

Review Essay / Essai critique

Thomas R. Berger. (2006, March). *Conciliator's Final Report: "The Nunavut Project"*

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In a controversial report, Thomas Berger recommended that the key to improve representation of Inuit in the territorial government workforce is to expand a program of bilingual English-Inuktitut education from kindergarten to grade 12. His emphasis on the importance of primary and secondary education to prepare Inuit for workforce participation at all levels is a necessary and sensible response to federal territorial bickering about responsibility for improving work-force participation of the Inuit. However, the gains he projects from expanding bilingual education – even if he were not underestimating challenges of implementation – cannot be a centre-piece for reform without taking into account the equally serious challenges of improving overall educational quality and directly tackling issues of socio-economic disadvantage.

BACKGROUND

The Territory of Nunavut was created as part of the settlement of the outstanding land claim of the Inuit. The settlement included the creation of a new public government in Canada's Eastern Arctic, representing all citizens living in the newly created territory. The new territorial government has powers similar to those of a province in Canada, including responsibility for education; however, Nunavut is unique in Canada because 85 per cent of the population are members of a single Aboriginal group, the Inuit. The settlement also included a comprehensive Land Claim Agreement, with constitutional status, between the Government of Canada and Inuit representatives.

Apart from typical provisions concerning issues of land title and environmental management, the Land Claim Agreement contains a commitment in Article 23 “to increase Inuit participation in government employment in the Nunavut Settlement Area to a representative level.” Berger calls Article 23 “an equity clause for a majority” (2006, p. 14). Eighty-five per cent employment by 2020 is the goal, “within all occupational groupings and grade levels.” (Nunavut Land Claim Agreement, 1993, Art.23.1.1). Currently, Inuit employment is stalled at approximately 45 per cent, and is concentrated in administrative and support positions. The commitment to Inuit employment is crucially important for equity in the territory. It is an effort to open up economic opportunities to Inuit and ensure Inuit are represented in the bureaucracy which has had a strong political impact on the territory.

There have been tensions over implementation of the land claim in general and Article 23 in particular between the federal and territorial government and Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, the organization representing Inuit. These tensions date back before the creation of the territory in 1999.¹ A key issue is Canada’s responsibility for future steps, if any, required to improve the representation of Inuit in Nunavut’s public service. In 2005, the three parties agreed to the appointment of Thomas Berger as conciliator, a person identified as a “recognized problem solver who could make a neutral assessment of the issues and provide the parties with recommendations that may resolve our differences” (Director General, Implementation Branch, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, cited in Berger, 2006, p. 2). Berger has extensive, high profile experience with Aboriginal issues in Canada and internationally. A former judge, he is best known for the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry in the late 1970s, which halted a massive planned pipeline development in the interest of the Aboriginal people and their lands in the Western Arctic.

BERGER’S REPORT AND THE NUNAVUT PROJECT

Berger starts from the powerful observation that “the objective of Article 23 has not nearly been realized” (p. 17). He goes on to fault all parties for focusing more on the question of where responsibility for that failure lies than working to address squarely the question of how to achieve the

objectives in the territory. He characterized the implementation struggles as “a barren search for avoidance of responsibility” (p. 21). Having constructed the issue broadly, Berger concludes that measures focusing on improving *demand* for Inuit employees among public sector employers have reached their limits, pointing to high employment rates among educated Inuit. Instead, he says, the problem is one of *supply*; therefore, “education is the key to moving towards fulfillment of the objective of Article 23” (p. 18). Although the Land Claim Agreement is silent on primary and secondary education for Inuit, Berger’s logic leads him directly to the question of schooling. He goes further, emphasizing the importance of Inuktitut as a language of the workplace and for government services. He summarizes his main recommendation as follows:

It will be my recommendation that the only way in which we can fulfill the objective of Article 23 is by adopting specific measures in the near term which will increase Inuit representation in the public service, and for the long term, establishing in Nunavut a comprehensive program of bilingual education in Inuktitut and English. (p. 22)

Berger recommends that the parties work out detailed agreements under which the Government of Canada provides “the lion’s share” of funding, with delivery in the hands of the Government of Nunavut (p. 40).

