



## ARTICLE

### **Opportunity for Aajiiqatigiingniq with Qamanittuaq youth: an examination of the factors impacting identity development and wellness**

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## Opportunity for Aajiiqatigiingniq with Qamanittuaq youth: an examination of the factors impacting identity development and wellness

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### Abstract

The community of *Qamanittuaq*, like many communities in Nunavut, suffers from disproportionate levels of youth suicide and substance related deaths (statistics Canada, 2016, Tootoo, 2018). This uncharacteristically high suicide rate in Nunavut has been described by Kral (2019) as a phenomenon that is a direct response to colonial disruption. The territory has begun to address the challenge strategically with the *Inuusivut Anninaqtuq* (IA) 2017-2022 action plan (United for Life, 2017). One key feature of the plan is to support community-led action for suicide prevention. This article presents the results from the first phase of a Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded Participatory Action Research Project designed to empower youth as leaders and change agents in their community. Within phase one, we sought to answer to the following research question: what factors impact youth identity development and consciousness about traditional and contemporary Inuit values, culture, and knowledge systems? Through focus groups held with Grade 10-12 youth within the context of the *Aulajaagtut* course offering at the local High School, we wanted to learn how youth defined their Inuk identity in the face of pressures from school, community and media. Through an analysis of the thoughts and products shared within the focus groups conducted in February 2019, we were able to gather insights into factors that helped or hindered pride in identity, resilience in the face of challenges and a sense of wellbeing/belonging in community. This article gives voice to the youth who are often unheard in discussions of curriculum development and solutions to complex community issues.

**Keywords:** Inuit identity, suicide prevention, decolonising education

## Introduction

The people of Inuit Nunangat (the four regions of Canada where Inuit have traditionally lived) experience suicide and substance abuse related deaths at a rate that is exponentially higher than communities in southern Canada. Suicide and substance related deaths are often described in medical terms as individual risk factors (Kral, 2019). However, Mills (1959), and Kral (2019) outline the need for examining suicide not as an individual but rather societal response to suffering caused by current and historical cultural disruption. The Federal Day/Residential school period within Inuit Nunangat represents one of the most significant cultural disruptions enacted by the Canadian government (TRC, 2015). Residential and Federal Day schooling was designed with the intention of cultural disruption through assimilation by educating Inuit children for membership in 'Canadian Society' defined by the values of southern<sup>1</sup> communities. Despite best efforts made by Inuit educational leaders restoration of Inuit control of Inuit education remains a work in progress as communities work to heal and schools grapple with supporting the best way forward.

Southern notions of academic achievement and success have permeated schools and send conflicting messages to children. For example, in traditional Inuit society, children remained loyal to their parents as the ultimate authority as long as they lived. Current conceptions of school and social supports usurp this, placing teachers, school administrators and other external authorities such as social service workers and police officers in positions of control and dominance over children and their parents. Additionally, in traditional education children were taught holistically, rather than through compartmentalised skills of the industrial school model adopted by mainstream Canadian provincial education systems. Teaching was embedded within Inuit values and culture that helped youth determine what it meant to be a healthy contributing member of Inuit society, or in Inuktitut to become *Inummarik*. Developing Inuit identity was an inherent aspect of education; teachers were Inuit and the activities, learning and daily life was shaped by Inuit society. All of this was dramatically changed with southern encroachment on the Inuit way of life, and youth today are caught between two worlds, the traditions of the past and the perceived modern way forward from the south. For youth faced with fundamental challenges to identity, Kral (2019) asks us to examine if suicide and death related to substance abuse is not evidence of individual mental health in so much as it is a response to the unanswerable societal questions of "who am I?" and "where do I belong?". If so, culturally responsive suicide prevention must be addressed not only through mental health provisions but through multifaceted decolonisation processes (Wexler and Gone, 2012).

