

DÉBAT / DISCUSSION

A Reply to John Bainbridge

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My reaction to John Bainbridge's response is that he has misread my critique of Berger's report. I unreservedly support the important goal of improving bilingualism in Nunavut's school system: bilingualism is important to improve language retention and student attachment to the school system, and to expand Inuit teaching and leadership. However, Berger's report overstates the likely impact of bilingual education on children's academic performance by sidestepping the weight of bilingual education literature that points to the importance of the socio-economic context that directly affects both additional language learning and academic success (August & Hakuta, 1997; Bialystock, 2006; Cummins, 1996). Moreover, his response does not address issues of educational quality that likely affect students' retention and learning in Nunavut's schools. In my view, any *solution* to Nunavut's educational woes must address culture and language, but cannot do so in isolation from pressing issues of poverty and school quality.

Bainbridge does not address the main point of my review: the limited promise of bilingualism without social and educational support. If I take him literally, Berger's question of whether bilingual education will work to improve schooling and community outcomes is irrelevant because, according to Bainbridge, "bilingualism was a Trojan horse," a mere *ploy* to activate federal funding for education in the territory. I suspect most Inuit see the issue rather differently – I cannot count how

many conversations I have had with adult learners in Nunavut (during my time establishing and running the Akitsiraq Law School there) that included disparaging remarks about “toy” diplomas that do not represent real knowledge and real accomplishment. It is my belief that Inuit demand for Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun in schools is similarly real and not a mere power-play.

As noted in his biographical statement, Bainbridge was the author of *Saqqiqpuq: Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education in Nunavut* (Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated [NTI], 2007), which has responsibility to critique government efforts and to push for the fullest interpretation of Inuit rights in Nunavut. *Saqqiqpuq* illustrates exactly what is wrong with treating all the ills of Nunavut’s schools as stemming from a “failure to fully entrench Inuit language, values, culture and society into its administration and delivery, thereby denying Inuit from fully utilizing one of the most powerful formal resources for empowerment” (Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, 2007, p. 35, emphasis added). The report contains several recommendations about how to restore Inuit language, values, culture, and society to formal schooling but, as in Bainbridge’s response to my article, sees Inuit control as being at the heart of fixing the system (see also Bell, 2008).

To improve Inuit control, Bainbridge supports reintroducing Boards of Education, based on the fallacy that the Government of Nunavut itself does not represent a form of Aboriginal governance, thereby proposing an additional layer of bureaucracy for Nunavut’s 30,000 residents. More important, he supports an immediate increase in the Inuit teacher workforce by dramatically reducing entry requirements for Inuit teachers. As the report notes:

The barrier to the use of [the Nunavut government’s power to legislate entrance qualifications] has been the fear that Nunavut teachers will be seen as being below national standards and the students will not get credit for their education elsewhere in Canada. That may well be true in the short run, but with a 25 per cent graduation rate, radical measures are required and they come at a price. (Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, 2007, p. 35)

Professional qualifications do indeed serve a gatekeeping function, as *Saqqiqpuq* argues. But the function is not merely about the restriction of supply to the benefit of incumbents.

It is reasonable for the Government of Nunavut to exercise its (Aboriginal) control over education by asserting that a body of knowledge exists, mastery of which is at least relevant, if not essential, to the practice of the profession in its schools. Preservice teacher education is often criticized, in general (see e.g., Levine, 2006) and within Nunavut (Clark, 2006), but substantial evidence suggests that the level of teacher training is strongly correlated with overall teacher quality and with student achievement, regardless of socio-economic background or second language status of the students (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Students, regardless of background, benefit from teachers' command over multiple instructional strategies when they have knowledge of child development, assessment for learning, and constructive discipline techniques, and perhaps most importantly, when they have the academic skills to keep on learning throughout their career; moreover, these teachers are more successfully retained in the profession (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). The impact of educational background, and back-ground in subject-specific pedagogy, is even more pronounced for high-school teachers (Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000). This research, though conducted elsewhere, poses a challenge to strengthen teacher education in Nunavut, not to cut it back.

The Nunavut Teacher Education Program should not be written off: where else will Inuit teacher candidates have the opportunity to work together to master pedagogy, strengthen their academic skills, and work to develop a substantial body of content in a distinctively Inuit curriculum (see, e.g., Russell, 2006)? They will also have opportunities to build peer support that will be a foundation for ongoing learning communities, within and across schools. Inuit teachers will face considerable challenges in the classroom – sending them in there with less background than anywhere else in Canada makes no sense; moreover, it replicates patterns that have been shown to limit achievement among poor and minority students in the United States (Peske & Haycock, 2006). Cutting back on postsecondary requirements makes even less sense for high school teachers, who are expected to have

knowledge of substantive subjects as well as teacher practice. Teacher training does not guarantee quality in the classroom or the school. However, the out-of-hand dismissal of this issue – combined with a failure to address other strategies to build quality in education – suggests NTI’s prescription is to trade-off quality in favour of bilingualism. It is also inconsistent with the main recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), which calls for increasing Aboriginal control over education by putting control into the hands of Aboriginal governments *and* by increasing the number of trained Aboriginal teachers, particularly graduates of Aboriginal teacher education programs.

Similarly Bainbridge’s reply to my review, as well as *Saqqiqpuq*, are both silent on the social context for education. Additional language acquisition – and educational success – is strongly correlated with the resources for learning that exist in the home and in the community (August & Hakuta, 1997; PISA, 2007). It is difficult to ask for ambitious education reform *and* to demand other forms of social investment addressing poverty and deprivation of key basic services from adult learning to adequate housing to community mental health. However, from my perspective, it is impossible, as Richard Rothstein (2008) has recently argued, it may even reflect a lack of intellectual, moral, and political integrity, for education reformers who suppress awareness of how social and economic disadvantage lower achievement. The challenge for the Inuit majority in Nunavut, working through both their government and their land claim organizations, is to push for a schooling agenda that strengthens Inuit culture – without sacrificing the demand for quality teachers and for sustained investment in social well-being in communities.

Nunavut’s students – and the agenda of Inuktitut bilingualism in Nunavut – deserve better than a one-shot strategy for educational improvement.

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