"Everyone is Willing to Help Each Other": Collaborative Practices in Nunavut Schools

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Abstract: During a constructivist grounded theory research study which sought to understand how Nunavut educators experienced the implementation of a new literacy framework, participants shared stories of how they collaborated with their colleagues to provide effective literacy instruction. Teacher collaboration has been linked to improved educational outcomes for students. Given this, it is important to understand how the teachers who participated in this study collaborated. Using Little's (1990) continuum of collegial relations as a theoretical framework, this work suggests that teacher collaboration in Nunavut schools often lacks the depth of joint work. However, even less collaborative experiences contribute to the professional learning of teachers and help to improve their instructional practices. An exploration of the collaborative activities of these teachers identifies directions for future research.

Keywords: Teacher Collaboration, Indigenous Education, Literacy Instruction

Introduction

Research has found that teacher collaboration has a positive impact on student learning (Goddard et al., 2007; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Vangrienken et al., 2015). However, not all collaborative activities have an equal impact on instructional practices. According to Hattie (2015), "too often collaboration is about sharing resources, sharing anecdotes and war stories and sharing beliefs about why or why not something might work in 'my' context" (p. 23). These forms of low-stakes collaborative activities indicate a supportive working environment while allowing teachers to retain autonomy and privacy over what actually happens in their classrooms on a daily basis. Hattie (2015) argues that:

> We must stop allowing teachers to work alone, behind closed doors and in isolation … and instead shift to a professional ethic that emphasizes collaboration. We need communities within and across schools that work collaboratively to diagnose what teachers need to do, plan programmes and teaching interventions and evaluate the success of the interventions. We need communities that promote and share professional development aimed at improving teacher effectiveness and expertise. (p. 23)

More meaningful collaborative opportunities have a greater impact on instructional practices, but require teachers to collaborate on a deeper level.

As I sought to understand their experiences with the implementation of a new literacy framework for Nunavut schools, teachers shared examples of how they collaborated with their colleagues to provide effective literacy instruction. While tangential to the purpose of that study, given the intersection of the research on collaboration (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Goddard et al., 2007; Mora-Ruano et al., 2019; Schleifer et al., 2017) with the need to improve literacy instruction in Nunavut schools (Berger, 2006; Department of Education, 2014b; National Committee on Inuit Education, 2011; Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, 2021) it was important that these stories not be set aside. Little's (1990) continuum of collegial relations was used to analyze the depth of collaboration occurring in the collaborative activities teachers related participating in, in order to consider whether they demonstrate the integrated and purposeful collaboration that Hattie (2015) calls for. Given the imperative to improve educational outcomes for Nunavut students, and that "underdeveloped literacy skills . . . [are] the number one reason why students fail to graduate from high school" (Department of Education, 2014a), understanding how the Nunavut teachers who participated in this study collaborate is necessary in order to determine what supports could be provided to help Nunavut educators maintain, or reach, the deeper levels of teacher collaboration that research has suggested may result in increased student learning outcomes (Hattie, 2015; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Rui et al., 2024; Villavicencio et al., 2021).

Positionality and Theoretical Perspective

Over the past two decades, I have worked as a teacher, a program support teacher, and a school administrator in Nunavut. In addition to these school-level roles, I have worked at the system level supporting professional development opportunities for Nunavut school staff. As I listened to the participants in this study relate their experiences collaborating with their colleagues, I thought about my own experiences and how they had shaped my learning and enhanced my work with my students.

When research is conducted in an Indigenous context such as Nunavut, it is important to consider the legacy of colonialism and the impacts that colonization has had. Supporting the necessary work of decoloniality requires a focus on strengths and successes to challenge the pervasiveness of negative stereotyping about Indigenous communities (Mitchell et al., 2023; Wilson, 2008). Indigenous research paradigms challenge this deficit thinking and are informed by appreciative inquiry (Chilisa, 2012). The collaborative practices that Nunavut teachers shared will be examined through an asset perspective in order to uncover the existing strengths that can be built upon.

