

## Relationality and Legitimacy

### Learning to Negotiate Meaningful Research Among Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Researchers

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**Abstract** This paper describes the ethical issues involved when research is conducted in an Inuit context by non-Inuit researchers. It draws on the experience of a three-year participatory action research project in Nunavik. It describes the strategies and approaches deployed and adapted by the “Other” researchers to apply the principles of critical Indigenous methodologies. The paper is a reflection on our relationship with the research participants and stakeholders and how our approaches and actions facilitated or hindered their meaningful participation in and ownership of the research. Participants’ feedback and reactions to the research process were elicited and are reflected in this paper. This article is of significance for researchers who are thinking of working in Aboriginal communities or other communities to which they are outsiders. While focusing mainly on the role of researchers and their approach, the paper also questions the challenge of bridging Western research practices and critical Indigenous research methods.

*Keywords: participatory research, critical Indigenous methodologies, Inuit context, ethics of research, relational inquiry*

## Introduction

There is a growing interest and investment in research in Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> contexts. Given the Aboriginal communities’ predominantly negative experiences with research, much effort has been invested in providing better guiding principles and safeguards to improve research practices. However, little is known about the actual application of these principles and guidelines by non-Aboriginal researchers and how they are experienced by Aboriginal research participants.

In 2010, Quebec’s Ministry of Education and the Fonds de Recherche du Québec – Société et Culture (FRQSC) launched a request for proposals for research

examining school perseverance among students in the province, including Aboriginal students. The information was conveyed to a colleague at the Kativik School Board (KSB), which thought it would be a great opportunity to look at how perceptions of teachers (both Inuit and non-Inuit) evolve over time and influence Inuit students' resilience. A grant proposal was developed in collaboration with KSB and received the support and approval of the school commissioners. Once the project received funding in spring 2011, the research sites were negotiated. Given the constraints of time, travel costs, and university teaching commitments, we realized that the project had to be limited to only one site so we could maximize our presence and the frequency of our visits. The project was carried out at Ulluriaq school in Kangiqsualujuaq on the east coast of Ungava Bay at the mouth of the George River near Kuururjuaq National Park.

Informed by critical Indigenous methodologies (Smith, 2012), we were particularly concerned about the research process and our role as non-Aboriginal outsiders. Could we create a relationship of trust and facilitate a process that encourages stakeholders to engage with the research and take ownership of its objectives, process, and results? This paper recounts our intent, actions, and reflections about the challenges of bridging different paradigms and the process of negotiating ethical research.

We begin by defining our social location as researchers (Castellano, 2004; J. Huber, Caine, M. Huber, & Steeves, 2013; Lavallée, 2009), who we are and how we came to be involved in this project. To situate the reader, we then provide brief background information on the research context, our objectives, the participants, and the methodology. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to describe the findings. These are discussed at length in the research report (Garakani, 2015). In the following section, we discuss research in the Aboriginal context and present an overview of the guidelines and literature that informed our epistemology and methodological process. Finally, in the last section, we describe in detail how we tried to enact the principles of critical Indigenous methodologies, which we have grouped under three sections: legitimacy of research, legitimacy of process, and legitimacy of results/benefits. We begin each section with a citation that illustrates a specific challenge. To tell the story, we introduce the literature that informed the principles and guidelines we had identified as important and explain how we tried to apply them in practice. During and at the end of the research project, we sought the opinions of teachers (Inuit and non-Inuit) about the research process. We therefore conclude each section with lessons learned and feedback from the participants.<sup>2</sup>

## Social Location of the Researchers

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Lavallée (2009) refers to work of Absolon and Willet (2005) and Bastien (2004) to emphasize the importance of locating ourselves as researchers, especially within an Indigenous research framework. She argues that Western academic research, heavily influenced by a positivist epistemological framework, positions the researcher as objective and neutral, whereas from an Indigenous perspective, research is relational and interconnected, so it cannot be seen as objective or unbiased. This interconnectedness means that the researchers are also affected by and learn from the research undertaken (Lavallée, 2009).

