# Southern Teachers Working in Canada's North: The Need for a Relevant Curriculum

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**ABSTRACT** (Press Here for Sound)

Great transition is happening in education in the north for Inuit students, in both program development and teacher orientation for southern, non-Inuit teachers. This article looks at a brief history of the north, the impact of southern intrusion, and how changes taking place today in both curriculum and development will bring about stronger educational experiences for Inuit students in the 21st century.

This article looks at the effects that post-colonization (Battiste, 2004) has had on education in the Arctic from a non-Inuit teacher's perspective. It is a chance for me to start looking at why changes need to be made by Qallunak (southern) teachers in northern classrooms, as well as looking at examples of curriculum changes that are currently taking place and the importance of these alterations. I come to this as a teacher myself, with most of my teaching career being in Nunavik and, for a short period, Nunavut. Working now as a pedagogical counselor and consultant in the north, I have had the pleasure of working with many southern teachers new to this culture; and finally I have had the joy of being involved in many curriculum projects aimed at hopefully improving education for the students of the north.

## An Abbreviated History

This journey starts by looking at the history, albeit a brief overview, of this particular area of the north, Nunavik, which is a provincial territory in Quebec, Canada

(Kativik School Board Social Studies Program, 1997). Nunavik, unlike the federal territory of Nunavut, is under the umbrella of three governments—the Canadian federal government, the Quebec provincial government, and its own local government called Kativik. This, however, is starting to change with the recent signing by all three bodies to create a new government system called the Nunavik government. Unlike Nunavut, which holds its own federal status, Nunavik will still be under the wings of the federal and provincial governments but will have more autonomy than the current Kativik government.

Historically, Nunavik was once called Quebec Nord, and in our southern schools was presented as a "barren land" and populated with the Inuit then called "Eskimos." The nomadic way of living was necessary as the Arctic is a frozen desert so the land base is sand on top and permafrost underneath, making an agrarian society impossible. However, the land was rich with animals, especially seal, walrus, fish, ptarmigan, and other animals that sustained life.

In the 1600s, Rupert, cousin to the King of England, claimed the lands around the Hudson Bay—so named for Henry Hudson, whose men mutinied and left him and his son and loyal followers behind on Digges Island just off the shores of Ivujivik—thus began the invasion of the north by Europeans. Fur was the new gold for Europe, and the best way to get this "gold" was to use the people who knew the land. Trading posts were set up, creating a new kind of economy in the Inuit life, one that did not always benefit the culture. Inuit culture began serving this new economy, and Inuit autonomy on the whole began to slowly erode. This was not the only thing affected by the invasion by the Europeans.

Around the middle 1800s, the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches began to send clergy to the north to convert the Inuit people to Christianity. Along with this attempt to change the spiritual beliefs of the Inuit, came a decision by Anglican missionaries to create a written language for the Inuit. Until this time, Inuktitut was an oral language, rich in its way of preserving the history and ways of the Inuit. Stories had been passed down for many generations, that were both rich and comprehensive. For example, a mere reading of the book *Unraveling the Franklin Mystery: Inuit Testimony* (1983) shows how exacting the stories remained through many generations.

The missionaries decided to borrow the syllabics from the Cree culture, to create a written language for the Inuit. The oral tradition, which had sustained the society so well for thousands of years, was considered insufficient by the Europeans.

The power these ministers wielded for creating and implementing a writing system was another example of the European colonization of the culture. They knew that written language would ultimately help the Christians bring the Bible and other documents to these northern people, thus rooting Christian spirituality in the society in a permanent way. Inuit society was changing.

The nomadic traditions of Inuit culture were altered. By the 1940s and 1950s, the federal government informed the Inuit that if they wanted their government cheques, medical services, and so forth, they would have to move to permanent settlements along the coast of the Hudson Bay, the Hudson Strait (known as the Ungava Coast), and the Ungava Bay. Education was provided mainly in the form of residential schools (in Quebec, the school system for aboriginal students was both federal and provincial). Inuit people were told to wear the E number disks[1] for registration purposes for various government services (*The Voice of the Natives: The Canadian North and Alaska*, Blohm, 2001). Inuit family names were changed to English ones through government intervention. In short, the colonization and erosion of the Inuit culture steadily increased.

