

Culturally Relevant or Diverse? Is it either/or?

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Abstract

Nunavut was created on April 1, 1999. Its creation was intended to bring greater control to Inuit over their lives. An essential element of this has been an increased focus on the education system. This paper will explore the current state and future direction of Nunavut curriculum with regards to diversity. It will consider whether diversity has a place in the quest to implement a culturally relevant curriculum for Inuit students. The work of Egbo (2009), Trevino (1992), Turner-Vorbeck (2005), and Williams-Carter (1999), will be drawn upon to provide a definition of diversity and the different types and ways that diversity can be implemented within the school curriculum. The Nunavut *Education Act* (2008) as well as key foundational documents will be examined to determine what message they articulate. The curriculum currently used in Nunavut schools at the primary, elementary and junior high grades will be contrasted with curriculum that has recently been developed to determine if a shift is taking place. Consideration will then be given to the idea that the experience and philosophy of each individual teacher and the inherent hidden curriculum of the school in which they teach dictates the degree to which curriculum documents and government mandates are implemented. Given that not all Nunavut schools are like Tompkins (1998) describes, “ultimately, teachers have the final say in how they choose to teach or not teach” (Stevenson, 2008, p. 81).

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According to the National Committee on Inuit Education (2011), “educational outcomes for Inuit are not closing quickly enough to keep pace with the opportunities now presenting themselves in northern economies, and worse, [the] underperformance of young people is exacerbating the serious social problems in Inuit communities” (p. 93). Changes to the educational system are needed to meet the needs of Inuit students by providing a more culturally relevant curriculum (National Committee on Inuit Education, 2011, p. 4, p. 81; Legislative Assembly of Nunavut, 1999, p. 6; 2004, p. 15; Education Act, 2008, §1). However, in this quest for a culturally relevant curriculum, has the Nunavut school system become too Inuit-centric? To explore this question first requires considering what a diverse curriculum needs to include, and then examining both the curriculum and what actually occurs in classrooms.

Locating Myself

Before beginning this examination, it is necessary to consider the background of the author. I am a white, unilingual English-speaking teacher. On Nunavut Day in 2000 I started work for the Early Childhood and School Services (later renamed Curriculum and School Services) division of the Nunavut Department of Education. I was peripherally involved in several steering and advisory committees that set the direction for curriculum development in Nunavut, and was part of a team that organized the Educational Leadership Program, a required two-summer course that all Nunavut principals must complete.

During the seven years I worked at the Department of Education, I was immersed in the stories of long-term Nunavut teachers, the dreams of Inuit educators, and the views of our Elder Advisors about education. Tompkins’ (1998) book *Teaching in a Cold and Windy Place, Change in an Inuit School* was used throughout the Educational Leadership Program. The work she did

in her school was held up as an example of how culturally reflective education could be done. I developed a passion for improving Nunavut education and decided to complete a Bachelor of Education degree so that I would be better equipped to understand and contribute to the discussions I was involved in.

In August 2007 I began teaching in a small school in Nunavut. I have been there ever since. During the past six years I have held a number of positions from teaching grade five to supporting English second language teaching, coordinating inclusive education efforts and eventually becoming the Assistant Principal. I have experienced firsthand the challenge of implementing government policies and programs. The pursuit of culturally reflective schooling is a daily struggle. The lack of qualified Inuit teachers, the constant turnover of southern teachers, housing shortages, and hungry children, can combine to make Tompkins' tale of culturally reflective schooling seem like an unattainable dream. I can say without doubt that the backbone of every Nunavut school is its Inuit staff members. I have been privileged to work with a number of talented and passionate individuals that have taught me far more than I had any right to ask.

Diversity

In the educational context diversity is a broad concept. It can be used to describe the inclusion of a multitude of differences present in our society into the curriculum. This can be achieved through multicultural education, a transformative approach, or a decision-making and social action approach. All of these strive to make all students feel included and to teach students about others.

