

Bilingual Education in Nunavut: Trojan Horse or Paper Tiger?

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Abstract

On April 1 2009, Nunavut celebrated its tenth anniversary as Canada's newest territory. Now halfway through the timeline set to fulfill its original goals, Nunavut is beginning to implement its new *Education Act*. This paper analyses education policy in the territory by specifically examining Berger's (2006) influential report, *The Nunavut Project*, which forms a basis for the new *Education Act*. Berger promoted the idea that achieving bilingual education in the K-12 system is required in order to improve graduation rates and increase Inuit participation in the wage economy. The paper provides both critical insights into Nunavut's struggles for self-determination, and a case study for other regions currently engaged in the arduous path towards decolonisation.

Introduction

Following two decades of negotiations, the creation of Nunavut—literally meaning “our land”—became a reality on April 1st, 1999. In October of that same year, architects of the new territory articulated a set of priority statements. Key goals include becoming a fully functioning bilingual society by 2020, making Inuktitutⁱ the official working language of government, increasing the number of Inuit in the government's workforce, and decentralizing operations in order to bring employment to smaller communities (Bathurst Mandate, 2000; Government of Nunavut, n.d.; Kusugak, 2000).

Against this backdrop is Justice Thomas Berger's influential report for Nunavut (Berger, 2006). Legendary across the North for his work during the 1970s into the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, Berger has tackled another pressing issue facing northerners today—education. In 2005 Berger was appointed by the Government of Canada (GoC), the Government of Nunavut (GN), and the Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI)ⁱⁱ as conciliator to examine new approaches to the implementation of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (NLCA, 1993). Entitled *The Nunavut Project*, the report subsequently forms a basis for the new *Education Act* which was approved by the legislative assembly on September 18, 2008 (GN, 2008; see also Windeyer, September, 2009).

Central to the report's recommendations is increasing high school graduation rates and Inuktitut literacy through creation of a comprehensive bilingual education program in the K-12 system. Only then, Berger (2006) reasoned, can proportional representation in the public sector be achieved as envisioned by Article 23 of the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement* (1993). According to Berger, “Under Article 23 the Inuit ought to have 85% of the positions in the public service. The fact is, however, only 45% of the employees of the Government of Nunavut are Inuit”ⁱⁱⁱ (p. 7).

Considering the current implementation of the new *Education Act*, Nunavut is at a halfway point between the *rhetoric* of visionary statements made a decade ago, and the *reality* of policy enactment by 2020. This critical juncture provides an important opportunity to analyze a central objective of Nunavut's educational policy: implementation of bilingual programming to fulfill the goal of increasing *supply* to meet a labour *demand* intended for Inuit, but currently filled mostly by non-Inuit who occupy upper echelons in the nascent bureaucracy.

By linking education to language Berger's report (2006) has been likened to the mythological Trojan Horse containing Greek warriors that was used to penetrate the city of Troy and win the Trojan War:

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. (Bainbridge, 2008, p. 763)

That is to say, the promotion of bilingual education is a stratagem to increase federal funding for education in Nunavut. However, by placing the burden of responsibility on the shoulders of schools to fix Nunavut's social problems through enhanced bilingual education, Berger's report has also been criticized for redirecting attention away from both the territory's overall educational quality and the socio-economic situation of Inuit students (Gallagher-MacKay, 2007). Using a critical modernist framework (Peet & Hartwick, 1999), I explore this tension and argue that the report places too much emphasis on fixing Nunavut's educational system while ignoring the shaky economic foundations upon which it rests. Consequently, Nunavut's Trojan Horse is more akin to a Paper Tiger—impressively ambitious on the outside, yet unlikely to withstand the test of time, even if it is capable of procuring more federal funding to support the recommendations made. I begin by providing relevant statistical information as a context against which to synopsis both the report's proposed language models and some challenges for their successful implementation. The second half of the paper examines the applicability of two indigenous education models recommended by Berger, and concludes by considering the educational successes occurring within Nunavut and Canada.

