

# Urgent Need for More Inuktitut Instruction in Nunavut Schools

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## Abstract

This paper presents preliminary findings related to Inuktitut from dissertation research carried out in 2006 in one community in the Qikiqtani region of Nunavut. Seventy-four Inuit were interviewed to find what they like about schooling and what they would like to see change. Strengthening Inuktitut through more and better programs in the schools emerged as a key concern for many participants. I recommend that the new Nunavut Education Act require schools to hire Elders to teach Inuktitut through the teaching of traditional skills, that the Bilingual Education Strategy be implemented, and that the Government of Canada and Government of Nunavut provide funding for both of these initiatives.

**Keywords:** Nunavut, Inuit Education, Inuktitut, Cross-Cultural Education

## Introduction

I will start by giving a very brief account of how I came to this work. I was hired in 1997 to teach grade 7 in a Qikiqtani community on Baffin Island that I'll call Tuktulik (there are often a lot of caribou fairly close by). I am a EuroCanadian from Ontario, and I received no orientation to Inuit culture or Inuit learners when I was hired and started teaching in Nunavut. I arrived 4 days before school started, and only then learned that my students had transitioned from Inuktitut as the language of instruction to English when they entered grade 5.

I experimented and invented my way through two years, took the only night-school Inuktitut course offered, and arranged a week of private Inuktitut instruction as

professional development in my second year. I learned some of the basic structure of the language and how to say simple things, and, following the intensive week, I understood some of the typical mistakes my students made in English, but I did not and do not speak or understand more than a few words and phrases of Inuktitut.

After two years I was very attached to the people and place, and very suspicious of a system that supports its students poorly in both languages. I knew that I and my southern colleagues had been inadequately prepared to teach Inuit students in an English as a second language (ESL) environment (BERGER & EPP 2005), and that relevant curriculum was scarce in English and almost non-existent in Inuktitut (BERGER, EPP & MOELLER 2006). My partner's career drew me south where I was able to pursue my interest in education in Nunavut through masters work.

In 2000 I did master's research in 5 communities in the Kivalliq Region of Nunavut (BERGER 2001). I found many dedicated individuals and schools trying to creatively meet the needs of students, and found that many Qallunaat (non-Inuit) teachers were frustrated by the system, and by their own inability to teach in culturally compatible ways. Through this work I became convinced that changes were needed in the school system, and also that Inuit need to direct these changes. For 4 months in the winter and spring of 2006 I was back in Tuktuulik, doing fieldwork to learn about what Inuit like about the schools as they are, and what they would like to see changed.

I know of very little work in Nunavut addressing Inuit views on schooling. Very recently, the *Sivuniksamut Ilinniarniq* (Learning for the Future) Consultations were conducted by the Nunavut Department of Education in 2003/2004 – although the results were first released earlier this year. In a nutshell, three sub-studies conducted across many communities found:

In all three consultations, students, parents, educators and community members called for consideration of Inuit language and culture in Nunavut schooling beyond the present cultural inclusion and co-curricular approaches. The principles of *Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangit* need to come alive in schools<sup>1</sup>. The consultations revealed that education stakeholders would like Nunavut graduates to have a strong foundation in traditional Inuit cultural skills, values and beliefs as well as being bilingual (Inuktitut/English). They want students to graduate with a strong sense of who they are as Inuit.... Requests were made by youth, elders and parents for more Inuktitut courses and instruction in English as a second language. (Executive Summary of *Sivuniksamut Ilinniarniq* Consultations, AYLWARD 2004: 11, 12).

Complementing these unequivocal findings are very recent consultations held by the Department of Education regarding the new Nunavut Education Act. They provide another endorsement of incorporating Inuit ways and knowledge "into every aspect of the

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<sup>1</sup> Editors' note: suggested translation "Inuit long-standing knowledge still meaningful today." See "Concerning Inuit Orality, introduction to the Proceedings".

education system” (Picco 2006: 1).

