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Meeqquerivitsialak – Discourses in a Postcolonial Greenlandic Pedagogy

Introduction: From Hawai'i to Greenland

Greenland was a Danish colony until 1953, and in 1979 the country gained Home Rule. Today, the country has 56.648 inhabitants and 12.5 % (2007) of these were born outside of Greenland¹. The majority of this minority are Danes who have immigrated as adults and who are carrying out specialist work, or filling in for a shortage of skilled Greenlandic labor power.

This situation is repeated within the day care sector where 50% of the 303 preschool teacher jobs are carried out by persons who have no preschool teacher training or pedagogical training at all (KIIP, 2007b: 16). Danish professionals are thus “imported” and often employed for the management posts. Almost without exception these employees are unable to speak Greenlandic and they are often also unfamiliar with Greenlandic living and working conditions and culture prior to their arrival. Furthermore, many day care centers have only one professionally trained preschool teacher and many of the unskilled employees suffer themselves from massive and untreated personal problems which influence their ability to support and stimulate the children (Børn & Unge, 2007: 21). Hence, the conditions for carrying out pedagogical

¹ These figures are based on the statistical categories “born in Greenland” and “born outside Greenland” (<http://www.statgreen.gl/dk/publ/befolk/07-1bef2.pdf>) and hence do not take important aspects such as language skills, ethnicity and age when arriving in Greenland into consideration. The figures do however, in my view, serve the purpose of demonstrating that a relatively large part of the population has moved to Greenland at a later stage in life (the majority as grown-ups) and hence may have a different identification with and attachment to the country than the majority of in-born Greenlanders.

work in Greenlandic day care centers have been challenging in terms of material and professional resources for many decades.

In 2006 however, the Home Rule Government launched a day care reform called 'Meeqquvitsialak' – The good day care center. The reform was allocated three years of work and 5 million Danish kroner (670.500 Euros). The reform covers three target areas: A revision of the fundamental laws within the area, the development of research based pedagogical and psychological methods and finally a revision of the contemporary teacher training and in-service courses (KIIP, 2007b: 5). Furthermore, culture and language have been made central themes of the overall reform (KIIP, 2007b: 3). In this article, I will concentrate on the second area, namely the development of psychological and pedagogical measures and goals for day care centers in Greenland.

To become inspired for this development process, a delegation of Greenlandic politicians and civil servants went to Hawai'i in 2006 to learn from the pedagogical model called CREDE. CREDE stands for Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence and refers to the Research Center where the model was originally developed to suit the school level. The model emphasizes five principles 1) co-operation between adults and children via practical projects, 2) focus on reading and writing skills, 3) taking point of departure in the child's own experiences and everyday, 4) stimulate complex thinking through e.g. translating acquired principles and skills from one context to another and 5) utilizing instructional dialogues. These principles have a documented positive effect on the learning level of all pupils, but have been proved especially beneficial for pupils who risk falling behind or leaving school prematurely (Tharp & Entz, 2003: 1).

The model itself does not represent a new strand of progressive pedagogy, but rather sets out to combine efforts in the different contexts surrounding the child¹. The Hawai'ian version

¹ See e.g. the article by Stephanie Stoll Dalton (http://www.crede.gl/fileadmin/user_upload/PDFArtikler/CREDEPAEDAGOGIK_GOER_EN_FORSKEL.pdf) or related articles at the homepage of the Green-

of the model appears to be interesting for the Greenlandic purpose for two reasons: It *also* focuses on the preschool level and it *also* takes as its point of departure the particular conditions of indigenous peoples. The model focuses on the learning of indigenous languages and cultures through an immersion program aiming at bilingual proficiency in both English and Hawai'ian starting already in kindergarten (KIIP, 2007a: 8-9).

In the following, I will examine three of the most important discourses which influence the conditions for Greenlandic pre-schools and hence must be considered in the work of translating the Hawai'ian CREDE model to not only a Greenlandic reality, but to the highly diverse economical and social settings within the country¹. I shall end the article by concluding that exactly this translation process is essential if 'Meeqquerivitsialak' is to contribute to the development of a Greenlandic pedagogy which may support the important process of mental decolonization.

First Discourse: Double Cultural Realities

According to anthropologist Klaus Georg Hansen, there exist two parallel realities in Greenland: The official and the unofficial. The official or Western reality was introduced by the colonial powers and rests in a crude version upon the principles that power is measured in quantities (how much have you got) and that human interactions are based upon unequal and fixed power relations (Hansen, 1989: 2). Today, the official reality is upheld by the elites in Greenland as well as implemented in the societal structures largely inherited from Denmark.

