

# THE CONTRIBUTION OF INUIT YOUTH AND COMMUNITY-DRIVEN INFORMAL EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS TO LIFE-LONG LEARNING AND PERSEVERANCE<sup>1</sup>



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Quality Inuit youth and community-driven informal educational programs are a crucial part of life-long learning (even though not part of the formal system of education as is), making available educational opportunities deeply grounded in Inuit ways. The process of *inunnguiniq* – the making of a human being, is foundational to life learning. Culturally anchored programs essentially recreate the kind of “informal, intergenerational and situated learning characteristic of traditional knowledge transmission” (Tulloch et al., 2012, p. 1) that was supported naturally, within and among families, in Inuit cultural practice (Karetak, Tester & Tagalik, 2017; Tagalik, 2012b). This project explores the contributions of Inuit youth and community-driven informal education to life-long learning and its implications for youth perseverance. The project is deeply grounded in what Inuit have always known to be true or Inuit Qaujima-

jatuqangit (IQ). It also builds on previous work by the Canadian Council of Learning (2009) on perseverance as understood and defined in collaboration with Inuit.

## Three Inuit Youth and Community-Driven Informal Educational Programs

The three programs we describe are situated in Arviat, the southernmost community of continental Nunavut, located on the western Hudson Bay coast in the Kivalliq administrative Region. Arviat, the second largest community in Nunavut, has great strength in Inuit culture and language. Our description of its programs emerged from an analysis



evaluation, indicators of positive cultural identity, happiness and sense of purpose were most highly articulated. Their responses to the evaluation clearly show strong improvements in mental health for the child. *“Those are the things that build the inner person, that enable somebody to become a good person, living a good life, who’s able to contribute to improving the common good”* (Tagalik, Interview). These cultural values continue to drive the program while food security has become a secondary outcome.

### Youth Environmental Monitoring Program (YEMP)

The Youth Environmental Monitoring Program was developed in response to community concerns about climate change, food security, and the health of the land and wildlife. In 2012, the Arviat Wellness Centre, through surveys, identified a need to understand climate changes evident in the community and to prepare for impacts of those changes, especially in relation to food security. Monitoring local wildlife populations would ensure a sustainable harvesting culture. AWC was also interested to taking advantage of warming and lengthening seasons to consider growing food locally. Additional concerns were about the health or potential contamination of wildlife. In 2014, the Arviat Wellness Centre (AWC) collaborated with ARCTIConnexion (a not-for-profit organization committed to indigenous youth empowerment and capacity building), to develop activities along these lines. It led to the environmental monitoring program which involved youth becoming trained by partner researchers and then assuming duties for collecting data with respect to climate change. For example, under guidance by ARCTIConnexion, *“the collecting and looking at fish samples”* helped to monitor water quality, impacts on creeks and streams, and changes to the health of fish. In collaboration with the Young Hunters Program and elders, youth also participated in traditional hunting practices and then analysis of the health of their prey. Preliminary data analysis suggests that animals are in good health while, however, some fish do show elevated levels of mercury.

Since climate change has altered local temperatures and the growing season, AWC was interested in studying the viability of growing vegetables locally. The building of a local research greenhouse took place in 2014 (Figure 3). It allowed youth to test various types of soil and fertilizer, monitor plant growth, and ultimately share crops with the community. A pilot-project on hydroponic plant gardens was added enabling some families to grow year-round. The centrally located greenhouse meant *“everybody walking by would kind of want to see it, and they were so amazed that it was so green and everything was growing so well, and when we told them this is soil from Arviat, they’re kind of amazed”* (Lindell, Interview). In the project, *“everybody was learning as we go”*. It was like *“learning during our projects, our home-grown research projects, rather than outsiders’ research projects”* (Lindell, Interview). The project also allowed youth to engage with elders finding out about edible local plants, such as the wild eatable blueberry “aqpiq” or ripe swamp blackberries, crowberry, and Labrador tea. Youth worked with southern researchers to measure

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growth rates and report back to elders about the availability of plants. Youth also received training for and researched water quality (chemical and microbial conditions) and quantity (water flow and levels) in the nearby traditional water sources still frequently used by local residents. Other projects entailed the study of permafrost and the quality of ice.

Overall, the program was about teaching youth to *“become a keen observer and able to report back what you observe... trying to make meaning of what you’re seeing, monitoring, collecting the data, and being able to analyze it over a period of time”* (Tagalik, Interview). That way, informed collective decisions can be made about the environment, while youth could develop the confidence needed *“to take the next step forward down their own path”* given their involvement in the program (Tagalik, Interview).

### Discussion

#### Moving Towards an IQ (Inuit Qaujimaqatugangit) Grounded Understanding of Perseverance and Life-Long Learning

These three Inuit governed informal educational programs build on the premise *“pay attention to what young people can accomplish when you give them a chance”* (Bell, Interview). The programs are about facilitating their involvement in local opportunities and having them *“move with opportunities”* as Inuit always did (Bell, Interview). The programs are about *inunnguiniq* (becoming capable), grounded in a strength-based approach, and guided by recognition that strengths *“have sustained Inuit through the many challenges to their cultural beliefs brought through contact, colonization and policies of forced relocation and assimilation”* (Tagalik, Interview; Tagalik, 2012a). Building on strengths implies the need to *“revitalize”* practices by *“train[ing] young people in the values*



of what it means to be a hunter and provider for your community”, as in the YHP (Tagalik, Interview), or have them “become keen observers of climate change” and their land, as encouraged in YHP and YEMP. It is about a focus on “a child’s path” which is culturally set, so the child moves among learning opportunities, “leading a child from birth to adulthood by showing and teaching them to be a better person in their everyday lives: to have good relationships with others and good attitudes in every situation” (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 69). It entails the development of *inuusiq* (knowledge of life and living) and *isuma* (wisdom), resulting in the becoming of *innumarik* (a human being or able person who can act with wisdom).

At the same time, some challenges remain to make programs like these pertinent. Leaders are needed in the communities who can take on the task to share with others and devote time to the training of youth. These leaders and carriers of IQ (Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit) are able to support and guide youth, but youth participation and commitment are also needed. Long-term financial support is needed as well as infrastructure and spaces adapted to the needs of the programs. Continued renewal and recruitment efforts have to be pursued as well to ensure the success and longevity of these programs over time.

## Conclusion

Inuit youth find themselves “stuck between two cultures, two times, two worlds, two languages, and torn in both directions” (Billard, Interview). The programs we reviewed were driven by a holistic vision of education where “anything and everything is interrelated” (Karetak, informal conversation), including Inuit and Western ways of knowing. It is learning that emerges from family, community, land, and school, collaboratively working as a system, offering opportunities to youth so they “can meet the goals they set for themselves” (Tagalik, Interview). Hence, we tried to capture how Inuit ways of being and becoming should drive life-long learning and why a serious commitment to pass on language, culture and lived experiences leads to the “making a human being who will be able to help others with a good heart” (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 112). ■

## NOTES

1 Research project, *A Collaborative Research Project with Inuit Youth, Families and their Communities about Informal Educational Practices, Community Driven Science Research and Life-Long Learning with Important Implications for Inuit Education and Perseverance*, Programme de recherche sur la persévérance et la réussite scolaires, FRQSC 2016-2020.

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