My research in Tuktulik helps to give some nuance and depth to these two broad processes. It confirms some key findings that hold across categories of age, gender, wage-employment status, level of formal education, and participation in traditional activities like hunting, carving, and sewing. It also explores some reasons behind some of the opinions, and examines some counter-examples – although there were few – to the majority opinion about the need for increased culture and language in Nunavut schools.

## **Methodology**

I want to point out that these are preliminary findings – the dissertation is months away, and I will be presenting findings to the community for comment next month. Still, I am very confident about what I will tell you today, and will use participants’ own words liberally.

I was a participant observer in the community and schools for 4 months, and had 2 years of living there and repeated visits in the meantime to help me contextualize what I learned. I conducted interviews with 74 Inuit adults, between 10% and 12% of the adult Inuit population, depending on whether you use the number of active charts in the Health Centre, or Statistics Canada’s 2001 census data as an accurate representation of the population.

Participants included 43 women and 31 men in these age ranges:

- 2 either 18 or 19
- 22 in their 20s
- 21 in their 30s
- 12 in their 40s
- 10 in their 50s
- 5 in their 60s
- 1 over 70 and
- 1 over 80

Eighteen participants had full-time wage-employment, including teachers, school support staff, cashiers, government workers, and others. Fifteen participants had part-time or itinerant wage-employment, four were students and 37 were not employed in wage-labour. At least 19 earn money through the production of arts and crafts, and at least 21 take part in land activities – hunting, fishing, and camping. Many more said they would if they had the equipment.

Six participants were grade 12 graduates, 4 were currently in high school, 3 had never been to school, and the majority had reached grade 7, 8 or 9. Many had studied at Nunavut Arctic College, including 2 who earned bachelor’s degrees. Two had some post-

secondary education in southern Canada. All that to say that the participants, aside from there being significantly more women than men, are demographically fairly representative of the community.

For this paper I focus on what I found in terms of language – particularly on the desire to preserve Inuktitut, and to broaden and strengthen the teaching of Inuktitut in the schools to help ensure its vitality. This finding will not surprise anyone working in the field. Aside from the recent consultations, Dorais and Sammons (2002), for example, reported that Inuit feel that Inuktitut is very important in formal education. But time passes, Nunavut's Bilingual Education strategy waits to be implemented, elders pass on, and more and more English is spoken. These findings support previous work and are a reminder that language must be a priority.

It is important to note that most of my questions were very general. The interviews were semi-structured and the interview guide evolved as ideas arose from participants. In later interviews I raised themes from earlier interviews to get others' feedback. Language emerged as an important issue for participants.

### **Selected Findings & Discussion**

Here is some of what I heard (Inuit voices are in italics and some quotes are edited for clarity):

*In my mind I hope they learn more Inuktitut to get to know their traditional stuff, so their traditional stuff will remain alive.* (Man in 30s)

*I want them learning Inuktitut and Inuit ways, because they're forgetting, and we can't just rely on people, you know, like me.* (Elder – Woman)

Thirty-seven people, across all categories of age, employment, gender, educational background, and participation in land activities said that there should be more, or stronger Inuktitut instruction in the schools, and 30 of the responses were spontaneous, responses to questions like “what is best about the schools?”

Twenty of the remaining 37 said that Inuktitut and English are important to learn in schools, things like:

*More English and more Inuktitut is all I'm asking for.* (Man in 20s)

Twelve more made some expression indicating that they value Inuktitut, though they did not say specifically that there should be more taught. They said things like:

*Well the good thing is that I know that they teach them Inuktitut, 'cause they're forgetting, and sometimes they tend to speak in English, even though they have to speak in Inuktitut. Me, I only talk to my children and grandchildren in Inuktitut. (Elder – Woman)*

All 5 of the participants who made no direct expression about Inuktitut made comments showing that they value Inuit culture in schools. So, 100% of the participants indicated valuing Inuit culture or Inuktitut, and 50% specifically said they would like more or stronger Inuktitut taught in the schools.