The unofficial reality or the Greenlandic philosophy on the other hand, is based on the idea that human beings are part of a

landic research institution Inerisaavik: www.crede.gl (articles appear in Greenlandic and Danish only).

¹ I hereby refer to the different conditions under which children grow up in Greenland depending on clima and socio-economic possibilites (farming communities in the south and hunting and fishing communities towards the north) as well as the size of the community ranging from tiny villages of less than 50 persons to the capital and metropole of Nuuk with more than 15.000 inhabitants.

whole and that power relations change according to the situation (roles may shift). The unofficial reality is widely accepted in the population, but it has no official voice. This reality contains explanations to the functioning of the world and educational lessons aimed at socialization. According to this understanding, children are part of a subject-subject relation and hence their integrity cannot be offended by forcing them to behave in certain ways (Hansen, 2007: 3-4). Rather the upbringing of Inuit at a more general level seems to be based on two main principles: Developing independence in the child referred to as *nammineq* and fostering a close attachment to the family and important geographical areas. The practical measures to ensure the development of these principles include the lack of scolding and sometimes even of an explicit guidance of the children as these have to learn from their own experiences and become used to making their own decisions (Flora, 2007: 154-158). They also include what anthropologist Jean L. Briggs¹ has termed Inuit morality plays where children are verbally challenged on their feelings or teased to the limits of their emotional and intellectual capacities.

One of the day-to-day consequences of this double reality in contemporary Greenland is the conflict between on the one hand, the dominant Western discussion patterns aiming at convincing one another, or at least obtaining a compromise and on the other hand, the Greenlandic focus on integrity and the right to one's own opinion (Hansen, 2007). Psychologist Ruth Blytman Nielsen rightly points out that the different realities and methods for upbringing do not exist in parallel or isolated from one another. Rather, she concludes that many Greenlandic children and youth experience a split between on the one hand, Greenlandic norms for politeness which underline emotional restraints, the upholding of harmony through avoiding conflict and learning through observations, mimicking and experimenting. And on the other hand, the Western and institutional demands for individuality,

¹ E.g. L.J. Briggs (1970) *Never in Anger*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts and London.

self-promotion and learning through exchanging opinions and feelings, arguing, asking questions and discuss. These splits may in some cases contribute to negative self-images and problems of communication and conflict management (Nielsen, 2007: 209-211).

Second Discourse: Pedagogic Professionalism

Not long ago, I read this quote in a Danish journal for day care teachers coming from an otherwise very professional Danish preschool teacher who has been living and working in Greenland for several years:

The world is knocking on the door, but Greenland doesn't want to play along. Greenlanders are like a group of teenagers home alone (Børn og Unge, 2007: 20, my translation).

This quote is not only a demonstration of a typical paternalistic view which is sadly still a reality among professionals within many sectors it also indicates the frustration of working in an environment where cultural norms and language barriers remain untreated. College teacher Rikke Høgh Olesen argues that Western pedagogic ideas dominate the pedagogical praxis in Greenlandic day care centers. She observes that the combination of many unskilled employees and the lack of a verbalized Greenlandic pedagogy leave staff, children and parents in a situation of misunderstanding.

Unskilled staff often practice what Olesen terms 'asuki pedagogy'. 'Asuki' meaning "I don't know" and suggests a non-reflected repetition of one's own upbringing. The asuki pedagogy makes the staff vulnerable to criticism from parents, from the media and from colleagues. In fact, the staff has only two choices of acting when confronted with criticism: They can submit to the critique by parents and consultants and follow their instructions, or they can argue and explain using a Western pedagogical discourse (Olesen, 2007: 328-329). The lack of a conscious and professionally validated Greenlandic pedagogy prevents the preschool teachers as well as the non-trained staff from utilizing

their cultural and local knowledge to produce a professionally accepted praxis suitable for a Greenlandic context.

Third Discourse: Postcolonial Politics

The Home Rule Government operates within the political, juridical, economic and discursive framework of the Danish Commonwealth. In more concrete terms, this means that institutions and areas like the police, prison service, criminal law (although these areas are currently being transferred to Greenlandic jurisdiction), natural resources, immigration, parts of the financial and insurance sector, the majority of the veterinary control including the control with fish and fish products, the immaterial juridical area and most of the air traffic, the traffic at sea, the working environments and most parts of the sea environment are still mainly controlled from Denmark. When it comes to foreign politics, Greenlanders cannot make their own agreements if these include interests within defense and security or arrangements that involve Denmark in some sense¹. Furthermore, Greenland still receives development funds of 3.5 billion Danish kroner (470.000.000 Euros) from the Danish state. Also, the limited range of choices when it comes to tertiary education, the lack of medical and other treatment facilities along with a shortage of trained personnel within many professions means that Greenland is still dependent on Danish universities, Danish hospitals and facilities for disabled, just as it would still be difficult to manage many of the services and functions offered in modern Greenland without the extra supplies of trained labor power from Denmark.

