

BUILDING A NATION IN THE CLASSROOM: EXPLORING EDUCATION POLICY IN POST-COLONIAL GREENLAND

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers an analysis of the education policy goals and practices in Greenland, a former colony of Denmark(1). It situates Greenlandic education policy within the context of nation-building processes. Studies on nation-building have long argued that the relationship between education and nation-building is an important area of investigation, especially in former colonies, such as Greenland, where nationalism has been foundational for independence from colonial rule (Akar & Albrecht, 2017; Chatterjee, 1993; Gellner, 1983; Hechter, 2013). These studies have made clear distinctions among the terms ‘nation-building’, ‘nationalism’ and ‘national identity’. Nation-building signifies the cultural and political processes aimed at constructing a nation. Nationalism is a political ideology and movement that aims for the unity, autonomy and identity of a nation. National identity refers to the collective identity at the national level (Hall, 2013; Smith, 1991).

As a point of departure in this conceptual framework, the aforementioned studies have directed attention to the importance ascribed by nation states, in general, and former colonies, in particular, to a standardised compulsory educational system in which instruction is provided in a common language, i.e. the national language. This creates an overarching national identity that can serve to consolidate and to strengthen social cohesion and to reduce barriers and divisions. In this view, albeit national identity involves elements that are constructed in opposition to other groups, nationalism is also a source of solidarity (Miller, 2000). However, an education policy that is informed by a nationalist agenda often conflicts with the aims and practices of an education policy that seeks to embrace diversity, be it cultural, linguistic or socio-economic. Hence, nationalist education policies run the risk of reproducing existing social barriers and divisions in a society and cementing, rather than reducing, social inequalities (Akar & Albrecht, 2017). Thus, there is a trade-off between achieving social cohesion and social inequality.

This chapter explores the possibility of a trade-off between social cohesion and social inequality in the goals and practices of Greenlandic education policy beginning in 1979 when the country gained home rule. Several studies have explored this trade-off in education policy. Examples can be found in New Zealand in the context of the country's bicultural education policy (Lourie, 2016) and in Catalonia in the unfolding competing conceptualisations of language, social cohesion and cultural diversity in the classroom (Dooly & Unamuno, 2009).

Education is a pressing issue in Greenland. For years, the country has struggled, with little success, to address and to eliminate a competence gap that negatively affects the labour market. The competence gap that confronts Greenland is twofold. On the one hand, employers demand skills that are not, or are only to a very limited extent, present in the Greenland labour force. Consequently, employers recruit staff internationally, most notably from Denmark, Greenland's former colonial ruler. On the other hand, employers need the non-skilled labour that is available in Greenland. However, non-skilled workers lack the incentive to take these jobs because of the relatively small difference between the minimum wage and unemployment benefits. Hence, there is a clear understanding in Greenland that the country needs to improve its educational system to address the competence gap and that this begins with primary and lower secondary school education.

The chapter first presents the context for Greenlandic education policy. This is accomplished by a focus on two vital elements: indigeneity and isolation, and colony and county. The chapter then explores Greenlandic education policy since the introduction of home rule in 1979. The emphasis is on the interactions among nation-building processes and education policy, governance structures, and teacher training. Finally, the chapter returns to the question that has guided this research, i.e. the possibility of a trade-off between social cohesion and social inequality. It concludes with the findings.

THE GREENLAND CONTEXT

INDIGENEITY AND ISOLATION

Greenland is the largest island in the world (2.1 million km²). The country is often considered to be both North American and European. Geographically, it is part of the North American continent. However, given that Greenland was a Danish colony for more than 200 years (1719–1953) and a Danish county for more than 20 years (1953–1979), it is also considered part of Europe.

While Greenland is the largest island in the world, it also has the lowest population density in the world. It has approximately 55,000 inhabitants who live along the coastline, mostly on the west coast. Almost one-third of the population (17,000) resides in the capital, Nuuk. Among the population are the Inuit, who are recognised by Denmark and the international community as an indigenous people. Thus, their rights are secured under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. However, the Greenland Inuits constitute an unusual group of indigenous peoples. Unlike some of the other peoples protected by the declaration, the Inuit are not a minority. Instead, they constitute the majority population of Greenland, and their language, Greenlandic, or, more accurately, the Greenlandic Inuit language is the majority language (Brincker & Nørregaard-Nielsen, 2015).

