

## **Diverse Contexts Within an Inuit School Setting—Schooling in Nunavik**

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**Acknowledgement:** I wish to express my unending gratitude to the teachers, community, school, and students discussed in the article. You are a model of the hopes and aspiration all of us have for the North. I hope my writing serves this purpose.

**Abstract:** *This is a qualitative case study of one school in one of the 14 communities of Nunavik. Nunavik is an Inuit Nunangat region located at the Northern tip of Quebec. Nunavik is also bounded by Hudson Bay to the west, Nunavut to the north, and Nunatsiavut (Newfoundland and Labrador) to the east. As is the case across the Canadian North and more specifically Inuit Nunangat, schools are responding to the challenges faced by their students and communities in a variety of ways to promote success. The case study shares the context of one of the 14 Nunavik communities and outlines success factors of the school, the determinants of success for students, and highlight many important links between the school and the community in support of culture and language. In this case the promotion of the Inuit language is a strong element in their success, Unique to this case while English language influence is quite high, this is modified by the additional influence of French language.*

### **Introduction**

As an outsider traveling to Nunavik for the first time, I anticipated significant changes to the context, both the people and the place. I traveled from Canada's most easterly and southerly location as I wound my way west to Montreal and then north to Nunavik. Nunavik seems quite far, yet I was still very close to a part of my home province, to Northern Labrador and Nunatsiavut in particular. The trip involved flying from St. John's, an overnight in Montreal, then onward to Kuujuaq, and yet another flight to the study site, one of Nunavik's 14 communities. I went from a spring day to a colder, ice-bound spectacle, with abundant evidence that spring was about to come forward. Ice still there but melting, and rivers ready to break out.

While seeing this changing context, I also came face to face with a closeness I had not expected. I have years of experience living and working in both Southern Quebec and Coastal Labrador, albeit before the Northern Labrador region was known as Nunatsiavut, and without any knowledge of the Inuit of Northern Quebec living in Nunavik. As such, Nunavik was completely new to me even though it shares the same Torngat Mountains and the George River caribou herd with Nunatsiavut. That was if I looked east. To the north, not too far across the water, is Nunavut and the relatively new territorial capital of Iqaluit. My colonial biases were evident, as standing on the western side of the Torngats and at the mouth of the George River, and slightly south of Nunavut drove this altered reality home to me in a surprising way. Reminiscent of the Berlin Wall, people from Eastern Nunavik recall that the reality of travel, kinship, and marriages between Nunatsiavut and Nunavik were common; albeit some said it is less now than years ago. In addition, many children and their families on both sides of the Torngats were out hunting geese, an awesome spectacle within this complicated legacy

### *1.2 The Research and its Respondents*

The autonomy of Nunavik and its school district Kativik Ilisarniliriniq's (KI) autonomy stems in no small part from the negotiations and political awakening of Indigenous peoples in the

1970s and, in this case in particular, Quebec's desire to develop hydroelectric power around the James Bay project. Indigenous groups, including the Inuit, gained concessions and recognition of some of their aspirations as a result. For many respondents in this study, the actions in the current Nunavik region school system mark a transition that empowered the KI to foster changes in their schools, enabling some schools to excel in promoting Inuit centric education. As such, the site chosen was reported as a rich example of success within this system.

This research is a qualitative case study based on a single all-grade school in an Inuit community of Northern Canada, in particular one of 14 communities in Nunavik (Northern Quebec). The data collection relies on respondents who were either school staff or community members involved with the school. They were a mixture of Inuit and non-Inuit; some were speakers of Inuktitut while others were not. This research was conducted at the same time as two other cases studies (one in Nunatsiavut and one in the Northwest Territories). Overall, 12 respondents with a connection to the school (teacher, administrator, student, parent, community member, staff, etc.) took part in this research through interviews. Each interview lasted between 30 to 80 minutes. The interviews and site visit were completed during a weeklong stay in the community in May 2019. Of the 12 respondents, nine were female and three male. Given the diversity of the school staff-teachers, it is also worth noting that six were first language Inuktitut speakers, four first language English, and two first language French. All spoke English well enough for the interviews. The respondents reflected a mixture of ages and experiences. For example, nine had completed a post-secondary program such as teacher training or other related field, and three had graduated high school. Indeed, six of the respondents were from the community and graduated from the same school. Of the other six, all of them came from the South. In addition, another six of the respondents had children who had attended the school at some point during the time they worked and lived there.

To better mask the respondents, rather than using pseudonyms, any reference to them is usually "the respondent." This is done to protect, as much as possible, the identity of any particular respondent. Other changes will assist anonymity, such as the random use of the pronoun as he or she when referring to the respondent comments. Other modifications include rounding the respondents' experience to five-year periods. This represented a balance of experience levels as low as three years to over 30 years.

## **2. Determinant of school success and graduation**

Any discussion of the above is also a discussion of Inuit culture and the community the school serves. This dynamic is evident in most of the views of the following respondents. When asked what the most important determinants of high school graduation were, the 12 respondents gave a range of responses including home support (parental engagement), strong teachers, systematic issues within southern centre schools, and concerns as to community focus and support for education.

*2.1 Parental-Adult Engagement.* The most-referenced comments centered on the role of parents or other influential adults as supporting student success. These comments spanned a variety of perspectives, sometimes personal, sometimes professional, and sometimes broadly focused. For example, commenting broadly, one respondent argued that there needed to be "a lot of support at home ... it would fix everything." Another factor involved students coming to school "well rested and on time." One respondent spoke of the school as being successful because the students' "parents hold them accountable." In addition, that it is "much more difficult to come to

school and be successful and be focused if you're not getting that support at home." Another respondent, speaking of her personal experience as a former student, remembered being pushed to graduate: "My mother was there to say you have to stay in school, you have to graduate. ... Students need someone to say you have got to keep going." It is important to note that while the vast majority of responses refer to the mother, other adults were also mentioned as important. For example, when asked about success determinants, this respondent referenced parental support as "the most important." However, she expanded on this to include other adults, stating that "when a student feels valued by any adult, parent or anyone, an uncle for example, then it will ensure they success in high school." This view was nicely encapsulated in the words of a respondent who said that "it's having that kind of cheerleader adult whoever it may be for them."

In some senses, parents struggle with trusting a school system that was historically eurocentrically guilty of inflicting harm on the cultural fabric of the Inuit, impeding parents' ability to raise children in a way they deem Inuit. As one teacher points out, "There's still a bit of a fractured relationship for some people because of the residual effects of inter-generational trauma in residential schools." This reveals parents growing to see more recent iterations of schooling as still being "foreign or new," but with a more positive outlook. As another respondent notes, parental engagement is difficult because there are competing roles students need to serve:

Education is fairly new for us still, still very young. And so a lot of the parents say well, if he's at school then he can't help me. He is old enough to have a job and so he's old enough to help around the house. ... It's not like that they're against school it's just they didn't need school at that time when they're at that age.

An easy comparison, for example: a 15-year-old in an Inuit household may will be a working member of the family unit, meaningfully engaged in the creation of wealth (hunting, for example), whereas a 15-year-old in a Montreal home is not as likely to be serving the same role in the family, and indeed may be a liability when not in school.

*2.2 Teacher Engagement.* One respondent stated that students needed a "cheerleader adult," often a teacher or other staff member in the school. Therefore, not surprisingly, respondents felt that teacher engagement was a determinant of success. For teachers, the focus is on their role in effective teaching, mentoring, and otherwise supporting the partnership between the school and the community.

For example, a teacher respondent cited the importance of "teachers who are called to do all they can, pulling out all the stops," noting that while there are many supports "the student also plays a role." Administrators stressed the importance of having "star teachers." Indeed, some teachers overcome many obstacles, such as a lack of parental engagement, in order to get the "toughest struggling students to graduation. ... Get them there regardless of whatever they are bringing from outside the school." Another elaborated, "We have had students with no parental support but have a really good relationship with the teacher." In cases where parent support is ineffective or lacking, the support of teachers can ensure the students learn.

Accordingly, teachers need to be engaged with parents as well as students. Two respondents spoke about the importance of developing relationships and understanding historical trauma within the community. One teacher pointed out the need to understand that the relationship is somewhat fractured, saying, "not everyone sees the school as a positive place but once the students get here we do develop that sense that this is a safe place." Diving deeper into community issues around parenting and detriments for success, this teacher argued, "The biggest

one is parents. They have trauma ... so they are unable to be adults and be emotionally available for that child. ... The community needs to work on dealing with this.” Indeed, it seems a key function of teachers is to support not simply to fill gaps in parental engagement, but also to understand and support parents in a way that helps them parent more effectively and to support the school. Additionally, the school needs to be focused on supporting Inuit culture. There are systematic issues that relate to school and its role within the community as it balances processes within the district and province.

