Discourses of Cultural Relevance in Nunavut Schooling

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Academic discourse relating to the cultural relevance of indigenous education is ever expanding both nationally in Canada and internationally. Reflecting upon recent research data as well as lived experience as a teacher educator in Nunavut, I offer a critique of some well-established beliefs connected to considerations of culturally appropriate schooling within indigenous school contexts. Specifically, the relationships between cultural relevance and sameness, place and community are explored in a discussion of educational change within the Canadian arctic territory of Nunavut.

Locating Nunavut

The Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, a national aboriginal rights organization, proposed in 1976 the creation of the territory of Nunavut as part of a comprehensive Inuit land-rights settlement in the Northwest Territories. Slowly, methodically, and strategically, Inuit leaders negotiated with the federal government until the Nunavut Agreement was signed on May 25, 1993. This agreement represents the largest land-rights settlement in Canada—covering one fifth of Canada's land mass (Kusugak, 2000). The signed Nunavut political accord of 1992 contained a commitment to the creation of the Nunavut territory in 1999. The enactment of the Nunavut territorial legislation was a significant historical event for all aboriginal peoples in Canada. As Jose Kusugak, one of the original land claims negotiators, pointed out,

> [f]or the first time since the Metis secured the creation of Manitoba, Canada's internal map will be changed for the purpose of empowering a specific aboriginal group (Kusugak, 2000, p. 22).

Nunavut has a population of approximately 26,000 people, with about 85% of this population being persons of Inuit heritage. There are 41 schools in 27 communities spread over a huge arctic land mass containing three time zones. Of the approximately 541 certified teachers, 26% are Inuit educators (mostly in the elementary grades). There are very few Inuit classroom teachers at the secondary level (Aylward, 2004a).

Nunavut Schooling Context

In 1994, I accepted a job as a teacher education instructor in the Nunavut Teacher Education Program (NTEP), a community-based program delivered by Nunavut Arctic College and accredited through McGill University. The main purpose of the program is to prepare Inuit teachers for employment in the elementary schools of Nunavut. At that time, the territorial government's teacher education strategy aimed to provide a workforce of teachers representative of the population. This resulted in efforts to educate 317 Inuit teachers by the time the territory of Nunavut was created in 1999 (GNWT, 1998). As a teacher educator, I was consistently confronted with questions as to the value, quality, and maintenance of Inuit language and culture in the Nunavut public school system. My experiences with the Nunavut Teacher Education Program brought home the realization that in many community schools, Inuit language and culture frequently are acknowledged in celebrations and special events but rarely seen as substantively contributing to "official knowledge" (Apple, 1993).

In August 1999, the first Nunavut government cabinet formulated *Pinasuaqtavut*, or "that which we have set out to do," a 5-year plan also known as the Bathurst mandate. In this mandate, renewed in 2004, the Government of Nunavut made a formal commitment to use *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*

as its foundation (Government of Nunavut, 2000; 2004). *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* is an Inuit epistemology that cannot genuinely make the translation from Inuktitut to English in all its richness. "I.Q.," as it has been nicknamed in *qallunaatitut* (English), is holistic and was first defined by Louis Tapardjuk of the Nunavut Social Development Council as "all aspects of traditional Inuit culture including values, world-view, language, social organization, knowledge, life skills, perceptions, and expectations. I.Q. is as much a way of life as it is sets of information" (Nunavut Social Development Council, 1998).

Since 1999, the Department of Education, as well as other departments within the Nunavut Government, have attempted to use I.Q. principles to guide policy and planning. The education reform agenda includes rewriting the Education Act, implementing stronger bilingual education models, and creating culturally relevant curricula for all grade levels K-12 (Nunavut Department of Education, 2000a). Discerning what is relevant within Nunavut schools has become the all-consuming task at hand. With the birth of Nunavut came an exponential increase in expectations from the public regarding school change—how curriculum and programs could become better connected to the realities and lived experiences of northern residents. Nunavut is not alone in this struggle. In the past decade, there has been considerable and focused political and social movement within many aboriginal communities to claim legitimate space for indigenous knowledges within formal schooling practices (Battiste, 2002; Bishop, 2003; Lipka, J., Mohatt, G. V. & Ciulistet Group, 1998).