The Nunavut Department of Education (NDE) has worked since its inception towards curriculum and education that is more reflective of traditional Inuit education and values, but implementation has been slow and challenging due to factors both within and external to schools control (Berger et al., 2016; ITK, 2017; NDE, 2007). Decolonisation of education is not fast and must be recognised as an ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'southern' will be used throughout the article to refer to communities and people in Canada which are not Inuit. This is intended to be an inclusive term, referring to all non-Inuit allowing for acknowledgement of the distinction between Inuit as a unique cultural group in Canada, defined by the land itself. All regions of Canada outside of Inuit Nunangat are geographically south.

process that is highly contextual and reliant on curricular changes, policy changes and highly self-reflexive staff committed to transformation (Asher, 2009). External to school efforts, the urgent need for health and wellness support to reduce the suicide and death related to substance abuse occurring within Inuit Nunangat has been nationally recognised. In 2017, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) the Inuit national advocacy group released a National Inuit Suicide Prevention Strategy (NISPS) that, when partnered with the *Inuusivut Anninaqtuq* action plan (2017-2022), maps a course of action for communities to support mental health and community wellness activities. With this research we aimed to bring schools, curriculum, teaching relationships and mental health together as a means to support identity development and resilience with youth at the centre of the conversation.

This article represents the results of the first phase of our three year participatory action project entitled *Ajurnaqtut Aniguinnasuut* (everything difficult always passes) conducted in Qamanittuaq. Within this first phase we wanted to gather knowledge from youth and community members to describe Inuit identity. In short, we wanted to conduct *Aajiiqatigiingniq* (community consensus building) to learn how youth define what it means to be *Inummarik* and Inuit in today's world, which is very different from the world of their grandparents. We wanted to understand:

- What factors impact youth identity development and consciousness about traditional and contemporary Inuit values, culture, and knowledge systems?
- What role the school, its teachers, and the community plays in empowering youth in identity development?
- How youth described Inuit *Qaujimagatuqangit* (IQ) in their lives and in visioning the future?

## Background and Literature

As we began this work, it is also important to describe how we came together as it is our own identities and histories that have informed the way we approached this work. Becky Tootoo is an educator in Jonah Amitnaaq Secondary School, Qamanittuaq and has lived in the community her entire life leaving only to further her education. She was first introduced to formal institutionalised education through Federal Day schooling. She then attended high school in Yellowknife, NT, and was one of the first graduates of the Eastern Arctic Teacher Education Program (EATEP) in Iqaluit and completed her Masters in Educational Leadership at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) as part of an Inuit specific community based cohort. Looking back at her youth, Becky recalls her life as a daughter of a RCMP Special Constable<sup>2</sup> and his wife. Elders played a huge role in the education of her parents which had an impact on her personal education.

Kathy, is a southerner, who lived in Qamanittuaq from the time of her birth until moving to Iqaluit during elementary school, and then returned south to complete High School. Her mother (Judy) was a former Federal Day school teacher who transitioned to teaching within the territorial controlled system in the

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<sup>2</sup> Inuit Special Constables, were employed by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to act as a bridge between Inuit and the federal police force. The southern RCMP officers could not have survived or completed their work without the support of special constables who worked alongside the southern officers and acted as interpreters, mediators and dog team drivers among many other tasks.

70s, and was one of Becky's teachers in public school. They met again in EATEP as Judy became one of the founding educators in the program. Like many southerners, Kathy's family was transitional, following job opportunities and finally leaving Nunavut completely while Kathy was in High School. Kathy and Becky met again, through UPEI and connected by a shared place, histories and experiences we came together having experienced parallel yet vastly different lives as youth, finding our way in Nunavut. These commonalities as well as acknowledged differences set the stage for the design of this research. Throughout the article our voices will appear when our own stories intertwine with those of the youth participants.

In establishing understanding of the challenges and opportunities for this research we prepared a brief literature examination of traditional Inuit education, the disruption caused by southern notions of education, and the youth suicide and deaths related to substance abuse as a response to colonisation.

