

# Considering a Framework for Inuit Child Care

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*In this article, I examine four key elements in an approach to early childhood curriculum development in the community of Inukjuak, Nunavik in Northern Quebec. These platforms include a community base with local control of funds and local direction of community projects. In the development of the Inukjuak curriculum, I suggest incorporating local knowledge, values, directions, and Inuit approaches to childrearing. It is relationship-based, drawing on many voices from the community including those of Elders, families, parents, educators, and children. Finally, the process is supported through an assessment cycle—one that starts with the creation of a shared vision and continues with regular check-ins to keep the project moving.*

## *Introduction*

I have chosen to position this early childhood curriculum framework in the community of Inukjuak and the region of Nunavik. This is because most of my work is done in Nunavik, and Inukjuak has a strong child care centre with a dynamic Director, an active board, a vibrant Elders' association, an established pedagogical counselor, and a broad-based desire to strive for the best possible opportunities for children and families in the community. In this article, I take some of the most poignant points from the readings in Child and Youth Care (CYC) 480 at the University of Victoria and weave them into the early childhood curriculum framework. The highlights are as follows.

- A strength-based approach starts inside the community (Kretzman & McKnight 1993). Each local community and the people in it have strengths and knowledge that are essential to the development of a meaningful curriculum.
- There are many sources of knowledge: child development offers but one perspective (Cannella, 1997). Woodhead's (1996) discussion of practice appropriate to the context of early development can be used as a springboard to plan curriculum based in local Inuit cultural values and contexts.
- Partnerships founded in strong collaborative relationships in centres, communities, and regions include Elders, teachers, parents, and children, and members of the larger community. They may draw on advice from government representatives, consultants, academics, and others. Effective communication enables the consistency that allows for deep learning and meaning-making in many ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Ball & Pence 2006).

- Assessment and evaluation through learning stories (Carr, May, & Podmore, 2002) and the use of pedagogical documentation provide ways to build on the interest and work of the child in a reflective, “rigorous, methodical and democratic way” (Dahlberg et al., p. 148). They can also support connections with children, families, colleagues, and communities and be used to plan for learning, share about learning, and learn about learning.

I intended to find a way to share the content of this framework with community members in the fall of 2008

### *Inukjuak*

Inukjuak is an Inuit community of 1,600 (Statistics Canada, 2006) situated on the eastern shores of Hudson’s Bay. Ninety-four percent of the population is Inuit; 90% speaks Inuktitut at home; and about 10% of the total population is 4 years of age or younger. As it is accessible only by air, Inukjuak is considered a remote community. The Government of Quebec recognizes the high cost of living there and has indexed child care funds in the region by 1.69% to reflect this reality (Tagataga Inc., 2007). Approximately half the adult population works for wages, and most are involved in the traditional economy: hunting, gathering, sewing, and so forth. Traditionally, Inuit had a diet high in protein and fat including seal, whale (muktuk—whale skin, a favorite food—rich in vitamin C), caribou, and fish (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2006). These foods are procured from the land and the sea and sometimes from the community freezer, which is run and supplied by the local hunters and trappers’ association. Today’s diet is changing with the availability of highly processed sugar-based foods: problems with children’s teeth and overall health are increasing.

Many Inukjuamiut belong to large families. Children are named after people significant to their families, and titles distinguishing relatives by maternal/paternal designations are complex and important connectors. Older siblings often care for younger ones.

The local child care service includes 110 licensed child care spaces in two buildings and is overseen by a parent-majority board and a locally hired Director. The Director is a graduate of the Kativik Regional Government’s Child Care Centre director training program. Tasiurvik (translates as *those who hold our hands*) is a large, 80-place centre with a full kitchen and multipurpose room. The 30-place satellite is called Pigur-saviapik (*little training centre*) and is situated in the adult training complex. Currently, 75% of the staff members are graduates of the CEGEP competence-based training program (telephone conversation with Kiel Morin, bookkeeper, Tasiurvik Child Care Centre, Inukjuak) and hold a college-level diploma in Native Child Care Services issued by the Minister of Education. The expectation is that by December 2008, all educators will be certified.

### *The Inuk child*

In 1990, the women of Inukjuak participated in a radio phone-in show held to provide understanding of the Inuk child to be used in the preface of a book about activities designed especially for use with young Inuit children living in Nunavik. The contribution was titled *Northern Children are Special*.

Northern children are special because they follow and learn Inuit traditions as they grow. Inuit children have their own culture that is unique.

Inuit children are special because of the food they eat. Most of the time, Inuit children eat country food like caribou meat, fish, ptarmigan and others. These foods are eaten fresh, frozen or cooked. Inuit children are often fed at odd hours, when they are hungry.

Northern children are frequently taken outdoors, which helps them adapt to the cold northern weather. Inuit children often go hunting with their families.