Indigenous Knowledges and Curriculum

Curriculum in most Canadian schools lacks the critical orientation that helps students understand the work accomplished through dominant discourses of race, culture, and difference (Willinsky, 1998; 1999). As Hickling-Hudson and Ahlquist (2003) noted in their case studies of indigenous schooling in Australia and the United States, "discourses of power cannot be taught by means of an uncritical curriculum" (p. 84). Worldwide, indigenous knowledges have been framed by western epistemological and curricular constructs as subjugated knowledges (Barnhardt, 2001; Brant Castellano, Davis & Lahache, 2000; Hampton, 1993; Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). Therefore, it is necessary that educators interrogate and continually question how institutions legitimate and organize knowledge. What knowledges count? Whose knowledges count? In the Nunavut context, subjugation and the lack of a critical orientation to curriculum development is evidenced in the power relations around efforts to include Inuit language and culture in academic curriculum and programs.

Globally, within indigenous educational discourse, a call has been made for educators to offer "multiple and collective readings of the world" that take into account local specificities and a deep understanding of indigenous groups' cultural resource knowledges (Dei, 2000). Representing the local or indigenous community knowledges and decentering European cultural knowledges, histories, and experiences has been shown to be part of effective school practice and transformation (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson & Zine, 2000). Dei et al. propose that educators seriously consider the school context in order to plan for the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum. The authors state that appropriately teaching indigenous knowledges means being responsive to issues of credibility, accountability, practice, relevance, sustainability, appropriation, validation, and legitimation.

Eurocentric public schooling in Canada perpetuates damaging myths about indigenous peoples and, through "cognitive imperialism" and "cognitive assimilation," has contributed to the limitations of indigenous students' potential (Battiste, 1986; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Iseke-Barnes, 2005). Marie Battiste, a Mik'maq scholar, describes the process of cognitive imperialism as the imposition of a Eurocentric worldview on aboriginal people. This cognitive manipulation has denied indigenous groups their language and cultural integrity by consistently validating and legitimating one dominant language and culture. As Adrienne Rich put it in *Invisibility in Academe*, "[w]hen someone with the authority of teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing" (quoted in Battiste, 2000, p. 198).

Assimilation and Imperialism in Nunavut Education

For many years, cultural genocide was enacted by the government-backed, church-run, residential school system in northern Canada. Even after the closing of residential schools, the Canadian government remained dissatisfied with the academic progress of Inuit students and placed the blame on the children—their homes, their values, and their perceived learning potential (VanMeenen, 1994).

In 1972, the first northern curriculum guides were created for elementary education. The curriculum represented attempts at reform undertaken by non-indigenous educational officials advocating for the "indigenization" of the existing territorial curriculum (Gorlick, 1981). According to Gorlick, the curriculum program became

> a noble cause to eradicate the educational biases against the indigenous child. Fairness, justice, and innovation were their platform. First, there was general compliance (since it was positioned as immoral not to agree), then more active resistance followed by withdrawal (Gorlick, 1981, p. 322).

In studying this failed school change effort, Gorlick identified how cultural hegemony was achieved through the construction of "professional imperialism" and the presence of "symbolic manipulation." Professional imperialism existed in the ways political rhetoric and systemic actions worked to establish the professional expertise of various social and educational services as essential for indigenous peoples; symbolic manipulation was present in the development of policies that maintained this professional authority.

Cognitive and professional imperialism and cognitive manipulation have played a significant role in the educational policies of the northern territories of Canada. The history of the government's policy and action is replete with contradictions, racist assumptions, and superficial community consultation (Aylward, 2006; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). The myth of the "fatal impact" (Bishop & Glynn, 1999) was perpetuated in Canada's north to explain how Inuit society supposedly could not survive the rapid changes brought upon them by the external economic forces and cultural invasions of the entrepreneurial capitalists and Christian soldiers, even though Inuit had demonstrated otherwise. This myth was further justification for government policies of educational assimilation and integration and reinforced a discourse of cultural superiority within northern schooling (King, 1998; VanMeenen, 1994).