I certainly agree with Berger’s core conclusion that education is the necessary key for meaningful equity progress for Inuit. As a former policy lawyer for the territorial government, and as a founder and Northern Director of Nunavut’s Akitsiraq Law School, I too see strengthening Nunavut’s education system an essential element of self-determination and improved quality of life for Inuit. Nunavut’s schools hold the key to implementing Article 23, and as it stands, they are not up to the job. Berger also argues there is significant federal responsibility for funding educational improvement to achieve constitutionalized land claim requirements, a conclusion that follows inevitably from what appears to me to be a common sense observation that the land claim targets will not be met without additional investment.

However, Thomas Berger overstates the significance of bilingual education as a solution for the current failures of elementary and secondary schooling in the territory. Diagnosing – and, even more

importantly, addressing – the causes of grave problems with the education system is more complex than Berger’s recommendation suggests. To realize the full promise of bilingual education it is necessary to tackle directly educational quality and the socio-economic situation of Inuit students. The Government of Nunavut introduced legislation in November 2007 that effectively implements Berger’s recommendation by promising to make bilingual education available by 2020 (Education Bill 21, 2007).

BILINGUALISM AS NUNAVUT’S MAIN EDUCATION PROBLEM

Berger argues, based on sound research, that loss of language and underachievement in school are linked. However, he appears to go further to suggest that offering extended bilingual education in the territory will remedy current problems of underachievement. Those problems are serious: the high school graduation rate is only 25 per cent (about 100 students a year, in real terms) and adult literacy levels are the lowest in the country.²

Most scholars of second language learning accept the concept that bilingual education promotes and supports academic achievement (see, for example, the extensive literature reviews in August & Hakuta, 1997, or Garcia, 2002), and both the Government of Nunavut and Nunavut Tunngavik have expressed serious interest in expanding bilingual education.³ Berger reviews several sources on Indigenous language retention and literacy (Martin, 2000; Heimbecker, 1997; Francis & Reyhner, 2002) to conclude that the loss of Inuktitut language skills stunts students’ individual academic achievement as well as undermining collective identity. His conclusions are not particularly radical, but it would be helpful for them to have been based in broader research about second language learning rather than exclusively issues around Indigenous languages, most of which are far more endangered than Inuktitut and which might, therefore, not be the only apt comparison.

Berger concludes that the existing system, which he describes as “early exit immersion” where students switch into English classes in grades 4 or 5, provides students with an insufficient foundation in Inuktitut and a too-sudden immersion in English, leading children to fall behind. Many students and their families in Nunavut also attribute

children's academic difficulties to this dramatic, and, as they see it, under-supported transition. Berger makes a number of causal links which, though intuitive, do not appear to be backed up by significant evidence. I quote at length:

Instead of adding a second language to a solidly anchored first language that they [students] continue to develop, enriching their language skills by adding the second, the opposite occurs. As they gain more English, Inuit children lose more Inuktitut. They lose fluency in their mother tongue; the literacy skills acquired in their early years atrophy and the space left 'vacant' by the loss of Inuktitut is not simply filled up with English. The children's initial threshold of fluency in Inuktitut should be – but isn't allowed to become – a foundation for the attainment of a second threshold of literacy – in Inuktitut. And they are not compensating for the lost Inuit language with new gains in English. Because they are never allowed to develop their Inuktitut initial fluency and literacy into advanced fluency and literacy through engagement with progressively more demanding subjects, and because the English program largely fails to develop higher-order skills, the children's Inuktitut linguistic strengths are never acknowledged. (p. 29)

To emphasize, the only evidence for this series of hypotheses is the evidence of low Inuit success on English literacy measures. He points to no evidence that children's Inuktitut "atrophies" nor that it leaves "vacant" space, even if there is considerable room to improve and deepen use of the language.

On this point Berger's rationale is not consistent with the broader literature on second language acquisition in immersion settings. In a very authoritative research review, August and Hakuta (1997) concluded ostensibly similar bilingual education programs have widely divergent effects, depending on the social and political context (See also Bialystok, 2006; Cummings, 1996). Research on second language acquisition points to a complex process with a diverse set of explanatory factors. A large number of studies have tended to show that bilingual groups of children – where socio-economic status has been controlled – may do better on a variety of measures of cognitive skill, in particular metalinguistic abilities (August & Hakuta, 1997, p. 32). Evidence suggests that students who are highly proficient in their first language, who have more expo-

sure to formal education, or have higher socio-economic status, will do better when they acquire their second language (p. 38).