The perspective and language in this paper are those of two non-Aboriginal female researchers trained in the Western research paradigm. Grappling with questions of identity, resilience, and belonging, the lead researcher has spent most of her life in a context of otherness, first as an immigrant, then as a professional working in humanitarian emergencies overseas, and later as a practitioner transitioning into academia. Her interest in this project was a culmination of past personal and professional experiences. Her first exposure to the Inuit context was in 2005, when she visited a friend in Kuujuaq. This was followed by a teaching contract in Arviat, Nunavut, in Canada in 2007.

The co-author, a French national, initially got involved in this project as a graduate research assistant. Having worked in program evaluations, she had a keen interest in ethical issues, more specifically, the rights of participants. She accompanied the project from the beginning to the end and developed a deeper appreciation of the challenges of applying ethical guidelines in the field.

Significant effort was made to involve Inuit postsecondary students in the research team. However, we soon realized that the small group of students attending college in Montreal were already juggling demanding schedules. We preferred not to overwhelm them further with additional work. However, we did meet with them twice a year to discuss various aspects of the research. They played an advisory role, providing us with contextual information, evaluating the acceptability of certain research tools, and discussing the findings. In Nunavik, our relationship with school personnel evolved and grew over time, and by the second year, we were able to work closely with an Inuit collaborator in the community. Action research recommends involving local collaborators on the team. Although their presence on the team is beneficial to the research, researchers need to keep in mind that individuals also have their own history with different members of their community, some positive and some perhaps not so positive. In such established dynamics, the proximity of

researchers with the local collaborator may affect how potential participants perceive the neutrality and trustworthiness of the research team.

## Introduction to Research Project and Context

Chapter 17 of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (1975) grants the Kativik School Board (KSB) the right to use Inuktitut as the language of instruction and to develop its own educational programs. KSB is the first school commission controlled by Aboriginal people in Canada. It is financed 75% by the Quebec government and 25% by the federal government (Vick-Westgate, 2002). From kindergarten to Grade 2, students study exclusively in Inuktitut, their mother tongue. The third grade is a transition year; students study half the time in Inuktitut and the other half in English or French. From the fourth grade, they are transferred to the French or English sector, where most subjects are taught by non-Inuit teachers. Students are not only confronted with a change of language but also different cultural expectations, pedagogical practices, and perceptions. Despite many initiatives and significant changes, a major gap remains in high school completion rates. For the 2009–2010 academic year, the percentage of early school leavers was about 80% in Nunavik compared with 17.4% in the rest of Quebec (Ministère de l'Enseignement, du Loisir et du Sport, 2013).

Many studies have examined the situation of youth in Nunavik, their educational attainment, and their high dropout rates. The emphasis has typically been on the challenges students face within their communities and the education system. These include the trauma of colonialism and the scars of abusive residential schools (Ives et al., 2010–2012), high teacher turnover rates (Mueller, 2006), pedagogical practices that are unsuitable for second-language learners (Berger & Epp, 2007; McGregor, 2010; Tompkins, 1998), and little involvement and engagement of parents and communities in schools (Vick-Westgate, 2002), to name a few.

But in the face of all the adversity, there is also a lot of initiative, perseverance, hard work, determination, and resilience that goes into shaping everyday life in Nunavik communities. In many research reports, this aspect often goes unnoticed. Consequently, we chose to move away from a deficit approach and focus on Inuit youth's resilience and capacity to adapt, despite the many challenges they face. While recognizing the importance and urgency of addressing structural social issues affecting the everyday lives of Inuit youth, this research focused on the constructive role that schools and teachers can play to sustain and enhance students' resilience. This research aimed to understand the influence of the perceptions and pedagogical practices of teachers (Inuit and non-Inuit) on the resilience and perseverance of students.

