

Recontextualizing Schooling Within an Inuit Community

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(Baffin Inuktitut translation by Matthew Inutiq)

Inuit community members in Baffin Island are learning to manage formal schooling, and at the same time modifying that institution so that it reflects their own community context. Yet finding the right fit between schooling and a new cultural context presents a challenge. Many Inuit find problematical the new values schooling introduces into the community. This article proceeds from the assumption that the practices and values of formal schooling historically have been superimposed upon already existing indigenous institutions, which, in many cases, remain invisible to “southern” educators. The concept “formal schooling” as used here is not restricted to classroom values and practices, but denotes the whole schooling system and extends to include the system’s many roles and varied content.

Les membres de la communauté inuite de l’île de Baffin apprennent à gérer les programmes scolaires officiels tout en leur apportant des modifications relevant du contexte communautaire. La recherche du juste équilibre entre les programmes d’études officiels et un nouveau contexte culturel constitue toutefois un défi. L’école introduit de nouvelles valeurs que de nombreux membres de la communauté estiment problématiques. L’auteure pose comme hypothèse que les pratiques et les valeurs de l’école officielle sont depuis toujours surimposées à des institutions autochtones déjà existantes qui, dans de nombreux cas, demeurent invisibles aux éducateurs “du Sud.” Ici, le concept d’“école officielle” ne se limite pas aux valeurs et pratiques rattachées à la classe, mais englobe l’ensemble du système scolaire, notamment les nombreux rôles et les contenus divers de ce système.

Arctic Bay, a Baffin Island community, is engaged in an evolving partnership with the formal school system. Community members are performing new school-related roles. Ideally, the two partners’ responsibilities should make sense to them. Arctic Bay residents acknowledge they are undergoing a process of change and value the new kinds of survival skills schooling introduces. Schooling,

however, originated in a cultural context different from that in which the inhabitants of Arctic Bay live: this challenges both partners. At the same time each partner tries to learn the significance of the other's practices, both must also incorporate new meanings and procedures into some of their own practices. Schooling is recontextualized as the two partners negotiate the mutual accommodation of schooling and a new cultural context.

The institutions of mainstream North American culture, of which schooling is a case in point, have usually been superimposed on Canada's indigenous communities with little, if any, recognition of their cultural contexts (Barman, Hébert, & McCaskill, 1986; Paquette, 1986). In many cases, already existing indigenous relationships and institutions remain invisible to non-indigenous educators (see Philips, 1983). Canadian indigenous communities are attempting to obviate this culturally-damaging practice, and community control of formal schooling is now a fundamental principle (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; Pauls, 1984; Ward, 1986). Once the encounter between school and community is no longer a one-way transaction, it becomes a process of cultural rapport.

In this article I provide insights into the encounter between Arctic Bay and formal schooling, and recount some challenges posed to community members as they participate in the recontextualizing process. I describe both the community and the school, and explain how my research objectives and procedure changed as my knowledge of the community deepened.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Researchers in various sites have documented instances of negotiating the encounter between schooling and a new cultural context (Bullivant, 1984; Harris, 1990; Holm & Holm, 1990; Jacob & Jordan, 1993; Lipka, 1989; Ryan, 1989; Stairs, 1991; Wax, Wax, & Dumont, 1989). Although they all assume that problems inevitably arise in the engagement between educators and pupils of differing cultural traditions, and support the ideal of cultural survival, they do so with varying emphases and from a range of theoretical perspectives.

Wax, Wax and Dumont (1989), whose 1960s account is the first in-depth study to examine critically the relationship between school and a native community, note that factors of geographical and social isolation reinforce problems of cultural difference for both the Lakota Sioux and their non-indigenous teachers, not only within their individual groups but also in the two cultural groups' encounters with each other. Jacob and Jordan (1993), drawing from experience in a cross-section of school settings, urge educators to proceed from the perspective of cultural difference, not deficit, on the part of minority students. In so doing, educators will more readily link the wide range of differing schooling patterns and outcomes of these students to the wide range of cultural meanings and practices in the students' respective cultures. On the basis of extensive observation in Canadian indigenous schools, Stairs (1991) proposes a

cultural maintenance model that would not only include in its curriculum indigenous language and course materials, but would extend the vision of cultural content to include both social and cognitive processes.

