



# Adjusting to a New Reality:

# Teaching in Canada's North

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Little did I realize that my response to a Spring 1998 newspaper ad, recruiting teachers for Northern Canada, would result in one of the most interesting experiences of a teaching career that spans some forty years. After taking early retirement and lolling in that comfortable state for a number of months, I was ready for a bit of adventure; but I did not imagine the children of the North would exert such an influence and hold on me. In fact, those children have changed my life. Teaching in the North must be experienced to be understood and appreciated, but I will try to share with you the culmination of three years of working in Tusarvik School, Repulse Bay, Nunavut. Perhaps the telling will inspire others to consider teaching in the north; there, as everywhere, there is a great need for dedicated teachers.

Soon after I found myself with a Grade Five class, I realized that many of the expectations, approaches, and ideas we take

for granted in the south (anything south of the 60th parallel is referred to as the south) did not apply in the north. For example, much to my surprise, school bags were conspicuous in their absence – as was an inclination to do homework of any kind. Although some students had impeccable attendance, others missed considerable amounts of time, and a few rarely came to school at all. It was shocking to observe the law regarding compulsory school attendance, clearly stated in the Education Act, so blatantly ignored without any apparent consequences. But even more distressing was the potential opportunity lost by the children who missed so much school.

As my first few days stretched into weeks and months, I began to change, readjust and redirect my southern focus. My goals became simpler, but I strongly felt them to be urgent and important. Foremost among them: students had to be in school for learning to occur. To reinforce regular attendance,

each month I invited all my own students who had perfect attendance for that month to come to my house for a “muffin-making Saturday.” Students loved to “visit”; therefore, this made-from-scratch muffin lunch, complete with fruit, drinks, and dessert, proved very popular.

School attendance was a major concern for all teachers, but inviting all perfect attenders from the rest of the school was impractical (although a few did manage to get included!). So I developed another incentive that I hoped would help motivate the general student body. At the end of each month, my co-workers gave

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me a list of their “perfect attenders” and, with the help of a few of my students who had earned the privilege, we took individual class pictures of these achievers, laminated the pictures, and displayed them in the foyer for all to see. Since our school was a focal point of community activity, many residents passed through the foyer. The display was wonderful publicity for the students who had achieved this honour – and indirectly, for their parents as well. Getting film developed in an isolated community is very expensive; thus the first picture display was something of a novelty. And, no sooner was it posted in the foyer than many of the photos disappeared!

I felt that the theft problem had to be confronted quickly and resolved. I ranted (as a teacher can do) over the PA, had heart-to-hearts with my students and others, and raised general alarm bells wherever I imagined they might have an effect. To the students’ credit, all the pictures were eventually returned – albeit a few the worse for wear – and the problem did not reoccur. I was able to continue the display on a monthly basis, as a year-long testimonial to the perfect attenders. And I was learning my own lessons: confront things head on and immediately, be reasonable, but firm and resolute, and let it be known that unacceptable behaviour is unacceptable behaviour – at the Equator, the Arctic Circle, or anywhere!

Attendance was priority one; completing assigned work was a close second. Since many students were not used to having – or at least completing – homework, I made sure that relevant homework was assigned every weekday night. If a student arrived without it, a note was sent home at noon, to be returned after lunch, signed by the parent. This note simply stated that the student had not completed homework for the previous night and would be expected to

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complete it before returning home that day. Depending on weather and distance, I would send the student home if s/he “forgot” to return the note. Only once did I experience repercussions for this. After giving a student the opportunity to return the note for a couple of days, I sent him home. There, I presume, he had awakened his sleeping mother, who apparently did not appreciate the intrusion and called the school, irate that the boy had been sent home a (relatively) long distance in (relatively) cold weather. Once I calmly explained the entire circumstances and the procedure I had followed, the mother came to understand my expectations. In fact, that mother became one of my many favorite moms, although her son’s attendance and homework was not one of my greatest success stories!

If students are unaccustomed to doing homework, and generally do not think of school once they have gone home, the first order of business is to change that mind set. The first time I got a phone call with the question, “Carmie, what’s our homework?” I resisted the urge to say “It’s eleven o’clock. I’m in bed, and so should you be!” Rather, I calmly explained the assignment, hung up the phone, and shouted, “Halleluiah!”