*2.3 The School and the System.* Historical research into school systems and their effectiveness often sees determinants of success as connected to graduation rates, employment statistics, and even post-secondary transitions. In this sense the competing views of how the system supports success was evident in the respondents’ comments. Part of the Kativik District mission for education is evident in this school as it deals with the dual nature of an Inuit centric and northern location within the context of a still-southern learning orientation for curriculum expectations often reinforced through provincially mandated graduation expectations.

Thus some respondents referenced the curriculum as being southern centric despite good efforts of both the district and school to lean towards local culture and language(s). For example, one respondent spoke of how the board system can help achievement within the more culturally relevant understanding of success, or as a determinant of graduation. Referencing culture and language support he surmised that “the board knows when the curriculum is the way it needs to be when the right support structures are in place from the school board, that helps.” But he lamented the lack of comparable expectations, noting they are “struggling with students who write the same exam as kids in Montreal ... good luck with that.” Yet another teacher argued that determinants of success are problematic, saying “I think the school board has a bit of a disconnect as to what they want us to accomplish.” This refers to an issue around math achievement expectations, and the decision by the KI to offer “attestation” certificates (school completion certificates) rather than actual high school graduation diplomas. This was not well communicated to the public and thus has been somewhat of a political issue in recent years.

*2.4 Culture and Community.* In a sense, there is a duality of expressions: one being the local or Inuit context, the other being the provincial requirements. One side of this duality sees respondents’ struggle with determinants of success along a narrow line, as meeting graduation expectations to complete high school, relevant locally but largely determined externally. The other side is not dissimilar to foundational beliefs about education and the long-standing view that education is about creating, or enabling a “good citizen” as a productive member of the community. In this case, being a good citizen means promoting Inuit culture and language as part of the mission of the school and district decolonize schooling and foster Inuit language and culture while supporting diversity that seems distinctive to Nunavik as part of Northern Quebec. One respondent voiced her concerns about local relevance:

What we're trying to teach and learn is dictated by the Quebec government. We have a say in what is in part of the program, but in recent years we've been getting more and more pressure from the provincial government to meet expectations and not ... what is relevant to here.

Expanding on the notion of a more culturally appropriate and community centric view of creating good citizens she argues that, for her,

[this] means something different because for some of the students working in a second language which is the only options for post-secondary at this point is really not accessible to them, but if they can get the skills of like responsibility, self-confidence, basic communication skills enough, then they're going to be very successful with many of the opportunities in town that they really want to go to.

*2.5 Student Engagement.* There is no doubt that the interests of parents, teachers, and others is on the welfare and success of students. As such, there was reference to the students themselves and their motivation as a determinant of success within their context. A respondent spoke of students specifically and the influences outside of school saying that “a lot of the students have been depressed lately.” Respondents also cited specific concerns about the school’s teaching mission. As one teacher suggests: on one hand the students’ perception of the purpose of schooling is linked to their motivation-engagement in school. On the other, she pointed out, “for some students here, the only purpose of graduation really at this point is to give you access to studies in the South.” She countered this with the argument that through education “they can get the skills” to support the community. In this way the respondents appear to address the duality of the school and the district mission to support the local culture and language while enabling students to seek opportunities elsewhere. Again, it seems schools have a role in supporting parenting and students to improve engagement.

### **3. Transition barriers**

Within the community schooling can be seen as from birth to post-secondary. To assist students with children there is a daycare-preschool within the community they can use. While the daycare is not in the school, it is nearby. In this case, it is an all-grade school, meaning students enter at Kindergarten and graduate from Grade 12. Within the school, they will pass through all the programs typical of schools in larger setting: primary, elementary, junior, and senior high school. And the school staff seem aware of the need to support students after graduation from high school. While the k to 12 school setting might appear to be more of a seamless process there are still transitions and barriers faced by students on their path to high school graduation.

*3.1 Grade Transitions in School.* One of the strengths of an all-grade school is that transitions within the school are less tumultuous, although there are many changes and contexts as students mature and reach higher levels of expectations. There appears to be two major transitions in the school journey within this community: one from primary, wherein students are taught in Inuktitut until Grade 3, and the other from elementary school into secondary (junior to senior high school). In Grade 3 they transition from an Inuktitut language stream-program where the students are Inuktitut first languages speakers and must opt into either an English or French stream therein becoming English or French second (or third) language speakers, a profound change in context and expectations. Respondents did say changes were made to aid this transition with some English and French being taught within the primary grades. A key concern within the transition from lower to higher grades is the increased expectations around workload, writing, as well as the normal challenges students face during their teenage years.

In addition, there were some transitions between languages, usually from French to English, mentioned by respondents. This seemed to be the result of students choosing English as the path of most likely success, a problematic decision usually made during the last years of high school.

*3.2 Language Transitions Within the School.* Having worked in an English language context for most of my life, hearing “second language learning” instinctively leads me to think of English as the second language (Inuktitut being the first), yet within a growing largely English milieu. The Quebec context is somewhat different due to the acknowledged dominance of French as the official and first language, meaning that usually second language learning occurs within a French milieu. However, Nunavik’s language is Inuktitut, and French and English are often the second languages learned within an Inuktitut milieu. This should be a rich context for multilingualism. Having said this, Inuktitut is a first language that operationally becomes a second or third language as these students progress through the grades. The reader should bear in mind that the Inuit of Nunavik are for most of their schooling learning a second or third language. They spend most of their lives embedded in their first language of Inuktitut, school days mostly in English or French, with increasing exposure to English because of increasing sources of English language mediums. In addition, other Inuit across the North are increasing their use of English as a second or even first language. It’s not surprising that this language use transition or support is reflected in school transition from primary to high school graduation.

In support of first language Inuktitut, students complete primary school in Inuktitut with about 45 minutes a day instruction in English or French. A respondent expresses concern that students are not as well-versed in English or French, and this works against them when they move from the more curriculum intensive and higher level of reading expectations in high school. For example, one respondent outlined her concerns about the curriculum, noting that there is “a lack of curriculum that’s provided like the program made the program because it’s second language and retention is low like you have to have a consistent approach.”

Another respondent referenced concern that students transition from Inuktitut first language to a system focused on English and French languages meant that:

[Students] are two years behind the expectations of a Southern student in terms of language [note that this is a comparison to first language French and English students studying in a French or English milieu]. However, there is no matching of that for other courses. So the Social Studies programs the science programs the math programs they’re all at grade level even though their [Inuit students using English or French] language is two years behind.

This statement is truly ironic, because the school system takes Inuit first language students and transitions them into a school of first language English or French. This is where marginalization operates in a normative fashion, unseen in terms of the speaker. It is within this context that the comparison of being behind first language (English or French) speakers is misunderstood, and indeed seems unfair.

This has ramifications for students and some programs. In teaching math, for example, there has been a move in approach from more algorithmic to more language rich. As a respondent stated,

It’s a massive problem. Yes, it used to be that essential knowledge was a certain percent, math reasoning, and then situational problems and our students are really good at the essential knowledge. They like those plug and play like the algebra. Here is the formula—they learn it. They feel confident about that. They know what to do. Now the approach is more like developing tools and then you give them a question and they have to pick from the toolbox what to use, and that gives them a lot of anxiety because they are not sure right away what to do. And it is a really big challenge for them to become

competent especially because they do not complete homework and the language and everything else. So that shift was a big detriment to our students, I think.

Reflecting this concern around math in particular, another respondent referred to changing expectations between grades. He argued,

It's almost impossible for them to be able to complete these programs because they just don't have the language available. And I see it a lot in math... it's a big shift as well from first to second cycle from secondary two to secondary three when the expectations get raised just how much more.

The language concerns suggest a tendency of some of the students who initially choose French as a second language (if Inuktitut was their first) to be moving toward a third language, i.e., English, based on perceptions of greater chances for success at the end of schooling. As a teacher respondent pointed out,

We also have a lot of students who shift over from French in high school because there's like a belief that French stage up is more difficult. So we see quite a few students transitioning over and secondary two or secondary three into English which is now their third language and they're expected to complete everything and get caught up.

One respondent discussed the language gap concern but offered what she felt could address it:

I wish there was more. Sometimes like with competency based grading system. ... So often they're moving too quickly and they don't have the language skills, so then they're hitting a wall in the sec four and five and if you're in sec five and you start the year thinking that you have you're going to graduate. We're, kind of, trying to make sure that people are moving up at the rate of their language acquisition because it's because we have to be able to legitimately say at sec five when you're finishing you should be able to go and with support be okay in college.

