

## **Inuit Elder Policy Guidance for System-Wide Educational Change in Nunavut, 2000-2013**

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Elders: are accepting of time and change; have certain roles with everyone; deserve respect, by young or old; have good humour; are strong—mentally and spiritually; take great delight in receiving gifts and are great collectors; are appreciative of gestures of love, attention and kindness; deserve to be responded to quickly when they ask for help; are strong-willed on certain issues; are respectful of others regardless of age.

*Inuuqatigiit: The Curriculum from the Inuit Perspective*  
(NWTDE, 1996, p. 47)

### **Abstract**

Elders have been educators and experts in the Arctic for as long as people have inhabited the region. The involvement of Elders in schools and school systems has a relatively shorter history, but is more significant than has been documented to date. Elder instruction, to teach language and/or to facilitate cultural content or “culture class” began as early as the 1970s in some Nunavut communities. By the year 2000 four Inuit Elder Advisors were working full-time for the Nunavut Department of Education (NDE) developing educational philosophy and other materials for schools, in collaboration with a pan-territorial Elders Advisory Committee (EAC), classroom teachers and curriculum staff. We argue that the active role of Elders at the territorial level of school system oversight was critical to achieving Nunavut’s aspirations for educational policy change in the years between 2000 and 2013. The article describes how this work was conducted in Nunavut, analyzes some of the outcomes and materials developed, and highlights the opportunities and complexities of working with Elders and Elder knowledge within contemporary institutions, such as school systems.

*Keywords: Inuit education, Elders, Elder knowledge, Indigenous education, educational change, Indigenous policy, Indigenous curriculum*

### **Introduction**

Elders have been educators and experts in the Arctic for as long as people have inhabited the region. The involvement of Elders in schools and school systems has a relatively shorter history, but is more significant than has been documented to date. Elder instruction, particularly to facilitate cultural content or “culture class” began in the 1970s in some Nunavut communities. In the 1990s, teaching positions were allocated to Elders to instruct language and culture in some schools. By the year 2000, four Inuit Elder Advisors were working full-time for the Nunavut Department of Education (NDE) developing educational philosophy and other materials for schools in collaboration with a pan-territorial Elders Advisory Committee (EAC), and working with curriculum staff and experienced classroom teachers. Many edu-

cators and administrators in Nunavut speak about the importance of Elder involvement in schools, and yet this involvement has not been the subject of research.

This lack of research raises questions such as: How has Elder involvement with schools changed over time? What was the rationale for hiring Elders as full-time advisors at the NDE when Nunavut was created? What were Elders' roles in relation to curriculum and program development? How has Elder knowledge influenced policy? What else do Elders—keepers of knowledge from the past—bring to education in the present in a cross-cultural, multi-lingual, and quickly changing context? These peripheral questions come together in our central research question: *What, and how, did Elders contribute to educational change at the territorial level in the years immediately following the creation of Nunavut?*

In Inuit society, Elders have been the holders and teachers of knowledge *from* the past, providing continuity in ways of knowing, being, and doing that support the development of capable human beings. They also offer knowledge *about* the past, carrying stories about events in the lives of their ancestors. Elder advice was, and still is, applied and mobilized in the present. Following the long history of European exploration in the Arctic that preceded settlement, the relatively recent history of sustained contact between Inuit and outsiders, and the more recent introduction of schooling, Elders have a particularly important role in Nunavut. Their influence in terms of maintaining access to cultural practices, traditional knowledge, and language is an advantage in the resurgence and self-determination by Inuit in this unique context. That advantage is also slipping away with the passing of the generation that was, in many communities, unilingual-Inuktitut speakers born and raised “on the land” or before permanent settlement. This change warrants reflection on what Elders have contributed and how their knowledge will be transmitted in the future.

When considering the role of Elders in education settings like schools, government working groups, or universities, one must attend carefully to the differences between enacting traditional ways of transmitting knowledge and sharing knowledge within the conditions of institutional and programmatic structures. Elders' teaching in schools and school systems may not replicate the approaches they take at home, in the community, or on the land. Usually, meeting or class schedules are pre-determined, group sizes are large, and institutional settings are not as conducive to practice-oriented learning. Elders, along with the school or government staff who collaborate with them, must plan for and accommodate these constraints. Even for talented and experienced Elders, it can be difficult to know how to proceed with teaching in their accustomed ways within school spaces.

Likewise, when Elder knowledge is incorporated into policy documents that are intended to impact well-established institutional approaches across a jurisdiction, many questions arise as to how to preserve authenticity, accessibility, responsiveness, and contextual relevance, as when the knowledge was first shared. Expectations of Elders, and of those who learn from them, can neither be idealized nor neglected, but rather should be established through collaboration and on shared terms. To offer such collaboration may demand extensive preparation, flexibility, and openness on the part of schools and systems. This kind of negotiation, and the long-term relationship building that frequently accompany Elder instruction, can be unfamiliar or even intimidating for teachers and government staff. Thus, this article works to contribute to a dialogue about how and why to work with Elders in school systems, including the opportunities and complexities illuminated by the case of the Nunavut Department of Education in its early years.

### **Author Positionality and Approach to this Research**

Catherine (Cathy) is Heather's mother and, in that sense, we share a great deal in terms of positionality. Both of us consider ourselves long-term Northerners of European and Settler ancestry. We both work, in our respective careers, to find ways to contribute to Inuit mandates for education in the Canadian Arctic, and beyond it. Heather's work is more focused in academia, whereas Cathy's experience is in school system administration and leadership.

