

Małgorzata Zielińska
University of Gdańsk

Critical Pedagogy of Place and the Case of Education in Greenland

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in analysing education from the local perspective and in connection with the places in which it occurs (e.g. Angayuqaq & Barnhardt, n.d.; Mendel, 2006). This trend could partly be seen as a response to globalisation. An example of this is the establishment of a new type of pedagogy – the critical pedagogy of place, which David A. Gruenwald (2003) has described as “the best of both worlds” (p.3) – one of them being the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy with its interest in social justice and challenging the dominant culture; while the second one is place-based education, which emphasises and strengthens the relation between people and their human and non-human environment, local knowledge, culture and nature. The aims of this new pedagogy can be seen as to “(a) identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (re-inhabitation); and (b) identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (de-colonisation).” (p. 9)

Analysing the case of Greenland, the largest island in the world and a self-governed Danish territory, may be an interesting contribution to this discussion. Lying on the peripheries of the world, covered mostly by ice and inhabited by only about 56 000 people¹ it tends to be overlooked in global discussions. However, it is here where the local needs of the people meet another culture's influence - namely, Danish – and global processes, such as for example, the spread of the global economy, climate change and the melting of the Greenland ice sheet. Education, as a sphere where all these factors meet and a tool enabling change, is therefore a vital issue here and a subject of debate.

This paper aims at showing the current situation of education in Greenland and the challenges it faces, as well as analysing it in the context of critical pedagogy of place. Before I do this however, it is important to point out that since critical pedagogy of place is a relatively new trend, many of the authors that I am going to refer to have only written about one of the traditions it consists of, and therefore, I will sometimes separate these traditions. What is more, the two components, that is,

¹ Data from July 2006

critical pedagogy and place-based education, are of a slightly different nature. Critical pedagogy is mostly a theoretical framework used for analysing educational practices, while place-based education creates practices and, to some extent, can be seen as a methodology. Thus, I will apply the former mainly to analyse the situation of Greenlandic education, while the latter will be more useful to suggest possibly beneficial practices.

I will start with a brief description of Greenland's historical and cultural background in order to give more insight into life on the island. After that I will go on to analyse the challenges which Greenlandic education faces and, with the help of critical pedagogy of place, I will try to suggest what might be done to improve it.

Historical Background

The history of Greenland and its people is complicated and - as it is for most countries - it is not certain who were the first inhabitants of the island. Some of the first cultures that are known to have settled in Greenland were the Sarqqaq, Dorset and Thule people (Erngaard, 1973). However, when the Vikings came to Greenland in 982, it is most likely that they found the island empty. Later, in 1260 the Norwegian king claimed the territory and after the union between Norway and Denmark in 1536, Greenland was declared to be Danish. For a long time contact between Greenland and Europe was discontinued, not being re-established until 1721. In this particular year a Dano-Norwegian missionary, Hans Egede came to Greenland, expecting to find a Norse settlement. However, the Norse culture had collapsed in Greenland in the 15th century – for unknown reasons – and instead of the Norsemen, he found Inuits on the island.

From this time on, the history of Greenland was the history of colonisation and – later and to some extent - de-colonisation, interrupted only by the Norwegian occupation of the Eastern part of the island in 1931 and the German engagement in war operations around Greenland during World War II. After the war, Denmark signed a treaty and allowed US military bases onto the island. In 1953 Greenland was made an integral part of Denmark and in 1979 it started to be self-governing. At that time, Denmark was already a part of the European Community, but in 1982 the majority of Greenlanders voted to leave it, which they did in 1985. However, Greenland still maintains economic relations with European countries, as well as with Canada, the USA, Japan, China and Russia. It also takes part in European programmes, such as the Northern Periphery Programme and Socrates/Erasmus.