Assimilation, through formal religious education of Inuit students, gave way to a more subtle approach in the 1970s of claims to affirm cultural diversity through integration, or the bicultural curricular approach of the "best of both worlds." However, a recurring theme of institutional yearning for "sameness," along with skewed theories of cultural deficiency, cultural deprivation, and cultural difference at work in northern schools, have meant that the philosophy of curriculum integration—mainstream or southern Canadian curriculum "infused" with indigenous knowledge—has become in fact a soft form of cultural and linguistic assimilation in Nunavut (Aylward, 2004a; Martin, 2000).

In response to school curriculum that has been deemed irrelevant and/or inappropriate, Aboriginal scholars and educators are attempting to identify how particular community cultural strengths can be used within school curricula and programs (Annahatak, 1994; Knockwood, 2004). How indigenous knowledge is constructed in Nunavut mainstream school curricula may be better understood through an examination of the interplay of the various discourses of cultural relevance present.

Discourses of Cultural Relevance

A critical guide to the academic discourse of cultural relevance and curriculum can be found in the work of Lisa Delpit and Gloria Ladson-Billing around diversity issues and African-American communities' interactions with the institutions of schooling in the United States. In amplifying to audible the "silenced dialogue" of educating other people's children, Delpit (1995) disturbs a liberal humanist definition of equality for all students by highlighting the "culture of power" that is unseen, unheard, and unspoken about in most education settings. Ladson-Billings (1995, 2001) envisions students' ability to stay connected to their cultural heritage as a way for students to be successfully "bicultural"—moving more easily between home and school cultures. Both researchers propose working against the marginalization and "othering" processes that are often prevalent when educational institutions attempt to address cultural difference. Stemming from her work in critical race theory and equity, Ladson-Billings advocates for educators to become more culturally competent. This would mean using the community values of their students and schools as a base for pedagogies while raising their "socio-political consciousness" to avoid an oversimplified and essentialist view of cultures.

Within indigenous schooling contexts, the development of a socio-political consciousness is vital to avoiding what Torres Strait Islander and scholar Martin Nakata (2000) calls the "cultural agenda of indigenous education policy." Following this agenda means using culture as the primary organizing principle and reproducing anthropological constructs of "culture." In addition, Nakata (2000), Delpit (1995), and Ladson-Billings (1995, 2001) recognize the dangers of a discourse of cultural relevance that intermingles with essentialist notions of cultural difference to cause a reinforcement of a "two-race" binary of culturalism within educational decision making. The two-race binary solidly establishes a "self" and an "other," with the self most often appropriated by the white middle-class constituency.

McConaghy (2000) explains the complexities of how, through the reinforcement of this two-race binary, colonialism sustains its place within indigenous educational practice. She challenges educators and researchers to move beyond culturalism by deconstructing and reconstructing how it is possible to "know" indigenous peoples, culture, and indigenous education. McConaghy suggests that the use of postcolonial and postculturalist theories avoids a relapse into oppositional discourses related to cultural relevance and cultural assimilation. In determining the curriculum and program of indigenous and aboriginal schooling, McConaghy warns that "we need also to determine when mainstreaming is a force for social justice and when it is a force for neo-imperialism" (p. 15.). Taking up postcolonial and postculturalist theories within indigenous education troubles the influence and assumptions embedded within the binary of mainstream Eurocentric schooling versus schooling deemed to be culturally relevant. These theories explicitly address the power relations at play in educational curricula and programs—a vital element to consider in planning for sustainable systemic change.

In amplifying the "silenced dialogue" of educating other people's children, Delpit (1995) disturbs an historically dominant liberal humanist discourse of helping to highlight the "culture of power" that is unseen, unheard, and unspoken about in most intercultural educational settings. She argues that in our anxiety over choice of the best instructional methodologies for becoming culturally relevant, the silenced dialogue of power remains unexamined. Haymes (1995) reminds us that an underlying tenet of liberal humanism is the Eurocentric notion of a "common humanity"; human beings are all the same because of their level of autonomy and rationality. I believe it is possible that well-intentioned Nunavut educators and policy planners may be analyzing issues of diversity and cultural relevance through a framework of "sameness" that draws upon essentialist notions of culture. A review of recent Nunavut Department of Education policy as well as data generated from a survey of Nunavut secondary educators provides some evidence for this viewpoint.

