

Measures of Success in the Nunavut Education System: Habkut or Unaaq¹

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Abstract: *Nunavut’s education system and supporting structure has been evolving since the signing of the Land Claim Agreement with the federal government in 1993. Historically, as part of the Northwest Territories, curriculum and evaluation in the Nunavut region was purchased from Alberta Education and this practice continues today. While the development of a local curriculum is ongoing, Alberta Provincial diploma exams are currently the only performance measure for the Nunavut education system and the English Language Arts diploma exam is the only exam used as a graduation requirement. This chapter will contextualize the use of these exams as performance indicators for the Nunavut education system within a view of educational success developed in Nunavut.*

Introduction

Covering nearly two million square kilometers, Nunavut represents over 20 percent of Canada’s land mass and has a population under 39,000. While there are regional differences, 76 percent of Inuit report Inuktitut as their first language (Statistics Canada, 2019). Historically part of the Northwest Territories, Nunavut territorial status came into effect on April 1, 1999. The agreement recognizes land rights and enables Inuit (who make up 85 percent of the population) to gain control over the territorial government. With aspirations to ensure institutions and services reflect Inuit perspectives, according to the Land Claims Agreement (1993), each government organization was to “assert an aboriginal title to the Nunavut Settlement Area...in accordance with their own customs and usages” (p. 1).

Those customs, as outlined in the Government’s original mandate, *Pinasuaqtavut* (2004), are based on the idea that survival in Nunavut’s harsh climate is only achieved by working together on life skills and principles for living (Nunavut Department of Executive and Intergovernmental Affairs, 2019). Now more specifically defined by Elders as that which “embraces all aspects of traditional Inuit culture, including values, world-view, language, social organization, knowledge, life skills, perceptions and expectations” (as cited by Nunavut Department of Education, 2007, p. 22), *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* (IQ) includes eight principles:

- Inuuqatigiitsiarniq: respecting others, relationships and caring for people
- Tunnganarniq: fostering good spirit by being open, welcoming and inclusive
- Pijitsirniq: serving and providing for family and/or community
- Aajiiqatigiinni: decision making through discussion and consensus
- Pilimmaksarniq / Pijariuqsarniq: development of skills through observation, mentoring, practice, and effort
- Piliriqatigiinni / Ikajuqtiigiinni: working together for a common cause
- Qanuqtuurniq: being innovative and resourceful
- Avatittinnik Kamatsiarniq: respect and care for the land, animals and the environment

¹ The Habkut, a device used to check the quality of snow, is used to represent assessment practices in The Government of Nunavut’s Foundation for Dynamic Assessment: *Ilitaunnikiliriniq* (2008). An unaaq is a harpoon.

Comprising 13 percent of the territorial budget (Main Estimates, 2019, p. v), nowhere in government are the aspirations of the territory regarded more seriously than in education and these eight principles remain the guiding objectives of the kindergarten to grade 12 program (Education Framework, 2007, p. 5).

Curriculum and evaluation in Nunavut

Currently, high school graduation requires students to complete a minimum number of credits in four strands: communications, wellness and leadership, innovation and technology, and social studies (Nunavut Government, 2016, pp. 2–4). In addition, students are required to complete ten credits at the Grade 12 level, including English Language Arts 30 and its mandatory Alberta Education diploma exam, worth 30 percent of the student’s grade. Currently, there is no territory-specific assessment program.

As per the Education Act (2020) the education program for schools (the content) consists of the delivery of the curriculum (3.8.1). Prior to the creation of Nunavut, curriculum was provided through the Northwest Territories. From 2000 to the present, despite efforts at developing its own curriculum (McGregor & McGregor, 2016), with the exception of the Inuktitut Language Arts curriculum, curriculum in all core high school subjects (mathematics, science, social studies, and English language arts) are provided to schools through an agreement with Alberta Education. Currently, Alberta’s diploma exams are the only standardized performance measure of the Nunavut education system.

Alberta diploma exams

The Alberta diploma exams were established in 1984 to certify individual and group results and to try to ensure province-wide standards of achievement are maintained (Alberta Ed, 2019). The exams are developed by Alberta Education and are the final component of a systemic program of ongoing evaluation that includes the Provincial Achievement Tests (Grades 6 and 9 science, English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies) and Student Learning Assessments (Grade 3 literacy and numeracy). The diploma exams take place in Grade 12 English language arts, French language arts, mathematics, the sciences, and social studies.