This abbreviated colonial history of Nunavik gives a sense of how the strong external controls and outside influences emanating from the South were eroding the culture. The continuing control of the north by government persisted into Canada's modern history, as late as 1972, during which time the government of Quebec, under Premier Robert Bourassa, decided to build a hydroelectric dam on the LaGrande River in Northern Quebec, with future plans to also dam the Great Whale River. This story becomes the centre point in the Quebec secondary four social studies program, and it is why I am relaying it here. I will discuss the social studies program as an example of important curriculum change for Inuit students.

The LaGrande River is in Cree territory and the Great Whale River is in Inuit Territory. Neither the government nor representatives from any of the societies or corporations involved with this hydroelectric dam project made an attempt to contact Cree or Inuit groups to inform them of what was going to happen to their native hunting grounds or homelands before the project began. With little consideration for these people, the government started its multimillion dollar project that would take many years to complete. The project drowned the lands of the Cree and Inuit people, taking away their homes, and affecting the migration of the animals they relied on for food. Finally, the northern people of Quebec, having had enough of government interference in their lives, formed a coalition and fought back.

The leaders of the coalition of Cree and Inuit people were Charlie Watt of Kuujjuaq, now Senator Charlie Watt, and Billie Diamond, Cree chief and leader. This group went before Judge Albert Malouf of Quebec with a demand that the LaGrande River project be stopped so that negotiations could take place. These negotiations ultimately acknowledged the Cree and Inuit as the inhabitants of the north, and allowed their claims to the land to be established. From then on the government had to consult with the Cree and Inuit before the project could go ahead.

In an unprecedented move, Judge Malouf granted an interlocutory injunction supporting the claim of the Inuit and Cree. It stopped the dam project completely. Despite pursuing the project through the appellate court, the government realized that it would have to settle with the two groups. The James Bay Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) was thus created.

## The Changes Begin

Out of the JBNQA the Kativik School Board, Kativik Regional Government, Kativik Housing Board, Kativik Health Board, Kativik Social Services, Kativik Police Force, and so on was born. The future for the people of the north was looking better, but while extensive changes had been made for the Inuit to regain control of their land and culture, many still had huge problems gaining control of their lives. Much damage had been done to the people in terms of cultural and personal self-esteem. It would and will take a great deal of time, perhaps many generations, to right all the wrongs done in the name of "well-meaning" trading, educating, and activities involving trade, education and religious conversion by the south.

## Changes Starting in Education—A New Inuit-Oriented Social Studies Program

In terms of education, the federal and provincial school systems for aboriginal students in Quebec were eliminated and replaced by the Kativik School Board. Plans were made for new schools to be built in each of the communities, though this would take many years to complete. Along with physical ownership of education, the JBNQA made allowances for the Inuit culture to have a direct say in the way education would be handled for their children. The best illustration of this change in Inuit education is in the social studies program.

Until 1989, the program used for social studies in the north was the same as in the south—the Secondary One program focused on geography, Secondary Two on

history and Secondary Three on geography again. In all the curriculum documents there was barely a mention of the north and the people living there—they remained, in short, a mystery to the rest of Canada. Also, the board offices were administered out of the south in Montreal. Many of the people working in the office had never lived or taught in the north. In 1989, Inuit representatives expressed their unhappiness with the southern social studies program that was being taught in the Kativik school system. This group included elders, parents, and Inuit teachers. With the implementation of the JBNQA, a door was opened to allow the Inuit to take control of their educational needs, making programs more relevant and sensitive to their context and culture. The Kativik Social Studies Guide describes how the Inuit of Northern Quebec wanted a social studies program

> that would include the study of the history of Nunavik including geography, economics, politics; reflect an Inuit perspective of history, geography, economics, and politics; develop the students' interest and skills in Inuktitut language; address the needs of second language learners. (Kativik Social Studies Program Guide, Secondary 1 to 5, p. i)

In 1990-1991, two curriculum developers were hired to build the Kativik School Board Social Studies program. For the next five years, with the help of elders and other people from the society, they looked at the needs and challenges of providing a culturally relevant social studies program. The implication of this forced the southern government in charge of education to admit that the educational needs for children of the north were very different from southern students, and that these needs had to be addressed.

