

Towards Piliriqatigiinniq in Literacy Instruction

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Understanding how educators embody the Inuit societal value (ISV) of *piliriqatigiinniq* / *ikajuqtigiinniq* (working together for a common cause) reveals ways in which collaborative activities could be replicated across Nunavut so that all educators, and in turn their students, can benefit. A brief overview of the research study I undertook for my doctoral degree provides context for the purpose of this paper which is to examine one aspect of its findings—how providing structured opportunities for teachers to engage in collaboration can strengthen literacy instruction. Following a discussion of the relationship between *piliriqatigiinniq* / *ikajuqtigiinniq* and teacher collaboration, successful examples of teacher collaboration taking place in Nunavut schools will be shared, and, finally, how more educators can have opportunities to engage in collaborative practices will be considered.

A Brief Overview of the Research Study

The intention of my doctoral research study was to gather the stories of educators to uncover the insights and lessons their stories reveal about literacy instruction in a bilingual environment, and more generally about the implementation of educational initiatives in Nunavut.

My Positioning

I am a non-Indigenous settler woman originally from northwestern Ontario who relocated to Nunavut more than two decades ago. I have worked at both the system level and the school level and have lived in all three regions of Nunavut. Although I have worked for the Nunavut Department of Education since 2000, the views expressed in this article are my own. The information in this article does not represent the official view of the Nunavut Department of Education or the Government of Nunavut.

The Importance of Effective Literacy Instruction

UNESCO (2015) has argued that literacy is a foundational skill that is “a prerequisite for engaging in further education and training” (p. 40), and this reflects my experiences as a Nunavut educator over the past twenty years. I have heard firsthand the concerns that educators, parents, and Inuit organizations have expressed regarding the school system (Berger, 2006; National Committee on Inuit Education, 2011; Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2019; Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated [NTI], 2011, 2021). These concerns are heard in the words of Aluki Kotierk, President of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), who stated in 2021 that “Nunavut’s current education system does not meet the needs of Inuit students or equip them to succeed in post-secondary education or [to] thrive in employment and economic opportunities” (NTI, 2021).

Consultation & Ethical Approvals

My research study received ethical approval from both the University of New Brunswick (REB #2018-120) and the Nunavut Research Institute (NRI) (#05 015 18N-M / #05 004 21R-M). As part of the NRI approval process, feedback on this research study was provided by NTI. I

drew upon the wisdom and support of my long-term colleagues (both Inuit and non-Inuit) during my research, and my doctoral supervisory committee included an Inuit Advisor who is an Inuktitut language expert, experienced Nunavut K-12 and adult educator, and former government senior official. While the inherently independent nature of doctoral work tends to preclude genuine collaboration when conducting a research study, my research study addressed the expressed needs of Inuit, and was supported by Inuit, both via their participation in my study, and the guidance key individuals provided.

Methodology & Data Collection

This research study was carried out using a methodology of constructivist grounded theory combined with *Inuit Qaujimagatugangit* (IQ) (Inuit traditional knowledge and worldview). The sensitizing concepts of Inuit societal values (ISV), appreciative inquiry, and a strengths-based approach informed the methodological decisions I made and how I analyzed the collected data.