Although I currently work for the Department of Education and have done so since July 2000, the information communicated in this article does not represent the official view of the Nunavut Department of Education or the Government of Nunavut. The only view I represent is my own. As a non-Indigenous settler woman, I deeply value the learning experiences I have had working with Inuit Elders and Inuit educators. It is my hope that by bringing the stories of Nunavut educators to light, I can, in some small way, give back.

Considering the Depth of Collaborative Activities

The borders of collaboration are hard to explicitly define. Collaboration is generally considered to take place anytime more than one person is working together on a common task or for a common purpose (Merriam-Webster, 2024; Ultimo, 2024; Vangrieken et al., 2015). This broad understanding of collaboration does not articulate the degree of shared effort or whether the contributions of both parties must be required to complete the task. This means that a variety of activities can fall under the label of collaboration. The continuum of collegial relations proposed by Little (1990) provides a framework for understanding how collaborative different activities labelled as collaboration truly are. In this framework, activities range from storytelling and scanning which demonstrate the least amount of cooperation and partnership, to aid and assistance, sharing, and finally, joint work which is collaboration at its most synergistic.

Storytelling and scanning for ideas are the lowest forms of collaboration. Examples of this include the day-to-day conversations teachers have with one another as they exchange information and tell short anecdotes about their teaching day (Little, 1990). These quick exchanges remain at the surface level and fail to provide sufficient information that could impact instructional practices (Little, 1990). In these conversations, teachers have the ability to keep what they are doing in their own classroom private, while benefiting from the ideas and support of others. While this can be helpful, especially for beginning teachers, it can also potentially lead to feelings of isolation if the stories told by other teachers do not align with what the teacher seeking support is experiencing in their own classroom.

At the level of aid and assistance, teachers provide help to one another when asked (Little, 1990). For example, when a teacher explicitly reaches out to a colleague with a concern or a question about something that is happening in their classroom and the other teacher provides advice or support, this is classified by Little (1990) as within this category. Unfortunately, these direct requests are often perceived negatively – as a sign that the teacher asking for help is less than competent (Little, 1990).

Activities in the sharing category of collaboration are characterized by the "routine sharing of materials and methods or the open exchange of ideas and opinions" (Little, 1990, p. 518). Many teachers regularly share lesson ideas, instructional strategies, or resources that they have found useful in their own classroom with their colleagues. In these dialogues "teachers [potentially] expose their ideas and intentions to others" (Little, 1990, p. 518). However, teachers retain control over how transparent they are about what is happening in their classroom. As the teacher decides what to share, they are able to focus on positive aspects that they are confident will be well-received. The culture of the school will play a significant role in determining how honest teachers are with one another within this level of sharing (Datnow, 2011).

Joint work is the strongest form of collaboration according to the continuum of collegial relations (Little, 1990). It only takes place when there is true interdependence and a "shared responsibility for the work of teaching" (Little, 1990, p. 519). This shared responsibility is akin to how Hattie (2015) argues that the purpose of teacher collaboration is for teachers to take collective responsibility for identifying and eliminating barriers and supporting the learning of every student in the school. However, according to Little (1990), given the structure of most schools, it is rare that true interdependence is needed for teachers to carry out their responsibilities. This means that collaboration in schools is most often voluntary and remains at the level of sharing.

Methodology

This examination of collaboration is derived from a study which collected the experiences of Nunavut educators about literacy instruction and bilingualism with the aim of providing insights into the implementation of a new literacy framework. The goal of the larger study was to provide information that could assist educational leaders with supporting the ongoing implementation of this literacy initiative as well as suggestions to inform the implementation of future educational initiatives in Nunavut.

Constructivist grounded theory combined with *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (Inuit traditional knowledge and worldview) was employed for this study. Grounded theory begins with the data in order to generate a theory to explain the behaviour or action that is taking place (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Simpson, 2000; Scott & Morrison, 2005). This provided space for the unique experiences of Nunavut educators to emerge and lessened the danger that their stories might be misinterpreted if they were approached with too much preconception (Charmaz, 1994; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Somekh & Lewin, 2011). Constructivist grounded theory, rather than classical grounded theory, was selected because it allowed for the incorporation of Inuit societal values and an appreciative, strengths-based approach to be used as sensitizing concepts through which the data was collected and analyzed (Bowen, 2006; Charmaz, 2010).