Ryan (1989) argues that formal educators' attempts to accommodate obvious cultural differences will not suffice in solving problems of alienation between indigenous students and the school system. From his perspective in an Innu community, he concludes that the institutional practices and values of the dominant society inevitably permeate the school, causing students' negative self-perceptions and low self-esteem, and thus inhibiting their school success. Lipka (1989) illustrates how formal schooling became a supportive resource to an Alaskan community through incorporating local concerns into the curriculum. He cautions, however, that "southern" educators must appear neither to be teaching the community its own culture, nor to be repeating the usual dominant-subordinate relationship pattern promulgated by their own culture.

Bullivant (1984) documents how Aboriginal formal school educators serve as cultural brokers for their communities as they strive to establish the optimum balance between education for advancement in Euro-Australian society and education for cultural survival. As each community manifests a different pattern of cultural practice, different educational strategies are required. Although Harris (1990) acknowledges the importance of community control, he claims that two-way schooling, in operation in several Aboriginal communities, is fundamental to Aboriginal cultural maintenance in Australia. In the ideal school model, the two cultural domains are distinctly separate and curriculum content and classroom practice represent each culture equally. A two-way exchange of knowledge enhances mutual recognition of equality. Holm and Holm (1990) describe the incremental success of a Navajo community-controlled school over a period of ten years, and note how both board meetings and educational practices have evolved to enhance bicultural procedures and content.

This overview summons attention to the efforts and concerns of some role players in the schooling system who are working to achieve effective and productive interaction between indigenous communities and formal schooling. The people of Arctic Bay are part of this pattern. As they give direction to the goals and practices of schooling they are making the change from being passive recipients within a superimposed system to becoming active participants in an evolving process.

Because the very nature of schooling requires that it function within a network of relationships, the concept "formal schooling" as I use it here is not restricted to in-school procedures but extends to include the system's many roles and varied content. From this perspective, schooling content encompasses not only curriculum and teaching methods but also community and school board agendas and decision-making. Similarly, schooling roles are filled by all the people who have school-related responsibilities. These roles include those of students, teachers, administrators at all levels of the system, elected officials, and community

members. It is apparent, then, that the participants in a cross-cultural encounter between school and community bring to it many perspectives.

THE BAFFIN SCHOOL SYSTEM

Arctic Bay's Inuujaq School is within the policy sphere of the Baffin Divisional Board of Education (BDBE), which, in turn, is responsible to the Northwest Territories Department of Education. That department supports the concept of divisional boards, not only as a way to ease administrative responsibility, but also in recognition of the extraordinary cultural and linguistic diversity in the territorial school population. The Baffin Board, inaugurated in April 1985 as the Northwest Territories' first divisional board, is responsible to the 13 communities in the Baffin region in the Eastern Arctic. Each school in this region has an elected Community Education Council (CEC), and CEC members in each community in turn elect one of their number to represent them on the Baffin board. In theory, Baffin education policy is made at several distinct levels, ranging from the centralized government department through the more locally oriented divisional board to the individual community.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of my research is to learn about the recontextualizing process in Arctic Bay as community members undertake new roles and become actors in the school system. At the time of writing, I have visited the community five times and have spent many months there as a participant observer. I have lived with Inuit families and have participated with them in the rituals and observances of their community life. I have also attended their education meetings and other forums for the new forms of local self-government introduced by "southern" practice. This article represents in part my current understanding of the relationship between the community and the school.

Initially I intended that the prime focus of my study be the procedures and goals of Arctic Bay's CEC. My purpose presupposed some knowledge of Inuit culture on my part, knowledge enabling me to identify the institutions that shape community members' lives. On the basis of an extensive literature search I created a framework of analytical concepts for Inuit ways of being to help me categorize my observations. I assumed I would soon be able to recognize and distinguish between different Inuit practices and, moreover, to distinguish those practices from "southern" ones. Although I had devised a thorough theoretical approach, I found that field experience gave theory new meaning. Furthermore, theoretical preparation alone proved insufficient groundwork for my enterprise. Living in the research community, I gained many new insights that required me to modify my original objective.

