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## **Children on thin ice**

*- when care and culture help heal Greenland's neglected children*

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## Children on thin ice

- when care and culture help heal Greenland's neglected children



### Abstract

In Greenland like everywhere else, how can some neglected children discover the way to transform the extraordinary pain of their traumas into a strength which enables them to live more positive and fulfilling lives? This article argues that an inspiring Greenlandic culture, within a family-like environment providing essential loving caregivers, helps the healing of neglected children. These ideas are not only drawn from psychological theories but also on an ethno-historical and sociological approach. Above all, they are based on our many years of social work experience at Børnehjemmet in Uummannaq, the oldest børnehjem in Greenland.

Part One gives some general guidelines on how to understand the child neglect phenomenon as it applies to Greenland's specific historical and socio-cultural evolution from the Inuit traditional society to the modern one.

Part Two points out that psychologist researchers have used a new concept called "Resilience" – the strength needed to bounce back from adversity or to overcome the traumas – to improve the social work with children.

Part Three explores how Børnehjemmet Uummannaq, round-the-clock residential home [døgninstitution] which belongs to the Home Rule government of Greenland, tries to foster child resilience by offering a Greenlandic family-like home atmosphere.

Part Four shows how Børnehjemmet Uummannaq involves the Greenlandic culture in its educational or therapeutic activities. A pedagogy of success is used to help children with severe alteration of self-esteem.

In conclusion, the authors stressed the necessity to support educational therapies and not just to focus on treatment of psychological pathologies. In one hand, a narrow ethnical conception, which would result in culturally self-centred children, should be avoided. In the other hand, Greenlandic cultural specificities – thoughts, feelings and behaviours – should be taken into consideration to be respectful to people and more effective in the social work.

*"Thus the little boy was always tormented and mocked, and did not grow except about the nostrils. At length he ventured out among the mountains by himself, choosing solitary places, and meditating how to get strength."*

*"Kaassassuk", in Hinrich Rink,  
Tales and traditions of the Eskimo, 1875*

-In one of Hans Christian Andersen's famous fairy-tales, the Ugly Duckling ["Den Grimme Ælling"] was rejected by his own family before he finally saw his image mirrored in the water and realized he was in fact a beautiful swan. Andersen himself, as a child in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had an alcoholic and illiterate mother who was beaten and had been forced to prostitute herself by her own mother. After facing his parents' dementia and death, he also experienced the violence and misery of children who needed to work in factories in order to survive. However, he was fortunate to have around him the love of many women and the magic of his cultural environment in Odense – the old Danish and German story-telling traditions where toads can be changed into princes. "The little Hans Christian escaped from a hell and regained his taste for life. He often saw the swans, wrote fairy-tales, and had laws made that protected other ugly ducklings" (Cyrulnik 2003).

Like the Ugly Duckling, Greenland too has a similar tale where a poor little orphan boy, Kaassassuk, recovered from his childhood trauma. Ill-treated by the people in his settlement, he became a strong boy who could kill three big polar bears at the same time and have his revenge upon his tormentors. This well-known Greenlandic tale reminds us of what was the real painful fate endured by orphan children in traditional Inuit society. For instance, great explorers like Knud Rasmussen and Peter Freuchen told stories about those young orphans who were left alone with almost no food or warm place to sleep because nobody was able to take care of them. Many of these unfortunate boys succeeded in finding the strength within themselves to survive the worst conditions and many became great hunters. In his autobiography untitled *Min Eskimoiske Fortid* ("My Eskimo Past", 1972), Georg Quppersimaan gave an authentic testimony about how an apprenticeship to hunting and an initiation into shamanism – the East-Greenlandic culture in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – made him strong enough to overcome the physical and mental distress of having had a starving orphan childhood.

