“There’s No Book and There’s No Guide”: The Expressed Needs of Qallunaat Educators in Nunavut

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Abstract

Non-Inuit educators in five communities in Nunavut expressed frustration about the lack of culturally relevant curriculum and resources, the unsuitability of these materials for students whose first language is Inuktitut, and their own lack of ability to teach Inuit students effectively. Although these are symptomatic of larger problems, we recommend that the Nunavut Department of Education prioritize the creation of culturally relevant, ESL-sensitive curriculum and resources, institute an orientation to Inuit culture for all non-Inuit teachers, and provide regular inservicing to help them teach Inuit students effectively.

Résumé

Les éducatrices et éducateurs non-Inuit dans cinq communautés du Nunavut ont exprimé leur frustration devant le manque de programmes d'études et de ressources qui reflètent la culture Inuit et qui soient adaptés aux élèves dont la langue maternelle est l'Inuktitut. Les éducatrices et éducateurs déplorent également leur incapacité à enseigner adéquatement à ces élèves. Quoique leurs besoins exprimés ne constituent qu'une partie de problèmes plus larges, nous recommandons que le département de l'Éducation du Nunavut mette en priorité la création de programmes d'études et de ressources appropriés à la culture et à la langue Inuit, l'orientation à la culture Inuit pour les enseignantes et enseignants qui viennent de l'extérieur et un développement professionnel continu pour les aider à enseigner en tenant compte du contexte culturel de leurs élèves.

Situating the Author

In 1997, at the start of my teaching career, I was hired to teach grade seven on Baffin Island in Nunavut (then the Northwest Territories). I was sent a package

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containing *The Inuit Way* (Boult, n.d.), a short guide to Inuit culture, and *Inuuqatigiit: The Curriculum from the Inuit Perspective* (Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment [NWTECE], 1996). On arrival, I learned that most of my grade seven students had been taught in Inuktitut until grade five; my expectations of student progress had to be modified, as most students' English skills were limited, and I had no knowledge of Inuktitut.

In the school I found no curriculum documents for art, music, science, or math, and several documents that had been adopted from southern provinces or created in Yellowknife. They were of limited use to me as a teacher. Most of the curriculum was beyond my students' abilities, seemed irrelevant to their lives, or was beyond my ability to teach since it dealt with traditional Inuit knowledge. The documents served, at best, to guide some of my decisions, and at worst, in the complete absence of documents, I had to decide what, when, and how to teach. I often felt unqualified, poorly prepared, and bereft of adequate resources (although without a viable curriculum to follow, I had immense freedom).

For two years I struggled, invented, and modified existing curricula and resources to try to meet the needs of my students and help them learn. I often encountered student resistance and sometimes became frustrated, but enjoyed living and teaching in Nunavut. I felt privileged to work with two groups of amazing students, but was disturbed by the almost total lack of formal discussion at any level around shared frustrations and obstacles of teaching in Nunavut. Even more worrisome, the problematic role of Qallunaat (non-Inuit) educators and Qallunaat-based schools (schools structured on southern Canadian norms) in Inuit communities was never formally named or discussed.

This discontent provided the motivation for my master's thesis, *Adaptations of EuroCanadian Schools to Inuit Culture in Selected Communities in Nunavut* (Berger, 2001), a review of practices designed to ensure schools fit their Inuit students. In this article, Qallunaat voices from that study are highlighted, voices calling for an understanding of Inuit culture (especially as it relates to education), relevant curriculum and resources, and ESL strategies to reach students whose first language is Inuktitut.

A word of caution before continuing. Greater success teaching Inuit students in Qallunaat schools is not unproblematic, as increased assimilation and loss of culture may result (Darder, 1991; Doige, 1999; Ogbu, 1992). Culture-based schooling may be imperative for cultural survival (Lipka, 1991; Simon, 1996; Stairs, 1994). Authentic community involvement in determining the aims of schooling is needed (Berger, 2001; Epp, & Moeller, in press), and the colonial history/present of schooling in the Canadian Arctic must inform considerations of formal education in Nunavut. Qallunaat teachers' calls for help should be

seen as symptomatic of problems that run much deeper than inadequate training and resources.

