

Literacy Instruction in Nunavut – Initial Findings¹

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The purpose of my research is to collect and examine the stories of educators related to the announcement of a new literacy framework by the Nunavut Department of Education during the 2014/2015 school year. I am currently in the data collection phase of my doctoral study. This paper summarizes the data I have collected to date, discusses emerging themes, and considers the next steps for my research study. This study will uncover strength-based insights and lessons about literacy instruction in a bilingual environment where Inuktitut is a first or second language depending on the community. It is anticipated that discovering both the shared and unique experiences and perspectives of literacy educators will provide Nunavut educational leaders with information that will help improve the on-going implementation of the literacy framework and future educational initiatives. Given that the majority of the Nunavut population, the majority of the students in the Nunavut school system, and many of my anticipated research participants are Inuit, it was ethically responsible to incorporate a balanced borrowing of Western and Indigenous research paradigms in how my research study is being conducted. The methodological approach of this study is grounded theory guided by a theoretical perspective of social constructionism and Inuit Societal Values². Data are being collected using a survey, interviews, and talking circles (focus groups). As of July 2020, 55 educators have completed the survey, and two interviews have taken place.

Locating Myself

Abolson & Willett (2005) stress the importance for researchers to locate themselves within their research. While “location is more than simply saying you are of Cree or Anishinabe or British ancestry; from Toronto or Alberta or Canada” (Abolson & Willett, 2005, p. 98), the places I have

¹The results communicated in this paper do not represent the official position of the Government of Nunavut, Department of Education.

² Eight Inuit Societal Values were identified by the Government of Nunavut to articulate Inuit Qaujimatugangit. Inuit Qaujimatugangit has been defined by the Nunavut Social Development Council (1999) to include “all aspects of traditional Inuit culture including values, worldview, language, social organization, knowledge, life skills, perceptions and expectations” (as cited in Department of Education, 2005, p. 5). These eight Inuit Societal Values are:

- Inuuqatigiitsiarniq: Respecting others, relationships and caring for people.
- Tunnganarniq: Fostering good spirits by being open, welcoming and inclusive.
- Pijitsirniq: Serving and providing for family and/or community.
- Aajiqatigiinni: Decision making through discussion and consensus.
- Pilimmaksarniq/Pijariuqsarniq: Development of skills through observation, mentoring, practice, and effort.
- Piliriqatigiinni/Ikajuqtigiinni: Working together for a common cause.
- Qanuqtuurniq: Being innovative and resourceful.
- Avatittinnik Kamatsiarniq: Respect and care for the land, animals and the environment.

lived have played a significant role in my journey. Originally from Thunder Bay, Ontario, I moved to Nunavut in 2000 to work for the Department of Education. I have had the opportunity to live in several communities, including Arviat, Kanngiqtugaapik, Iqaluit, Uqsuqtuuq, and Qurluktuk. My passion to contribute to Nunavut education arose from the decades I have spent working with Inuit and non-Inuit colleagues and my own experiences as a Nunavut classroom teacher and administrator. Over the past twenty years, I have held roles at both the school and department levels. I currently oversee a staff of 21 responsible for teacher certification, program implementation, professional development, recruitment, orientation, and mentorship. Although I currently work for the Nunavut Department of Education, the results communicated in this paper do not represent the Department's official position.

I selected this topic as my doctoral research study because of my experiences supporting both Inuit and non-Inuit educators to implement balanced literacy strategies while I worked as a literacy team lead and my informal conversations with educators and senior Department staff. I believe that listening to the stories of Inuit and non-Inuit educators will provide insights that can be acted upon to strengthen the ongoing implementation of the literacy framework and to inform the implementation of future educational initiatives in Nunavut. My position as an insider means that the relationships I have with my research participants will not be over when this study concludes. My ongoing professional work aligns with the Indigenous concept of “giving back” (Kovach, 2009, p. 149) as more than disseminating findings after a research study. This is a value I am committed to beyond this research study.

Initial Data

An invitation was emailed to all educators across Nunavut to complete an anonymous survey. The survey consisted of three sections — Personal Background, School Demographics, and Language and Literacy. The Language and Literacy section provided an opportunity for respondents to answer a series of questions in further detail, including:

- How do you perceive the role of each language (Inuktitut and English) in the lives of your students in your community?
- Define/describe literacy.
- Are you aware of the literacy framework?
- What is balanced literacy?
- During your teaching in Nunavut, what successes have you experienced using balanced literacy?
- How effective do you believe balanced literacy to be for developing strong literacy skills in both Inuktitut and English?
- What support have you received to help you implement the literacy framework and/or balanced literacy?
- What supports have been most helpful?
- What additional supports do you perceive as needed?

Of the 55 educators who completed this questionnaire, 23% were Inuit, and 24% speak Inuktitut. Most of the educators are in classroom roles, with the rest fairly evenly split among Student Support Teachers, Learning Coaches, and Administrators. 24% teach the majority of their

classes in Inuktitut. 60% have completed a Bachelor of Education degree, while 34% have completed graduate-level studies in education. Interestingly, 36% have taught in Nunavut for more than ten years, while only 14% have taught in Nunavut for less than two years.