### **Traditional Education: IQ and becoming Inummarik**

In terms of personal development, southern thought focuses on the process of individual self-actualisation, while Inuit goals are seated in creating harmony for the community; a "we" rather than "me" positionality. To become Inummarik (respected Elder/ real or genuine person) is a life-long learning process (Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association, 2002). This was traditionally achieved holistically through mentorship and practice with Elders as part of a community working together in daily life (Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association, 2002). Children learned by playing games, imitating adults and observing activities and the world around them (Ittusardjuat, 2020). The 'curriculum' included knowledge and skills needed to thrive in the arctic environment, seated in Inuit principles, values, laws and competencies which comprise an educational model known as Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) (NDE, 2007). IQ is defined by elders as 'a set of values and practices, the relevance and importance of these and ways of being and looking at things that are timeless' (Karetak et al., 2017, p.1). IQ is comprised of eight principles: innuqatigiitsiarniq (Respecting others, relationships and caring for people); tunnganarniq (fostering good spirit by being open and welcoming); pijitsirniq (concept of serving); aajiiqatigiingniq (consensus decision making); pilimmaksarniq (concept of skills and knowledge acquisition); piliriqatigiingniq (working together for a common cause); qanuqtuurniq (being innovative and resourceful in seeking solutions); and avatittingnik kamatsiarniq (respect and care for the land, animals and the environment). Knowledge was developed in relation to practice, using whatever techniques and tools were appropriate to learning, thereby teaching youth to be innovative, flexible and critical thinkers (Kublu and Oosten, 1999). There was no fixed time or classroom, learning occurred when it was convenient for both parties and was student driven (Angalik, 2017; Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association, 2002). Learning was highly relational, youth learned relationship to their environment and the living and non-living things as well as their responsibility to one another (Angutinngurniq, 2017). The relationships formed through this learning gave youth a sense of place, belonging and responsibility (Kaluraq, 2020). Learning was also highly experiential, by listening to the stories of Elders as well as through participating in activities to serve their families (Angutinngurniq, 2017). Learning was non-competitive, the goal was not to rise above the other learners, but rather personal mastery (Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association, 2002). Education was considered a community responsibility; children could

turn to any adult (or older child) for life lessons (ITK, 2017). Youth through their education played an integral role in society, supporting their family as they learned (Tootoo, 2015; Towtongie, 2017). All of these activities and approaches to learning were disrupted with the arrival of southerners and southern schooling.

### **Colonial disruption of education in Nunavut**

It is impossible to capture the complexity of dislocation and disruption of Inuit society caused by the assimilationist approach of southern schooling<sup>3</sup>. Initially, schooling was limited to missionary schools which were not established or managed in a uniform manner, which meant that prior to 1950, Inuit children and families were impacted to a greater or lesser degree based on their proximity to a mission school. While some missionaries encouraged literacy development through the use of Inuktitut and the maintenance of the Inuit way of life this was not the majority. For example, by 1930, there were three residential schools all located in the western regions of the North West Territories. All had been built by either Catholic or Anglican missionaries without unifying Federal guidance and supports (TRC, 2015). During the 1950s the Federal government began an active process of systemic assimilation of Inuit through forced relocations and settlement development, which included the implementation of the Federal school system as a means to declare sovereignty over the Arctic and indoctrinate Inuit youth into southern notions of society. Investment in the arctic only began with the cold war Era and it is no coincidence that newly formed settlements were created in areas considered geographically significant for military defence. The fact that funding for Inuit education and the control of school was housed within the Federal Department of Resources and Development only serves as further evidence of intentions. Throughout this era Inuit were relocated and coerced out of their traditional homes and lifestyle. Inuit culture and society was faced with devastating challenges, which is only now beginning to be acknowledged by the federal government. During the Federal Day school era, children were required to be enrolled and attend schools to the age of 16 if a family wished to access federal supports. It was difficult for many parents to understand why children were taken from their needed role as helpers in society to sit in classrooms to learn things that did not seem to be of value for the Inuit way of life (Pauktuutit, 2002). Federal Day schools offered K-9 education in settlements while those wishing to complete secondary school had to relocate for 10 months of the year to regional boarding schools located in four larger communities (TRC, 2015). The centralised secondary school model was not discontinued until 1996 (TRC, 2015).