Given my positioning as a white settler, I did not believe it was ethically appropriate or possible for me to use an Indigenous research methodology with fidelity. Although Chilisa (2012) advocates for a balanced borrowing of Indigenous and western methodologies, I was uncomfortable with the notion of balance. Instead, I chose to combine Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit with constructivist grounded theory. This methodological stance acted as the interpretive lens that guided my decision making throughout this study; particularly with the development of my research protocols, how I conducted my interviews, and my use of sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2006; Charmaz, 2010).

This research study was approved by the University of New Brunswick Research Ethics Board (REB #2018-120) as well as by the Nunavut Research Institute (#05 015 18N-M / #05 004 21R-M). It was inspired by the recommendations identified by the National Committee on Inuit Education (2011) in their report, *First Canadians, Canadians First. National Strategy on Inuit Education*. Specifically, this work was inspired by recommendation three: "A new era in Inuit education must be founded on a system of bilingual education supported by bilingual educators and effective bilingual programs" (National Committee on Inuit Education, 2011, p. 11), and recommendation five: "For Inuit students to fully engage in bilingual education, meaningful and relevant curriculum needs to be in place, supported by useful teaching and learning resources" (National Committee on Inuit Education, 2011, p. 12). This report highlighted the need for more research conducted in Inuit communities (National Committee on Inuit Education, 2011).

The participants in this research study were educators who experienced the implementation of the literacy framework. Educator was defined broadly to include classroom teachers, language specialists, student support teachers, learning coaches, administrators, regional office consultants, and Department of Education senior managers. Their stories were collected through a questionnaire and interviews.

A questionnaire was developed that included opportunities for both structured and unstructured responses. It asked for demographic information about their academic background, previous and current teaching positions in Nunavut, the languages they spoke and used in their teaching, and the implementation of the bilingual language of instruction model selected for their school. Unstructured responses asked respondents to reflect on how they perceived the role of Inuktut and English in the lives of their students, assessed their awareness of the literacy framework, and asked them to describe and define literacy and balanced literacy. Germane to this examination of collaboration, respondents were asked about their successes with balanced literacy and the supports they had received as they implemented the literacy framework. It was these questions which prompted many educators to relate their collaborative practices with their colleagues. The questionnaire was provided in Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, and English. A link to an electronic version of the questionnaire was distributed by the Nunavut Teachers' Association to their members and was also made available to other Nunavut educators who did not hold unionized teaching positions. The questionnaire was used to gather initial data and an overall snapshot. Given the geographic distance over which Nunavut schools are spread, the questionnaire provided an opportunity for more educators to participate in my study.

Fifty-five educators completed the questionnaire. Twenty percent of respondents self-identified as Inuit and thirteen percent declined to identify their ethnicity. Most years, the approximate ratio of Inuit to non-Inuit educators in Nunavut schools is around thirty percent (Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2019), so while turnout was lower for questionnaire responses, and this is undoubtedly a limitation of this study, there was still substantial representative participation from Inuit educators. Most respondents had taught in Nunavut for more than two years (0-2 years 13%, 2-5 years 20%, 5-10 years 25%, 10+ years 33%), and fifty-one percent held classroom teaching positions, with other school-based roles also represented (classroom teachers 51%, language specialists 4%, learning coaches 15%, student support teachers 11%, administrators 11%).

Interviewing was also used to gather data. Open-ended unscripted interviews began with the prompt "tell me about your experiences with the literacy framework." This lack of a pre-defined rigidly-adhered to set of questions encouraged interview participants to set the direction for what they shared and where the conversation went. I asked follow-up questions to further understand what they had shared, and at times I asked similar questions to those included on the questionnaire if that information had not already been provided. To ensure that individuals were not pressured to agree to an interview, I used the strategy of networked introductions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Trusted colleagues acted as intermediaries (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Wilson, 2008). They reached out to educators they thought would have a valuable perspective to share. This allowed the educator to ask them questions about the research study, for the colleague to vouch for me, and for the educator to make a decision whether or not to participate. Only if they agreed to participate did the intermediary provide me with their name and contact information. This practice aligned both with the guidance provided by Wilson (2008) that in some Indigenous cultures, it is considered rude to decline a direct request, and also addressed potential ethical concerns that an educator may have inadvertently felt pressured to participate (Zeni, 2001).

