

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS IN THE NWT AND WHAT IS NOW NUNAVUT

Prior to recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) for curriculum in all jurisdictions, Heather E. McGregor begins, the Departments of Education in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories (NWT) had arranged a partnership with the Legacy of Hope Foundation to develop a curriculum module focused on the history of residential schools, McGregor adding that Canada's territories had the highest per capita rate of residential school attendance.¹ By linking Northern narratives with the Canadian history of colonization and contemporary movement towards reconciliation and decolonization, McGregor hopes to “help students better understand their families, communities, and country.”²

In particular, McGregor reports on a grade 10 social studies module entitled *The Residential School System in Canada: Understanding the Past — Seeking Reconciliation — Building Hope for Tomorrow*, as, she tells us, it represents Northern perspectives on residential schools and is addressed Northern audiences.³ The “module” also, she continues, “compares the context of Canadian policy to implementation of that policy in the Arctic; features Inuit and First Nations experiences and cultural references; develops social studies thinking skills in students; and engages them in contemporary discourse and actions tied to the legacies of residential schooling,” all the while aiming to “make instruction of this difficult topic more accessible for northern teachers.”⁴ Seems like a lot for a “module.”

Then McGregor links the development of this residential school history education module with “the unusual history of education, including, but not limited to, residential schools in the NWT and what is now Nunavut” and with “contemporary educational goals in Nunavut, goals that have been shaped and conditioned by this very history.”⁵ McGregor was a member of “the curriculum development team working on providing northern students with histories of residential schools”; they “decided to collect several additional narratives from former students and survivors,” as conducting “original research to supplement what can be found in published sources is typical of the process of developing locally and culturally responsive education resources in northern Canada.”⁶ Speaking with former and survivors would also provide “an important opportunity to engage in conversations with Northerners about what they would like students to learn about residential schools.”⁷ She reports: “Many former students and survivors emphasized that they would like the greatest breadth of stories to be included, that all stories — positive, negative, or anything in between — should be available to the students.”⁸

Despite this request, McGregor reports that “Not *all* stories or perspectives could be included in the curriculum module on the history of residential schools,”⁹ although why is not specified. The lack of detailed explanation – perhaps underfunding

or simply the size of the task? – is puzzling given that McGregor “understand[s] decolonizing in the context of the Nunavut school system as deliberately, inclusively and continuously reflecting on stories from the past that have shaped Nunavut schools as we find them today, and using those stories to inform new decisions about shaping schools to better fit with their communities, attending in particular to Indigenous knowledge, language and self-determination.”¹⁰

While the Indian residential school system started in the mid-19th century, “Inuit over the age of 70 living today did not participate in the formal education system, nor did they have the opportunity should they have wanted it.”¹¹ Through the “early decades of the 20th century traditional Inuit childrearing and education took place much as it had in the Arctic for centuries.”¹² “After World War II,” McGregor continues, “concern for Canadian sovereignty and interest in northern resource development, together with a secondary consideration for Inuit welfare, led the federal government — reluctantly — to begin to intervene in the lives of Inuit through provision of social services, including education.”¹³ McGregor reports that despite this “comparatively short colonial period, fast pace of change, and the era in which this change was experienced,” Inuit were not spared “the cultural and social disruption, and appropriation of their lands, imposed through colonization on Indigenous peoples in Canada.”¹⁴

Before 1955 fewer than 15% of school-aged Inuit were enrolled in schools, but in that year the federal government issued a policy to increase enrollment, consequently “developed schooling through a matrix of different sites and forms, amidst infrastructure challenges, limited budgets, and other variables,” resulting in the establishment of “public schools, schools run by mining companies, church-run schools, and removal of students to attend schools in southern Canada.”¹⁵ McGregor notes that this occurred after the government had taken “steps towards ending the residential school system for Indigenous students in southern Canada.”¹⁶ The “*intent* of the government was not to replicate the southern system,” instead intending to establish “a ‘multicultural’ school system serving all residents of the Arctic, in which some students would reside in hostels,” casting these schools as “federal day schools” despite the fact that “most students who attended were separated from their families and required to live in hostels.”¹⁷