The curriculum and approach to teaching during this era was consistent with that observed in southern schools. However, the underlying impact was a devaluation of language (English was the language of schools) and cultural approaches to education, with the dominant resources and teaching staff all arriving from the south. In 1970 the Federal Government transferred the responsibility of education to the Northwest Territories (NWT) which set the stage for a shift in education towards community-driven, culturally and linguistically responsive schooling for Inuit. Since this initiative much work has been undertaken to shape Inuit school systems that are responsive to students' learning needs to create

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<sup>3</sup> Schooling will be the collective term used to describe formalised approaches to education brought by southerners to Nunavut.



safer, more nurturing spaces for youth to develop and succeed (Madden and McGregor, 2013; McGregor, 2010; Vick-Westgate, 2002). Regional school boards and departments of education have created Inuit-centred policies, curricula, materials, and tools (e.g. Baffin Divisional Board of Education, 1989), and have been active partners in research documenting effective models of Inuit education (e.g. NDE, 2007). At the community level, as well as at the governmental level, innovative teachers, principals, and educational leaders develop and adapt materials, assessment tools, special initiatives and intervention practices to meet the needs of Inuit learners (Walton et al., 2013). However, in light of high workloads, rapid staff turnover, and the challenges of communicating across regions much of this work remains unknown, undocumented, underutilised, and/or unevaluated (Watt-Cloutier, 2015).

There is no doubt that the current format and structure of schools remains a colonised space. The introduction of formal schooling and an economy modelled from the south has created a disconnect. Children are now expected to be independent at 18, to leave home, get a 'good job' (Towtongie, 2017). The prevailing authority positioning of schools based on historical and current experiences clashes with the Inuit value system. Inuit elders who have experienced life before settlement, and life after settlement are saddened by what they observe as a loss of resiliency in the youth mindset (Tootoo, 2015; Towtongie, 2017). Prior to settlement Inuit values of collaboration, adaptability and creativity in the face of adversity would overcome hardships, but youth of today can become lost in mixed messages (Kral et al., 2014; Towtongie, 2017).

Schools are currently places that are associated with tensions both for students and their parents (Berger and Epp, 2006; Illasiak, 2015). According to Becky, education in Nunavut schools must be based on the culture in which the majority of the students live and breathe. She was once told by her uncle that if we do not spend the time teaching youth where they come from to give them a foundation to stand on, then we have not done our job in education appropriately. She brings this into her classroom daily, because the effects of non-teaching will be felt by the students for years to come in the way of social problems, suicide, depression etc.

### **When there is no vision for the future: suicide as a response to colonial disruption**

Prior to settlement, Inuit populations did not suffer from significant rates of suicide (Obied, 2017a). Inuit have seen unimaginable changes in a very short amount of time that have led to social feelings of displacement and disorientation (Mannik, 1990). As an example of the extent this tragedy is impacting communities, from September- December 2017, Qamanittuaq with a total population of 1,690 residents of which 38% are 19 years or younger, experienced four deaths related to addictions or suicide (Statistics Canada, 2016; Tootoo, 2018). That is approximately one young person per month which Cowley (2006) claims has the potential to disrupt the fabric of community with collective feelings of grief, remorse, guilt, blame and trauma. It has long been illustrated in literature, that when cultural norms in a society have been disrupted, suicide rates increase (Durkheim, 1951). The high rate of suicide among Inuit youth is a shared challenge across Inuit Nunangat (Ferry, 2000; MacNeil, 2008). It is also complex, as suicide rates have been attributed to interconnected factors such as socioeconomic, environmental (e.g. public policy, judicial system, unemployment), personal and intergenerational trauma as well as cultural assimilation (Eliason and Storrie, 2009; MacNeil, 2008). Egeni (2011) in his examination of Inuit

suicide describes 'suicide as a final output of pain' (p.117) and suggested public policy must address each of these factors based on the unique individual and community needs. Borowsky et al. (1999) identify that increasing the social protective factors has far greater impact on reducing suicide than reducing risk factors. While Chandler et al. (2003) identify cultural continuity including self-governance, land claims acknowledgement, control/relationship to education, health, police, fire and cultural services as critical social protective factors to reduce suicide in communities. However culture can be disrupted significantly by increased urbanisation, changing expectations of the gender/social roles of individuals, colonisation and associated societal erosion such as language loss (Erikson, 2005; Ferry, 2000; Tester and McNicoll, 2004). All of these things have been occurring in Nunavut for multiple generations. But the possible solutions are also emerging from communities themselves.

