

Inuit Language, Culture, and Parental Engagement in Schooling in One Nunavut Community

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This article explores findings on Inuit parental engagement in schooling drawn from interviews with 74 Inuit adults and from four months of participant observation in one Nunavut community. It describes the many ways that Inuit parents support their children's learning—ways that are sometimes different from those of a stereotypically assertive middle-class Euro-Canadian parent. It argues that it is a mistake for teachers to expect Inuit parents to support schools as EuroCanadian parents might. Instead, to increase parental involvement, Nunavut schools should honor Inuit wishes by bringing Inuit knowledge strongly into schooling. The desire for more culture, more Inuktitut, and more Elders in schools was passionately expressed by participants who also wanted higher academic standards. Although participants expressed support for schooling due to its role as a gateway to paid employment, further support would result from making schooling in Nunavut supportive of Inuit language and culture.

Introduction

The government schools were basically “outpost” versions of southern schools. Their programs had nothing to do with our language, culture, or the adaptive challenges faced by our people.... Rather than making us stronger, they tended to undermine our confidence and identity. (Watt-Cloutier, 2000, p. 115)

Schooling in Nunavut is in crisis. Most of Nunavut's 9,000 students are Inuit, but fewer than 25% graduate from high school (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2008); of those who do, almost none go to university (Dorais & Sammons, 2002). Inuit students who enter school with confidence and optimism often end up losing faith in themselves (McElroy, 2008). Nunavut schools must be improved (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and the Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2007).

Inuit have lacked control over schooling for the entire history of schooling in the eastern Arctic (Berger, 2005; Rasmussen, 2009; Van Meenen, 1994). The school system began as, and remains, a system based primarily on the knowledge, pedagogy, and culture of Euro-Canadians, which hurts Inuit students and limits their academic achievement (Berger, Epp, & Moeller, 2006; Cummins, 1986). Reviews of research confirm that for schooling to work well for Indigenous and minority students, culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy are needed, and communities must feel ownership of schooling (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Osborne, 1996). Canadian studies have also called for curriculum that reflects Inuit iden-

tity and for Inuit control of schooling (Arctic Institute of North America, 1973; Aylward, 2004; Northwest Territories Special Committee on Education, 1982).

Also a substantial body of literature suggests the need for parental support of schooling if students are to achieve widespread success (Agbo, 2007; Aylward, 2006; Cummins, 1986; Deyhle, 1992; Harrison, 1993; Lipka, 1989; Mackay & Myles, 1995; Ogbu, 1992; Powers, 2006; Taylor, 2007; Tompkins, 1998). There are, however, barriers to Aboriginal parents becoming actively involved in their children's schooling. These include feeling intimidated and uncomfortable (Douglas, 1998) and having had poor and sometimes abusive experiences themselves in schools (Kavik, 2007). These barriers may be difficult to overcome, but as Tompkins wrote, "What happens in school can greatly influence certain parents to become more or less involved there" (p. 87). It is believed that parents will become more involved in schools when their involvement becomes more meaningful (Reyner, 1992), when schools approach parents in ways that respect the parents' culture (De Gaetano, 2007), and when school goals make more sense to parents (Watt-Cloutier, 2000).

What happens in Nunavut schools? For many years policy has called for the infusion of Inuit culture into Nunavut schools. The Government of Nunavut's (1999) first mission statement committed to school curriculum that emphasized cultural relevance, and its update (2004) committed to building the education system on Inuit ways and values. The Nunavut Department of Education's (2004) *Bilingual Education Strategy* called for a dramatic increase in Inuktitut in Nunavut schools, and its *Sivuniksamut Illinniarniq* consultations found that people "want students to graduate with a strong sense of who they are as Inuit" (Aylward, 2004, p. 12). Consultations for the *Nunavut Education Act* led the Minister of Education to write: "The creation of a new Education Act will mark a fundamental shift in the delivery of education in Nunavut. We are committed to creating an Education Act based on Inuit Societal Values" (Nunavut Department of Education, 2006, p. 1). The new *Education Act* calls for schooling to be available in Inuktitut to grade 12 by 2019 (Government of Nunavut, 2008).

Still, Nunavut schools remain based on an early-exit language model, Inuit culture remains marginal, Inuit have little control over schooling, and it seems that little has changed in the schools since the creation of Nunavut (Pizzo-Lyall, 2006; Rasmussen, 2009). Millions of dollars are needed to help transform schooling in Nunavut to a culturally responsive bilingual system (Berger, 2006). Policy and rhetoric in the absence of action will not satisfy parents or increase their support for the schools. Support will increase when schooling is responsive to community wishes (Lipka, 1989; Pashagumskum, 2005).