Nunavut's Numbers

Covering one-fifth of Canada's landmass, Nunavut's sparse population is spread out over 27 communities. Based on the 2006 Census report: 24,635 Inuit lived in Nunavut, out of a total territorial population of 29,474, and the national Inuit population was reported to be 50,586; between 1996 and 2006 the Inuit population in Nunavut experienced a 20% population increase, as compared to an 8% increase for Canada's non-Aboriginal population; and the median age for Inuit was 22 years old, compared with 40 years old for non-Aboriginal Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2008). According to the 2006 Census report,

[t]he potential implications of a young, growing Inuit population are numerous. These include a possible increased demand for housing stock and for schooling at all levels, including preschool. There may also be a greater demand for skills training as young Inuit adults make the transition from school to work in the wage and traditional Inuit economies. (p. 19)

Only 25% of Inuit children in Nunavut currently graduate from high school (Statistics Canada, 2008). However, this figure is misleading and most likely much lower considering students graduate with fewer required courses and lower standards than is common in many other Canadian provinces (Alexander, 2009; Bainbridge, 2008). Factors cited as contributing towards low educational levels are the absence of an enforceable attendance policy and the current policy of "social promotion"—which allows students to progress from grade-to-grade without requisite skills and knowledge until they reach Grade 10 when the Alberta curriculum^{iv} is used (North Sky Consulting, 2009; Thompson, 2008a).

With respect to language, the 2006 Census report indicates Inuktitut remains relatively strong in Nunavut but has experienced an overall decline in use (Statistics Canada, 2008). Language shift varies considerably with respect to regions, however some overall trends can be gained from the survey results: 83% of Nunavummiut (Inuit in Nunavut) reported Inuktitut as their first language (L1), down from 88% in 1996; 64% reported Inuktitut as the language used in the home, down from 76% in 1996; 91% reported that they spoke Inuktitut well enough to carry on a conversation, although this, too, was a decline from 94% in 1996. The Census report indicated that in general Inuktitut was spoken equally by Inuit in all age groups and that adults considered the ability to speak and pass along the language to future generations to be very important.

The lack of an industrial, agricultural, or manufacturing base means that the public sector remains the largest employer for the territory—collectively comprised of 3200 territorial and 300 federal government employees (Berger, 2006; Hicks & White, 2000). Consequently, efforts to achieve proportional representation in both territorial and federal government positions mean approximately 3000 of these available positions should be filled by Inuit. However, only half of the projected number of public sector positions is currently filled by Inuit, which translates to

a shortfall of approximately 1500 positions. Currently the GN is unable to fill nearly one quarter of its positions owing to lack of qualified workers (GN, 2010). Meanwhile, unemployment rates in the territory for Nunavummiut range between 24–70% across different communities (Légaré, 2009). Apart from aligning with the goals of Article 23, improving employment rates would also contribute to a reduction in social problems attributed to dramatic changes in lifestyle and livelihood. Social problems include poor health, over-crowded housing, family violence, widespread substance and alcohol abuse, Canada’s highest crime rates, and some of the world’s highest suicide rates (Alexander, 2009; Légaré, 2009). Limited economic opportunities and social problems may partly explain the demographic shift from northern communities to mainly southern urban centres: “In 2006, 22% of Inuit lived outside Inuit Nunaat^v, up from 17% in 1996” (Statistics Canada, 2008, p. 23).

The lack of a private sector may impact the state of education in Nunavut, as limited job opportunities may translate to lower incentives to become educated, especially considering Nunavut’s affirmative hiring policies more or less ensure Nunavummiut work in the public sector. More than 90% of Nunavut’s revenue comes from federal transfer payments, which are far greater than any other territory or province. For instance, Nunavut received 91% of its revenue from federal cash transfers in 2008-09; Prince Edward Island—the country’s most dependent province—received 41% of its revenue from the federal cash transfers for the same year (GoC, n.d.). Some observers explain these inordinately high transfers by noting *all* new governments require substantial revenues before they gain some measure of self-sufficiency (Hicks & White, 2000). Yet increased dependence on federal transfer payments seem an inevitable future reality, especially considering the huge infrastructure requirements associated with decentralization of services to remote areas, limited opportunities to diversify the economy, and some of the highest birth rates in the country.