Greenland – a part of the Danish Realm (Rigsfællesskabet) – is no longer a colony, however it is not independent either. It has been granted home rule - “a form of being according to which some functions of the state of the sovereign independent nation, the colonial power, have been taken over and institutionalised locally by the colonised nation, but which, at the same time are intended to secure the ideological hegemony and territorial and military rule of the colonial power” (Jonsson, 1999, p.3). Most researchers (Jonsson, 1999; Jensen, 2003) agree however, that home rule is only a temporary status for Greenland and a step towards independence. There has been an ongoing debate on the island whether it should become an independent state or not, the strongest drawback of a change in its status being the loss of huge Danish subsidies. Jonsson (2003) has also pointed to the problems of “voluntary colonialism, organisational dependency and institutional racism” (p.23) while Finn Lynge (n.d. a) has criticised his society for being too passive. He has argued that Greenlanders having learned through the centuries to listen to orders from Copenhagen, have to change their colonial mentality and dare to decide for themselves. The discussion still continues and it is difficult to say if Greenland will become an independent state and, if so, when it might happen. However, even those who are in favour of staying in the Danish Realm see the need of increasing Greenland's sovereignty within the framework of home rule.

Culture and Language

After World War II the island underwent very quick modernisation and industrialisation. It changed from a very traditional society to a modern welfare state (Rasmussen, n.d.). In as little as one generation, people moved from tents and igloos to blocks of flats and the traditional lifestyle was changed. This quick change has resulted in an identity crisis among many inhabitants, large numbers of alcohol-addicts, as well as suicides. In 1992 there were 88,2 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to 22,3 in Denmark and 8,7 in the Faroe Islands in 1993 (Jonsson, 1999, p.20). Another figure showing indirectly dissatisfaction with what is happening on the island, is the net migration rate. With -8,37 migrants/1000 people it is tenth in the world among the countries with the largest out-migration.²

Today, Greenlandic culture is to some extent a mixture of two realities. One is the indigenous culture, where fishing and hunting are important parts of one's identity and where there is respect

² Data for 2006, from: Immigration Statistics, Retrieved: April 11, 2007 from:

http://www.nationmaster.com/red/graph/imm_net_mig_rat-immigration-net-migration-rate&int=-1

for ancestors and traditional values. The other reality is the (post)modern lifestyle brought by Danes, with Scandinavian welfare and middle-class values, as well as the more global western pop-culture and commodification. It has brought to Greenland a division between the poor and the rich, where people living in traditional dwellings and hunting, instead of buying food in the supermarket, suddenly start to be seen as poverty-stricken and unemployed.³

It may be therefore concluded that the struggle is not only between the indigenous Greenlandic culture and colonial Danish influence, but also more generally between the global culture and economy, and local traditions.

Similar factors – that is, local, colonial and global – also influence the linguistic situation on the island. Greenlandic, which comes from the same language family as the languages of the Inuits living in Canada and the USA, is the language commonly used by the population in Greenland. At the same time, Danish dominates administration and the media (Olsen, n.d.). Greenlandic society, consisting of around 88% Greenlanders, is practically bilingual, even though the two languages are diametrically opposed. However, there is also a third part to this equation, namely the English language, which Greenlanders need to learn if they want to compete in the global economy, as well as communicate with Americans from the military base in Qaanaaq (Thule).

On top of this, Greenland is severely affected by global warming. Decisions taken in other countries (e.g. about the emission of greenhouse gases in the USA) have a strong impact on the climate of the planet and, subsequently, on the condition of the ice cap in Greenland. There is no doubt now about the dramatic consequences it might have for the whole planet (for example floods), but it is also important to notice that it is also changing the Greenlandic environment and life on the island – all of this as a result of global problems rather than the Greenlanders' own actions. Paradoxically, at the same time as Greenland is gaining more and more political independence, it is also losing control over what is happening on the island. Looking at this issue from the point of view of the critical pedagogy of place, which is interested, among other things, in eco-justice (Gruenwald, 2003), and thus in “addressing environmental racism, including geographical injustice and environmental pollution” (p.6), we may see that this situation violates the “Principles of Environmental Justice”

³ This point of view is presented for example in *Grønland i Tusinde År* by Erik Erngaard, (Erngaard, 1973) pp.194-195, “Det rige land og det fattige” (“The rich land and the poor”) where we have two pictures presented – one of a “woman in her modern kitchen enjoying coffee” and the other of a woman, who cuts ice and boils it in a kettle. The latter “doesn't belong to the rich society” (“hører ikke til det rige samfund”), says the text.