For McGregor the “clearest case of inconsistency in implementation of this supposedly new educational policy was at Chesterfield Inlet, where operating funds for the day school came from the federal government, but the Roman Catholic church and grey nuns oversaw schooling and accommodations under conditions hardly distinguishable from the southern residential school model.”¹⁸ It was from this school “the greatest number of accusations, and convictions, of abuse emerged.”¹⁹ There were three other federal schools, including the Joseph Bernier Federal Day School with its hostel, Turquetil Hall, already in operation but transferred to federal control in 1954.²⁰ One hundred students were enrolled, overcrowding both the school and hostel,” and

the school was – as at Chesterfield Inlet – run by the Catholic missionary organization and underfunded by the government.²¹ In 1958, Sir John Franklin School was opened in Yellowknife, operating the only federally run (non-denominational) hostel at the time, followed by the opening in 1959 of the Sir Alexander Mackenzie School in Inuvik; this school supported two hostels: Grollier Hall (Catholic), and Stringer Hall (Anglican).²² The fourth school was called the Churchill Vocational Centre, a non-denominational training centre and hostel; it opened in 1964.²³ These four were followed by “twenty-two community day schools for the elementary grades were built in what is now Nunavut during the late 1950s and 1960s, ending with Repulse Bay in 1968 and Nanisivik (a mining settlement) in 1976.”²⁴ While schools were under construction, students from outlying areas were sometimes flown to nearby communities or regional centres, but the opportunities were limited: by 1970 only four communities in the eastern region (Qikiqtani) were offering schooling beyond grade 6.²⁵

McGregor reports that “Inuit parents’ views on whether or not their children should attend school — residential or day school — and what their education should entail, were generally not taken into consideration.”²⁶ Inuit parents, she continues, “were often reluctant to be away from their children, and would move into communities (instead of staying on the land) if it meant they could be together with children attending day schools.”²⁷ Evidently many parents did not relocate, however, as McGregor also reports that “many Inuit students” suffered as did Indigenous students to the South, including: “separation from families for extended periods, against the wishes of parents; shaming and penalties associated with using Inuit language; poor living conditions including overcrowding and malnutrition; and many other forms of abuse and cultural assimilation.”²⁸ Outcomes were also similar, McGregor adds, including: “missed opportunities to learn subsistence skills necessary for life on the land; intergenerational effects of emotional, physical and sexual abuse; and damage to family relationships and lack of knowledge about parenting skills.”²⁹

While lacking jurisdiction over their children, Inuit parents, McGregor tells us, “still carried the weight of responsibility for their children’s wellbeing and future.”³⁰ Moreover, the new schools showed “few characteristics or activities of traditional Inuit education,” perhaps in part because teachers were non-Indigenous.³¹ In fact, “very little about school was familiar or culturally affirming for Inuit students, and the harsh imposition of English could be very difficult.”³² Not until 2005 did all Nunavut communities have schools offering grades 10–12, the smallest communities were last in line.³³ McGregor’s concludes that “policy, educational opportunities, and experiences in different Nunavut communities have been inconsistent and were significantly affected by local factors.”³⁴

In contrast to many southern residential schools, northern schools and hostels enrolled non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous students, although the non-Indigenous student population was smaller.³⁵ Non-Indigenous students were sometimes the

children of the schoolteachers, others were the children of those working at oil rigs (for example in Norman Wells), and still others were the children whose parents worked in remote communities without grades 7-12 education available.³⁶ McGregor reminds that there were students of federal schools and residences who judged their education as “a positive skill-building and social experience.”³⁷ Certain students put these skills to pursuing the Nunavut land claims and self-government.³⁸