Heather attended cultural classes taught by Inuit Elders in elementary school in the 1990s and also worked for the Nunavut Department of Education on system-wide change initiatives during this time period (2009-2012), witnessing the role of Elder guidance at the territorial level. She is a historian, scholar, and educator who has written extensively on education in the eastern Arctic. This article originates from Heather's dissertation research (H. E. McGregor, 2015, p. 134-170), which explores the very recent history of educational change in Nunavut's public school system.

Cathy carries 40 years of experience in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut school systems and was involved in designing and facilitating many of the policy, curriculum, and leadership changes that Nunavut called for during this period. She retired from the position of Executive Director of Curriculum and School Services for the Nunavut Department of Education in 2013, a position she had held for 10 years. During that time, Cathy worked directly with the Elders who are discussed in most detail in this article. Given this experience and role, Cathy participated in in-depth interviews with Heather to inform her dissertation and this resulting publication.

The limits of this research approach are its focus on documents produced by or for the government (used with permission from the NDE) and our first-hand perspectives, recognizing Cathy's deep involvement in the work in question. Ideally, future research would include a wider survey of Elders and policy-makers, administrators, educators, and students involved in the school system to illuminate the significance of Elder involvement with more breadth and depth. A more comprehensive examination of how Elder knowledge is being implemented or mobilized in schools, and how it affects the lived curriculum of Inuit and non-Inuit students on an ongoing basis, would be highly valuable. Nonetheless, we hope that documenting this phase of Elder guidance for policy development in Nunavut schools, and its associated processes, contributes to institutional memory within Nunavut. This research may also inspire and mobilize similar commitments in other Indigenous and public school systems across Canada or beyond.

## **Indigenous Elders Working with Schools and School Systems: A Review of Literature**

Not properly acknowledging the Elders is probably the most serious mistake we make as we attempt to create a quality education for our people... How can we learn about our traditions on which to base our education if we don't ask the Elders? Little is written by our people that we can turn to for this information. (Kirkness, 1998, p. 13)

Indigenous Elder involvement has increased in educational institutions across Canada over the last 40 years. To draw generalizations about the ways Elders are being invited into, and taking up roles in, K-12 schools and post-secondary institutions will undoubtedly fail to fully account for the successes and challenges of Elder participation. It is also nearly impossible to accurately represent the different ways Elders are understood and positioned in different Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) communities and societies. Nevertheless, a review of existing literature on Elder involvement suggests the initiative to employ Elder Advisors at the territorial level in Nunavut is a distinct approach to integrating Inuit knowledge and Elder knowledge in public school system materials and practices.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, there are few sources that demonstrate the complexity of attending to the needs of Elders, as well as those who learn from them. Here we draw on literature that describes Elder-led teaching and learning in or for schools, rather than more broadly in family and community life. According to our searches, there is little in the way of literature focused on Inuit contexts on this topic, which is why we widened the scope to Indigenous contexts, mostly Canadian.

Elders are defined in the literature on (primarily) First Nations education as: those who hold and teach situated Indigenous knowledges in ways that are relevant to their communities, following substantial life experience. Jo-ann Archibald (2008) defines Elders as those who hold wisdom:

One cannot be said to have wisdom until others acknowledge an individual's respectful and responsible use and teaching of knowledge to others. Usually, wisdom is attributed only to Elders, but this is not because they have lived a long time. What one does with knowledge and the insight gained from knowledge are the criteria for being called an "Elder." (p. 3)

Archibald (2008) points out that age is not necessarily or exclusively a factor in being viewed as an Elder, but rather, holding knowledges or gifts as a result of life experience, cultural training and education, and reflection (p. 42). These gifts are passed on to others. Elders are often storytellers whose oral practices are characterized by using humour, being able to hold the attention of listeners for a long period

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that while Nunavut was created as the result of a comprehensive settlement agreement with the Canadian federal government, its human/social services such as the school system are run by the public territorial government, not dissimilar to the Yukon or Northwest Territories school systems. There is unique legislation in Nunavut to ensure the languages and culture of its Inuit majority population are privileged across the system (see McGregor 2012b), but schools are not administered through an Indigenous-governance model comparable to First Nations band council schools elsewhere in Canada.

of time, and telling stories that are remembered (Archibald, 2008, p. 61). Elders are “culturally trustworthy” according to Archibald (2008), and what is expected of those who learn from Elders in return is respect (p. 42).<sup>2</sup>

Indigenous scholars commenting on the role of Elders in Indigenous societies emphasize teaching by example and teaching through life experience, both positive and negative. As Vine Deloria (1991) describes, “The elder exemplifies both the good and the bad experiences of life and in witnessing their failures as much as their successes we are cushioned in our despair of disappointment and bolstered in our exuberance of success” (p. 23). Deloria (1991) also distinguishes Elder knowledge as transmitting the sense of responsibility that each person carries to their family, community, and, more broadly, within the march of history. Therefore, they learn who they are, which is in contrast to the kind of knowledge usually privileged in professions that focuses almost exclusively on how things work (Deloria, 1991). Jeannie Kerr, synthesizing the work of Indigenous scholars, found similarities in ontological foundations and the role of Elders in mobilizing Indigenous knowledge. She describes this similarity as:

...knowledge originates from the land, yet is in an ongoing cycle of being sourced and expressed through the people in a variety of ways, mainly arbitrated through the embodied wisdom of the Elders and Knowledge Holders. Importantly, the knowledge is held differently according to the roles and relationships of the knower in the community. (Kerr, 2013, p. 171)