Brief History of Schooling in Nunavut

The earliest schools, dating back 100 years but covering few parts of the Eastern Arctic, were mission schools with curriculum and methods chosen by the missionaries, few of whom were trained teachers (Van Meenen, 1994). Beginning in the 1950s, Qallunaat schools were imposed on the Inuit as part of the Canadian government's plan to move them from the land into settlements (Crago & Eriks-Brophy, 1994; Tester & Kulchyski, 1994), and the EuroCanadian system of education was superimposed on the Inuit way (Douglas, 1994). At their inception, "in the absence of any official, standardized curriculum, [teachers] were expected to create their own" (Van Meenen, 1994, p. 174, 175), but regions in the Northwest Territories soon adopted the curriculum of the adjoining southern provinces. By 1960 satisfactory curricula still had not been developed and there were few local teachers (Jenness, 1964; Van Meenen). By 1965, there were many curriculum documents that included northern themes, but "they still did not directly relate to Inuit culture" (Van Meenen, p. 235), and in 1971, a federal study "found that children in northern schools could not relate to the existing teaching materials" (Van Meenen, p. 251).

The 1970s saw more attention focused on the question of culture in Inuit education. A series of studies called the very structure of the school system into question and blamed schools for the loss of Inuit culture. Poor teacher preparation was cited, with criticism levelled at the standard orientation period which lasted only two or three weeks for new teachers hired from the south (Arctic Institute of North America, 1973, p. 136). Van Meenen (1994) commented that "this process of recruiting and 'preparing' teachers almost guaranteed that they would not have an appreciation for their students or their way of life" (p. 261), and wrote that the government take-over of education from the missionaries led to the single-minded purpose of integrating the Inuit into mainstream Canadian society.

In 1982, the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly Special Committee on Education [NWT LASCE] tabled its report, *Learning Tradition and Change in the Northwest Territories*, which called for substantial modifications to the educational system. The report was written in English and Inuktitut, and hearings were held to encourage Inuit input. Among its many recommendations was a call for the decentralization of curriculum control, noting that "there is an immense gap between the Department of Education's conception and production of a curriculum and its implementation in the

classrooms” (p. 34). It recommended that curriculum development be delegated to the divisional boards of education (p. 73) with input from parents and teachers (p. 77), based on research and systematic observation by teachers (p. 81).

Fourteen years later, after broad consultation, the first ‘Inuit’ curriculum was released. *Inuuqatigiit: The Curriculum from the Inuit Perspective* (NWTECE, 1996) discussed Inuit values and named the traditional knowledge, skills, and attitudes that children should learn in each grade. Unfortunately, most of the Qallunaat teachers in Nunavut, which include virtually all intermediate and senior teachers, are unqualified to teach this curriculum.

The history of schooling in the area now called Nunavut has been one of Canadian Government self-interest (Tester & Kulchyski, 1994), unqualified and under-prepared teachers (Arctic Institute of North America, 1973; NWT LASCE, 1982; Van Meenen, 1994), and inadequate curriculum and resources (NWT LASCE, 1982; Van Meenen, 1994). It has contributed to the poor performance of Nunavut schools and the ‘underachievement’ of Nunavut students (NSDC, 2000; Wright, Taylor, & Ruggiero, 1996).

Methodology

The larger study (Berger, 2001), on which this draws, intended to document adaptations made or desired to better fit Qallunaat schools to Inuit culture. The schools employ predominantly Inuit teachers at the primary level, and predominantly Qallunaat teachers at the intermediate and senior levels, while about 90% of students are Inuit. Educators in nine schools in five communities in the Kivalliq region of Nunavut were invited to participate when the first author, Paul Berger, was in each of the communities for several days. Twenty educators, including four student-teachers, took part in taped interviews, and eight more spoke to Berger informally, after which he wrote field notes.

Only one interview participant was Inuit. The small number of Inuit participants was predictable, given the research design. As a white outsider, Berger had no special ties to these communities, and spent too little time in each one to allow trust to build between him and the Inuit teachers. Trust is thought to be essential for researchers in indigenous settings who hope to hear indigenous voices (Steinhauer, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Weber-Pillwax, 1999). Because the research design resulted in few Inuit participants, data primarily represented Qallunaat views. In this article we explore the expressed needs of Qallunaat educators. It would be very valuable to study the needs of Inuit educators, but we do not do this here.

The study sample constituted over 10% of the region's Qallunaat educators. Although the study sample was small and non-random, the common recurrence of some ideas indicates that data represented the views of many Qallunaat educators in the region. Small samples have legitimacy in exploratory studies, in areas lacking extensive research (Clifton & Roberts, 1988; LoBiondo-Wood & Haber, 1998). Still, participants in the study were self-selected; those who did not volunteer may not have supported the idea of adapting schooling to Inuit culture. This would likely mean that their views regarding what is needed in order to improve schooling would also be different. Although we don't claim generalizability to all educators in Nunavut, we are confident that many Qallunaat educators share similar concerns.