The Inuk child has a special family situation, meaning that adopted children know their natural parents. The adoptive parents are respected and considered the real parents of the adopted child.

Last but not least, Inuit children show they need to be loved. They need cuddling and hugs from their parents and caregivers, which in time will contribute to their behaviour and growth. (Contributed by Annie Kasudluak Alaku, in consultation with the women of Inukjuak, Kativik Regional Government, 1990, p. 5)

The above description helps to provide an understanding of the Inuk child from the local perspective. Rinaldi (2006) describes her view of the rich, strong, powerful, competent child. She details the child who is curious, constructivist, respectful, and continually seeking to “reinterpret reality and continuously give it new meanings” (p. 123). I see the young Inuk child as fundamentally strong, vital, and capable. I wonder how Inukjuak families, educators, Elders, and community members would describe the young Inuk child in 2008.

### *Inuit Early Childhood Development Vision*

The Inuit Early Childhood Development Working Group comprises leaders in Inuit child care from the six northern regions where Inuit reside. This group has developed an ultimate goal of “100% healthy, happy and safe Inuit children and families” (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2006, p. 3). The key points of the vision include:

- Inuit Early Childhood Development encompasses Inuit languages, culture, and ways.
- Inuit children are thriving. Inuit children are emotionally secure, physically strong, intellectually stimulated, and spiritually fulfilled. The needs of all children are met in culturally, developmentally, and demographically appropriate ways.
- Inuit families (includes parents, guardians, caregivers) are recognized and honor their important role as the child’s first teacher.
- Inuit Elders provide the foundation and knowledge.

- The Inuit ECD Strategy is unique. Programs and services for Inuit children are developed based on an understanding of Inuit culture, languages, and ways. Programs and services must create and maintain a balance between the use of traditional and contemporary child development knowledge.

The challenge now is to take the information provided above and integrate it into a useful and accessible early childhood curriculum framework to be developed with stakeholders in the community of Inukjuak. To do so, I examine four areas of the curriculum framework: local base, many sources of knowledge, partnerships, and assessment.

#### *Local Base*

I believe that community control of funds and local direction of activities for local projects is essential and supports the ability of the community to come together and make things happen. Kretzman and McKnight (1993) present an approach to community asset-building that includes three important components. These are: (a) start with what is present in the community and the capacities of its residents; (b) concentrate first on agenda building; (c) be relationship-driven. Kretzman and McKnight write, "Each community boasts a unique combination of assets upon which to build its future. A thorough map of the assets would begin with an inventory of the gifts, skills and capacities of the community residents" (p. 6). Kretzman and McKnight warn how the needs approach can lead residents to see themselves as "fundamentally deficient, victims incapable of taking charge of their lives and their community's future" (p. 4).

The 1995 *Nunavik Position Paper* (Martin, Gordon, & Saunders, 1995) described how the awaited child care program in Nunavik should set out to serve those "who need support in child development and parenting skills" (p. 5). The Quebec educational program documents detail how this program was designed for disadvantaged children (Government of Quebec, 1996/1997). These examples clearly demonstrate how *need* and *disadvantage* provide the context and rationale for government funding, yet Kretzman and McKnight (1993) explain that "reliance on the needs map ... virtually ensures the inevitable deepening of the cycle of dependence" (p. 4). I would like to see this cycle broken.

I believe that the asset map is a wonderful way to document and display community strengths. It can be used starting at the child care centre: creating biographies with a photo of each contributing member of the child care community including children, families, educators, board members, Elders, and so forth. Building on family, child, and community strengths means working with the direction of parents, members of the board, Elders, and interested community members. It means finding out what local stakeholders believe is important for Inukjuamiut children to know, to be, and to become. It involves work with the community in figuring out how to meet goals.

Recently, I have been involved in the development of a project called “Aniingngualaurtaa—Let’s be Outside.” In this project, we call for the participation of Inukjuak children (Clark & Moss, 2001), Elders, educators, educator trainees, child care board members, and the community to provide direction and content for the approach. The Aniingngualaurtaa project is building on community strengths by creating opportunities for people to come together and talk about and document childhood memories (Hughes, 2007). It is also doing so by listening to people’s stories, recording those stories, and noting suggestions and acting on them. It is building community strength by creating a cycle of contribution and communication.

*Many Sources of Knowledge*  
Cannella (1997) writes,

[Child development] does not represent a truth that should be applied to all human beings, but a set of beliefs that have been constructed within a particular social, political, cultural and historical context by a particular group of people with power over other groups of people.