Elders are consistently, but usually briefly, mentioned in literature on improving educational experiences for Indigenous learners, such as by noting the importance of instilling respect for Elders in students or inviting Elders to act as guest speakers (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Kanu, 2011). In documenting the interruption of cultural, linguistic and traditional knowledge transmission caused by residential schools and other assimilative educational policies, researchers and educators have recognized intergenerational learning from Elders as crucial to Indigenous self-determination. Battiste and Henderson (2009) argue: “Elders, knowledge holders, and cultural workers are indispensable to the process of appropriately naturalizing [Indigenous Knowledge] and Aboriginal language education in schools and teacher-training institutions” (p. 15). The literature also emphasizes Elders’ role(s) as bridges between cultural domains (Medicine, 1987). Particularly for Indigenous students who do not have grandparents, or whose grandparents do not carry Indigenous knowledge, Elders are said to be an important source of intergenerational experience as well as cultural and linguistic references and modeling (Kaomea, 2001). Examples of the ways Elders are involved in educational institutions typically include public school culture and language instruction (Kaomea, 2003), undergraduate Native Studies/Indigenous Studies programs (Newhouse, 2008), professional development for teacher candidates or practicing teachers (Grant, 1995), and cultural orientation programs (Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1998).

Few works provide much detail as to how relationships and initiatives with Elders are undertaken and sustained, and the role of Elders in educational institutions is usually represented as being unproblematic (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). There are many important questions surrounding the roles of Elders in schools: How do educators, administrators, or curriculum developers relate to Elders? What works well and what does not? What are the specific impacts of Elders on learners and other teachers? What impact is there on Elders by participating in educational institutions? What epistemological questions are raised in Elder instruction and how do educators mediate those differences? And, perhaps most importantly, what is the full range of ways Elders can contribute at multiple levels in educational contexts—rather than being limited to occasional guest appearances?

Castagno and Brayboy (2008) suggest that Elders, among other community members, should be involved in program and policy development and decisions, or school governance. But no suggestions are made as to whether or how to facilitate this differently for Elders given their special status and potentially differing needs. Amy Parent (2011) also found that it is not uncommon for schools serving a primarily Indigenous population to have Elders sitting on their advisory or governance committees, and in terms of parent and community involvement in schools, Elders are often at the top of the list. But, again, the characterization of their involvement is brief (Parent, 2011, p. 12). Madden et al. (2013) found that barriers exist to the implementation of Indigenous education in public schools, even where institutional commitments have been made to such goals through structures like Elder committee oversight.

<sup>2</sup> But, Archibald (2008) points out, this should not be “blind trust” as there have been cases of individuals misidentified as Elders who misused their position to enact harm (p. 42). This has been the case in Nunavut as well.

Exceptions to those who gloss over challenges in providing for the involvement of Elders include Julie Kaomea (2001), who argues that insufficient care and planning is offered to Elders in Hawaiian schools. Elders have a demanding schedule and work under conditions most trained teachers would find frustrating:

Virtually homeless in our schools, with no classroom or even office space to speak of, these itinerant seniors scurry back and forth through the halls on an efficiency maximizing teaching schedule that has them running from room to room at a hectic and even dizzying pace. (Kaomea, 2001, p. 80)

In another example, Agnes Grant illustrates the tension that comes from institutional student evaluation tools in contrast to Indigenous assessment strategies, in the context of an Elder-led program. She argues: "It becomes imperative that university evaluation be reexamined to identify ways in which student teachers can be evaluated in conformity with university standards while also allowing acceptable community and elder involvement" (Grant, 1995, p. 216). Grant goes on to outline the distinctions between student-teacher supervisors' approaches to evaluation and those that Elders would prefer with some suggestions for compromise.

Archibald (2008) provides the most comprehensive and nuanced description of the involvement of Elders in Indigenous knowledge mobilization for school curriculum and programs. She describes the development of curriculum based on First Nations perspectives on law and justice in British Columbia, and the process of collecting stories from Elders. Archibald (2008) notes considerations such as: time constraints of institutional projects that are inconsistent with time necessary to build appropriate relationships with Elders (p. 107-108, 125-126); following appropriate and situated expectations of respect and responsibility in relationships, as well as establishing the terms under which permission will be offered to use Elder knowledge (p. 110, 125-126); and, creating teacher training resources to support the use of Elder-generated stories through appropriate pedagogy (p. 111-112, 122-123). She notes ethical principles, permissions, cultural protocols, verification processes, reciprocity, publication, and use of Indigenous knowledge by non-Indigenous educators as ongoing issues in work with Elders (Archibald, 2008, p. 143-153).

More attention should be given to how the kind of engagement called for by many scholars might be made possible in schools and school systems. This engagement can support further dialogue on how the needs of all involved can be negotiated respectfully, so as to ensure that the knowledge held by Elders is shared on terms that account for the histories of appropriation, misunderstanding, and disrespect in the use of Indigenous knowledge and relationships with Indigenous people by institutions (Smith, 1999/2012). The remainder of this article documents aspects of the ways the NDE has been working on and practicing these processes.

## **A Brief History of Elder Involvement in Nunavut Schools**

*Inuuqatigii: the Curriculum from the Inuit Perspective* (NWTDE, 1996), developed with the input of no fewer than 55 Elders, says that students should learn the following:

Elders are highly respected for their mental abilities, knowledge and wisdom. Inuit revere anyone who has lived a long life and has gained knowledge in practically every aspect of life and is willing to share the knowledge. Traditionally, the elders made decisions for the whole camp. Their advice on every situation was consulted before decisions that might affect the camp were made. Today, elders are almost the only ones who have the knowledge of traditional skills and language and have much they can contribute towards the education of the young. (NWTDE, 1996, p. 47)

A detailed Master's thesis by Naullaq Arnaquq (2008), a long-term Inuk educational leader from Iqaluit, also describes the traditional role of Elders. She goes on to mention changes to their roles, as difficult experiences with settlement and colonization occurred in the Arctic:

Elders who told stories and legends in their homes helped to pass on a rich legacy of language and storytelling. [...] Songs, mores, values and chants are woven through many of these epics. Children were told shortened versions appropriate to their age and as time went on, learned the adult versions which had all the sex, violence and graphic scenes. Many families lost their storytellers during the flu and TB epidemics from the 1930's to the 1950's, and trag-

ically, the biggest loss happened when schools and communities were established breaking the age old tradition. (Arnaquq, 2008, p. 163)

Arnaquq goes on to describe how Elders develop and offer *uqaujjuusiat*, “gifts of words of advice” through their own life experiences, through discussion with other Elders, and through validation in the repetition of their observations:

Older people who lived to see the trials and patterns of life, saw the truths of the *uqaujjuusiat* (gifts of words of advice) they had received being validated over time in their long lives so they passed them on with gentle conviction. Talking to other Elders and people in the context of daily life situations and events also confirmed their thoughts and experiences. There would be events they had pondered and theorized about which would eventually be validated so these would then become part of their advice. (2008, p. 162)

Likewise, according to a qualitative study of perspectives on ageing in one Inuit community, “part of the determination as to whether an elder is recognized as particularly knowledgeable necessarily involves his or her ability to communicate with younger people” (Collings, 2001, p. 149).

Since at least the early 1970s, Elder instruction occurred intermittently and variably in territorial schools, usually on the initiative of motivated teachers or principals, through guest visits or separate classes. Made-in-the-NWT program policy at the time, the “Red Book” (NWTDE, 1972), does not refer to Elders specifically, which may be because the term “Elders” was less common then (Arnaquq, 2008, p. 106). The policy does, in several instances, recommend reliance on “local expertise” to infuse instruction with cultural content, and in practice this would have often meant involvement by Elders. Local involvement was almost exclusively achieved through an “add-on” approach called cultural inclusion, like Wednesday afternoon story-telling or country food preparation. Over time, many schools implemented guest instruction by Elders as a regular occurrence. This instruction was often referred to across the North as “cultural class,” sometimes held outside the school through land-based programs. Despite sometimes hiring Elders in full-time teaching positions to teach language and culture classes, we are not aware of any empirical evidence to describe the impacts on students of this cultural inclusion approach, nor whether it had an impact on other classrooms, subjects, or school programs.

In addition to the culture and language add-on model, efforts were made to integrate Indigenous content into the common subject areas of social studies, language arts, or science. The practice of drawing on Elder expertise for development of locally and culturally relevant teaching and learning materials increased in the 1980s with the establishment of the regional Teaching and Learning Centres (TLCs) and legal provision for instruction in Indigenous languages beyond primary grades (Special Committee on Education, 1982). A major goal of the TLCs was to publish books in Indigenous languages. TLC staff would record Elders’ stories, conduct interviews about cultural knowledge, and make books or units based on the knowledge collected.

The role of Elders in such progressive efforts was primarily a function of the need to source Inuit knowledge, and the lack of documentation of such information elsewhere. It was not until later that Elders were seen not only as conduits of traditional knowledge and Inuit principles of living, but also invited to guide school policy and programs at a deeper level, to enhance responsiveness to Inuit families, and to nurture intergenerational learning.

As of the 1990s, Elder involvement increased in classroom instruction, curriculum development, and school-community consultations. Leading up to the creation of the Nunavut government, special additional funds were made available to the public service for increasing human resource and professional development opportunities. This funding substantially increased what was already allocated by the Inuit boards of education for Elder instruction (C. McGregor, 2001). The presence of Elders was expected to transform schools into places that community members would feel more welcome and comfortable visiting, and Elders could model for school staff the values that reflected the local community. These positive impacts of Elders, beyond direct instruction, are corroborated by Arnaquq’s memories (2008, p. 141), and stories shared about the role of Elders in school decision-making by Inuit educational leaders (Tompkins, 2006, p. 246). O’Donoghue et al. (2005) state that the role of Elders was mentioned many times by Inuit educators reflecting on the strengths of education between 1985-1999, calling it a “key factor in promoting best practices in Inuit education” (p. 8). But, the involvement of Elders in school instruction may not universally have been viewed as positive and, because there has been little research on their impact, the outcomes remain unclear.

In terms of Elder involvement in curriculum development, *Inuuqatigiit: The Curriculum from the Inuit perspective* (NWTDE, 1996) was ground-breaking because it arranges aspects of Inuit knowledge into learning topics and outcomes for students from K-12. Crucial for the goals of supporting Inuit staff, Inuit language instruction, and cultural responsiveness, it is a rich resource representing a significant investment on the parts of the four Inuit divisional boards and Department of Education during the 1990s, as described in more detail elsewhere (H. E. McGregor, 2010, 2012a). The intent of *Inuuqatigiit* was that it should make content and learning experiences accessible for integration into any coursework or subject areas; instead of teaching culture in a separate class.

