it] subtracts from the child’s linguistic repertoire, instead of adding to it.*” [\[1\]](#) This form of education is generally known as “subtractive education,” but it has also been called “*submersion education*” for the fact that Indigenous children forced into this situation must either sink or swim. The process has also been appropriately identified as “*linguistic genocide*” or “*linguicide*,” and defined by Skutnabb-Kangas as “*killing a language without killing the speakers.*” [\[2\]](#)
- [\[1\]](#) Magga et al 2005:3.
- [\[2\]](#) Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:311-318. 362-374:

# They do harm to First Nations Forms of Life

- Magga et al have demonstrated how Indigenous children subjected to subtractive or submersion education, “*or at least their children, are effectively transferred [from their own group] to the dominant group linguistically and culturally,*”[\[1\]](#) whether or not they are removed from their own community to attend school. There is only one good term for this process and it is “assimilation,” since there is no question that Indigenous children who manage to complete subtractive education programs must also assimilate to some degree or other to the dominant society culture of the school in order to succeed.
- [\[1\]](#) Magga et al 2004:4. See also Anders-Baer, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008:5-10.

# They do harm to First Nations people

- Indeed, these same scholars have now identified subtractive/linguicidal state education policies, specifically, as the major culprit in the physical harm suffered by Indigenous Peoples in the disproportionately high rates of “*youth and adult criminality, alcoholism and drugs use, suicides, unemployment, negative health and housing conditions*” mentioned above[\[1\]](#).
- [\[1\]](#) Magga et al 2005:6-7.

# They do harm to First Nations Communities and Canadian Society as a whole

- Since language is the foundation of culture, its destruction in individuals on a mass scale, inevitably leads to the disruption, even destruction of whole communities and cultures. This process, now clearly caused by subtractive models of education, has even been called a “*weapon of mass destruction.*” [1] While racism, discrimination, dispossession, and low socio-economic conditions are admittedly important factors contributing to the dismal circumstances of Indigenous Peoples worldwide, Magga et al demonstrate that “*the use of the wrong teaching languages (and lack of indigenous content, methods and ethos in schools) is one of the most important factors, possibly the most decisive factor [in creating these circumstances].*” [2]  
[1] Skutnabb-Kangas 2008b.
- [2] Magga et al 2005:6-7.

# Consequences for both Canadian and First Nations Societies

- **First Nations School Completion rates** at 40-50% for the last 10 yrs where Canadian average rates lie between 80-90%
- **First Nations Languages**–
  - All but three of 63 expected to become extinct by the end of this century
  - Virtually no child speakers except in the three relatively healthy languages (Cree, Inuktitut, and Ojibway)
  - All fluent Maliseet speakers are now over 60, meaning the language will no longer be viable in ten years
  - Mi'kmaq is judged to have only 30 remaining years of viability
  - Percentage of speakers of all First Nations Languages declined from 29% in 1996 to 24% in 2001.

# International Human Rights Laws and Standards

- **Canada in violation of several Human Rights Instruments to which it is signatory:**
  - The **Convention on the Rights of the Child** which requires Respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and Values.
  - but according to Magga et al (2005),
  - “...it would seem clear that an education in a language other than the child's mother tongue and which contains no recognition of that mother tongue is an education that is unlikely to contribute to respect for the child's own cultural identity, language and values.” [\[1\]](#)
  - [\[1\]](#) Magga et al 2005:13.

# UN International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948)

- **Original draft** included: Article III(1) as follows: “*Prohibiting the use of the language of the group in daily intercourse or in schools, or the printing and circulation of publications in the language of the group.*”[\[1\]](#) removed by Canada and other countries, but still an internationally agreed upon definition of Linguistic Genocide.
- **Final Form (sections applicable to Canada)**
  - **Article II(e)** “*forcibly transferring children of the group to another group*”,
    - **Article II(b)**: “*Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group*”
    - **Article II(c)** “*Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part*”
      - [\[1\]](#) Chrisjohn et al. 2002:246 and 2008.

# International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights (ICESR) of 1966

- **Par. 1** requires that education must provide for “*the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential*”
- Magga et al declare that
- “*...it could be forcefully argued that only MTM education, at least in primary school is consistent with the provisions of Para 1, because any other form of education tends not to guarantee the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, nor does it enable children who are subject to non-MTM education to participate as effectively in society.*” [\[1\]](#)
- [\[1\]](#) Magga et al 2005:13. .

# The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court of 17 July, 1998

- A number of clauses in this statute could be readily interpreted to include subtractive forms of education as crimes against humanity. For example, its definition of “*persecution,*” alone, posits “*the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity to be a crime against humanity.*”
- Indeed, Anders-Baer et al conclude that “[t]he concept of ‘*crimes against humanity*’ provides a good basis for an evolution that will ultimately lead to the stigmatization through law of subtractive educational practices and policies.” [\[1\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Anders-Baer et al 2008:17.

# Important Human Rights Instruments to Which Canada is (shamefully) not Party

- **ILO Convention #169**
- **UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007**
- But these instruments are still relevant to Canada insofar as “...*international human rights law has developed to the point where policies of assimilation are now at odds with relevant international standards*” [\[1\]](#).
- [\[1\]](#) Anders-Baer et al, 2008:10.

# Benefits of MTM Education

- *“If indigenous and minority children are taught additively, with their own language as the main teaching language during minimally the first 6-8 years, while they also receive good teaching in a dominant language as a second language (preferably given by bilingual teachers), they have a very good chance of becoming high level bilinguals (or multilingual, if other languages are added later).”* [\[1\]](#)

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[\[1\]](#) Magga et al 2005:7. See also Save the Children 2007:4-5.

# More Quotes on Benefits of MTM Education

- *“The evaluations of immersion bilingual education and heritage language education tend to favor ‘strong’ forms of bilingual education and heritage language education. Such studies indicate that such bilingual education not only results in bilingualism and biliteracy but also tends to heighten achievement across the curriculum. Strong forms of bilingual education tend to raise the standards and performance of the children. However, these results do not stop at individual achievement. In societal terms, there are benefits for the economy in strong forms of bilingual education.”* [\[1\]](#)

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[\[1\]](#) Baker 2006:287.

# More Quotes on Benefits of MTM Education

- 1.) *“[T]here is evidence that strong promotion of L1 [mother tongue] proficiency represents an effective way of developing a conceptual and academic foundation for acquiring English literacy [for all students].”* Cummins 1984:150-151.
- 2.) *“Research has shown rather conclusively that mother-tongue language development can enhance second language acquisition: in other words, that literacy skills first learned in the mother tongue are transferable to second languages.”*
- Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs 1990:5.
- 3.) *“Studies completed by UNESCO have demonstrated that learning in the official languages was more successful if literacy was established in the mother tongue first. Learning First Nations mother tongue literacy is the most important factor towards attaining individual / collective empowerment.”*  
Assembly of First Nations 1994:6.

# NEEDS

- Recognition that by ignoring the International Research we do so at our peril—High social costs
- Governments to Make available the option of MTM for all First Nations Students (both on reserve and off)
- Positive Linguistic Rights Legislation
- Halt the take-over of First Nations Education that is now occurring with its emphases on English or French literacy
- Funding for MTM in every First Nation (it may well turn out to be cheaper than addressing the current social costs of Subtractive Education)
- Training in Curriculum Methods, Curriculum Development
- More Research