McGregor acknowledges that such student testimony “adds complexity to the sometimes-simplified equation between the residential nature of a school and inherent damage to students.”³⁹ She concludes: “Children from Canada’s northern-most territories had experiences with schools that show a variety and complexity that cannot, nor should be, easily generalized or encapsulated by increasingly common notions associated with the term “residential schools” in southern Canada.”⁴⁰ While at times experienced as “extremely dislocating,” other students reported “positive outcomes.”⁴¹ Simply bringing together youth scattered across the huge Arctic area was one such positive consequence: “This networking, community building, and the solidarity it produced in political movements towards land claims is perhaps one of the most significant northern legacies of residential schooling.”⁴²

McGregor then moves away from the facts she has just reported toward more mainstream even clichéd rhetoric, writing that “studying the educational past helps those involved in schools now to consider how and why decolonizing processes re-centre Indigenous knowledge, language, and culture through new conceptions of curriculum, pedagogy, and educational policy.”⁴³ Then McGregor invokes what is for me the problematic notion of so-called culturally responsive schooling – in the U.S. implying white teachers should act “black” – as she reiterates the clichés of contemporary curriculum counsel:

To facilitate culturally responsive schooling, all educators — regardless of their ethnicity or where they grew up — require orientation, mentoring, professional development, and support to move away from reproducing the education practices they themselves likely experienced as students or teacher candidates, particularly those that emerge from colonizing and assimilative educational traditions. They also need support to learn and practice what it may mean to teach and learn differently in Nunavut, recognizing the conditions of education that have arisen from the difficult policies and experiences during colonization, as well as the resilience and change enacted through accelerated processes of decolonization.⁴⁴

McGregor advises that “educators’ engagement with educational history cannot be limited to an exposure to academic literature,” recommending instead “local histories, histories that are informed by multiple perspectives, or histories that offer insight into Indigenous worldview,” all of which are of course reported through “academic literature.” Asking academicians “to meet, listen to, and build relationships with people who have seen education rapidly changing in Nunavut first-hand over the last sixty-

five years,”⁴⁵ can be not only logistically difficult or impossible – staying alive long enough to remember sixty-five years of schools is no easy accomplishment in itself⁴⁶ – but would surely impose a burden on informants who cannot always be counted on to accommodate curious outsiders.

COMMENTARY

The research assistant - Anton Birioukov-Brant - who reviewed this article judged McGregor’s account of residential Schools in Nunavut and Northwest Territories (main focus on Nunavut) as “comprehensive,” suggesting that “McGregor disrupts common and almost taken-for-granted singular narratives of Residential Schools by highlighting the variance of experiences and types of Residential Schooling in the Arctic.” He continues: “Rather than challenging the dominant narrative outright, McGregor points to the need for contextual and community-based histories that capture the complexity of historical educational developments,” complexity that “allows for responsive curricula and pedagogy to thrive,” as “through this community-generated history, decolonization and reconciliation can begin to flourish.” Sidestepping the issues I’ve just raised – longevity and hospitality fatigue – I note that McGregor’s article itself is a strong instance of “academic literature” achieving that complexity.

REFERENCE

McGregor, Heather E. 2015. Listening for More (Hi)stories from the Arctic’s Dispersed and Diverse Educational Past. *Historical Studies in Education* 27 (1), 19-39.

ENDNOTES

¹ 2015, 19.

² 2015, 20.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ 2015, 21.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ 2015, 22.

¹¹ 2015, 23.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 2015, 24.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ 2015, 25.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ 2015, 25-26.

²⁹ 2016, 26.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ 2015, 28.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ 2015, 31.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ 2015, 32.

⁴⁰ 2015, 33.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ 2015, 35.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Especially since the life expectancy of Nunavut is 70.74 years:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/588104/life-expectancy-at-birth-nunavut/#:~:text=The%20life%20expectancy%20for%20those%20born%20in,Nunavut%20from%202018%20to%202020%20is%2070.74%20years.>