In both Danish fairy-tales and in Greenlandic traditional tales, as well as in reality, numerous examples can be found of neglected children learning to live healthy and happy after great traumatic experiences. How then can some children discover the way to transform their extraordinary pain into a strength which enables them to live more positive and fulfilling lives? This article explores how the Children's Home [Børnehjemmet] in Uummannaq – the oldest børnehjem in Greenland – tries to support this unpredictable transformation. We do not pretend to give any definitive explanation for post-traumatic recovery, nor do we offer any "old wives' tales" on how to give the children a good life. Child neglect<sup>1</sup> [omsorgssvig] is obviously a very complex issue which covers different family situations from temporary parental deficiency to severe sexual abuse, suicide and murder. Besides, while there are many theories based on scientific methodology, there is very little research that deals specifically with Greenland which has a unique history and lifestyle different to any European model or experience.

Our more "modest" goal here is rather first to give some general guidelines on

1 Different terms are used in the specific literature including "abuse", "ill-treatment", "maltreatment" and "mistreatment".

how to understand the child neglect phenomenon as it applies to Greenland's specific historical and socio-cultural evolution. Then, we would like to show how an inspiring Greenlandic culture within a family-like environment that provides essential loving caregivers helps the healing of neglected children. The ideas we present are not only drawn from psychological theories but also on an ethno-historical and sociological approach. Above all, they are based on our many years of social work experience at Børnehjemmet in Uummannaq.

## Child neglect in Greenland

The social status of children varies from one society to another and has changed throughout history. It is dependent on the evolution of family socio-economic conditions and cultural representations. In the past in Greenland as in all of the Arctic, many explorers, missionaries and ethnologists noticed the extreme affection shown by parents and family to their children. The Inuit relatives had a reputation of “never making use of whipping or harsh words to correct” (Egede 1741<sup>2</sup>) their little “kings” (Maurie 1955) who enjoyed “extreme indulgence” and “a thousand playful endearments” (Briggs 1970). If infanticide of babies or invalids and neglect of young orphans existed, it was only occasionally due to the often inevitable shortage of food and famine. It was tough survival conditions where collective solidarity was not able to sustain the unfortunate weakest members.

In more recent times however, in spite of the introduction of modern amenities and comfort, child neglect did not disappear or decrease. While fortunately infanticide vanished, absence of parental care has affected children of all ages and has become a permanent social problem. The main cause of this apparent paradox can be found in the fast move from a traditional society which consisted of small self-sustainable settlements to one based on modern European-styled town life which began at the time of Danish colonization and continues today. During the past 50 years, the rapid economic, social and cultural changes have diminished the nature-linked lifestyle, have made the old working skills redundant, and the traditional values outdated. These major changes have influenced everybody's lives in one way or another. For many Greenlanders, this has resulted in a feeling of inadequacy, a loss of identity and self-esteem, whose first symptoms can be seen in the high rates of domestic alcohol abuse and suicide. In his *Short History of Greenland* (2003), Jørgen Fleischer summarized the consequences of what he called a “cultural clash”. “The encounter with another culture seemed to be a true shock for Greenlanders” [...] who “experienced a spiritual decline – indeed, human degradation. [...] The rebirth of the people of Greenland was painful and reverberations from this hectic period are still felt”.

It is very important to understand that, even if the past is gone, “reverberations are still felt” today because the socio-economic transition and the cultural recovery

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2 This quotation of Hans Egede's book, *Det gamle Grønlands perustration* (1741), is taken from Fred Bruemmer (1979).

process is still ongoing. The increase of social differences, in a society where people were used to having little, does not foster or facilitate this long recovery.

Deeply confused and anxious, many alcohol-abusing parents have not been able to take good care of, educate and socialize their own children. This psycho-sociological failure of the family exhibits itself in many different ways and degrees of severity depending on the cases, from temporary abdication of parental responsibilities to extreme aggressive behaviours including pregnancy drinking (causing foetal alcohol syndrome), psychological depreciation, physical violence, sexual abuse (incest, paedophilia), suicide and murder.

When young victims of family violence become biological parents in their turn, they have not inherited the culture to be parents. They are unaware that “it’s not enough to give birth to a child, they also have to bring [him/her] into the world” [“det er ikke nok at føde et barn”, man skal også sætte det i verden”] (Cyrulnik 2001). Lacking the personal experience of having been loved or even appreciated, they become deeply handicapped – they have not learnt to give love back. Moreover, they carry the major scars from their childhood trauma in their adult unconscious memory. Because these “ghosts of the past keep on whispering” to them (Cyrulnik 2003), they are driven to reproduce the same neglect or sexual abuse that they had received as children on their own offspring. When the traditional solidarity of the extended family fails to provide a reliable caregiver, the community solidarity assumed by the social welfare must fill this gap by placing the wounded children in residential homes [døgninstitutioner] or foster families.

