

UPDATE FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Between Tradition and Innovation

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ABSTRACT: Teaching, as an occupation, spans the gap between tradition in a society and needed innovations that invade as new tendencies from the outside world, in the form of legislation, curriculum revisions, changes in the larger society, and so on. This paper deals with the problems of accommodating innovative trends in Greenland teacher training. It is not our intention to present a solution to the problem, but to raise questions about innovation in a society that has a profound conservative tendency.

RÉSUMÉ: L'enseignement entant que métier, fait le lien entre les traditions d'une société et ses besoins de d'innovations, celles qui créent les dernières tendances et qui sont apportées par le monde extérieur. Ces changements se manifestent dans les domaines de la législation, des remaniements de programmes, de la société en général, etc. Au Groenland, la société est profondément ancrée dans ces traditions et ce papier soulève les problèmes auxquels les enseignants font face avec l'intégration de nouvelles méthodes lors de leur stage de formation. Ici, notre but est non de trouver une solution au problème, mais d'évoquer les questions de changements.

Teacher Training in Greenland

There is one college for teacher training in Greenland, called *Ilinniarfissuaq*, situated in the capital of Nuuk. There are two ways to be trained as a teacher. Qualifying as a teacher normally takes four years of full-time study after high school but there is also a field-based teacher training. This takes four and a half years, but field-based students work part-time as teachers while studying. For the last one or two years of their training, these students have to move to Nuuk to

finish their studies there. At the present time there are 120 students living in Nuuk and 40 field-based students.

The reason for having a field-based form of training is the lack of trained teachers in Greenland. In Greenland 25% of the lessons in primary schools are taught by untrained staff (Grønlands, 2005a) and the distribution of trained teacher is very uneven. In particular, the smaller settlements have difficulties in attracting teachers, and the field-based students are supposed to fill this need. To become a field-based student, one must be 25 years of age and be a breadwinner in the family. As a result, field-based students are, on average, older than full-time students, and are more connected to their communities.

The reform of Greenland's school system is called *Atuarfitsialak* (The Good School), introduced in August 2003. In the preamble to the planning document, the intention was formulated in this way: "We want to depart from the view that children are passive objects for the teachers but want to view them as active partners in learning" (*Læreplan*, 2003).

Greenland today is, in many ways, a modern society where information technology especially is changing everyday life. This presents the school system with new challenges and places new demands on the teachers. Teachers have to be flexible and be aware of new practices in teaching.

The Research Project

The field-based students were asked to perform an examination with the help of a PowerPoint presentation. They were expected to prepare IT-based projects at home and then come to the college to participate in the examination.

The teachers choose to use this form of examination because they thought that a form of oral examination could develop into a discussion where the students in the classroom would reflect on their own teaching practices in discussion with the other students. The students had received a demonstration the year previously on how to do this at home (due to the great distances, the field-based students come to the institute for only two short residential sessions in the first two and half years of their training).

We – the authors of this paper – were interested in how this was going to work out since we are the teachers responsible for the implementation of IT in the college's curriculum. We therefore

distributed questionnaires to the students and conducted interviews with both the teachers and the students (Gedionsen, Søndergaard, & Sørensen, 2003).

We used open and closed versions of interviews (semi-structured) for both teachers and students (Kvale, 1994, p. 41).

We were astonished to find that the students showed very little interest and put little effort into preparing their presentations. Owing to bad weather they had a couple of days before the residential session was to start. Many of the students realized that they had to prepare their presentations to have any hope of passing the examination, but they did not seem to accept the idea of doing so. They expressed all the usual nervousness before an examination, but they did not point to any problems with their presentations, although this was in fact something new for most of them. This attitude is the subject of the following discussion.

The World of the Students

Greenlandic society is marked by a high degree of mobility, and it is an obvious conclusion that people therefore have a large need for communication. But mobility existed before there were reliable mail systems and electronic communications, and a system had evolved to cope with the lack of communication – you live where you live and have your social connections locally. The new role of the pupils as featured in the school reform program *Atuarfitsialak* was similar to the view of the human being in modern society as described by the English sociologist Anthony Giddens (Giddens & Pierson, 2005, p. 25). The human being is pictured by Giddens as being the shaper of “the reflexive project of one’s own being.” Man becomes multidimensional and has several different worlds in which he can participate. But the students did not view themselves as being “multidimensional” with possibilities for acting in an international world. Meeting at the College in Nuuk, two of the students – one from the far north and the other from the far south of Greenland, a distance of 2500 km – realized that they had been working on the same topic, but had not used the Internet to communicate about it. All the students have access to computers and the Internet but they did not see themselves in that way – as members of a dispersed community. They did not even comment that they had missed out on the possibilities of working together.

Intercultural and Transcultural Learning

In multicultural societies (which certainly is the situation in Greenland today) there are two basic concepts for a more principal cosmopolitan way to look upon education – multicultural and transcultural education.