There are many types of diversity that can be included in a curriculum. Egbo (2009) speaks of "human diversity, bio-diversity, diversity of opinions, religious diversity, linguistic diversity, [and] cultural diversity" (p. 2) whereas Williams-Carter (1999) discusses "character

education, moral education, peace education, peer mediation and conflict resolution strategies, emotional intelligence instruction, service learning, antiviolenace education, critical thinking instruction, and global education" (p. 6). Trevino (1992) values diversity in "social stratification based on economic status, degree of acculturation and ethnic/racial self-identity, experiential background, language and language patterns, geographical location, [and] gender" (p. 2-3) and Turner-Vorbeck (2005) believes "there also exists a need for an examination of other aspects of diversity which represent the varied physical and social worlds within which today's school-children live and learn" (p. 6).

Many proponents of a diverse curriculum argue that students need to be well versed in the history of all groups (Williams-Carter, 1999, p. 4) as well as the different biological and social factors that create diversity (Egbo, 2009, p. 3). These two aims can be met through a multicultural curriculum. Multicultural education or a multicultural curriculum approach meets the multiculturalism policy of the Canadian government. It can best be described as applied multiculturalism (Egbo, 2009, p. 53) or as a curriculum that is culturally diverse (Williams-Carter, 1999, p. 4). It would include explorations of common values, differences, understandings, accommodations, preservation and adaptations (Egbo, 2009, p. 53-55). Students would become more knowledgeable and accepting of the differences of others.

Diversity can be met through the approach taken instead of the specific aspects included in a curriculum. Using a transformative approach enables "students to see ideas from diverse perspectives" (Perry-Sheldon, 1994, p. 3). They then learn to "view events from their own perspective as well as through the lenses or experiences of others" (Perry-Sheldon, 1994, p. 4). Alternatively, by using a decision-making and social action approach to the curriculum, teachers

use the curriculum to explore social issues and provide opportunities for social action (Perry-Sheldon, 1994, p. 4).

Diversity can also be addressed through instructional activities and materials. Pacing, transitions, and monitoring for comprehension, all affect how the curriculum is received by students. Using different instructional styles, such as cooperative learning and group work, addresses the diversity of the student population. "Grouping students on the basis of mixed ability" (Egbo, 2009, p. 155) and providing differentiated instruction can "give students multiple options that are matched with appropriate texts" (Egbo, 2009, p. 158) and reduce the isolation and labelling of students. The materials selected "should be realistic, factual, balanced, and objective in order to eliminate stereotyping, tokenism, misconceptions, and oversimplification" (Trevino, 1992, p. 1). The curriculum needs to ensure that it includes the best material for addressing each objective (Trevino, 1992, p. 6) and that it provides enough background information so that teachers "have an adequate understanding ... to interpret the content" (Trevino, 1992, p. 6).

Nunavut Curriculum

Article 1(1) of the *Education Act* (2008) states "the public education system in Nunavut shall be based on Inuit societal values and the principles and concepts of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit". Although the *Education Act* (2008) does not define Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ), the definition commonly used is based on work done by the Nunavut Social Development Council: IQ includes "all aspects of traditional Inuit culture including values, worldview, language, social organization, knowledge, life skills, perceptions and expectations" (Department of Education, 2005a, p. 5). Throughout the *Education Act* (2008) there are numerous references to Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) and the responsibility of stakeholders (i.e., the Minister of

Education, District Education Authorities, Principals, Vice Principals, Teachers, etc.) to ensure that IQ is the basis of the school program (Education Act, 2008, §1). Section 8(4) states that "the curriculum shall promote fluency in the Inuit Language and an understanding of Nunavut, including knowledge of Inuit culture and of the society, economy and environmental characteristics of Nunavut" (Education Act, 2008). District Education Authorities (elected boards in each community) are given the authority to create educational programs as long as they are grounded in IQ (Education Act, 2008, §9). Further, materials are only to be approved for use in the school system if they "are relevant to Nunavut culture" (Education Act, 2008, §10) and assessments are to be "culturally appropriate" (Education Act, 2008, §78).