I have conducted two interviews. Each interview began with me and the interviewee(s) exchanging information about each other. In this way, we demonstrated inuuqatigiitsiarniq (respect) and tunnganarniq (welcoming) by saying who we were, describing our relationship to one another, and explaining our interest in the topic (Chilisa, 2012, p. 221). I then posed an open-ended question, ‘Tell me about your experiences with the literacy framework.’ I hoped that through these conversations, data regarding their understanding, use of, and potential struggles with, the literacy framework would emerge.

Emerging Themes

My focus is on searching for the successful practices that educators have experienced and the innovative strategies they have implemented to overcome perceived challenges. Wilson (2008) suggests that research studies often focus on the negatives rather than the positives, resulting in the further “proliferation of negative stereotypes about Indigenous communities” (Wilson, 2008, p. 17). By viewing the data through an asset rather than a deficit perspective, the propagation of negative stereotypes will hopefully be avoided.

Educators are Aware of the Literacy Framework

Ninety-five percent of the survey respondents and both educators interviewed indicated that they were aware of the literacy framework. In March 2014, the literacy framework was announced in a press release, but no accompanying document was provided. During the 2017/2018 school year, a draft framework was released, and school staff were provided an in-service day to review and provide feedback. In fall 2019, the finalized literacy framework was released, and all school staff were expected to participate in a one-day in-service to become familiar with the literacy framework. Given that the literacy framework has transformed from being a theoretical desire of the Department of Education to an actual released document, it is not surprising that educators are more aware of this document and the intention of the literacy framework now than they may have been initially in 2014.

Both interviewees drew connections between the literacy framework and balanced literacy. One participant stated, “No, I’ll be honest I haven’t been taught it lots of times... but my understanding is more of the recent balanced literacy, so I don’t know if that’s exactly the literacy framework so.” and another seemed to concur while providing additional context:

[The] literacy framework is a plan to improve literacy across the territory.... So I guess it might be an attempt at like a coordinated effort to support literacy across the territory without each school and DEA [District Education Authority] acting on it’s own, doing it’s own thing. It’s to prioritize literacy as sorta a foundation of success for students. Those were the original discussions. If we’re not doing literacy, if we’re not supporting literacy, what are we doing? Which leads into balanced literacy. What are we going to use across the territory? What’s a strategy we’re going to implement to support teachers with?

Given that balanced literacy was the initial and continuing focus of the Department, it is not surprising that for both individuals I interviewed, literacy framework equalled balanced literacy. This connection signals a move in the right direction. Educators are aware of balanced literacy as a prioritized strategy by the Department, and most are aware that there is a literacy framework of some sort, even if the details may not be clear.

Educators Would Like More Opportunities for Training

When survey respondents were asked what supports they had received to help them to implement either the literacy framework or balanced literacy strategies, the most common response was professional development (80%). This was followed closely by resources (68%) and then both coaching and time equally (43%).

When asked what supports have been most helpful, survey responses included “PD [professional development] and working with teachers” and that “In-services help me understand.” The desire for more training was also evident in responses such as “More PD for BL [balanced literacy]” and “All staff must be trained; actual demonstrations.”

This perceived need for training was reinforced in the interviews. In my conversation with one participant, it seemed like much of the training received was perceived as external to himself. Training has been something arranged and done by others, not something that he himself has sought out. During our conversation, he indicated, “we had someone come in from the Department,” “the principal of the other school,” “our learning coach has gone out for training,” and that “someone [went] out for Inuktitut guided reading training.” It appears that his concept of professional development is that it is an externally initiated process delivered by educators external to the school.

Overall, educators have found professional development and time to work with and learn from their colleagues as most helpful. They seek more professional development, more coaching, and more Inuktitut resources that would support their teaching.

Next Steps

In this research study, I have deliberately used the term ‘perceived’ in reference to seeking to uncover the supports required. There are two aspects to this—first, what do educators need, and second, what do educators think they need—both are important pieces of the puzzle that I want to better understand through this study. The Department has provided opportunities for training over the last few years, and educators have access to funding for self-identified professional development through the PD Council. The Department has also designed teacher resources such as videos and teacher guides that support self-directed study to learn how to use provided resources to implement balanced literacy strategies. One of the questions I keep returning to in my academic and professional work is around professionalism: What is the professional responsibility of educators to engage in their own professional development?

Now that I have collected some initial data, I have started data analysis. Adherence to a grounded theory methodological orientation means that I must be willing to follow the data and allow a

theory to emerge naturally. Theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation will guide the direction for where further information should be gathered. Additional participants will be sought following the principles of completeness and saturation (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) using the concept of “networked introductions” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 68) as well as my contacts. This means that the focus will be on continuing to gather data until “the range of responses” (Wolcott as cited in Baker & Edwards, p. 4) has been found and stopping when it becomes repetitive (Ragin as cited in Baker & Edwards) and the responses are no longer different (Wolcott as cited in Baker & Edwards).

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