There was also support for more English in school, including several participants who would like it taught earlier, and one who suggested it should be the language of instruction. In all, 19 said more or stronger English should be taught, and 23 of those remaining that Inuktitut and English are important. Many of those who would like students to learn more Inuktitut in schools also wanted them to learn more English. I'll return to English a bit later.

That is a general idea of what I found with respect to language. I want to start looking at specific findings with something positive. A number of participants said they were happy that some young children have strong Inuktitut skills, that the daycare includes an elder who teaches traditional songs and games, and that Inuktitut instruction is rigorous in the early grades:

*My daughter, she's excellent in English writing, but I prefer her to know more [syllabics]. But she knows more Inuktitut than me; you know, she knows the finals more than I do. (Woman in 30s)*

*Like daycare... that's where they pick up Inuktitut... Especially Inuktitut songs that we haven't heard for 20 years. And it's coming out of daycare kids. (Woman in 30s)*

*I think the younger students are being taught our very strong Inuktitut language now, this year. I think, 'cause I heard a young kid saying something I haven't heard for seven years, and it suddenly clicked in there and I knew what it meant. (Woman in 40s)*

I also heard a Qallunaat educator say, at a public meeting, that it is great that Inuktitut is so strong, as evidenced by the fact that kids always speak to each other in Inuktitut. Participants painted a different picture. Many expressed concern about losing the language, and this formed the basis for wanting more taught in the schools. Here are some of the reasons why people worry:

*My children's Inuktitut is more English than anything else. They may be speaking in Inuktitut, but they're putting their words together in Qallunaatit. (Woman in 50s)*

*"Since I don't understand your type of language, I have to ask you in English." I always say that to students. "Try to tell me something in English. That way I think I can understand it, but the way*

*you're talking to me in Inuktitut, I'm not understanding it at all".... They have to shorten it, right; they understand it but we don't.* (Woman in 40s)

*That's what he's trying to say; they're like kind of speechless now...they can't really finish the word without saying it in English which these older people can't really understand.*  
(Elder – Man, through interpreter)

*There's also that mixing of two languages. I don't like that. And just saying the ending of it. No wonder we're losing the language. Because we're only using parts of it. Use it all. Don't just teach half of it.* (Woman in 50s)

*Some of the people are taught very mixedly. We still live with my elderly parents. My two daughters speak mixedly so they can't understand.* (Woman in 20s)

*There's lots of things to learn in Inuktitut yet they're not being taught in school. They can learn a lot in school.... Like they don't even know how to speak properly anymore.... They've dropped so many words that they don't really know how to put their words together.* (Elder – Woman, through interpreter)

*They learn Inuktitut first, the first 3 years of their life in school, and then they drop that and go to Qallunaaq school. They forget their Inuktitut.* (Elder – Woman, through interpreter)

*It's more like baby-talk Inuktitut.* (Woman in 40s)

*That's what I'm finding out from my grandkids. They don't know their own language, because they're not always with us. What does that mean when I talk to them, or want to ask something: "Can you get that thing to me?" I say the word and they say, "what is it, what?" They cannot understand.*  
(Elder – Woman)

In Greenland, Birgitte Jacobsen (2004) wrote that it is now taken for granted by people that Greenlandic will not disappear, but that is emphatically not the case with Inuktitut in this community in Nunavut.

