

## FEATURE

### Seeing education with northern eyes: University of the Arctic Thematic Network for Teacher Education for Social Justice and Diversity in Education

Jennifer Spratt, [j.spratt@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:j.spratt@abdn.ac.uk)  
Senior Lecturer, University of Aberdeen, Scotland

Kirk Anderson, [kirk.anderson@mun.ca](mailto:kirk.anderson@mun.ca)  
Professor, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

Mhairi Beaton, [M.C.Beaton@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:M.C.Beaton@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)  
Senior Lecturer, University of Leeds, Beckett, England

Rauna Rahko-Ravantti, [etunimi\\_sukunimi@ulapland.fi](mailto:etunimi_sukunimi@ulapland.fi)  
Lecturer, University of Lapland, Finland

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.26203/y09p-4r42>

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**To cite this feature:** SPRATT, J., ANDERSON, K., BEATON, M., and RAHKO-RAVANTTI, R., (2018) Seeing education with northern eyes: University of the Arctic Thematic Network for Teacher Education for Social Justice and Diversity in Education. *Education in the North*, 25(1-2), pp. 175-180.



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## Seeing education with northern eyes: University of the Arctic Thematic Network for Teacher Education for Social Justice and Diversity in Education

Jennifer Spratt, [j.spratt@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:j.spratt@abdn.ac.uk)  
Senior Lecturer, University of Aberdeen, Scotland

Kirk Anderson, [kirk.anderson@mun.ca](mailto:kirk.anderson@mun.ca)  
Professor, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

Mhairi Beaton, [M.C.Beaton@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:M.C.Beaton@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)  
Senior Lecturer, University of Leeds, Beckett, England

Rauna Rahko-Ravanti, [etunimi\\_sukunimi@ulapland.fi](mailto:etunimi_sukunimi@ulapland.fi)  
Lecturer, University of Lapland, Finland

### Synopsis

The University of the Arctic is a virtual organisation of universities, colleges, research institutes and other organisations concerned with education and research in and about the North. Within the organisation, Thematic Networks are the primary means of cooperation between member institutions. Through the Thematic Networks faculty and researchers can facilitate knowledge generation and sharing across the North based on common interests and priorities within this area. This feature article describes the formation of the Thematic Network for Teacher Education for Social Justice and Diversity in Education; its values, themes, goals and activities.

**Keywords:** Teacher Education; University of the Arctic; Cooperation; Indigenous Education; Northern Pedagogy

### Introduction

The University of the Arctic is an umbrella organisation whose members include universities across the eight Arctic nations and countries whose northern borders look towards the Arctic (e.g.UK). By providing opportunities for researchers in different universities to form Thematic Networks based on shared interests, the University of the Arctic has been the stimulus for much interdisciplinary, multinational work with a focus on the circumpolar North. In this article we will report on the work of one of these Thematic Networks, which has a focus on Teacher Education for Social Justice and Diversity in Education.

Our Thematic Network is led by the University of Lapland, Finland. Its members are teacher educators, who are located in twenty different institutions, in eleven countries (Finland,

Denmark, Canada, Norway, Scotland, England, USA, Iceland, Sweden, Mongolia and Russia). Currently (2017-19), Finland is the chair of the Arctic Council and it has identified education as one of its priorities. Its support for our network is evidenced in its endorsement of our project, 'Teacher Education for Diversity and Equality in the Arctic' for the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG) (University of the Arctic, 2018).

Many members of the network live in the Arctic region and have grown up and worked in countries that have used colonist pedagogies rich in 'nationalism.' Traditionally each of our countries has tended to see their nations within a modernist and singular north-south/east-west nationalist identity. Development in the North has largely been about resource extraction and assimilation. For example, Canadians have been taught about "Canada's North as an area to exploit (and sometimes care for). Teacher education has also had that 'flavour', with conflicting results.

The University of the Arctic's vision of the Arctic - as a North and Circumpolar transnational region with an identity of its own - calls for an understanding of teacher education which breaks with modernist colonial approaches in favour of social justice and diversity. Attendees at the Thematic Network symposium agreed that such a vision empowers the North and enables us to better understand the context of North for the North: or what was termed at the meeting 'Northern eyes seeing'. The aim is to empower the North to deal with its issues, one of which is addressing 'Southern eyes seeing' and related perspectives.

