

## The Education of Inuit Youth in Nunavik: Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

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Tatiana Garakani

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Résumé de l'article

À partir des données recueillies au Nunavik entre 2011 et 2014, cet article met en lumière la perception des élèves Inuit et leurs enseignants (Inuit et non-Inuit), sur comment leur motivation, le but scolaire, la qualité de leurs relations, et les pratiques pédagogiques influencent leur persévérance. Informée par les méthodologies critiques autochtones, la recherche a été menée avec l'approbation de la Commission scolaire Kativik Ilisarniliriniq. Un large éventail d'outils de collecte de données a été mis en place pour faciliter la participation des enseignants de primaire et secondaire, des secteurs francophones, anglophones et inuit, ainsi que des élèves du secondaire (secteurs francophone et anglophone).

# The Education of Inuit Youth in Nunavik: Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

Tatiana Garakani<sup>i</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article draws on data collected in Nunavik between 2011 and 2014 to describe the perceptions of Inuit students and their teachers (Inuit and non-Inuit) about their motivation, the purpose of schooling, the quality of their relationships, and the pedagogical choices and approaches that influence their perseverance. Informed by critical Indigenous methodologies, the research was conducted with the approval of Kativik Ilisarniliriniq, the School Board of Nunavik. A wide range of research tools was used to facilitate participation by teachers from the French, English, and Inuit sectors, in elementary (Kindergarten to Grade 6) and high school (Grades 7 to 11), and participation by students from the French and English sectors (Grades 8 to 11).

## RÉSUMÉ

**L'éducation des jeunes Inuit au Nunavik : Perspectives des enseignants et des élèves**

À partir des données recueillies au Nunavik entre 2011 et 2014, cet article met en lumière la perception des élèves Inuit et leurs enseignants (Inuit et non-Inuit), sur comment leur motivation, le but scolaire, la qualité de leurs relations, et les pratiques pédagogiques influencent leur persévérance. Informée par les méthodologies critiques autochtones, la recherche a été menée avec l'approbation de la Commission scolaire Kativik Ilisarniliriniq. Un large éventail d'outils de collecte de données a été mis en place pour faciliter la participation des enseignants de primaire et secondaire, des secteurs francophones, anglophones et inuit, ainsi que des élèves du secondaire (secteurs francophone et anglophone).

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**M**uch has already been reported on the challenges facing schools in Inuit communities: high teacher turnover rates (Mueller, 2006), pedagogical practices unsuitable for second-language learners (Tompkins 1998; Berger and Epp, 2005; McGregor 2010), limited involvement and engagement of parents and communities in formal school settings (Vick-Westgate 2002), and the

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i. École nationale d'administration publique, Montréal, Québec, Canada. [tatiana.garakani@enap.ca](mailto:tatiana.garakani@enap.ca)

trauma of colonialism and scars from abusive residential schools (Ives and Sinha 2016), to name but a few. Despite all the challenges, Kativik Ilisarniliriniq (the School Board of Nunavik), its schools, teachers, and staff have been at the forefront of trying novel ideas, implementing different projects, and exploring ways to help their students succeed. However, there is still very little consensus on what schooling in Nunavik should be or look like.

There are those who express concern about imposing, once again, an education system that is not relevant to the lives and experiences of Inuit students. Some advocate a greater role for informal and land-based education. Others draw attention to the large number of Inuit students affected by adverse childhood experiences and trauma. Given the long-term impacts on the students' cognitive, social, and mental health, they advocate devoting more attention to the mental health of the students before tackling academic goals. Meanwhile, some believe that it is important to recognize the students' strength by maintaining high expectations and preparing them for postsecondary education. Hence, schools, teachers, and their students constantly search for ways to strike a delicate balance between different ideas, approaches, and philosophies. Still little is known about the short- and long-term impacts of many projects and initiatives on the students and the teachers. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), in its 2011 National Strategy on Inuit Education, highlighted that there is little data and evidence-based research to illustrate trends and to document and disseminate promising practices: "National and some provincial and territorial education data for Inuit are often grouped under an 'aboriginal' heading, which significantly limits its usefulness in examining Inuit trends. There is a limited amount of data that can inform us on 'how Inuit are doing' in education, or what 'progress' looks like" (ITK 2011: 97).

This research project was developed in consultation with Kativik Ilisarniliriniq and with their approval. The objective was to understand how the perceptions of teachers (both Inuit and non-Inuit) and their pedagogical practices had evolved over time and influenced the Inuit students' school perseverance.

While recognizing the importance and urgency of addressing structural social issues affecting the everyday lives of Inuit youth, this research chose to focus on the constructive role that schools and teachers can play to sustain and enhance student resilience and school perseverance. As microenvironments, schools can create safe spaces where resilience and protective factors are enhanced through positive relationships. Suitable pedagogical practices can give students a sense of control over their learning, and schools can be places where students go beyond necessities and envisage possibilities (Greene 1998; Rutter 2006).