Strategies for Improving Bilingual Education

The central assumption in the report guiding bilingual education policy is that fluency in a first language (L1) significantly improves academic success in general and also contributes to learning a second language (L2). This assumption is supported by empirical research showing a positive correlation between “additive” bilingualism (i.e., when L2 is “added” while *maintaining* L1) and students’ linguistic, cognitive, or academic growth (Cummins, 2000; May, Hill, & Tiakiwi, 2006). Moreover, additive bilingual programs promote a set of values, practices and beliefs that re-affirm the cultural identity of students (Cummins, 1990, 2000; Francis & Reyner, 2002). Consequently, Berger’s (2006) strategy could be considered a win-win situation—bolstering cultural continuation and academic success, while concomitantly developing an educated workforce. Nevertheless, evidence indicates that in addition to L1 proficiency, exposure to formal education and higher socio-economic status are also variables that play a role in determining student success in bilingual education programs (Gallagher-McKay, 2007).

A discussion paper by Martin (2000) heavily influenced Berger’s report. Entitled *Ajiiigatigiinqnip*, Martin’s 20-year plan involves implementing what he referred to as “strong” bilingual maintenance programs for the Nunavut educational system. Martin is critical of the original system inherited from the Northwest Territories (NWT), which he characterized as a “weak,” “early-exit transitional model” that represented a “subtractive” language model. In this model students generally are taught their first language of instruction from kindergarten to grades 3/4/5, at which time an abrupt “transition” to English takes place in all subjects. The end result of this transition, as Martin explains, may be that students lack fluency and literacy skills in *either* language:

instead of ‘adding’ a new (second) language to a solidly anchored first language, which is what happens when an English-speaking child learns French at school, enriching his/her language skills by adding another language, these students are experiencing just the opposite. (p. 14)

In recognition of the different regions in Nunavut, three models are recommended by Martin (2000): a general bilingual model, called the Qulliq Maintenance Model is proposed in regions where both Inuktitut and English are the language of instruction throughout schooling; a “two-way dual language model” where both languages are taught and used as language of instruction for the capital of Nunavut, Iqaluit, where English is most predominant; and an “immersion program” for both Inuit and non-Inuit children is proposed in the west (Qitirmiut), where the Inuinnaqtun language is most threatened. In each model, Inuktitut would be maintained rather than eliminated right through to the high school level. In reference to the Qulliq model, “English will progress in a very efficient way by being introduced as an oral class K-3, and used in a compulsory two periods per day after grade 3” (Martin, 2000, p.

56)^{vi}. By Grade 4 English as a second language would be taught for a period a day with no academic subjects taught in English before Grade 8. By high school students' proficiency in both languages will be strong enough to allow both English and Inuktitut to be the language of instruction for academic subjects.

In accordance with the Nunavut *Education Act* (GN, 2008), a phased implementation of the models will eventually be applied to all grades by the 2019-2020 school year. Berger (2006) reasoned the proposed maintenance models would enhance learning by redirecting energies and funding towards improved curriculum development and teacher training. Consequently, more Inuit would be in the classrooms, trained to teach culturally relevant core subjects which would counterbalance the current practice of having Inuktitut relegated as a language course. Berger (2006) reasoned that by providing more role models and interesting curriculum for young Inuit, motivation for learning would increase, which would in turn translate to improved graduation rates.

Challenges for Implementation

While the actual costs for implementing the above programs are not mentioned, Berger (2006) estimated an additional \$20 million per year would be required for near term initiatives (e.g. scholarships, community career development counsellors, internship programs). Berger cited two reasons as to why funding must come from the federal purse: 1) Nunavut cannot afford it; and 2) like the French language in Canada, minority languages education is constitutionally protected under section 23 of the *Charter of Rights* and thus a federal responsibility. Despite pledging \$24 million for the creation of a cultural school in Clyde River, the federal government has yet to come up with the additional requested funds for the bilingual education program (George, 2009; Légaré, 2009, NTI, 2010). However, the GN has also been criticized by both the auditor general and Nunavummiut for fiscal mismanagement (Bell, September 2009; “Breakdown at Nunavut”, 2007; North Sky Consulting, 2009). It is also argued that elected land claims politicians have not made education and educational investment a priority (Gallagher-McKay, 2007; see also Blanchett-Cohen & Richardson, 2000). Nevertheless, priorities may be changing. In its latest budget the GN has increased funding to train teachers and develop bilingual curriculum, and NTI has filed a \$1-billion lawsuit against the federal government over Ottawa's failure to properly fund skills training for Inuit (GN, 2010; Windeyer, January 2009).