She continues, “Child development is an imperialist notion that justifies categorizing children as backward, needing help from those who are more advanced” (pp. 63-64). Cannella’s perspective helps me to appreciate the confining focus of developmental theory and helps me understand how important it is when working with Inuit in Inukjuak to examine our own values and belief systems and consider development theory, with its roots in Euro-Western culture and its impositional pervasiveness, as one of many sources of knowledge. Woodhead (1996) introduces an interesting idea with his definition of practice appropriate to the context of early development (PACED). He explains, “It is inappropriate to assume that a concept of development derived from one context can or should be the basis for defining good or poor quality in other contexts” (p. 69). Developmental niche

embraces both the tangible aspects of children’s physical and social environment as well as the more elusive but equally powerful meaning systems that regulate their relationships: the expectations that affect the way they are treated and which the children themselves incorporate into their identity. (Super & Harkness, 1977, 1986, in Woodhead, p. 61). Various cultures define the child in accordance with specific societal expectations. LeVine calls this the “cultural software” and notes it includes “belief systems, goals and expectations of children” (Woodhead, p. 63). Nsamenang (in press) describes West African childrearing values and practices. He laments the imposition of Euro-Western approaches to ECD as devaluing Africa’s rich cultures, dependable traditions, capacity, and accomplishments. He details a concern for cultural sustainability: “Africa, like the rest of the Majority world, has suffered not simply cultural capture but more importantly, the disregard of its worldview and resourcefulness to care for and educate its offspring in its own terms” (p. 14).

For many years, I have been wondering about how to incorporate Inuit knowledge, Inuit ways, and Inuit approaches to childrearing in Inuit child care centres. I am excited about developing this curriculum framework

because I think that Cannella's (1997) challenges to child development theory, the possibilities that the concept of developmental niche create, and the understanding that there are many majority world cultures with their own values and beliefs help open the door to consider what would make for an early childhood curriculum frame that is grounded in local knowledge, is led locally, and draws on sources from all over the world.

In 1998, the Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association hosted a national conference on Traditional Inuit Child Rearing Practices. The purpose was to gather information from Elders about Inuit childrearing. Two Elders from each of the 52 northern communities in which Inuit reside attended this three-day conference, which resulted in a magnificent poster featuring an Inuk child in the arms of an Elder, a collection of four videos about Inuit childrearing practices, and a boxed set of Inuktitut-language songs for young children (Pauktuutit, 1999). This is one way of gathering Inuit specific knowledge.

CYC 480 has taught me much about appreciating the base of knowledge in the community (Ball & Pence, 2006). It has taught me about not being limited by developmental categorization and working in the context of the community toward the values and meanings of children's learning. The purpose of the Aningngualaurtaa Project is to develop an outdoor/nature curriculum grounded in Inuit knowledge. The method is to draw on the knowledge of Elders, educators, parents, and children to develop the materials and approach. Incorporating multiple sources of knowledge does this by creating opportunities for many community voices to speak and to be heard; by drawing on the academic literature (Hughes, 2007; Rinaldi, 2006); and by connecting with regional organizations. Kativik Regional Government is a main supporter of the research and has dedicated a staff member to the file; Avataq Cultural Institute is the sponsoring organization. I wonder if the establishment of a small Inukjuak-based inter-organizational committee would be a useful way to support the curriculum frame. I wonder how I can effectively share Cannella's message with people in the community.

#### *Partnerships*

"The commitment to work in partnership is a conscious decision to harness the potential that exists in the network of relationships that define us as human beings" (Ball & Pence, 2006, p. 17). *Relationship, partnership, collaboration* are words used to describe the connectivity of human beings. Relationships in the world of early childhood include child/parent/family/teacher/Elders/community members/external contributors. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model "provides a way of considering the layers of influence on the developing child" (Chandler, 2009, p. 6). From the perspective of the child, the system is made up of four interconnected circles that start in the middle with the micro-system based on the child and his or her immediate world: family, child care, and friends. The mesosystem

involving among others teacher-parent relationships comes next. The exosystem involves government policies, social structures, and the community where the child lives; and finally, the macrosystem encompasses the cultural and societal patterns and ways. This ecological model demonstrates how relationships are so interconnected, so encompassing, so much a part of our lives, whether we see them or not. The recognition of the value of many interconnected relationships is, I believe, a key component of this curriculum framework. I examine some of these relationships below.

The New Zealand approach creates a significant place for the family in the development and delivery of programs and services. The overarching guiding principle states, "Management and educators of chartered early childhood services, in partnership with parents/guardians and whanau, will promote and extend the learning and development of each child attending or receiving the service, through the provision of quality early education and care" (*NZ Revised Objectives*, 1996, p. 2).