This article draws on the data collected between 2011 and 2014, and focuses specifically on the perceptions and experiences of the Inuit students and their teachers. The objective is to draw attention to the similarity and differences

between various accounts, in the hope that the diversity of the voices will help to shed some light on the positive stories and successes that tend to get lost in a larger discourse about the many challenges facing the education of Inuit youth.

The conceptual framework that informed this research will be presented briefly, followed by a summary description of the research methodology. The results section will be divided into two parts: the perceptions and experiences of (1) the teachers, and (2) the Inuit students. Finally, in the conclusion, a comparison between different perceptions will be discussed.

## **Conceptual framework: Understanding teachers' and students' perseverance**

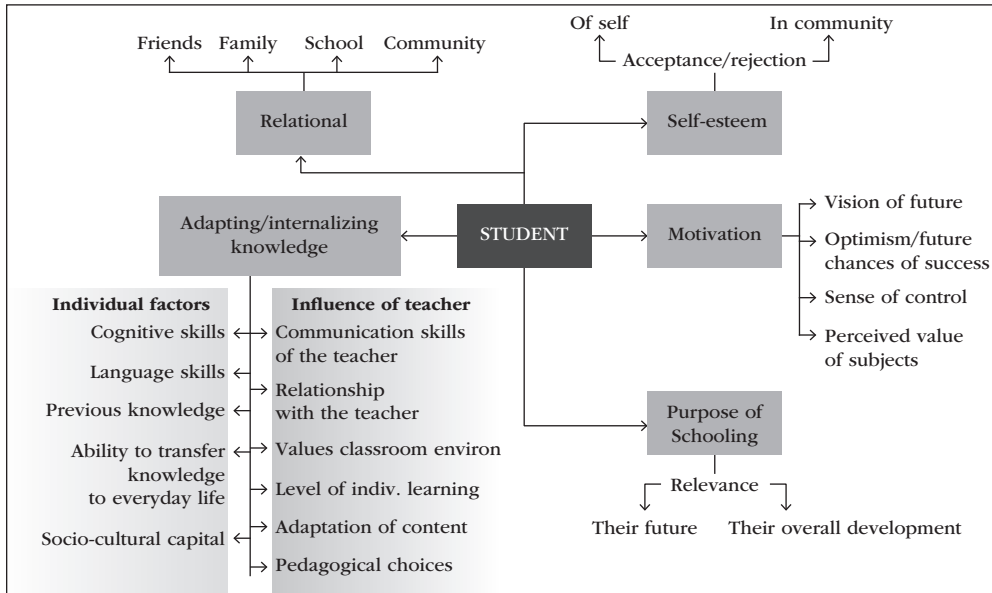
The concepts of motivation, engagement, perseverance, and resilience are often used, sometimes interchangeably, to frame and explain factors in school success. In the research report (Garakani 2015), an entire chapter has been devoted to defining these concepts, their affordances and limits, and how they link and overlap with each other. For the purposes of this paper, we have limited our presentation to the concept of perseverance.

Many researchers (Bandura 1982; Lai 2011) consider motivation to be the key factor in school perseverance. Carrier (2009), however, cautions that having the will to succeed is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by the know-how. For Ames (1992), student motivation depends on how students perceive themselves in relation to the learning activities and to the process of learning itself. Lacroix and Potvin (2009) believe that academic motivation can be nurtured if students develop a positive perception about the value of activities and the subject matter (interest, importance, and usefulness), a sense of interpersonal effectiveness, and control over their learning. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) explain that motivation may be studied from different theoretical perspectives. For example, motivation could be framed as expectations and hope of success (self-efficacy and control), as intrinsic motivation, as self-determination and interest, and as socio-cognitive and self-regulation.

Other researchers have focused their attention on the students' self-esteem and how they are perceived by others (Bong and Skaalvik 2003; Laaroussi et al. 2005; Deniger, Dubé, and Goulet 2009). Course content and course relevance constitute determining factors for Carrier (2009) and Perrenoud (1996). The impact of school and classroom environments on student perseverance has been highlighted by Kanu (2002), Chouinard et al. (2005), and Presseau et al. (2006). For these authors, classroom socialization determines how students approach and understand subjects, as well as how they perceive teaching strategies, learning activities, and classroom communication models. Others have drawn attention to the importance of pedagogical practices (Toulouse 2007; Rousseau, Deslandes, and Fournier 2009), and the quality of relationships with teachers

and peers (Chouinard et al. 2005; Laaroussi et al. 2005; Dyke 2007). Bourdon et al. (2007) have emphasized the beneficial effects of parental and community involvement in the school.

Figure 1 illustrates our effort to group and summarize all the factors put forward by various studies on school perseverance. The elements constituting the student's perseverance model are self-esteem, motivation, perceived value of the school, quality of their relationships, individual factors, and influence of teachers.



