

Do the Khanty need a Khanty Curriculum? Indigenous Concepts of School Education

Aimar Ventsel and Stephan Dudeck

Khanty Education

This paper addresses the situation of state-run education for the Khanty people of Western Siberia. We will focus on various concepts among Khanty activists themselves, as well as on the views of the government administration. Our study is based on interviews and conversations with the inhabitants of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region, and particularly of the Surgut region, which were carried out in the course of several trips since 1993. While our informants represent only a small segment of the Khanty population, given the situation of the Khanty today, their opinions and concepts seem to be the predominant ones.

The Socio-cultural Background

The situation of indigenous peoples in Western Siberia has suffered from a single prevailing conflict: since the Sixties, ruthless exploitation of the region's rich oil and gas deposits has led to the large-scale in-migration of Russian-speaking people, forced industrialization and urbanization (Projektgruppe Gelebte Anthropologie 1995: 20–22). This development has both socially and economically marginalized the indigenous population, who live off fishing, hunting, reindeer breeding and the gathering of natural products (Martynova 1996: 193; Prodan et al. 1992: 3; Afanasyeva 1996: 152). Political change since the collapse of the Soviet Union has made it possible for the indigenous population to discuss their interests openly for the first time, and, in part, to assert these interests successfully in the political sphere. (Projektgruppe Gelebte Anthropologie 1994: 50–58; Tyumentseva 1996: 241). In general, the family, the school, and everyday contacts with people of their own age have been the leading factors in the socialization of adolescents in the Russian Federation. This is also true for Western Siberia.

Various objectives have been assigned to (formal) school education, which is the focus of our research. These aims range from the acquisition of practical knowledge (to improve job prospects in both the market and subsistence economies), to the imparting of cultural values and ethnic identity, and on to enhancing the ability to adapt oneself to a modern industrial society. Individual aims particularly include gaining the skills and knowledge required to formulate and meet one's own needs in the social environment, while retaining a stable identity. The viewpoints taken by representatives of the indigenous population on this subject are not unanimous, but depend mainly on three main factors.

1. The socio-economic factor

The living situations of indigenous peoples vary considerably. Some Khanty have a traditional subsistence lifestyle in the boreal forest. The economic existence of most of these individuals is, at least in the long term, threatened by the oil and gas industry. In some cases they even depend entirely on economic support from the oil companies, or have been forced to move to so-called ethnic settlements (*natsionalniye poselki*). The Khanty live in ethnically more-or-less homogenous settlements. They have, however, few prospects for employment and depend mainly on government subsidies. There are exceptions in the government sector, where some Khanty hold white-collar positions in boarding schools or in medical, cultural or trade institutions. In towns there are also some limited job opportunities for indigenous individuals in these same sectors. There is also the so-called intelligentsia, which occupies, in part, a neo-traditionalist position in society.

2. The ethno-political factor

Ethnic identity can be established in different ways. Russia requires its citizens to declare their nationality. The indigenous populations of our research area may define themselves as either Khanty, Mansi, Nenets or Russian. This external component has two aspects. On the one hand, people belonging to the indigenous groups have access to a number of privileges and support programs. On the other hand, the social prestige of indigenous people among the majority (Russian) population is very low. Prejudices, mainly stemming from racist and paternalistic attitudes, are widespread. Within the minority groups, ethnic identity depends on knowledge of the traditional way of life

and economy, and having a command of the mother tongue is very important. Some Khanty individuals consider their ethnic origin to be the decisive fact in their personal identity, whereas others merely use ethnic origin to seek access to government subsidies and privileges.

3. The linguistic factor

The indigenous languages of Western Siberia are further divided into very different dialects. These differences are so marked that speakers of neighboring dialects cannot understand each other. Most written variants are based upon a single dialect that was chosen to establish a literary language, but which has never really found widespread acceptance (Niomysova 1990b: 338–339, 1990a: 168). Moreover, the command of the native language depends on age and social situation. Some members of the generation of grandparents still living in their traditional settlements are monolingual Khanty speakers, while their grandchildren from new settlements and towns speak only Russian. Between these two extremes there exist all degrees of bilingualism. Nevertheless, there are also children who master neither Khanty nor Russian sufficiently to meet recognized standards, while other Khanty not only speak several indigenous languages fluently but have also mastered literary Russian.