The only exception to this emphasis on IQ is for francophone students. Section 159 provides for French-language instruction "in French-language educational facilities" (Education Act, 2008) where "the number of children of rights holders is sufficient" (Education Act, 2008, §159). Indeed, in Iqaluit, Ecole des Troils-Soleils is a francophone school with a student population of approximately sixty. The languages of instruction in this school are French and Inuktitut.

A reading of the *Education Act* (2008) would lead one to conclude that there is no place for diversity within the Nunavut school system. There appears to be no place for any inclusion of any sort of diversity. Even within the focus of IQ and francophone rights, it is not a blending of the two to promote greater understanding, but rather a separation – IQ for all, except where there are 'enough' francophone students who will then receive their own separate education.

In contrast, the *K-12 Program Organization for Nunavut Schools* and the *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit Education Framework* seem to suggest that there may be room for diversity. While they state that all new curriculum will be "grounded in Inuit culture, language, heritage,

and traditions" (Department of Education, 2005b, p. 20), and that *Inuuqatigiit* will be the "foundational curriculum document" (Department of Education, 2005b, p. 5) from which all curriculum is derived, they state that an aim of education is to develop students that are "able to actively participate and contribute as Nunavut takes on new roles in the global community" (Department of Education, 2005b, p. 2). The *Framework* further states that "education in Nunavut respects and plans for diversity" (Department of Education, 2005a, p. 5) and that "all students are entitled to a relevant education" (Department of Education, 2005a, p. 5). This could suggest a culturally relevant yet diverse curriculum, but there is no elaboration of the skills that are deemed necessary to participate in the global community, or what is meant by diversity or a relevant education. It is also interesting to note that both of these documents were written before the *Education Act* (2008). That the *Education Act* (2008) glaringly omits any mention of diversity or cultures other than Inuit and francophone could signal a shift in policy.

Inuuqatigiit, The Curriculum from the Inuit Perspective is meant to be the curriculum document upon which all other curriculum will be based. This curriculum, released in 1996, is a series of themes around which expectations at each division (primary, elementary, junior, senior) have been articulated. Teachers are expected to teach using these themes, such as polar bears, water, responsibilities of women, etc., to overlay the curriculum expectations from other subject areas in an interdisciplinary manner. It is interesting to note that this document makes mention that "we want to celebrate similarities of all people ... talking about what is important to each of us and by listening to others" (Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment, 1996, p. 3). Within a very Inuit focused curriculum document written by Inuit educators, one needs to wonder if this is a call for diversity from a dominant Inuit majority, or a cry for their voices to be

included from a marginalized involuntary minority. At the time that *Inuuqatigiit* was written its authors likely did not conceive that it was to become the basis for all future curriculum.

There has been very little new curriculum development work completed since the creation of Nunavut. The curriculum currently in use is a hodgepodge of Western and Northern Canadian Protocol (WNCP) Frameworks (language arts, mathematics, social studies), NWT curriculums (language arts, science, social studies, physical education) and Saskatchewan curriculum (art, drama, dance, music). The senior high school program remains based on Alberta course credits and students are required to pass Alberta departmental exams in order to graduate. No direction has been given as to which documents carry greater weight when they conflict, as they often do. This review of Nunavut curriculum will be limited to those focused at the primary, elementary and junior high grades.

An overview of the WNCP Frameworks reveal a typically somewhat diverse Canadian curriculum written from a dominant non-Inuit perspective. The *Language Arts Framework* speaks of the importance to "respect and build upon a child's first language" (Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 1998, p. 1), while the *Mathematics Framework* suggests that "a variety of teaching and assessment strategies is required to build upon the diverse knowledge, cultures, communication styles, skills, attitudes, experiences and learning styles of students" (Western and Northern Canadian Protocol, 2006, p. 3). Strikingly the *Social Studies Framework* claims to be "inclusive of the multiple cultural perspectives of contemporary Canadian society" (Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 2002, p. 9) yet then designates Distinctive Learning Outcomes for Aboriginal or francophone students that are only to be taught with school-board approval. Separate outcomes for some, that can only be

taught in some circumstances, seem in opposition to its stated claim that its content is reflective of Canadian society.