**Figure 1.** Model of student perseverance (Author 2011)

Given the high turnover rate of teachers in Nunavik, especially amongst non-Inuit teachers, it was also important to understand factors that influence teachers' perseverance. Most of the factors in the student model are relevant to analysis of teacher perseverance. Hence, we developed a similar model of teacher perseverance with some adjustments. The teacher's model includes the following factors: motivation (how teachers envision their own future and that of their students, their optimism about their chances of succeeding, their perception of the value of the subjects they were teaching); how teachers perceived the purpose and relevance of schooling (school goals, academic standards, their role as a teacher); the quality of their relationships (with students, other teachers, the school administration, parents, and the community); their knowledge, skills, and competencies (knowledge of the culture and the community, protective factors and risk factors affecting their students, needs and capacities of second-language learners, reflective approach, technological skills, content and subject expertise);

and their pedagogical practices (interpersonal communication skills, classroom management, individualized teaching, capacity to adapt content, pedagogical choices, etc.).

## Methodology

In her renowned book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Smith (2012) criticizes research in Indigenous settings: “Research has been worthless to us, the Indigenous world, and it has proved its absolute usefulness to those who wielded it as an instrument. It told us things we already knew, suggested things that would not work and made careers for people who already had jobs” (178).<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Indigenous Peoples’ experience with research has been predominantly negative, both in the research process and in its outcomes, and this negative experience may explain their scepticism and reluctance to participate (Humphery 2001 in Kendall et al. 2011). For Smith (2012), research is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. Kendall et al. (2011) stress that the challenge for non-Indigenous researchers and practitioners is to “ardently adopt appropriate methods of research that can lead to acceptable, sustainable, and efficacious solutions within Indigenous communities ... and to espouse new ways of seeing that respect local Indigenous ways of knowing and adopt participatory approaches whereby knowledge remains under the control of the community” (1719).

Informed by critical Indigenous methodologies (Kovach 2009; Smith 2012), we opted for a holistic and multifaceted approach to ensure inclusive participation and ownership of the research process and outcomes. The ethical guidelines that informed our research approach were based on critical Indigenous methodologies and on specific guidelines, such as those found in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (CIHR et al. 2014), the guide published by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) and the Nunavut Research Institute for undertaking research with Inuit communities (2007), and the *Inuit-Specific Perspectives on Research and Research Ethics* from Inuit Tuttarvingat of the National Aboriginal Health Organization and ITK (2010).<sup>2</sup> The principles highlighted in these guidelines, along with the literature on critical Indigenous methodology (Kovach 2009; Smith 2012; Tuck 2010) that informed this research were as follows: (1) a desire to respect, protect, and preserve knowledge, traditions, and practices; (2) continuous consultation and negotiation with all stakeholders

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1. Kativik Ilisarniliriniq also uses this quotation in their research directives.

2. Also see Garakani and Peter (2016) for a specific focus on the ethical issues of doing research in an Inuit context.

and participants; (3) informed consent as an ongoing process; (4) ownership and control of the research by the community; (5) collaboration and partnership with community members; (6) clear understanding and mutual agreement about the research objectives; (7) inclusive participation; (8) tangible benefits and concrete results in meeting the needs of the community; (9) clear agreement on the management, access to, and use of the project results; and (10) mechanisms to demonstrate compliance with ethical values (Garakani and Peter 2016).

We tried, as much as possible, to create conditions for an inclusive participatory approach by highlighting a diversity of views and experiences and by focusing on agency and voice (of students and teachers). The data were collected and analyzed right away throughout the project, an approach that enabled us to be more flexible and sensitive to the social context (Crossley and Vulliamy 1997). At each stage, the data were analyzed and presented to the participants for feedback. The discussions provided an opportunity to adjust the course of the research and maintain its relevance to participants.

### Data collection tools

Many research instruments were considered. During the preliminary field research, and throughout the research process, the appropriateness, acceptance, relevance, and user-friendliness of all the tools were continuously discussed with individual participants. Tools were frequently modified and adapted to the comfort level of the research participants, and new ones were created to meet specific needs. The following instruments were developed, adapted, or retained for use:<sup>3</sup> (1) semi-structured interviews; (2) focus groups; (3) observations within and outside the classroom; (4) weekly motivation self-assessment surveys; (5) thematic and year-end questionnaires; (6) interactive questionnaires (using individual handheld devices to vote); (7) “dream” timetables (each student designed his/her imagined perfect class schedule with choice of subjects); (8) digital stories; (9) photovoice (students took pictures of things most significant to them); and (10) writing a collective story.<sup>4</sup> Table 1 provides an overview of data collection tools used for each component of the conceptual model.

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3. These tools are described in detail in an earlier article on ethics of research with Inuit youth (Garakani 2014) as well as the research report (Garakani 2015).

