TEACHER ENGAGEMENT WITH HISTORIES OF EDUCATION: SUPPORTING EDUCATIONAL CHANGE IN NUNAVUT

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ABSTRACT

Using examples from Nunavut's social studies curriculum, this article illustrates that Nunavut has new expectations for teachers. When asked to teach new histories in new ways, how can teachers be better supported to link decolonizing approaches to learning and schooling, culturally responsive pedagogy, and reinterpretations of Canada's history? Engaging with Arctic histories of education can offer educators important avenues into this complex changing space. By opening a conversation about the relevance of local, regional and territorial histories of education, the intention is not only to help teachers understand what has happened in the educational past, but to enhance teaching and learning approaches that are culturally responsive, locally relevant, and supportive of community-driven visions for school change.

The history of our people, including the recent creation of Nunavut and the settlements of other Inuit claims is important information to know, for both our southern population and even more to our own Arctic youth. There is a huge desire to be inspired by strong pasts and strong people, we need to sing for our leaders, and dance for our accomplishments, and have courage because of our losses. We learn from all of it, become wiser because of them, and we learn to have hope because only then will we understand how much we've really survived. And this instills pride in our country, our territory, and our people.
Stacey Aglok McDonald, 2009

And if we are to restore the trust of parents who have been deeply hurt by their own educational experiences, we must build an education system grounded in the Inuit culture, history and worldview, and with respect for the role of parents.
Mary Simon, 2011

INTRODUCTION

Staking the Claim: Dreams, Democracy & Canadian Inuit (hereafter referred to as *Staking the Claim* or *STC*) is a required grade 10 social studies module for Nunavut schools that examines the history of four Inuit land claims processes across Canada. One of the most unique aspects of the program is that it is based on a film of the same title that documents Inuit youth interviewing negotiators and leaders involved in the claims, seeking histories and experiences, and making connections between what they learn and their own lives. Combined with archival photos and other material, available in English and Inuktitut, the film is intended to be used throughout the module to support student learning activities. A range of issues, historical events, and collective and individual perspectives are examined, beginning with traditional Inuit lifeways, delving deeply into the difficult experiences of settlement and colonization, and tracing the pathways towards political mobilization, land claims and self-determination. Students are encouraged to engage with family and community members to learn about their experiences and memories from the time of the land claims process. The module finishes with an activity entitled "Fire in Your Belly" in which students identify ways they can make a difference in their own community, or participate in continuing the work of promoting Inuit cultural, linguistic and political vitality.

In addition to examining processes of colonization and decolonization in Canada's history, the module clearly demonstrates the initiative, perseverance and leadership of two generations of Inuit – the older generation who struggled to bring about the Inuit land claims, and the younger generation who care about investigating and documenting their people's history for the future.

This kind of social studies program development is crucial to creating more relevant and engaging learning experiences in the Nunavut education system. However, delivery of such programs also depends on the important question and challenge faced in Nunavut as well as across Canada: What approaches contribute to better preparing and supporting teachers to facilitate Indigenous education in culturally-responsive ways, particularly in schools in which a majority of students are Indigenous? My focus is on the use of educational history with teachers, and how that relates to the Nunavut requirement to provide schooling built on foundations of Inuit culture, language and worldview.

The vast majority of students in the public school system are Inuit, whereas most educators – particularly at the secondary level (grades 7-12) – are hired from outside of Nunavut. New teachers often arrive with a lack of familiarity regarding the place, people, and educational mandates. Teachers who come from within Nunavut are trained through the Nunavut Teacher Education Program, which places emphasis on instruction in the Inuit language at the elementary level. Only recently have efforts been made to create a special focus area for instruction at the middle school level (grades 7-9). Increasing the number of Inuit teachers and reducing the turnover of teachers overall would undoubtedly benefit the school system. However, all educators – regardless of their ethnicity, language skills, or where they grew up – require orientation, mentoring, professional development and support to move away from reproducing education practices emergent from colonizing, assimilative or Eurocentric traditions (that they themselves likely experienced as students). Understanding educational histories could contribute to shaping teachers' capacity to facilitate a different kind of educational experience that is more responsive to Nunavut students. As I will discuss, Nunavut educational histories would focus on when and why schools were introduced, how education has or has not changed over time, what schools and educators have done (or not done) for Northerners, the experiences of students, educators and families participating in schools, and how the past influences what schools mean to communities now.