(1991). Signed at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in October 1991 in Washington DC, they emphasise: “the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.” (article 5).

This cultural, linguistic and environmental situation also finds its reflection in education, which can be seen as a theatre of struggle and the means of change. One of its goals has been formulated in the “Principles of Environmental Justice” (1991):

Environmental Justice calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasises social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives. (article 16)

Does Greenlandic education fulfil this aim?

Education in Greenland

The first known educational institutions in Greenland were schools founded by missionaries. Their aim was to enable people to read religious writings. Apart from their religious role, they had some impact on the literacy of the society, though it was limited by the lack of teaching qualifications and language skills of its Danish educators (Olsen, n.d.). Taking this into consideration and adding the fact that it was not until the second half of the 19th century that Samuel Kleinschmidt translated the Bible into Greenlandic and formulated the orthography of this language (Bricka, 1887-1905), the first students were most likely learning how to write and read in Danish and not in their own language. Moreover, in 1724, Greenlandic students started to be sent for their education to Denmark. Cultural assimilation by means of education began.

In 1845 a teachers' college was established, where Greenlanders were educated to become teachers. Karl Kristian Olsen, the director of Inerisaavik, the Greenlandic Institute of Educational Sciences, quotes in his article about education on the island (n.d.) Peter Berliner's book *Skole og Samfund*, where Christian Berthelsen, the first Greenlandic head of a school, gives an account of his education:

Our teacher didn't neglect geography, and in Danish history we learnt the succession of Danish kings. World history with the migration of ethnic groups and the first World War

were also among the subjects. On the other hand we didn't hear so much concerning the history of Greenland. We learned little in mathematics over and above the four arithmetical skills. (as cited in Olsen, n.d.)

In the 1930's education on the island was strongly criticised by those Greenlanders who travelled to Denmark. In their opinion it was “too antiquated to rise to the challenges facing Greenland in conjunction with the transition from traditional hunting activity to a fishing industry. There was the desire for more and better instruction in the Danish language and for increased academic performance in the educational system.” (Olsen, n.d.)

Later, these demands were modified and after the establishment of the home rule system, the contents of education were altered to adjust “to the needs of Greenlandic society” (Olsen, n.d.). Also, the language of instruction in schools was changed to Greenlandic, as it is nowadays. Even Danish students are integrated into Greenlandic-speaking classes. However, higher education is conducted “primarily in Danish.”⁴ Danish is the first foreign language that children learn - it is compulsory in classes 4 to 11⁵ and optional in class 12. English, which according to Tommerup Jensen (n.d.) is more popular among students, is introduced in the seventh grade.

Challenges for Education

Since the 1970's, attempts at the “Greenlandization” of education have been strengthened, but not enough to overcome the obstacles. One of the major problems has been the lack of Greenlandic teachers. Even though teachers have possibilities of professional training, there are not enough candidates. Educated youth who study in Denmark, often choose to stay there instead of coming back. Therefore, around 20% of the teachers in Greenlandic schools are Danes, who meet language and culture barriers when they come to the island and who transmit their own culture rather than teaching to live in the indigenous one.

Apart from employing foreigners, other solutions to the problem of the lack of teachers include hiring people without any qualifications (Lynge, n.d. b) and making the teachers work more. The latter option results in most of them being overworked (Christiansen & El-Salanti, n.d.).

⁴ From the University of Greenland's website. Retrieved April 05, 2007, from <http://www.ilisimatusarfik.gl/Home/OmIlisimatusarfik/tabid/60/Default.aspx>

⁵ In Greenland children start primary school at the age of six.

There is also a lack of teaching materials, as not enough have been printed, probably because of the low numbers of potential readers (Guldberg, n.d.). Many teachers have to develop their own instructional materials, while some use Danish ones.

One of the biggest problems for Greenlandic education and a consequence of the two factors mentioned above, is that while primary and secondary education are held in Greenlandic, the language of instruction in tertiary education is mostly Danish. Students need to speak it very well to be able to study. Therefore, there have been voices that by “the excessive concentration on Greenlandic and the respective downgrading of Danish language skills” (“Greenland's School System,” 2003) Greenlandic government policy has led to a high dropout rate in higher education - in 2003 there were only 3 newly graduated social workers, out of 13 accepted onto the programme. In other high schools the numbers are also alarming (ibid.).