4. The photos and the video of the collective story are available at <http://enap-nunavik.ca/regards-et-temoignages/>.

**Table 1.** Research activities to collect data on various components of the conceptual model

Components of the conceptual model	Data collection tools for teachers	Data collection tools for students
Self-esteem	n/a	Weekly motivation self-assessment surveys
Motivation	Online journal Session-based questionnaire Semi-structured interviews	Digital stories Semi-structured interviews Writing a collective story Photovoice Teachers' assessment of individual student's motivation
Purpose of schooling	Semi-structured interviews Focus groups	Digital stories Photovoice Ideal weekly class schedule (dream timetable) Interactive questionnaire
Quality of the relationship	Classroom observation Year-end questionnaire Semi-structured interviews	Writing a collective story Photovoice Interactive questionnaire Focus group Semi-structured interviews
Pedagogical components	Classroom observation Theme-based questionnaire Semi-structured interviews Focus groups	Interactive questionnaire Focus group

Because each tool had different affordances and constraints, and because different tools appealed to different participants, the wide range of tools helped us to elicit diverse voices (including some that were often silent) and to accommodate individual preferences and comfort levels. It was also important to diversify the tools because each of them provided a different type of insight, thus affording a more comprehensive understanding at the end of the process.

### Profile of the school

The research was conducted in a school that had 23 teachers and 254 students (pre-K to Grade 11). The school is renowned for its relatively lower teacher turnover rate, and for an administration favourable to new initiatives and projects to promote school perseverance of its students.



## Profile of the teachers

Our sample was composed of 27 teachers: 7 men and 20 women; 10 Inuit teachers and 17 non-Inuit (Qallunaat) teachers, including 8 English speakers and 9 French speakers. There were 15 teachers for elementary school (pre-K to Grade 6), 8 for high school (Grades 7 to 11), and 4 who taught both elementary and high school classes. It is important to note that the high school level had only 2 Inuit teachers: one teaching language and culture, and the other religion. Amongst the 27 participants, 11 had more than 6 years of experience, 6 had between 3 and 6 years, and 9 were early career teachers. During our 3-year research, some teachers left and new ones arrived. This explains why our sample (N=27) is larger than the total number of teachers in the school (N=23). As Table 2 indicates, every teacher participated in at least one research activity (interview or focus group discussion), and high school teachers participated in most of the activities.

## Profile of students

Of the 254 students in the school, 96 were in high school (Grades 7 to 11). Participating students were in Grades 8 to 11 in the French-language and English-language sectors or were recent graduates attending college. Girls outnumbered boys significantly. A total of 46 per cent of the students in the French-language sector and 37 per cent in the English-language sector participated in the research. Table 3 summarizes how many students participated in different research activities.

## Results

This section begins with a presentation of teachers' (Inuit and Qallunaat) perceptions and experiences, followed by the Inuit students' accounts of their school experiences.

### Teachers' perceptions and experiences

The conceptual model presented earlier is used to group the findings under four headings: (1) teachers' motivation, (2) teachers' perception of success and the purpose of schooling, (3) teachers' rapport with the students, and (4) their pedagogical choices and practices. Whenever possible, efforts have been made to distinguish between perceptions of Inuit and Qallunaat teachers. To preserve participant anonymity, the letter "Q" is assigned to non-Inuit teachers (for both French- and English-language sectors) and the letter "I" to Inuit teachers, followed by a random number, to help differentiate between different individuals.

#### *Teachers' motivation and sense of control*

The motivation of teachers depends on their self-efficacy (Bandura 1982). To understand the level of self-efficacy of teachers, we examined their discourse

**Table 2.** Number of teachers participating in various data collection activities

Participants	Semi-structured interviews	Observations	Online journal	Session-based questionnaire	Theme-based questionnaire	Year-end questionnaire	Focus Groups
Number of teachers	27	9 classroom 8 informal activities	7	6	5	5	7

**Table 3.** Number of Inuit students participating in various data collection activities

Students	Semi-structured interviews	Weekly motivation questionnaire	Teachers' assessment of students' motivation	End of the year questionnaires	Dreamed timetable	Digital stories	Photo voice	Writing collective story	Interactive questionnaire + Focus groups	Focus groups
Grades 8 and 9	6	10	11		7	8		8	16	
Grades 10 and 11	9	11	13	7	13	8	8		20	
College in Montreal										Year 1, N=10 Year 2, N=5
Total # of student participants	15	21	24	7	20	16	8	8	36	15

about their optimism and their chances of success in their profession, their vision of the future, and how they perceived their personal contributions, as well as the value of the subjects they taught.

Teachers described how little control they had over the composition of their multigrade classrooms, the previous preparation and knowledge of their students, and the relevance of the school curriculum to student needs and the context of Nunavik. They also felt some frustration and helplessness over difficulties faced by their students outside school. Most high school subjects were taught by Qallunaat, many of whom were early career teachers. Teachers found themselves trying to meet the standards of the South while trying to compensate for the slow academic progress of many of their students. Many teachers felt overwhelmed by the high rate of student absenteeism and the challenge of managing classroom discipline in the multilevel classrooms, and many even questioned the relevance of the subject they taught. As teacher Q7 mentioned, “Sometimes I feel frustrated with myself, because I don’t think I can provide the students with what they need.”