Together with the historical colonial conditions, this one-way dependency relationship between Denmark and Greenland has caused politics, political discourses and the media in Greenland to be highly directed at Danish politics, at the Danish-Greenlandic relationship and most importantly at reclaiming societal institutions. According to anthropologist Jens Dahl, one of the postcolonial traits in Greenland is the overdeveloped central

¹ <http://www.stm.dk/Index/dokumenter.asp?o=6&n=2&h=3&d=779&s=1>

administration which is not adapted to the socioeconomic conditions in the country. The overdeveloped central administration is characterized by both exercising control over large if not the majority of the economically productive means in the country *and* controlling ideological institutions like the church, the educational institutions and the media. Dahl questions whether the political influential groups are able to make reforms which change structures without also radically changing the original form of the Home Rule Government including the inherited administration (Dahl, 1986).

The somewhat opposing conditions of the Greenlandic elites and politicians consisting of on the one hand, dependency on Denmark in relation to services, resources, economy, foreign politics etc. and on the other hand, a relative economic and political freedom (from the people) to carry out domestic politics establish a particular framework for development and change. In my experience, one of the consequences is that discourses – both domestic and abroad - about development are often structured along the lines of the binary oppositions between modern and traditional, Danish versus Greenlandic, former colonial rulers versus the oppressed people. This means for example that Greenlandic culture is often reduced to either a trait of the past, the original and pure Greenlanders living in harmony with nature, or it is treated as artifacts within the trading cycles of Western capitalism. There is no in-between, no hybrids or third spaces as these are difficult to utilize in postcolonial politics which is often ordered not only along the ideological lines of left and right but also along the lines of for and against, or independence from or a continued cooperation with the former colonial powers.

Conclusion: The Decolonized Greenlandic Pedagogy

In conclusion, let us return to the day care reform Meeqerivitsialak. The reform in many ways addresses these three mentioned discourses, or conditions. It focuses on language and culture, it reacts to the lack of educated personnel, it strives to build on research-based principles and it informs juridical changes. The final product will be a manual to assist the day care

centers in implementing the five CREDE principles and in the latest public update of the process, it was reported that the CREDE model is already being tested in six kindergartens along the west coast (KIIP, 2007b: 3-5).

It is, however, my hope that the reform will also succeed in changing the colonial experience and contribute to installing agency in the people. It can and must do so through providing a process which allows for:

Taking as a point of departure the bi-cultural and bilingual situation which face Greenlandic children and young people today. Instead of experiencing mixed signals and demands, children must be supported in integrating and rely on more cultures and realities and in becoming proficient in at least two and preferably more languages.

Supporting the development of a professional Greenlandic pedagogy which in no sense must be understood as a national top-down curriculum for child development and education. Rather, I refer to an (international at best) environment for constant debate, experimenting, observations, writings and mimicking over the challenges of integrating Western pedagogical traditions with the Greenlandic philosophy and Greenlandic norms and methods for upbringing.

And finally, Meqquerivitsialak is a centrally controlled reform and hence it is important to secure the inclusion of local knowledge in the translation process. This knowledge must come from both the communities and from the day care centers. This exercise is not only important from a democratic perspective or in order to balance centralized and decentralized influence, it is also vital because it holds the potential for liberating Meqquerivitsialak from the restraining political dichotomy of modernity and traditionalism. Local and professional experience will add a nuance to the understanding of Greenlandic culture and upbringing and guarantee that it becomes more than symbols, more than qajaq (kayak) and illu (house, igloo).

A successful day care reform will qualify the work of Greenlandic preschool teachers and it will force Danish personnel to reconsider their own expertise and its limits in a Greenlandic

context. It will engage people in Greenland in discussions, selections and translations of values and principles for upbringing and reinstall a sense of responsibility and collective self confidence. Also, it will contribute to the process of turning the political attention away from Danish models and politics within the day care area and instead focus on the Greenlandic translation process as well as inspiration and research results coming from the international community. It is however of the utmost importance that the translation process is not neglected and that time and flexibility is provided for developing a Greenlandic solution. Otherwise, one foreign although indigenous inspired model (the Hawai'ian) is simply replacing another (the Danish) at the cost of the children.

When one of the teachers in the Hawai'ian CREDE program was asked what the purpose of their particularly developed education was, she responded: "The purpose is to reclaim Hawai'i. The School is the means to take back Hawai'i again." (KIIP, 2007a: 8, my translation). And that is exactly what Meeqerivitsialak should also be all about.

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