Nunavut has begun to address the challenge of suicide from both a top down and bottom up approach. From the top, the Inuusivut Anninaqtuq (IA) 2017-2022 (NISPS) action plan is a national strategy for suicide prevention (United for Life, 2017). Communities have begun to gather formal evidence on Inuit-specific approaches to suicide prevention (NISPS, 2016). The NISPS is premised on the belief that suicide is a preventable health crisis, that demands a systematic response (Obied, 2017a). After one year of implementation ITK has reported enhanced mental health services across Nunangat including support for youth programs, family workshops, and land-based healing programs, but continues the call for more work (ITK, 2017). Funding has been made available for grassroots organisations to develop community level programs; supporting each community/organisation funded to respond to unique needs identified (United for Life, 2017). Our project is premised on the belief that youth across Inuit Nunangat will become the next generation of leaders advocating for improved local and national policy, therefore they should be given the opportunity to find their voices early. Additionally, we believe that schools have a role to play in restorative justice for youth, aiding them in developing their identity and voice. As Kral (2019) states Inuit communities are taking and must take an active role in self-healing to regain control. This is as true for individuals as it is for communities, particularly in Inuit society where the me, is intrinsically tied to the 'we' through IQ values. Therefore, with the support of a National Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant, we designed this project for the youth to work together in Qamanittuaq.

## **Methodology**

Within this article we share the results of the first phase of a participatory action research project that was seated in Indigenous methodologies that prioritised relationship, dialogue and respect (Kovach, 2009; Leitch and Day, 2000; Wilson, 2009). This article shares youth voice in the identification of the factors that impact identity development as well as their views on modern Inuit identity. Within this phase we collected data through two small group discussions conducted consecutively with three classes in the grade 10 and 11 Aulajaaqtut (Nunavut specific health and wellness) course during Feb 2019. Each small group discussion (focus group) was structured with an initial prompting question and youth responded first by writing/drawing their personal responses and then sharing responses orally (when comfort levels allowed) for group discussion. Both private notes and class discussions were recorded and have been analysed thematically in relation to the research question (Saldana, 2015). 26 young



people aged 15-18 participated, and helped guide the shape of discussions through continual reflection and member checking (Arnaquq, 2014; Healey and Tagak, 2014).

## **Results and Discussion**

The results and discussion presented here has been organised into two parts in relation to each of the small group discussion prompts held with youth. The first discussion centres on youth response to the question: what defines modern Inuit identity? The focus of the discussion was guided by questions such as: what makes you feel proud to be Inuk?; what makes you feel strong in your identity?; how do you define being Inuk? While the second discussion was a response to the prompts: how is your Inuit identity supported?; what factors exist in community to build up your sense of self, or detract? The first question – what defines Inuit identity – is a fundamental question for youth and Elders, which both researchers have heard repeated many times in interviews with community members during discussions of student success and persistence (Snow and Obed, 2021; Snow and Ochalski, 2018). While the second question emerged in preparation for the subsequent student action project (phase 2 on hold due to covid restrictions).

We have shared the youth responses in relation to the scant Inuit identity development literature available, but also in relation to Becky's experience as a mentor and teacher for more than 20 years in Nunavut. To protect identity of the participants, all youth have been identified in abbreviated form.

### **What it means to be Inuit in today's society**

Youth we spoke to identified eight critical factors in their personal definition of identity, this included: knowledge of shared history, IQ values, cohesion, language, physical well-being, self-efficacy, deep connections to land and connections to one another.