Many reasons were expressed for concern about language loss. Like Dorais and Sammons (2002) found in several Nunavut communities, most were connected to people's identity as Inuit. For example:

*That little kid's pure Inuk. I would not believe that little kid was speaking English instead of our language.* (Man in 20s)

*'Cause I'm Inuk. We're the last generation that can speak in Inuktitut before we lose it. Other communities have lost it.* (Woman in 30s)

*Said to a granddaughter from Iqaluit who was not able to speak proper Inuktitut: "You're not turning White." (Elder – Woman)*

*The new generation they don't know how to hunt, they don't know how to speak fully Inuktitut. They're lost! (Elder – Woman)*

It was also noted that children without "Inuit skills" would have low self-esteem, and that without good Inuktitut, English would be harder to learn:

*Either they have to learn their ways, Inuit ways, or I don't think they could follow English ways. (Woman in 40s)*

*Not learning Inuktitut means you can't learn English.... Kids need to be around more elders. The more Inuktitut they learn the better English they'll learn. (Woman in 30s)*

*I also believe in there's a saying that when you have your mother tongue, language proficiently, then you can survive anywhere. (Elder – Man)*

These ideas echo current thinking in research on language learning (CRAGO 1992; WRIGHT & TAYLOR 1995).

A number of practical reasons were also given for including Inuktitut as the language of instruction in the higher grades, or at least for having Inuit teachers who were able to translate concepts into Inuktitut while teaching in English. One recent graduate said that the English had been his biggest stumbling block, another that it is discouraging when you do not understand, and that people drop out because they do not understand:

*Hardest thing for me going to school was mostly the English part; like sometimes it was very difficult for me to understand some of the things that were being taught in school because of English. (Man in 20s – recent grade 12 graduate)*

*I've seen a lot of students growing up and dropping out because they don't know how to speak that good English, and so when someone's teaching you in a language that's not your own, you don't understand anything and then it really becomes discouraging for people. (Woman in 20s – recent grade 12 graduate)*

There were some who recommended that English be taught earlier, or who supported the current model of switching to English in grade 4 or 5. This seemed tied to success at school and the need for English to gain access to the wage economy. Good English is seen as necessary to get a job. The pervasiveness of English was also noted, as was the need for strong English skills in order to continue studies in the south. Two examples of reasons for wanting students to learn English well, were:

*I want my kids to learn more English so they can have a good job anywhere they go.* (Woman in 20s)

*He hears that school, education counts a lot when it comes to finding jobs. When you live up here in the north, you have to know both now, Inuktitut survival, and Qallunaatit as well.*  
(Elder – Man, through an interpreter)

Government of Nunavut policymakers need to consider this. Asked if he had done anything to help his kids be successful in schools, one person said:

*I do try and help them, especially with comprehension of English. I'm even more into it than with Inuktitut. Because now the fact that our government today is very slow in that regards. They keep talking about eventually one day it will be an Inuit working government; I don't see that happening.... Mind you I still teach them Inuktitut.* (Elder – Man)

The valuing of English because of its importance for success in education and work suggests the importance of policy in these areas. Steps toward making Inuktitut the *de facto* working language of Nunavut would raise its status in the arena of employment – weakening the dominance of English and strengthening Inuktitut – adding one more reason for people to value strong first language skills. Pedersen (2004) reported that in Greenland the language is partially protected by the fact that Danish, the competition, is much less ubiquitous than English. With the strong competition from English in Nunavut, Inuktitut should receive all possible protection through legislation.

Along with the ubiquity of English, there may be some other reasons why some people want more English taught, or more English taught earlier. In some cases people in their 40s or 50s mentioned their own experiences in strict schools where they were forced to speak only English, and noted that their English is generally better than people in their 30s. This might seem to support an all-English environment in schools, though concern about what might be lost was voiced as well. Watt-Cloutier (2000) wrote about the higher achievement of many students in schools 30 years ago, and also about concerns, but she credited the high expectations placed on students for their success, rather than the all-English environment.

The Qallunaat living in Tuktuulik may play a role in Inuit support for English as well. One participant said that a teacher once told her she should speak English to her children at home, but that she had said 'no way.' One Qallunaat teacher said to me that he thought that an all-English classroom environment might be necessary for students to REALLY learn English. I do not question the good intent of the teacher, but am concerned about the validity of the claim, and the potential for loss involved.