Cultural Relevance as Sameness

Nunavut secondary school educators[1] recently participated in *Sivuniksamut*, a comprehensive research and consultation process completed by the Department of Education, which examined the overall structure of Nunavut schools and the changes necessary for improving Nunavut students' graduation options. Responses from Nunavut secondary school educators surveyed clearly indicated support for an additive approach of Inuit cultural inclusion in curriculum, referring to the addition of Inuit cultural content to the existing southern Canadian standard fare. The survey results demonstrated that movements towards graduation options that were more Inuit culture based without adherence to southern Canadian educational institutional curricula and standards would only be acceptable to present Nunavut secondary educators as an "alternative" to an otherwise established system (Aylward, 2004b). Articulations of this kind of "best of both worlds" curricular approach often lead into discussions among educational administrators and policy planners of how Inuit language and culture can be infused into the "naturally superior" southern Canadian school standards so as to ensure employability and responsible citizenship. However, this infusion of indigenous cultural content is what some aboriginal scholars refer to as attempts to make buffalo and rabbit stew with one buffalo and one rabbit, in reference to the power differential at play and the differing levels of recognition of the two ways of knowing (Wilson & Wilson, 2002).

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[1] Questionnaires were sent out to all secondary educators, including administrators, counselors, language specialists, student support assistants, and elders working in the schools. There were 213 responses; 43 of which were Inuit employees. Of the 43 Inuit respondents, eight were classroom teachers.

In Nunavut, constructions of relevance through sameness are also reflected in recent government policy and practice within the Department of Education. *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: A New Philosophy for Education in Nunavut*, published by the Nunavut Department of Education (2000b), states that Inuit language and culture, local knowledge systems, as well as individual students' cultural knowledge all need to be the foundation of curriculum development. The document promotes the creation of an *I.Q.*-centered high school and the flexibility of secondary school graduation options. But this document also states that "a new program of studies need not be the *same* as other jurisdictions; however, it must be considered as equivalent" (p. 2; emphasis added). Related to this call for equivalencies, an analysis of the secondary educators' open-ended responses on the Sivuniksamut questionnaire revealed that the secondary school educators of Nunavut made consistent links between offering multiple graduation pathways for secondary students with the desire to maintain academic standards judged as equal to those of the southern Canadian provinces.

The secondary school questionnaires also netted many suggestions with respect to programs, activities, or courses that would help keep students in school. A review of the approximately 90 responses in this category revealed that only a minority (less than 10) of responses could be considered unique to the Nunavut schooling context. The majority of responses listed were similar to those documented in much of the literature related to the students labeled as "at risk" learners (Thomson, 2002). The category of "at risk" in education has in many ways only served to expand the margins of educational practice for further exclusion of those students considered "other" (Fine, 1990). In attempting to address the needs of the "other," deficit discourses can promote the fixing of "broken" students as a major educational goal within aboriginal education, which in turn contributes to constructions of what Jester (2002) has named the "unhealthy native."

Based on some of the policy positions of the Government of Nunavut and the opinions of the secondary educators' surveyed, curricular and policy changes that consider cultural relevance may only be acceptable within Nunavut education if they translate into equivalencies judged to meet southern Canadian educational institutions definitions of academic excellence. Immediately, one has to wonder how different or culturally relevant the Nunavut education experience can be while intertwined with these discursive formations of standardization and homogenization. Currently around the globe, initiatives aimed at infusing indigenous knowledge into public schooling are in collision with the forces of educational standardization and accountability that are consistently being deployed as moves claiming to address issues of equality (May & Aikman, 2003; McCarty, 2003). Being bilingual (English-Inuktitut) and having a strong foundation of Inuit traditional knowledge are devalued within

these frameworks of standardization. The requirement of sameness as it applies to graduating Grade 12 Canadians could be considered a barrier to any substantive systemic school change in Nunavut.