The Thematic Network has recently been granted UNESCO / UNITWIN (University Twinning and Networking Programme) status from 2017-2023. Our interests resonate with UNESCO foci on inclusive education, teacher education and indigenous peoples. This status will allow us to invite southern partners to join the network. The support and endorsement of our group has allowed us to come together to discuss and conceptualise our shared interests and challenges, when seeking to develop culturally sensitive approaches to teacher education and research for social justice and diversity, in the complex contexts of the far north.

### **Group members**

To provide a flavour of the range of the membership of the group, this section will provide a short account of the professional interests of the authors of this paper, as teacher educators, and their reasons for joining this Thematic Network.

Jennifer Spratt works at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland where she is Director of the Inclusive Practice Programme, providing Masters level courses for teachers, as part of their career-long professional development. The content of these courses are closely aligned with her research interests in Inclusive Pedagogy. The concept of Inclusive Pedagogy offers a framework for thinking about how teachers can respond to the diversity of children in their

schools, without resorting to the type of categorisation that may stigmatise or make deterministic judgements about some groups of children. The cultural diversity that can be found within Scotland, coupled with the isolation of some of its highland and island communities, create challenges for teacher educators that are shared across the Thematic Network.

Kirk Anderson is the Dean of the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland (Canada). He has been a teacher and principal in rural and Indigenous schools and an education professor at the University of Saskatchewan (2002-2003), University of Calgary (2004-2007), and University of New Brunswick (2007-2011). He comes from a family with Mi'kmaq and Inuit ancestry. His primary university research and teaching areas are Indigenous education, school leadership and school effectiveness. He has also conducted significant research into success in Indigenous schools and has worked on various international projects. He is a member of the University of the Arctic Indigenous Issues Committee (2013-Present) and Canadian lead for the SDWG project. Kirk is also the current (2017-2019) President of the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE).

Formerly working at the School of Education in University of Aberdeen, Mhairi Beaton now works at the Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University, in the North of England where she is a Senior Lecturer in Special Educational Needs. Mhairi leads Master's level courses for practitioners who wish to engage in part-time study whilst working in a range of educational contexts; some based in the UK, others in international settings. Along with her former colleague Jenny Spratt, Mhairi has been involved in researching the theoretical concept of Inclusive Pedagogy. Mhairi comes from a Gaelic speaking family in the North-West Highlands of Scotland. She has a specific interest in exploring how the voices of those who are or have been silenced or marginalised within society can be authentically heard and acted on. This is pertinent for communities whose indigenous languages and cultures have only been recognised within government legislation in recent years.

Rauna Rahko-Ravantti works at the University of Lapland at the faculty of education as a lecturer for Sámi language and culture. Rauna is indigenous Sámi herself and her interest are in developing Sámi education and broadly culturally responsive education. Rauna is originally trained as a Sámi language classroom teacher, but she has continued her studies at the University of Lapland where she did her doctoral thesis about Sámi education. Rauna's research interests are in indigenous education and indigenous methodology. In this network Rauna wishes to increase understanding and awareness about the diversity of the education in North.

As these short biographies demonstrate, even within a fraction of the group membership there is a wide diversity of experience and knowledge that is relevant to the work of the

Network. The network as a whole is a diverse community with a wealth of knowledge and experience of teacher education in the North

### **Why we formed a Teacher Education Network**

Teachers across the globe are expected to work with increasingly diverse communities of children and young people. Teachers need to be prepared and supported to work inclusively with all their pupils. Discussions within the thematic Network have highlighted that there are common challenges for teacher education and the teaching workforce across the circumpolar North. The teacher education network was formed to address these challenges across national boundaries by working together and learning collectively how to support the professional learning of student teachers and more experienced teachers in these settings.

Typically, in Northern countries there are significant contrasts between large cities and small scattered rural communities. Teacher educators must prepare their student teachers for the geographical isolation of many of the schools they will work in and the benefits and challenges this can pose. Socio-economic inequalities exist across the North but can often, particularly in small rural communities, be hidden or not readily apparent initially to new teachers. Teachers must be prepared with the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes to serve these Northern communities. Across the north there are a wealth of indigenous communities each with their own strong cultural tradition and with a wealth of languages. Teachers must value this diversity and associated strong cultural traditions in ways which simultaneously prepare the pupils for the wider world. In addition to preparing and supporting individual teachers, the Thematic Network aims to support schools in the North.