Today, the program is in transition again and in need of further development to address the requirements of Quebec's Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) by integrating the geography and Canadian/European history components throughout the program in a competency-based approach (i.e., an approach that encourages the development of "a set of behaviours based on the effective mobilization and use of a range of resources," both internal and external to the student) (MELS, 2009, Competencies section). However, it will still have Inuit history components, both modern and ancient, as well as a continuing look at the changes in Inuit culture and society in the 21st century. The goal is to help students develop competencies in the social studies area relevant to them as citizens of Nunavik. This means that Inuit students who successfully complete social studies will have developed an interest in Nunavik, northern politics, as well as in their country and the world. They will acquire the ability to not only present their perspective, but also to

try and understand the perspectives of others. The implementation of a program that is about the Inuit, for the Inuit, and uses Inuktitut alongside the second language is a significant development for the north and the students living here.

The current social studies program is not competency-based, but instead combines and integrates Inuit history, geography, northern economics, and relevant parts of European history. The competencies that will be developed for the Inuit social studies secondary program will be shaped into a program that is relevant to the Inuit people's own historical culture. It will enable Inuit students to see their society, and help them understand their role as responsible citizens in their communities and in Nunavik.

## Relevant ESL Program Created for the North

Another change relevant to schools in the north was the realization that a southern ESL program or English language arts program did not focus on what was needed for the students of Nunavik for whom English was neither was their first language nor the language of the local community. In order to create a distinctive second language curriculum that would specifically meet the needs of the Inuit students, research was needed to decide the frame of reference for the new curriculum. First, the mission statement for the school board needed to be considered. Secondly, the philosophy of the Quebec Education Program (QEP) had to be looked at. These two values needed to be compared to see how they fit together. Once these two ideas were married, the beginnings of a new language curriculum could be deliberated.

The development of this new ESL curriculum had to consider many factors. First of all, the students were working in a forced second language situation where they had to learn all their core academic subjects in their second language. Secondly, this ESL program had to be extremely practical, so that when completed all students would be able to work with "southerners" in a second language situation, read and write in their second language, and continue their education and job training in a second language.

More importantly, this program needed to allow the students to rely solely on themselves for gathering information, generating opinions, translating, and feeling comfortable in any situation where their second language was necessary. In short,

we were creating an entirely new ESL curriculum that would sit comfortably with the culture, and yet give them the freedom and independence from translators to acquire and express ideas for themselves.

A team of educators from services and curriculum development in the north spent three years putting together a competency-based language program that allows Inuit students to learn a second language in authentic situations that are relevant in terms of culture, northern work, and social interaction. It allows for the fact that in most of our communities, teachers have to deal with one class of several secondary groups together. The scales and descriptors developed with this program allow the teachers to use common material amongst the group and also allow them to assess and evaluate based on the scales for each group within the class. The teacher is able to be creative not only in assessment situations, but also in using Learning and Evaluation Situations that have been developed specifically for these classrooms. They can also develop their own LES situations using the materials they have in the class as well as those that are sent to them by the Board.

The constant challenge for curriculum in northern schools is the multi-level classrooms that remain. It is not unusual for a teacher to be expected to teach a grade seven secondary one, two and four class, with the expectation that she/he will be able to teach the appropriate sciences, language, math and social studies that will benefit everyone in the multi-age class. The new language curriculum helps this situation a great deal, but we are still struggling with other subject areas that are still being developed to meet the unique requirements of many of the schools.