Today, this child neglect problem is so serious that it is acknowledged by ruling political leaders who have decided to make child protection and education the top priority of the new government. The last data available shows that in 2004, 282 children and teenagers under 18 years old were placed in residential homes [døgninstitutioner], mostly for various forms of neglect (MIPI 2005). This number, which represents a proportion of 17 children for every 1.000, has almost doubled in the last 10 years. The increase of vulnerable children in the statistics might first be explained by progress in predictability and recognition. Bigger professional knowledge about neglect with a better efficiency of case description to social services is fortunately breaking the social silence in which neglected children lived their long nightmare before. But although sometimes fully crowded children homes offered room for more residents and new homes opened, many other kids at risk are still out of reach of professional help and it is impossible to ignore the growing negative social impact of the problem<sup>3</sup>.

In the past, most of Greenlandic dysfunctional families usually managed to take relatively good care of their babies – somebody from the extended family like a grand-mother or a grand-father, an uncle or an aunt took over for deficient parents. Neglect started when children grew older or became teenagers. Having experienced a

3 Child neglect is a recurrent subject in the national newspapers (e.g., *Atuagagdliutit/Grønlandsposten* or *Sermitsiak*).

nurturing childhood, these kids had developed a sense of attachment. They were able to recover with a domestic, friendly and/or professional help. However, for several years now, professionals have encountered an “increasing number of children with early severe emotional damage” who “lack the abilities necessary to form attachment, confidence and other deeper emotions towards other people” (Alne and Gregersen 2003).

The most credible hypothesis which can explain this recent phenomenon lies in the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s in Greenlandic society. Extended families were broken up by increased alcohol consumption or were separated by the fast growing urban concentration and isolation from the settlement. Torben Alne and Conni Gregersen, two of the most experienced childcare professionals in Greenland<sup>4</sup>, observed that: “The young people and young adults from that time are now grand-parents. We therefore assume that some of the grand-parents nowadays are not available for their grand-children because they are not living in the vicinity of their children and grand-children and other because they have integrated the indifference that often follows severe alcoholic abuse in their lifestyle”. The infants who did not develop the necessary capability of attachment before the age of 2, with a minimum of feeling of security and trust to one adult, will have serious emotional, social and cognitive problems (Berger 2005). The result is that their pathology is not easy to observe or to prevent, and they often come to institutions when the damage done is deep and therapy is difficult.

How can we try to improve the future development of these handicapped children? Is neglect a psycho-social heritage which is inexorably passed on through generations? Research and experience respond positively, even keeping in mind that our social work is difficult and success unfortunately does not come automatically with all children.

### **Child neglect and resilience: The strength to overcome**

These children have one main quality: their youth and with this youth a constantly evolving internal strength which allows them to grow and become new persons. Against all odds, the vicious reproductive cycle of child neglect can be broken when victims find somebody who give them lasting love and competent help. This fortunately happened to the young P. when he met a warm woman who was an educator for a long time at Børnehjemmet Uummanaq. She felt affection for him even though she tried hard to prevent him from stealing by always keeping all her keys deep in her pockets. Many years later, an adult P. was proud to show her the key of the fish factory where he had become a leader...

“Resilience” (or “resiliency”) is the new concept that has been used first in the USA by psychologist researchers “to describe a set of qualities that foster a process of successful adaptation and transformation despite risk and adversity” (Benard 1995).

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<sup>4</sup> Torben Alne has been forstander of the Children’s Home “Meeqqat Illuat” in Nuuk for 30 years and Conni Gregersen is psychologist in the residential homes [døgninstitutioner] section of the Ministry of families.

Collecting personal stories of people recovering from traumas, they found out that protective factors, such as “strong relationship with a competent, caring, pro-social adult”, “feeling of self-worth”, “meaningfulness of life”, “talents valued by self and others” among others, can change the course of child development (Masten 1997). The results of this on-going research are used, for example, to improve both school success and to help social work with children at risk. Its main quality is to offer hope by insisting on a positive outlook and an optimistic attitude even when still remaining realistic, i.e., to consider all children as promises rather than as failures.