The NWT curriculum documents are mixed. *Communications* (language arts) is written from the perspective of teaching English as a second language to Aboriginal students. It describes the necessity of recognizing, respecting and reflecting each student's cultural background, language and learning style (Northwest Territories Education, 1989, p. 1) "to build the self-esteem necessary for successful school achievement" (Northwest Territories Education, 1989, p. 9). The *Primary* and *Intermediate Elementary Science Program Guides* are a contrast to one another. The *Primary* curriculum includes Inuit topics such as arctic land animals, yet the *Intermediate* curriculum does not. *Elementary Social Studies* suggests that learning "should reflect the unique nature of its peoples' past – their traditions, history and values" (Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment, 1993, p. 2), but also calls for a more global education that:

begins with the premise that information and knowledge around the rest of the world must make a feedback loop into our consciousness so we can better understand ourselves and our relationships to each other and to other peoples, cultures, nations and global issues. (Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment, 1993, p. 10)

This suggests room for a more diverse curriculum. The *Physical Education* document supports gender diversity when it calls for a balance "among dance, games and gymnastics" (NWT Education, 1975, p. 2) and cultural diversity in its focus on an "understanding of aspects of movement that are part of the Canadian heritage" (NWT Education, 1975, p. 3).

The Saskatchewan Arts curriculum is very diverse when compared with the rest of the curriculum currently used in Nunavut. One of its goals is to teach students how "societies and cultures construct and record their history, values, beliefs and individual and collective visions"

(Saskatchewan Learning, 2009). It also contains specific sections on how to address First Nations and Metis content and perspectives, multicultural content and perspectives, and gender equity. Unfortunately Nunavut only allocates about a third of the time to the Arts that Saskatchewan does, preventing teachers from implementing it in its entirety. The more robust and diverse aspects of this curriculum necessarily get cast aside.

There has been new curriculum developed for the junior high level (grades 7-9). A document entitled *EL2, The Junior Secondary Handbook for Nunavut Schools* was developed based on the work done by the Kativik School Board in the Nunavik region of northern Quebec. It calls for classrooms that are "inclusive communities that recognize strengths and the value of every individual" (Curriculum and School Services, 2004, p. 2-7) but it does not suggest that diversity of any sort be included in the curriculum. It is extremely focused on Inuit students, their language needs, and their existing interests. However, the language arts modules that have been created for these grades do encompass issues of diversity. Topics such as peace education (*Peace It Together*), global awareness and active citizenship (*Take Action*), human rights (*Say Yes to Children*), and gender equity and politics (*Turning Sixteen*) are represented. It is worth mentioning that some of these modules were developed before the *EL2 Handbook* and all were developed before the *Education Act*.

Overall it is difficult to reach a conclusion at this time about the role of diversity within the Nunavut curriculum. Its current role is certainly limited to non-existent. Educational initiatives undertaken since the creation of Nunavut show inconsistencies. The *Education Act* (2008) calls for a very Inuit-centric curriculum while recent curriculum modules address aspects of diversity. As additional new curriculum is developed, it will be interesting to see if the Inuit-

centric focus called for in the *Education Act* (2008) is implemented or if a curriculum that embraces diversity is created.

Classroom Reality

Teachers in Nunavut have a great deal of autonomy over what occurs in their classrooms. Administrators often have little experience in Nunavut and visits from regional office staff are rare. The experience and philosophy of the individual teacher and the inherent hidden curriculum of the school in which they teach, dictates the degree to which curriculum documents and the spirit of the *Education Act* (2008) are followed. Berger describes his arrival in an Inuit community in 1997 (Berger & Epp, 2005, p. 1-2). He says, "the [curriculum] 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. ... [resulting in] immense freedom" (Berger & Epp, 2005, p. 2).