The call for Canadian national education standards has never been stronger. This pursuit of standards hails discourses of what Bear Nicholas (2001) calls "internal colonialism" for many aboriginal communities. The move to national common curricula has also prompted important questions regarding who is defining school success and how (Canadian Association of Principals, 2004; Platt, 2004; Robertson & Ireland 2004). The multiple meanings and assumptions embedded within excellence and standards discourses present within the Nunavut education context are indicators of normalizing discursive strategies that promote the achievement of equality through sameness. Perhaps there are other ways to frame cultural relevance within indigenous education—ways that offer more possibility and less potential for reductionist practices. Ruminations on community and place may present those kinds of productive spaces.

Cultural Relevance, Community, and Place

Discussions of culturally relevant schooling within indigenous and aboriginal school settings tend to focus on culture as ethnicity or race rather than taking up the more complex perspectives of cultural negotiation, hybridization, and the sociocultural dimensions of relationships within a community (McConaghy, 2000; Nakata, 1998). In some ways, considerations of the cultural relevance of school curricula and programs rely too heavily on theories of cultural difference and not enough on those concerning community and place.

Anne Douglas (1998), using an educational anthropological framework, compared the socialization processes of one Nunavut community to the socialization processes of the school with respect to social organization, social roles, and social control. As the title of her dissertation states, she found "there's life and then there's school." However, distinctive in Douglas' study was her focus on the dynamics of the northern community—on *place*. Studies of cultural relevance within indigenous and aboriginal school settings often frame up an argument for infusing indigenous community values, beliefs, and practices *into* the institution of schooling. The issue of integration is usually centered on the challenges of incorporating community resources into school curriculum and programs. Often missing is a substantive consideration of the community as a particular place and space that contribute much more to schooling than posing as a touchstone, cultural baseline, or mere background to the important work of "real" education.

Researchers working with Aboriginal communities on environmental projects and explorations of sustainability offer a potentially useful analytic tool for deconstructing

educators' obsession with culture and multiculturalism within schooling while reorienting us to place. Cameron, Milligan, and Wheatley (2004) describe localized environmental action aimed at building a "place-responsive society." Drawing on Malpas' (1999) philosophical investigations of place, the researchers propose reconsidering the relationship between place and experience. Place is not experienced but rather is a complex structure that makes human experience possible. Place can then be considered as an ongoing dynamic that deeply connects to the everyday life of teachers and students and moves beyond geographical considerations with regard to Nunavut education, for example, and engages with the relationships and socially constructed realities of place (Casey 1997; Schubert, 2004).

"Place-based education" approaches to pedagogy and curriculum also offer some hope for disrupting notions of place and community within aboriginal schooling contexts. Being place- and community-relevant within school curricula takes up methodologies of cultural studies, problem-based learning, environmental education, and entrepreneurship (Smith, 2002). For Alaskan scholars Kawagley and Barnhardt (1997), developing education indigenous to place legitimates local indigenous knowledges and world views and explores how these are juxtaposed with more dominant scientific perspectives. In this way, the Alaskan Native Knowledge Network of Educators is moving towards "an emphasis on education *in* the culture, rather than education *about* the culture" (Alaska Native Commission, 1994; Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1997, p. 15).

Gruenewald (2003) suggests that an integration of critical pedagogy and place-based education could strengthen the development of an "intense consciousness of place" and work against the dominant educational discourses of standardization. From this perspective he proposes that both "decolonization" and "reinhabitation" would be possible within dislocated communities. He defines decolonization as learning to recognize the disruption and injury of place and reinhabitation as learning to live well in places that have been disrupted and injured. These notions may resonate particularly with the experiences of Nunavut communities as they work to cultivate a post-colonial stance towards systemic educational change (Arnaqaq, Pitsiulak & Tompkins, 1999; Battiste, 1998, 2004). As Gruenewald (2003) notes, a critical pedagogy of place opens up the possibility for important conversations about "what it means to live well in a place" (p. 11).