Fourteen interviews took place using a combination of in-person, telephone, and email formats. A variety of formats were used to accommodate the geographic distance between myself and some of the participants. Twenty-one percent of interview participants self-identified as Inuit. The majority of interview participants had taught in Nunavut for more than two years and they held a variety of roles, with most having held multiple roles during their Nunavut teaching career (classroom teachers 79%, language specialists 7%, learning coaches 21%, student support teachers 14%, administrators 21%, consultants 7%, senior managers 7%). Many of the interview participants spoke at length about the collaborative practices that they had been a part of. The rich stories of their experiences informed my research study, but the passion with which many participants spoke about collaboration within their schools meant that this specific aspect deserved to be further explored for others to learn from. Following each in-person and telephone interview, the recording was transcribed and a copy was provided to the participant for verification.

As data were collected it was initially coded using open coding to label variables (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I developed a code list after coding the first item. The data in each subsequent interview transcript and completed questionnaire were compared to those existing codes. Process coding was used to indicate the action that was taking place and the codes I used were neutral in order to encompass a range of responses (Saldaña, 2016). Data collection ceased when theoretical saturation had been reached because no new data were being found (Glaser, 1978).

Results and Discussion

Nunavut teachers provided examples of how they worked with their colleagues as they grappled with how to provide effective literacy instruction for their students. Little's (1990) continuum of collegial relations provides a framework to understand the characteristics and depths of these collaborative activities and helps to explore these successful practices.

Storytelling and Scanning for Ideas

Many teachers in this study benefited from school cultures that exemplified the Inuit societal values of *inuuqatigiitsiarniq* (respecting others, relationships, and caring for people) and *tunnganarniq* (fostering good spirits by being open, welcoming and inclusive). This is seen in comments that extoled the virtues of "having someone to bounce ideas off of" (Questionnaire Respondent 37), the sharing of materials that Interview Participant 3 experienced in their school when they related how their learning coach would meet weekly to "provide the language arts teachers with resources," and in the short conversations that Interview Participant 7 engaged in with other teachers. Although

less collaboration takes place at the level of storytelling and scanning for ideas, a positive environment sets the stage for deeper forms of collaboration to develop.

Aid and Assistance

Although Little (1990) cautions that requests for help are often viewed negatively, Interview Participant 4 expressed, "I have asked for help from several staff members … Everyone is willing to help each other which creates a wonderful work environment." Similarly, Participant 11 related that "anything that goes [awry] in my guided reading group, or interventions, I bring back to [the learning coach] and usually they steer me." This supportive environment in which teachers were not afraid to ask others for help was echoed by other participants with statements such as "my coworkers are always there for me" (Questionnaire Respondent 3). The Inuit value of *tusaasurniq* (listening) that teachers engage in at the lower collaborative level of aid and assistance, helps to build the trust needed to engage in deeper forms of collaboration (Vincente, 2017, p. 23).

Sharing

Sharing was the level of collaboration that participants in this research study most often reported taking place. Interview Participant 7 spoke of weekly one-on-one meetings with their learning coach and biweekly meetings with all language arts educators in their school to discuss "what we were doing in our classrooms that was effective and where they were struggling." Participant 3 also spoke about weekly meetings with all teachers after school during which they would "discuss ways to improve their language block." A learning coach who participated in this study explained that after literacy data was collected, they would "meet with each teacher to share and discuss the results and look at how to help each student improve" (Interview Participant 14).

The inauthenticity that can result if teachers put too much of a positive spin on what is happening in their classroom (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998) can prevent stronger forms of collaboration from developing. However, the collaborative examples provided by the teachers in this study indicated a sense of *suliniq* (honesty). This vulnerability and transparency support the development of more intense collaborative practices.