In this article, I provide evidence of substantial parental support for schooling in one community in Nunavut and discuss reasons for this support. I argue that if schools pay attention to Inuit wishes for schooling that honors Inuit culture, parental engagement with the schools will increase.

Methodology

I am a white male academic committed to being an ally in changing Nunavut schools to become "sites of hope" (Tompkins, 2002, p. 407). This work on parental engagement was part of my dissertation research (Berger, 2008), a descriptive case study where I explored Inuit visions for schooling in one Nunavut community.

I caution that white men have historically written accounts "constructed around their own cultural views" (Smith, 1999, p. 8). Although I have tried to bring Inuit ideas and voices to you, my analysis of parental involvement may differ from the conclusions an Inuit researcher would have drawn. This work is still the product of a non-Inuit researcher's experiences, thinking, and writing.

The research was conducted in an Inuit community of a little over 1,000 people in the Qikiqtani region of Nunavut, selected because I taught there in the 1990s. Before conducting the research, I traveled twice to the community to discuss the research, changing the aims and format substantially following District Education Authority input. This was a "researcher inspired project" with modifications following community input (Menzies, 2004). I returned to present preliminary findings, then to deliver a six-page summary of the preliminary analysis, and finally to deliver copies of the dissertation.

The research was conducted in 2006 through ethnographic interviews with 74 Inuit adults and participant observation during four months of field work. All who volunteered were interviewed, although I made special invitations to Elders and people with full-time wage employment to make the sample representative. Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 80, with a distribution roughly reflective of the age demographics of the community. Forty-three women and 31 men were interviewed. Eighteen had full-time wage employment, 15 part-time or itinerant, 37 were not involved in wage employment, and four were in high school. Interviews were semistructured and averaged about half an hour in length. They were coded, along with field notes, using the qualitative software *Atlas.ti*.

Some ideas from earlier interviews were discussed with later participants to check what I was hearing, a form of participant validation (Lather, 1986). Data source triangulation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2001) also increased my confidence in the findings, as I sometimes observed things I had heard about in an interview. For example, when a parent showed up at 11 p.m. to ask her son to come home from a spontaneous

street baseball game, it supported what she had said about parental involvement.

The community where this research took place shares many characteristics with Nunavut's 26 other communities, although Inuit culture and language use varies considerably across the territory. Recent consultative processes (Aylward, 2004; Nunavut Department of Education, 2006) and other literature that I cite give me confidence that the main findings would resonate across Nunavut, although some of the specifics would certainly vary. For example, in western Nunavut there has been much greater language loss than in eastern Nunavut communities, and this might result in differing wishes about language usage in the schools.

The findings of this study were limited by the interview questions, only one of which asked specifically about support for student learning. Not all participants found it an easy question. For example, one young woman seemed stumped, but later in the interview said suddenly that her young daughter was very smart and could sing many songs in English and Inuktitut. She, of course, had taught her daughter the songs, but it had not occurred to her to mention this when I asked about support for her child's learning. In another instance, a woman said that she just made sure her grandchildren were in school and tried "to keep in touch with how well they're doing in school—that's about it." Some time later I saw her grandchild working on a book of learning games that she had provided, and I watched her translate the English instructions into Inuktitut. Again it had not occurred to the participant to mention this support. I suspect that my question was inadequate and that asking several questions on the topic, or giving some examples to prompt participants, would have led to richer data.

Findings and Discussion

Findings are described below in three main sections. First, I present many ways that Inuit parents and community members support student learning, and I argue that the schools should not expect Inuit parental support to look like stereotypical, middle-class, Euro-Canadian parental support. Second, I look at the connection between schooling and wage employment as the major factor motivating community support for the schools. Third, I contend that changing schools in Nunavut to places that support Inuit culture and language would increase parental engagement with schooling, and I explore some avenues for pursuing this change.

Parental support for student learning and schooling

The overwhelming sense I gained from all participants was that people wanted their children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews to do well in school. Much of the support people described for student learning was practical or oral support, and many people said that they wanted their children to do better than they themselves had done in school. A woman

in her 30s said, "That's what I tell my kids to do—you can do better than me."

People reported going to parent-teacher interviews, encouraging children to stay in school, and giving advice about how to act in school such as: to pay attention; get along with classmates; work hard; not fool around; read; and be good to others. Many also said that they talked to their children regularly about school, like an Elder who said, "I know myself what my kids are doing when they're in the school.... I try to talk to my kids every day, just to find out how are things in school—at lunch time and after school." Some parents spoke of practical actions like helping a child "to be well-rested and fed so she can concentrate," and some students and recent graduates also noted that being wakened, fed, and encouraged were important.

