

Heather E. McGregor. *Inuit Education and Schools in the Eastern Arctic.* Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010. 220 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7748-1744-8.



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Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik (University of Alberta)

Heather McGregor's *Inuit Education and Schools in the Eastern Arctic* examines the history of Inuit education in the Far North of Canada. She finds that colonization only occurred there in earnest after World War II and she divides the Far North's history of education into the pre-1945 traditional, 1945-70 colonial, 1970-82 territorial, and 1982-99 local periods. Throughout the book the author demonstrates a real effort to complement and contrast the reports of government bureaucracies and outside researchers with the voice of the Inuit.

A century ago, missionaries entered the Arctic and often stayed long enough to learn the Inuit languages. Around 1900 missionaries developed a syllabary for Inuktitut and reading and writing it spread. During the colonial period after World War II small government schools were established in the new settlements, often built around Hudson Bay Company trading posts, where the Inuit could buy food and rifles, leading to a move away from traditional Inuit ways of life.

Teachers recruited from southern Canada to staff village schools lacked training in cross-cultural education and usually did not stay long enough to learn much about the Inuit. Besides the language gap these teachers faced, there was a fundamental contradiction between their values and those expressed in the teaching materials they used, and Inuit values. McGregor quotes Mary A. Van Meenen's 1994 doctoral dissertation stating, "The core of the problem was that neither the federal nor territorial governments understood the peoples they were trying to educate" (p. 87). The resulting culturally assimilationist education led to a loss of Inuit cultural identity and "widespread ... spousal abuse, alcoholism, and suicide" (p. 81). McGregor quotes Alootook Ipellie as to the effect of this colonial education that could be found across the world: "For years, all three generations had different goals and values, and all suffered. The educational system failed Inuit youth. They dropped out in swarms year after year, creating a society of half-educated young men and women who could not adjust fully to ei-

ther of the cultures they were being brought up in. They became sons and daughters without destiny, without pride in their past and without much of a future--dropouts, social sores, listless vegetables. Many of them chose the easy way out by committing suicide" (p. 81). McGregor notes the need to bring along adults educationally as well as their children to avoid these generational splits.

McGregor cites various studies and interviews that describe traditional Inuit education as "learner-centered," "fundamentally experiential," and based on the need for environmental knowledge to survive in the harsh northern environment. It was family-based and focused on experiential knowledge and "ecocentric identity" (p. 39). Family members taught "the ways the Inuit live with, and know about, their environment" (p. 31). She notes that "children [were] named after a respected Elder who had recently passed" and that "treating a child with disrespect or imposing one's will was equal to acting in that manner toward the child's Elder namesake and was therefore unacceptable" (p. 42). McGregor quotes Taqtu from Susan Cowans's edited book, *We Don't Live in Snowhouses Now: Reflections of Arctic Bay* (1976): "Later on the children had to go to school, which was all right too: they had to learn if they were not going to be staying in camp. They had to take jobs, which was also all right. There was really no choice, and I accepted it gladly because our children had to learn. I wanted them to learn English so they can have good jobs when they grow up" (p. 70). Inuit parents saw that the greatest benefit of education was learning English because this could lead to jobs, which the loss of the traditional nomadic hunting life made increasingly necessary.

Some teachers, but not nearly enough, responded to the meaninglessness for Inuit children of southern textbooks used in northern classrooms. In 1960 R. A. J. Phillips noted in the journal *North*, "teaching should begin with the familiar

and move at the appropriate pace to the new and challenging" (p. 80). And in 1968 a primary-level Arctic Reading Series was printed.

In the 1970-82 territorial period First Nations in Canada demanded more voice in the education of their children, and the Canadian government began exhibiting more sensitivity towards cultural differences. In southern Canada this meant more band-operated schools and in 1976 in the North a Linguistics Division was formed in the Northwest Territories Department of Education to develop materials in Aboriginal languages. More Inuit teaching assistants were employed, and some Inuit received teacher training because of the 1968 formation of the Northwest Territory Teacher Education Program. McGregor notes, "For Inuit to own the education system they had to first become familiar with it and involved in its operation" (p. 97). There was a call for more Inuit studies in the 1970s, but curriculum materials were still lacking. McGregor quotes Mi'kmaw education scholar Marie Battiste to the effect that, "Through ill-conceived government policies and plans, Aboriginal youths were subjected to a combination of powerful but profoundly distracting forces of cognitive imperialism and colonization. Various boarding schools, industrial schools, day schools, and Eurocentric educational practices ignored or rejected the world-views, languages, and values of Aboriginal parents in the education of their children. The outcome was the gradual loss of these world-views, languages and cultures and the creation of widespread social and psychological upheaval in Aboriginal communities" (p. 23). However, despite all the problems, this education helped develop an Inuit leadership that could resist federal paternalism and work for self-determination.

At the start of McGregor's local period, in 1982, three regional boards of education were established and culturally appropriate teaching resources were developed. There was a call for culture-based and bilingual schooling so that educa-

tion would “be community-based, culturally relevant, student-centred, activity-oriented, balanced, integrated, collaborative, and process-oriented” (p. 134). Despite this educational progress, McGregor finds that educational issues were largely ignored in the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement negotiations, leading to the establishment of the Nunavut Territory in 1999, with the result that the three regional school boards were dissolved. Today, there is more local governmental control but less local educational control and there are fewer educated local people to qualify for government jobs. McGregor finds that, “Inuit are living with very low standards in one of the richest countries in the world” (p. 161).

McGregor notes that there is a danger of trivializing Inuit culture when bringing it into the classroom and that tradition is not static. In an appendix, she lists the eight guiding principles of *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* agreed on by consensus of Inuit elders to be included in Inuit classrooms. They include “respecting others,” “being open, welcoming,” “developing collaborative relationships,” “environmental stewardship,” “knowledge and skills acquisition,” being “resourceful,” “consensus decision-making,” and “contributing to the common good” (pp. 173-174). She finds there is more culture-based education today, but schools still rely on Alberta standardized tests to determine graduation, leading to an increased dropout rate.

McGregor concludes that, “The evidence thus far is that schools continue to rely on the methods and structure of schooling established by Qallunaat [white] education, whereas learning opportunities that reflect traditional Inuit methods are exceptional,” which helps foster a 70 to 75 percent dropout rate and the highest recorded levels of suicide among the approximately 35,000 Inuit today (p. 166). Because of the current re-centralization of school administration, “parents ... are increasingly disengaged from involvement in educational decision making” (p. 168). The use of Eng-

lish as the instructional medium has been problematic from the beginning of colonial education. As the 1972 Northwest Territories Department of Education’s survey noted, “Language is such a vital aspect of the culture of any people that its loss frequently constitutes a seriously traumatic experience for those involved and constitutes an automatic denigration of their whole culture” (p. 91). McGregor cites the passage of a 2009 Inuit Language Protection Act in her afterword as giving some hope for the acknowledgement of the cultural needs of the Inuit but, overall, McGregor’s book does not end on an optimistic note.

Inuit Education and Schools in the Eastern Arctic is a valuable contribution to the history of colonial education worldwide and in Canada. It complements Anne Vick-Westgate’s book, entitled *Nunavik: Inuit-controlled Education in Arctic Quebec* (2002). What is particularly interesting about Inuit education is how compressed in time the changes that have taken place are. In southern Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and many other places, governments got involved in indigenous education in the nineteenth century; the colonial and territorial periods of indigenous education lasted more than a century; and, in some contexts, those periods are likely still ongoing.

describes

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