

# HISTORY AND NATURE OF INUIT EDUCATION

In Nunavut, Heather E. McGregor reports, most communities are large enough to support only one K-12 school. Apart from a nursing station or a detachment of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the school is the “most evident institutional or government presence.”<sup>1</sup> Number may distinguish Arctic schools from their counterparts outside the Arctic, but inside it’s the bulletin board, as the reflect “the Arctic environment but also the use of Inuktitut.”<sup>2</sup> A majority of students are Inuit, while Qallunaat students are fewer; teachers, especially at the secondary level, are often Qallunaat; even so, Inuit teachers and staff are represented in every school; “all curriculum materials under development are based on Inuit culture.”<sup>3</sup>

While the Inuit “surely count as a First Nation in a literal sense,” the two sets of peoples share little in common: there are, for instance, no treaties with the federal government and, perhaps more significantly, “Inuit groups have chosen to negotiate rights and privileges for themselves based not on a national racial or ethnic status but on the condition of their residency in areas defined by land claims.”<sup>4</sup> The Inuit movement for self-determination was driven by “environmental consciousness and concern for the wildlife, land, and other natural resources that had sustained them and actively influenced their culture for thousands of years.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the “environment” is the “main subject of Inuit education,” what is sometimes termed “traditional ecological knowledge” (TEK).<sup>6</sup> For TEK McGregor substitutes *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ)*, preferable, she explains, “because it is the term currently used by Inuit in Nunavut to represent what is traditional,” namely, that “knowledge that has been passed on to us by our ancestors, things that we have always known, things crucial to our survival – patience and resourcefulness.”<sup>7</sup>

Education, McGregor continues, was “crucial” to the “survival” of Arctic persons, and was consequently “fully integrated into childrearing and life-long experience,” preparing children to be “successful in a hunter-gatherer society that was nomadic, sparse in population, and family-centred. The purpose of education was to learn to know, be, and do in the age-old manner of an Inuk.”<sup>8</sup> “Caring,” McGregor reports, is a “foundational quality of Inuit education,” often expressed by parents, as “older family members” often acted as “teachers,” dedicated not only to “survival” but also to “discovering the special interests and skills” of the their children.<sup>9</sup> McGregor adds: “Treating a child with disrespect or imposing one’s will on a child was equal to acting in that manner toward the child’s Elder namesake and was therefore unacceptable.”<sup>10</sup> Inuit conceptions of children “as mini-adults who simply need to be reminded of or re-familiarized with the knowledge that lies within them, exists in direct contrast to the Western tabula rasa concept applied to children,”<sup>11</sup> but this contrast ignores that this conception coincides rather exactly with ancient Greek

idea of “recollection.”<sup>12</sup>

Describing Inuit education, McGregor emphasizes three aspects: (1) education is that knowledge and those skills focused on the environment; (2) its methods are experiential; and (3) education is informal and learner-centered, structured by the “close relationships that characterize Inuit society.”<sup>13</sup> She suggests that the IQ principle of *Pilimmaksarniq* references those skills “comparable” to what the Qallunaat would call “environmental education.”<sup>14</sup> Another IQ principle is “environmental stewardship – in Inuktitut, *Avatimik Kamattiarniq*, which McGregor defines as “responsible behaviours that act to protect the relationship between Inuit and the environment.”<sup>15</sup> Children should not ask “many questions, as asking questions was considered a sign of unknowing, that *isuma* was lacking, to which vague or evasive answers might be offered by the teacher.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, asking “why?” – perhaps the central European philosophical question - is considered a “rude question,” as children are expected to mimic others to learn how tasks are to be done.”<sup>17</sup>

Like other Aboriginal peoples, Inuit education emphasizes those “legends, stories, and histories that comprise their oral culture.”<sup>18</sup> Before “most Inuit became literate in the early twentieth century as a result of missionary work bringing Christianity to them through the syllabic system of writing Inuktitut,” the Inuit “relied solely on oral transmission of knowledge and history,” spending “many hours” during the “cold and dark winter” telling and listening to “the history and legends of their ancestors.”<sup>19</sup>

From the mid-1940s through early 1970s, McGregor recounts, the “Inuit lost their autonomy in their Arctic homeland,” autonomy simultaneously political and cultural.<sup>20</sup> By the late 1950s, small schools dotted the Eastern Arctic, and Inuit children suffered the “paternalistic, assimilative approach of Qallunaat educators.”<sup>21</sup> She concludes that the “system of experiential, learner-centered, environment-based education could not co-exist with that of the formal school system.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the jobs promised to those Inuit who did finish their education did not materialize.<sup>23</sup> Inuit uses the terms *ilira*, *ilarasuk*, or *iliranaqtuq* to depict what many felt regarding the “influx of Qallunaat and their persistent instructions about living a proper Canadian life,” a feeling of being in awe, respect tinged with fear.<sup>24</sup>