To avoid despair and discouragement, many Qallunaat teachers thought it important, especially for new teachers to Nunavik, to adjust their expectations. A weak sense of control over the environment and over the academic success of their students often led to a lowering of school expectations. For example, teacher Q11 explained, “I came without previous teaching experience ... Maybe it was a good thing in some respects, because I didn’t come up with the standards and expectations of the south. It allowed me to quickly adjust to the level of the students, without having unrealistic expectations.”

Inuit teachers experienced a different kind of pressure. They did not have to deal with provincial standards, but they had to struggle with lack of adequate material and insufficient resources to teach Inuktitut and Inuit culture. They raised concerns about young people losing their language and culture, and stressed the need to involve Elders, parents, and the community. Several initiatives and projects have been put in place in schools across Nunavik to promote language and cultural practices, but they tend to be rather random and intermittent. Some Inuit teachers have created a library of Inuktitut resources, and some have even put out their own books.

Inuit and Qallunaat teachers, especially at the high school level, believed that the students were not motivated or did not value the opportunities that formal education could offer them. Hence, teacher Q7 reported, “One of my biggest frustrations here is getting students to understand the value of education and the fact that it can give them more choices to change their lives the way they want to.”

For most teachers (Inuit and Qallunaat), the difficulties of young people were mainly due to external problems (housing, for instance), which went beyond their own competencies and those of the school. For them, the main obstacle to success at school was the student’s family environment, a factor over

which they generally had little influence. Teachers often expressed a lot of empathy for the difficulties that their students faced outside the school, and they believed that school should be a welcoming and safe space.

### *Teachers' perception of success and purpose of schooling*

For Inuit teachers, the school should primarily serve to teach Inuktitut and Inuit culture and traditions, while helping students to complete high school. On the other hand, some Qallunaat teachers believed that the school mainly aimed to provide students with a safe, structured, and supportive environment for socialization and create a sense of belonging. For others, the school mainly served to help young people to complete their high school education and meet the requirements for postsecondary education if they chose to go that route. Hence, new teachers to the community were confronted with many visions of how to define “student achievement” and the “purpose of schooling.”

Teachers were encouraged and given flexibility to adapt the course content and their pedagogical approaches to their students' needs. However, adapting the curriculum or the activities required a certain level of experience and confidence. The teachers needed to know which areas to prioritize and to be able to trust their own judgement. For early career teachers, or those new to an Inuit context, and teaching multigrade classrooms with second-language learners, it became particularly difficult to adapt the content of several courses at the same time (while juggling absenteeism, teaching second-language learners, accumulated effects of falling behind academically, etc.). Several teachers mentioned their trouble gauging to what extent they could adjust their expectations. They often questioned the relevance of some academic content and had trouble grasping the knowledge that the students must acquire by the end of each school year. According to teacher Q10, “I think that sometimes, in fact, often it is a challenge because the level of the curriculum is too advanced and not relevant enough ... especially because here we are in a unique situation, and I think that certain themes or subjects are really not relevant to young people's future ... I think many teachers have trouble with that.”

While most Qallunaat teachers questioned the relevance of the school curriculum, the Inuit teachers felt that the program should devote more space and time to teaching Inuit history, culture, language, and traditions. They advocated better integration of Inuktitut language and culture classes and the creation of designated areas in the school to teach traditional activities, such as skinning sealskins, or use of medicinal plants with a hands-on approach. As teacher I10 explained,

The school is good, but I would have wanted to teach more traditional culture and practices ... more to teach who we are as people, where we come from ... instead of teaching only the “History of Qallunaat”. That's what I want ... We must teach more our past and our heritage ... Young people

are less and less proficient in their mother tongue ... They are taught, but in their everyday lives they watch TV, they are on the internet ... They speak with their parents in Inuktitut, but they do not know enough about it.

As mentioned above, there was little consensus among teaching staff on academic objectives and standards, and their overall goals seemed nebulous. The same held true for the notion of success, which the teachers perceived in different ways. For some, the main criterion for success was student perseverance, while others emphasized creating an environment for student well-being. One teacher remarked, “For me, the success is to keep the students here, even if they retain only 5 or 10 per cent of the content, they still learn something, it is better than nothing” (Teacher Q2). Another teacher explained,

I am responsible to teach young people who may or may not pass the exam at the end of the year. My responsibility is to give them all the tools to succeed. But I also have to understand that not everyone will succeed at the end of the year. But I can at least provide them a positive experience, and hopefully that will help them to think and learn. (Teacher Q5)

Finishing high school was considered an important achievement, celebrated widely by parents and the community. Some teachers attributed student success to greater autonomy as learners and critical thinkers. Given the various interpretations, there is a need for a shared definition of success adapted to the Inuit context and encompassing academic, social, cultural, and community aspects.

### *Teachers' rapport with students*

Teachers were greatly concerned about the well-being of their students and recognized the importance of positive relationships with students as a key factor for success. However, establishing trust requires time and an ability by the teacher to create connections with the students. Teacher Q6 emphasized, “If you stay longer, it's easier for them to trust you, because they know you.”