Parents of preschoolers often had specific ideas about preparing their children for school, like this man in his 20s: "Before she goes to school I wanna do some planning first, like talk to her ... tell her that her grandma's going to be teaching, my sister's teaching, my cousin's teaching." Many people gave accounts of teaching children a variety of things such as reading English before a child started school, teaching letters and numbers to a preschooler, teaching writing in Inuktitut and English, and helping to read Inuktitut. One parent said that his 7-year-old daughter's English skills were excellent and that they spoke and read Inuktitut with her: "She likes to come to us and read with us, so we read with her." Some noted that they started teaching their children when they were very young.

Participants also reported helping their children with homework, although homework was reportedly not given frequently. One person said that he and his partner helped if they could when asked, but that their children rarely asked. I asked a woman in her 40s about her niece, whom I saw doing math worksheets: "When she needs help she asks one of us, and if we think that she's gonna do well we just leave her until she asks for more."

There were many other signs of support for student learning, like an Elder who spoke of being proud of her daughter, the first in the family to reach grade 12, and a woman who told her 7-year-old that she would always go to parent-teacher interviews even though her daughter said it was not necessary because she was doing fine. A parent at a school improvement meeting asked for more homework to be given and for organization to be taught and modeled: "Organization is the most important thing in school.... all I wanted to say is we need more organization in our children's work.... I want to see what my children do in school." One parent reported home-schooling her daughter for one period a day because she was unhappy with the content and tone of a class at the high

school and believed it was important for her daughter to learn. Another parent told me that her daughter in grade 3 was

Really into writing and spelling. So I ordered her two textbooks for math and English. She loves those. Those I wish kids would be able to take home, what I have at home. Two thick textbooks like that—all math one, and the other is all English.

Still another bought her daughter a toy laptop that sounded out letters to help prepare her daughter for the introduction of English in school, and one participant asked me if I could talk to a former student of mine who had recently left school to try to persuade her to go back.

Two people described incentives that they offered their children to stay in school and graduate, including skates, a snowmobile, and a bank account. Some participants showed their engagement in their children's schooling by describing what their children were learning, difficulties they were having in school, or the grades they had received in the past few years. One said,

There are times you feel you have to speak to the teachers, and you can't just ignore it. You know, you can't just let it be—slide by you. Whatever happened up there, you know, you hear about it, you go there.

Many participants also reported receiving support and encouragement from their parents when they were in school. A man in his 20s described how vital support had been when he was studying in southern Canada.

The most important part of learning was my parents. They were supportive of me. They were always there when I was in need. And being able to eat. Not being hungry. Keeping in touch with my peers. It was hard though, to be on my own training, and away from home.... It's important to have support from your community, your peers, your parents especially.

Another way that parental support for student learning can be inferred was the desire expressed by 23 people, almost a third of the interview participants, for the schools to educate to higher academic standards. Participants expressed concern with the academic level of schooling and noted that it did not prepare students who graduated for further studies. Some recent graduates also noted that school would have been better if it had been more challenging, confirming Watt-Cloutier's (2000) concern. The call for higher academic standards resonates with Inuit across Nunavut (Aylward, 2004; Nunavut Department of Education, 2006).

Together with support for students and student learning, participants expressed support for the schools even though I did not ask about it explicitly. Statements of support for the schools ranged from direct, such as "I support schools, the way they handle themselves up there, the higher school.... I think they have good, strict rules that are understandable for the students," to more oblique: "It's good to see there's more graduates every year than there was back then." Participants appreciated that the

schools were improving and that “these teachers nowadays try to help a lot, which is good.” One man in his 30s said,

The best thing about the schools here today is that they have more learning stuff than we did before, like they have computers.... They are also learning Inuktitut, their own language, which we didn't have when we were here.

All participants said that schooling was important despite many describing traumatic experiences that they themselves had endured in school.

Some parents and community members desired changes that simultaneously showed support for schooling and suggested avenues to improve schooling and school-parent partnerships. Some felt alienated from what went on in the schools, and at a school improvement meeting, one group's draft mission statement said, “People would be more involved if they are informed about the education system.” One parent said that it was hard to help her child prepare for university without knowing how to do so and wished that there had been more information from the school. A number of people asked for more communication from teachers; one said that it was not easy to hear that your child was late, but “those are the things you want to hear too, because you want to fix it.” She recommended more events for teachers to get to know parents.

Participants also recommended better curriculum and resources so that students could be properly supported and an orientation for southern teachers. A man in his 50s said,

What they should do when they hire teachers is have an orientation period before they start teaching and tell them what to expect and what to do if they get into a situation that they can't handle. Because if you don't understand the culture you're going to get angry, you know, because you don't understand them and they don't understand you.