As with other Aboriginal peoples, Inuit children were sent to residential schools,<sup>25</sup> and by 1968 “nearly every settlement in the NWT had a school.”<sup>26</sup> McGregor emphasizes that the curriculum of these day schools was “foreign to the experience of Arctic life and Inuit culture,” requiring “social behaviours or characteristics that were contrary to those practised by Inuit.”<sup>27</sup> That curriculum was “consistent with what was offered to school children in southern Canada,” specifically in Alberta (for children in the NWT) and Ontario (for the Eastern Arctic), and that curriculum was standardized and tested.<sup>28</sup> Not until the late 1960s did more locally focused curriculum materials appear; these followed individual teachers’ frustration with the standardized curriculum.<sup>29</sup> Over time, McGregor reports, there

emerged a “growing belief that the Arctic required its own unique system of education.”<sup>30</sup> And “traditional Inuit education continued to occur on a casual, seasonal, and much reduced basis within families, but the lack of time and opportunity were barriers impossible to avoid.”<sup>31</sup>

The April 1, 1970 transfer of responsibility for education to the Government of the Northwest Territories, based in Yellowknife, ushered in an effort to incorporate Aboriginal culture and language into classrooms, including the teaching of Aboriginal languages during the early elementary years, by an increase in curriculum materials that reflected northern content, and by increased involvement of community members and parents.<sup>32</sup> These developments coincided with federal policy changes, McGregor notes, including that of “multiculturalism,” issued on October 8, 1971.<sup>33</sup>

While official documents during this period pledge allegiance to altering education to accommodate Aboriginal students, McGregor reports that the Department of Education made its own judgements of how and when to do so, rather than allowing students, their parents, and their communities, to do so.<sup>34</sup> And while the Department persuaded many teachers and administrators that “cultural recognition” is important, its efforts often conveyed a “tone of condescension and tokenism,” thereby failing to redirect education to Inuit ends.<sup>35</sup> Education continued to fail to support Inuit in “knowing, being, and doing in accordance with their traditions, ancestors, and culture,” nor did it provide the “cultural capital to succeed economically in the Qallunaat way” - “hope and vision” but also “practical change.”<sup>36</sup> McGregor attributes this failure to “Qallunaat administrators [who] until the Education Ordinance of 1977 [were] legalized local education authorities,” after which authority began to shift to “Inuit parents and community members,” many of whom, she notes, had been “educated in the Qallunaat way.”<sup>37</sup>

McGregor marks 1982 as the “beginning of a new chapter in the history of education in the Eastern Arctic,” what she calls the “local period,” as the Department of Education acted in “both policy and practice to the delegation of responsibility to local education authorities,” integrating “Inuit culture into the curriculum,” employing Elders, and “most importantly,” involving parents and community, an involvement that, she reminds, “had not existed since the traditional period.”<sup>38</sup> Undermining these efforts in the West, however, was the “necessity of meeting the standards for graduation under the Alberta curriculum,” resulting in “reduced graduation levels.”<sup>39</sup>

During the colonial period, McGregor concludes, Inuit had been “politically, socially, and economically paralyzed in their increasingly interventionist encounters with Qallunaat, [and] it was believed by Qallunaat, and by many Inuit, that the future of Inuit children could be best secured if they learned to act, think, and do in the Qallunaat manner.”<sup>40</sup> The first federal interventions meant removal of children from their homes, thereby disrupting familial relationships while “teaching them that Inuit

language, knowledge, and ways of doing belonged to the past and were dying out,” in a word assimilation.<sup>41</sup> Soon, she adds, “many Qallunaat in the Arctic, and across the country, no longer viewed assimilation as an appropriate purpose for education and instead turned their eyes toward cultural protection.”<sup>42</sup>