Despite all the work done in recent years to create an education foundation that is strong and meaningful to the culture, there is still great reliance on the south. This is especially true in the secondary sector where southern teachers come north to work in Inuit classrooms. The question remains: What can be done to help these teachers succeed?

## Southern Teacher Development

As a pedagogical counselor for secondary ESL and social studies, my approach with new teachers from the south is as follows. I emphasize that while they will be given all the books and materials required to perform well in the classroom, they must learn about the students first. If they do not develop a rapport with the students, if they do not try to find out about the students' cultural and social milieu, then successful education will not happen in their classes.

Secondly, I remind these teachers that they will eventually leave the north, unless they become married to a beneficiary, which would allow them to live permanently in Nunavik. Currently, anyone without beneficiary status cannot remain in Nunavik unless they are employed by a northern organization. The JBNQA makes it impossible for those who are not beneficiaries to stay, so educators come to Nunavik for the purposes of work, but with the knowledge that one day they shall leave. I remind the new teachers of this and tell them to make sure that when the time has come to leave, that they leave behind something constructive and positive for their students. I urge them not to leave a mess or a conflict and to be respectful of the place in which they have chosen to work.

From my perspective, successful teaching in the north happens when southern teachers rework their methodologies to adapt to the learning styles of Inuit students based on their knowledge of the milieu in which they have chosen to work. Sometimes this happens; at other times it does not. However, I wonder sometimes how any of our students succeed given the turnover of staff in the north. In many situations, I am sure that I, as a student, would not be successful.

Let me share my own realizations as a teacher. I wanted to be successful in the north, so I needed to try and put myself in the shoes of the students I was teaching. I took Inuktitut classes, as I had taken French classes all through school and high school. I kept thinking that I understood the nervousness that a student learning a second language has because, I thought, I too have been in their situation. But of course, this was arrogance at an extreme. First of all, my way of living was not "on the line" if I did not learn this second language. Secondly, I was not forced to take the second language; it was by choice, so I had the ability to walk away any time I wanted. Thirdly, I always had the "power language of English"—it was my first language and it was in societal control, and so there was never any danger to my self-esteem or cultural esteem development if I learned that second or third language.

In short, I had no idea what the students I was working with were really going through. My naivety was unbelievable. It created a journey for me with my students teaching me along the way, showing me how my own inability to understand what they were feeling could affect them in their learning.

Psychologist Haim Ginott (1972) has stated,

> I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily

> mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humour, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or deescalated, and a child humanized or dehumanized. (p. 47)

Coming to any classroom brings great responsibility to the teacher. I feel that part of that accountability of the teacher is to understand the unique learning situation of the Inuit student. For this student, the language of power in the class is not his/her first language, and so the student is forced to learn in a second language. If the teacher is not from that culture, or does not try to understand the situation that the student finds her/himself in, it can wreak havoc on that student's learning, esteem, and cultural development. In situations where the power language is that of the teacher (i.e., English) and not that of the student, the teacher is always in control. For both the teacher and the student, this is a scary and daunting position to be in, even more so if the teacher is not aware of, or does not take the time to understand, what that means to the student.

In fact, I believe that the teacher from the south, who is teaching the power language, steps into what Freire calls "banking education" (Freire 1970; 2000). Without excusing the situation, the teacher may automatically revert to what Freire calls the "anti-dialogical banking education," sticking to content and keeping control of the class by controlling the language used and what will be done. This obviously creates the teacher-oriented class. A teacher sometimes can forget that students are trying to not just survive but thrive in a class where they have few choices in how they are going to learn or what they are going to learn.