The Inuit authors of *Inuuqatigiit* report that the guidance of Elders allowed them to come to a consensus with greater ease, and that Elder guidance offered a “turning point of the whole project,” helping them grow as educators, adults and knowledge holders (Aylward, 2009, p. 146). One writer declared, “It really made us wealthy in a way” (quoted in Aylward, 2009, p. 146). Committee members would return to discuss items with Elders more than once throughout the drafting process. Identification of content, including recommending “key experiences” that students should have to learn particular content, and assigning learning outcomes to age levels (or divisions), were the primary topics of consultation held with Elders in the *Inuuqatigiit* project. Arnaquq (2008) wrote about the deep impact an Elder consultation event for *Inuuqatigiit* work had on her:

The Elders we sat and listened to were talking about issues and topics they had not read about but knew from experience and heard from their Elders who heard it from their own Elders! It was the deepest legacy of oral knowledge being shared and recalled as these Elders spoke together. (p. 178)

The affirmation expressed by Arnaquq was accompanied, for some Inuit educators involved in the writing, by concurrent feelings that were less positive. Several writers remember the process as painful, producing “self-turmoil” because of the need to face their own loss, and the problematic process of recovery, of language and knowledge (Aylward, 2009). This process was difficult for the authors and produced many conversations about the interventions of colonization on their ability to learn Inuit knowledge, including attendance at residential and day schools (Aylward, 2009). And yet, Aylward (2009) concludes, “In acknowledging the expertise of the elders through interviews, conversations and visits, the authors began to believe they could be taken seriously and be successful within the world of curriculum and policymaking” (p. 148).

## **Elder Involvement at the Nunavut Department of Education, 2000-2013**

### *Elder Advisor Positions*

The nature and depth of Elder involvement with the school system changed substantially when four individuals were hired as full time Elder Advisors by Curriculum and School Services, Nunavut Department of Education in 2000. These positions were located in the decentralized departmental headquarters office in Arviat, where all of Nunavut’s curriculum work was done at the time. Naullaq Arnaquq, then director of the division, commented on how this change would depart from how the system was administered under the former Northwest Territories government: “It had to be different from Yellowknife and reflect Nunavut’s needs, goals, language and culture so I made sure there were Elder Advisors’ positions in place. The curriculum and program had to be based on Inuit values, philosophy and knowledge while taking into consideration contemporary ways” (2008, p. 155). The visionary understanding that more comprehensive Elder knowledge and advice would be needed for Nunavut schools came from the long-term education staff like Arnaquq and the staff working in the Arviat office.

The impact of the Elder Advisors on the curriculum office in Arviat (holding four of the 17 full-time staff positions), and on the entire NDE, is connected to the characteristics of the individual Elders that took up the work. Louis Angalik, Donald Uluadluak, Rhoda Karetak, and Mark Kalluak were recognized across Nunavut as unique individuals with extraordinary capabilities. All were born on the land, that is, before their families had settled in communities, and three out of four of them were (for the most part) unilingual Inuktitut speakers. Donald, Rhoda, and Mark were artists capable of communicating complicated or nuanced ideas effectively across languages using drawings. Mark had worked for the Inuit Cultural Institute and was acknowledged to be an authority on language. All had taken a program,

offered over two years in the mid-1990s called the “Language & Culture Certificate,” intended to prepare adults who are not trained teachers to instruct students in language and culture. Mark and Louie have been honoured with the Order of Nunavut, and Rhoda and Donald received honorary doctorates from the University of Prince Edward Island.

Although he was not employed in the same way by the NDE, Mariano Aupilaarjuk contributed significantly to the Elders’ work. He was one of the most noted Elders and thinkers in Nunavut, and also received an honorary doctorate from the University of Prince Edward Island. Aspects of his traditional knowledge, such as the importance of equal focus on knowing, being, and doing, have been brilliantly documented by Janet Tamalik McGrath (2011, 2018, see also 2002), in which she mentions his contributions with the NDE.<sup>3</sup>

Cathy remembers these individuals as “pretty keen observers about life,” bringing a unique combination of wisdom and common sense. They were dignified, respectful, and humble. As is true of most Elders, they would not claim to be experts and yet were highly generous in sharing their own experience and knowledge. Each person carried specific expertise, as well as common life experiences. Cathy listened to stories shared by the Elders about their life experiences during colonization, when Inuit became obliged to settle in Arctic communities. Reflecting on what she heard, she remembers the Elders being very conscious of not criticizing non-Inuit too strongly, even when they had personal life experiences that would have warranted being very critical.

The Elder Advisors’ responsibilities were to share their lived experience: to generate information about Inuit culture that would be used to form the foundation of a school system. As noted above, information on specific topics like animals and plants had been collected to certain degrees through previous Elder consultations, but the work with these Elders was intended to reach a deeper level of knowledge mobilization.

The work proceeded organically with these Elders, differing substantially from previous work. This approach was much more open-ended, driven by the interests and suggestions of the Elders instead of the school system, which left more room for honouring, as Cathy put it, “how integrated life was, and how complicated it is to talk about that.” They grappled with questions like: How did people relate to each other, what were the laws that underlay the way people related to each other, and the values that underlay that? In some cases, the same topics have been revisited through Elder conversations that have taken them deeper and deeper into thinking about Inuit knowledge (see also McGrath, 2011). In other words, it has not always been a linear process but also a recursive one.

The impact of Elders in the government office echoed the impact of Elders in schools. They contributed specific cultural and language expertise; affected the way business was conducted in the office itself (communication, human relations); and raised awareness of Elder perspectives on the purpose and goals of schooling. While Cathy was in Arviat she interacted with the Elders on a daily basis, observing that it made a difference to everyday operations and interactions. She remembers:

It forces [the office] to use Inuktitut. They have a huge impact on the context, the feeling, the atmosphere and the culture of the office, just like they do in a school. They’re good to go to for advice when you have problems. They have lots of life experience, which is relevant to running the office and problems with staff and things like that. They bring a different way of being and living that is more ‘Inuit’ to the way the office operates.

For their advisory roles, the Elders had learned to use computers to produce word documents in Inuktitut. All four Elders had been involved in the schools in Arviat previously. However, they were not teachers and did not presume to know how ideas should be applied in the school context. Therefore, collaboration between Elders, department staff in Arviat, and experienced classroom teachers supported unprecedented bridging between traditional Inuit knowledge and the contemporary school system.