According to the teachers, the school administrator emphasized and encouraged them to participate in various extracurricular, cultural, and sporting activities to help them create a strong bond with their students. Teachers stressed the challenge of juggling their dual roles and attitudes toward their students: teacher or friend, proximity or distance, fun or discipline, entertainment or academic content. However, some teachers emphasized the importance of balancing compassion with assumption of responsibility. For them, it was important not to fall into the trap of victimization but instead to empower students to be accountable and responsible. One teacher advised,

Just treat them with respect ... Do not treat them as disabled ... [like] they know what's going on ... They know there are consequences to their actions. Do not treat them as if they are fragile and will break down. If you

raise a child like that, this child will never learn to manage his/her own problems and assume his/her responsibilities. (Teacher I10)

### *Teachers' pedagogical choices and approaches*

Qallunaat teachers come with academic preparation (pedagogical and subject matter expertise) from different universities in different provinces, and with different levels of experience, but generally they have very little knowledge of Inuit culture and Inuktitut. Inuit teachers, on the other hand, have knowledge and expertise in Inuktitut and Inuit culture, but often lack formal subject matter training. This is why Nunavik has so few Inuit high school teachers. In-service training is offered to Inuit teachers, but for some this training remains too theoretical and fails to cover the practical implications of classroom teaching.

Few Qallunaat teachers have been trained in second-language teaching, and they end up teaching subjects to Inuit students as if the latter were native French or English speakers. Familiarization with the structure of Inuktitut can help Qallunaat teachers better understand student learning patterns and thus better adapt their pedagogical approach to the needs of their students.

Some teachers promoted the use of concrete exercises and learning activities, instead of focusing solely on abstract explanations. They highlighted the importance of being attentive to non-verbal cues as a feedback mechanism to determine the level of student interest and engagement. Teachers devoted considerable attention and energy to student behaviour and classroom management. For teacher Q17, taking care of the classroom environment was a prerequisite for everything else: "Do not try to convey academic content in an environment that is upside down; it will never work."

Student fatigue was a shared concern amongst all teachers, and admitted even by students. The "fatigue" expressed by students must be nuanced, however, because it can hide several other physical or emotional feelings, for which students may not have words. Their high level of tiredness makes it harder for them to work in class and concentrate, and it leads to disruptive behaviour. Many teachers described their strategies to manage student fatigue, depending on how widespread it was in their classroom. Some offered the tired student an opportunity to nap, but they worried that other students would also want to nap. They also thought it important to discuss the situation with young people in order to better understand the causes and adjust their responses accordingly. Teacher Q12 explained,

I talk to them individually, to understand why they went to bed so late. If they answer the internet, or something like that (under their own control), I will usually give them advice so that they go to bed early: read a book, do their homework, etc. If they answer something like "their parents were drinking" (out of their control), then I can only empathize with them and realize that there is nothing I can do about it. I hope the next day will be a better day.

When fatigue was relatively widespread, teachers tried to adjust classroom activities, often by simplifying them and making them more playful. In some cases, expectations had to be lowered. Teachers, overwhelmingly, emphasized the importance of personalized follow-up to properly support each student and meet his or her specific needs. Overall, the time and energy allocated by teachers to relational aspects (especially through extracurricular activities), recreational activities, and classroom management seemed to leave little space and energy for self-reflection about course content or pedagogy.

### **Inuit students' perceptions and experiences**

Given the differing perspectives and visions on Inuit youth and their education, we were determined to include their voices and perceptions. As mentioned earlier, we used a variety of research tools to make it easier for them to participate. In this section, their experiences and perceptions are grouped under four headings: (1) students' motivation and self-esteem; (2) the purpose of the school; (3) their rapport with their peers and teachers; and (4) course content and pedagogical approaches. Students' voices are identified by a random number, followed by F (female student) or M (male student).

#### *Students' motivation and self-esteem*

The study revealed that, contrary to teacher perceptions, students in this school had an overall positive perception of themselves. They exhibited a sense of internal control over their success, attributing it primarily to their own efforts and sometimes to external triggers (playing hockey, teacher support, a particular event) and/or long-term support (teacher, student counsellor, parents). For example, to the question, "Who helps you stay and persevere in school?" one student replied, "Me" (Student 4F, English sector, Grades 10/11).

In addition to having a positive view of themselves, the majority of the students believed that their teachers held a positive perception of them, with 40 per cent thinking their teachers found them intelligent, and 30 per cent thinking their teachers considered them hardworking.

Expression of positive self-esteem does not mean that students were not struggling with many different issues as adolescents, such as personal/family issues, tensions with peers, or difficulty with schoolwork. In general, students were struggling with such issues or preferred not to address any issues relating to their families and their community.

The young people were shy and had trouble expressing themselves with adults and Elders of the community on issues that were either personal or more general. Many approached new things (including classroom activities) with apprehension and fear of failure.