The State Administration of Education and the Urban Khanty

This part of the paper is empirical. We shall attempt to summarize data that we gathered over two summers of fieldwork (1997 and 1998) in and around the town of Surgut, and to analyze the opinions of people we met and interviewed.

The issue of native education is complicated, with many and varying points of view. The future of the education of the indigenous population depends not only on the will, the wishes and the intentions of the people. In Siberia, as everywhere in Russia, the education system was established, and is controlled, by the state. The people who created and still control it are mostly non-Natives. In the Surgut administrative region there are two education departments. One administers the high-school education of indigenous children. It is part of the Department of the People of the North. The second is part of the Department of Education. Among other things, it administers

continuing education for school drop-outs. One of its clerks deals with the on-the-job training of native children. In neither department do any native people work; we spoke only with Russians. What we noticed during our interviews was a disconcerting attitude to their subject on the part of the clerks. It is no exaggeration to say that, in general, those who govern and control the education of native children have strong prejudices against the indigenous population. A paternalistic attitude—that they, the Russians, are the representatives of civilization, and that the Khanty people are nothing but a primitive ethnos without culture or morals—is very much alive among the Russian clerks. We were very surprised when the clerk in the department of on-the-job training told us that, in fact, the Khanty people get everything they want from the state and therefore do not bother trying to improve their living standard. She claimed that they are so lazy that they do not even want to take care of their own children, and therefore send them to boarding schools instead. In certain cases she may even be right. But anyone who has ever spent time with the reindeer Khantys knows how much they love their children and how unwillingly they hand their children over to the boarding school. We cannot generalize from the situation in certain villages, where people have already degenerated socially though alcohol abuse.

In the Soviet Union school education was compulsory. Parents who did not send their offspring to school had to expect serious consequences from the state. Since the abolition of compulsory school education, the situation has changed. The clerks can no longer coerce the parents or simply “confiscate” the children. If parents refuse to send their children to school, they can no longer be punished. The clerks accuse native parents of having low moral standards and consciousness. That the Khanty themselves do not much approve of the boarding schools—where their children learn to smoke and drink alcohol—is overlooked by the clerks. The clerks blame all these problems on the nomadic way of life, along with marriage at an early age and alcoholism. Given these attitudes, many children are unwilling to go to school, and even find support from their parents for their refusal.

How a colonial way of thinking pervades the system of education can easily be seen in the concept of teaching the mother tongue. Officially, the Khanty language belongs to the 66 “favored” languages (out of 183 in the Russian Federation) that are taught in school (Kargin 1996: 196). But reality belies the statistics. It overlooks the fact that the Khanty language is divided into numerous dialects, and that teachers in many cases teach the “other”

dialect and therefore speak the “wrong language”. Teachers in the Surgut region, for example, mainly teach the *Kazym* dialect, which in the Surgut region is viewed as a foreign language, and therefore dismissed by referring to it as “*ne nasha*” (not ours). Clerks in the Department of Education consider the problem solved when native children receive their mother-tongue classes in any one of the several Khanty dialects. This ignorance is understandable, because according to statistics the number of Russians who are able to speak either Khanty or Mansi in Khanty-Mansi okrug is precisely zero (Afanaseva 1996: 151). The fact that the mother tongue is taught as a foreign language, i.e., using the methodology of foreign language lessons, through Russian, is hardly surprising. More important to the clerks is that the Native children are not good enough in Russian. We should add that all young Khanty we met spoke fluent Russian, in most cases without even an accent. We do not claim that there are no young people who are not bilingual; we never met any, however.

In addition to the Department of Education staff, there is another group of people who are of significance in matters of indigenous education, the so-called urban natives. They have been largely ignored by researchers, which is surprising, considering that the so-called national intelligentsia (*natsionalnaya intelligentsiya*) of the northern indigenous groups (mainly living in the cities) is not small at all—28,1% of the native population (Uvachan 1984: 196).