In the most extreme case I heard, a long-time Qallunaat community member criticized Thomas Berger's (2006) report for calling for more federal funding to strengthen Inuktitut and Nunavut's schools, saying that he did not want his tax dollars wasted on a

dead language. Later in our argument he said that the same could be said for Quebec: “They’re Canadians. They should learn English, forget French, and get on with it.”

There are certainly many Qallunaat living in Tuktuulik who would not share this view at all, and I have little direct evidence that local Qallunaat beliefs about language are important, but I suspect they form one more push towards English and another insidious assault on Inuktitut. I think this may even hold true for very open and respectful southerners, who may nevertheless quietly assume that Inuit will one day live like and work like Qallunaat.

One other reason was mentioned that may explain support for English in schools, or ambivalence about the expansion of Inuktitut. A number of concerns were voiced about capacity problems if the schools were to move toward more Inuktitut as a language of instruction:

*Ya if they start using them regularly in school, they could learn.... the Inuktitut strong speeches. If they start using that more in school they could do that, but it's kind of hopeless the way things are going now. Even Inuktitut teachers ask questions like, 'How did they do this? How did they do that?' If they don't know that, then they don't know the description for it. Then that means they have a lack of Inuktitut too. (Elder – Man, through an interpreter)*

*Younger Inuit teachers don't really know our culture – what's the use of them trying to teach it if they themselves don't know it? (Woman in 40s)*

*There's lots of reasons why I want people to learn Inuktitut. I really want Inuit teachers to be taught Inuktitut. Real Inuktitut. Solid Inuktitut. There's only very few people, elders, who know real Inuktitut left...there are only few of them and they'll be gone in no time. (Elder – Woman, through an interpreter)*

*Maybe we still have a slight time, because there's still elders around. Very slight. Because, my Inuktitut's not perfect anymore – it was never perfect anyway – compared to my parents' Inuktitut, because I was in school most of my life in my younger years. (Woman in 50s)*

If the capacity to strengthen Inuktitut in the schools is weak and fading it seems to me to double the urgency of moving forward. Almost all of the participants felt that elders should have formal involvement in the schools, and some suggested that elders should co-teach the Inuktitut classes in the high school, or that they should teach Inuit teachers to help keep their Inuktitut skills strong. A few examples:

*That would help a lot if you have an elderly person just teaching Inuktitut, and the way they should be talking. (Woman in 40s)*

*Although maybe some people have other ideas, but to her she thinks that before the elders are all gone that they should start schools like that; like involve the elders with education more now.*  
(Elder – Woman, through an interpreter)

Some made the direct link between language loss and the loss of land skills on which the language is based. A few made detours during the interviews to tell me about specialized vocabulary connected to the land:

*Like if I say something in Inuktitut, a real proper word, some people tend to say, 'gee, I haven't heard that word for so long'.... Of course you don't usually do those activities you did before there was so many English people came up to your settlement. And yet you don't do those activities anymore, like everyday activities. You tend to lose certain words – a real proper word.... I hope I don't.* (Woman in 40s)

*I would like to see more Inuit culture by Inuktitut. Most people are having trouble pronouncing Inuktitut words.... One day if you go hunting, what about if you don't know about the snow? And if you were lost and make a little shack for yourself to survive. But remember pukujaq is no good to build an igloo – or an example like that. So maybe it'd be better for people to learn more Inuktitut and culture.* (Man in 20s)

Thirty years ago Brody (1975) wrote that sometimes younger Inuit could not understand older people's sophisticated language. He distinguished between *inuttitummarik*, correct Inuktitut with a wide vocabulary, and *inumarittit*, sophisticated language related to wisdom and knowledge of the land (51, 52). At least some of the loss described by participants may be loss of the latter kind of language, a reflection of the change from camp to settlement life.