TEACHING INUIT LAND CLAIMS HISTORY IN NUNAVUT

Following publication of *Staking the Claim* in 2009 all educators in Nunavut were required to attend a one day in-service to raise awareness of this new program's content and goals. This indicates the importance attributed to this history, as well as how crucial training and orientation initiatives are, in the Nunavut education system. The northern and Inuit content, as well as the pedagogical expectations of *STC*, make the necessary skills and approaches particularly important to consider in terms of preparing social studies teachers for program delivery. For example, the program includes:

- A clearly stated learning competency related to self-determination: "The overall goal of this module is to build student awareness of how Inuit once had, then lost, and are now regaining control over their lives and destinies" (p. 2);
- An expectation that teachers sensitively engage students' families in learning about land claims history, including encouraging students to come up with questions with their families that they can work towards answering;
- Critical discussion about vocabulary and concepts such as 'acculturation' and 'assimilation', surface culture and deep culture, empowerment and disempowerment;
- Exploring the concept of extinguishment of rights in which students are asked to compare the language in the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement* to the Robinson-Superior Treaty of 1850 and consider how rights can be extinguished through such agreements.

The learning objective stated on page 50, unit 5, also summarizes the goals of the module overall:

> *Students will learn about the unequal relationship that developed between Inuit and the newcomers, and will reflect on that relationship in today's context. They will be introduced to many examples of challenges Inuit had during the transitional times, which led to Inuit wanting a land claim. A large component of this unit will be to engage the community and to learn from people in the students' communities who experienced these transitions.*

In a letter to educators in the *STC* Teacher's Guide, two non-Inuit educators who are experienced with instructing courses on Inuit land claims in a post-secondary context explain the significance of the module to teachers who are new to the material:

> *The story of what Inuit achieved within a mere three decades (i.e. from 1970 until 1999) represents one of the most inspiring stories in all of Canadian history. In many respects, it was Canada's other 'quiet revolution'. Helping Inuit youth to know this story – their own story – is a service that will generate positive benefits for generations to come. At the same time, helping non-Inuit students to know this story will build cross-cultural respect among those who are also committed to building the future of Nunavut (Morley Hanson and Murray Angus, p. x).*

An attempt is then made to soothe any potential concerns on the part of teachers who are encountering the history of Inuit land claims for the first time:

> *…you don't have to be experts in Nunavut land claims or Inuit history to teach this material effectively; rather, this resource will guide you, and your students, through a process of learning based on knowledge that already exists within the community, supported by lesson plans, resource materials, and the three video documentaries. Your role, as teacher, will be to facilitate the learning process – a process that will invite students to engage with their parents and grandparents about a time of great change in Inuit society (p. x).*

The likelihood that teachers will be unfamiliar with the module content and recent northern history is emphasized through this statement, but that is not the only reason teachers should be encouraged to see themselves differently in Nunavut classrooms. One can extrapolate that by asking teachers (often non-Indigenous teachers) to destabilize their role as 'expert' in local histories, they are recognizing and promoting the knowledge and experience brought into the classroom by students. This expectation places emphasis on the importance of pedagogical expertise rather than content expertise, particularly when a teacher is leading learning relating to the decolonization of land title and decision-making across the North. These points are reinforced from the perspective of a young Inuk who participated in creating the *STC* documentary and reviewing the module:

> *In Inuit traditions, the learner and the teacher are not fixed responsibilities, both must work together, and neither must be afraid of taking on the opposite role. I hope* Staking the Claim *will be a learning journey that both you and your students can embark upon and enjoy together*

> *as a team, and I hope that this journey inspires you all to be as proud as I am to be a part of this spectacular piece of living Canadian history (Stacey Aglok McDonald,* STC*, p. viii).*

Raising awareness amongst teachers regarding content in *STC* and reconsidering the teacher's function as a skilled and responsive pedagogue rather than a knowledge holder should not only be for the purpose of helping teachers to be more comfortable taking on an unconventional module. It should also be about unlearning and relearning the role of a teacher in Nunavut schools: becoming a teacher who can engage in the kind of meaningful, critical, decolonizing teaching and learning opportunities envisioned through *STC*, and to nurture an awareness of histories that are relevant to Inuit and Northerners in Nunavut.