Greenlandic is spoken on the west coast of Greenland. On the east coast, which is much less densely populated, the population speaks a dialect that is so different from that of the west that it is sometimes considered a separate language (Brincker, 2017). Hence, Greenland has two languages. To this could be added a

third, the Thule dialect, which is spoken in the northwest. However, most debates on language concentrate on the relationship between Greenlandic and Danish, the language of the former colonial power, which still plays a dominant role in Greenland, especially in Nuuk. Hence, Greenland is a multilingual indigenous community in which Greenlandic, East Greenlandic, the Thule dialect and Danish are spoken. This community is relatively isolated geographically. However, with climate change and the resulting changes in the permafrost, glacier ice and sea ice, Greenland has been receiving an unparalleled amount of international attention in terms of geopolitics, environmental risks, the potential existence of natural resources below the ice and the prospect of new shipping routes.

COLONY AND COUNTY

From 1721 to 1953, Greenland was a Danish colony. In 1953, the country became fully integrated into the Danish state, and it gained the status of a Danish county. This was in sharp contrast to the tendency of colonies around the world to gain independence. With its Danish county status, Greenland became aligned with Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland on their journey to becoming universal welfare states.

During the county years, 1953–1979, Greenland embarked on a very rapid modernisation process that included education. The argument was that for Greenland to achieve the same level of economic prosperity as the rest of Denmark, it would need to become industrialised. Industrialisation in turn required that education be given priority (Mikkelsen, 1963). Without significant investments in education, the projected increase in the demand for skilled labour, in both the short- and long-term, could not be satisfied without a significant influx of migrant workers, especially from Denmark. The beginning of the 1970s thus marked a period of increased prioritisation of education in Greenland.

Subsequent to the formation of a nationalist movement in the late 1960s and 1970s and the repeated calls for autonomy, Greenland gained home rule status in 1979. Thus, the Danish-developed welfare system was transferred to and implemented in the semi-autonomous Greenlandic administration within the framework of the Danish Realm. In many aspects of government policy, the introduction of home

rule resulted in radical breaks from the mindset and policies of the 1950s and 1960s. One of these was education, which was identified as the first area to be transferred from Danish to Greenlandic authority and jurisdiction. The next section explores Greenland's education policy beginning in 1979 when jurisdiction shifted from Denmark to Greenland.

EDUCATION POLICY IN GREENLAND

EDUCATION POLICY AND NATION-BUILDING

With the introduction of home rule and the responsibility for education residing with the home rule government, one of the primary education policy objectives became the definition of the framework for and content of educational programs from a Greenlandic rather than a Danish perspective to increase the relevance to Greenlandic culture. The Greenlandic language, which in the previous 10–15 years had been overshadowed by the Danish language, was now being given higher priority (Binderkrantz, 2008, 2011).

The political goal was to reduce the number of migrant workers, a large proportion of whom came from Denmark, and to make Greenland self-sufficient regarding its labour force. Combined with the policy of *Greenlandization*, an idea that captured the spirit of the 1980s when Greenlandic culture, traditions and values were a focus, education became an important part of the development of a Greenlandic nation and an overarching Greenlandic national identity.

After the emphasis on Greenlandic values and language during the 1980s, the focus shifted in the early 1990s to the quality and need for Danish language proficiency. This was a reaction to the unintended consequences of the 1980s education policies, most notably the limited opportunities for students whose primary and lower secondary instruction had been in Greenlandic. These students, whose only or primary language was Greenlandic, were impeded from furthering their education, e.g. attending upper secondary school, because the language of instruction was Danish. This was in sharp contrast to the experiences of the bilingual students for whom the transition from lower to upper secondary school, with instruction in Greenlandic, to high school, with instruction in Danish, was not a problem. The

Danish-language students who did not speak Greenlandic were denied access to the teacher training college in Nuuk because they could not speak Greenlandic (Dagsordenspunkt 30-1, FM 1995:14).

With the 1990 school reform that was implemented in the mid-1990s, non-Greenlandic speaking students were no longer required to receive separate instruction in Danish-speaking classes. A two-tiered school with Danish and Greenlandic sections was considered a relic of the past. Instead, Danish-speaking students were to be integrated into the Greenlandic-speaking classes. The national politicians hoped to accommodate Greenlandic- and Danish-speaking students in the same classroom. The integration policy was discussed throughout most of the 1990s. A major obstacle was the lack of support materials for teaching Greenlandic as a foreign language to non-Greenlandic-speaking students just as there were limited materials for teaching Danish as a foreign language to non-Danish-speaking students. In addition, there was a severe shortage of qualified teachers in both subjects. Hence, although the education policies were designed to accommodate one nation in one classroom, resources such as teaching materials and trained teachers, which were preconditions for the successful implementation of these policies, were not in place.