Calls for More Parental Support

Although much support was expressed for schooling, and many practices described that supported student learning, some people did say that they had little contact with the schools, and some participants expressed the desire for more parents to be more involved in their children's schooling. For example, “Parents need to teach their kids too, not just the teachers.... Parents need to be there too—I need to be there too.” Several Inuit teachers and student support workers who took part in the study wished for more parental support for student learning, and several mentioned low turnouts at parent-teacher interviews as problematic. One said, “It doesn't take all night, but I see that a lot; only a few parents do come. To me, it seems like they don't care about their students. But I bet they do too, in their certain ways.”

This participant seemed caught between the school discourse of parental deficit and her own sense of things. I have also heard non-Inuit teachers complain about poor turnout at parent-teacher interviews and assert that this demonstrated a lack of caring by parents, a dangerous assumption and something reported by Fuzessy (2003) among former teachers from

Nunavik (northern Quebec). Taylor (2007) noted that Inuit educators across Canada expressed the need for more parental support, but pointed out some of the many reasons Inuit parents might feel uncomfortable interacting with schools, including an understandable lack of trust and feelings of inadequacy related to their own experiences in school.

Caution About Uncritically Seeking More Parental Support

Before tackling how the schools might change to encourage an increase in parental support, I argue that it is important not to expect Inuit parents to support students and the schools in what might be called stereotypical middle-class Euro-Canadian ways. In the section above, I quote an Inuit parent who said that he would prepare his daughter for school by stressing family connections in the school, and noted others saying that they would help with homework only when asked by their children. These are varying ways of supporting students, valuing family relationships and student autonomy respectively, two deeply held Inuit values (Briggs, 1970). These Inuit orientations should be honored, and any attempt to change Inuit parental behavior should be considered carefully. The issue of bedtimes illustrates this more fully.

One way some parents said that they supported their children was by enforcing bedtimes, although several noted that other parents did not do so but should. Conversations with non-Inuit teachers often gravitated toward poor attendance and punctuality, and blame was sometimes leveled at Inuit parents for not ensuring that children came to school on time. Attending school regularly and being on time probably helps most students to be successful in school, and Taylor (2007) cites this as essential. I remember one of my students arriving very tired when I was teaching grade 7 in the community. It turned out that she had come straight to school after being up all night, and she was certainly not ready to learn. During field work too, in spring 2006 when darkness never really fell, I observed midnight baseball and soccer games involving young children in the middle of the week. Still, I caution against pursuing the goal of early bedtimes uncritically. It risks keeping the Euro-Canadian schools in the colonizing role of pushing for assimilation. This I saw during field work as non-Inuit teachers argued that community thoughts about lateness were not important, that Inuit just needed to get used to school structure.

Brody (2000) described a conflict between Inuit parents and non-Inuit teachers in Pond Inlet in the 1970s; he explained that for Inuit, the autonomy of the child was paramount. Asking Inuit parents to enforce bedtimes might be deeply uncomfortable for some, and teachers' need to have rested students may collide strongly with the Inuit valuing of autonomy (Briggs, 1970; Douglas, 1998). Some participants' words illustrated this tension. One man in his 40s said, "Especially the kids that are a little bit older, they don't want to be kinda listening to us telling them to go to sleep.... They're trying to come up with any excuse to stay out another

hour." An Elder said that she tried to have the kids go to bed, but that it was not always possible: "When I can't reach them, they're on their own." This must be understood in the context of a small community where people know each other and where kids might play from one end of town to another without telling anyone where they are going, much as they did in the past (Brody, 1991). Other examples arose of Inuit valuing the autonomy of their children. One was when I asked a woman in her 30s if she was confident that her daughters would do well in school and she said, "I'm confident. It's them having to want to. I hope they feel that they have to go to school every day." Another parent indicated it was the parents' responsibility that children were in school and said, "As well as the child has to want to do it. Or it'll be disrupting other kids in the school."

These parents, who clearly had high hopes for their children's success in school, were also aware that they did not and could not control their children. This resonates with Brody's (2000) words, that an Inuit child:

is expected to make her own judgements, take her own initiatives, be clear about her own needs and preferences.... The Inuit way is without authoritarianism; parents are inclined to trust children to know what they need. Individuals have to be left to make decisions for themselves.... This belief is fundamental to the Inuit way of being in the world. (pp. 14, 31)

Asking parents to intervene, although understandable from a school perspective, can put some Inuit parents in a precarious position (Douglas, 1998). This does not mean that teachers should lower expectations and give up on their goal of having punctual and consistent attendance. A greater understanding of Inuit culture, though, could lessen the risk that non-Inuit teachers mistakenly believe that Inuit parents fail in their parenting (Brody, 2000; Vallee, 1972). This in turn would open the doors to greater cooperation with parents, the possibility of finding solutions together, and the ability to look inward at what the schools can do to increase students' motivation to attend school consistently and well rested.

