

WIPCE: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

1987 - The Start of an Empowering Global Indigenous Education Movement

The World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education (WIPCE) commenced in 1987 in Vancouver, Canada.

Dr Verna Kirkness, WIPCE Founder and the primary organiser of the 1987 WIPCE conference, describes in her autobiography "Creating Space- My Life and Work in Indigenous Education",¹ the historical context to the triennial WIPCE conference. Dr Kirkness' role in creating WIPCE is legendary and her unique voice and perspective is presented here to honour her contribution to the WIPCE tradition and Indigenous education generally.

Dr Kirkness writes:

"Another exciting development for me was organising the first World Conference of Indigenous People in Education in 1987. It was during a Multicultural and Native Indian Education Conference in Vancouver in 1985 that I presented the idea that we should have our own conference on Native Indian education. I held a poster session, inviting people interested in exploring this idea to join me. Several did, and we soon were talking about a world conference. We formed an International Indigenous Peoples' Association, with membership of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who shared common interests and goals. This included believing that educational success of Indigenous peoples lie in applying traditional values and believes to contemporary educational practice. We planned to hold a world conference in June 1987 based on the theme 'Tradition, Change and Survival and a sub-theme 'the answers are within us.'

Dr Kirkness further adds:

In 1986, prior to the conference, we held a roundtable in Vancouver to discuss the general shape of our conference program. A panel of twelve educators and Elders from seven countries discussed issues in traditional education for a contemporary world before an audience of 100 delegates. We also invited presentations from Indigenous schools considered to have made progress in controlling their own schools.

The first World Conference of Indigenous People in Education was held June 8 to 13, 1987. The opening day was held at Xwmelch'sten, the site of the Squamish Nation, where we gathered together in the Longhouse for the opening ceremonies. Fifteen hundred people from seventeen countries were represented and sat in groups. It was an amazing sight. Following the protocol of the Squamish Nation, speeches were made and gifts exchanged by the hosts and the visitors. The day continued with demonstrations of traditional forms of education. There was a large stage for singing and dancing, a tent for the performing arts, an Elders tent for story-telling, an area for showing various ways of cooking salmon, a games area, and so on.

¹ Kirkness, Verna J. *Creating Space – My Life and Work in Indigenous Education*; University of Manitoba Press 2013 p138-139

The pivotal role of community, represented by Elders and community knowledge keepers, was captured in the inaugural WIPCE conference providing both a primacy of purpose and of place.

WIPCE is a movement of individuals and organisations dedicated to the design and development of culturally affirming and intellectually enriching education for Indigenous peoples. Many of the principles and values underpinning the work and focus of WIPCE is reflected in the Coolangatta Statement and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

The words of WIPCE Founder and Patron, Dr Verna Kirkness captures the essence of WIPCE when she reflects on the inaugural conference held in Vancouver, Canada in 1987. Dr Kirkness reflects:

Having our first day at Xwmelch'sten set the tone for the conference that would take a more formal format when it moved to the UBC campus.

Keynote speeches, paper presentations, workshops all addressed some aspect of the importance of having culture as the basis for learning, holistic learning – cognitive, spiritual, physical and emotional growth, and ownership of education. By all measures it was a successful conference, one of many to follow.

Since then, the conferences, now known as WIPCE, World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education, take place triennially, with meetings having been held in New Zealand, Australia, Hawaii, mainland USA, and Peru. It was back in Canada in 2002, at Stoney Park, Nakoda Nations, in Morley, Alberta. The size of the conference has grown to the thousands, and many more countries are represented. What started as an idea in 1985 has stood the test of time, and we have all benefitted from the gathering of nations.

The acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills derived from education are valued pursuits and aspirations for Indigenous peoples globally. The accrued skills and knowledge resulting from participating in schooling and post schooling learning opportunities that are culturally affirming as well as intellectually enriching is viewed as fundamental to positive human growth and development and serve as an empowering tool central to cultural survival and celebration as Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous people globally have struggled to ensure that our cultures, traditions and worldviews are embedded in teaching and learning practices and environments. It is perhaps only during the past 2 generations that Indigenous peoples have won the long-denied right and responsibility to be involved with, and in some cases control, the education that is delivered to Indigenous students. Various Indigenous peoples continue to struggle to exercise and enjoy this right, notwithstanding the emergence of instruments of the state and those framed by Indigenous peoples such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Coolangatta Statement.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) acknowledges the aspirations and objectives outlined above principally in the following Articles:

Article 3 declares that: *“Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”*

Whereas Article 14.1. declares, *“Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.”*

Article 19 of the Declaration stipulates that: *“States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.”*

The Coolangatta Statement was initiated as a feature of the 1993 WIPCE hosted in Wollongong, NSW Australia. The statement takes its name from the mountain and village where the group assembled to draft the document leading up to the 1993 conference.

The Coolangatta Statement was ratified through a series of workshops and was eventually adopted by the delegates at the 1999 WIPCE hosted by the Hawaiians at Hilo and was officially handed to a representative of the UN for consideration in the drafting of the education components of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Another great initiative that grew out of WIPCE is the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) which was established during the 2002 WIPCE held at Stoney Park, Nakoda Nations, in Morley, Alberta. WINHEC continues to provide an academic and research forum where matters relating to Indigenous higher education can be considered and advocacy can be initiated.