Demonstrating a balanced view of the language dynamic, an Inuit teacher and parent respondent outlined her longer term view of this problematic language transition:

With us Inuit, we're not ready because from Kindergarten to Grade 3; they learn the mother tongue. It really brings back from learning the second language, but it is not a bad thing. If I were to compare my own child, who did her high school all through it, and she's going to be in her third year university.

Clearly, with the current system, success in an Inuktitut first language setting has to foster Inuktitut while balancing the use of other languages. This discussion about the Inuktitut language and related performance of first language students in a system that favours English or French leads to an obvious question: what if the reverse were happening in the South—would the Southern students and their schools do any better on completion of high school?

*3.3 Expectations on Grade Level.* This is an all-grade school in an isolated Inuit community. Unlike many students in the Quebec systems, these students will never experience transitions from school to school, busing to another community, or even large changes in the students they meet as they move through the grades. Having said this, important decisions are made in grade three, including whether to transition to study in either of the French or English streams. Moving into high school sees a change in workload expectations (homework and writing, for example), a process which intensifies in senior high while life's challenges are also influencing these emerging adults. Respondents wrestled with language use and concerns about how students in high school seemed less prepared, or able to deal with the second language materials and

teaching due to a system that assumes language competency of first language English or French learners.

As one respondent captured it, while the barriers are less than they were previously, there are still issues around going through school and language and the transition to English or French in Grade 3. She stated:

[It is] not as much anymore, before like when I was a student no base of French. At least they know, starting to know the alphabet. English is not so much because English with the Internet, the TV, with all of the exposures to the outside world, they are getting so much English.

An administrator respondent noted that in the transition from primary to high school students face a multitude of changes that are seen as “tough:”

Number one being is that all the way from Kindergarten to Grade 6 you have a homeroom teacher that teaches almost all of your courses you only go out for Inuktitut gym culture that is it. Then when you got to secondary, you had math specialists, and English specialists and maybe a Social Studies specialists, in addition to your gym and culture. You’re up to seven teachers and one of the things that allows good teachers to succeed in this school is the relationship with the student.

Transitions from school to post-secondary involve many things as well. Among the strongest changes are the physical and cultural dislocation, and the increased expectations of a completely new educational institution. Focused on her own transition from the school to the college level, one respondent recalled that her “first year it was like oh my goodness! I have so much homework we never got prepared for homework.” Another respondent, not originally from the community, spoke more globally about this transition: “I think nobody's ever ready.” Further, she voiced a concern more specific to the students within this school:

We're not ready because kids here do not appreciate school enough to take homework seriously. So when there is homework they do not bring it back. It's not done. But since we're not ready for the workload in college we're overwhelmed.

While there is help offered by KI in partnership with some Southern colleges and universities, there are also cases wherein students take advantage of transition years, or programs, closer to home. As such, this bridges the changing expectations and context from high school and community to post-secondary institutions outside the community. This was seen favourably by some respondents: one related that “some of the students when they graduate ... will go to a transitional program afterwards before going on to maybe college or university.” This respondent also sees that “the school does a pretty good job of preparing them.”

In summing up the aims of education within the context of transitions, a respondent added a more philosophical goal. He pondered,

But really there's no way to prepare for here other than being a good human being and a good listener. I do not know any other, being, you know, a good citizen. That's really the only way I think you can prepare.

#### **4. The school and graduation success. How can the school improve graduation rates?**

As can be expected, graduation is a key goal of the school and those interviewed. However, this is not simply getting a credential to leave high school. For many respondents this question explores the purpose of school, including such considerations as transition to the community, ability to access post-secondary institutions, taking advantage of gaining employment, and most of all enabling students to become good citizens who contribute to Inuit



values in their community. As such this is discussed below in terms of school and community values, and teacher supply.

*4.1 School and Community Values.* Referencing school and community values as linked to graduation-success, a respondent commented that Inuit culture and school support for community values is a matter of “consistency, as many of the things were really based on the values that were coming from the community anyway.” Another respondent noted how the school and community “have a connection in order to better guide those students to stay in school.”

Expanding on societal issues, one teacher respondent felt concerned that in order to foster graduation-success systems and communities need to deal with

...so many things beyond these walls of the classroom that just aren't there. Those needs are not being met. So if the community or the board can kind of collaborate and getting those supports in place assisting parents, assisting students. Just try to heal and be emotionally and mentally well. I think that's the biggest thing that needs to happen.

Some respondents felt the community could better support the schools. For example, a respondent mentioned the importance of good parenting, and that “the family that parents their kids are going to parent them to the end.” Another was concerned about distraction from school and referenced media, noting that seeing school as a priority is “kind of hard to answer ... I feel like we're competing with the media world, because these ... new generations are like on the media a lot.” Yet another respondent felt the lifestyle was an issue as “living healthy might even help a lot more. Going to bed early of course.”

Perhaps indicating that school can be that welcoming and supportive contact is the suggestion that many students do choose to be at school. One teacher shared her view that school was successfully dealing with “attendance. We do a good job here ensuring students come to school on a regular basis. In terms of school programming. You know what maybe. Maybe offer a few more very programs.” This points to a means of reaching the higher goals of producing good citizens while dealing with some of the concerns raised as a part of schooling. Or, as one respondent who is also from the community stressed, graduation and school celebration of Inuit culture “should be a very big deal it should be in the news. It should be fought for as every day is culturally relevant.” Curriculum and approaches need to reflect Inuit culture as a means to success in community and for post-secondary education. She said:

It's culturally relevant, doesn't mean it has to be easy work. It does not mean ... will not be prepared for college because you are we are learning about this our culture. It can be challenging at the same time.

*4.2 Teacher and Specialist Supply.* It comes as no surprise that any discussion of student success in schools references good teaching. A key concern in northern communities is the hiring of good teachers, and retaining them to support those relations that are important to smaller schools and culturally sensitive contexts. In this context it means a mixture of Inuit and non-Inuit teachers working as a team to support graduation, i.e., the good citizen.

Reflective of the initial supply and continuity of teachers, an administrator mentioned support for Inuit student and the value of counseling. Within this is the need for Inuktitut speakers who know the context of the Inuit culture as well. To distinguish these from the conventional guidance counselor role seen in many school systems, these Inuit centric counselors are referred to as “cultural counselors” to better reflect their distinctive role.

To assist with the guidance part of their role, the cultural counselors are given additional training for some elements of the more conventional counseling. This emphasis on Inuit needs means that some may not be trained as teachers. There were some concerns around the availability of capable cultural counseling as the principal discussed how he has to be very selective about who our candidates for counselors will be. They've all been high school graduates. And in some communities, you don't even have someone who finished high school being your counselor. They go to trainings, but there is only like a few trainings maybe a year maybe they only get one per year and they do not last because they burn out. So then, we are always back to square one. ... Overwhelmed ... kids were confiding about suicide on a regular basis.

Further, he notes the importance of those effectively serving this role, as well as those serving the more robust counseling role, as invaluable contributors to student success and graduation.

Clearly, if good teachers teach in culturally sustainable ways, with relevant programs, with community support, students will succeed. In response to the question of student graduation-success, reference was made to those within the school that support students and deal with the issues that often detract from success. Highlighting creative and meaningful approaches, an administrator referred to a community health pilot project:

We would need more services to take care of the child. We are in the middle of a pilot project right now with a psychologist. ... The Health Board wanted the pilot having a psychologist in the school and not a school psychologist that just tests because most school psychologists are doing testing. He is doing psychotherapy with our toughest kids and their families. He works with the kids at the school. He meets them together. He is helping parents with parenting. He is helping the kids digest their emotions and the trauma that they have. The difference he's making is enormous, although he is one person and he is on a two week on, two week off basis. He handles about 10 kids of which we had three. The difference is unbelievable.

Support for teacher and from teachers as part of learning community continuity are also critical components of school student graduation-success. There were various suggestions for meeting the demand for teachers, including recruiting teachers from the South, and supporting teacher development for Northerners either at traditional universities, or as part of a Kativik Inuit teacher development university partnership program. One response outlined the importance of teachers to graduation-success:

I didn't realize I was going through barriers, but now since I'm a teacher I can see that there needs to be adjustments made. I am talking for our school right now. ... Teachers have a different goal. They have different expectations from the students.... So we need to have like baseline on expectation. Same expectations because if the students do not know they do not readjust in a very healthy way.