Claiming that the concept has been known for centuries by their people, American Indian educational leaders have stressed the importance of a holistic approach including mental, physical, spiritual and emotional wellness based on their traditional culture (Heavyrunner and Morris 1997). The power of this “cultural resilience”, as they call it, is used by many tribal leaders to promote success as well as to heal the people from the “reverberations” of their painful past and the youth from school failure, substance abuse, mental health problems or juvenile delinquency. They state the importance “for the children to have people in their lives that nurture their spirit, stand by them, encourage and support them”. “It is the family, community, school and tribe’s responsibility to nurture, protect, and guide them” (Heavyrunner 2002). In addition, many studies provided evidence that children having a “strong positive feeling of belonging to a native community” and “participating in cultural activities” feel better about themselves (Strand and Peacock 2002).

Psychological well-being is thus strongly connected to cultural well-being. How then to support and foster the use of care and culture as resilience factors for Greenland’s neglected children?

### **A greenlandic family-like home**

“Vi Grønlændere er et familiefolkefærd”, affirmed Asii Chemnitz Narup, the Minister of Health and Family. “Også set i dette lys er det et stort slag for børn, der må skilles fra familien i kortere eller længere tid. Udfordringen for det sociale arbejde består bl.a. i at finde nogle måder at løse problemerne på, som tager udgangspunkt i vore egne traditioner og værdier” (Chemnitz Narup 1999).

Up north on the West Coast of Greenland, on the small island of Uummannaq, Børnehjemmet has seriously taken this “challenge” [“udfordringen”]. This round-the-clock residential home [døgninstitution] belongs to the Home Rule government of Greenland and is housing around 25-30 children and teenagers. Its general philosophy is to foster child resilience by offering a family-like home atmosphere and educational [pædagogisk] or therapeutic activities which keep the Greenlandic culture at the centre. This is made possible because of a low turn-over rate of the staff who is 90 % native. The Greenlandic language is dominant in the daily life which makes kids feel more comfortable and more understandable by educators. All the resident children are educated as sisters and brothers, experiencing a normal child life full of games and affective relationships. Sometimes, they live with their educators in long-

term stays (vacation, study travels, camps [koloni], nature expeditions, etc.) or even when possible at their educators' own homes. As time goes by, these educators become a kind of extended family for the children, like in the past when relatives other than parents took over the role of the real caregivers.

Børnehjemmet Uummanaq also works with schools and the local community which have a constant duty to avoid social exclusion. Because these children have been depreciated in their own families, they cannot afford to be depreciated again or excluded from the society. These precious links with the community are absolutely necessary as well as they foster resilience by playing a great role in providing a good all-round education. Actually, all available resources including all motivated and competent individuals in the community should be involved in the task of educating or teaching these children. As an African proverb wisely states, "it takes a village to raise a child".

It is this "village", the community, or the institutional home which must replace deficient biological parents by providing loving adults who can give feelings of security, stability and confidence to the children – needs so vital for each child's intellectual and emotional development. The greatest respect for the deficient parents is not to help them by using their own children for therapeutic reasons. It should be needless to say that the kids must always be protected first. The true respect the community should have is to make sure all the children "feel good, especially to be able to be independent in their lives and to have a more stable and more blossomed relationship than their parents" (Berger 2005).

However, when possible and desired by both sides, Børnehjemmet Uummanaq tries to involve parents, according to their abilities, in their children's life. For example, a couple was invited to live for several periods of time in a detached house belonging to and close by Børnehjemmet. In this way, they could have their kids at home as much as they could assume them and rely on the educators if necessary. In addition, the parents were asked to teach their talents and skills to their children – in that case as skilled Greenlandic jewellery-makers and producers of beautiful ivory pendants. This approach fosters not only a "good feeling" about themselves but also helps them regain the esteem from their own children.