While the early territorial school system failed to reflect Inuit education – it was conducted by “Qallunaat according to their ideas of what was best for Inuit” – it was still an improvement over the assimilationist federal system, in part because “Inuit began to be included in educational decision making.”<sup>43</sup> As George Tomkins characterizes the Canadian curriculum,<sup>44</sup> McGregor describes the Inuit tradition of education as one of “continuity and change.”<sup>45</sup> Unlike their ancestors, today most Inuit need no environmental knowledge nor do they maintain a close relationship with the land and sea for survival. Today, formal Qallunaat schooling is compulsory and, McGregor reports, “increasingly determines the direction” of Inuit lives.<sup>46</sup> Despite these profound changes, Inuit continue to “insist” that their cultural traditions – “essentially connected to the environment” - are central to their “sense of identity, to their understanding of their history, and to their capability to pursue successful and happy lives.”<sup>47</sup> Despite this insistence, cultural knowledge was not prioritized; nor was it included in the land claim agreement or in any other large-scale initiative associated with Inuit rights and benefits.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, McGregor concludes, the formal education system had not yet achieved its potential to reflect the vision of Nunavut.<sup>49</sup> She attributes this failure to the “short-sightedness that resulted in negligence by Inuit representatives toward the education system during the years of negotiation with the federal government,”<sup>50</sup> but ameliorated by “educators and administrators” who - in the late 1980s and the 1990s - made efforts to address local needs and preserve Inuit culture.<sup>51</sup> Until resources are increased, however, educators in the Eastern Arctic will, McGregor predicts, be “hindered in their efforts to deliver education that manifests an Inuit vision of the past and future.”<sup>52</sup>

A year later, McGregor recounted events leading to the 2008 *Nunavut Education Act*, legislation that requires Nunavut’s public school curriculum to become “relevant” to the majority Inuit population, requiring revision “on a substantial scale”<sup>53</sup> to reflect Inuit culture: *Inuit Qaujimagajatuqangit* (IQ).<sup>54</sup> Traditionally, she reminds, Inuit education “reinforced the relationship between the individual, their family—generations both past and future—and the environment.”<sup>55</sup> “Survival,” she adds, was completely dependent on this education.<sup>56</sup> The 2008 *Nunavut Education Act* affirms IQ, specifically the role of Elders as “subject experts, the requirement to educate students bilingually, in the Inuit language and either English or French; the philosophy and procedures of inclusive education, to ensure every student has their unique strengths and needs recognized and accommodated; as well as affirmation of Inuit views of learning, parental engagement, and the values of Nunavut communities.”<sup>57</sup> No longer is assimilation the purpose of education; “cultural protection” is.<sup>58</sup> Without a large non-Inuit student population or widespread public

expectation that schooling be “multicultural” or “culture neutral,” McGregor points out, cultural protection can proceed “with fewer constraints.”<sup>59</sup> McGregor cites the *Piniaqtavut* development committee, comprised of a large number of Inuit educators working bilingually, that registered educators’ “concerns” over “the southern perspective embedded in most curricula, the large volume and fast pace of mandatory content, and the lack of resource materials for teaching in the Inuit language.”<sup>60</sup> To determine what knowledge is of most worth, “most households in every Baffin community were surveyed and a draft of the resulting document was circulated to each community’s district education council.”<sup>61</sup>

The result was *Inuuqatigiit: The Curriculum from the Inuit Perspective*, a curriculum issued by the Northwest Territory’s Department of Education, Culture and Employment in 1996 and a curriculum reflected collaboration among Inuit groups across the Northwest Territories.<sup>62</sup> This curriculum not only incorporated northern content but affirmed “Inuit ways of knowing, being and doing.”<sup>63</sup> Since the creation of the Government of Nunavut in 1999, curriculum development has occurred on a territorial basis rather than the regional basis; the 2007 “landmark document” *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: Education Framework for Nunavut Curriculum* (to which McGregor refers as the “IQ foundation document”) conveyed an even “more detailed vision of education from Inuit foundations.”<sup>64</sup> The IQ foundation document acknowledges 55 Inuit Elders, 65 Northern and Inuit educators, 12 community experts, and 18 government staff addressing the canonical curriculum question: what knowledge is of most worth?<sup>65</sup>

Rather than numerous subject areas, four integrated strands structure the curriculum developed by the Department of Education, a scheme McGregor judges as “facilitating closer approximation of the holistic nature of Inuit knowledge.”<sup>66</sup> These include:

- *Nunavusiutit*: heritage, culture, history, geography, environmental science, civics, economics, current events, world news.
- *Iqqaqqaukkaringniq*: math, innovation, problem-solving, technology, practical arts.
- *Aulajaaqtut*: wellness, safety, society, survival, volunteerism.
- *Uqausiliriniq*: communication, creative and artistic expression, critical thinking.<sup>67</sup>

That the subtopics overlap, even coincide, with various school subjects, is obvious.