## Research in an Aboriginal Context: Empowering or Damaging?

Numerous Aboriginal scholars have criticized the deficit approach of Western-centric research practices (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Tuck, 2010). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) describes how an “Indigenous problem” approach was theorized around the notions of cultural deprivation and deficit, laying the blame for poverty and marginalization on people themselves. For her, research has played an important role in legitimizing the “Indigenous problem” as part of the academic discourse by not only conveying the message that the communities are to be blamed for their own failures, but by also communicating to them, explicitly or implicitly, that they have no solution to offer.

In the research context, the terms ‘research’ and ‘problem’ are also closely linked. It becomes somewhat complicated for Indigenous researchers to discuss ‘research’, ‘problem’ and ‘indigenous’ without individuals or communities ‘switching off’ because of the history of defining Indigenous peoples as . . . the problem . . . the word research is believed to mean, quite literally, the continued construction of indigenous peoples as the problem. (p. 96)

Likewise, Tuck (2009) refers to “damage centred” research as a persistent trend intended to document native communities’ pain and brokenness to hold those in power accountable for the oppression. Deficit models tend to focus on a particular student, family, or community to explain underachievement or failure. Similarly, damage-centered research looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain the contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy (Tuck, 2010). Tuck explains that even though the intention is to achieve reparation and to hold perpetrators accountable, by establishing harm and injury, these types of research end up reinforcing “a one-dimensional notion of [the Indigenous] people as depleted, ruined and hopeless. . . . The oppression becomes the defining factor of a community” (Tuck, 2009, p. 409). It is therefore no surprise that the word *research* is considered to be one of the “dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary” (Smith, 2012, p. 1).

The Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2009) explains that by only focusing on negative stories, we overlook the many other stories that form us and, hence, create stereotypes. She explains that “the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” In her 2009 TED Talk about the danger of a single story, Adichie describes the power of stories:

The single story robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are

similar. . . . Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

For us the research process was as important as the results. We believed that the process itself should be beneficial to the participants and should provide an opportunity to create dialogue amongst stakeholders and contribute to the empowering of the community. Well aware of the unbalanced power relations within the research situation (Denscombe, 1995), we were particularly concerned with developing strategies and tools to engage students and teachers so their voices and stories could emerge and shape the direction of the research and its results.

Many research instruments were considered. Tools were frequently modified and adapted to the comfort level of research participants, and new ones were created to respond to their specific needs. Given that each tool had affordances and constraints and that different tools appealed to different participants, the combination of tools helped us elicit diverse voices (including some that were often silent) and to accommodate individual preferences and comfort levels. The research participants were school personnel, students in grades 8 to 11 in both the French and English sectors, and all the teachers, both Inuit and non-Inuit at the primary and secondary levels in the French and English sectors. The table below provides an overview of the participants and tools used.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1: Overview of Research Tools and Participants**

<b>Research</b>				
<b>Year</b>	<b>Data-Gathering Tool</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Participation</b>
1, 2 & 3	Focus groups	✓	✓	13 focus groups
2 & 3	Interviews	15	28	43 participants
2 & 3	Observations	✓	✓	18 observations
2	Online diary		7	7 participants
	Motivation – self-assessment questionnaire	21		21 participants
	Evaluation of students by teachers		7	24 evaluations
	End-of-period questionnaire		6	6 participants
	Thematic questionnaires		5	5 participants
	End-of-year questionnaire	7	5	12 participants
	Dream timetables	20		20 participants
	Photovoice	16		16 participants
	Writing of a collective story	8		8 participants
	Interactive group questionnaire	41	15	56 participants

Traditional academic research guidelines have, for the most part, reproduced positivist Western academic values. In recent decades, efforts have been made to improve these guidelines and research practices in Aboriginal communities. In the second edition of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS2; Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2014), *Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, a guideline for researchers in Canada, chapter 9 is dedicated to the requirements and core principles of “respect for persons,” “concern for welfare,” and “justice” when undertaking research in an Inuit/Métis or First Nations community. It emphasizes the importance of respecting local ethical practices and seeking community engagement in the research. The TCPS2 and similar guidelines highlight the importance of integrating local ethics, especially Aboriginal codes (Halse & Honey, 2005; Kenny, 2004; Schnarch as cited in Fletcher et al., 2011). Other documents that informed our research were the guide published by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) and the Nunavut Research Institute (NRI) for undertaking research with Inuit communities (Nickels, Shirley, & Laidler, 2006) and the *Inuit-Specific Perspectives on Research and Research Ethics* from ITK and Inuit Tuttarvingat of the National Aboriginal Health Organization (2010).