The results of research on the variable success of bilingual education programs redirects attention away from issues of cognition and back to issues of socio-economic status and poverty. Many, many children in Nunavut directly experience poverty, low health status, overcrowding in their homes, parental unemployment, and exposure to violence and suicide of close relatives (e.g., Hicks & White, 2000 pp. 89-90; Statistics Canada, 2003). The majority of children do not have parents who have completed high school, a factor that is highly predictive of academic success. For many, peer dynamics do not support continuing in school. Many children have undiagnosed and/or untreated disabilities, some of which may relate to special education needs that are unlikely to be met due to an almost complete lack of special education resources in the territory. (Berger is obviously very struck by the high numbers of children with hearing impairment, for example, see pp. 34-35). Berger notes the importance of improving health and housing for the people of Nunavut alongside bilingual education, but he does not squarely confront the limits that these issues put on his solution.

Berger's assertion that students' transition from Inuktitut to English occurs too soon in terms of the development of students' Inuktitut language skills is questionable. Although there is compelling evidence of age-related decline in the ability to learn a second language, the concept of a "critical period" for the acquisition of a second language remains controversial (e.g., Bialystock, 2001; Hakuta, Bialystok, & Wiley, 2003; Meisel, 2006). Some evidence (e.g., August & Hakuta, 1997, p. 38) suggests that the *age* at which individuals acquire a second language is an important individual-level factor in terms of performance on academic tasks – but those studies compare children who face English language immersion in kindergarten unfavorably with those whose immersion begins in grades 2 to 6, as is the case in the Nunavut model. In other words, it is unusual to characterize the Nunavut program as an example of early-exit immersion. If the school system (and the society around it) were working as it ought to be, students in grades 3 or 4 should be achieving the kinds of threshold levels of language mastery in Inuktitut that would facilitate a smooth transition to second language instruction.

The difficulty that students face making the transition to English in grades 4 and 5 suggests learning issues that are already well-entrenched before the English immersion program begins.

It is important to acknowledge the rapid rate of change, and, I would argue, improvement in the delivery of education in the Eastern Arctic. Over fewer than forty years, education has shifted from an often-coercive residential school system to community-based education where approximately one-third of the teachers are locally-educated Inuit. That said, there are reasons to be concerned that the quality of education in Nunavut remains unacceptably low, and insufficient to develop higher-order skills in English or Inuktitut. Cummins (1996), a strong proponent of bilingual education, stresses the importance of good-quality instruction in the minority language as well as the majority language to realize the psycho-educational benefits of bilingualism (p.123). There are currently very few mechanisms for accurately tracking students' achievement in Inuktitut literacy and limited curriculum resources for Inuktitut beyond the primary level. Anecdotally, there appears to be a relatively low focus on literacy – in either language – across the territory's schools. Many people have noted low expectations for Inuit achievement, quite independent of language; Korhonen (2006) has pointed to some rather strikingly unhelpful stereotypes about Inuit / Aboriginal learning styles ("Inuit [and other indigenous peoples] are [said to be] concrete [hands-on] learner[s]" p. 20) that limit the range and complexity of concepts being taught. Emphasis on the oral tradition of Inuit has, perhaps, lead to a lack of emphasis on teaching reading and writing despite their obviously high utility for academic success. There are advantages to continuing to support instructional use of Inuktitut beyond grade 5, but I am not sure that supporting Inuktitut will overcome these profound issues of educational quality.