Although the initial intent of the study was to focus on current and desired ways to fit the schools to their Inuit students (Berger, 2001), during the interviews most of the Qallunaat participants spent at least some time speaking of crisis and frustration. Like Errante's (2000) respondents who didn't always follow her expected scripts, unanticipated stories emerged repeatedly around pleas for help in understanding Inuit culture and in teaching ESL students. These commonly and strongly expressed needs are here explored from a critical perspective, and related to the literature on cross-cultural education.

Findings and Discussion

We present findings under two major headings: curriculum and resources, and orientation and inservicing. We prioritise participants' voices (in italics), as they convey the urgency of the situation perceived by many Qallunaat teachers in Nunavut.

Curriculum and Resources

We realized that the curriculum in the older grades, especially in social studies, was the Alberta curriculum and they weren't interested in it. It didn't grab them at all. Now maybe it's stuff they should learn; maybe the French Revolution has its importance, but they don't get enough geography, and geography is one of the subjects which can be used. Inuit are good at it because it involves what their life is about. The land, maps, GPS, rocks, weather; all this sort of stuff is something which comes naturally to our kids but we don't get to teach it.

This participant said that a course on the geography of Nunavut was being developed, another felt that many of the curriculum documents had already

been 'northernized' to some degree, and one said that Nunavut educators are good at modifying southern curricula. Still, most of the participants expressed frustration with the existing curriculum, characterizing it as culturally inappropriate, a mismatch with students' interests and abilities. More 'Inuit' content was desired: *"now that we have the Department of Education... they should realize that Inuuqatigiit is just the beginning; you know, we need a lot more."* One said that ample funds are available to hire guides and Elders to support teaching from Inuuqatigiit, but said that *"it takes a lot of work outside the classroom to organize those things."*

Although the necessity of modifying curricula and resources was frequently cited, there were many who said that new, culturally appropriate curriculum was necessary: *"if it's totally the wrong curriculum and it doesn't fit this culture, then maybe we do need to develop our own stuff,"* and, *"they cannot modify their current curriculum for the simple fact that it's too culturally specific to the South."* More Northern and more Nunavut content were desired, and English language arts curricula that included Inuit legends and stories, an idea supported by *Inuuqatigiit*. Educator awareness of the problematic nature of southern curricula contrasts Goddard's (2002) findings that many individuals in northern Saskatchewan and Alberta do not believe that culturally appropriate curriculum is necessary. The self-selection of the participants may be responsible for that, as educators who did not support the goal of fitting the schools to Inuit students likely did not take part in the study.

Many authors have discussed the need for culturally relevant curriculum (LaFrance, 1994; Stairs, 1994; Watahomigie & McCarty, 1994; Williamson, 1987) that relates "to the experiences and interests of the child" (Crago, Eriks-Brophy, Pesco, & McAlpine, 1997, p. 251). This does not mean insularity; Stairs (1994) cautioned against allowing 'culture' to suggest a too limited curriculum. But the reality of the unsuitability of curriculum and resources in Nunavut was obvious. As one participant said:

Here I am reading a story about little squirrels jumping from tree to tree and...a lot of these kids don't ever see trees...first of all you have to explain what a tree is, then you have to explain what a squirrel is, and by then they've kind of lost the flow of the whole story.

As great as the lack of relevant resources in English was, several participants noted an even greater lack of Inuktitut resources. To date, those teaching in Inuktitut have been expected to translate and adapt many English

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resources, although the NWT LASCE (1982) report cautioned that “Native-language teaching material cannot be prepared by merely translating existing English material” (p. 93).

Beyond specific concerns about adapting curricula and resources to be culturally and geographically relevant, participants raised broader issues. One spoke of the need for continuity between design, resources, and implementation of curriculum:

I think you have to identify the resources, time, days, and free up teachers. I think the best people to do this are classroom teachers, but you've gotta have commitment from higher up, from the regional boards, and/or Education Nunavut to get this stuff done, and they're going to have to put some dollars out. I sound like a broken record, but I'll say forever that the North, all these little Arctic communities, that they are under-funded and under-serviced education-wise in perpetuity...and until the greater authorities and jurisdictions decide to put some money on education it's going to get worse.