This includes active work to create a school culture and community support to encourage teachers to remain in the school. One indication in support of graduation-success is that the teachers tend to stay longer, and there are more career spanning teachers in school compared to other schools in the Nunavik region.

Within this relative strength a long-term teacher respondent from the South cautioned that "they had to address was for sure the turnover and the fact that many of the teachers are coming from outside." She raised a concern about teachers within the Nunavik teacher development program:

[They] don't really have a strong teacher training. They're doing it on the spot ... getting as good as the teachers they're working with and many of those teachers didn't have a huge say classroom management background or theoretical background. They didn't know why they were doing what they were doing they they're just following books that were given to them.

Confirming that strong teachers seem to serve as a core strength at the school, another school administrator-response spoke of strong exemplars within the current staff and noted:

We need to be able to create more (reference names of three key teachers). ... Teacher recruitment is crucial, especially for our region. If we are going to hire teachers that barely speak English and nothing against them; there is nothing because education up here is so. Like I said, it's not intrinsic motivation that drives these kids. It's that inspiring. It's that, I really like coming to school because my teacher really offers really fun ways to learn. There are some really great things going on. And so a teacher is very crucial in that success. And it's not even the program because if it's a really great teacher, he can take that program and make it into magic.

## **5. Culturally appropriate approaches to teaching and student assessment**

Culturally appropriate approaches to teaching are vital to student success. It is also important that assessment provides outcomes that, as Anderson and Lane (2020) outline, comprise a mixture of culturally appropriate learning experiences linked to culturally appropriate assessment measures. The question of whether assessment was done in culturally appropriate ways produced an interesting collection of ideas in response. Typically, respondents did not refer to assessment, but rather saw it as culturally appropriate teaching. To the point of the question, that of culturally appropriate assessment, others did spend some time on the key issue of assessment and whether is it culturally appropriate to the Nunavik-Inuit context.

*5.1 Culturally Appropriate Approaches to Teaching.* The respondents who focused their responses to assessment in the context of culturally appropriate teaching and programs typically cited north-south distinctions, language, curriculum or programs, and related approaches to teaching as being culturally appropriate or not. When asked about culturally appropriate assessment, respondents focused on whether the learning experiences were culturally valid and seem to miss the point of how assessment measures are, or are not, culturally appropriate. As such, this provides important and related insights.

One respondent, a staff member, spoke of students getting specific time for “outside” cultural activities. Another respondent referenced the school district and some of the work KI was doing to adapt curriculum and related materials. Yet another felt that “It would be good if they ... learn more Inuit ways.” A teacher respondent focused more specifically on the curriculum, saying that there is some adaptation if this was problematic. She reasoned,

It's tricky because... I think that there is an attempt to bring ... but it is not authentic because as soon as you put it in a book that is not culturally [appropriate], that does not fit. So even in the way that, you know knowledge is communicated, I think it's hard.”

Another teacher respondent seemed to encapsulate this complex relationship between the teachers, adaptation, and support for language and culture while dealing with the southern mandates. He expanded on the point at length:

In some regards. Yes. The students are still able to take their Inuktitut and culture courses, which is good. In English, there is a lot more flexibility. The teacher here

\_\_\_\_\_ does great work. She explores a lot of Inuit artists and writers and those things in our programs you can explore that as well. But for other subjects like science and math, no. They are very much southernized. I just got thrown a book from the south and was told, here deliver this. I think the board is working on that. They apparently have an Inuit science and new social studies program coming out too, which is good. And they are trying to encourage co-teaching between an Inuk teacher and another teacher, which could be fun. I hope that comes to place, but as it stands now not as much as it should be. Evident in this discussion, implicitly as least, is that assessment needs to consider context. How can assessment be culturally appropriate if the teaching and learning context is not?

*5.2 Culturally Appropriate Assessment.* Many of us have dealt with assessment measures of various kinds with school systems. In addition, many of us have questioned the efficacy of the assessment in truly measuring achievement (more summative) or informing teaching and learning (more formative). Within the context of cultural differences then, the assessment measures, processes, and indeed the concept face operational changes that can be damning for some students and problematic for their schools. Indigenous and Inuit contexts seem especially prone to this dilemma.

A clear reality of assessment in any province in Canada is that it measures achievement in the context of provincial norms. It may be adapted, but the norms are not always rooted in the place, which seems particularly true in the colonized context of the North as mandated from the more populace south. A teacher respondent highlighted this in her discussion of assessment within the Nunavik context. She argued,

I think we're caught between. It is something I have been saying to our local commissioner a lot. ... Because of the James Bay Northern Quebec agreement, our board has a lot more power than they are using. I think that we're getting a lot of pressure from the Ministry of Education to say here's our assessments.

Further, she commented that while local teachers

tweak them make them culturally sensitive .... The reality is that I think that that a lot of our assessments are, in the upper secondary, are exactly what the Quebec government is sending us with a few words tweaked because of the second language idea."

Organizationally, there are issues from the province to the district and the people hired to oversee assessment. The influence of the James Bay Agreement and the creation of KI with special authority within Nunavik do seem a step in a positive direction. However, even this positive direction is seen as problematic. For example, with reference to the persons actually overseeing such assessment, there is concern about both their knowledge of the cultural context and realities of teaching in the community schools. One respondent laments:

It's people that have never taught that are often working on those projects that have never been in our schools. ... They're hired ... they don't have that that grip on the ground knowledge of what's really happening in schools.

Pragmatically, an administrator respondent stated, "We are working on it (assessment)" with the caveat that "because with the Quebec system, right. ... We need to follow their guidelines. And so when we assess we need to make sure that we're in that, but we also try to take into culture into consideration." She refers to the primary grades as an example, saying:

There's no real assessment tools in K, 1, 2, and 3 to assess the kids ... because there's no tools ... I know they are trying to create some... Inuktitut is a very special language. ... I

know they're trying to mix assessment tools for first language so that it can be culturally appropriate.

And within this the use of second language practices come into plan. As she noted, sometimes we take the assessment tools that are second language ... where like second language teachers will teach our Inuktitut teachers and say this is assessment tools that we have, but you can adapt it to your, to make it culturally appropriate. We kind of do those things, but there's not a school board wide one, but I know they're working on.

It seems most current efforts to deal with assessment in a way that reflect culture and language come from the experience of teachers. This respondent continues,

I wouldn't say that it is hugely culturally appropriate. I think that when teachers stick around for a few years they understand sort of how to meet those needs and how to communicate in a way that isn't creating a barrier or an unnecessary hurdle ... for the real understanding and the knowledge to be brought forward. I don't know if that makes sense because we're kind of in a tricky place.

Another teacher respondent complements this notion of longer-term teachers adapting assessment (and teaching) practices. She said that assessment is not culturally appropriate, but that "I think we're doing the best that we can. I often feel that we set the students up for success. I know that the exams that they're taking in secondary like the weight of the exams are so huge." This respondent's comments, shown here in full, quite clearly articulate the context and issues:

We're testing them at the time of year when they're the least able to learn. As soon as spring comes when the weather is, nice like this it is light out until ten thirty at night and it's back up at 3:00 in the morning. We will have students out all night. They just they're not sleeping in the spring. ... As the melt happens you can just feel the shift in the whole school to spring mode. The kids are tired. It is difficult for them to be engaged in the class. Also it's goose hunting season so they're going hunting all the time as soon as the water was open right now which it was a couple of years ago like they would be boating all the time. That is what we are asking them to take an exam that is worth a huge percentage of their grade when we already know that retention is low in the North. I feel that we have really smart kids with so much potential and I feel that we often set them up for failure in the way we assess we assess them as if they're Southern students. We do not take into account all the factors. I think if you look statistically it doesn't show how much potential and how intelligent our students are here.

The ways of assessing students were also noted as lagging behind college practices, as well as lacking the flexibility for the Inuit context. For example, a teacher argued,

I think we have more power than we're using to say like our curriculum isn't there yet. ...more options ... oral exam, why not? ... Why can we count that? You know, but because like when they need to be able to write if they go to CEGEP.

Furthermore, she referenced concerns about simply translating Southern concepts to Inuktitut making it the second language:

They were trying to really quickly update the Math program so all they did was take the programs from the south, popped them in. Well, the first thing is a bad translation of French. First of all. So like one of the questions is "the equestrian da da da". It is like, we don't have horses first of all, and we don't have [*explicative deleted*] horse riders, why can't we call them a horse rider? Sorry, I just didn't mean to swear, but like be even those kind of things you know, like that's it." The dynamic tension of schooling and the purpose of the north-south context is apparent in her comments.