THE PLACE OF HISTORY IN ENHANCING CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS AND DECOLONIZING EDUCATION

Staking the Claim is a unique example of the movement towards reconceptualization of education in Nunavut. K-12 curriculum development and reform initiatives to better reflect the strengths and needs of Inuit have been underway for more than 20 years, and were significantly bolstered by the 2008 *Nunavut Education Act*. The *Act* is the first provincial or territorial education legislation that strongly represents the educational vision of an Indigenous population in the history of Canada.

Asking teachers to "fall in line" with new curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and other policies necessitates substantial training, mentoring and in-classroom coaching and modeling initiatives. In Nunavut, with 43 schools in 25 fly-in communities, this involves a high level of financial and human resources. As noted, the Department of Education has pursued this kind of in-service, for example at the time of implementing *STC*, but questions remain: Do teachers understand the intent behind Nunavut's education legislation, the goals related to curriculum change, and the connections between that history and a social studies module such as *STC*? How do teachers learn about facilitating a curriculum that is more culturally and locally responsive for Nunavut students?

Decolonizing schools depends on teachers coming to know that the history of education for Indigenous peoples in Canada has been, for the most part, a history of assimilation. It requires them to understand that Indigenous perspectives continue to be excluded or misrepresented in learning materials. And, persistent, normalized Eurocentrism is a barrier to educational change. In order to challenge and change dominant constructions of history and identity, teachers and students need exposure to Indigenous perspectives. It is not only differing perspectives on the same events that are needed, but differing contexts for history, and differing ways of making meaning from it that are more coherent with Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.

Awareness of different histories could bring teachers and communities into dialogue about other things that may need to be viewed from different perspectives, such as everyday actions and relationships in schools. It is too easy to avoid seeing oneself as implicated in histories and, good intentions notwithstanding, reinscribe colonial relations. Practices of examining the past must be connected to ongoing, if sometimes invisible, colonial structures with which individuals are complicit, or to which they are subject. If teachers are being asked to help students describe and interpret the power differential experienced during the process of negotiating a land claim, they must be ready to engage with their own role in power differentials that may still exist within schools and in communities. This is not for the purpose of eliciting paralyzing guilt or other associated emotions (though emotions should be attended to), but to enter into explicit conversations about respectful relationships in schools that are informed by the social context as it has been shaped over time.

To this end, educators' engagement with educational history should feature local histories, histories that are informed by multiple perspectives, or histories that offer insight into the Inuit worldview. To explore the local history of education as a vehicle and starting point provides teachers with information about what has happened in their community, and facilitates opportunities for them to meet, listen to, and build relationships with people who have seen education unfolding and changing in Nunavut first-hand. It could also model pedagogies that are appropriate to learning in that community.

This may help form teacher perspectives in some important ways, such as: becoming more sensitive to local explanations for patterns of involvement or disengagement with schooling and therefore better able to participate in an inclusive learning and teaching community; becoming more informed and equipped instructional leaders for students who are trying to make sense of individual, family, local and global change in formal and informal learning journeys; and, becoming aware of positive educational changes, significant local initiatives and community strengths, so that such work can be recognized, nurtured and promoted within and outside the school.

EXISTING INITIATIVES IN NUNAVUT

There are several existing and anticipated opportunities for Nunavut educators to explore relevant histories of education. Principal and vice-principal candidates are required to attend the Nunavut Educational Leadership Program (ELP) for two weeks over two summers to attain certification. ELP is largely focused on supporting principals to oversee the reconceptualization of schooling and the system-wide reforms that have been underway. One of the central themes taught each year during ELP is "Roots: Transforming Education in Nunavut", which typically incorporates a presentation on issues related to educational history such as local or regional oral history projects, a guest speaker or screening of a documentary about a particular aspect or event in Nunavut history, and individual activities related to engaging with each participant's identity and positionality. ELP provides a model for activities that link the histories of education in Nunavut with educational change, and this kind of orientation and support must be expanded to reach all school staff. It is expected that a historical component will be included in an orientation program for all new Nunavut education staff, currently under development by the Department of Education and Nunavut Teachers' Association.

Awareness of residential schools history is another important example of what Nunavut teachers need to participate effectively in a school system working towards change. The recently completed, ground-breaking module *The Residential School System in Canada: Understanding the Past – Seeking Reconciliation – Building Hope for Tomorrow* developed by Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and the Legacy of Hope Foundation, is doing a great deal to orient teachers to the relationship between the educational past and present. In Nunavut this module is taught along with *STC* in grade 10. It facilitates complex critical discussions about both educational policy and lived experience of schooling across the North and Canada. Many former students of residential schools in Nunavut have voiced the importance of teachers and students being aware of this difficult past and contributed to development of the module. A 3-day intensive training workshop for grade 10 social studies teachers was offered at the time of the launch of this module, and system-wide awareness training is underway in Nunavut as well.