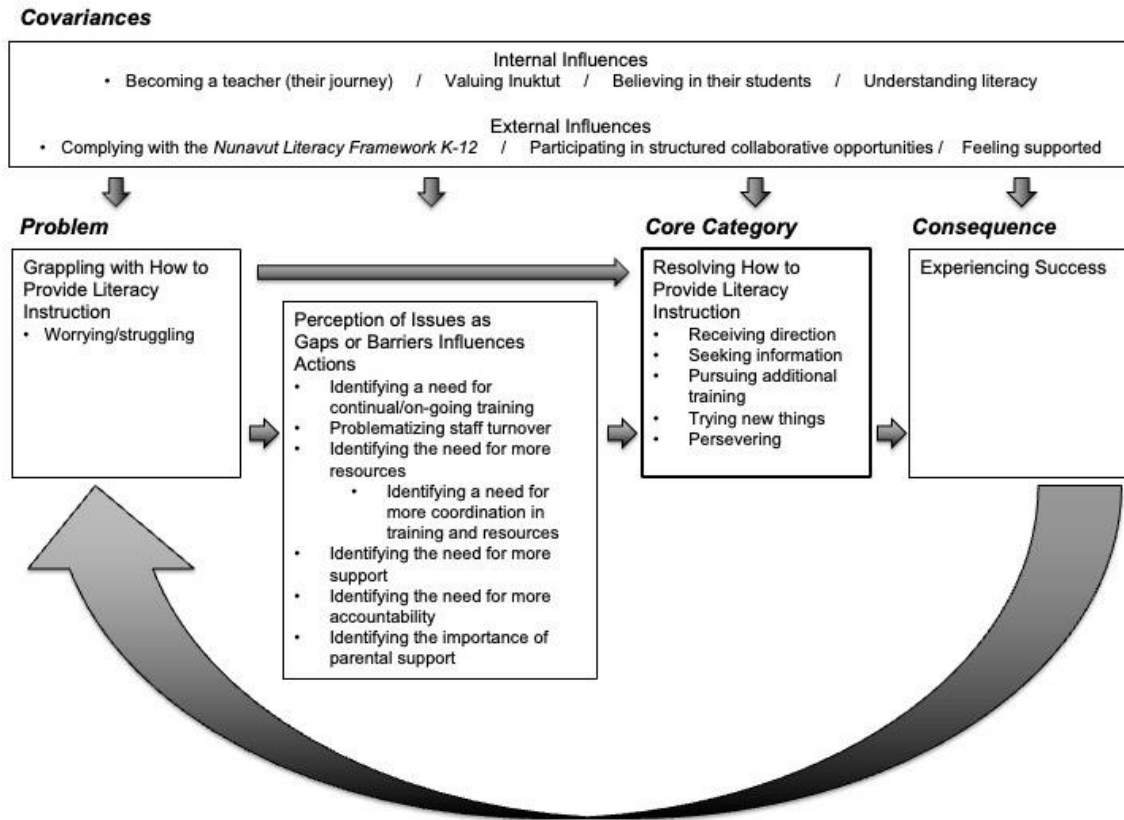
Interviews took place with three Inuit and eleven non-Inuit educators. With the assistance of the Nunavut Teachers' Association a translated questionnaire in Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, and English was circulated to all educators in Nunavut. Fifty-five educators completed the questionnaire, and while not all respondents chose to indicate their ethnicity, twenty percent identified as Inuit educators. Although the numbers fluctuate from year to year, Inuit educators generally reflect around thirty percent of total Nunavut educators (Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2019).

Results

This study found that Nunavut educators grapple with how to provide effective literacy instruction. They address this in different ways with their actions leading to varying degrees of success. Given that conscientious educators continually strive to improve their instructional practices, experiencing success, regardless of how much or how little, feeds back into their problem of grappling with how to enhance their literacy instruction, making the theory that emerged from this grounded theory study an unending cycle. Figure 1 illustrates this theory.

Figure 1

Overview of the Theory



Note. This figure illustrates the core category as well as the problem and consequence of the theory that emerged from this study. The covariance variable “participating in structured collaborative opportunities” was found to influence how educators perceived the issues they encountered.

Participating in Structured Collaborative Opportunities

As educators move from problem to resolution in this theory, they reported encountering issues. They perceive these issues as either gaps or barriers, and significantly, their perception appears to impact the actions they take. As part of the theory a set of covariates was identified. While these covariance variables are not directly connected to the other variables in this theory, they are likely to have the most influence on how educators perceive these issues—as either gaps they can overcome, or as barriers that are roadblocks. The variable of “participating in structured collaborative opportunities” was identified as one of these covariates. The purpose of this article is to explore this variable given the influence it has over the actions educators take.

