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Book Review

Inuit Education and Schools in the Eastern Arctic by Heather E. McGregor.
Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010. 220 pp. \$85.00 hardcover; \$32.95 paper.

Sheena Kennedy

Inuit Education and Schools in the Eastern Arctic is a comprehensive and thoughtful analysis of the history of education and education policy in Nunavut that will appeal to a wide audience. While tracing the history of education in the territory, it also tells the story of the relationship between Inuit and the Canadian state after World War II, a history of cultural negotiation and shifts in decision-making power. McGregor's book, the first account of the history of education in Nunavut, is valuable for its rich and detailed analysis but also – and perhaps more importantly – for the important questions that it raises about values and the role that they play in decision-making and policy design.

McGregor's use of the analytical framework of “knowing, doing and being” (44) as a way to compare Inuit and Qallunaat (non-Inuit) education is particularly useful in helping to ground the reader throughout the historical periods she describes. This framework also provides a lens through which to understand the purpose of education not just in Nunavut, but all across the country. Education is about curriculum (knowing) about methodology – how and where curriculum is delivered (doing) and, ultimately, about helping young people to develop into full and active members of society (being).

McGregor divides her historical account into four periods. In the “traditional period” described in chapter 2, the three components of knowing, doing, and being were distinct and well defined and the purpose of education was clear. Education during this period was eco-centric: knowledge was inextricably tied to the environment; it was experiential and learner-centred; and it was locally driven, integrated into everyday life. Child rearing and education were linked so that cultural values and desired

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characteristics of the society were integrated into the learning process. In the next chapter on the “colonial period,” McGregor describes the fundamental shift in decision-making power that occurred in just one generation, forever altering “knowing, doing, and being” in Inuit communities. The analytical framework shows that the Qallunaat model was in direct opposition to the existing Inuit model of education – knowledge was associated with books and literacy and English became the language of knowledge and assimilation; education took place outside of the home and children were segregated from their families and the land. At the same time, young people had much less access to the people from whom they would learn the skills needed to succeed in their own communities. The values promoted in school did not match the values promoted at home. This model of education did not facilitate “self-determination, self-identity, or self-sufficiency” (55).

Later, the political mobilization of Aboriginal people in Canada strengthened, and the process of decolonization and cultural re-negotiation began. The content and method of an education system are rooted in values and in the desired outcomes of education – what a society wants its members to know and do, and be. Chapters 4 and 5 take us through the “territorial” and “local” periods leading up to the creation of Nunavut. During these three decades, both Inuit and non-Inuit worked towards trying to define what “knowing, doing, and being” looked like in a rapidly changing North – sometimes in concert and sometimes at odds. The challenges associated with integrating these two systems – two ways of knowing, doing and being – remain today, although the political landscape and power relationships, therein, have changed.

McGregor concludes that more local control and more involvement by communities, and parents and elders in particular, will lead to an education system that not only reflects the society in which Northern youth live, but will also best prepare them to succeed in that society. The issue of how to do achieve this remains unresolved, however, and McGregor does not offer many suggestions in this regard. Also absent from her account are the voices of students. We heard from politicians and bureaucrats, teachers, parents, and elders but not from the students themselves.

McGregor’s methodology and overall approach to research serve as an excellent example to others, especially students of the social sciences who work in a cultural context outside their own. McGregor’s understanding of her own position – as researcher and community member – and its inherent limitations are clearly stated at the outset, which both helps to orient the

reader and is appropriate, given the nature of the book.

Moreover, the author's excellent use of the literature, which draws extensively on documentary review and oral histories as well as her own experience, alongside her own research to define and work through difficult concepts and periods in Canadian history adds to the strength of the argument and the utility of the book for different audiences.

I would recommend this book to a wide general audience because it offers a structured and well-researched account of the relationship between Inuit and the Canadian state. Specifically, I would recommend this book to students of history and policy studies, to current educators, particularly those working in the communities, to all new teachers in Nunavut, and to policymakers.