Within the classroom, I tried to provide a program that was both challenging and realistic, one that provided structure, expectations, and direction. As time passed, my belief that my job was to teach kids, not necessarily a syllabus, was reconfirmed. This may be one of the biggest mistakes that teachers coming from the South commit; they look at the curriculum of a particular grade and immediately start to deliver it, by the book, without enough consideration to the fact that the students may not be academically or culturally ready.

Most of my students were not highly proficient in English and needed both increased exposure and intense practice.



# Teaching in Canada's North



So every morning, for the three years I was at Tusarvik School, they arrived in the classroom to find a letter to them, written on the board. As time passed, I was encouraged with how the kids came to expect this, and how they immediately tried to read it the moment they arrived in class. These letters became the medium and springboard for much communication, the introduction of new vocabulary and concepts, and a kickoff for discussion of numerous issues.

Another in-class tool I found invaluable for language development was journal writing, where I accepted the most basic English attempts and responded to each personally with questions, observations, and anecdotes of my own.

These two approaches, although very time consuming, were highly instrumental

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## EN BREF

L'enseignement dans le Nord canadien est une occasion d'apprendre autant que d'enseigner. Au cours des trois années qu'elle a passées à Repulse Bay dans le Nunavut, Carmie Maclean a graduellement adapté ses méthodes conçues pour les écoles du Sud afin de mieux répondre aux besoins éducatifs et au contexte dans lequel vivent ses élèves. L'importance qu'elle accorde à l'assiduité scolaire et aux aptitudes langagières lui a permis de remporter le Prix du premier-ministre pour l'excellence dans l'enseignement en 2001.

in helping my students learn to read by presenting them with print that was personal, pertinent, and unique to them. The teacher-generated texts were simple enough for most to read, yet challenging enough to allow the more competent ones to expand their limits. It was a thrill for me when I would note a student using the vocabulary words we had been learning or attempting new grammatical structures for their own text.

Since my students displayed strong observation skills, I made copious use of charts, which visually displayed their homework record, their spelling scores, attendance and other performances such as completion of particular units in English or Math. These charts became a source of conversation, a quiet challenge to the poorer performers, and a concrete testimonial to personal improvement and change.

Constantly on my mind was the desire to make the students – and indeed, the community – see that school was part of the skein of life, not a little diversion that takes place between nine and four. Common attitudes toward education, the pervasive mistrust of the school system in general, the lack of recognition of the benefits of a good education, the acceptance of teenage pregnancy as a way of life, related stresses, the high dropout rate and the general apathy toward high academic achievement were all factors affecting the quality of school life. Some of the brightest young people I have ever worked with I found within the walls of Tusarvik School. But, when all is said and done, northern



students, like students everywhere, have to take ownership for their own learning; they have to see some value in the experience; they have to want both to come to school and to excel when they are there. Like students everywhere, many of my northern students appeared to object to structure, discipline, routine, and reasonable, high, expectations, but – also like students everywhere – they actually thrived on the security, success, and sense of caring that such a regime offers.

During my final year in Repulse Bay I was surprised and honoured to receive the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence. I do not consider my work at Tusarvik School extraordinary; it was consistent teaching on a daily basis, doing the things that caring teachers do wherever they find themselves: They meet their students where they are and inspire them onward. Their kids know – school is important! 🍎

**Carmie Maclean** retired from teaching with the Halifax County-Bedford District School Board, Nova Scotia, in 1995. She taught three years at Tuarvik School in Repulse Bay, Nunavut, and is once again retired in Nova Scotia, where she is living in Cape Breton — waiting for her next adventure! Carmie was presented with the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence in May, 2001. [carmiemaclan@yahoo.com](mailto:carmiemaclan@yahoo.com)

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## Flight

*it is her hands  
that I remember first;*

*jaundiced folds of flesh  
wrapped like leather  
around bony fingers*

*the way she used  
to weave them  
among her strings, her wire*

*snip, bend, snip, bend  
the privileged dance  
she did to create  
her cages*

*each motion  
constant, habitual,  
the tedious forms  
rising out of nothing,  
out of coil, out of metal*

*her eyes  
careful globes  
inside her head,  
a wilted flower  
bent and heavy,  
hanging from a thirsty stem*

*night and day she wove  
her wings clipped,  
caught behind wire,  
waiting to fly*

By Emily Lapper, Glenlyon-Norfolk School  
Victoria, British Columbia

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