GOVERNANCE AND REGULATION

In 1997, a new regulation that entailed the reform of the governance structures for primary and lower secondary schools was passed. The regulation was a result of recommendations from the Municipal Reform Commission and a project group that had found the existing governance structures too hierarchical and lacking sufficient opportunities for localisation. According to the project group, this made it exceedingly difficult to fully benefit from local knowledge and instructional experience. In some cases, this resulted in an uneven distribution of competencies and, thus, an imbalance between expertise and financial responsibility (Dagsordenspunkt 35, FM 1997).

The regulation created the foundation for the primary and lower secondary schools being jointly governed by the home rule government and the municipalities. As part of the reform, school boards were established at all schools to improve cooperation

among parents, policymakers and teachers and to stabilise the work of each school. The purpose was to allow those who are directly involved in the schools to have greater influence and, at least in principle, to pay relatively more attention to the local contexts within which the individual schools operated.

Finally, in early 2000, the *Atuarfitsialak* (good school) reform was implemented. It expanded the debate on governance and regulation by placing the child at the centre of education. This represented a shift in Greenlandic education policy from the central national level with a focus on nation-building, to the local level with an emphasis on the local context and, finally, to the level of the individual child. This movement occurred against the general perception that after more than 20 years of Greenlandic authority over education, the initiatives and reforms had not been successful in adapting the primary and lower secondary schools to the Greenlandic context. According to the policymakers, the *Atuarfitsialak* reform was the first attempt to create a truly Greenlandic school designed to fulfil the needs of the people of Greenland (§6, Landstingsforordning nr. 8 af 21. maj 2002 om folkeskolen)(Dagsordenspunkt 35, EM 2001:1).

The *Atuarfitsialak* reform was launched in an environment in which political parties were thought to have spent more time discussing the cultural differences between Greenlanders and Danes in the abstract than addressing the social barriers and divisions in the population. An educational system on Greenlandic terms that could unite the people of Greenland in an overarching identity and achieve social cohesion had been much desired, but the terms had never been laid out. The reforms under home rule had lacked clearly defined goals and objectives that could be operationalised throughout the education system. The focus had been on the development of governance and regulatory frameworks rather than their implementation.

In 2009, the Home Rule Act was replaced with a new act granting self-rule to Greenland: the 'Self-Rule Act'. This act recognises that, pursuant to international law, the people of Greenland have a right to self-determination (Lov nr. 473 af 12/6/2009). The introduction of the Self-Rule Act did not significantly affect education policy. Presently, the *Atuarfitsialak* reform still constitutes the legal framework for primary and lower secondary schools in Greenland. However, in recent years, initiatives have been launched to evaluate the *Atuarfitsialak*. These initiatives were

triggered to a large extent by the general perception that Greenland needed to address and to eliminate its competence gap if the country was to become fully independent of its former colonial power, Denmark. This perception has mirrored the general understanding that tackling the competence gap would need to begin with primary and lower secondary school education. Recently, the Ministry of Education embarked on a major reform to restructure the entire education system. It is based on the evaluations of K–12 school systems around the world. A main purpose of the reform is the development of better links between elementary and higher education. This involves increasing compulsory schooling from 10 to 12 years and strengthening coherence and consistency within the school system. An important goal of this reform is that all villages, regardless of size, be able to offer instruction from Grades 1 through 8. It is the plan that upon completion of the 8th grade, students can receive 9th and 10th grade instruction in their local cities. The final two years, Grades 11 and 12, would be done in ‘campus cities’. The adoption and implementation of this reform have not yet occurred.

TEACHER TRAINING

In 2016, the Danish Institute of Evaluation conducted an evaluation of the teacher training college in Nuuk at the request of the University of Greenland. The Institute concluded that the teacher training college in Nuuk was facing serious problems regarding education quality. This was most pronounced in mathematics and English as a foreign language. On the basis of the grades awarded in the final examination, the Institute concluded that the quality of instruction in Danish as a foreign language was somewhat higher than those awarded in mathematics and English. However, according to the Institute, this covers a great spread and 45 percent of a graduating class received grades in Danish as a foreign language that were as low as those awarded in English and mathematics (EVA, 2016).

This situation is problematic especially because Danish is still central to the Greenlandic educational system. Thus, young Greenlanders who want to educate themselves beyond lower secondary school must master Danish. The use of both Greenlandic and Danish in the Greenlandic educational system therefore constitutes a challenge for those who speak only, or mainly, Greenlandic. This problem was identified in the 1990s. While Greenlandic-speaking students do not

experience language problems in the primary and lower secondary schools, they are disadvantaged upon entry to upper secondary school if they do not have good Danish language skills.