Joint Work

Little (1990) suggests that in the field of education collaboration at the level of joint work is rare. However, the participants in this study related a few examples that move beyond sharing. These practices align with Hattie's (2015) views on teacher collaboration. Interview Participant 14 spoke of how they brought together different staff members to provide additional support when students aren't progressing, explaining that:

> We also look at each child to see if they went up at least one level. If they did not, we brainstorm possible reasons … we will ask the Student Support Teacher to meet … to offer reasons as to why and how we can offer support.

Three participants spoke about how teachers at their school collaborated to implement instructional programs at their schools. At Interview Participant 1's school, small group instruction took place at a common time with multiple classroom teachers sharing students according to their instructional needs to provide more differentiated and individualized support. At Interview Participant 10 and Interview Participant 14's school, teachers worked together in their grade divisions to group students by reading level in order to provide guided reading across grades at a common time in both Inuktut and English. They also shared about a staff-led, school-wide language program in which Elders came into classrooms each week to support Inuktut instruction.

While none of these examples are true joint work since the individual teachers retain autonomy and can keep what they are doing when alone in their classroom private, elements of these examples begin to show the promise of joint work. This indicates a move towards collaboration as a collective responsibility for student learning and illustrates the Inuit societal value of *piliriqatigiinniq / ikajuqtigiinniq* (working together for a common cause).

Future Directions

The categories within the continuum proposed by Little (1990) can be thought of as stages. I propose that it would be challenging for teachers to jump immediately into joint work if they have not had opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues at the lower levels of storytelling and scanning for ideas, aid and assistance, and sharing. These lower levels build the necessary relationships required for joint work.

This raises two interrelated issues that require further consideration and research. First, is the role of school culture in fostering teacher collaboration. Unless the conditions within a school are conducive to collaboration, attempts at forcing collaboration are likely to be unsuccessful and result, at best, in contrived collegiality, and at worst, open resistance (Datnow, 2011).

Separately, though related, is how staff retention may impact teacher collaboration. Although data is not available as to what percentage of Nunavut teachers are new either to the teaching profession or new to living in Nunavut each year, comments made by some of the participants in this study indicated that the schools they work in are experiencing significant turnover. The need to build the trusting relationships necessary before deep levels of collaboration can take place may mean that collaborative practices in Nunavut schools experiencing staff turnover may tend to be at those lower levels as newly hired teachers are brought into the fold. This supposition is supported by the fact that most of the collaborative activities participants in this study spoke about were at the level of sharing or below. Research in Nunavut schools is needed to consider how the existing research on fostering positive school climates where the deep collaborative practices Hattie (2015) calls for take place can be adapted to contexts experiencing lower staff retention.

Conclusion

Little's (1990) continuum of collegial relations provides a helpful way of thinking about the collaboration that takes place in different activities. Although Hattie (2015) focuses on the benefits of collaboration at the level of joint work, the other levels of collaboration are also important. de Jong et al. (2019) argue that the depth of collaboration doesn't necessarily have a direct correlation with the teacher learning that takes place through them. Less collaborative activities can result in improved student learning when those activities help teachers to improve their instructional practices (de Jong et al., 2019; Ronfeldt et al., 2015). The benefits of teacher collaboration should be considered both from the perspective of what it contributes to the development of each individual teacher's professional practice, as well as how taking collective ownership over the learning of all students in the school contributes to enhanced student learning outcomes.

Although teacher collaboration alone will not improve high school graduation rates or result in decoloniality, research does show that it can lead to improved instructional outcomes for students (Hattie, 2015; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Rui et al., 2024; Villavicencio et al., 2021). Examining the collaborative experiences that Nunavut teachers shared in this study through Little's (1990) continuum of collegial relations suggests that even less collaborative activities contribute to, and help to develop, school climates where piliriqatigiinniq / ikajuqtigiinniq (working together for a common cause) flourishes. Supporting different collaborative activities will result in professional learning opportunities for all teachers, and lead to the deep collaboration necessary for teachers to take collective responsibility to ensure all students are successful.

Acknowledgement

The information communicated in this article does not represent the official view of the Nunavut Department of Education or the Government of Nunavut.

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