Consequently, there are not enough highly educated workers born in Greenland, while in the labour market “the emphasis is on formal educational degrees rather than on native knowledge, local personal contacts and networks, as well as the local language” (Jonsson, 1999, p.19). This leads to hiring Danish professionals instead of Greenlanders, which Jonsson calls “institutionalised racism,” and which further hinders the “accumulation of work experience of native workers and hence the accumulation of local know-how and skills” (Jonsson, 1999, p.22). Another result of this situation is the maintenance of dependence on Denmark and delay in the potential sovereignty of the island.

Improving the Danish language skills of the students might help with the dropout rate, it does not however seem to be the way of overcoming Danish dominance and empowering Greenlanders. We can also look at the high dropout rate differently - Angayuqaq and Barnhardt (n.d.) suggest:

Students in indigenous societies around the world have, for the most part, demonstrated a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the experience of schooling in its conventional form - an aversion that is most often attributable to an alien school culture, rather than any lack of innate intelligence, ingenuity, or problem-solving skills on the part of the students. The curricula, teaching methodologies, and often the teacher training associated with schooling are based on a worldview that does not always recognise or appreciate

indigenous notions of an interdependent universe and the importance of place in their societies.

A critical pedagogy of place, starting from the very beginning of children's education, can possibly be the answer to this problem. Looking first at one of its parts, place-based pedagogy, we may conclude that it is not only experiential, so the students are more likely to become engaged in what they learn, but it also relates to the environment they live in, to the local culture and traditions. It is much broader than just “learning to earn” (Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000, p.4). It is rather “learning to be where we are” (Smith, 2002, p. 584).

Smith (2002) has emphasised that there is no settled curriculum in place-based education, as it depends on the characteristics of each location and the teachers themselves. However, he has listed five general “thematic patterns that can be adapted to different settings” (p. 587):

- cultural studies (getting to know the local culture and history, for example by interviewing local people)
- nature studies (observation of local nature)
- real-world problem solving (students identify problems at school or in the local community and try to solve them)
- internships and entrepreneurial opportunities offered to students, so that they see employment possibilities after graduation and do not drop out of school or consider migration as their only chance to find a satisfying occupation
- induction into community processes, which can teach children how they can contribute to the life of the community, by engaging them in various projects, for example ecological ones.

All of these ideas would seem to be able to improve Greenlandic education. By including local (indigenous) knowledge and relating education to the human and non-human environment, place-based education can strengthen students' engagement in learning and their relation to the place they live in. If joined with showing possibilities of employment in the local community (for example as teachers), students might be less likely to abandon the island.

Another vital part of the pedagogy of place is environmental education. Sobel (1999) has emphasised the importance of first helping children to love nature by exploring it and later,

approximately at the age of 12, to start social actions to save it. However, it is essential to notice the specific environmental situation of Greenland. If most of the environmental problems come from outside the island, action is of particular significance, not merely in one's local community, but on an international scale as well. That is why not only identifying the problems and trying to find solutions, but also learning to effectively express one's needs, are the skills that should be found in the curriculum. In other words, Greenlanders should learn to “re-inhabit” their places, that is, they should learn to “pursue the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological life of places, near and far, now and in the future” (Gruenwald, 2003, p.7).

Conclusion

Looking at the present situation of Greenland, it may be concluded that if Greenlanders want to become more independent and overcome cultural and social inequalities in the place where they live, they need to make some changes to their education. Firstly, more students should be encouraged to finish their studies and stay on the island. This could partly be done by means of a consistent policy towards languages in schools, that is for example, encouraging students to learn foreign languages, but without making their whole success at school contingent upon this one factor.

Secondly, it seems vital on the one hand, to keep the level of schools similar to those in Denmark, so that students are able to study abroad, but on the other hand, to include more elements of indigenous knowledge into the education the Greenlanders receive. This may not only strengthen pupils' relations to the place they live in and, possibly, decrease the number of emigrants, but also support de-colonisation by showing the value of the local culture.