Dahlberg et al. (2007), in describing the postmodern perspective, tell how the child constructs knowledge and identity by "being in relation and dialogue with the world." They go on, "When the human encounter is the basis for pedagogy, as well as for ethical relationships, then to facilitate and accomplish these encounters becomes the 'true' role of the early childhood institution" (p. 76). Relationship-based learning is the essence when the child is a co-constructor of knowledge. Rinaldi (2001) describes how when properly supported, the "child [becomes] a producer of culture, values and rights, competent in learning and competent in communicating with all the hundred languages" (p. 51). The supportive teacher is a learner, collaborator, researcher, theorizer, facilitator, and partner in the learning process (Mercilliot Hewett, 2001).

Kretzman and McKnight (1993) remind me of how relationship is fundamental to the asset-based, internally driven community development process. They state, "One of the central challenges for asset-based community developers is to constantly build and rebuild the relationships between and among local residents, local associations and local institutions" (p. 9). I think that creating a cycle of collaboration and communication is one important way of promoting ongoing dialogue in and beyond the child care setting on the communities' aspirations for the child. This can include hosting open houses, conducting open-line radio shows, sharing posters about centre activities in the community, setting up an inter-agency community committee on childhood, and participating in local games. It also means going beyond the community: taking part in regional training sessions and directors' meetings, attending national conferences, and accessing information about early childhood on the Internet.

The childhood memory pictures and stories, which were created by staff and administration during the January planning meeting for the

Aniingngualaurtaa Project, have been reproduced, assembled in a binder, and distributed to each of the communities in Nunavik. These pictures and stories will be used in Inukjuak as building blocks as we head into the second phase of the project. The cycle implies checking back in, revising the plan in response to feedback, and setting up to show that listening involves responding. I wonder about the potential positive effect on the child, family, and community of a relationship based approach to ECE.

#### *Assessment*

For several years, I have been thinking about how to foster better connectivity between families and child care centres in Inuit communities. One idea was to hold a community meeting during which parents and community members would articulate hopes, desires, and wishes for their children. Then together with educators and centre administrators, we would develop a community vision and plan to make the vision come alive. The evaluation phase would involve checking back in at predetermined dates and seeing together how things were proceeding.

The New Zealand Ministry of Education has produced a document called *An Introduction to Kei Tua o te Pae: Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Carr, Lee, & Jones, 2004). The text documents five strands of learning: well-being, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration, and it describes "assessment as a powerful source for learning" (p. 2). The approach shows how assessment and pedagogy can build from one episode of learning to another. Exemplars are "examples of assessments that make visible learning that is valued so that the learning community (children, families, whanau, teachers and others) can foster ongoing and diverse learning pathways" (p. 3). I believe that exemplars are an excellent and powerful way to connect with families. I will put forward the idea of using learning stories to my colleagues in Inukjuak as a part of this proposed curriculum framework. I will also speak about pedagogical documentation. They are both integral parts of this curriculum frame.

"Pedagogical documentation enables us to take responsibility for making our meanings and coming to our own decisions about what is going on" (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 145). It continues,

Documentation offers an important starting point for the dialogue, but also for creating trust and legitimacy in relation to the wider community by opening up and making visible the work of these institutions. Thanks to documentation, each child, each pedagogue and each institution can get a public voice and a visible identity. (p. 158)

This past winter, I began experimenting with pedagogical documentation in Inukjuak. I took a series of pictures. One set showed a boy and a girl working together to tie the boy's shoelaces. It was fascinating, because immediately I showed the photos to the pedagogical counselor and teacher, they started to think how to use what they saw in the pictures to plan for learning.



During Phase 2 of the Aniingngualaurtaa project, digital picture frames will be purchased for use as a means of providing a daily photographic record of activities that take place outdoors—to share with children, educators, family, and community members.

### *Happy, Healthy, and Safe Inuit Children*

The proposed curriculum framework supports the child's sense of belonging by involving children, families, parents, Elders, and community members in the development of a curriculum based in the knowledge of the community. It supports the child in developing a strong identity fortified by his or her connectivity to familiar family values. It contributes to the child's capacity to draw on many perspectives and supports the development of the curious and perseverant explorer, rich in the understanding that there are many ways of knowing. It promotes facility as a communicator and collaborator through exposure to multiple meaningful relationships and a variety of partnerships. It helps prepare the child to be reflective, consider experience, plan next steps, and become a responsible contributor (Carr et al., 2002).

My next steps will be two. The first will be to make this frame accessible to community members, and then as a group, figure out together how to assemble a community developed, delivered, and designed curriculum for Inukjuak: a curriculum frame designed by, for, and with Inuit children, families, language, and culture. The second step will involve widening the scope of my reading and reflection to incorporate the thinking of Aboriginal scholars such as Greenwood and Fraser (2005) and Rameka (2007) from New Zealand. The depth of their Aboriginal knowledge will very much contribute to the development of this work to incorporate both Aboriginal terms of reference and world view as they relate specifically to early childhood learning and care.

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