Few non-Inuit teachers are "professionally prepared" (Department of Education, 2005b, p. 10) for what they encounter. They experience a disconnect between their values and behavioural expectations and those of their students" (Egbo, 2009, p. 79). They often enthusiastically try to embrace Inuit culture never realizing that "exposure to a culture ... is not the same as understanding" (Trevino, 1992, p. 4) leading them to draw conclusions that are "misleading and/or demeaning" (Trevino, 1992, p. 4).

Stevenson suggests that teachers fall into one of two categories – subscribers that strictly follow the curriculum and adapters that modify it to meet the needs of their students (Stevenson, 2008, p. 81). Subscribers often become overwhelmed. They are unable to cope with adapting the curriculum to the needs of their students so they persevere in teaching a curriculum that fails to

reach them. Adapters that utilize a continuous progress approach¹ tend to experience greater success. They are able to assess both the curriculum and the needs of their students and decide where the two best intersect. "Ultimately, teachers have the final say in how they choose to teach or not teach" (Stevenson, 2008, p. 81).

Teachers that try to implement the curriculum as is, would likely teach a largely Inuit-centric curriculum with some infusions of diversity. However, many teachers find themselves hindered by a lack of resources (Berger & Epp, 2005; Perry-Sheldon, 1994, p. 4). There are few, if any, resources or textbooks to support the curriculum. Non-Inuit teachers, most with limited knowledge of Inuit culture, are left on their own to create lessons based in Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit as called for by the *Education Act* (2008). This is an impossible task and where the culture of the school and its hidden curriculum come into play. Some schools, such as Tompkins (1998) describes in *Teaching in a Cold and Windy Place*, do an exceptional job of team planning and supporting one another to create and implement the IQ based school program that the *Education Act* (2008) calls for. Others take a "limited approach, studying the exotic customs and behaviours ... celebrating ethnic holidays or observing ethnic weeks" (Trevino, 1992, p. 5). Most fall somewhere in between, with good intentions but limited implementation of a culturally relevant curriculum for their Inuit students. Conversely, non-Inuit teachers may be more comfortable integrating a multicultural curriculum, having been somewhat prepared in their teacher education programs. Resources are also easier to find, and it is much easier to teach about the 'other' when they are not in the room.

¹ The concept of continuous progress is one of the philosophies upon which education in Nunavut is based. It is described as neither social promotion nor retention. Instead, each student remains with their peer group, but continues to work on the curriculum expectations that they need to master. (Department of Education, 2005b, p. 12-14)

A Place for Diversity?

There are undeniably benefits to a Nunavut curriculum that is culturally relevant for its Inuit students. It would produce resilient, culturally knowledgeable Nunavummiut by considering the needs of the whole child (Hainnu, 2010, p. 1, p. 4). This would empower Inuit students and provide them with a "real sense of purpose and belonging" (Hainnu, 2010, p. 3).

At the same time there are benefits to a Nunavut curriculum that embraces diversity. Inuit students need the skills to be successful in post-secondary institutions so that they can become the doctors, lawyers, and teachers that Nunavut requires. They need the capability to work with those that are different to take their rightful place within Nunavut and on the national and global stage. The reality must also be considered that there are simply not enough Inuit educators or resources to implement an Inuit-centric curriculum.

The Nunavut school system may be in the process of eliminating diversity in favour of a culturally relevant curriculum. As new curriculum is developed it will reveal either the Inuit-centric school system called for in the *Education Act* (2008) or one with a more diverse perspective. A Nunavut curriculum grounded in IQ does not require the elimination of diversity. What is required is a curriculum that is both culturally relevant and diverse combining both Inuit and Qallunaat (non-Inuit) Qaujimajatuqangit.

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