Elders describe *maligait* (natural laws) as the fundamental laws that governing one’s place in the universe, the environment, and in society. They testify to the interconnectedness of the world, specified in the following:

- Working for the common good.
- Being respectful of all living things.
- Maintaining harmony.

- Continually planning/preparing for a better future.<sup>68</sup>

These too seem very much in accord with the aspirations of public education across Canada.

Supplementing these natural laws are “communal laws” or what, McGregor reports, is characterized as “IQ principles”:

- *Inuuqatigiitsiarniq* – respecting others, relationships and caring for people.
- *Tunnganarniq* – fostering good spirit by being open, welcoming and inclusive.
- *Pijitsirniq* – serving and providing for family or community or both.
- *Aajiiqatigiinni* – decision making through discussion and consensus.
- *Pilimmaksarniq* – development of skills through practice, effort, and action.
- *Piliriqatigiinni* – working together for a common cause.
- *Qanuqtuurniq* – being innovative and resourceful.
- *Avatittinnik Kamatsiarniq* – respect and care for the land, animals, and the environment.<sup>69</sup>

These eight principles, she adds, constitute “cross-curricular competences at all levels and through all activities both within and outside of the school.”<sup>70</sup>

Nunavut is the only jurisdiction in Canada with legislation requiring all public education to be based on Indigenous knowledge.<sup>71</sup> Such “place-based” education requires the curricular articulation of Inuit values “in context,” embodied in “required pedagogy and student competencies,” necessitating “high quality, culturally-responsive, locally-relevant and linguistically-appropriate teaching units, learning materials, and assessment tools.”<sup>72</sup> “Burdened” by the geographic dispersal of communities, high staff turnover, the lack of staff with Inuit language skills, and the lack infrastructure (such as staff housing), “the importance of curriculum change is not only linked to increasing educational achievement amongst Inuit youth, but also with continuing to support Inuit self-determination,”<sup>73</sup> the “dream of Nunavut.”<sup>74</sup>

McGregor juxtaposes Nunavut curriculum theory and scholarship on Indigenous education in Canada, identifying both distinctions and “four areas of common struggle,” among the latter: “walking in two worlds; human resource development; decolonization; and, radical implementation and radical pedagogy.”<sup>75</sup> Inuit education resides on the “margins of Canadian Indigenous educational scholarship,” McGregor suggests, not always evident in generalizations about Indigenous experience, indeed often absent.<sup>76</sup> McGregor reminds that the Inuit suffered a shorter period of colonization; they represent the majority where they live, and so the Inuit culture and language are more widespread and vital.<sup>77</sup> Still, institutionalizing “Inuit ways of teaching and learning, and the content knowledge needed to support IQ practice in schools,” has not occurred “quickly,”<sup>78</sup> in part due to difficulties in retaining sufficient Inuit educators, administrators and support staff.<sup>79</sup> Despite these and other challenges – “isolated small communities and Arctic weather”<sup>80</sup> as well as “disengagement” of Inuit youth, financial resource instability<sup>81</sup> – advantages abound: the majority Inuit population shares more cultural and linguistic

commonalities across great distances than do dispersed Indigenous peoples; there is a history of Inuit engagement in education even prior to Nunavut; political success in land claims disputes; and, the legal, territorial mandate affirming Inuit education.<sup>82</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

McGregor juxtaposes Nunavut curriculum change with scholarship on Indigenous education in Canada, identifying both distinctions and “four areas of common struggle.” Inuit education resides on the “margins of Canadian Indigenous educational scholarship,” McGregor notes, not always evident in generalizations about Indigenous experience. The Inuit enjoyed advantages over other Indigenous peoples, McGregor suggests, perhaps crucial among them a shorter period of colonization. As well, the Inuit represent the majority where they live; Inuit culture and language are therefore more widespread and vital. Still, institutionalizing “Inuit ways of teaching and learning, and the content knowledge needed to support IQ practice in schools” has not occurred “quickly.” Despite these and other challenges – “isolated small communities and Arctic weather” as well as “disengagement” of Inuit youth and financial resource instability – advantages are evident: the majority Inuit population shares more cultural and linguistic commonalities across great distances than do those of dispersed Indigenous peoples. Other advantages include: a history of Inuit engagement in education even prior to Nunavut, political success in land claims disputes, and the legal territorial mandate affirming Inuit education.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> McGregor 2011, 12.

<sup>2</sup> McGregor 2011, 13.

<sup>3</sup> McGregor 2011, 13.

<sup>4</sup> McGregor 2011, 25.

<sup>5</sup> McGregor 2011, 26-27.

