CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN NUNAVUT

Focused on Nunavut during 2000-2013, Heather McGregor and Catherine McGregor examine the Government's provision of curriculum K-12, founded on *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ). They describe "how the Curriculum and School Services Division of the Department of Education undertook to fulfil this responsibility through unique, made-in-Nunavut curriculum development processes and products," concluding by "outlining the opportunities and challenges evident in the work of creating curriculum, teaching resources, and learning materials that centre Inuit knowledges, languages, and contexts."[1]

McGregor and McGregor start their story in the 1970s when "policy makers decided that adapting or developing curriculum from scratch would better fit northern contexts than imposing southern curricula," but "time, financial, and human resources necessary for curriculum development never met the needs at all levels and across all subject areas, which created a patchwork."[2] This curricular "patchwork" was criticized by "community members and some scholars … as pulling teachers and students in too many, sometimes opposing, directions," curriculum criticism [3] McGregor and McGregor characterize as "growing pains," adding that even so "there were notable curriculum accomplishments and precedents from 2000 to 2013."[4]

The Curriculum and School Services Division (CSS) of the Nunavut Department of Education (NDE), McGregor and McGregor report, "was adamant—even radical—about pursuing change during this period, as evidenced by hiring Elders as full-time staff, leading research on made-in-Nunavut educational philosophies, and integrating Inuit knowledge into dozens of projects."[5] McGregor and McGregor were "interested in how, when advancing new mandates for schooling centred on *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ), the NDE provided and developed new materials intended to achieve those mandates."[6] IQ was defined by Elders as "knowledge that has been passed on to [Inuit] by our ancestors, things that we have always known, things crucial to our survival" and that which "embraces all aspects of traditional Inuit culture, including values, world-view, language, social organization, knowledge, life skills, perceptions and expectations." [7] That involved "disrupting the Eurocentric approaches," and the authors promise to "describe curriculum development and implementation processes," concluding with a discussion of "the ongoing opportunities and challenges of developing made-in-Nunavut curriculum and teaching materials."[8]

McGregor and McGregor conceive of the concept of curriculum "broadly," considering "almost any tool identified as required or recommended for school programs as curriculum, including policy documents such as directives, prescribed learning competencies, approved teaching resources and student learning materials, required or recommended assessment tools, and program support manuals that outline

roles, responsibilities, and pedagogies."[9] All of that could be subsumed in Aoki's "curriculum-as-plan." Unacknowledged the second half education experience, the "curriculum-as-lived,"[10] what Aoki positions as at least as if not more important than the first: "If, as many of us believe, the quality of curriculum-as-lived experiences is the heart and core as to why we exist as teachers …., curriculum planning should have as its central interest a way of contributing to the aliveness of school life as lived by teachers and students."[11] There was no reference Aoki's work in the article, but Catherine and Heather McGregor appear to share Aoki's insight.

"It is a significant challenge," McGregor and McGregor note, "to fill the need for high-quality materials that not only demonstrate responsiveness to Inuit culture and language but are actually *founded* on Inuit knowledge," that due to "deep colonial structures embedded within curriculum and schooling."[12] Somehow "curriculum must also enable Nunavut students to enter university and must be comprehensive enough to replace commercially available materials,"[13] university admission one of those "deep colonial structures" one supposes. McGregor and McGregor then tell us that Nunavut curriculum development from 2000 to 2013 was "consistent with many procedures used by the Government of the Northwest Territories prior to the creation of Nunavut," including participating in the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol (WNCP); conducting research into contemporary approaches to curricula in other jurisdictions (e.g., twenty-first-century skills); involving representative teacher committees in selecting, adapting, or developing curriculum; and using a progressive feedback-loop process (research, needs assessment, development, implementation, review, revision)."[14] Sounds all quite "colonial" to me. They add:

> There were also consistencies with Inuit regional curriculum projects prior to Nunavut. *Inuuqatigiit* is particularly worth noting because Nunavut curriculum development processes have been similar in several ways: establishing a philosophical base or framework for the content that draws on Inuit knowledge; consulting with Elders to collect Inuit knowledge; and producing materials in English and Inuktut.[15]

Was such cultural complexity, even incommensurability, incorporated into the curriculum that was developed?