RESEARCH PROCESS

During my first three-month stay in Arctic Bay I found both the process and the results of observation frustrating. My interaction with the CEC was delayed, as scheduled meetings were repeatedly cancelled. When the meetings recommenced more or less according to schedule, I failed to see significant interaction or policy-making in them. From my perspective, council members exchanged little information and made few decisions.

In this same period, I attended other community gatherings and visited Inuit informally in their homes. These occasions made me increasingly aware of the extent to which Inuit both represent themselves and interact with one another in ways different from those of my culture. Before long, I realized I had been observing the processes of the CEC from a “southern” perspective. I had assumed that all decision-making forums with similar types of responsibilities, regardless of culture, must function approximately according to the same general principles. And not only was I presupposing a “southern” type of group interaction on the part of council members, I was also presupposing a more or less “southern” conception of their roles on their part. I realized I had insufficient knowledge of Arctic Bay community institutions, decision-making among them. I also had insufficient knowledge of the criteria informing community members’ relationships to one another and their relationship to schooling, both as a group and individually. I further realized that even though Arctic Bay Inuit might be in a position to integrate their own practices into the school system, this did not necessarily follow smoothly or automatically.

It became quite clear to me that to continue to focus on the processes of Arctic Bay’s CEC without having a more informed understanding of community institutions would not be productive. I therefore turned my attention to the community as a whole, trying to arrive at a much clearer conception of the context in which local educational policy is made and to which the formal school system is adapting.

THE COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Inuit family groups traditionally had permanent camps in the vicinity of the present community of Arctic Bay due to favourable weather and hunting conditions in the Admiralty Inlet area. After the Hudson’s Bay Company established a permanent post at the sheltered northern end of the bay in 1936, Inuit gathered there in the late summer when the annual supply of trade goods arrived via sea-lift. From its earliest days, this settlement was understood to be a place where “white,” or in Inuit terms, “Qallunaat,” values dominated.

Thirty years ago, only five interrelated Inuit families lived in the settlement. Their livelihood depended on the two “southern” enterprises then in operation, the Bay store and the federal government weather station. As one resident from

those early days said, "All the things that were built at that time belonged to the government" (Cowan, 1976). In 1959 an existing building was adapted to serve as a school for a handful of students, but before long the teacher was moved elsewhere and schooling was temporarily discontinued. That building is now the Hunters and Trappers Association office. The federal government built a permanent school in 1962. An Anglican church followed in 1965, which an Inuk resident was employed to oversee and maintain. At the same time, the Inuit population of Arctic Bay began to grow as the federal government informed families living on the land that all children should be in school. People were told that if they moved into the settlement they could have houses for \$2 a month and receive family allowance cheques. Both a community council and a housing association were started in 1967, and by 1969 the latter was responsible for 11 houses. As was the case in other communities, a southern settlement manager administered Arctic Bay. At one time the community's teacher filled this role, as well as serving as one of the three housing association members.

Some Inuit had permanent camps close enough to the settlement so that their children could walk in to school daily. But the pressure to encourage families to become permanent community residents was strong. In the early 1970s both federal government representatives and settlement Inuit visited those who still lived in camps distant from Arctic Bay and told them they must move in and send their children to school. This form of pressure was effective and as a result the community grew rapidly. By the late 1970s Arctic Bay's population was 350, and it is still growing. In the last decade it has increased by 50% and in 1993 stands at 550.

Arctic Bay residents are conscious that community life means living under the jurisdiction of Qallunaat institutions. Whenever they can, Inuit leave the community to go hunting and fishing. There are still many full-time hunters in the community, and those with full-time wage employment hunt on weekends or in the evening if time and light permit. People often return to their former family camp sites, particularly for long periods during the summer months. They are proud to tell one where their particular "land" is. On numerous occasions I have been told, "If you want to see us as we really are, you must come and stay in a camp."

Because this way of life remains fundamentally significant to Inuit here, and because it is still practicable, although in a limited and somewhat technologically transformed way, its practices, interrelationships, and ideals still provide the guiding principles for most people. These practices and ideals are associated with the life of members of extended family hunting groups who are mutually supportive of and dependent on one another for their survival.