Sadly, non-Inuit teachers new to Nunavut still receive no mandatory orientation to Inuit culture or to teaching Inuit students, and they may not be well positioned to teach in cross-cultural settings (Berger, *in press*; Berger & Epp, 2007). Work is needed with non-Inuit teachers to help them realize that what is considered good parenting varies across cultures. Perhaps most important is for Euro-Canadian teachers to become aware of their Eurocentrism and tendency to judge others' actions from their own cultural frame (Delpit, 1995; Lee, 1985). Learning about our own culture so that we see it as one of many rather than as natural and inevitable would help Euro-Canadians interact respectfully with others (Lee, Menkart & Okazawa-Rey, 2006; Shore, 2003).

I saw and heard of many things parents did to support their children's learning including those familiar to Euro-Canadian teachers such as helping with homework; reading to children; teaching songs, words, and the

alphabet; and enforcing bedtimes. However, the support was probably not the same as the “pressure” to succeed that Ogbu (1992) wrote about that comes from some Euro-American parents. This is something that I think non-Inuit teachers should be very careful about trying to change. Although the desire for children to do well in school is widespread, it is dangerous to expect Inuit to pressure their children as do some non-Inuit parents. The price is high if Inuit parents need to act white for their children to succeed in school. In this matter, non-Inuit teachers need to recognize their limitations and seek guidance from Inuit (Mueller, 2006). Like some participants in this study, Inuit parents may want assistance in understanding how specifically they can support student learning, but this should not be assumed. Schooling has already disrupted parental roles and parent-child relations, and some Inuit parents have changed basic patterns of communicating with their children to prepare them for success in school, and the schools have done little to adapt to Inuit culture (Crago, 1992).

It has been noted that it would be valuable to reassure parents that activities that enhance identity are entirely appropriate ways to support learning and that urgency in teaching young Inuit ABCs might be misplaced. This matches evidence that students with a strong sense of their culture do better in school (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Chandler, 2007; Deyhle, 1995) and evidence that strong grounding in a first language makes learning a second easier (Cummins, 2000). Parental support of schooling and of student learning probably should look different in an Inuit community than in a predominantly Euro-Canadian one (Douglas, 1998; Pashagumskum, 2005). Schooling should look different too. If educators are interested in increased levels of success for Inuit students, the focus should be on creating schools that are responsive to community wishes, a move that would result in more support and parental participation (Gibson, 2005; Tompkins, 1998).

Before looking at fruitful ways to increase parental engagement in schooling, I describe briefly what I found to be the biggest source of support for schooling: the connection between school and work.

Wage Employment as a Reason for Community Support of Schooling

If schooling is seen to be doing a good job in helping reach community goals, the schools may enjoy strong community support (Harrison, 1993; Lipka, 1989). The main purpose of schooling that generated support according to my interview data was the schools’ role in preparing students to find wage employment, a connection made frequently by participants.

Many people said that graduating from grade 12 would increase the chances of finding work. For example, through an interpreter, an Elder said, “Education counts a lot when it comes to finding jobs.” Many people said that this would be how they would encourage their children to go to school. For example, a young mother of a preschool child said that she

would tell him to stay in school and finish so that he would “find more jobs.” Another tells her nieces and nephews to stay in school “to get better jobs.” One young woman said that she herself returned to school because she realized that she “wasn’t going anywhere” without school, and a successful young carver said that he had gone back because he did not expect to keep carving forever. One recent graduate connected his motivation for staying in school directly to his goal of finding a job, which in turn was important for him to enable him to hunt. He said, “It was really expensive to have a snow machine. The only way to get a snow machine was to finish highschool and get a job. That’s how I felt.”

Douglas (1998) wrote that people in the Arctic Bay community saw schooling as intimately connected to future employment. In Ulahatok, a small community in the western Arctic, an increase in wage employment opportunities requiring higher-level skills reportedly led to more parental encouragement for children to go to school to increase their employment prospects (Stern, 1999). A paucity of jobs in the community where I did the research may have had a limiting effect on support for schooling due to this link. Many people I spoke to believed that graduating from grade 12 would not lead to getting a job, because there were “no jobs available.” One person said that she could see that graduates did not get jobs easily, “because there’s lots of graduates and they’re just walking around.” Taylor (2007) wrote that most jobs in the communities did not reward applicants’ level of schooling and, therefore, did not motivate people to stay in school.