### *Elders Advisory Committee (EAC)*

The EAC was created in 2000 to augment and extend discussions about Inuit language and culture. Partly because the four Elders working at the NDE all were living in Arviat, it was necessary to create a larger and more geographically representative group with whom to consult. The committee met two or

<sup>3</sup> Janet Tamalik McGrath’s Inuit knowledge research was conducted in Inuktitut and describes a theory of Inuit knowledge renewal, based on interviews with the late Mariano Aupilaarjuk. The interviews lead McGrath to conclusions regarding intercultural dialogue around knowledge production in Inuit contexts.



three times per year every year, with differing membership, but always including both men and women from a variety of communities. The group dynamic and opportunity for Elders to build on and respond to each other's knowledge was important, as well as the variety of perspectives. Cathy describes the work, and its challenges, as follows:

I think it's really hard for us to imagine how difficult it would be to create the framework of a culture from lived experience. And then analyze that lived experience to come up with the beliefs, laws, principles, values, and the stages of learning, the lifelong continuum. And then to talk about child rearing and all the elements of how important child rearing is, or was, or still is. I think they had to experiment quite a bit with trying to find people who could think in that metacognitive way, but also think in the kind of practical way—because that was the only way they could actually figure out what were the steps or stages, or the views about any of those deep, kind of amorphous topics.

Sometimes the committee was approached with specific questions or requests for approval on policy ideas, whereas other times they followed their own direction. Joe Karetak, the coordinator in Arviat who worked closely with the Elder Advisors and EAC, provided the crucial bridge between them and the department. According to Cathy, he facilitated by providing a summary or synthesis of each meeting and identifying further questions to work from in future or liaising with the department about other topics to discuss.

All of the EAC meetings were audio-recorded to be available for future use. The audio tapes are intended to be digitized, archived by topic, transcribed, and translated into English. Cathy points out:

People can go back over time and maybe even see things in it that we don't see now because we're too close to it. And it's a very rich bank of information for forever, to have, because those people who have that lived experience kind of prior to such great impact of outsiders are dying. And they're not going to be available much longer to tell us that. So the bank of information is key for future interpretation.

Indeed, as a historical researcher interested in child-rearing and education prior to the introduction of Arctic schools, Heather used transcripts from early EAC meetings to characterize Inuit education (H. E. McGregor, 2010).

### *Working with Elders*

Apart from the work they did together in the Arviat office, the Elder Advisors were frequently called on to contribute to workshops and presentations for the NDE and other government department working groups/committees, usually by opening the dialogue and contributing stories or ideas relevant to the meeting purpose. This approach is similar to the role of an Elder-in-residence that is becoming more common in universities recently. However, the Elders were also available to curriculum development staff for smaller consultations to provide guidance at the time of initiating a new learning program or curriculum development project. The C&SS "Project Outline" template (August 2012) and "Curriculum/Program Actualization Process" (November 2013) call for coordinators to outline how their project will align with Inuit knowledge, as well as a separate section where they must describe the steps to complete "cultural research" or "Elder involvement."

One example is the design of a training program for school community counsellors. Before the program was even outlined, the coordinator responsible for it asked the Elders questions about the kinds of things counsellors should know—about the relationship between adults and children, how children were seen and expected to behave, or how conflict was dealt with in the past. Such meetings would be simultaneously translated for the benefit of the staff who did not speak Inuktitut and would also be audio recorded for potential future transcription, although such processes are, of course, time-consuming and there have been challenges with keeping the tapes organized and accessible for staff to use.

The process C&SS staff follow in working with Elders is comparable to an Inuit knowledge/cultural research project. The staff member responsible for the project (the researcher), identifies the topic and creates some questions to start the conversations. These initial questions also drive the identification of Elders (participants) who may have expertise in the areas of interest. If one of the Elder Advisors at the department is not the best person to ask about that topic, or if it is important to consult with Elders in a particular community, then others are considered. Conversations with the Elders are more open-ended

than a typical question-and-answer based interview, but staff are encouraged to prepare some questions. When it comes to analysis and application of the knowledge, similar to a research project, there are few guidelines that can assist to shape the fluid nature of these processes—depending largely on the product into which the knowledge is being incorporated (teaching resource, training program outline, or policy document). Figuring out how to mobilize the knowledge, especially when combined with best practices from mainstream educational theory, also called for in curriculum/project expectations (C&SS, August 2012, November 2013), can present coordinators with conflicts, contradictory expectations and numerous challenges. Sometimes knowledge is attributed to “Elders” generally in the documents (with specific acknowledgments to the participating Elders in the front matter), and other times, such as if a story is being used, it will be attributed directly to the individual Elder who shared it.

The C&SS practice of doing focused and specific Elder consultation at the outset of a project during this period was intended to build Inuit content into school system policies, programs, and products from the beginning, not as an “add-on.” In the context of Nunavut, the purpose of taking this approach intended to show respect, to honour Elders as knowledge holders, and ensure Inuit perspectives deeply inform materials. This practice also reflects the fact that many other C&SS staff members are not Inuit. Therefore, when the coordinators consult with the Elders first, it makes them think differently from the outset about the process, organization, themes, and specific content. Many long-term educators in Nunavut are well aware of the unconscious assumptions and cross-cultural miscommunication that continue to occur when teachers who are not Inuit deliver programs with Inuit students. Building Inuit knowledge in from the beginning provides additional supports in addressing this challenge.