In multicultural education the primary goal is to give an ethnic minority in a society, through educational programs, a chance to survive in a society which is dominated by another majority. The ethnic majority normally does not take part in the multicultural educational programs – this is thought-provoking and indicates a hegemonic proportion between the implicated cultures (Kahlig, 2000/2001, p. 69).

But in colonized societies this is not the situation since here the hegemonic culture often is the minority culture as has been the situation in Greenland. In the 1930s there was a very hectic discussion in the Greenlandic part of the society. The situation at the time was that the Danish colonial rule viewed the Greenlandic population as *native children* who should be cared for but also kept in this state. One of the ways of accomplishing this was to prevent Greenlandic people from learning Danish (Lanngard, 1995, p. 331).

In the transcultural situation the same educational program is valid for both the majority and the minority. The goal is to pass on one's own cultural limitations and to realize that an understanding of another culture implies that you know your own. This is a condition for success in the project for understanding another culture (Kahlig, 2000/2001, p. 69).

The Choice of Culture

Of course a person is born into a certain context and a certain culture as an individual and as a member of a certain society. A large part of what we call *culture* is an amalgamation on a personal level and the level of the society. The strong nationalistic tendencies fluctuating in the western world today are often referred to as traditional virtues, and it is interesting that they often reflect the values of the 1950s, apparently referring to a time before the age of the majority.

In Greenland, the golden days refer to the time of the old hunting society. It is a very idealized time and historical facts are looked upon as irrelevant (Steen, 2003, p. 86). Values, views, and so forth in Greenland are attributed to this earlier culture, but they get in the way because they are sacrosanct and are set beyond the point of discussion. It is not

possible in modern Greenland to discuss these values – that is looked upon as treachery and is considered to be in bad taste to do so. It also leaves the impression that by declaring the things you do not accept, like, or master, that is considered to be “un-Greenlandic.”

Tradition and Innovation

When pressed, we all have a tendency to present ourselves from our best side – we all pretend a little. But in a colonial and post-colonial society this might have a special meaning. When the first missionaries arrived in Greenland in the 18th century they wrote home about the lack of discipline observed in the Greenlandic manner of bringing up children. The Canadian Inuit had similar customs to those of the people of Greenland (Turner, 1979, p. 27). Discipline existed in society but took place during the teaching of hunting skills (Glarborg 1968, p. 45). It is still normal today not to correct children when they are in the family milieu. The lack of discipline is also described in literature from the 19th century, but there has been a change. It is still common not to limit the child’s behaviour within the family milieu, but in the wider society obedience is regarded with approval. In the 20th century it is looked upon as a virtue to express obedience or as one parent expressed it in 1958: “I did not ask the school about this because I am a humble man” (Glarborg, 1968, p. 65).

Karen Langgård from the University of Greenland, *Ilisimatusarfik*, has expressed it in this way:

In spite of the equalization between generations in other ways, there is still adherence to the old way of bringing up children in both family and school: *naalanneq*, obedience. An ideal that the church – as school authority – established so firmly that it persisted even after pedagogic development towards children’s independence, ability to debate, and active learning in Denmark. Instead *naalanneq* even became a fixed part of the national identity and thereby one of the characteristics that is regarded as a differentiation from the others – the Danes. An ideal that surely functioned excellently in small static societies – whether Greenlandic or Danish – but which has been a problem for many years now in Greenland, and that only recently has been considered in the school reform *Atuarfitalsalak*. (Langgård, 2004, p.140)

The field-based students have their roots in the *naalanneq* culture. The students wanted a traditional examination where the teacher represented authority – they did not want to act as independently

reflexive students. They wanted to limit the examination to a very narrow field. In Greenland one of the big events in life is the start of school. It marks one of the major transitions in the child's life from the world of the family to the world outside – the colonial world or, today, the post-colonial. It is common to use a radio broadcast to send greetings from parents and grandparents, often with the wish that the child might behave well. It is understood that the child will show *naalanneq* and modesty and in that way to prove that the child is a good Greenlander.

By characterizing *naalanneq* in Greenland as a traditional virtue is to also set it beyond discussion. In Greenland the word *traditional* is used to declare that something is good and therefore beyond dispute. At the present time, the teaching method concept called CREDE is being introduced in Greenlandic schools. On one of the evaluation papers used by the pupils they are asked to comment on this: "Could you use some of your everyday experiences in this subject?" Since this question is difficult for children to answer it is followed by an illustration as an explanation for the child. The illustration shows a boy in traditional fur clothing harpooning a seal. There are not many children in Greenland today who are able to associate themselves with this situation but by using a traditional motif for the illustration, criticism can be avoided. It is not possible to criticize things or behavior labelled as traditional, because *traditional* has become a marker for ethnicity.