### **Shared values and practices – Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ)**

Youth identified pride in identity associated with IQ values and traditional activities. Understanding and practicing traditional values helped youth recognise a path towards identity and adulthood. As one participant illustrated: "We all understand each other and we are there to guide each other in the right direction" (S3). While another outlined shared values as supporting resilience stating: "Following the IQ principles makes me strong...I feel resilient" (S2). Learning values from Elders, alongside traditional skills was considered an important factor in identity exemplified by the statements: "our values gives me pride, our land, our past, our ancestors. They all make me proud to be Inuk" (S6); "Knowing there are people willing to help me learn something our great ancestors knew how to do, but few people know how to do it and I could add on to teaching others something ancient [gives me pride]"(S3). And finally, acts of traditional skills development enabled youth to help define who they were, as exemplified by S10: "I was proud when I learned I could throat sing" and "I can make my own clothes. I like helping my mom sew parkas, amauts, atajuks. My mom is also teaching me to sew mitts" (S11). Hicks (2007) describes this mixed role modelling of parents, Elders and fellow youth as contributing to the formation of a new 'life script' for youth, that will help them learn how to enact traditional values within the 'modern' society they face. The youth in our conversations, as in Hicks (2007), were able to acknowledge and

recognise the 'olden days' while identifying aspects from Elders, they brought forward in their own identity development.

### **Knowledge of shared history**

The majority of the youth we spoke with identified some pride, strength or responsibility in carrying forward Inuit history, both ancient stories and the more recent past of residential school survivors. The ability to survive, thrive and be culturally resilient was an important part of personal identity development. Statements such as: "Our history gives me pride. Their (elders) endurance" (S2); "we are working together and surviving through the years. And that we have a strong ancestry" (S9); and "I feel strong when Inuit tell stories of hard times they've gone through" (S6). One student very clearly identified resistance to cultural genocide through restoration of traditional practice as an important part of Inuit identity stating: "Even when the government tried taking away our culture we stayed resilient and kept our culture. Inuit culture is bouncing back – it's starting to spread all over Canada. Traditional Inuit tattoos are back – it was extinguished a long time ago but it came back" (S6). While another outlined the same concept from a modern position this way: "no matter how bad the problem we [the community] will bounce back and push through maybe not right away but we will make it there" (S8). This theme, is likely one of the most critical, and is certainly the most often repeated in the literature, where Kral (2019) cites the results of multiple projects, in which youth outline aspects of cultural resilience through learning and sharing history, ensuring a new cultural memory is maintained.

### **Listening, learning and speaking Inuktitut**

Restoration of language is a work in progress, within Nunavut, that is not without its challenges as the government itself most recently recognised (CBC, 2020). Almost all participants in some way associated identity with language. Through statements illustrating developing skills such as: "I can kind of speak and write in Inuktitut" (S10). Alternatively youth shared pride in mastery and use "language gives me pride" (S2); "having to learn new things and speaking our language" (S3); and "The feeling of Inuktitut being spoken amongst young children, teenagers makes me feel strong about being Inuk" (S1). Tulloch et al. (2017) outlines the critical role language has in establishing identity and pride in culture for marginalised learners, evidencing that increasing language proficiency is a means to grow confidence in contexts beyond language development alone. Cohen (2001) states that language is critical to self-identity and well-being. This claim is reiterated by Obed (2017b) who outlines the maintenance of Inuktitut, despite the historical and ongoing challenges, as a source of pride and societal strength that should be built upon.

### **Connection to the land – being a person of Place- being Inuit**

According to Stairs (1992), Inuit define self through an eco-centric positionality rather than individual-centric. Therefore going to the land, refers to restorative practices of living in a traditional way, the way grandparents thrived prior to colonisation, in a balance with nature. Youth frequently cited the need to be "on the land" in this way, such as: "What makes me proud is being on the land with family" (S7); "I feel proud once I am on the land. We had such strong ancestry there" (S4); and "I feel proud going on the land and going back home with food" (S12). Obed (2017) along with many others has outlined the critical importance of the land-human connection for Inuit youth in both restoring sense of self, but also

healing from previous hurts. While Blakney (2009) describes this as a form of mediation and self-sufficiency, as a clear mind, local knowledge and skills as well as physical strength are traditionally needed for healthy life.

