

Elders and Curriculum

Jurisdiction: Nunavut

Contact: Cathy McGregor

Level: K-12

Theme: Curriculum/materials

Description of Practice:

With the creation of Nunavut, the Department of Education was tasked with building a new educational system within the context of Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ) or Inuit indigenous knowledge, and with rewriting the curriculum for K-12 to emphasize cultural relevance and academic excellence.¹ The work is on-going, but has been characterized by the employment of Inuit Elders on staff and of Inuit Elders as curriculum experts and has culminated in an educational system for Nunavut around core cultural ways of being, knowing and doing; and in the production of curriculum documents which use cultural knowledge and practices as the key academic building blocks. The identified goal for Nunavut's educational system is to provide support to our students in all areas of their development so that they can achieve personally-set goals, become well-equipped to contribute and serve their families and communities, demonstrate leadership and healthy attitudes, and be able to actively participate and contribute as Nunavut takes on new roles in the global community. By entrenching IQ core competencies within our system and curricula we aim to provide the environment within which the strength of 'inummarit' or a wise person can develop.

Background:

The restructuring of the educational system required collaboration with Inuit Elders, Inuit organizations, and GN departments to translate the core IQ values and beliefs into working models for school improvement. This initial consultation resulted in a philosophical approach called *Sivuniksamut Ilinniarniq*. Most importantly, Elders² have advised us that the existing system does not promote mastery and expertise. Working towards mastery and gaining expertise was highly valued in traditional Inuit society. *Sivuniksamut Ilinniarniq* builds these elements into our new system.

Sivuniksamut Ilinniarniq is grounded in the following principles:

- Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit is the foundation of education in Nunavut.
- All students shall have equal access to an appropriate education program in an inclusive, respectful, age-appropriate environment.
- All students are entitled to a relevant education that validates the importance of learning in different ways, and in different environments, and at different paces in order to ensure success.
- Accordingly, education in Nunavut respects and plans for diversity and builds on the strengths, knowledge, skills, values and beliefs of communities, families and individuals.
- Education in Nunavut will respect the uniqueness and strengths of each student and seek to enhance the potential for success for all students.
- Students will be supported in developing self-reliance, self-direction, leadership skills, and in taking responsibility for their own achievement.

¹ *Pinasuaqtavut/The Bathurst Mandate*, GN 2000

² We use a capital "E" for Elders who are recognized for specific expertise and a lower case "e" to refer to older people in general.

- Students have a right to individual and dynamic assessment that assists them in clearly tracking personal achievement according to their learning path.
- Parents have a right to actively participate in understanding and supporting their child's learning path.
- Education in Nunavut is committed to a '*learning about learning*' approach that involves process, core relevant concepts, multi-disciplinary and holistic approaches, and project-based and cooperative learning strategies. This includes an understanding and core focus on the social and emotional development of each child.

The grounding of every curriculum document comes from work with the Elders. There have been a number of Elders meetings hosted over a five year period – the Elders' Advisory Committee meetings with their general, global approach to Inuit Qaujimagatunangit, as well as several topic- specific meetings with Elders, have resulted in the IQ Educational Framework for Nunavut Schools.

Development:

In order to accomplish these goals, Inuit Elders were hired as cultural advisors into 4 of the 13 curriculum positions at C&SS. In addition, an Elders' Advisory Committee was formed. This is a steering committee of about 20 Elders from across Nunavut who come together twice annually to provide direction to the curriculum development process. Elders from across Nunavut also sit on foundational advisory groups for each of the four curriculum strands, and on working groups within each curriculum strand for the various levels (grades). These groups each meet 3-4 times annually.

Evidence:

The meeting process with Elders is a powerful one and is often described by Elder as their first opportunity to speak openly about cultural issues, values and beliefs. A high level of commitment to and participation in this process has emerged. Other GN departments are studying the meeting process which has been designed for Elders and are hoping to replicate it. Inuit educators also describe their participation in the process as the first time they've been able to see themselves and their cultural beliefs in the school system. The response of students to the curriculum modules has also been extremely positive as students respond to opportunities to become grounded in cultural values, beliefs and practices, and to develop a strengthened collective cultural identity that can be supported within the school rather than at odds with it.

Adaptability:

This curriculum development approach is based on a model that begins with the knowledge of the Elders and represents and shares that knowledge in respectful and appropriate ways throughout the curriculum. All documents go back to the Elders' Advisory Committee for validation before they go on for departmental approval. Once recognition is given to the real expertise of those who hold the cultural knowledge, and a commitment is made to engage them in every aspect of curriculum development, there can be assurance that the curriculum products will serve the educational needs of the students.

Further information:

Cathy McGregor Director of Curriculum and School Services,
 Department of Education, Government of Nunavut
cmcgregor@gov.nu.ca (867) 857-3051