Differing languages, as well as differing styles of making meaning, can certainly affect communication in these consultations. Working through an interpreter and across non-Inuit and Inuit perspectives, there are several levels and opportunities for miscommunication. Cathy explains:

The non-Inuit tendency is to ask a very specific question, and the Elder tendency is probably to talk more generally. Sometimes I think non-Inuit don't think their question has been answered, and they have to figure out another way to ask it. Working through the interpreter, for whom English is not their first language, usually, their interpretation sometimes is really hard to understand. Are they translating it literally or are they translating the meaning of what the Elders are saying? And also what the non-Inuit are saying? And then... you can have the arrows of communication going in opposite directions without much overlap.

The non-Inuit staff member may immediately be trying to understand the Elder knowledge they receive in the context of the contemporary school environment, but the Elder is not necessarily thinking about it that way. Their lived experience is different, and that can be hard to bridge.

### **Lasting Elder Legacies in Nunavut School System Policy**

The Elder Advisors' participation in developing reference materials for Inuit knowledge renewal includes the identification and elaboration of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit principles,<sup>4</sup> and specifically how they can be applied in the context of child-rearing and schooling. Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) is said by Elders to embrace all aspects of traditional Inuit culture. A direct translation of the term is “Inuit knowledge already acquired that is still relevant today.” IQ has been advanced by Inuit who have a long and deep connection to the land in the Arctic, and education in the language and culture that existed before, and persisted within and against, colonizing influences. These principles are espoused by the Government of Nunavut and throughout Nunavut society (GN, 1999, 2004, 2009; Henderson, 2007; Timpson, 2008). The government asked all departments to incorporate IQ, and creation of a government-wide IQ advisory council called Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit Katimajit has supported this expectation (Timpson, 2008, p. 212). The Elder Advisors and the EAC worked consistently on describing and elaborating on how to use these principles with children and youth, such as developing cross-curricular competencies to assist with assessing how children learn them.<sup>5</sup> The Elders and the EAC also identified laws of relationships, natural laws, values, attitudes, stages of learning/a learning continuum (rather than grades), and strands

<sup>4</sup> Six of the eight IQ principles were identified by the Nunavut Social Development Council with Elders in early consultative work by the Nunavut government (Arnakak, 2000; Henderson, 2007; Nunavut Social Development Council, 1998; and Tester & Irniq, 2008), and two more principles (Inuuqatigiitsiarniq, Tunnganarniq) were later added.

<sup>5</sup> Competencies, as opposed to learning outcomes, integrate expectations for knowledge, skill and attitude development (NDE, 2008a).

of learning (rather than separate subjects areas) that comprise foundations of instruction according to Inuit knowledge, culture, language, and tradition.

Much of this knowledge is documented in the landmark NDE “foundation documents.” These are entitled *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit: Education Framework for Nunavut Curriculum* (referred to hereafter as the “IQ foundation document”) (NDE, 2007); *Inuglugijaittuq: Foundation for Inclusive Education in Nunavut Schools* (NDE, 2008b); *Ilitaunnikuliniriniq: Foundation for Dynamic Assessment as Learning in Nunavut Schools* (NDE, 2008a); the yet unpublished *Inunnguiniq: Critical Pedagogy for Nunavut Schools* (2010a); and one more document on bilingual education. As written elsewhere (H. E. McGregor, 2012a), the IQ foundation documents articulate the most detailed vision of education from Inuit perspectives to date. Under development by the Elders and curriculum development staff since 2000, these documents provide direction for policy, curriculum, and programming. Indeed, the *Nunavut Education Act* calls on the education system to account for IQ in all of its programs: “It is the responsibility of the Minister, the district education authorities and the education staff to ensure that Inuit societal values and the principles and concepts of *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* are incorporated throughout, and fostered by, the public education system” (section 1(3), emphasis in original). Without the work of the Elders, there would be little way in which this requirement could be envisioned or on which the implementation of it could be based.

Elder knowledge is shared through the IQ foundation documents in various ways. The first is in the acknowledgments, which lists more than 55 Elders, along with many Inuit educators, community experts, and curriculum staff. Secondly, Elders share philosophy and values related to schooling through metaphors, such as the “iglu metaphor for child development and learning,” and the traditional story Puinaiqsiaq Nikanaiqsiaq that describes the purpose of schooling as “creating an able human being” (NDE, 2007, p. 17 and 57). Also evident are direct quotations attributed to individual Elders in sections of the document devoted to defining key Inuktitut terms. Some generalizations are attributed to Elders as a result of Inuit knowledge research, such as “Elders describe *maligait* (natural laws) as the most fundamental laws entrenched in Inuit society that respect one’s place in the universe, the environment and in society” (NDE, 2007, p. 25). The contribution of Donald Uluadluak in terms of drawings is pervasive throughout the foundation documents, in which nearly all key concepts are accompanied by his colour illustrations. Elder knowledge is also evident in the use of Inuktitut terms throughout the foundation documents, including syllabics and Roman orthography to support readers learning how to pronounce and use terminology. Distinctive in the *Inuglugijaittuq* and *Ilitaunnikuliniriniq* documents is the inclusion of short stories or memories attributed to each Elder Advisor or members of the EAC, in sidebar columns that relate to the main text. Photos of the Elders appear, pictured in their cubicles in the Arviat office, on the land, or in historical photos. Individual Elders shared dreams, legends, life experiences, and demonstrated specific land skills or practices. These are examples of the lasting legacies of the Elder Advisors, contributions which continue to be available to school system administrators and educators who are working towards fulfilling the development of a made-in-Nunavut education system.