Although completing grade 12 was seen by many as providing an advantage in finding work, it was not seen as such by all people, and it is not certain that it will remain thus in the future. Unemployment is high in Nunavut, and if a large corpus of unemployed graduates builds in the community, motivation derived from the connection of school to work might weaken. Nor should support for schooling due to the connection of schooling to work be accepted uncritically. The work that graduates are being prepared for is often structured in ways that are abrasive to Inuit, for example, requiring actions that seem bossy, and are diametrically opposed to what many Inuit consider mature or intelligent behavior (Stern, 1999).

Despite these concerns, this basis of support for schooling may predominate because it is the role on which schools currently focus. After beginning school in Inuktitut and with Inuit teachers, most students in Nunavut are forced into an all-English environment in grade 4 or 5, and by the time they leave the junior grades, they will have an Inuit teacher for no more than a few hours of Inuktitut instruction per week. Although some students will take part in a supplementary “culture program” of Inuit skills with Inuit Elders as teachers, too little time will be spent there to see learning Inuit culture as a real purpose of schooling. Although their connection to jobs seems currently to win considerable support for schools in

the community, a shift toward making Inuit culture more central in schools stands to increase and deepen community support for schooling.

Following Inuit Wishes to Increase Community Support for Schooling

The strongest and most consistent finding in my research on Inuit visions for schooling was the desire for Inuit language and culture to play a greater role in schooling. This echoed findings from two Nunavut-wide consultation processes, the *Sivuniksamut Ilinniarniq* consultations (Aylward, 2004), and the *Nunavut Education Act* consultations (Nunavut Department of Education, 2006). Participants wanted an increase in Inuit knowledge and skills to be taught both inside and outside the schools. They wanted an increase in, or strengthening of, Inuktitut in the schools, the meaningful inclusion of Elders in schools, and higher academic standards. With almost unanimous agreement, where opinions were expressed, these wishes were consistent for women and men; younger and older participants; the wage employed and those without wage employment; high school graduates and those without formal schooling; participants who took part in traditional activities like hunting, sewing, and carving; and for those who did not. Moving the schools toward honoring participants' desire for more Inuit language and culture holds promise for increasing parental and community support for schooling. An overview of participants' wishes can be conveyed with some numbers and examples.

Inuit culture. Of 74 people interviewed, 37 expressed the desire for more Inuit culture in the schools without being asked about it directly. For example, when asked what was most important for children to learn in the schools, a woman in her 40s said, "Cultural traditional stuff. I think it's really important because they're unfortunately losing our traditional way.... More traditional skills." A man in his 40s, when asked what should stay the same about the schools, said, "I believe you need a little bit of change, 'cause we're losing our culture, Inuit culture." Asked about what should change about the schools, an Elder said through an interpreter, "She wants the traditional living of Inuit being taught in schools." Some of the expressions were spontaneous such as when a woman in her 30s said, "I wish there were more Inuit culture things in the school, rather than teaching them in English. Inuit ways."

Twenty-three more participants, when asked, declared the desire for more Inuit culture in the schools. They made comments such as, "I want her to go in a school program where they're taken out.... That way she will know her traditions." Another seven participants expressed the importance of Inuit culture without stating clearly that its presence in the schools should be increased, and five participants said nothing clear enough for me to code. One said that students should decide whether to study Inuit cultural skills, and one expressed concern that Inuit ways would not help students in postsecondary education, although she also made statements supportive of Inuit culture in the schools. Overall, there was an over-

whelming endorsement of increasing the teaching of Inuit cultural skills and values in the schools. Many reasons were given including a desire to stem the loss of Inuit culture, the need to pass on culture to future generations, children's desire to learn it, the current usefulness of the knowledge and its role in survival, and the positive effect that learning about Inuit culture has on learning in general.

Discrete skills were named such as building igloos and sewing skins, broader things like surviving on the land, and interacting properly with each other. Some of these might be possible to learn in the current structure of Nunavut schools, but some would require fundamental changes in how schooling is conducted. For many Inuit the concept of isolated skills and knowledge does not exist as it does in the Western scientific tradition (Bielawski, 1992; Thorpe, 2004). Actions have historically been connected holistically to all of life (Stairs, 1992). Outside school, Inuit typically learn technical skills together with character skills, whereas inside schools these are "frequently pulled apart and never reassembled" (Watt-Cloutier, 2000, p. 118). For Inuit skills to be included in schools, then, schooling must be restructured so that skills can be taught embedded in Inuit ways and values. For this to occur, the teaching itself may also need to change. When an Elder said that the schools should "experience" students into jobs, or a woman in her 30s said that Elders must teach the skills, "because we learn by seeing or hearing," another pedagogy based on another epistemology is suggested. Adopting these suggestions would change the schools dramatically. A shift to Inuktitut as the language of instruction would also create a profound shift.