The Khanty in the city are not a homogeneous group themselves and therefore represent different points of view. Their knowledge of their mother tongue is highly variable. Moreover, they define their Khanty identity in several distinct ways and value it differently as well. Some speak the Khanty language fluently, others have almost forgotten it, and still others never even spoke the Khanty language in the first place, yet still consider themselves to be Khanty. We met people who, according to their passports, had the Khanty nationality, but never had any (true) connection to that ethnicity. They took the Khanty (usually their father's) nationality in order to receive certain privileges, such as money due them through compensation programs, a place at the university etc. On the other hand, there are people who recognize as fellow Khanty only those, who speak the language and have knowledge of the culture. Naturally, such heterogeneous groups of people—with such varied backgrounds—do not have a single opinion on education. The spectrum of opinions is broad. It ranges from the point of view that there is a need for a

unitary literary language, because only in that way can the Khanty survive under urban conditions (Sopochina 1997), to the view that “there is no use for education in the Khanty language, because some day all the languages will mix together and vanish. Only one or two will survive” (Mamyshev 1997). We were surprised to find that (even some) people (who work at, or for) the Khanty Cultural Centre had no opinion on the issue of education in the mother tongue. This Centre, which really should be working to preserve the Khanty identity in Surgut, concerns itself only with folkloristic handicrafts and music. The people at the Centre represent the typical Soviet attitude, that the small nations are useful only for folklore festivals. Education is the task of the state, and they see no reason to interfere. They see the status of Khanty language teaching as satisfactory: there are schools where the Khanty language is taught; there are some school books for that purpose; there are even a number of poets and writers who write in Khanty; and there are newspapers in the language. “What else is needed?” they ask. In our view, no help in solving the problem of native education can be expected from that direction.

Many people of Khanty origin in Surgut are not able to speak Khanty. Usually, the more educated a person is, the more distant he or she is from the Khanty language and culture. Few of these people are equipped to answer the question of whether the Khanty need school education, literature or media in their own language.¹ They receive all their information via the Russian language and do not need alternative sources. Their viewpoint is that there are enough Russian radio and TV stations, and thus there is no need for their own media. Like the nomads of the taiga, they think that the Khanty language can continue to serve the needs of intra-family and intra-ethnic communications, but that to go further would be artificial. On the other hand, a few hard liners demand the creation of a literary language, arguing that only in this way can the identity of the Khanty people under urban conditions be preserved. Natives in the city do not live in the traditional society, where one can learn the language through everyday activities. But a common literary language does not mean the dialects will die out. The demands on a language in modern times are different from what they once were. Having a literary language enhances the prestige of the entire language and serves to unite the people around it (Sopochina 1997).

Alternative School Models

Next, we want to describe alternative types of school education and reform plans that are aimed in particular at the indigenous population. Most Khanty children attend boarding schools situated in the ethnic settlements. In accordance with the statewide curriculum, their lessons are held in Russian. Khanty language is simply one subject among many that they are taught (Kontsepsiya 1994: 52). In recent years, the prohibition against speaking Khanty at boarding school has been removed. However, the physical facilities and availability of staff at rural schools are usually much less than at urban schools (Niomysova 1996: 47). The main problem is one of finding and hiring teachers and other educators who are willing to work in remote villages. Above all, parents, indigenous politicians and education specialists criticize the fact that, on the one hand, children receive an inferior school education, while on the other, they are becoming alienated from family socialization because of their absence from home. This leads to an insufficient knowledge of their mother tongue, traditional occupations and cultural values.

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, some reforms have been implemented that should improve the educational situation of indigenous children (Obrazovatel'naya politika 1994: 28). Summer holidays have been extended by a month to give children the chance to stay longer in their traditional environments (nomadic camps) in the taiga. Some boarding schools have established familial living arrangements to prevent the separation of brothers and sisters and the destruction of the traditional social context. In a number of schools in ethnic settlements, for instance Saranpaul, Russkinskaya, Varyegan, Kyzhikov and Polnovat, special subjects have been introduced to help children acquire traditional occupational skills. However, all these measures have failed to reduce the number of children who are staying away from school, since school attendance is no longer enforced by coercion.