ADVANTAGES TO BILINGUALISM

Those (Cummins, 1996; Ogbu, 1992) who study bilingualism among historically low-achieving groups have argued that educational challenges for these groups are not primarily a function of language. Though he has been criticized for over-simplification, Ogbu (1992), for example, has argued that "involuntary minorities" such as colonized

peoples are particularly disadvantaged in school systems because of deep socio-historical legacies through which collective identities are constructed in opposition to the majority group, which in turn control schooling. As Cummins (1996) argues: "Underachievement is not caused primarily by lack of fluency in English. Underachievement is the result of particular kinds of interactions in school that lead culturally diverse students to withdraw from academic effort" (p. 65). The solution of bilingual education may go some way to address these factors in that, if implemented, it would require a substantial increase in the number of new Inuit teachers and, perhaps, a resulting shift in curriculum towards areas where traditional Inuit knowledge is stronger (Berger suggests examples of colonial history, geography, or land courses). A change in the cultural interactions in the schools may keep some children engaged longer and may lower some students' levels of alienation. Stephen Harris (1990), writing about Australian Aborigines, identifies a dilemma for Aboriginal students: wanting to learn the 3R's and wanting at the same time to maintain their cultural integrity. He argues that the hidden curriculum of Western schooling produces profound cultural conflict among students, where academic success is perceived to be at the cost of Aboriginal culture, and therefore recommends explicitly bicultural schooling where students have an opportunity to learn about each world on its own terms. He argues bicultural schooling may produce less ambivalence and greater academic success. Because bilingual education in Inuktitut will necessarily change the face of the teaching profession, it is more likely to produce a genuinely bicultural schooling experience that may be less alienating.

Berger's concern about students losing their Inuktitut through their exposure to English is consistent with literature on language shift, which charts the loss of language at the social level by minority language speakers (e.g., Fishman, 2006). The school can be an important site for minority language preservation but it is not clear that in-school exposure to English, or even English immersion, is the cause of students choosing not to use Inuktitut in a range of contexts. Inuktitut, as one of Canada's Aboriginal languages, is vulnerable, and its speakers are undergoing significant linguistic shift. Statistics Canada, for example, reports that the number of people reporting an Aboriginal language as their mother

tongue is growing more than three times as fast as the number of people reporting the use of an Aboriginal language in the home (Statistics Canada, 1998). In other words, Aboriginal people are actually using their languages less and less. Berger (2006) explicitly references (p. 36) the federal Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission which led to the federal policy of official French-English bilingualism as a model for Nunavut. He argues that strengthening and maintaining Inuktitut into high school – combined with further entrenchment of Inuktitut as a language of work and government services – may be an important element in preventing language shift.

POLITICAL WILL

It is politically convenient to lay the problems with Nunavut's schools at the feet of the issue of the lack of Inuktitut throughout the school system. Parents, teachers, and Inuit groups already accept that academic problems are, to a large degree, a function of language of instruction. For educators and politicians in Nunavut, linking achievement to bilingual education allows the system to avoid looking inward to the multitude of ways in which students are not having their needs met. Moreover, it defers accountability for results because it is contingent on training significant numbers of Inuit teachers to populate the school system. The existing teacher education program is the prototype of professional training in Nunavut. It has a distinguished history and fairly good funding; however, the program faces huge problems with recruitment and retention of teachers and does not offer training for secondary teachers. The pool of teachers in Nunavut will not get bigger without a substantial new investment in supporting teacher candidates. There is no evidence that Nunavut is prioritizing adult professional education – for example, there has been no expansion of student housing in the college system despite the fact this is a major obstacle to student recruitment, retention, and the expansion of any programs. There is an ever-worsening funding shortage, but elected and land claim politicians in Nunavut have not made investment in education and educational quality a priority in their dealings with the federal government.

Bilingual education is a good policy for Nunavut. Berger's model has practical suggestions for implementing aspects of bilingual education

over the next twenty years including training adults in the communities to teach particular subjects that are within their expertise. Both directly, and indirectly, bilingual education promotes meaningful Inuit employment. However, it is not a fix for the school system – on that front, more needs to be done and there needs to be higher accountability for achievement with whatever level of bilingualism is in place.

NOTES

¹ The Land Claim Agreement and the Political Accord, committing to the creation of the new territory, were settled in 1993.

² On the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey in 2003, over 88 per cent of Inuit scored below level 3 in prose literacy; the territorial rate of adults with low literacy rates was 72 per cent – 20 points higher than any other jurisdiction in Canada including the other territories.

³ The Government of Nunavut has committed at the level of policy, but not legislation, to offering bilingual education from K-12 on a model proposed by Professor Ian Martin of York University (*Aajjiqatigiingniq*) (Martin, 2000). At its Annual General Meeting in 2006, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated resolved to support Inuktitut as the language of instruction *in all subjects* from K-12.

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