Børnehjemmet Uummanaq spends a lot of time to setting up what is called a "structured pedagogy". This consists for children experiencing their daily routine according to their needs such as eating enough (Greenlandic food naturally comes often in their diet) and at regular hours, wearing clean clothes, participating in the home chores, respecting each other, etc. This repetitive and stable frame is necessary in order to teach them respect for their basic needs, to make them feel secure and to give them opportunities to make convivial interactions. Supper time – especially when they have finished eating – is always a cool and relaxed moment when everybody can talk about what has happened during their day. Moreover, their home is always a nice and clean environment where Greenlandic handicrafts and art are everywhere. Local paintings, soap stones figures and porcelain dolls wearing the different Greenlandic traditional costumes decorate the rooms and corridors. If the

children understand that they come from a beautiful culture, there is a chance for them to understand that they, as persons, are beautiful too.

Nevertheless, to feel good about one's own culture does not mean to be confined to one's small village. It takes a world to raise a child today since modern education is required to live in our global economy. As many young Greenlanders then have to go studying abroad for several years, they feel the pain of affective separation and cultural privation in a foreign environment. For the teenagers of Børnehjemmet Uummannaq, it is a little easier since they already experienced living or visiting other countries while enjoying summer holidays. When they are studying in Denmark, Børnehjemmet still supports each of them by offering help and a place to stay in educators' private houses or in a foster family, even when they get accommodation in their new schools. They have educators visiting them in their new home once or different times a year and this is also a nice way to show love and care in the difficult time of study exile so far from their homeland, people, language, food and culture. All non-neglected young people might not get this easy help but they do not have any psychological fragility of having been neglected in their childhood. When Børnehjemmet's residents are walking alone, they can sometimes feel tired or suffer again – even been submerged by the pain – if they have to face what might be a small obstacle for other people. Psychological wounds are always the hardest to heal. No surprise then that these wounded youngsters need to be nursed more than normal.

In Uummannaq, the oldest teenagers and the young adults can get a private place to stay in one of the Børnehjemmet's small single houses where they experience a new relative autonomy not far from the "mother" home. For example, while F., 21, was a trainee [praktikant], he stayed in one of these single houses until his professional situation was definitely stabilized. Another resident, 25 year-old S., preferred not to leave Børnehjemmet, even he has a job since a long time. But with a psychological handicap that makes him forget to eat or to clean himself after some days, could he really live totally on his own?

Finally when the oldest "kids" leave for good, they can keep in touch with their educators as long as they wish, get a visit and help from them if possible. Most of them are flying with their own new wings but some might consider Børnehjemmet as the sweetest nest they have lived in. It is no surprise that the young adult T. from South Greenland said he lived there the "best years of [his] life" and would like to move back to Uummannaq. Among others with the same feelings, he might have to try it in order to grow up and understand he is not a child anymore. It is up to each of them to build a better life, no matter where they live. In the last years, several former residents went back to Børnehjemmet Uummannaq and worked there for a while. Their educators positively supported them. Like normal parents who do not stop feeling responsible when their kids are over 18 or when they have left home – they keep on caring all life long.

Because neglected children have had more negative experiences in their life than others, they feel bad about it and deeply depreciate themselves. To compensate both their handicap and the trauma of having been handicapped, they must then have

more positive experiences than a well-functioning family usually has. When playing with cards, most people need to feel a bit lucky sometimes by getting a good deal; otherwise, their interest rapidly decreases and they will probably give up the game. When they get very bad deals all the times, they have to get some master cards at once to get excitement again and keep on playing. When she arrived in Børnehjemmet Uummanaq, M. was sometimes an angry teenager with aggressive behaviour because she had felt so little affection around her in her family that she could not stand to be left alone. It was difficult to imagine that this North Greenlandic girl had never been out in nature for the first fourteen years of her life. With Børnehjemmet's educators and hunter employees, M. could not only go boating to the settlements in the Uummanaq bay but also travel to Denmark, England, Germany, Sweden and the Faroe Islands! The little girl who had never been out of town suddenly discovered the big world. It was an extraordinary way to open finally her mind as much as possible. She still remembers these extraordinary "first times" of her life as beautiful moments which helped her to feel better about herself. With her personal caring educator always available to talk to, she began to think quietly about herself and in a more constructive way. She finally left Børnehjemmet and became a social worker who wanted to help other people.