The tests are developed by committees composed of ministry specialists and teachers. Administration of all exams is standardized through strict guidelines provided in administration guides sent to all schools and teachers. Marking of exams takes place in a central location where machine-scorable responses are scanned and written responses are scored independently by two or more qualified teacher markers (Alberta Education, 2019). The exams account for 30% of the students’ final grade, the other 70% is made up of student class or term work.

The only exam required for graduation in Nunavut is the diploma exam for English language arts. This exam is composed of a personal response to text, worth 20%; a critical/analytical response to literary text, worth 30%; and, a reading comprehension section worth 50%. Accommodations are provided “not to optimize performance but to level the playing field” but “cannot alter the construct being assessed” (Nunavut Secondary Admin Handbook, pp. 10–13).

The results are not published but executive directors and principals receive a confidential report of results achieved by the students in their jurisdictions or schools. According to the Nunavut Administration Handbook, executive directors may request similar reports for instructional groups within the school jurisdiction and educators in each jurisdiction are “to study the examination results carefully and use them to determine the strengths and weaknesses of their

program and resources” (Nunavut, 2017, pp. 10–17). Individual results are sent directly to students.

Validity and reliability

Reliability measures reveal whether the instrument used to measure particular constructs is accurate. Discrepancies between two individuals assessing a response can reveal inconsistencies in either the markers or the instrument (inter-rater reliability) and an individual scoring differently on two similar tests purporting to measure the same construct also reveals something about the measures (test-retest reliability). Each item (question) on the diploma exam is developed by expert teachers and Ministry specialists in Alberta, and is aligned to specific curricular outcomes of the Alberta English Language Arts curriculum. The items and exams are field tested to ensure appropriateness of the questions, adequacy of writing time limits, test length, text readability, graphics clarity and appropriateness, and question difficulty (Alberta Education, 2015, p. 2). Final forms (tests) are also field tested to ensure internal consistency using Cronbach Alpha measures that rate each of the individual’s responses to the difficulty level of each of the different items on each of the instruments (they should correlate).

Validity has to do with whether the data gathered represent what was intended (McDavid et al., 2018, p. 169). Face validity refers to the instrument’s ability to accurately measure the construct as intended, on “the face of it” (McDavid et al., 2018, p. 172). For example, Alberta Education (2019b) states that the exam questions are based on the outcomes set out in the provincial curriculum. In the Alberta Program of Studies, outcomes are defined as “statements identifying what students are expected to demonstrate with increasing competence and confidence from the beginning to the end of the program” (Alberta Education, 2003, Organization section). On “the face of it,” the exam questions should measure the outcomes of the Alberta curriculum.

Content validity refers to the ability to measure the intended definitional content of a construct or the “full theoretically relevant range of content of the construct” (McDavid et al., 2018, p. 172). While Alberta Education recognizes that they are unable to measure all of the outcomes in the curriculum, the Student Guide notes the best way to prepare for the questions is “To be actively involved in all aspects of your English Language Arts 30–1 classroom... to develop effective reading, writing, and communication skills” (Alberta Education, 2019, p. 3).

Predictive validity is defined as the ability to which a measure of one construct can be used to predict the measures of other constructs in the future (McDavid et al., 2018, p. 173). As a graduation requirement, this could refer to the diploma exam’s ability to predict future success. The Learner Assessment Branch of Alberta Education claims to provide, administer, and score high quality valid and reliable exams (Alberta Ed results analysis 2017, p. 21).

Discussion

Issues of reliability and validity of the Alberta diploma exams as correlated with the Alberta curricular outcomes is not in question. There are, however, a number of issues with regards to using the Alberta curriculum and diploma exams in Nunavut and there is a particular issue with establishing the Alberta English diploma exam as a graduation requirement.