Between 2000 to 2013, McGregor and McGregor emphasize, "Nunavut was committed to developing its own curriculum to replace programs from Alberta and other jurisdictions."[16] The Government mandated "re-writing of the K-12 school curriculum, to emphasize cultural relevance and academic excellence" and devise a course of study "built in the context of *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*."[17] Replacing Alberta secondary-school curriculum was "warranted" since its "geographic, social, and cultural content was and still is unfamiliar to Nunavut students,"[18] a feature of curriculum everywhere one assumes, unless students come to school already knowing what they're set to study. Then McGregor and McGregor back off a bit, saying that the intention was "to design programs that provided a better bridge between what is familiar and

valued by northern families with new learning competencies and unfamiliar content."[19] A second reason the Alberta curriculum was replaced was its exclusion of "bilingualism or second-language pedagogy," even though "Nunavut schools were not yet offering bilingual instruction in all grades." [20] Another consideration was "persistent Eurocentrism," adding up, at least "partly," to Nunavut students "performed relatively poorly on Alberta standardized summative assessments in Grades 10 through 12," as the Alberta curriculum "used assessment schemes inconsistent with Nunavut's philosophy of teaching and learning."[21] Alternative assessment would be devised, specifically replacing "the Grade 12 social studies final exam … with a capstone project."[22] The new curriculum would feature both "English and Inuktut materials at the same time to better reflect the two 'thought worlds' of each language," a "slow, challenging process that required additional resources, but it was thought to bear high-quality fruit."[23] Given the almost infinity of thought expressed by English-speakers worldwide, is it not rather reductionistic to imagine either language as a "thought-world" that could be somehow incorporated into curriculum?

"Rather than organizing curriculum into numerous subject areas" – a recommendation I and others have made[24] - curriculum developers preferred "four integrated strands" that represented the "holistic nature"[25] of Inuit knowledge:

- *Nunavusiutit*: heritage and culture; history; geography; environmental science; civics and economics
- *Iqqaqqaukkaringniq*: mathematics; innovation and technology; analytical and critical thinking; solution-seeking
- *Aulajaaqtut*: wellness and safety; physical, social, emotional and cultural wellness; goal setting; volunteerism; survival
- *Uqausiliriniq*: communication; language; creative and artistic expression; reflective and critical thinking[26]

Rather than using the jargon of "learning outcomes" the Nunavut curriculum "uses competencies," a concept long contested in U.S. curriculum studies, but which here evidently emphasizes "blending skills and knowledge to effectively navigate the demands of real life."[27] Sounds like a distinction without a difference to me.

Nunavut's assessment scheme, McGregor and McGregor report, "is founded on the concepts of continuous and differentiated progress," replacing advancement through grade levels – first, second, third, etc. grades – but by moving "through the five stages of learning for each competency, whenever those milestones may occur for them (one teacher picks up where the other has left off)," an organization "intended to prevent students from repeating content or being retained when some are slower than others,"[28] although how and why that would be achieved is not obvious to me. Another distinction *sans* difference, at least conceptually, but McGregor and McGregor assure us that this organization – which followed "consultation with Elders[,] … combined with contemporary assessment research and best practices from around the world."[29] In the McGregors' assessment, the new curriculum "involved transformation

of the system to meet Nunavut-based desires and needs, and necessarily involved tackling many components at one time," apparently no matter of ""tweaking' components here and there."[30]

Given the complexity of the undertaking, no one curriculum development plan would do, as "curriculum development was intended to draw on traditional Inuit, contemporary Inuit, and contemporary Qallunaat knowledges, and engage students in applying those differing knowledges in their lives."[31] To illustrate, McGregor and McGregor report that the "Grades 10-12 *Aulajaaqtut* (wellness program) addresses how expectations for children and youth differ between Inuit parents long ago and parents."[32] The authors also report that "school-level implementation of made-in-Nunavut curriculum and resources from elsewhere was generally the responsibility of elementary, secondary, and Inuktut program consultants in three Regional School Operations offices located across Nunavut," although "coordinators for each project usually led development of the required in-service outline and implementation 'kits'," thereby "facilitate[ing] in-service for the regional program consultants, who then fanned out to schools to adapt and deliver the in-service in twenty-five communities," what the authorities imagined to be "another capacity-building initiative, similar to having teachers serve on curriculum committees."[33]