Living Well in Nunavut

Living well in Nunavut necessitates further considerations of place and community within all aspects of education. However, educators also need to be careful not to put forward what feminist scholar Iris Marion Young (1992) calls the "ideal of community." Young makes the argument

that in our desire for unity, community can become the "normative ideal of political emancipation" (p. 303). Instead, Young, and many others working the margins and borders of intercultural education, suggest that a more meaningful and heterogenous alternative would be a comprehensive politics of difference (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004; Smith, 1999). Whereas the ideal of community may deny difference, a politics of difference within educational policy and curriculum would make it impossible to reduce cultural differences to sameness in the name of unity or equality.

In Nunavut education, taking up a politics of difference in relation to creating culturally relevant schooling necessitates tuning into the particulars of community and place while pushing back the social construction of success, standards, and excellence that draw upon assimilationist and colonial histories. In addition to a politics of difference, the education system in Nunavut can contribute to living well by taking up an ecological model of community to strengthen and support indigenous community-based education (Fettes, 1999). Related to Stairs' (1994) work, Fettes proposes a model whereby indigenous communities work towards a shared cultural negotiation around the context, meaning, and processes of schooling. This approach negates a "single value" model of education so that "effective community-based school is thus obliged to *imagine* a community of its own or, in Stairs' terms, to negotiate one" (Fettes, 1999, p. 36.)

Nunavut needs to reconceptualize and decolonize its educational practices in order to develop shared standards of indigenous community-based education. One way to do this is to question all of the present familiar schooling structures and open everything up for negotiation, including the common understandings of cultural relevance. The Nunavut government has begun this negotiation of schooling by making a commitment to placing Inuit language and culture at the foundation of Nunavut schooling. The principles of *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* are positioned by the Department of Education as central to curriculum and instruction. Indigenous knowledge is working its way into the officially legitimate worlds of curriculum development.

This valuing of *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* is a necessary first step to what the authors of the curriculum from the Inuit perspective—*Inuuqatigiit*—hoped for when they began its implementation in Nunavut schools in 1996. The *Inuuqatigiit* authors promoted a sociocultural and sociostructural view of community-based education such that Inuit culture was given status and power in curriculum development (Aylward, 2006). Efforts to implement the *Inuuqatigiit* curriculum and reorient Nunavut schooling towards an Inuit worldview and away from bicultural or "both ways" (Pence & Ball, 2002) schooling are presently part of an ongoing complex negotiation by Nunavut educators.

Negotiating a better place for Inuit languages has come in the form of a reconsideration and restructuring of bilingual education. Two Government of Nunavut commissioned languages of instruction research projects Qulliq Quvvari-arlugu (Corson, 2000) and Aajjiqatigiingniq (Martin, 2000) revealed what had been known by teachers in community schools for many years: There were serious problems with the ways in which bilingual education was being implemented in Nunavut. As reinforced by the teachers who participated in my own study (Aylward, 2006), there exists a wide range of issues of grave concern regarding Nunavut's bilingual education program including: the levels of teacher competency, home and school language gaps due to language loss, lack of leadership and support, ambiguous standards and systems of accountability, discrimination against Inuit language stream students, and denial of minority language rights.

One of the results of the Languages of Instruction research projects was recognition by the Government of Nunavut that maintenance of the Inuit language would only be possible with deliberate language planning. This realization in turn provoked a new Bilingual Education Strategy (Government of Nunavut, 2002). Distinctive to the plan are the explicit goals of maintaining and promoting the use of Inuit language within all school programs rather than viewing it as a "transition" language utilized only until English competency is achieved. This institutional change in approach to bilingual education is an important development in the Nunavut socio-political context. It represents a significant contribution to the discourse of decolonization and works against the discourse of assimilation as the new bilingual education policy gives authority to the reclaiming of official space for indigenous language in schooling.

Regardless of school efforts to become more culturally relevant and authentic through the development of appropriate and competent systems of learning, there will always be the divisions between "life" and "school." The Nunavut educational challenges discussed here demonstrate how rural and indigenous schools communities would benefit from educators and policy makers deliberating upon constructions of place as they collide with constructions of culture. These collisions, contradictions, and tensions do not have to end with a collapse to the default position of sameness. Education, as public space and experience, is more about community than it is about difference (Fain, 2004). If Nunavut can sustain its commitments to systemic change, then it may be possible for schools to become places of reinhabitation where all can learn to live well.

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