One participant suggested that elders should be hired not to teach the language in isolation, but to teach traditional skills, through which the language would also be learned. Participants said that there is much to be learned on the land, and most participants wanted more Inuit cultural knowledge and skills taught in and out of the schools. It was sometimes hard to tell whether people were speaking of "Inuktitut" as the language, or as Inuit ways of doing things, when they asked to have more in schools.

Since participants were nearly unanimous in saying that more traditional Inuit skills should be taught in the schools, an obvious synergy exists: elders strengthening students' language skills through teaching traditional skills. A model like one used by a school in the Kivalliq could be employed, where the community is consulted about what skills should be taught, then many elders are coordinated to teach small groups of students the desired skills. While it would only be a baby step towards the Department of Education's goal of incorporating Inuit ways into every aspect of schooling, it could be implemented sooner rather than later. To do it seriously would take new funding, or reassigning funds from current teaching positions.

There has been some concern raised in the literature on Inuit education that

students might be alienated by learning traditional cultural practices (STAIRS 1994), and several participants worried about this as well. However, younger participants talked enthusiastically about sewing and hunting and camping experiences they had in school, expressed concern that these are no longer so available, and expressed the desire for more opportunities to pursue Inuit culture in schools.

Two more observations from the fieldwork. Only a few participants chose to read the Inuktitut version of the consent form. When I started asking why, people said that they could, of course, read the Inuktitut version, but that it would take them longer. One explained that with syllabics you need to sound the word out piece by piece instead of reading through word recognition. Another said that it is just a matter of practice. Practice may be difficult to come by. Unlike in Greenland where Pedersen (2004) wrote about the different genres of literature available to young Greenlanders, in my experience in Tuktulik there is little available to read in any language – not comics, not magazines, not newspapers, not novels. A clear preference for reading English, and greater facility in it, should be taken as an urgent sign that Inuktitut instruction needs strengthening in schools.

Another issue arising from the consent form was dialect. From several comments on the issue it seems that people feel very strongly about preserving the local dialect. One elder said:

*People from different communities, they want to have their own language in the community. Put them in the paper. Same as here. Because we are not one; even though we are one Inuit, in our language we're not one. (Elder – Woman)*

Perhaps in today's world of desktop publishing materials could arrive in the community, be translated into the local dialect, and printed on site. This might be a great role for the schools to take on.

## **Concern**

At a public meeting about school improvement, sponsored by the Department of Education, community members in Tuktulik clearly expressed their desire for more Inuit language and culture in schools, and for more elders. A school official responded that he was sympathetic, but that there was no money available to hire more elders, and that culture should be integrated across the curriculum. When the idea of converting teaching positions held by southerners into money to hire elders and local experts was raised, it was rejected with the explanation that the school is already understaffed and almost unable to provide the courses students need in order to graduate. It seems disingenuous to hold consultations that cannot result in any changes. If the Department of Education is really considering what Education Minister Ed Picco (2006) called a “fundamental shift in the delivery of education in Nunavut” (1) Inuit voices must be heard, and heeded.

## Concluding Recommendation

Inuit in the study gave a strong endorsement of Inuktitut, and many asked specifically for its teaching to be expanded or strengthened. To conclude I want to make a recommendation. Implementing the Department of Education's own Bilingual Education Strategy (2004) – giving more exposure to English as a Second Language programs earlier, moving Inuktitut instruction into the higher grades, improving curriculum and resources in both languages, and improving teacher training and support, would, I believe, please the vast majority of participants in this study. There are many obstacles to doing this, not the least of which was pointed to in a recent report by Thomas Berger (2006) – the need for millions of dollars from the Government of Canada.

It is irresponsible for the Government of Canada to balk at this request. The federal government is responsible for imposing southern schooling on Inuit, and the disruption that has resulted. The current school system is still colonial (BERGER 2005). With a 6 billion dollar surplus last year, refusing to increase funding to address this is unconscionable.

As a man in his 30s said:

*I know kids are smart enough to learn both Inuktitut and English.*

Of course they are, and they deserve a school system that will support that goal.

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