Many of the schools in Northern areas have difficulty recruiting and retaining educators from the south of the nations. The schools face the problem of a high teacher turnover and must find ways to bridge the gaps between the ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences between teachers and their students.

### **Values, themes and goals of the Network**

The value statement of the network is framed as:

*Seeing education with northern eyes: Co-creating culturally responsive arctic pedagogies and transformative teacher education to enable agency and sustainability for the Circumpolar North.*

The need for a pedagogy of the North and teacher development that focuses on this is apparent to members of the Thematic Network. In support of this, our overall goal is to “enhance teacher education for equity and social justice in the Arctic region” (University of the Arctic, 2018). The three key themes around which the network organises its activities are: Education for inclusion and social justice; Learning for long distances in school education and teacher education and; Indigenous education and cultural sensitivity.

As actionable items and shorter-term goals we aim to: advance shared and relevant research, establish 'steady' cooperation between teacher educators and member universities, and encourage faculty and staff exchanges. Our goal of advancing research occurs in two key forms, research to find what's 'out there' and dissemination of what we have learned. Our goal of steady cooperation understands that, cooperation is embedded in our research and dissemination, as well as outreach to other organizations. Steady cooperation is effective or reliable sharing of ideas through dynamic organizations and many communication tools. All of this will support one of our long-term goals to "develop a virtual research and resource centre." As such the Network is a highly effective medium for this.

### **Activities of the network**

Since the formation of the Network, we have met regularly, to share our perspectives and develop our work. We hold an annual symposium where we discuss our national contexts for teacher education, identify shared interests in teaching and research. This is currently held at the University of Lapland. Much of our planning takes place at the annual symposium.

Additionally, the network has held 2 or 3 online research seminars per year. Online seminars teacher education in the North related to social justice and diversity between participating teacher education institutions. Themes of the seminars have covered, for example, topics related to indigenous knowledge and methodologies and diversity, and have been attended by staff and research students across the North.

The Thematic Network's first shared online teaching involving the Universities of Helsinki/Open University and the University of Aberdeen was carried out on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2017. The Finnish participants were student teachers, whereas the Scottish participants were experienced teachers undertaking a Master's level course in inclusion. The seminar asked participants to discuss the topic: What is diversity in learning? The seminar's purpose was to stimulate thinking about diversity and how to deal with it in research, teaching and learning. The students appreciated the opportunity to hear opinions from teachers who were committed to their work on inclusion. Some of the international differences were interesting as well as the commonalities; the Finnish students seemed surprised by the Scottish policy focus on poverty, whereas in Scotland, poverty is the main topic of conversation. After the session, the students encouraged the Thematic Network to develop more joint sessions.

The Thematic Network hopes to incorporate online seminars into more permanent courses, which would have capacity for more students, further stimulating the discussions and hopefully overcoming some of the language barriers as well as making scheduling more manageable. More recently the Network has been disseminating in other forums, including The University of the Arctic Conference in Aberdeen, Scotland, (2017) and the Finnish Education Research Association (2017). Plans exist for panel presentations at the Canadian

Society for Studies in Education Congress (2018) at the invitation of the Association of the Canadian Deans of Education. Another example is the regional Arctic Forum (Finland, Norway, and Russia to date) to be held in May, 2018. Other countries and regions are pushing the Network's message in a way that will surely impact teacher education. We are co-authoring a Yearbook for the University of the Arctic, to be published in 2019. Complementing this, thanks to our colleagues in Scotland, is this special edition journal issue.

As we get to know each other's strengths we are coming to the point of encouraging faculty and student exchanges. For example: looking at a Pan-Arctic doctoral group focused on Indigenous and Arctic Pedagogy. Truly an exciting way to help change the world.

As described above, dissemination within our network arises from both experience and research. We also push to support research and teacher development. The recent Finnish Chair of the Arctic Council (2017-2019) provided a unique opportunity to link the Network's efforts to the work of the Arctic Council. Arctic Council representatives met with us at a Network symposium in Helsinki. And they listened. The Finnish chair took seriously our argument that the development in the North, for teacher education, and indeed the Finnish Chair thrust on education, must be about empowerment and emancipation. Furthermore, we became engaged in the Arctic Council's Sustainability Development Working Group (SDWG) actively planning for research and cooperation across the North.

As organizations go, the Network is young but we feel initial success in serving its aims and goals are reflected in the impact of the examples given above.

## References

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