### **Physical well-being**

It might feel odd that physical well-being and mastery of physical challenges is tied to identity, but for many, in particular young men, ability to do well in sports, and the ability to not only survive but thrive in the arctic environment in a healthy way was an important part of identity. This may be a reflection of survival in the environment as Blakney (2009) discussed. Youth in our conversations identified this more traditional identity factor making statements related to hunting and survival in the environment such as I am proud because: “[I have] the ability to withstand the cold and cold water” (S15); “[I can] catch ptarmigan with rocks” (S15) and “[I am] good at providing food [hunting]” (S10). However, many students also highlighted excellence in school sports and mainstream extracurricular activities as important aspects of identity by responding to questions about pride and personal strength by saying things like: “Playing basketball, when I’m playing I forget about everything” (S11); “The thing that makes me proud is playing basketball with my friends” (S13); and “I feel proud for playing sports, square dance, walking, talking, hearing, seeing” (S12). This may be tied to the social protective factors of social recognition for achievement in sport as identified by Beaudoin et al. (2017). Kral (2019) outlines the need for an outlet for anger, and sport may be part of this equation. However, there is a larger modern cultural dimension that needs more exploration with regard to physical activity and identity.

### **Independence, self-efficacy and personal mastery**

Recognising their unique positionality gave youth a sense of pride in identity, as exemplified by this comment: “Learning different skills than I would have learned in the south [makes me proud]” (S8). In another example youth listed traditional skills that were important to independence of not only self, but Inuit from southern society: “Our ability to make our own clothing, hunt on the land and the background culture. Along with beliefs and legends” (S3). These feelings were also tied to personal mastery: “Children are taught to do things such as hunting, respecting, helping and many other things at a young age” (S13); Being “resourceful as we can” (S13) and community agency were also identified: “I feel strong when people in a community fight for change” (S6). Youth exemplified traditional coming of age milestones as important, such as learning to hunt, or making a useful garment, illustrating these milestones are still recognised as important. However, Kral et al. (2014) outlines the disruption of traditional knowledge transfer in the community from Elders and community members to youth as being disrupted, which further illustrates the importance of schools in supporting this aspect of youth development.

### **Connection to community**

Relationship to others is a critical aspect of traditional identity (Dorais, 1997). Though youth did not explicitly identify traditional kinship relationships as part of their identity all participants identified the importance of community as part of their identity as exemplified by: “Everyone is there for each other” (S9); “I am proud to be an Inuk because people are helping each other, respecting each other and sharing food” (S5); and “I feel strong when communities help one another when one of them is in

trouble” (S6). Community was defined using the strong bonds associated with close family such as: “Whenever someone is going through a hardship in life everyone in the community is there to support and love them in any way they can” (S4); “I feel strong knowing that this community will support each other” (S8); and “we have our family and friends surrounding us, that we survive together as a town. And we stick together and stay strong. We survive through it. We show that we love and support each other, we help out” (S9). Youth also identified the importance of being a support to others in the community in response to the question what gives you pride in your identity: “Supporting my family” (S14); “helping people” (S12), “teaching others” (S12); “coaching junior basketball” (S14); “doing things to make our family safe and providing things for us” (S10); and “Taking care of my brother/son/family members” (S11). For youth there was a much stronger ‘we’ focus in identity than there was ‘me’. Stairs (1992) includes this as part of the eco-centric identity definition associated with Inuit culture and it appears this has not been diminished despite the ego-centric nature of schools.