While I strongly advocate for teacher awareness of residential schools histories, discussion about the history of education in Nunavut can too easily be limited or simplified by a focus on residential schools. For example, the matrix of educational opportunities and their associated living arrangements that Inuit students had access to and experienced cannot be easily encapsulated by the generalized narrative of residential schools that now exists in the minds of many Canadians. Indeed, many students had positive and formative experiences at residential schools. Across Canada a focus on residential schools tends to overshadow the assimilationist policies and difficult experiences of day schools that have continued long past the residential approach. It is too easy to say that only in a class discussion on the most harrowing moments in our educational past should teachers be concerned about their position in relation to students and the colonizing forces of education. I have focused here on relating the history of education to delivering the land claims history module partly to try and draw the discussion outside of the residential schools context, and illustrate that decolonizing schooling is no less important when discussing other topics.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHER ENGAGEMENT WITH EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

What follows is a list of examples within three areas of educational history that are relevant to Nunavut educators and may be featured through enhanced programs connecting knowledge of the past with educational change in the present. This is not an exhaustive list, but an illustrative one that provides examples that I view as relevant to Nunavut communities. In addition to outlining existing and anticipated territory-wide initiatives above, I would like to recognize that initiatives or discussions on

the topics listed below may already be underway in some communities, or have been in the past; this is work that I hope will continue to be supported.

Foundational Themes:

- Traditional Inuit education and childrearing practices and how they have been adapted over time in response to social, economic, and other changes in Nunavut;
- The importance of relationships with the environment and wildlife, subsistence activities, traditional ecological knowledge and how they have changed;
- History of the relationship between Inuit and federal/territorial governments, including the role of education within welfare state interventions and land claim negotiations; and
- Recognition of myths, stereotypes and generalizations about Inuit and Indigenous peoples in education programs, and replacing them with access to individual voices, Elder/oral histories, multi-vocality, authorized biographies and documentaries.

Local Histories:

- Whether and when students from local/regional communities attended residential schools, federally-funded day schools and student hostels, including details regarding range of experiences, both negative and positive;
- The role of parents in educational decision-making such as the local timeline for creation of district education authorities, number of parents who work in the school (increases/decreases), and extent to which school programs have welcomed parent involvement; and
- Analysis of employment and post-secondary opportunities in the community over time and relationship between school programs and employment, or other resources external to the school itself.

Educational Change Stories:

- Number of Inuit educators who have worked in the school in the past and currently work in the school, perhaps including a canvassing of those teachers regarding the strengths and challenges they experience in delivering educational programs;
- Impact of local and territorial leadership development initiatives for school administrators, teachers and local education authorities (parent councils), including changes in support for such initiatives from the government;
- Documentation of successful programs that have led to student engagement or improved achievement, such as attendance incentives, co-op or apprenticeship programs or Elder involvement; and,
- Analysis of changes seen in student achievement as a result of increasing access to bilingual resources, introduction of new literacy pedagogies or increased number of school staff speaking Inuit language in classrooms.

CONCLUSION

Teachers cannot be expected to effectively bring decolonizing pedagogies and culturally responsive approaches associated with educational change into their classrooms for the benefit of Nunavut students, families and communities, without receiving significant initial and ongoing supports. Teachers also can no longer "make do" teaching Inuit students using approaches that do not make space for Inuit culture, language, worldview and values. I have used *STC* and social studies education as a site of reference to argue that an agenda, resources and programs for better educating *all* educators across all levels and subject areas in educational histories could form a generative component of educational change. Educational histories can play a role in addressing the legacy of Canada's assimilative educational policies and practices, and provide a vehicle to better prepare teachers to facilitate culturally responsive learning using a range of pedagogies. It may support efforts to reconstruct

history and social studies education using Indigenous knowledge and approaches, and delivering relevant, exciting and critical-thinking learning programs. Opening a conversation about the relevance of histories of education is not only to call for initiatives that engage teachers in coming to understand what happened in the educational past, but also to enhance teaching and learning approaches that are culturally responsive, locally relevant, and supportive of community-driven visions for school change.

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