Teacher recruitment and training also remain a key challenge. Berger (2006) argued Inuit teacher retention rates were among the highest in Canada prior to the creation of Nunavut—a decline he attributed to “poaching” educated Inuit to other sectors of the public service. As Bainbridge (2008) has noted, “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” (p. 764). Currently, only 38% of the 573 teachers in Nunavut are Inuit, with no Inuit teachers beyond Grade 10 (Légaré, 2009). Dorais and Sammons (2002) have criticized Martin's (2000) report for both failing to address the academic proficiency of teachers in subjects other than Inuktitut, and also neglecting to consider the amount of time and resources (both human and financial) required for adequate training and curricula development. If these matters are not considered, the authors warned, an emphasis on quantity over quality by the GN in its haste to produce teachers would result in poor training that would exacerbate rather than ameliorate low academic achievement of Nunavut students.

Lessons Learned from Abroad and Home

Māori “language nests” (*kōhanga reo*) in New Zealand, and Greenlandic education are both cited by Berger (2006) as inspirational models Nunavut could learn from and adopt. Pre-school language nests are considered crucial towards successful school-wide implementation of bilingual education programs, as they instil a sense of ownership in education through active community engagement in teaching the language to future generations (Berger, 2006). With respect to Greenland, after gaining autonomy from Denmark in 1979, the preservation of the Greenlandic language became a priority and is now the language of instruction throughout primary and secondary schools (Berger, 2006). However, the report only provides one reference for language nests, and none for Greenland—an omission that requires further analysis in order to corroborate the recommendations made.

Kōhanga reo are pre-school language immersion centres that began in the early 1980s, and were followed by total immersion schools at the primary (*kura*) level for students in school years 1 to 6 (Stewart-Harawira, 2004). These

schools were established out of concern for language loss: between 1930 and the 1960s the number of Māori who could speak Māori dropped from 96.6% to only 26% (May et al., 2006). Berger (2006) lauded the tremendous success of the language nest movement, noting that in 1992^{vii} there was only one centre and by 1998 there were 646. However, more recent statistics reveal a steady decline in language nests: in 2005 there were 501; by 2009 the number had decreased to 464 (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009). Similar patterns are beginning to show in the *kura*: the number of students was at its maximum in 2007, with 6,272 and has dropped by 4.1% to 6,015 in 2009 (Ministry of Education, 2009). The percentage of children able to speak Māori is declining in all age groups (Bauer, 2008), and only 17% of Māori children were enrolled in some form of Māori-medium education (May et al., 2006)—indicating the vast majority participate in mainstream programs instead.

Two lessons that Nunavut may gain from the New Zealand experience include: (1) the importance of local control; and (2) the need to connect language acquisition research with practice. The initial tremendous success of the language nests can be attributed to their genesis as grassroots movements within the communities where community members formed an integral component of schooling. However, these programs also required considerable local autonomy (Stewart-Harawira, 2004). Under Nunavut's new *Education Act*, District Education Authorities (DEAs) have been given more power to determine local educational needs—a significant policy reversal from a decade ago when the Government of Nunavut abolished regional school boards (Bainbridge, 2008). Most Nunavummiut consider greater autonomy at the local level essential for improving education achievement (North Sky Consulting, 2009; Thompson, 2008b). Consequently, the new *Education Act* is a positive step towards establishing similar programs in Nunavut.

The decline in Māori language immersion programs may be due to the lack of a comprehensive policy concerning the transitioning into English language programs at the secondary level. While the programs' philosophy maintains students will develop full competency in both English and Māori (Te Aho Matua, 2000), findings indicate an ad hoc approach towards teaching academic English predominates, forcing parents to withdraw their children from these schools despite their political commitment towards Māori language revival (Berryman & Glynn, 2004; May & Hill, 2003). Cummins (2000) argued that the “English will happen automatically approach” that has characterized Māori-medium education is “seriously flawed” (p. 192). Similarly, May et al. (2006) argued transitioning to an English language secondary school requires a program that enables students to practise academic English literacy skills which may be best facilitated through a 50/50 dual language program at the later stages of primary education.