The reasons for the gap between the primary and lower secondary schools and the rest of the education system is complex. However, a shortage of Greenlandic-speaking teachers qualified to teach at the secondary level and the lack of instructional materials written in Greenlandic appear to be the main reasons. These factors have played a dominant role in the ongoing situation in which upper secondary education is conducted in Danish. The argument has often been made that the size of the Greenlandic population is not conducive to an education system in which instruction is provided exclusively in Greenlandic. An independent Greenland needs a population that is fluent in many languages. Whether one of these languages should be Danish, the language of the former colonial power, remains an open question. In the present situation, where Danish is the language of instruction in upper secondary schools, it remains the language of social mobility. An individual who does not speak Danish cannot advance in society. Hence, contrary to the hopes and good intentions invested in the long line of education reforms that have been implemented since the introduction of home rule in 1979, Greenland's tendency to reproduce social, most notably linguistic, barriers that date back to the period of colonialism remains. Danish, the language of the former colonial ruler, is still the language of social mobility.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Studies on nationalism have asserted that educational policies that seek to create social cohesion and to construct an encompassing national identity through a standardised compulsory state school system with instruction in a common language, i.e. the national language, risk promoting elitism. This is particularly true in societies in which nationalism has been foundational for independence from colonial rule (Akar & Albrecht, 2017; Chatterjee, 1993; Hechter, 2013). These societies risk being confronted with the dilemma of making a trade-off between achieving social cohesion or social equality. Greenland may be considered an example of such a post-colonial society.

Since the introduction of home rule in 1979, there have been ongoing attempts at adapting the education system, in terms of frameworks, content and governance structures, to the population and the context of the country. This chapter has addressed two dominant aspects of that context: indigeneity and isolation, and colony and county. The vast geographical distances and small population scattered along the coastline with a predominance of settlements in the west create difficulties for the settlements and smaller towns along the coast and especially in the east, south and north to attract, to select and to retain trained teachers. As a result, the schools in these areas must often rely on untrained part-time teachers. Inevitably, this affects the quality of education and exacerbates the negative effects of the current structure in which primary and lower secondary school instruction is conducted in Greenlandic and upper secondary school instruction is conducted in Danish. This arrangement promotes a bilingual, highly educated local elite who typically reside in the major cities, especially the capital. This group is left in a relatively more advantageous position than those who live in the outlying areas. They often do not master Danish, the language of the former colonial power, and they have not necessarily been taught by teachers who are as well trained as those in the larger cities.

It must be noted that the above-described situation is not unique to Greenland. It can be observed in many post-colonial countries. Thus, it is not uncommon for a local highly educated elite with a nationalist agenda to replace the colonial power only to strengthen the existing societal divisions and barriers (Akar & Albrecht, 2017). Avoiding this trade-off between social cohesion and social inequality and enabling both social cohesion and social equality to flourish remains a concern. It is a matter of designing an education policy that supports Greenlandic nation-building processes while reducing the social inequality that threatens to divide Greenland into an affluent centre on the central west coast and an impoverished periphery. This question must be addressed urgently if Greenland is to close its competence gap.

Greenland face a competence gap that negatively affects the labour market. There are two sides to this competence gap. Employers demand skills that are not, or are only to a very limited extent, present in the labour force in Greenland. As a consequence, they recruit staff internationally, most notably from Denmark, Greenland's former colonial ruler. Employers also need non-skilled labour that is

available in Greenland. However, non-skilled workers lack the incentives to take these jobs because of the relatively small difference between the minimum wage and unemployment benefits. Consequently, Greenland has not been successful in achieving the level of economic development and growth that would permit economic independence from Denmark, which annually provides a block grant that constitutes approximately 50 percent of the national budget. The continued dependence on the former colonial power is a thorny issue for many Greenlanders. A growing group aspires to achieve full economic and political independence. Therefore, this group has applauded national policies that support nation-building processes. This includes an education system that provides instruction in a common national language. The problem with the use of both Greenlandic and Danish is that opportunities for social mobility are available only to individuals who master both languages. Danish fluency is necessary for social advancement. This situation influences the competence gap faced by Greenland and the attempts to address and to eliminate it.

ENDNOTES

1. Danish and Greenlandic historians and Arctic researchers have been debating whether or not Greenland was a Danish colony. It is not within the scope of this work to participate in that debate (Thisted, 2005, 2009).

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