She also stated that assessment is

very inappropriate for the students. It is mostly exam based. All final exams are worth 20, 30 or more percent. And it is not the kind of dynamic ongoing collaborative assessment that I would like to see that I think is where most pedagogical approaches are heading. Like even at most universities now, there is not as many final exams; there is more of these collaborative kind of ongoing things. I think we need to do that and I think that would be a lot more culturally appropriate too.

## **6. Exemplars of student success and persistence**

The twelve respondents were asked to share an example of a student whom they saw as successful and to describe the context that may have enabled this success. Respondents' answers drew on a number of factors within two overarching themes. The first is that school-based responses were characterized by comments related to school climate, academic support, and an interesting discussion around the second language context (Inuktitut being the first language of most students). The second theme was more community centric, characterized by comments referring to parental engagement, and student motivation or engagement. Related to these two themes is community impact of successful students.

*6.1 School Based Influences on Success and Persistence.* The teachers, staff, and students within the school are actively engaged in activities to promote student success and persistence. Respondents also represented a variety of roles, including teachers, administrators, and staff (many of whom are former students of the school), thus exemplifying the school's goal to help parents support students and, indeed, to have an impact on the community.

Respondents referenced both persons whom they saw as successful and elements of the school efforts that enabled the success, including factors such as the instructions-academic emphasis, and the school climate as a supportive place. They also noted issues around the educational space for the Inuktitut, English, and French languages, thereby highlighting a view that many of the students were Inuktitut first language striving to be successful in an English or French second language context.

*6.1.1 Academic Persistence.* Clearly, being in the school matters. The school actively supports approaches to improve student attendance. As one respondent explained, "if someone were to come late to school or not show up we would call them at home to ask them to come and tell them. Explain to them what will happen in the future." This is not the school merely checking; rather it is supporting, letting the family and student know there is both awareness of issues that may affect attendance, and help available. One administrator recalled a conversation with a student that outlines this approach:

I said, tell me why you feel like you are not smart enough? ... Because I have missed too much school. I said, tell me why you are missing school? ... OK. Tell me why you have been smoking a lot. Oh, because I have been really sad. Tell me why ... it's a now and then, because we had that conversation yesterday.

This respondent related that after the discussion,

[the student] says to me ... I'm going to come tomorrow to try to write my exams. Before he said, I quit school. He did not want to quit school, but I needed to ask him the questions away instead of going No! Do not quit school. He didn't want me to say that he wanted me to ask those questions so that I could guide him out of that because a child

doesn't say, I want to quit school and they want to quit school, they just quit school. They say that because they are trying to send me a message. ... He's asking me for help instead of like encouraging him.

As a result the student found the persistence to try again.

*6.1.2 School Climate.* Respondents spoke glowingly of the school climate being one that accepts and encourages everyone. In highlighting success related to persistence a teacher spoke of a student who returned and would graduate soon. She said,

I really didn't know she's going to make it. ... she dropped out and it was like aaahhh; it broke your heart that we were offering. So she dropped out that year and then the next year she came back. ... something happened and it clicked.

Evidently the school climate is one where the door is never really closed; there are several supports within the school; and if the student leaves, there are several paths back. Or as an administrator respondent stated, the teacher helps students “know, that is OK. It is part of the journey. And so the kids say I really like being in your class at that time. And so they tend to come back.”

Complementing this perspective another school administrator spoke of solving this type of problem, noting that “There was no question they were coming in and we would work on them to solve the problem together. Our most successful kids they always had that.” Yet another respondent and former student stated, “I think a lot of us that have graduated here and went to college have a similar experience like. There was always someone there to tell us that we can achieve anything that we want in life like.

*6.1.3 Inuktitut First Language – The Second Language Context.* This site is in Nunavik, part of Quebec, but the first language of the community is Inuktitut. The school starts students in Inuktitut language, but in Grade 3 students switch to primarily English or French language instruction for the remainder of their education. This presents a nuanced understanding on the part of the school. First, that the school works in an Inuktitut speaking context and that English and French are second or third languages for these students. This is a key factor in understanding success at the higher grades and indeed post-secondary. As one of the teacher respondents outlined, this is “... a huge learning curve because she still was writing like a second language student. She had to try to make that that transition into writing more first language.” Further, in some cases, it seems students move from one language stream to another as they move through the grades. As another teacher illustrated,

A student I have now and she transferred over from French and at the first month and a half she had a very negative attitude towards it. But now I've taught her two years now and now she's probably my most positive student about it.

A key point here is that seeing Inuit students as Inuktitut first language speakers who are graduating an essentially second language system is an important factor in understanding the persistence of such students within both the school, post-secondary, and indeed the community in which the first language is Inuktitut.

While this discussion is about success, and the languages are framed as problematic, there are examples of persons who highlight this as a potentially significant strength in such contexts. Case in point: one school member who seems to have mastered all of this was cited as an exemplary success by some of the respondents. One of respondents stated this school member

was “fluent all in three languages. She's asked to do anything now; she's comfortable talking in front of people in any language.”

## **7. Exemplars of when we thrive**

To better understand the excitement of the learning journey and generate thinking about innovation, respondents were asked to recall a time when they saw students or others within the school “thrive.” Essentially this could be the result of an individual transition, or the impact of a planned effort such as a program or policy. Respondents revealed a variety of ideas that loosely fall into the themes of co-curricular activities, classroom coaches, a specific reference to the Compassionate Schools process, and academic support.

*7.1 Co-curricular Processes (Sports and Related Activities).* Some respondents mentioned a new hockey program that seemed to be generating excitement within the school and community, with links to school attendance and performance. The “coach” also works in the school supporting its in school programs. One respondent believed the hockey program was valued by students. She stated, “All the boys are pretty much 100 percent in school because of hockey. ... We were having so much problems ... with the boys... But with hockey the hockey program it's changed 100%.” To a lesser extent, girls are also benefiting: “The girls are in there too, not as much as the boys but the girls, a few of them.”

Another consideration related to this discussion is: where does the money come from? In this case, the respondents seem to have a knack for gaining the resources to serve a good idea. As one of the administrator respondents noted,

To be honest with you. I have no idea where \_\_\_\_\_ gets the money. I just said we have to do this \_\_\_\_\_. And she, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ seem to find money where they need to, but there needs to be money for that. That is not cheap. You know, because you got to a person, he has a salary; he has a few trips. It is expensive.

Expanding on the reference to the hockey program, one of the administrator respondents demonstrated that the hockey program is an example of a broader approach, linking sports and other innovations to student success. As he pointed out,

[this] happened over the years. The hockey program as an example, but even aside from the hockey program there has been badminton, there has been running clubs. There's been mostly the sports that are very popular, but even some non-sport ones.

He continues to link this to the importance of school partnerships within the community, arguing,

I'm always harping about partnerships; we signed an agreement to promote a school-hockey program. Yes, it was the ... using the arena, but that we were going to be in partnership and the expectation for the hockey players was that they perform in school. ... we are challenging every kid where they are. ... if one is down here; we are challenging them to be that much better and he is part of the program. If there is someone who is up here and we challenge him to be that much better and he is in the program. When you do that well and you don't use hockey as an axe to cut ... you're lifting a kid to earn their hockey.

Extending the example beyond hockey, the respondent outlined a pattern of success targeted at having students succeed and thrive:

We've had a great deal of success and the same has been for some of those other sporting programs like badminton and running club because running club had a trip attached to it.



They were going out to the Caribbean doing a half marathon. So those kids they wanted to go, you know, there was a big carrot at the end. And so we said yeah your running is really good, but you know you have to attend better. We need a minimum of attendance and we get them there because we do it a bit at a time like, Oh, you do not come all morning. I need you to start coming in the mornings maybe get here by after recess yeah get them there. Okay. Good. We got that. Can I get you here for the start of the day? Let's try it a few times a week. We get them there and you can turn the kid around because they're motivated by that carrot at the end.”

This is truly a carrot and stick (a hockey pun) approach. In truth, it seems the aim is to support students but not to be overly punitive in the application of these incentives.

An important distinction of the partnership is that this is not a true extra-curricular program, because the teachers do not run it. As the administrator respondent pointed out, “we tried to do it with just our teachers as extracurricular was overwhelming because before that it was a joint you know program. ... It was too much.”