A second challenge relates to the fact that the L1 for the vast majority of Māori is English (Bauer, 2008; May et al., 2006). Consequently, in the Māori context L2 gets added to L1, rather than the reverse. Moreover, children are not taking the literacy skills out of the education domain and into the home; only 9% of respondents in a 2001 national language survey reported that children under 12 spoke Māori half or more of the time (Bauer, 2008).

In comparison to the Māori language, Inuktitut is in a stronger position to adopt maintenance language programs as it still remains the “mother tongue” and “language of the home” for the majority of Nunavummiut (Statistics Canada, 2008). However, Inuktitut use is also in decline (Statistics Canada, 2008), suggesting that the territory needs to closely align practice with research or, like New Zealand, it may be a case of too little too late.

Aside from language nests, Greenland is considered to be “the best evidence that an Aboriginal language need not be overwhelmed by a European Language”—despite the fact that the education system is failing to graduate students unable to use Danish or English (Berger, 2006, p. 33). Greenland and Nunavut do share some common features, including proximity, a shared ethnic history, and analogous transitions associated with European expansion led by missionaries and whalers which disrupted traditional patterns of subsistence which has been attributed to similar social problems (Hamilton & Rasmussen, 2010). Nevertheless, historical material differences exist between Nunavut and Greenland, making comparisons and application of Greenland's education system problematic.

Unlike in Nunavut, literacy and schooling has been very much part of the Greenlandic culture for the past 250 years as the following chronology indicates. In 1766, the New Testament was translated and published in Greenlandic; the first cookbook was published in 1802; the first publishing company was developed in 1860; and the first novel was published in 1901. With respect to formal schooling, Greenland had its first vocational education program (kayak building) in 1784; a training school for midwives was created in 1800; and in 1847 a teachers' college, Ilinniartissuaq, was established. By 1905, some students were sent to Denmark for further education. In 1992-1993, composition in Greenland schools included 498 Greenlandic teachers and 270 Danish teachers, with projected

increases in the number of Greenlandic teachers in the following years; instructional materials in the Greenlandic language have been published since the beginning of formal education in the previous century. Ilisimatusarfik, Greenland's university, began as the Inuit Institute in 1983, offering two year studies in Greenlandic grammar, Greenlandic literature, Greenlandic history, and in political science within a Greenlandic framework (Harper, 2000; Olsen, n.d.; Rasmussen, 2008).

Compared to Greenland's rich literary history, newspapers and government documents comprise the bulk of material written in Inuktitut—an indication that reading for pleasure in Inuktitut has yet to develop in Nunavut. However, young people have expressed an interest in developing Inuktitut literacy (Martin, 2000). It would appear reasonable to conclude that if Inuktitut is to thrive and remain an integral component of Nunavummiut identity, reading for pleasure outside of the school is of critical importance.

Attempts to create a common Inuit orthography were rejected by North American Inuit on the grounds that inter-dialectal differences would render any common orthography an auxiliary one, rather than for public use; consequently, Greenlandic literature would not be made accessible for Nunavummiut. More recent attempts to integrate regions is presently underway, as seen in discussions concerning a national Inuit education strategy designed to create Inuit friendly curricula and help guide the work of educators who teach Inuit living in Nunavut, NWT, Nunavik, and Nunatsiavut (Bell, 2009).

While Nunavut may gain some insights from programs abroad, a look at local successes associated with education and language may also prove beneficial. Of note are findings from Dorais and Sammons' (2002) examination of turns of speech amongst school children in three communities located in the eastern part of Nunavut (see Table 1). Their study revealed significant regional differences in language use and preference, indicating the use of Inuktitut proportionally increases in outlying centers. The authors concluded that cultural factors most likely contributed to regional differences; the lingua franca of Iqaluit, is English; in contrast, Igloolik prides itself on its cultural strength and has invested a lot of effort in Inuktitut education. Dorais and Sammons (2002) also noted:

We are unable to explain the Igloolik situation. Data analysis may be erroneous....In the best hypothesis, curricula and teaching methods in Igloolik school might be so efficient that this institution would completely fulfill the objectives that should be those of any Inuit school: to reinforce knowledge and use of Inuktitut among students. Such a hypothesis however is probably too optimistic, even if the Igloolik school has long been recognized for its excellence. (p. 65)

Aside from the caveat provided by Dorais and Sammons (2002), Nunavut's regional differences suggest emulating language models from abroad may be premature given the potential to discover best practices existing within the same culture and region.