In Nunavut, the Education Act (2020) begins by stating, “The public education system in Nunavut shall be based on Inuit societal values and the principles and concepts of Inuit Qaujimatatuqangit (Part 1.1.1). Again, while “on the face of it” the diploma exams may be a valid measure of the curricular outcomes, when graduating from a field of study one would

expect the certification and outcomes of a program to align with the intended objectives. The constructs of the exam may be able to apply to one of the IQ values, Pilimmaksarniq / Pijariuqsarniq (the development of skills), but the other seven IQ values are attributes rather than skills and are not measured by the exam. This relates to the content validity but also refers to the predictive validity of the constructs. Does graduation, or success on the exam, predict the individual's ability to respect others, serve, or work collaboratively? The constructs within the program (the curricular outcomes) align with the exam but do not align with the objectives of the program (IQ values).

Language issues present another issue with the exams. Aylward (2012) states:

The fact that Inuit maintain their majority status today, within a public government, is key to understanding the political and educational contexts of Nunavut, and indicates that constructing a role for Inuit language and culture within Nunavut schooling reaches far beyond the usual majority/minority binary. (p. 214)

In addition to the mismatch between the values and graduation requirements in content, there are serious issues regarding language in a curriculum and assessment scheme developed outside of Nunavut (Berger, 2009b; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Despite high content validity between the Alberta curriculum outcomes and the test items and ensuring "that future provincial assessments will contain authentic and relevant First Nations, Métis, and Inuit content by inviting teachers with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit expertise to review items for authenticity and validity of perspectives" (Alberta Education, 2017, p.67), the Alberta programs make no allowance for bilingualism or second-language (McGregor & McGregor, 2016, p. 114). Over 76% of the Inuit population of Nunavut reported that Inuktitut was their mother-tongue (Statistics Canada, 2019).

Conclusions

The mismatch of the curriculum and assessment in the current system has serious consequences. Headlines such as "Nunavut school system sets students up to fail by not failing them" (The National Post, 2013), and "2/3 of Nunavut Grade 12 students fail Alberta diploma exams" (CBC, 2016), blame the victims rather than recognizing the disconnect between the objectives of the system and the outcomes that are measured and reported.

The Land Claim Agreement between the Inuit of Nunavut and the Government of Canada mandated Inuit control over their own government and a fulfilment of Inuit language rights. Education is one of the largest government portfolios and also the repository of the territory's future. The Land Claims Agreement (1993), the Bathurst Mandate (2004), the Education Act (2020), and the Education Framework (2008) clearly establish Inuit values and language as the foundation, and the legacy, of the agreement and the IQ principles identify what those values are. Ensuring the content and evaluation of that system matches those values is essential.

Developing curriculum is a monumental task, as is developing a valid and reliable systemic evaluation system. Neither are a reality as yet. Efforts over the past 20 years have included the development of localized curriculum and teaching resources (McGregor & McGregor, 2016), but at present they are incomplete and many of those documents remain unopened in school resource closets. Further, establishing an evaluation program before the content of the curriculum is established puts the cart before the horse, as there are no agreed upon constructs from which to measure.

Nunavut does have clearly agreed upon constructs from which they could build a measurement system of the *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* values. Constructs such as resourcefulness and helping may be challenging to evaluate, particularly for a territory with limited capacity in

measurement expertise. Internationally, nationally, and provincially, educators and policy makers have shifted priorities towards competencies such as critical thinking and creativity, collaboration, and perseverance (Alberta, 2018; British Columbia, 2018; Council of Ministers of Education, 2018). The capacity to work through the difficulties of accurately measuring these kinds of constructs at such a large scale could inform smaller jurisdictions through the development and sharing of expertise but, as noted by many others, any development must come from within Nunavut (for example, Berger, 2009a & 2009b; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2011; Watt-Cloutier, 2000, p. 119)

In the meantime, expecting students to continue to take the Alberta diploma exam should be reconsidered. Although the exams are reportedly reliable and valid measures, and they do help in setting standards for instruction, those standards are not aligned with some of the most important goals of the system and they present a deficit view of the students in Nunavut. When discussing her experience in school in a small Inuit community, Sheila Watt-Cloutier (2000) cautioned that such southern practices “Rather than making us stronger, they tended to undermine our confidence and identity” (p.115). Simply establishing southern standards onto northern and Inuit culture is not obtaining valid or reliable data, nor ensuring a rigorous education—and is damaging the children of Nunavut. Continuing the work on local curriculum and aligning assessment measures is essential.

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