An aspect of these survival practices can be seen in the patterns of respect and prohibition interwoven into kinship ties. Members of an extended family address one another with the kinship terms and names that connote their relationships one to another, and sisters- and brothers-in-law traditionally are prohibited from

addressing one another directly. As another example, a hunting son-in-law will always bring meat to his in-laws' home, and I have observed a son-in-law employed in the wage economy bring a supply of gasoline to fuel his hunting father-in-law's skidoo.

It is not that we in the south fail to respect our extended families, but that these non-individualistic Inuit observances are carried out in such a matter of fact, non-assuming way. The Inuit "ningiqtuq," or sharing practices, all serve to strengthen and maintain cohesion and solidarity of the group.

Although southern institutions continue to regulate settlement life, the character of these institutions is changing. The role of settlement manager is no longer necessary, and the role's responsibilities have evolved into the more equitable ones of a government liaison officer, a position now held in the community by a local resident who completed his formal schooling in Churchill. So also the rector of the Anglican Church is an Inuk, initially from the neighbouring community of Pond Inlet, who trained at Baffin's theological seminary in Pangnirtung. A similar progression of local involvement has occurred in other institutions, including the school.

THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

A large, low, green building, whose structure reveals it to be the locus of a Qallunaat institution, is strategically situated in the centre of the community and dominates the emerging vista of the hamlet as one approaches by land or across the bay. This is the fourth building to house the school. The school program runs from kindergarten through Grade 10, and has included an optional Community Occupations Programme for students in grades 9 and 10.

The 1992/93 school population was 200; six years before it was 159. The 1992/93 teaching staff numbered 18, of which 6 were southerners, as the principal has continued to be. Of the 12 Inuit staff, 4 were certified teachers, with degrees from the Eastern Arctic Teacher Education Programme (EATEP), 4 were classroom assistants, pursuing EATEP courses toward a teaching certificate during the summer, 1 was a special needs assistant, 2 were part-time cultural instructors, 1 was a part-time Inuktitut language instructor. Home room teachers are Inuit up to and including Grade 4, although students have increasing amounts of English instruction in their program. By grades 5 and 6, the school day is split between Inuktitut and English, and grades 7 to 10 are taught in English with several periods of Inuktitut instruction during the week—the reverse pattern of the elementary grades. This pattern continues in 1993/94.

By comparison, five years ago, although the staff numbered 16, 8 were southerners. Two of the Inuit staff, the grades 1 and 2 teachers, had teaching certificates, only 1 had classroom assistant status, and the culture and language instructors were casual employees rather than permanent staff. Full-time instruction by Inuit teachers did not extend beyond Grade 2.

The school population is obviously growing, and there have been visible changes in school facilities, staff composition, and curriculum. Some changes have not been positive, however. During the 1980s, the school had four different principals; at the end of the 1990/91 school year all the southern teaching staff, of which there were five, left the community (not en masse but for various personal reasons). At the end of the 1991/92 school year, four of the six new southern staff left. The staff who do stay are frequently assigned a different grade each year, making it difficult to build up a stable body of curriculum materials for an individual grade. And as with all schools, but particularly those within the jurisdiction of the territorial government this year, there are budget cut-backs and constraints, which, added to the unpredictability of staff continuity, inhibit program development.

As are other institutions in the community that are not Inuit in origin, the school is in flux. The nature of the changes is not clear to me. In seeking understanding, I pose these questions:

—Do the changes imply that the school is meeting the needs of the community or that the community has greater control over what takes place in the schooling process?

—Are the changes in the school the result of on-going negotiation between Inuit and Qallunaat values?

—Which culture's values underlie the content of the school in terms of curriculum and interpersonal behaviours?

—Despite the predominance of Inuit staff, whose school is it, or, in other words, which culture is the host?

As I ponder these questions and become increasingly aware of their many implications, I realize that they demand time and attention, and, if not answers, at least greater clarification.

THE CHALLENGE OF SCHOOL TO COMMUNITY VALUES

I sense that parents are wrestling with this same dilemma—whose school it is—with respect to the values integrated into their children's education. For instance, at a general community education meeting held in the fall of 1992, parental concerns included the following. When students are absent from school, they are either excused, E (a legitimate excuse) or considered truant, T. The school categorizes as truant students engaged in either baby-sitting or unloading freight from the sea-lift. Why should this be, ask parents, as the youngsters are working and learning, and particularly in the latter case, earning money? All Inuit family members contribute to the rearing of the young as part of the cultural learning process, therefore minding a younger sibling, niece, nephew, or cousin is normal practice. (One Inuit friend, a teacher in her early 30s, told me that during the time she was growing up she thought her older sister was her

mother, even though her mother lived with the family. She was surprised, but not upset, when she learned the identity of her natural mother.)