"In looking at examples of Nunavut-developed curriculum during this period," McGregor and McGregor conclude, "it is clear that substantial efforts were made to incorporate Inuit knowledge, Inuit identity, IQ principles, and Inuit stories."[34] That faint praise is followed by not-so-faint criticism: "our review showed teachers and students were not often explicitly asked to think critically about the sources of knowledge they encountered, the author's point of view, what types of knowledge were produced by differing sources, or how they related to each other."[35] Moreover, "attribution to an author or individual was sometimes missing from Inuit stories or Elder knowledge," a fact about which McGregor and McGregor add: "Without consistent indication of authorship, one cannot assess the accuracy, utility, or credibility of knowledge, whether it is held and attributed individually or collectively."[36] These observations are academically damning, but one wonders if from an Indigenous perspective they are not also culturally specific, e.g. "Eurocentric."

"In summary," McGregor and McGregor write, "the opportunities associated with Nunavut developing its own curriculum, in our view, facilitated transformation of the school system from within and provided for the realization of the goals and values for Nunavut schools as articulated in the Nunavut Education Act, Inuit Language Protection Act, Nunavut Settlement Agreement, and calls from Inuit parents."[37] "These opportunities," they continue, include

- integrating Nunavut beliefs, values, culture, and history;
- building on the strengths, learning styles, and characteristics of Inuit students;
- influencing pedagogy based on what works in Nunavut, from experience;

• involving parents, district education authorities, Elders, and community members;

and

• ensuring high expectations for learning competencies that reflect IQ and Western knowledges."[38]

Perhaps that last phrase, specifically the conjunction between "IQ *and* Western," enables McGregor and McGregor to critique the curriculum as academically flawed.

McGregor and McGregor acknowledge "numerous difficulties in developing curriculum in Nunavut," including "the need to provide teaching resources before the full scope and sequence of curriculum competencies had been completed at each grade level, in each strand, or in each subject area," a fact that meant "developers sometimes had to work with learning outcomes identified in the Northwest Territories or other western provinces."[39] This meant that "it was difficult to determine an appropriate combination of made-in-Nunavut units with materials borrowed from other jurisdictions,"[40] maybe a problem covered over by the conjunction noted above. McGregor and McGregor also report that "so much energy was devoted to development and in-servicing that very little program evaluation occurred," meaning that "efforts to determine the worth of new or revised materials were not based on systematically collected evidence."[41]

There was also a lack of "Inuit staff with strong language and culture skills," but "Nunavut's greatest curriculum difficulty originated from making ambitious commitments that no organization could realistically meet within the suggested timelines, let alone one burdened heavily by capacity issues."[42] So "educators in Nunavut thus grapple with a paradox: on the one hand, there is no time to waste in better supporting Nunavut youth to develop the cultural identity and contemporary competencies required to have choices in their future; on the other hand, more time is needed to bring about the significant system transformation that may achieve this radical vision."[43]

In his commentary, Anton Birioukov-Brant notes that what made this tale of curriculum development "particularly unique … is the explicit focus on Indigenizing the curriculum through *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ)," what he judges to be "a radical departure from more traditional approaches, which view Indigenous education as an add-on." He continues: "While teaching about Indigenous topics is mandated in most provinces, none go as far (to my knowledge) as Nunavut in the integration of Indigeneity in prescribed curricula. Although as the authors acknowledge there are barriers, this is quite a fundamental and, in a sense, revolutionary approach to Indigenizing the curriculum." Be that as it may, it is not an "approach" readily or even appropriately adopted in other jurisdictions, given greater cultural diversity and political complexity outside Nunavut.

References

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ENDNOTES

[1] 2016**,** 109.
[2] 2016, 110.
[3] A concept with a long history: see Mann 1975.
[4] 2016, 110.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Aoki 2005 (1986), 159-164.
[11] 2005 (1986), 165.
[12] 2016, 113.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Quoted in 2006, 113-114.
[18] 2006, 114.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Pinar 2023, 41.

[25] 2016, 115.
[26] Ibid.
[27] 2016, 115-116.
[28] 2016, 116.
[29] Ibid.
[30] 2016, 121.
[31] 2016, 122.
[32] Ibid.
[33] 2016, 123,
[34] 2016, 125.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] 2016, 126.
[38] Ibid.
[39] 2016, 127.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] 2016, 128.
[43] Ibid.