Piliriqatigiinniq / Ikajuqtigiinniq & Teacher Collaboration

Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit is comprised of “a set of values and practices ... that are timeless” (Karetak & Tester, 2017, p. 1). Piliriqatigiinniq / ikajuqtigiinniq is one of eight Inuit

societal values that help to further articulate IQ. Piliriatigiinniq / ikajuqtigiinniq is the concept of working together for a common cause. According to Arnakak (2002), “as a communal society, the concept of working together and collaboration have vital significance to the Inuit” (p. 38). Given that the Nunavut education system is to be built on the principles of IQ and ISV (Education Act, 2008), piliriatigiinniq / ikajuqtigiinniq should be an integral way in which Nunavut schools operate.

Teacher collaboration has positive effects, both for teachers, and in turn, for student learning (Goddard et al., 2007; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Vangrieken et al., 2015). Vangrieken et al. (2015) conceptualized teacher collaboration as follows:

[Teacher collaboration is the] joint interaction in the group in all activities that are needed to perform a shared task. This concept is not static and uniform but different types of collaboration can occur with varying depths. In a sense collaboration can be seen as an umbrella term, being part of different collaborative concepts. (p. 23)

This joint interaction that is at the heart of teacher collaboration exemplifies working together for a common cause (piliriatigiinniq / ikajuqtigiinniq).

Structured Collaborative Opportunities – Examples & Implications

Educators in this study spoke about meeting with their school’s learning coach to discuss how things were going in their classroom, to seek help when needed, and to review the student literacy data they had collected to identify next steps for each student.

Several educators spoke of team meetings either with the educators teaching the same grade as them, or with educators from their grade division. During these meetings educators said they would “discuss ways to improve our language block” (Interview Participant [IP] 3), “brainstorm how to help the students that are learning below grade level while keeping the others challenged” (IP 4), or to “plan out our balanced literacy instruction and explore resources” (Questionnaire Respondent [QR] 6). These meetings open the door to the private world of each educator’s classroom. This sharing allows them to see that others are also struggling with how to provide literacy instruction.

Educators in schools where collaborative structures such as scheduled meetings with their learning coach and divisional or team meetings were in place, and where they were expected to participate in these activities, seemed more likely to perceive the issues they encountered as they grappled with how to provide effective literacy instruction as gaps rather than barriers. These built in collaborative opportunities provided them not only with a place to receive advice and support, but also a sense that they were not alone in their struggle.

Moving Towards Piliriatigiinniq / Ikajuqtigiinniq

In schools with climates that are conducive to teacher collaboration, and that reflect the Inuit societal value of piliriatigiinniq / ikajuqtigiinniq, teacher collaboration tends to become more spontaneous and teacher driven (Datnow, 2011). The structured collaborative opportunities revealed in this study are a precursor and reinforcement of these unstructured and informal collaborative practices. For example, in some schools, educators reported working with other staff to develop and plan instructional programs that took place across multiple grades such as cross-grade guided reading programs, school-wide writes, and bringing Elders into the school to

support vocabulary development, and one educator recalled how they worked “with teachers and community members to produce literacy materials for classrooms” (IP 13).

Structured collaborative opportunities should be established at both the territorial and school level. They should align with Department of Education expectations for literacy instruction, and be connected with the objectives of training sessions provided by the Department. This cohesiveness would mean that these collaborative opportunities would serve as reinforcement, rather than risk being seen as an add-on, or in conflict with Departmental direction.

Further, learning coaches and administrators should be provided with training and support in how to establish these collaborative structures at the school level, both so that they are successful and feel supported with their attempts to do so, and so that the activities in schools align with upcoming Department of Education training initiatives and expectations. Fostering better connections between the work of school learning coaches and the work of the Department of Education will result in a greater alignment of priorities across the education system.

Conclusion

The theory that emerged from this research study indicates that “participating in structured collaborative opportunities” helps educators to perceive the issues they encounter as gaps rather than barriers and positively influences the actions educators take in how, and whether, they resolve to provide literacy instruction. While it should be kept in mind that “teacher collaboration is not a panacea that solves all problems” (Vangrieken et al., 2015, p. 29), establishing these opportunities could serve as a way to further embed the Inuit societal value of piliriatigiinniq / ikajuqtigiinniq into school structures, and also serve as a springboard to less structured forms of teacher collaboration.

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