I perceive a conflict here between what Inuit community members value and what the school system values (see Brody, 1975; Paine, 1971; Paine, 1977). This example shows that to some Inuit parents the school appears to be negating important values of both cultures. From the Inuit cultural perspective, the school discounts the learning of their own culture, and from the Qallunaat perspective, the school discounts the value of work for pay. Inuit may well ask themselves why in these instances working and earning money is devalued, since the Qallunaat culture appears to value this so much. That there are different rules for different settings would not only (rightly) appear inconsistent to Inuit, but also contradict what the school and other institutions as a rule maintain.

Another school-related concern gave rise to conflicting values among Inuit themselves. Some parents expressed surprise that cultural instructors should be paid to take children out on the land—shouldn't this be done voluntarily? This, again, would be the culturally accepted way of doing things. On the other hand, it is extremely important to most parents that the cultural instructors be accepted and legitimate members of the school staff. Many parents want these teachers to be full-time rather than part-time staff. Here is a paradox for parents: it is important to them that cultural instructors be employed as full-time school staff, yet at the same time, they would like to see the recognition and continuation of their own Inuit values and practices whereby it is taken for granted that older society members teach the young.

Perhaps the reason for the urgency on the part of some parents to have these instructors become full-time is that for many of them the cultural instructors provide the only link with the school with which they can identify. Many parents have not gone to school themselves, and thus are unfamiliar with classroom practices. On the other hand, not only are they familiar with the content of the cultural instruction (women's skills for the girls, men's for the boys), they are also familiar with the way this content is transmitted. And this gives rise to yet another challenge: some southern-trained school personnel are critical of the traditional Inuit mode of knowledge transmission. They consider the one-to-one interaction of teacher and learner an inappropriate way to achieve the schooling goal of group learning, and prefer the simultaneous participation of all students in effect in most Qallunaat schools.

As a final example of an issue that evokes the questioning of values, the BDBE, sensitive to parents' desire to take their children with them when they go out on the land during the school year, has instituted as official Board policy that under such circumstances, if the school is advised ahead of time, the children will be considered "absent" rather than "truant." For some parents, however, even the "absent" designation is inappropriate, as again they feel their children are in a learning situation and should be credited as such (see Harris, 1990). Although Arctic Bay residents recognize that their way of life is in transition,

most are still so close to the life to which they are essentially accustomed that its values and practices continue to dominate their lives.

CONCLUSION

Community members' concerns indicate that some values associated with schooling are inconsistent with the Inuit way of life. Furthermore, schooling appears to raise conflicting values not only between cultures but also within each culture. The challenge posed by recontextualizing schooling in Arctic Bay lies in part in resolving these inconsistencies.

The final form into which the partnership between the community and the school will evolve is not clear. One possibility one can be eliminated: current educational policy and practice on one hand, and the firmly entrenched cultural values of the people of Arctic Bay on the other, negate the possibility that schooling could fail to take community values into account. However, the community choice to place primary emphasis on community control, a standpoint Holm and Holm (1990) advocate as essential to cultural maintenance, or the decision that cultural domain separation, in line with Harris' (1990) vision, is the fundamental objective, are possible alternatives.

The people of Arctic Bay could realize a fourth option. Although schooling at times appears to threaten established family and community roles, the peoples' essential practices and values create a continuous communal fabric and provide the prime source for identity, both individual and collective. Grounded in this culturally viable context, community members continue to enlarge their understanding of both the institution of schooling and the responsibilities and possibilities of their own associated role. In due course they will be able to articulate and put into practice their own vision of partnership. I suggest that the community's continuing viability will be a fundamental component of this partnership. In fact, to participate in a partnership with schooling can also help reinforce Arctic Bay's cultural viability. As education policy makers, community members will be in a position to integrate their own values and practices into the schooling system. They may choose to negotiate with the school system to determine to what extent they need to integrate these values into the institution to maintain the cultural balance they require for survival.

NOTE

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