At the beginning of the Nineties indigenous educators, together with the Moscow Independent Methodological University, pioneered the concept of the "cultural-anthropological school", abbreviated as KASH, in the village of Kazym (Kontsepsiya 1994: 53, Kultur-antropologicheskaya shkola 1994: 54-59). The director of the school is Olga Kravchenko, a Khanty. The KASH is based on the traditional boarding school system, though the curriculum is rigorously organized on an ethno-cultural basis. The school program encompasses three levels (Kravchenko 1994: 43). At the first stage,

which includes the lowest grades, children are expected to acquire the traditional knowledge of their respective ethnic groups. Lessons are held in the mother tongue to the greatest possible extent. There are parallel Khanty, Nenets, Komi and Russian classes. The second stage attempts to achieve a “dialogue between cultures”. The third stage aims to guarantee the possibility of continuing on to further education and a profession, while still imparting a stable cultural identity. Despite these good intentions, Khanty parents have remained, so far, skeptical of this type of school. They have no confidence that education can both provide access to the Russian-dominated urban sphere and also enable children to live a traditional life in the taiga (Golovnev 1993: 94f, Kravchenko 1994: 44).

A different kind of effort has been implemented by the Nenets poet Yuri Vella, who has rejected the boarding school system for the children of reindeer breeders. Drawing upon the experience of early nomadic schools in the Soviet North, the so-called “Red Chum”, which taught children and adults in their usual living environments (in their camps), Vella has brought in a private tutor to live in his camp and to teach his grandchildren. During the course of one winter the children acquired so much knowledge that they were promoted to the next grade after passing examinations at the local boarding school. Although the children are following the Russian curriculum, they are not alienated from their traditional environment. As Yuri Vella says metaphorically, “the reindeer themselves show the reindeer breeder’s children how to tame them.”

The so-called “ethnographic summer holiday camps” are aimed at acquainting children with the traditional lifestyle and the cultural heritage of the indigenous population. These children are learning effortlessly about life in the traditional forest environment. The target group, in this case, is mainly children who do not otherwise get the chance to become acquainted with the traditional lifestyle through their parents or grandparents, because they are growing up in large settlements or towns.

The idea of a “radio school”, the brainchild of academic Leonti Taragupta, has been proposed for children who live dispersed across the taiga. The contents of the school subjects would be broadcast regularly by radio to taiga encampments. Meanwhile, mobile teachers would travel across the taiga from camp to camp to assess how well children are learning. Such a radio school could also be useful for adult education.

A program to revive the so-called *faktorii*, developed by a group of academics from Surgut University, offers a compromise between the models mentioned above and the boarding school system. It involves establishing points of supply with medical, trade and educational institutions close to the traditional camp sites (Prodan et al. 1992: 4). This model would enable closer contacts between parents and children. At the same time, life at the *faktoriya* would be organized to harmonize with indigenous culture. The program also proposes a monthly rotation of children between the school and the home camp. The question of transportation remains the main problem. Above all, besides introducing new teaching methods and new media, the idea is to improve cooperation between parents and school staff. All of these new alternative school models face the problem of how to find and attract qualified teachers and educators to work in the taiga. Besides inadequate material support and the strain on physical resources, the low prestige of indigenous culture is a significant negative factor.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have to concede that there is obviously no such thing as a typical “Khanty school”. Various groups, which differ in social status and in the way their ethnic identity has been shaped, have different needs for school education. Even the best-intentioned reform of the school system cannot prevent the social marginalization of the indigenous population and their loss of cultural identity. Schools cannot impart what should be achieved through the family and social environment. All indigenous people engaged in reforming the education system have a single aim: to give Khanty children the same educational opportunities as the children of immigrants enjoy, and to do this by means of alternative school concepts that neither tear them from their social context nor alienate them from their cultural identity.

Notes

1) The society is moving from the urban environment to teleparticipation (Canclini 1988: 270). In Siberia and in Russia in general, most people do not have any alternative to Russian TV- and radio programs, both for technical reasons and because of poor knowledge of foreign languages.

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