### *Students' perception of success and purpose of schooling*

According to students in higher grades, most young people and their families and community attached great importance to receiving a high school diploma. But students knew little about the options available to them after high school and therefore had no long-term vision. They thought the only career options were the ones they had witnessed in their community, such as aircraft pilot, midwife, police, teacher, nurse, or working at the co-op. They had no knowledge of possible alternatives.

Those who wished to pursue postsecondary education faced a lot of anxiety. They felt poorly prepared academically and torn between living in their own culture and living in a different one far from their family and community.

Some students stressed the importance of having a variety of school activities (such as theatre, music, etc.) to broaden their horizons and opportunities. Extracurricular activities were particularly valued. Meeting Inuit college students also had a positive influence on some. They thought they should be exposed at an earlier age to educational and career opportunities to stimulate their imagination and encourage them to think about their future projects. One student reflected,

I think they [youth] need to have more dreams, they need to be more like: once I get older I'm gonna have a nice house, I'm gonna have a good job ... I don't think they see that in themselves because they ... they see their parents, I am not saying everything is bad but, but watching their parents and other cousins in drugs and alcohol ... it is not easy to see the alternative. (Student 2F, English sector, Grades 10/11)

High school and college students thought adults perceived them as losing their language, and as uninterested in Inuit culture. They pointed to the challenge of “belonging” to two worlds (Inuit and non-Inuit), and the rejection they might feel by being more closely involved in one culture than in the other:

It's really hard to be in both worlds ... You are here and there, which side I choose? I want to be in the middle ... For sure if we say: oh we don't want non-Inuit people to come here, we want to be like we were in the past, it's not going to work ... because we depend so much on the outside. And we can't just lock the outside from coming here, it's not going to work, we cannot ignore things anymore ... There needs to be effort on both sides. (Student 2F, English sector, Grades 10/11)

### *Students' rapport with peers and teachers*

For students, the quality of their relationships at school had many ramifications for their perseverance and overall success. Friendship could be an important source of motivation, especially among younger students. For older students, peers could be a source of both protection and risk. Peers could not only support and



encourage but also cause tension. A student described the typical teenage tensions: “Like, when I’m in the hallways and when I’m with my classmates and on Facebook, and looking at other teenagers ... I see that they are always complaining about dramas ... There is a lot of dramas in this town ... This girl talked behind my back, ... stuff like that” (Student 2F, English sector, Grades 10/11).

High school students were frustrated with the disruption that some students caused, which prevented them from working. Some wished that the teachers would be stricter in managing the classroom environment, which they described as being chaotic at times. Successful students generally benefitted from individualized support from their teachers. Teacher encouragement and support was highlighted as a key motivator for students, especially during trying times.

Students had developed their own coping strategies. While some might discuss their issues with a trusted adult (a teacher, a student counsellor) or a friend, others tended to isolate themselves. As one student put it, “Sometimes, I don’t want or can’t to do my work. One day I just ran out ... It wasn’t my day ... So I ran out, and cried ... and the next day I came back to school, did my work, finished all my work ... Sometimes life is hard” (Student 4F, English sector, Grades 10/11). Another student also described isolating herself as a coping strategy: “I don’t talk to anyone ... I just do stuff to forget it ... like sewing or knitting or beading” (Student 13F, English sector, Grades 10/11).

At the same time, students felt that some Qallunaat teachers did not show interest in them or did not understand how they learn. As they saw it, if teachers took the time to participate in activities outside the school setting, they might be able to see their students differently:

They [teachers] are new and I do not think they know who we are ... how we work ... how we learn, ... so I think they need to learn, and be willing to see how the students learn, different ways ... not just their ways ... Maybe they should go camping with their students. Because I think as an Inuit we are proud of that ... We don’t verbalize it as much, but bring them camping, spend some time with the students to learn more about them ... and make a stronger connection, like a better bond, and go in school and look at what the student is good at and not good at, and work on what is not good at. (Student 2F, English sector, Grades 10/11)

### *Students’ perception of course content and pedagogical approaches*

To find out about the perceived value and relevance of education to students, we asked them build their own “dream timetable” using an empty template. Students were free to choose whatever courses they wanted and to propose new ones as well. The exercise confirmed the data gathered during the interviews; that is, students generally gave equal importance to Inuit and non-Inuit content. In individual exchanges, however, most students felt that more time and attention should be given to Inuktitut. Most felt they had not gained an adequate level of

Inuktitut proficiency, making them less confident to express themselves in the community. Student 2F in Grade 10/11 explained her lack of proficiency in Inuktitut: “I interviewed 3 Elders and ... one did not speak English and I started in Inuktitut ... But I think I’m starting to be stronger in English than I’m in Inuktitut ... It’s a sad fact but ... so, it was hard for me to talk with the Elder. Because my Inuktitut isn’t strong, and I felt that big gap, so ...”

Students reported trouble expressing themselves in their mother tongue and in English or French. Some even attributed their lack of participation in class to trouble expressing themselves in the language, for fear of making a mistake and feeling they had little to contribute.