*7.2 Classroom Coaches.* Tracking student behaviour and teacher “coaches” to advise teachers is a practice that seems to be producing some exciting results in this school. An administrator respondent explained this practice as tracking

what the student has been doing. We collect this data and to ... see if he keeps getting referred. ... When we look at the referrals ... there must be and many times ... we send the coaches ... to ... watch this student to see why it keeps happening. Ten forty-five on day three because children have pattern like they really do. If things are not going well they create a pattern. And because they are not able to vocalize it, we have as I have school. ... The coaches go and look, they observe, and many times the teachers have said well when you are doing this class at this time because he cannot see the screen this is why he is misbehaving. ... They will say OK; you need to move the student to this area so that he is able to, because sometimes the teachers have so many to watch. They do not realize those tiny little things. ... They are (the teachers as coaches) the ones who will help the teachers or go and observe the students to see what it is that is missing. Maybe they need a bouncing chair, maybe they need like something heavy on their knee their thighs like different things. So that is so awesome and that ensures student success.

*7.3 Compassionate Schools.* Another promising intervention that seems to be contributing to a thriving school climate is the Compassionate Schools process. One respondent referenced the district’s leadership role in promoting this:

Director General ... was an advocate for understanding trauma. And the need for healing in our people especially. And so many years ago I took part in going to Seattle to go and look at schools that were running Compassionate Schools and PBIS which is positive behavior intervention and support.

They did the training with other teachers from KI. While the others no longer work for KI, this respondent and this school have followed through. She continued to praise the approach: Compassionate Schools is really understanding where the child is coming from instead of having a regimented view of what education is. It is really like looking at the child and accepting child as is. And finding the appropriate tools to help the child succeed.

*7.4 Academic Support.* The school shows considerable evidence of a variety of academic supports which are targeted at improving teaching and learning. Some are curriculum-subject specific, while others are more general and motivational.

An example of support for academics is given by a respondent who described her excitement about her students' writing improvements. She worked to increase her expectations and indeed the students' writing capacity. She revealed,

I love seeing them start to write. ... They did not know how hard I push them in class. They all complained at the end of term one when I was saying ... your assignments for the end of his term are write a hundred and fifty words on the Blah blah blah blah. They [complained]: we can't do that! We never did that before! ... This year ... I said 500 words ... to add an extra assignment because I felt like they were going to finish too soon and they just sat down and started going... It is neat to see where they go from a place of saying we can't do that. ... Then you just keep supporting them to get there and say hey just try another 50 I bet you can make it and boom. ... One of the girls wrote 1,100 words.

Clearly, supporting writing in a way that increases student confidence and performance is a context for a thriving school and students. Another key approach to improving performance and helping students succeed, indeed thrive, can be seen in some of the respondents' comments about teachers, and motivating students to succeed in mathematics.

As one respondent in primary offered, making real world connections leads to increases in the

level of engagement ... I'll talk about a math ... measurement I did with my kids. ... in terms of the material the level engagement is high if like the content, [if it] is meaningful and if there is an applicability to it, they can make real world connections to what they're doing.

This respondent also referenced meaningful relationships between teacher and students:

The other biggest thing has to be relationship between the student and the teacher. The kids can never thrive in anything I think, unless there is a strong relationship that allows the student to feel safe enough to really participate and engage in whatever you're doing.

A senior high teacher respondent brought up an example related to the mathematics tutoring program, saying, "They would come in. I mean, some of them had to be encouraged to come in but once they came in and they received the tutoring help they felt more confident."

The previous two examples reference both engagement and improving capacity. The next respondent outlined an example of a combination of both, as students overcame negative views of math to celebrate its connection to a world they aspired to. As he related the concept:

I called it community math and we went to a few different locations. We went to the police station, the arena, the co-op. ... I think the students really enjoyed that, using their hands doing something applicable outside of the classroom, something real.

He added that he would also "give them a picture and they have to do a scale drawing with water and paint in the snow. Anything where they can be more hands-on. They really thrive at that."

Furthermore, this links to the real world and enabling the students to be more expressive. A teacher respondent expressed the view related to school thriving that "if the teacher made an effort to make it fun then you could see the students like engaging and blooming more and being more vocal." Perhaps confirming this view, another teacher recalled an example:

I was watching ... a video that I made when I was teaching Grade 3 and we used to go around town and talk about all the buildings, the church, the arena. Oh my God I was so impressed the way they were talking.

## **8. What other schools can learn from Nunavik**

All schools have something they can learn from each other—what did respondents from this school feel other schools could learn from them? As another teacher respondent put it, “we are always trying something.” Respondents saw success in their school, a success they felt might be shared with others. As such, they shared important ideas worthy of any school and its students. These ideas included support for the community-partnered hockey program, considering the staff and teachers to be important in any success, and having a fresh attitude as part of the approach to dealing with students. There were also more formalized responses such as counseling support for students, the Compassionate Schools approach, an admin team that champions innovation while supporting learning, as well as a student-centred approach to problem-solving called the Agora. To start, however, what can be learned from things that did not work so well?

*8.1 Things That did not Always go Well.* Responses to this question ranged from instances of periodic “challenges” and teacher transition, to more complex issues related to partnerships and a positive behaviour program. One example of this came in the form of concern expressed that when a teacher leaves, students are disappointed and become reluctant to form bonds with new teachers: “[students] don’t really like new teachers because they get attached to a teacher and then you see them leave.”

Perhaps also related to changes in the teaching complement, one of the teacher respondents questioned consistency related to challenges:

Usually anything we try here is successful. We have an issue of sticking to it ... so we will see an increase in student being on time ... it’s hard to stick with one thing through the while school year.

Overall, there seems to be concern about the need to be innovative due to the waning effectiveness of efforts to deal with behavior challenges. For example, citing attempts to improve attendance or homework completion a teacher lamented that a first these were a “...big hit ... but when we tried it again the effect had worn off and no one was interested.”

With respect to the short-term interventions mentioned above, a teacher respondent summed this up as the inability to change intrinsic motivation through extrinsic efforts. As she stated, “We always come up with solutions ... sometimes we do challenges to support student getting here on time ... it does not work because ... you can’t really change a behavior from the outside.”

A more formal approach referred to as the positive behavior intervention system (PBIS) used to prevent or address misbehaviour also had results that tended to be temporary. This involves always “being positive you can talk about like lots of positive praise, but you’re basically feeding the kids positive whether it be like a tangible reward like it could be like a movie or a popcorn day.” While there are improvements “when we give those rewards for, let’s say, secondary attendance or secondary lateness for the one month of the challenge.” Yet it is not long term, as “once the rewards, or challenge related or it ends it seems ... It’s just like it never happened.” Nonetheless, persistence means not giving up and being determined to focus on the

positive while still seeking longer term solutions (maybe the true long-term outcome). Although there seems to be little

carry-over from these kind of reward sessions even all the positive stuff is good. It is better than negative. It is better than punishing kids for being late. The effect of those kind of big one-month drives is minimal. We haven't entirely abandoned them.

The determination to keep trying new things or supporting on-going good practice is not always a matter of internal school concerns. In some cases a local partnership may be weakened. Discussing this type of concern, one respondent argues,

I don't want to say it didn't work because we keep trying. ... It was two years ago when we had a mayor who was so awesome. I am hoping that she gets re-elected in three years. ... it just didn't continue because of many different factors and because \_\_\_\_\_ wasn't elected anymore. And \_\_\_\_\_ who is like a big player, got a different position. ... All of us just kind of became really busy. ... It was incredible because we were able to really discuss the reasons why the kids stop coming to school and what parents can do; those kind of things. But I don't like to say it didn't work because we keep trying.

Undaunted, when asked about this partnership she stressed that “once we have that community team solid again ... that is something that we're going to do again.” Clearly, while not everything works, persistence is essential as the search for solutions is always ongoing in this school. In interesting observation needs to be made here: the school personnel’s commitment to positive reinforcement, changing approaches to help success, and determination to help students succeed are part of a supportive schools culture that is working.

*8.2 Programs that Motivate Students.* The hockey program was described as a “huge factor” in student persistence. While this was discussed earlier, it is mentioned again here as the kind of community partnership response that linked the school to students’ interests in a way that prompted improvement in students’ performance, and indeed persistence. Students were motivated, albeit extrinsically but for a lengthy period, to perform better in school. That such processes seemed weaker when led by teacher and gained strength with an external hire specific for this purpose adds value to them. Teachers did not carry the weight of this program; indeed it seems teachers were given much-needed support as programs like the hockey program boosted their effectiveness. This is borne out as an administrator respondent described the impact of this and other sports programs: “of course there's those sport programs like the hockey is very big right now and in the past badminton was a success. Yeah but the big one is really the teachers. It's a game changer.”