<sup>6</sup> McGregor 2011, 31.

<sup>7</sup> McGregor 2011, 31.

<sup>8</sup> McGregor 2011, 37.

<sup>9</sup> McGregor 2011, 37-38. Caring is also a key concept in curriculum studies: see, for example, Jung 2016.

<sup>10</sup> McGregor 2011, 42.

<sup>11</sup> McGregor 2011, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Pinar 2019a, 22, n. 35.

<sup>13</sup> McGregor 2011, 44.

<sup>14</sup> McGregor 2011, 44.

<sup>15</sup> McGregor 2011, 45.

<sup>16</sup> McGregor 2011, 46.

<sup>17</sup> McGregor 2011, 46.

<sup>18</sup> McGregor 2011, 47.

<sup>19</sup> McGregor 2011, 47.

<sup>20</sup> McGregor 2011, 54.

<sup>21</sup> McGregor 2011, 54.

<sup>22</sup> McGregor 2011, 55.

<sup>23</sup> McGregor 2011, 55.

<sup>24</sup> McGregor 2011, 61.

<sup>25</sup> McGregor 2011, 65.

<sup>26</sup> McGregor 2011, 72.

<sup>27</sup> McGregor 2011, 72.

<sup>28</sup> McGregor 2011, 72.

<sup>29</sup> McGregor 2011, 73.

<sup>30</sup> McGregor 2011, 79.

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- <sup>31</sup> McGregor 2011, 82.
- <sup>32</sup> McGregor 2011, 85.
- <sup>33</sup> McGregor 2011, 87.
- <sup>34</sup> McGregor 2011, 114.
- <sup>35</sup> McGregor 2011, 114.
- <sup>36</sup> McGregor 2011, 114-115.
- <sup>37</sup> McGregor 2011, 114-115.
- <sup>38</sup> McGregor 2011, 116.
- <sup>39</sup> McGregor 2011, 148.
- <sup>40</sup> McGregor 2011, 151.
- <sup>41</sup> McGregor 2011, 151.
- <sup>42</sup> McGregor 2011, 151.
- <sup>43</sup> McGregor 2011, 151.
- <sup>44</sup> Tomkins 1986.
- <sup>45</sup> McGregor 2011, 152.
- <sup>46</sup> McGregor 2011, 166.
- <sup>47</sup> McGregor 2011, 166.
- <sup>48</sup> McGregor 2011, 166.
- <sup>49</sup> McGregor 2011, 168.
- <sup>50</sup> McGregor 2011, 168.
- <sup>51</sup> McGregor 2011, 168.
- <sup>52</sup> McGregor 2011, 169.
- <sup>53</sup> McGregor 2012a, 27.
- <sup>54</sup> McGregor 2012a, 27.
- <sup>55</sup> McGregor 2012a, 30.
- <sup>56</sup> McGregor 2012a, 30.
- <sup>57</sup> McGregor 2012a, 31.
- <sup>58</sup> McGregor 2012a, 33.
- <sup>59</sup> McGregor 2012b, 290.
- <sup>60</sup> McGregor 2012b, 292.
- <sup>61</sup> McGregor 2012b, 292.
- <sup>62</sup> McGregor 2012b, 293.
- <sup>63</sup> McGregor 2012b, 294.
- <sup>64</sup> McGregor 2012b, 296.
- <sup>65</sup> McGregor 2012b, 296. The question becomes What's Worth Knowing in the document. McGregor notes that the document also acknowledges the curriculum development work undertaken done by the school boards prior to Nunavut - *Piniaqtavut* in 1989 and *Inuuqatigiit* in 1996.
- <sup>66</sup> McGregor 2012b, 297.
- <sup>67</sup> McGregor 2012b, 297.

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<sup>68</sup> McGregor 2012b, 298.

<sup>69</sup> McGregor 2012b, 298.

<sup>70</sup> McGregor 2012b, 298.

<sup>71</sup> McGregor 2012b, 299.

<sup>72</sup> McGregor 2012b, 299.

<sup>73</sup> McGregor 2012b, 300.

<sup>74</sup> McGregor 2012b, 300.

<sup>75</sup> McGregor 2013, 87.

<sup>76</sup> McGregor 2013, 88.

<sup>77</sup> McGregor 2013, 89.

<sup>78</sup> McGregor 2013, 101.

<sup>79</sup> McGregor 2013, 105.

<sup>80</sup> McGregor 2013, 109.

<sup>81</sup> McGregor 2013, 110.

<sup>82</sup> McGregor 2013, 109.