Students generally found the course content difficult. It is important to note that student responses of feeling tired, bored, or not interested often concealed trouble grappling with the content. They may have had the motivation without the know-how. While the content was challenging for many, some students felt they were not being challenged or well prepared. The same students preferred teachers who were more “strict” and who set clear parameters. One student explained, “The school is OK ... But maybe it would be better if there’d be more stuff to learn, like hard stuff. Not just the easy stuff” (Student 13F, English sector, Grades 10/11). Another remarked, “I don’t know how to say this but maybe we need to be pushed a little bit more, like the kids in the South, so we will be prepared because a lot do struggle when they leave for college” (Student 3F, English sector, Grades 10/11). This sentiment was also shared by high school graduates attending college in Montreal, who felt that high school had not prepared them for college.

Students often spoke of teachers who got discouraged and gave up. They stressed how important it was for the teachers to remain motivated and encourage students by exercising “positive pressure.”

Like their teachers, the students also struggled with the multigrade classroom instruction. The problem was further accentuated by the wide disparity within the same grade level. The stronger students felt bored and left out, while those experiencing more problems were at a loss. These two groups of students tended to distract their classmates, the first group because they finished the assignment quickly before everyone else, and the second group because they were simply not following. Given the constraints of multigrade and multilevel classrooms, students advocated individualized instruction and approaches that would take into account how each of them learned. In other words, they argued for differentiated pedagogy. They also wished for better clarity on how to do an assignment, perhaps with a demonstration, and not relying simply on explanations. They wanted teachers to provide personalized support proactively because students did not tend to seek help from their teachers.

The importance of incorporating cultural and land-based activities was often highlighted. Students stressed that these activities helped make school more relevant to them, while also creating a sense of well-being and connectedness.

## Conclusion

Inuit youth experience interpersonal problems similar to those of adolescents elsewhere. However, their problems are made worse because they live in small communities where everyone knows everyone else. Peer pressure, both positive and negative, is also very present in the school and the community.

The students in this study generally exhibited positive self-esteem and motivation to succeed. Nonetheless, they did not always have the background, previous knowledge, or know-how to tackle their assignments successfully. They often spoke about the importance of school for their future, but they knew very little about the options available to them after high school, in terms of training and employment. They expressed a need for professional guidance during the early grades so they could better understand opportunities and possibilities and have better access to different career paths. Students overwhelmingly emphasized the key role of extracurricular activities and sports not only in expanding their imagination and broadening their horizons but also as a way to manage sadness, anger, and personal problems at school, at home, or in the community.

This narrative indicated an ongoing effort to consolidate multiple identities. The students conveyed an irrevocable attachment to their language, culture, and community, while recognizing the importance of other academic subjects. They wished Inuktitut would be valued as much as English and French in the school. Many students missed not having an opportunity to hunt, camp, or take part in other traditional activities. Many suggested that school should help bridge the cultural gap by providing better opportunities for language learning and culture.

The study found that teachers were generally very sensitive to the difficulties experienced by the students (including their environment), and they consequently invested much energy in the relational aspect and in management of student behaviour, to the detriment of pedagogy and learning. We suggest that both spheres of student life should influence each other. School success can increase the students' sense of control and self-efficacy, which in turn can improve their behaviour and self-esteem.

The teachers felt overwhelmed by teaching second- (or third-) language learners, with different levels of preparation, in a multigrade classroom, and with material poorly adapted to the context, while managing a high level of student absenteeism. Their narratives indicate little sense of control over the success of their students, and therefore little self-reflection on their pedagogical practices. Over time, they developed a tendency to lower their academic expectations and focus more on student well-being and management of student behaviour.

Teachers acknowledged that students behaved very differently within and outside the classroom. In the classroom, they often seemed disengaged, unmotivated, and even helpless. By contrast, in an informal setting, most of them demonstrated maturity, skills, leadership, and initiative. It is therefore important for Qallunaat teachers to take part in activities outside the school with students

to observe and better understand their many strengths and capacities beyond the academic setting.

Remarkably, concerns over cognitive aspects and pedagogical issues were much more present in the students' narrative. While most of them found the current academic content challenging, they were well aware that they were not being adequately prepared for postsecondary education. They acknowledged the difficulties the teachers faced, but they wished that teachers would remain positive and keep challenging them, without getting discouraged or lowering expectations. They mentioned the important role that various teachers had played in motivating them. They referred especially to teachers who exercised "positive pressure" on them and encouraged them to work hard to succeed.

As mentioned in the introduction, education in Nunavik continues to face many challenges and remains a contested issue. The debate about education priorities and policies in Nunavik is sensitive and easily becomes a source of political tension. There is a vital need to bring forward the voices of Inuit youth, and to take into account their needs, concerns, and priorities in education policy decisions. The people of Nunavik are young, resilient, creative, and aware of the issues that affect their parents and their communities. They know that the burden of preserving their language and culture lies on their shoulders and that they must find and make their voices heard. They are seeking to bridge the past, the present, and the future. They want to know the past to teach their children, while looking forward to the future and balancing the demands of their two worlds.

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