### **Involving the Greenlandic culture in education and therapy**

Børnehjemmet Uummanaq also uses a kind of pedagogy of success. It is essential to give a child a limited goal or a bearable challenge according to his/her abilities and personality – a goal that enables the child to start a success story and to understand that he/she is improving in life. For one child, it will be to go to school for some hours a week; for another one, it will be to have responsibility for his own dog team in a dogsled expedition for two months. Every educator knows that when someone succeeds in doing things he/she did not expect to achieve, he/she gains a lot of self-confidence. And this is especially true with these kids who suffer from very severe alteration of self-esteem because their parents depreciated them and because they failed at home, in school and everywhere else our competitive modern society credits only the best ones. Up here in North-West Greenland, when you drop out of school and when you are not a very good football or handball player, you have another way of being socially recognized – becoming a hunter/fisherman is highly valued and the first seal a teenager shoots is still celebrated.

That is why using local resources – the vast wilderness and the Inuit traditional culture – in our pedagogy was not difficult to imagine. In Uummanaq, many people are still deeply connected to nature through hunting and fishing activities. Dogsledging is still more common than snowmobiles, boat trips than car rides. So, asking professional hunters to take kids away on the ice for several months of travelling, hunting, fishing, living outdoors, is quite... natural! Far away from town's easy temptations, this "dogsled project", "school of nature" or "long-distance expedition" is an environmental therapy [miljøterapi] connected to the traditional Greenlandic way

of educating children: by osmosis with adults in the local environment. This educational style is well adapted to the typical ethnic behaviour of Greenlanders who, for example, give greater importance to self-observation than formal explanation. Because the local hunters are not professional teachers, silent watch of their gestures and “learning by doing yourself” are required from the children. No compulsory courses with stressful exams, no rush in learning and no selection only increasing the standing of the best ones: all the children freely progress at their own rhythm.

Much more than a real technical education, this socio-culturally accurate experience has many therapeutic benefits. The following few examples illustrate this point clearly. To experience the wonderful adventure of becoming a dogsled driver, one needs to have a special relationship to the dogs including being motivated to take care of them all year long. It is a common experience for many people to care about animals when they have lost confidence in human adults. In taking care of animals, they are able to begin expressing feelings of affection without fear of rejection or pain. Another example is the climate. When out in the cold by  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  or more, one has to find personal resources to cope with it. One has also to be very careful about clothing. Children learn to take care of their skin clothes (having the right size and the complete equipment, not losing anything, drying them in the evening, putting them back in the bag if weather is getting too warm, etc.). It is also a good way of teaching them to take good care of themselves.

Many travellers have written about the great lessons they have learned from travelling in the wilderness. Explorer and artist Eigil Knuth highly praised the sensation of freedom and mental liberation experienced on a long dogsled journey. In her way, experienced educator Rebi Jørgensen knows it too. She led Børnehjemmet's farthest expeditions on the sea-ice of North Greenland for many years – twice on the 1500 km-long distance from Uummannaq to the Thule area! She recognizes all the benefits teenagers could get from using their mental and physical strength: “Nature can give the kids peace and quietness. I think they must put their thoughts in order when they are on an expedition. Like the people in India who walk in the mountains to meditate. But for us, we go on ice. We can see the kids are feeling more confident because they are more and more open and are at last able to speak about what they have kept hidden. We can see a smile on their face and they start to express their emotions”.

Nevertheless like all kinds of education, lessons need to be repeated in order to be deeply understood. Seventeen year-old Nuuk boy J. learned how to lead his own sled dog team and found strong motivation next winter to cross the high mountains of the Nuussuaq peninsula – three weeks in the freezing cold, 500 km of deep snow, big rocks, long slopes to climb or to slide down, with more than 1000 meters difference in altitude. From his great adventure, he gained a lot of self-confidence being aware that he succeeded in overcoming huge difficulties by himself (or with little help from the hunters). Coming back to Nuuk and to his problems, J. unfortunately was still not strong enough to resist the temptations of alcohol.