Such an attitude would present problems in any society – modern or otherwise. Ms. Langgård at *Ilisimatusarfik* has expressed this attitude in the following way:

In these years there is a discussion, especially in connection with the school reform *Atuarfitalsalak*, as to how the more traditional socialization of children can be developed to move the focus from passive obedience to developing the child's ability to use initiative, argue for their own opinions, and express their feelings. This is a difficult process, because the 'old way' is a part of the Greenlandic self-concept in parts of the population to define what it means to be a Greenlander and to be Inuk. Greenlandic society is marked by constant abuse of alcohol and with that neglect of children, sexual abuse of children, and violence, and harrowed by suicide. It is necessary to discuss these tragic subjects openly, and this is now at last taking place, but it has been delayed because such discussion was not a part of the traditional way of handling these problems. I [Langgaard] think that some of the reasons for this attitude are to be found in this special way that ethnicity, and especially

politicised ethnicity, work: when a people decides to define and be defined as an ethnic group and nation, and must fight to become an actor (agency), then there will be a tendency toward a definite delimitation. In the case of Greenland, both at the individual level and at the level of society in general, there is the possibility of over-communicating the Inuk identity and under-communicating the Scandinavian roots which are also a part of the modern Greenlandic culture. This dichotomy of thinking makes the development of attitudes that are looked upon as Danish or European difficult. It is more a problem concerning the mental development of a society consisting of small settlements towards a modern society than a problem concerning ethnicity. (Langgård, 2003b, p. 280)

The Australian researcher Bill Ashcroft, has developed the perspective of agency as a subject. For him:

Agency refers to the ability to act or perform an action. The term has become an issue in recent times as a consequence of post-structuralist theories of subjectivity. Since human subjectivity is constructed by ideology (Althusser), language (Lacan), or discourse (Foucault), the corollary is that any action performed by the subject must also be to some extent a consequence of those things. For the colonial discourse theory of Bhabha and Spivak, with much of the post-structuralist position on subjectivity, the question of agency has been a troublesome one. However, many theories in which the importance of political action is paramount take agency for granted. They suggest that although it may be difficult for subjects to escape the effects of those forces that "construct" them, it is not impossible. The very fact that such forces may be recognised suggests that they may also be countered. (Ashcroft, Gareth, & Tiffin, 1998, pp. 7-8)

In a report from the Greenlandic Home Rule Committee on Education (Grønlands, 2005a) there is an attempt to develop a new model to overcome the *naalanneq* culture. One of the traditional ways of looking upon the world is *Sila*, which is a Greenlandic word with several meanings. One of them is to feel the world and the surroundings in harmony and balance and to see the subject as a part of this balance. Here it acts as a counterbalance to the process of individualization and privatizing which is taking place in Greenland today, and the model is built upon the word: *Inummarissarneq*, which means to be well, and to be positive. Here it is used as a model of agency:

The message is an appeal to look upon who you are, to be aware of where you are in life, and from there you can consider what to do

with your life with due respect to the well-being of yourself and your family.

The theory then describes three positions:

- (1) the first position: consciousness-raising. Here are the people who think and theorize in a secure distance from the society – also called the ivory tower syndrome;
- (2) the second position: opposition. Here are the persons who do not agree with the established order and who could benefit from practising or theorising their opposition; they could begin some sort of education or just open a book! and,
- (3) the third position: innovation. Here are the persons who have decided to do something and to make practical use of their knowledge.

If we compare the student's situation with this model, it becomes evident that they are in the first position. Their knowledge is very far from being practiced. They do not feel obliged to reflect upon their own practice. For them, the school system change is not something they are going to be concerned with or see the necessity of involvement in. School and education is still considered to be in the ivory tower.

To use this model concerning acting (agency) it is necessary to consider the limitations of ethnicity as a marker of being a Greenlander and Inuk.

The Situation in the School System Today

The situation in the Greenlandic primary schools is not very good. Half the young people leave school without an education beyond primary school (Grønlands, 2005b). About one-third of the children leave school without being able to write or read adequately to function in everyday life. If you look more closely the view becomes even darker. In the small settlements very few of the young people get any education beyond primary school.

So changing attitudes in the school system are extremely important. Because of this situation, a workshop was convened, and its report contains several recommendations. One of them is an ambitious plan for educating teachers to the level of a Master of Education (today, teachers have a degree at a bachelor level). That would mean further education of an additional three years' study after finishing their first teaching degree. The goal is that two-thirds of all teachers would have Masters

Degrees. But if there are no ideas for changing practices both of individual teachers and of the educational system as a whole, people will still be in the first position – the ivory tower.

The Future of the Teachers' Training College – Ilinniarfissuaq

This year the curriculum at the College will be changed so there will be a stronger demand on the students to act as individually responsible and reflexive students. Although from this small research study into the ways of looking at examinations from both the students' and the teachers' point of view, it is expected that there will many problems, and a risk that the College will produce teachers who still think in the ivory tower way of thought. Future teachers may not be able to see that if they do not participate in the development of changing attitudes in the school system, they have put themselves into the position of well-meaning spectators.

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