Inuit language. Nunavut's early-exit model of schooling, where most students switch from all-Inuktitut to all-English instruction in grade 4, erodes first-language competence (Dorais & Sammons, 2002). The hope for strengthening Inuktitut through the schools was expressed by 23 people in the study, with 18 more saying the same when asked directly, and a further 25 making statements that demonstrated their belief in the importance of Inuktitut. Eight made no remarks about Inuktitut that I could code.

It is probable that paying attention to these parents' wishes would increase community support for schooling: feelings about language run deep. Joy was expressed at the strong Inuktitut coming from the daycare and early grades. A woman in her 30s said, "Daycare, that's where they pick up Inuktitut. Especially Inuktitut songs that we haven't heard for 20 years." A woman in her 40s said, "I think the younger students are being taught our very strong Inuktitut language now, this year." Concern was also expressed about what happened later on. One woman in her 50s said, "My children's Inuktitut is more English than anything else. They may be speaking in Inuktitut, but they're putting their words together in *Qal-lunaatit* [English]." An Elder noted, "They learn Inuktitut first, the first

three years of their life in school, and then they drop that and go to Qallunaaq school. They forget their Inuktitut." Several participants also noted how difficult schooling could be for students struggling "in a language that's not your own."

Participants wanted a strengthening of Inuktitut in schools due to language loss and the connection of language to identity. Connections were also made between the ability to learn English and the ability to "survive anywhere" for students with a strong grounding in their mother tongue. This sentiment echoes research on language-learning (Crago, 1992; Cummins, 2000; Taylor, 2007). Inuit Elders view language loss as the most serious threat to Inuit culture and are especially concerned about the decline of fluency and comprehension among the young (Nunavut Social Development Council, 1998). The recently passed *Nunavut Education Act* (Government of Nunavut, 2008) requires the provision of schooling to grade 12 in Inuktitut by 2019. Moving schools to places that strengthen rather than erode Inuit language would win substantial support from parents and community members.

Elders. Participants said that a school program that seriously addresses Inuit culture and language would need to draw on the knowledge and experience of Elders. Twelve people, without prompting, declared that Inuit Elders should be a part of schools or have a bigger role in schools, and 42 more said the same when asked. There was no indication that I could code from 19 participants (many of whom were not asked). One person said that as long as more Inuit culture was taught, it did not matter whether it was by Elders or others. The desire to have more Elder involvement in schooling, as well as the desire to increase Inuit culture and the desire to strengthen Inuktitut in schools, was voiced almost unanimously across all demographic categories by all who expressed an opinion.

Participants' comments included: "That's the only way we're gonna know about our culture—from Elders." Some expressed concern about alienation of Elders from youth, something described in the literature (Kral & Idlout, 2006) and believed that having Elders in the schools would help. Many people made reference to their own happy memories of Elders visiting their classrooms. A woman in her 30s said, "To learn they need Elders. We had Elders when I was going to school." A student support assistant said that students "really like Elders coming in," and that having them in the school "makes the students feel supported by the community." The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) states that Elders must have an active role in schools.

Increased Community Support by Centering on Inuit Identity

Some participants made comments that made clear connections between Inuit language and culture in the schools and parental support and community involvement. One woman in her 30s, generally supportive of schooling, expressed disdain for a school that graduated students without

cultural competence, saying that most graduates “don’t know their own culture.” Another woman, also in her 30s, said that her father was not strict about schooling because it made her lose her culture. Both of these women were concerned about their children losing their culture and expressed the desire for more culture to be a part of schooling.

One participant explicitly connected cultural content to parental participation in schools. A woman in her 40s, she said, “If you have increased cultural activity in the school it will also bring parents in because they know some stuff too. They know their own culture, and I think it would help with self-esteem.” In the Nunavut community of Sanikiluaq, the principal described how cultural activities served to draw parents into the school, some of whom had very poor school experiences themselves and, therefore, were naturally reluctant to get involved (Kavik, 2007).

