

## DÉBAT / DISCUSSION

A Response to Kelly Gallagher-Mackay in the *Canadian Journal of Education* 30(4), (2007), 1093-1104

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I read with interest Kelly Gallagher-Mackay's review of Thomas Berger's (2006) report, recommending the expansion of bilingual English-Inuktitut education from K to 12 in all Nunavut's schools. Gallagher-Mackay asserts: *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.* Gallagher-Mackay has taken too narrow a view and, consequently, she has missed the point of what Berger was trying to achieve.

I was senior policy advisor for Nunavut Tunngavik Inc (NTI) throughout the course of the negotiations with the Government of Canada (GoC) and the Government of Nunavut (GN) to update the funding levels for the continued implementation of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (NLCA.) Accordingly, I attended all the meetings with Berger and wrote NTI's briefing papers. Prior to joining NTI, I worked for the GN coordinating the development of the government's funding proposal which was tabled in the negotiations. I, too, am a lawyer and I was an elementary school teacher for 24 years, 12 of which were spent as a principal of First Nations schools in northern Manitoba and northern Ontario.

When the negotiations to update the funding levels for the continued implementation of the NLCA began in 2001, it quickly became obvious within GN that the implementation of Article 23 of the NLCA (the obligation to achieve and maintain a representative level of Inuit

employment in the public service at all grade levels and in every occupational group) was not only going to be staggeringly expensive, it was well beyond the capacity of this small and inexperienced government to implement. Because GN depends on federal transfers for 95 per cent of its income, any progress on Article 23 was absolutely dependent on the federal government. However, the federal government denied any responsibility for training another government's work force, and believed that its obligation under Article 23 applied only to the very small Nunavut regional office of fewer than 350 employees (compared to 3,741 GN public servants). Consequently, after four years of fruitless negotiations, the three parties eventually reached an impasse and Berger was called in by the GoC as conciliator.

Berger's mandate came from the GoC and his recommendations were primarily addressed to them. He was acutely aware of the limits of his mandate and of what he could achieve. He quickly grasped that the essence of the dispute was the failure to implement Article 23 and that was, as Gallagher-Mackay correctly points out, a "supply" and not a "demand" problem. Further, it was obvious to Berger that the cause of the supply problem was the failed education system.

Berger made no claim to be an authority on education, much less bilingual education, but he well understood that the school system in Nunavut was a failure, and he was aware of the broad educational and socio-economic reasons that lay behind it. He referred to these reasons in his report and he also pointed out that student achievement was much worse than the 25 per cent graduation rate that Gallagher-Mackay refers to. Many of the 25 per cent who graduated did not function at a grade-12 level.

It is well established that one of the core solutions to the problem of the low achievement of Aboriginal students is that the schools they attend must reflect their culture and the societal values of their people. Presently, most of the schools in Nunavut do not offer an education that reflects Inuit societal and cultural values. On the few occasions when Inuit students learn anything about their own culture it is generally presented as an artefact and usually by non-Inuit teachers. It has long been recognized in Nunavut that most Inuit students eventually become alienated by a system that is based solidly on European culture and the

Alberta curriculum. By dropping out, Inuit students are voting with their feet on the relevance of their schools.

Berger was not advocating bilingualism as a facet of a larger school program. He urged bilingualism because it would inevitably place the schools in the hands of Inuit and this solution would profoundly change the whole culture of the education system.

Berger was not the first to advocate bilingual instruction in the Inuit language as a core solution for the education system's problems. The Government of Nunavut's Department of Education released its bilingualism strategy in 2003, two years before Berger's report. It was based upon two earlier reports: *Qulliq Quvvariarlugu* by David Corson (2000) of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and a thoroughly academic paper by Ian Martin (2000), *Aajiiqatigiingniq*. Consequently, it was not necessary for Berger to plough the same furrows again.

Nor was there any point in Berger stepping into the field of either education or social policy. Neither of these are federal responsibilities and yet through their control of GN's income they controlled the solution. The policies of the Government of Nunavut were only so much paper unless they could extract the necessary resources from the Government of Canada.

Berger believed that bilingualism was the Trojan horse that would defeat the defence of the federal government that they had no responsibility for Nunavut's education system. Bilingualism was the only issue that touched a weak spot in the federal government. Accordingly, far from intending to be an academic treatise on bilingual instruction, Berger's report was an eloquent argument to the Government of Canada that it has a moral if not legal responsibility to do for the Inuit majority of Nunavut what they did for the French majority of Quebec – and there-by, vicariously, address one of the core problems in Nunavut's education system.

Gallagher-Mackay is correct in asserting that there is a lack of political will in the GN, although I am not sure it is fair to include the land claims politicians. NTI has vigorously criticized the Department of Education for their many failures, not just in language instruction. The Department's most egregious political failure has been its opposition to real community involvement in education. Unfortunately, Gallagher-

Mackay makes no mention of local control, which is probably at least as important as the language of instruction in transforming the culture of the schools. The GN has always opposed local control of education. One of the new government's first acts was to abolish the three regional school boards in 2000, ostensibly to save \$1 million annually. It is now the only jurisdiction in Canada that denies the significance to student achievement of Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education.

Gallagher-Mackay overstates the importance of poverty on student achievement. It matters, of course, but if children have a strong sense of self-worth and believe they have a future, then poverty does not hold most back. Placing Inuit children in schools dominated by white teachers teaching a European culturally based curriculum does nothing for their self-worth. Nor do they have much of a future. Inuit children can see that, in spite of negotiating the land claims agreement and establishing Nunavut, most of the jobs in the GN and every other significant employer in Nunavut are taken by non-Inuit.

I would like to make one last point. Gallagher-Mackay asserts that: *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)*. However, the way the commitment is worded in Bill 21, it is not worth the paper it is written on. The Department of Education has expressly refused to extend the same rights to instruction in the Inuit language as the Francophones have to instruction in French, and if Bill 21 is passed into law there will be nothing that Inuit parents can do ensure that the government makes bilingual instruction happen.

Finally, if bilingual instruction is to be implemented it will require more than 300 Inuit teachers, many more than the Nunavut Teacher Education Program (NTEP) has produced since its inception thirty years ago. Far from coming up with creative measures to address this acute shortage, the Department of Education, the NTEP, and the Nunavut Teacher's Association, dominated as they all are by non-Inuit, want to make teaching more exclusive. Contrary to the NLCA obligation that artificially inflated education requirements should be removed, they are advocating 'raising the bar' for entry into the profession by increasing the training period from the current four-year degree to a five-year

honours degree. In the 12 years remaining, it will require a miracle for GN to implement its “commitment” to bilingual instruction from kindergarten to grade 12 by 2020.

#### REFERENCES

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