The concerns about the lack of curricular relevance are not new. Van Meenen (1994) cited a 1971 study that found that students couldn't relate to the teaching materials. In 1973, The Arctic Institute of North America said that new curriculum was being developed, taking culture into account. In 1982, the NWT LASCE report recognized the gap between curriculum conception, production, and implementation (p. 34), and stated that historically, inadequate resources had been dedicated to curriculum development (p. 75). It recommended that community members, classroom teachers, curriculum specialists, linguists and language specialists take part in curriculum development (p. 80, 98), and noted the lack of curricula in Inuktitut (p. 81). It also acknowledged that local teachers “can develop useful programs and teaching materials on their own” (p. 81), and suggested that these be shared and distributed. Curriculum invention and intense resource creation were mentioned by many participants, although these were default strategies rather than ones which were reported to be recognized or supported by policy.

Teachers also expressed frustration at the inadequacy of curriculum, resources, and teacher training for educators in an ESL environment: “*I think what I need is probably a little help on ESL, because I started to teach like I was teaching in the South and it's not possible.*” The NWT LASCE (1982) report recommended that funding be made available for the development of ESL

programs, resources, and to increase the number of professional development days to provide in-service ESL training (p. 19). The report warned that few teachers had any training in teaching ESL, that resources had primarily been intended for those whose mother tongue was English, and that “teaching English, and only English, as if it were a Native child’s first language is detrimental to learning” (p. 97). Participants’ views suggest that little has changed:

I was not prepared for what I found when I came up here, and that was basically that these students are being treated as if they don’t speak Inuktitut as a first language. Right now I’m being paid to teach English Language Arts - what I’m doing is creating my own path as I go through this curriculum...they’ve introduced the new curriculum this year, the WELA program, and there’s no recognition whatsoever that these kids speak Inuktitut...I cannot follow the curriculum.

The NWT LASCE report stated that teachers untrained in ESL might “mistakenly regard some children as retarded and in need of remedial work” (p. 98) and Sharp (1994) wrote that indigenous people may be labelled as “handicapped” by dominant culture teachers who do not realize that the ‘problem’ is of an ESL nature.

Many of the Qallunaat teachers in the study seemed well aware that language problems, and their inability to deal with them effectively, were important influences in the classroom. One said that she looks at her grade 5 curricula, “*but I certainly cannot teach the concepts, they simply don’t have the vocabulary.*” Van Meenen (1994) wrote that ESL materials were created for use in Eastern Arctic classrooms, yet many participants commented on their absence. Over twenty years ago the NWT LASCE (1982) report suggested scrutinizing existing materials to determine what could be adapted for use in the north (p. 100). Although they recommended that ESL specialists and board representatives do this work, many participants reported that teachers do this work themselves.

Qallunaat educators overwhelmingly expressed the strong desire for culturally relevant, ESL sensitive curriculum and resources.

Orientation and Inservicing

While it may never be possible, and may not be desirable for Southern teachers to act like Inuit (Lipka, 1989), an orientation to culture and inservicing to help Southern teachers understand their students and teach them effectively was recommended by many. One favoured an orientation “*by somebody who has*

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been up here for 10 to 15 years or more...somebody who knows the culture, somebody who knows what the problems are. That's a necessity." Others echoed that sentiment:

There's a big need for some kind of...an inservice. I don't think it's in existence. You walk into the classroom the first day - what do you do? You're not prepared for this kind of stuff, and there's no book and there's no guide. Most of the kids haven't got a clue what you're talking about.

One thing that we need to go back to is an orientation. That was very successful. It was mandatory for us to come for at least a week before school started. Somebody would meet us, get us set up; each day something was planned. We met people, went to schools, pronounced kids' names. We were briefed on things to avoid, and went out on the land for a fish fry and tented for several days. 'Here's a connection to what life is like in the north'...we haven't done it for years now...it hasn't been on the agenda...that's unfortunate.