During field work, community members were invited to join staff from the elementary school and the high school at two school improvement meetings. Much of the discussion focused on community wishes to increase Inuit language and culture in the schools, and there was consensus that Elders should be a presence in both schools. When a community member asked near the end of the second meeting whether the talk would lead to action, a high school official said that unfortunately, there was no money to hire Elders, and no plans were laid to realize any of the goals that had been discussed. Even with the current Government of Nunavut policy and rhetoric of change, bringing Inuit culture into the schools will not be easy. To date the limited “handicrafts” approach to Inuit culture has lacked challenge and real-world relevance; much more is needed (Watt-Cloutier, 2000). Money is needed to transform schooling (Berger, 2006), and Eurocentrism must be acknowledged and overcome (Berger, *in press*). Despite the many obstacles to bringing Inuit language and culture into schooling meaningfully, schools would fulfill community wishes and thus stand to gain much support.

There are two more reasons to expect that a shift to schooling that honors Inuit culture will result in increased community support for schooling. First, schools that reflect Inuit wishes would indicate a measure of Inuit control over schooling. Inuit are used to being asked to support schooling as it exists, but examples in the literature suggest that increasing control over schooling leads to an increase in parental involvement. Battiste (1987) documented this with Mi’kmaq parents and McCaskill (1987) with Mohawk parents. Second, students who are firmly rooted in their culture seem to do better academically than students who are less well rooted in their culture (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Chandler, 2007; Deyhle, 1995). This suggests that schooling supportive of Inuit identity would lead students to increased academic achievement, thus fulfilling another strong desire expressed by participants in this study, as well as across Nunavut (Aylward, 2004).

Taylor (2007) suggested a community-wide process to increase Inuit parental involvement in schooling while concurrently eliciting community ideas about the proper goals of schooling. These fit logically together, but if the schools do not actually change in response to Inuit parents' wishes, the exercise will come to naught. In Nunavut these wishes are known, and schools should move toward Inuit culture.

Avenues to More Inuit Culture in Nunavut Schools

A full exploration of how to change Nunavut schools to meet community wishes is beyond the scope of this article, but I do provide what may be some critical components. The key issue is control. The Government of Nunavut and those who negotiated the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement* have been calling for major change in the school system for decades (Rasmussen, 2009), but many factors work to block the needed change. First, the Canadian Government—the entity that imposed assimilative schooling in the Arctic in the first place—has refused to live up to its obligations under the *Land Claims Agreement* and refused to fund a transformation to bilingual/bicultural education in Nunavut (Berger, 2006; Rasmussen). As Rasmussen noted, Canadians seem more interested in the land and the wealth below it than in the people on it. Without money to enact necessary changes, the agency of the Government of Nunavut is severely limited despite good intentions and promising rhetoric. Canadians should financially support the decolonization of Inuit schooling.

In the absence of increased funding, some work could still be done if priorities changed and funding was used in other ways. For example, millions of dollars spent recruiting teachers from southern Canada could be redirected to prepare more Inuit teachers (Rasmussen, 2009), teachers who would be much better positioned to bring Inuit culture into schools. Unfortunately, as Graveline (2002) noted, when the bureaucracy is largely white, it is unlikely that it will dismantle Eurocentric hegemony—and in Nunavut the bureaucracy remains predominantly white (Berger, in press; Rasmussen). The educational bureaucracy can easily thwart or slow changes deemed important by Inuit leaders and has been effective in doing so. The bureaucracy or its Eurocentrism needs to change.

Without enough support from the Department of Education, teachers and principals can still pursue change at the school and classroom levels. A past Euro-Canadian principal in Nunavut, Tompkins (1998) documented ways of bringing Inuit language and culture into schooling including strategies to raise the status of Inuktitut and planning meetings to share the strengths and insights of her Inuit and non-Inuit staff. Teachers too can act. Non-Inuit teachers may not be aware that Nunavut schools marginalize Inuit students (Aylward, 2006), but many wish to be more effective teachers of their Inuit students (Berger & Epp, 2007). This may lead some to become conscious of their own Eurocentrism and commit to

becoming allies in creating schools that reflect Inuit priorities. There is much work to do at many levels.

Conclusion

Inuit wishes for more Inuit culture, language, and Elders in schools present an opportunity for increasing community support for schooling. Community and parental support are important for schools to be effective, and this support is more likely if the school fulfills community expectations (Cummins, 1986; Harrison, 1993; Lipka, 1989; Ogbu, 1992). If people feel that the schools are lacking something, and especially if the lack results in a devaluing, ignoring, and assaulting of Inuit identity and culture, it should be expected that community support will not be optimal. I document much parental support for student learning and community support for the schools drawn largely from the schools' role in preparing students for wage employment. This support provides a strong foundation on which to build. Inuit voices show the way forward; much more support can be expected if schools in Nunavut work to become places supportive of Inuit identity. This will open the doors for more community involvement, increased student success, and greater student well-being.

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