*8.3 The Golden Ticket — Teachers and Staff That Make a Difference.* Staffing this school, and within that, supporting the work of teachers with a mixture of pressure and support were key elements in the responses as to what other schools could learn from this one. As one respondent pointed out, the community views the students as benefiting from having “good teachers” in addition to “very good support workers from the office.” Another respondent affirmed, “Our staff loves the kids. ... Everybody does something small. ... It's everyone.”

Teachers in this school stay longer. As one respondent noted, “turnover is very low. The only reason why we lose is for retirement, when they are pregnant or when they have to leave for their children. It is not bad yet. Hoping it stays like that.” Highlighting his belief in the effectiveness of those teachers, another administrator respondent stated that the school success and student persistence is the result of teachers, particularly the influence of teacher leaders:

I don't want to pick on people or call on anyone even the good ones. ... you can go look at the wall by the bathrooms there [just outside the main office where the graduation class photos are hung]. The graduation classes are small but were big for three years. We had like a teaching team that was off the charts for those three four years. What a difference it made. Now we are back to small classes again because that teacher was on a leave and now that teacher's back. ... The attitude she brings to the whole sector it is contagious too. ... She only teaches English, but the math teacher, social studies teacher; everybody sees wow! OK well, we are getting somewhere and it improves communication in the sector. Yeah. Good teachers are really the golden ticket.

Modeling this sense of effective teaching as being both student-centred and task-orientated, a teacher respondent outlined her view. She argued that to be persistent, students and teachers need to embrace

the idea that it's like fresh start each day so you might have had your meltdown ... broken a TV or flip the desk the day before, but when you enter back in the next day ... For sure, there's going to be the discussion about what happened. But that happens in the office and when you come back to class, it is okay. Glad to see you. You know, and go with like go from there and try to make it a new start.

*8.4 A Safe Place—Supporting Students.* Mentioned in various sections of this report is compassion for students, and related to this is creating a safe space for students, a theme of the Compassionate Schools program. This program focuses on safe spaces for students, providing training for teachers to contribute to a supportive and caring environment. This safe and caring space seems to permeate throughout the operation of the school. As one administrator respondent described the program,

It's about caring for the student as a person. I think that is what we do really well. ... because of what we want to accomplish with compassionate school; where a compassion administration towards our teachers; our teachers are in turn learning what it means to be compassionate and give the benefit of the doubt etc. to their own students. .... the attitude that kind of permeated into our school and staff as a result of that has changed things in the building. The kids feel like it's a safe place to be.

The longer tenure of teachers and administrators adds a level of continuity and consistency as a whole school approach to dealing with students. All the efforts in the school are ultimately geared towards student success or persistence. Some of these efforts seem particularly nuanced toward dealing with the student's Inuit culture and issues linked to the student's behavior that come in conflict with the expectations of schooling. These issues come from a variety of sources but are singularly linked to the student's ability to change.

*8.5 Compassion as the Right Stuff—the Administrative Team.* It is quite normal for administrators, such as a principal and vice principal, to refer to each other as a team, or partners. This conception truly applies to the principal and vice principal of this school. Both administrators have been in the school for over 20 years and display great mutual respect for each other. One is the compassionate school champion and an exemplar of diversity within a strong Inuit cultural background. The other is a long term Northerner who uses compassion and drive to support excellent teaching and the school's goals. Indeed, the combination is a compelling framework showing how leadership works to support Inuit culture, effective teaching and learning, within a successful school.

Recognition that good leadership is important to schools is longstanding. The stability of an admin core that has been in this school for about 20 years has enabled the vision and efforts to transform the working expectations of this school. Even before the current leadership, the previous principal had served for over 20 years. One administrator respondent noted that succession should not be left to chance: “I’m starting to kind of scout out someone who would have that personality to keep the spirit of this school alive. So I’m looking.”

Another respondent recalled the pleasant reaction she had to the school as a newcomer: What really struck me was the support of the principal and the vice principal. It is just remarkable. And if you would have, I think when you have the support, at that level it makes you want to do your best. At least makes me want to do my best.

Further and more generally, she shared that the school also “has supportive teachers as well as teachers. But that was one thing that stood out to me that the level of organization here. The programs here the support of the administration was just terrific. ...I was really impressed.”

An important element that links student support to good teaching and a supportive administrative staff is the nuanced approach to the corrective process of school discipline. Referencing both this and her support for the positive influence of the school leadership team, one teacher respondent and community member shared:

We have pretty good very good principals. ... very supportive principals. They are not strict. ... you can go talk to them about a problem you have and you know they won't be like really tough repercussions, they're just very accepting I think bullying with like kids bully a lot. ... They are rough and tough especially in the Inuit culture. Being physical is how you become dominant and being dominant means you're respectable, but bullying is not accepted here at all. If you make a student cry you go right to the principal or you go right to that Agora.

One particularly noteworthy thing this school could share with others is how the concept of an open space concept office area simply called “The Agora.” Respondents referenced quite often as part of the student support network and available safe space for students. A teacher respondent answered that the school could share

the way we have our Agora setup. That is the first thing that pops into my head. I will probably think of more things, but it seems to be like kind of like a catching net for students like. This is open room where the principal and the behavior technician are normally present and have their desks there as well.

This enables both corrective and preventative action because there is also a link to the principal. As the respondent continued, presented at length to provide detail:

They have relationships with both. And you don't go just if you get in trouble, like you go to de-escalate, you go if you can't work in the class like a quiet place to work, you go off like you've identified that like I'm just too hyper right now to be in the class, I need a space. So it is not a negative, for sure has as if some a negative connotation to some kids, but it is not ... like how we think of in the South, like principal's office. It is not like that at all.

This trust is in part the Agora, but it is also the long tenure of the two persons within it. Indeed the behavioral technician, as this respondent continued, has been here for 30 years and everybody knows him. We see a lot less like walking out of school, a lot a lot less kick outs, than I know I hear about in other communities. Even a

lot less behavior like running in the halls... apparently in other schools in other communities like leaving class and running through the hall is just a norm.

Dealing with students, and sometimes teachers, in what is an open space, semi-public, concept does not mean private matters are never addressed. One respondent explained that in some cases, "I'm not sure that works well ... everybody. Some people really like privacy when they talk. ... If you really want privacy we can go in main office." Additionally, for teachers uncomfortable with these two options there is a private hour offered in the Agora space.

## **9. Perspectives on the quality, strength, of education**

Response to the question as to quality and strength of education was mixed. Most respondents felt the quality of education was high. For some this notion was expanded upon as being within the region, and for others it was in comparison to others places they have worked. A small number felt it was not high, but again, this was contextualized as either with potential to do better, or in reference to north-south comparison. In those cases, the strong view was expressed that the quality of education is linked to adaptation of the processes and curriculum to the north and in particular the Inuit. Another distinction within respondents' thinking was the tendency for some, mostly when considering as a parent or student, to refer to post-school readiness (colleges and/or work), while teachers and administrators commented more on academic matters and within this north-south relationship in terms of post-school readiness. A dominant duality within this is sensitivity to the need to respect provincial expectations, but within the context of improving the school's support of Inuit traditional knowledge and culture as a key to a quality education.

Respondents also provided a variety of answers which fall into a few main concepts, discussed below, such as the impact of teachers; readiness for college and work, often within the backdrop of the north-south dynamic; and support for language and culture, among other ideas. These responses reveal three key themes: dedicated teachers, readiness for post-secondary education, and readiness for work or community living.

*9.1 Dedicated Teachers.* In response to the respondents' answer to whether the educational quality was high, if needed, a probing question was asked—what makes it so? A common thread was "dedicated teachers," a sentiment echoed in one respondent's comment: "And we are very lucky ... they (the teachers) are very determined." Another respondent stated, "We have incredible teachers. ... We can have the most beautiful program, but ... it's the quality of the teachers that determine the quality of the education."

Similarly, one Inuit teacher stated that "the quality of education can be the same level as the South, if it's not adapted to our culture it will not be adequate." Similarly, as another teacher put it: "I create my own curriculum, my own material, try and make the subject matter more relevant. But if you are not going to do this then I wouldn't say the quality of education is very high." In this sense, the answers portrayed a high quality education in a school that was seeking to improve within its context, while being aware of external realities as well.

The centrality of teachers as change agents and leaders in effective schools is well known. In this case, there are examples of how the work of teachers bridges gaps, leading students to success while supporting and improving the quality of education. For example, a stable, competent teaching force provides a vision to the future as well as a steady influence on current good practices. One respondent identified the imperative of recruiting and retaining these

dedicated teachers: “You need teachers that can inspire you to a long term vision. ... Teachers are crucial. And I believe that we have incredible ones.” Another respondent praised a colleague for helping students with their writing skills (something discussed below as a concern for post-secondary readiness); yet another recalled how fellow administrators and teachers assisted with her transition in joining the school. She noted, “the administration are extremely supportive ... they will point you in the right direction ... There is lots of support.”