Table 1

Turns of Speech in Three Baffin Communities

Community	Inuktitut		English	
	Grades 1-3	Grades 10-12	Grades 1-3	Grades 10-12
Iqaluit	36.4%	1.5%	54.8%	87.7%
Kimmirut	73.7%	26.3%	9.4%	90.6%
Igloolik*	37.5%	97.5%	27%	2.4%

Note. Adapted from *Language in Nunavut: discourse and identity in the Baffin region*, by J. Dorais, and S. Sammons, Iqaluit, Nunavut, Canada: Nunavut Arctic College, 2002, p. 65.

Other highlights include the Ottawa-based Nunavut Sivuniksavut (NS) bicultural transition program, which began in 1985 and serves as a transition year between high school and post-secondary studies. Two indicators of the program's success are its 80% completion rate and the level of interest it has generated amongst youth (Eggertson, 2008). Up until recently NS accepted approximately 22 students to take part in the two-year, eight month accredited program, but is now proposing an expansion to increase its capacity to accommodate 80 students (George, 2009;

N.S., n.d.). Berger (2006) lauded the program's success and recommended additional funding to support the program. Similar programs have been implemented in other parts of Canada (Blanchett-Cohen & Richardson, 2000) including at the high school level (e.g., Western Arctic Leadership Program, Fort Smith, NWT). More research as to why these programs are so successful may prove fruitful.

Paper Tiger?

Like Odysseus and his warriors before the gate of Troy, unorthodox attempts to penetrate the impenetrable are sometimes required in order to be victorious. Certainly, many challenges lie at the gate of Nunavut, not the least of which is for governments to both increase and redirect funding towards developing Nunavut's most precious resource—an educated public. Initiatives must include increased funding for teacher education programs, which should include housing, childcare and adequate training, along with adequate funding to support a comprehensive curriculum congruent with Nunavut's own vision. Yet, the prevalent tendency to blame the system remains a politically expedient means of avoiding thornier issues relating to the economy. If employment is more or less guaranteed by default owing to ethnicity, then what incentive do Nunavummiut have to get higher education when they are sinecures of a system designed to meet demand? While empirical research may support some aspects of language models undergirding the new *Education Act*, the degree to which these programs can stem the tide of drop-outs is constrained by the overarching socio-economic realities facing the region. Compounding these challenges is the unrealistic timeframe to effectively implement bilingual programs; as each year passes increasing numbers of Nunavummiut are relocating to urban centers in the South where Inuktitut language use amongst Inuit significantly declines. Finally, Berger's (2006) success stories illustrate the unfulfilled promise of the Nunavut Project: the most successful school program exists outside of the territory; Maōri-language nests have failed to stem the tide of language loss; and Greenlandic education exists for historical material reasons different from Nunavut's—all of which suggest Nunavut's Trojan Horse is likely to remain a Paper Tiger.

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Notes

ⁱ Inuktitut is the majority indigenous language of Nunavut and shall be used for purposes of this discussion. Inuinnaqtun is a similar language used primarily in Cambridge Bay and Kugluktuk (western Kitikmeot region of Nunavut).

ⁱⁱ NTI is the organisation which manages the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement for the Inuit of Nunavut

ⁱⁱⁱ Currently 51% of GN positions are occupied by Nunavummiut (GN, 2010).

^{iv} Nunavut inherited the Alberta curriculum from the NWT at the time of division.

^v Inuit Nunaat refers to 'Inuit homeland' and extends from northern Labrador to the NWT.

^{vi} Martin notes the proposed bilingual maintenance model is similar to the Canadian 'extended core French' model which allows children to develop much stronger L2 skills than the 'core French' model of one period per day.

^{vii} Note: the first kōhanga opened in 1982, not 1992.