The literature is replete with calls for an adequate orientation and ongoing inservicing to ensure that Southern teachers in the North have some understanding of Inuit culture and sound teaching approaches for use with Inuit students. In 1973, the Arctic Institute of North America reported that teachers in the North were not properly prepared to do their jobs, and called for an extension of the two to three week orientation. In 1982, the NWT LASCE report recommended that "a teacher orientation program shall be established immediately" (p. 109), the previous one having been abandoned. It cautioned that:

Disciplinary problems may also occur in conflicts of will between persons of different cultures, as might happen when a new teacher arrives without proper preparation in a small community...Southern teachers come to northern schools with little or no knowledge of the Native cultures, little or no training in cross-cultural education, little or no understanding of instruction in a second language, and unable to make use of a classroom assistant. Turnover among these teachers is high and interrupts the continuity of education programs.
(p. 29, 31)

Stairs (1991) noted that in the absence of a Southern teacher orientation to student learning expectations, it is the students who suffer the consequences. She wrote that teachers' "ways of teaching are as important as the knowledge itself" (p. 287). Kawagely (1993) also wrote: "teachers must be willing to learn at least the rudiments of the Native language and culture in order to do an effective job of teaching" (p. 162).

Even if Southern teachers are not able to emulate Inuit discourse styles, it is beneficial for educators to learn about those patterns (Corson, 1992; Crago, 1992; Douglas, 1994). Crago viewed the learning of a second language as synonymous with the learning of a second culture, and wrote "school becomes a form of secondary socialization where the pragmatics of the first language interfere with the learning of the second language" (p. 488). For instance, she reported that a parent apologized at an interview when the teacher said that the son was "talking well in class" (p. 496). Reticence to speak was misperceived by some teachers as a language difficulty; being socialized *not* to speak too much to adults is a cultural rather than a purely linguistic factor which may slow Inuit children's acquisition of English.

Crago (1992), Leavitt (1991), Roberts, Clifton and Wiseman (1989), Watahomigie and McCarty (1994), and Williamson (1987) all mentioned the necessity of an orientation or inservicing for successful teaching in minority cultural settings. In one community in Nunavut, Tompkins (1998) ran orientation sessions to help her Qallunaat staff learn about Inuit culture. While an orientation and continuing support would not ensure that teachers would be able to respond appropriately to Inuit students, the lack of them virtually guarantees that misunderstandings and frustrations will occur, and that teaching will be less effective than it could be.

Summary and Recommendations

Stakeholders in the communities need to have input into the aims of education in Nunavut schools (Armstrong, Bennet, & Grenier, 1997; Barnhardt, 1999; Berger, Epp, & Moeller, in press; Lipka, 1994; Stairs, 1994). What follows is a summary and recommendations for improving practices in the problematic, but currently existing, Qallunaat-based Nunavut school.

Participants in the study did not feel that teachers had all the tools that they required to do their jobs well. The lack of an orientation to Inuit culture, the lack of appropriate curricula and relevant resources, and the lack of training for teaching ESL students were all repeatedly cited. We strongly recommend that an orientation period, and continuing inservicing to prepare

and support Qallunaat teachers for their work in schools with Inuit students, be instituted. A comprehensive orientation package should be available to introduce teachers to Inuit culture, and to present current best practices from the ESL and Inuit education literatures. An obligatory, paid orientation could start each school year to compensate for the probable lack of extensive multicultural and ESL training in applicants' and current teachers' backgrounds. Ongoing inservicing will be needed to support this beginning (Spillane, 1999), and in order to address needs of educators as they arise throughout the year. This could be modelled after Tompkins' (1998) approach, where the District Education Authority approved bi-weekly early closures, and where Inuit and Qallunaat staff learned from each other.

Many participants were unsatisfied with the lack of culturally relevant curricula, both in Inuktitut, and ESL-sensitive in English. Many related the necessity of heavily modifying curriculum, and of creating their own curricula and resources. A major emphasis on the development of culturally relevant and ESL-sensitive curricula and resources in both languages should be undertaken. Concurrent with Department of Education and regional level efforts for curriculum and resource development, release time could be provided to all educators who apply for it for the purpose of polishing and sharing their best resources. Thus, a resource base would grow which was created and tested at relatively low cost at the grassroots level.

The creation and existence of quality resources means little if there are no effective mechanisms in place to distribute them, and to ensure that educators are aware of their existence. Ideally, resources would be coupled with inservicing, and each school would maintain a library of practical and theoretical materials relevant to education in Northern settings.

Conclusion

Educators in the study showed commitment, flexibility, and creativity, but expressed frustration at their inability to support student learning in a satisfying way. In December of 2003, Berger visited the school in Nunavut where he had taught. He had déjà vu. In spite of years of recognition of these problems, they remain.

Qallunaat teachers in Nunavut need an orientation to Inuit culture, help with ESL strategies, more relevant curriculum and resources, and ongoing training for effective cross-cultural teaching. These things would begin to address some of the symptoms of a much larger problem (Berger, Epp, & Moeller, in press).

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