It always takes a long time to (re)-develop a positive identity, especially when one has been down and all the more so when one has almost only been down. It is an even more complex process in an ex-colonized country where a lack of ethnical self-

esteem can sometimes still be felt. But this precious self-esteem – both individual and cultural – is one of the most important sources of strength we can give to a child to enable him/her to meet and overcome challenges and difficulties of life. When a local hunter starts a close relationship with a child, he plays a great role in the awareness of his/her own value. Like the 63 year-old Uunartoq – “hot/warm” – who brings his own competences as a great hunter, his frequent jovial mood, and his grandfather-like affection to Børnehjemmet’s dogsled expeditions and nature travels. Even an old hunter like him, although he clearly prefers to educate boys, he was able to touch the heart of a young teenager girl. Sitting together on his sled during a long expedition, helping him with the dogs or to set up the camp, listening to his funny stories before falling asleep in the tent, she proudly called him “Dad”.

The dogsled educational project in Børnehjemmet Uummannaq is a psychological therapy as well as a cultural reevaluation. Happiness of life, trust in adults, self-confidence and self-pride are its keywords. Maybe a new pride for the kids but it is in fact an old feeling which comes from their ancestral culture and the greatness of their forefathers – an inventive people who was able to live in harmony with one of the toughest environments in the world. This pride is somehow still living in some of the hunters of today. With them, the children can get back a part of their cultural identity – at least understand that they are coming from a beautiful and strong culture. As 17 year-old N. said: “I don’t really know how my forefathers were living but I feel good now understanding they were very brave to survive such conditions”. This feeling of belonging as a great source of resilience and well-being is unfortunately not promoted by modern society and progressively erased by cultural homogenization in our global world.

## Conclusion

As noted above, the problem of child neglect is a social fact in Greenland (like everywhere else) which is caused by specific psycho-social and cultural conditions. It is therefore necessary and urgent to act on a global level and promote effective social policies. Prevention is always a better choice than reparation of damages and losses. It is as necessary to support educational therapies, and not just to focus on treatment of psychological pathologies. In the social work in Greenland, we have to avoid a narrow ethnical conception which would deny the benefit of scientific knowledge and result in culturally self-centred children. But we also have to take Greenlandic cultural specificities – thoughts, feelings and behaviours – into consideration. Otherwise, it could lead us to an abstract universalism which is in fact an ethnocentric conception – dealing with Greenlandic children exactly like Danish ones. This way of healing would be disrespectful to people and really less effective.

This article has tried to promote the use of local environmental and cultural resources in the social work with neglected children in Greenland. This respectful approach fosters resilience by trying to provide a natural source of well-being and strength to bounce back from adversity. By receiving unconditional love too, it is

hoped that they are able to give this love back to their own children. These ideas and approaches, which may be suggestive rather than definitive, are a contribution to question the alleged fatality of neglect or abuse. They also are a wish to give inspiration and to encourage everybody to have hope. Alone in the mountains, the little orphan boy Kaassassuk stopped crying, started to meditate<sup>5</sup> on how to find some comfort and to take his mind off his grief and called for help. Like Kaassassuk or other ugly ducklings, the children from Børnehjemmet Uummannaq and from all Greenland can find ways to a healthier and happier life by getting stronger and regaining their self-esteem with their own culture. We, of course, know that they are skating on thin ice since their psychological health is fragile. Starting to be resilient is only a first step for them – they can later fall down again like the babies who start to walk alone. But now, at last, they can learn to be children again.

### **Ann Andreassen**

*Born in Faroe Islands in 1960. Forstander of Børnehjemmet Uummannaq for 20 years. Social pædagog, family therapist. Created original educational activities including dogsled expeditions, hunting and fishing schools, international summer holidays, music therapy and filmmaking.*

### **Jean-Michel Huctin**

*Born in France in 1968. Pre-doctoral graduate in social sciences, preparing a PhD on Greenlandic culture and youth people. Collaborates with Børnehjemmet Uummannaq in its educational activities for almost 10 years. Educated teacher, free-lance author and photographer, consultant for documentary filmmaking.*

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<sup>5</sup> "Meditate" is the verb used both in Hinrich Rink's and Knud Rasmussen's versions of the tale.

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