### **Educational Policy Change through Elder Visioning**

The employment of four Elder Advisors as staff in the curriculum office significantly affected policy, curriculum, and leadership in the NDE. This move constitutes an unprecedented role for Elders in developing source material on which to base directions and decisions in creating teaching and learning resources, and other supports, for a public school system in Canada. Their role was not just with an “Inuit studies” module or course, but intended to be pervasive. Specifically, this approach is seen in the development of the foundation documents and conceptual material associated with them, and the comprehensive referencing of IQ in the *Nunavut Education Act*. These provisions include certification of Elders as Master teachers for school-based instruction, and the creation of a committee of Elders responsible for evaluating implementation of the IQ duties in the Act by school leaders. All of these mechanisms were conceived to support the creation of a new school system for Nunavut.

The role of Elders had previously been much more casually pursued for consultation and program instruction. In Nunavut they became institutionally-supported knowledge holders tasked with collaboratively generating and synthesizing new ways of understanding and applying Inuit knowledge from, and about, the past. The purpose of this work was to reconceptualize the assumptions, philosophies, and or-

ganizing principles that shape schools, based on alternatives put forth by Inuit to assert their own knowledge, language, and culture as the foundations for schooling. Associated administrative and curricular changes to school operations resulting from this reconceptualization work were mandated through the *Education Act* and intentionally in-serviced with all stakeholders: parents, community parent committees, teachers, and educational leaders at every level in the school system, as well as shared with many potential employers.

It is important to note that even as Inuit curriculum and policy development was undertaken by Elders at the territorial level, we cannot make any claims regarding its implementation in every school or classroom across Nunavut. Significant efforts at providing in-service to practicing teachers in the areas of Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* and made-in-Nunavut materials were part of the departmental efforts during this period (H. E. McGregor, 2015). The work of the Elders described here formed an important part of the content and approach to mandated educational leadership training in Nunavut at this time. However, we know anecdotally that dissemination of information and best practices across Nunavut was, and remains, notoriously inconsistent. Many teachers, principals, and superintendents who are not Inuit stay in Nunavut for short periods of time or frequently move from one community/region to another. Many Inuit teachers are overburdened by comparatively limited access to Inuit language teaching materials and relevant professional development, coaching, and other supports. These factors, combined with the challenges of logistics, communications, and travel in the Arctic, mean that educational change is even more precarious in Nunavut than in most other jurisdictions.

Nevertheless, we suggest that the many actions associated with providing for this Elder involvement—from necessitating simultaneous interpretation at departmental meetings, to the financial commitment of assembling the Elders Advisory Committee from around the territory, to the expectation that teachers and principals be evaluated on their implementation of IQ in schools—can be viewed as decolonizing practices. That is, accounting for the history and ongoing impacts of colonization in the Arctic, new ways of operating and relating in the public domain are being envisioned and pursued to give primacy to Indigenous imperatives. These are actions intended to make space for different understandings of what knowledge is of most worth in schools, how students should be expected to demonstrate learning, and what those involved in education should do to create successful schools. The ultimate rationale for this comes not only from what individuals in the Arctic hold to be good and right, but from the legal requirements and responsibilities agreed to under the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement*, the *Nunavut Act*, and the legislation subsequently created by the Nunavut government. The advocacy of Inuit politicians, the hard work of Inuit educators, the creative thinking of curriculum developers and experienced teachers, and the generosity of time and energy of the Elders made this possible.

The role of Elders was emphasized and advanced by long-term Nunavut educators who saw the need to create sustained practices to access Inuit knowledge and wisdom. These were practices intended to reach beyond the disruption of knowledge transmission and culture that occurred with the process of intensified colonization and settlement in communities, toward some understanding of what Inuit experience was like before. According to the Elders themselves, such efforts do not signify a desire to “go back” or change time, but rather to see how the knowledge of Inuit can be integrated into a contemporary school system:

Elders are articulating how and why *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*—beliefs, laws, principles, values, skills, knowledge and attitudes—are so well suited to Inuit today. In doing so, the Elders are not advocating a return to the past, but a grounding of education in the strengths of the Inuit so that their children will survive and successfully negotiate the world in which they find themselves today. By entrenching *IQ* beliefs and principles within the system and curricula, the aim is to provide a learning environment where *silaturniq* (becoming wise) is fostered, and within which the strength of *inummarik* (a capable person) can develop. (NDE, 2007, p. 21, emphasis in original)

This approach suggests Elders know where we are now and take the position that where we are now could be improved with the input of those who constitute and shape our communities—largely, Inuit who wish to protect and promote their language, culture and heritage, and have a desire to see it made more accessible for youth and for future generations. Using the government system to create Elder positions, making Elder consultation a responsibility, and providing the time and funding necessary to pursue consultation, allowed for sustained and recursive collaborative working relationships. As a result,

deeper access to Inuit knowledge was made possible.

For many people, there is something different about learning in the presence of Elders—watching them with learners and seeing the expertise and wisdom they contribute—that produces a sense of oneself in the flow of time. This experience provides a reminder that the ways schools position knowledge, and the demonstration of mastering it, are not the only ways people expect and desire to know, and that there is always someone who knows something more and something different. Perhaps one is reminded that there are questions that must be put to someone more experienced. There are challenges that warrant patience beyond one's stores. There are situations that call for precision that one might not fulfill, except under the watchful eye of someone who is highly respected and someone who expects the best. In meeting the expectations of a respected Elder, one models what is possible for the learners coming up behind, and one is given the opportunity to pass knowledge along as well, to become the teacher. Eventually, one will be expected to act as an Elder, because Elders do pass away and new ones are needed. Outside the sense most educators hold of being a professional, a union member, an authority, a skilled pedagogue in control of the classroom, one is reminded of being a community member. The Elder working alongside the educator, or mentoring the educator, denotes this status and this opportunity: to be a lifelong learner. When change is upon us, when time slips away, when children are born and start school, we may think of an Elder we knew who withstood harder times, more demanding changes, and had more time to know what it means to be an able human being. And we are strengthened by that.

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