In a recent article Kublu (an Inuk) and Mallon (2000), Kublu relates a story where she applied to an Inuit organization in Ottawa. She had her résumé written in English, but thought it should be translated into Inuktitut. This is how she described the text after the translation: " … and it sounded arrogant, boastful, and cold, cold, cold. Then she sat down and wrote a resume directly in Inuktitut. It came out fine, until she translated it into English. The English version was vague, unfocused, even wimpy!" (Kublu & Mallon, 2000, ¶ 3)

The translation between the two languages also brought what I would describe as a distinct change in tone. To an Inuk, the Inuktitut version would make perfect sense, but the translation to English made it inadequate and vice versa—from English to Inuktitut it became unclear.

This story pinpointed for me what I have been struggling to understand as both teacher and counselor for a long time. Are Inuit students being forced into a learning situation where they are personally negated—where their "Inukness" takes second place in themselves when they are working in their second language? Are southern teachers as a whole insensitive to the fact that learning this power language brings to this culture a sense of "dismissiveness" of their own culture? Given that southern teachers are unable to really walk in the footsteps of their Inuit students (i.e., the teachers' language is never compromised), are they able to foster and create an atmosphere that is appropriate for learning the second language while still honouring and creating an academic environment that is inclusive of the Inuit culture?

It behooves educators to create the appropriate classroom milieu and learning situations for northern students when they are in a forced second language situation. Each August, the new teachers are invited to a week of orientation in the north. When they arrive, they are placed with a family from the community so that they can experience first-hand living in the culture. They will also see the lives of their students, and so starts the first contact and introduction to the culture for southern, non-Inuit teachers.

During the course of the week, I give four workshops for teachers. Two of them are in conjunction with the Kativik social studies program, in which the teachers come to understand the differences to the southern or other Canadian programs and the emphasis on Inuit history. Stress is placed on the importance that the program be followed. The other workshop is the explanation and implementation of the new ESL program, and how it allows for authentic learning situations for the students. While these two workshops are necessary in terms of what the teacher will be doing within the classroom, they also provide a place for discussion and questions.

In this workshop, which is predominantly presented in visual form, I discuss the importance of understanding that non-Inuit teachers cannot unilaterally impose their teaching style and southern perspectives on the students. I discuss the importance of ego-permeability, where a teacher needs to be open to what is happening for the students and to use those teaching moments whenever they arise. I also discuss language usage—how one should never leave the first language at the door (Cummins, 2000), and that it is important to let students use their own language to help them with their comprehension of their second language. For example, if a teacher has a concept that he or she would like the groups to present, the students could discuss, in their first language, the concepts, and then work together to create

their second language presentation. Also, when a concept explained by the teacher is not understood by all students. The teacher should invite students who did understand to translate the concept into Inuktitut. This not only honours the language of the students, but also allows all students to grasp the needed knowledge

I encourage the new teachers to go to the homes of the students they are teaching, meet the parents on "home ground," discuss things other than the school, and join in, whenever invited, on outings with people from the community. I strongly suggest that each teacher ask the students to teach them some Inuktitut as well, which allows both parties to see each other in a different light. Then, and only then, can a southern teacher begin to acquire an understanding of the milieu in which he or she has chosen to work. We encourage teachers to not compare their southern ways to northern ways. Both are unique and rich and must be experienced in their inimitable distinctiveness.

By virtue of their very presence at school, southern teachers are deeply involved in the development of Inuit students. They must create a receptive atmosphere for those students. Canadian schooling and learning of the second language must not threaten Inuit cultural identity and self-esteem. Educators must continue to develop programs that give strong foundations in education and honour the culture of the learners. To accomplish these goals, it is critical to help southern teachers become ever more aware of the clientele for whom they are working. It is a high expectation, but one that the Kativik School Board and Nunavik are addressing.

## Notes

1. Baptismal and Inuit names were recorded, along with the disk number, or E (Eskimo)-number, assigned to each Inuk. The disks were approximately the size of quarters, and were made from pressed fiber with a hole punched in the top, allowing them to be worn on a string around a neck or wrist. With approval of the Secretary for the Department of State, they were stamped with the Canadian Coat of Arms as well as their unique four-digit number. (Bonesteel, 2008, p. 38)

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