In concluding this discussion with youth we used the iglu as a metaphor to demonstrate the need to build Inummarik (capable human being). The snow blocks of the iglu must be secure, they must be cut with precision. First the builder checks the hardness of the snow with a tool – habgut (a snow probe). They look for the snow that will build the best iglu for their family. The person building the iglu will cut an area in snow that they see to be the perfect snow for their home. This area will be the base. They do this so that the blocks will be the same size and will fit together. It’s very important that the blocks will fit. The blocks they cut and remove will be the foundation – these are the most important because they will hold the weight of the rest of the iglu. As teachers we need to lay down the blocks to support the foundation for youth. These blocks represent the history and wisdom of our elders. The wisdom that students yearn to learn about. We heard, students want to learn about Inuit resiliency, both traditional and today. How Inuit overcame obstacles that they faced, about traditional values of sharing, and caring for one another’s safety. Traditionally not only did the Inuit share their food they also trusted extended family members to help raise their children. They knew that the extended family members grew up learning the values and beliefs that the children need to learn to survive. The youth told us, schools do not fully offer this same safety network for a variety of reasons, which impacts how youth define and express their identity. However, one of the important discoveries we made through this work, is the Aulajaagtut course, which was the home for the research project is also considered an important and meaningful school based support by youth in both helping to develop their identity definition and putting down the foundation for growth.

### **Factors supporting identity development**

Exploring the Iglu metaphor became the focus of our second small group discussion (example provided as figure 1). We divided the iglu into three layers, the base, the middle and the top in order to capture our descriptions of supporting factors found in schools and community.



support/guidance from Elders/community members. In addition youth repeated, knowledge of traditional skills, values, community stories as important structures to support belonging. And finally, many youth noted reciprocal relationships, providing supports to others, through offering advice, being trusted, teaching others as actions that built a sense of belonging.

### **The top (what am I proud of, what gives strength)**

A well-built igloo can support the weight of a full grown adult standing on the top. The last block or keystone diverts all the pressure from the top of the igloo over the entire structure. Therefore, we asked the youth, about their keystones, what gives strength, what supports resilience and their answers aligned with everything we had heard before. Youth identified, working as a team, responding to advice and getting pushed to do better. They identified people who provided strength such as family members, friends and Elders. But in parallel with the Aylward (2004) report, youth returned to basic needs, such as enough time to rest and good food to eat. One youth directly shared the need to, “move on from the past” as critical to strength and resilience.

### **The outside (how can schools support me)**

Finally we asked about pressures, external forces that impacted the structure of the igloo that could make or destroy it, and likened these to the pressures youth felt in school. Youth using both positive and negative formulations (what the school did or did not do) that added pressure to their ability to grow. They identified the need for more role models/Inuit educators; more Inuktitut usage in school, teaching Inuit problem solving; teachers using assessment to promote growth, rather than simply right or wrong in a fixed or limited time. They asked for acknowledgement that tasks could take some people considerably longer than others. They asked for more instruction in IQ through engaging activities such as land based learning, sewing and practical skills development along with language. And finally they asked for more directed learning on self-advocacy, and negotiating an unsafe and unstable world around them. Many simply asked for more guidance on how to be a better person on the planet. All of these requests, could also be found in Aylward (2004) illustrating a persistent need for greater support.

### **Final Thoughts**

It is now 2021 and students continue to yearn for many of the same changes to education identified in 2004. Blakney (2009) stated to be Inuk is to be aware of the environment and the community, to be busy, active, mobile and engaged with all that is around you. This learning can be complemented in the schools – it can be supported and reinforced if it is happening in the home and vice-versa. Unfortunately, colonial disruption has made both school and at home support more difficult for Inuit youth to receive, which results in feelings of isolation, cultural confusion and a challenge in wayfinding (Kral, 2019). Hicks (2007) has identified the challenges of Inuit youth as being conflicted between two ‘life scripts’, that of traditional life of ancestors and of modern life exemplified by media and urban living. The youth in our conversations identified both aspects of their identity with pride and as sources of strength with more fluid intersectionality than that of parents and elders (Snow, 2021). Building a strong sense of Inuit identity is fundamental in the mental and cultural strength of youth. If this strong base is not laid down



for them they will continually question what their purpose in life is, question who they are and where they stand in the world.

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