*9.2 Post-Secondary as College-University Readiness.* Respondents were sensitive to the notion that a quality education should result in successful post-secondary education. This shows that graduation meant providing more options for students to attend post-secondary institutions, although most would attend colleges and universities in the South. As such, there seems to be a mixture of responses to college readiness with more senior teachers considering challenges and support while newer teachers saw the concerns but tended to see solutions as well.

The sense that the school is actively enhancing the readiness of graduates as part of a high quality education was strong. However, respondents also had concerns, including consideration of the differences between the north and south. One respondent, reflecting on being parent, student, and in some cases teacher, felt the “school work is too easy here. And homework is not given enough.” Yet seeing through this complexity, the same respondent also noted, “at home there is not enough support either.” More focused on student motivation, another teacher respondent questioned the readiness and motivation of students, arguing “Most colleges come back at us that our students are not ready. They are not used to presenting that that level for assignment or the quantity of assignments and homework.” Even relatively simple things, such as being on time, are problematic. As one teacher respondent noted, “Even yesterday it was a big final exam, not a single student was on time.” Another respondent recalled that during her time as a post-secondary student she could not be her “... best self because I did not know how to manage my time. There is lots of homework and here we don’t get that much homework.” Another respondent, speaking of her own experience on high school graduation and attending college, lamented, “When I went to college nobody really taught me how to write an essay. ... My writing skills weren’t that great.”

An interesting point is made here as yet another respondent refers to a former student who somewhat intuitively noted, “Students from the South are just as unprepared as we are.” A key concern within this dynamic is: do students from the North blame themselves for not being ready when readiness is an issue for *most* students transitioning into post-secondary institutions? Also, the notion that having the school follow, or otherwise support, the student attending post-secondary may hold promise of easing the transition.

The district seems to be aware of the needs of students in transition to post-secondary. As a result, there are programs in place to help, but some of the respondents suggested students are not always willing to seek help. For example, one teacher noted that such post-secondary students felt overwhelmed and essentially shut down:

[They] hide out; don’t go to see academic advisors, our school board does provide a lot help, tutors, academic counselling, so like so many things ... they prove to help the student .... The unfortunate thing is if the students are not willing to access that. ... To make the transition.

Interestingly, showing a continued connection to school even after graduation, she went on to mention support from her high school teachers saying that she improved her writing schools while in college “on my own with some help from the teachers here.”



*9.3 Post-Secondary as Work-Community Readiness.* Further to the school and community sense that, as one respondent said, “schools are here to enable students to go to post-secondary education,” school also has a role to play in supporting culture, language, and the community. Education in this case needs to enable and foster good citizens in a just society, as they may stay to support and lead their community or region.

While some students do leave school early, there is considerable reference to school leading to success as part of a school-to-work link to the quality of the education they receive. Many respondents referred to opportunities within Nunavik, the community, and the relationship to this as part of a quality education. One teacher respondent observed, “A lot of my students already have jobs, most of them part time.” In addition, with higher education students tend to see the “value in employment and saving money and everything else.” Another referred to a recent employer, noting that while the work involves being away (two weeks on and two weeks off), it is within Nunavik, and the flexibility enables a somewhat modified traditional lifestyle. As she stated,

We have quite a number of people that are going there and sticking with it and doing well and actually have two weeks on and two weeks off. So for hunters, you’re always going to get a part of the season for goose hunting, or whatever.

Additionally, it seems there is an incentive to pursue more education, as another respondent commented, “I think that they consider high school graduates before anyone else.” A quality education seems to help with readiness to the world of work. Students seem to fare well in the transition to work; a teacher respondent noted that “quite a few people hired from here that are making a really positive transition to that workplace, moving up quickly, although sometimes hired for more menial stuff.” Furthermore, she notes that “quite a few people because they have done really well in school and they have the work ethic and good reading skills. One of the girls was the top in her class for the heavy equipment operator... that’s huge. ...”

## **10. On being Inuit and valuing Inuit culture**

Does being Inuit matter? Questions about who can be a good teacher or where good teachers are from was on the minds of respondents. Capturing one side of this discussion, a teacher respondent argued that “to be a good teacher... It does not matter where you are from. ... You have it or you do not. And it's not because you're from here that you're going to be a good teacher.” In the views of many respondents, being Inuit does matter.

First and perhaps more to the point of worldviews, an Inuit teacher respondent lamented that few people actually “...know about Inuit. ... Our country is not very educated on this.” She does credit the district in helping with this lack of knowledge: “KI ... brings the new staff to good track to tell them about the Inuit culture. ... A one or two day thing. So they're knowledgeable, kind of.” The gap in knowledge may well be reflected in more relationship- or school-based interactions. As another Inuit respondent suggested, new teachers “don't really know how to teach the Inuit student ... If you're a new teacher that has never been in the North and doesn't know the culture, don't know our, I don't know. Our ways. And I guess you don't really know.” Providing a specific example, she explained, “When we say yes, we say yes with our eyes ... So some teachers will tell you, why some students don't say anything when they're actually answering them with their eyes.” The context of the issues facing the all of Inuit of the North, and in particular the members of the community, was a concern or one Inuit respondent. She stated that “if you're not from here and don't know the struggles that we go through so you

wouldn't really understand what's going on with these students like why some students can't thrive as others.”

A Southern respondent spoke of the Inuit and their context:

If they are from here, yes. They understand I think the side that everybody else coming from outside needs to understand, but then I think sometimes they have the challenge of trying to become a teacher without having the tools already in their toolkit and that's a huge challenge.”

Another Southern teacher respondent argued,

If they are from here, they are like mostly Inuit teachers. They completely understand, it is a cultural thing. They understand like nuances and subtleties in the students that we don't like that I'll never understand why I don't speak the language so I'll never be able to pick up on some things that like a first like an Inuit teacher can. Born and raised part of the community. There is always going to be like a bit of a gap in understanding.

Also supporting the Inuit teachers and their better understanding of the local context, one of the Inuit administrator respondents claimed,

The Inuit teachers? Oh yea! They do! Like sometimes I will I will have a teacher come and talk to me and I understand that is an issue. But this is a whole community like the community is like this so the child is not behaving this way on purpose. That is all he knows because so because I understand him, we are from here.”

Reflecting the administrative partnership and strong support for teachers in this school the other administrator contended,

The teachers from here are just naturals. ... They solve their problems differently. I do not get many referrals for the Inuit sector. ... If a teacher can fix it, the kid stays in the class and they learn. ... You go in her class and you can hear a pin drop. If you have a different respect for an Inuit teacher. Not only that, she knows their parents she knows everybody in their family so she just says hey Jimmy that is enough I want to be calling your mom. You know. So yeah, there they have it. They're born with it.

In closing, this school is a clear case of a variety of successful approaches to schooling for Inuit children in Northern Quebec being applied by a group of dedicated and committed teachers and community members. The context is similar to other northern areas in that there is a forced dependence on southern priorities which has to be balanced with building commitment to local priorities. Further, there is a need to decolonize much of the education process as Inuit people who span the north of Canada learn to adapt to the north-south geopolitical distortions of their longstanding existence. In this case, Nunavik seems to be adapting. With the distinctive influence coming from Quebec, there seems a unique blending of Inuit, English, and French languages and cultures that distinguishes this context from the other regions of Inuit Nunangat, which seem less diverse.

Having good people committed to good work is a powerful antidote to the ills caused from years of colonial and assimilationist practices. However, good will alone is not always enough. Here we see a pattern of effective schools supporting a re-emerging society, with fundamental change enabled through the return of control to the people living in the Nunavik region. Often the move to local decision-making includes improved ability to target funding toward innovation, and thereby success. The James Bay Agreement and subsequent political changes in the province, while not creating a separate territory, have created a distinct region within a distinctly Northern and Inuit area. From this rich position, schools and society are rebuilding for a better future, even as they adapt to the continued realities of southern biased governments and

other systematic obstacles. In this case a school and community are improving the odds with students, parents, teachers, staff, and an administration who work to support success in schools within an Inuit and Northern perspective. It's not that the respondents in this study have found all the solutions. Rather, they persist in dealing with their challenges. They remain committed to seeking success and implementing the supports needed to ensure success for the school and its students, while fostering Inuit culture and language, and a sense of diversity that has a place in all our futures.

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