Critical pedagogy of place, that is, analysing education in terms of social, cultural and ecological justice joined with using the methodology suggested by place-based education might help with both re-inhabiting and de-colonising the island. Whatever its inhabitants decide – staying in the Danish Realm or leaving it - being able to generally “live well” (Gruenwald, 2003, p.9) on the island and to change whatever they find harmful to themselves or their environment are vital skills to be learned.

References

- Angayuqaq, O.K., & Barnhardt R. (n.d.). Education Indigenous to Place: Western Science Meets Native Reality. Retrieved March 31, 2007, from <http://ankn.uaf.edu>
- Bricka, C.F. (1887-1905). Kleinschmidt, Samuel Petrus. *Dansk Biografisk Lexikon, 1st edition* [Electronic version] p.218
- Christiansen, J.M. & El-Salanti, N. (n.d.). Hverdagen i folkeskolen - om undervisernes og inspektørernes psykiske arbejdsmiljø, trivsel og samarbejde: Rapport om den grønlandske folkeskole. Retrieved December 10, 2005, from <http://www.casa-analyse.dk/2667>
- Erngaard, E. (1973). *Grønland i tusinde år*. Lademann Forlagsaktieselskab, Copenhagen: Lademann Forlagsselskabet.
- Goldbach, I. (2000). Greenland: education and society between tradition and innovation [Electronic version]. *Intercultural Education; Nov2000, Vol. 11 Issue 3*, p259-271, 13p
- “Greenland's school system buckles under dropout rate” (2003). Retrieved March 10, 2007, from http://denmark.dk/portal/page?_pageid=374,692393&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL
- Gruenewald, D.A. (2003). The best of both worlds: a critical pedagogy of place [Electronic version]. *Educational Researcher*, 32, 3-12.
- Guldberg, H. (n.d.). Hvor går grænsen i Grønland?- indtryk fra en danskers undervisning i Grønland. Retrieved December 10, 2005, from <http://udd.uvm.dk/199810/udd9.htm?menuid=4515>
- Jensen, J.A. (2003). The position of Greenland and the Faroe Islands within the Danish Realm. *European Public Law; June 2003, Vol. 9 Issue 2*, pp. 170-178
- Jonsson, I. (1999). Greenland. From Home Rule to Independence: New opportunities for a new generation in Greenland [Electronic version]. In H. Petersen & B. Poppel (Eds.), *Dependency, Autonomy and Conditions for Sustainability in the Arctic*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- “Histoire du peuplement du Groenland de l'Est et du Nord - Les Eskimos,” (n.d.). Retrieved March 12, 2007, from <http://www.alainbidart.fr/OLD/people/g2.htm>
- Lynge, F. (n.d. a). Selvstyre for Grønland. Retrieved April 10, 2007, from <http://www.nanoq.gl/>
- Lynge, F. (n.d. b). Selvstyre: Gå-på-mod. Retrieved December 10, 2005, from

http://www.namminersorneq.gl/dk/dk_gen3-02.htm

Mendel, M., (Ed.), (2006). *Pedagogika miejsca*. Wrocław : Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej Edukacji TWP

Olsen, K.K. (n.d.). Education in Greenland. Retrieved January 2006, from <http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/IEW/edgreen.html>

“Principles of Environmental Justice” (1991). Retrieved April 18, 2007, from: <http://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html>

Rasmussen, R.O., (n.d.). Factsheet Denmark: Greenland, Retrieved December 10, 2005 from <http://www.nanoq.gl/English.aspx>

Smith, G.A. (2002). Place-based education: Learning to be where we are. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83, pp. 584-594

Sobel, D. (1999). Beyond Ecophobia. *Yes!, Winter 1999 Issue: Education for Life*. Retrieved April 10, 2007, from <http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?ID=803>

Tommerup Jensen, K. (n.d.). Danish in Greenland: From curriculum to reality. Retrieved December 10, 2005, from http://home.scarlet.be/~giedoc/tino/tomme_en.htm

Woodhouse, J. L., & Knapp, C. E. (2000). Place-Based Curriculum and Instruction: Outdoor and Environmental Education Approaches. Retrieved April 13, 2007, from ERIC Digest database