
North Education While Retaining Culture Possible

By LARRY CARPENTER

MONTREAL—The indigenous peoples of the far north—Eskimos and Indians—appear to be entering an era in which their educational programs will be improved while their cultures are preserved.

Last week some 140 participants and observers at the first International Conference on Cross-Cultural Education in the North closed four days of sessions here with general agreement on two points:

—Native children should begin their primary education in their mother-tongue instead of the language of the dominant culture.

—People who live in the Arctic and subarctic regions of the world should be involved in planning and carrying out their own educational programs.

Conference Chairman Frank Darnell of the University of A-

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laska in Fairbanks said the meeting was a landmark in northern education.

"There was an international conference to consider problems of polar bears, but this is the first time the world's specialists on the north have gathered to consider the education problems of the peoples of the north."

Darnell emphasized that the purpose of the conference was to "inventory" the education programs now existing in the arctic and subarctic regions of the world and to provide a forum for the exchange of knowledge among those persons responsible for the programs.

"This was not intended to be an action conference," he said. "Our intent was simply to bring together education administrators, teachers, and specialists from the behavioral and social sciences who are involved with the far north."

"Now that we have met, the conference may prove one springboard for solving the complex problems of education for minority peoples in the northern regions of the world."

Participants at the meeting came from the circumpolar nations of Canada, Denmark (for Greenland), Finland, Norway, Sweden, U.S. (for Alaska), and U.S.S.R.

Few Indians or Eskimos at-

tended, but those who did strongly expressed views that any future conferences on education in the north should involve a majority of participants who are indigenous to the north.

Asked why only a handful of natives of the north were invited to the meeting, conference officials explained that participants had been selected on the basis of two criteria:

- Recognized expertise on cross-cultural education in the north.

- Current commitment to programs in the north.

The fact is that at present few indigenous peoples of the arctic and subarctic actually participate in the formulation and administration of their education programs. Traditionally, they have been on the receiving end only—a situation they generally dislike and against which they have become increasingly vocal.

Most conference participants seemed to be in agreement with complaints registered by Indians and Eskimos. Dr. Norman A. Chance, a noted anthropologist who served six years at McGill University and recently joined the faculty of the University of Connecticut, expressed a popular view in a paper he delivered to the conference.

According to Dr. Chance,

"The most ideally conceived and implemented program of education for native northerners is a program that involves native northerners in the design planning and execution."

"If those of us in education cannot revise our assumptions about the importance of native involvement in northern educational planning, we can hardly expect other less sensitive economic and social institutions to change their approach."

In his recommendations for the natives of Alaska and Canada, Dr. Chance indicated a preference for real rather than "advisory" native representation on school boards, the teaching of primary grades in the native language, the development of more effective adult education programs, and other measures designed to assist the native to synthesize his involvement in two worlds.

It may be several months before the effect of this conference is truly known, but most evidence points toward benefits for natives of the north in all lands.

The conference was jointly sponsored by the University of Alaska at Fairbanks and the Arctic Institute of North America with headquarters in Montreal. It was funded in large part by the Ford Foundation.