Similarly, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torre Strait Islander Studies has produced a comprehensive set of guidelines for the conduct of ethical research in Indigenous studies, highlighting four key principles: (a) demonstrated benefit and sustainable outcome for the community, (b) the use of culturally sensitive procedures and methods, (c) the need for adequate and appropriate consultation with local communities, and (d) sufficient community involvement in and control over the entire research project (as cited in Kendall, Sunderland, Barnett, Nalder, & Matthews, 2011, p. 1721). While there are differences among the various guidelines, all share four common principles: (a) appropriate consultation prior to initiation of research; (b) the necessity of adopting a participatory approach; (c) the importance of the protection of participants, knowledge, and the community; and (d) critical reflection about the impacts and benefits of the research.

Our research was informed by the principles highlighted in these guidelines, along with the literature on critical Indigenous methodology (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Tuck, 2010). We were guided by: (1) a desire to respect, protect, and preserve knowledge, traditions, and practices; (2) continuous consultation and negotiation with all stakeholders and participants; (3) informed consent as an ongoing process; (4) ownership and control of the research by the community; (5) collaboration and partnership with community members; (6) clear understanding and mutual agreement about the research objectives; (7) inclusive participation; (8) tangible benefits

and concrete results in meeting the needs of the community; (9) clear agreement on the management of, access to, and use of the project results; and (10) mechanisms to demonstrate compliance with ethical values.

## **Enacting Principles of Critical Indigenous Methodologies**

As highlighted by Kovach (2005), Indigenous epistemology is nonlinear, fluid, and interwoven. As a result, the research purpose, process, and results do not exist separate from one another. However, for the purposes of clarity, we have grouped the principles mentioned above into three categories: (1) legitimacy of the research (relevance, perceived benefits, trust); (2) legitimacy of the process, which we have divided further into two subsections: informed consent and voluntary inclusive participation; and (3) legitimacy of the results/benefits. We introduce each theme with a citation from one of the research participants to illustrate a specific challenge. We then develop each theme by providing an overview of key points in the literature and examples of the steps taken. We conclude each section with our lessons learned and the feedback from teachers who participated in this project.

### **Legitimacy of Research: Its Relevance, Perceived Benefits, Relational Approach, and Trust**

“... so, who is this research for?”

—Question asked by an Inuit teacher (I10)  
at the end of the second year of the project<sup>4</sup>

Legitimacy is an ongoing process and requires constant renegotiation. Kendall et al. (2011) point out that research has remained intrusive, with little benefit to most Indigenous people. It is therefore “not surprising that Indigenous people generally view researchers with skepticism, and share an understandable reluctance to participate in research” (Kendall et al., 2011, p. 1720).

Legitimacy of the research in terms of its relevance and perceived benefits for local participants and the community is a key concern. This project was developed with the collaboration of the KSB and had the support of the commissioners and the school director. However, legitimacy at the macro level did not guarantee legitimacy in the eyes of various stakeholders at the community level. We therefore dedicated the first year to preliminary field research (Caine, Davison & Stewart, 2009), focusing our efforts on establishing relationships and discussing the relevance and orientation



of the research with various stakeholders and potential participants. We tried to create opportunities for potential participants to raise concerns, apprehensions, and opinions about the research and the proposed processes through focus group discussions, anonymous online surveys, and individual follow-ups. The first year also allowed us to better understand the research context. We developed a wide range of research tools and tested their feasibility, acceptability, and usability with potential participants.

Despite all our efforts, the participants, for the most part, remained cautious and apprehensive. The students were initially hesitant. They were especially reluctant to speak in focus groups, but they seemed more comfortable and motivated when we introduced activities that required the use of an iPad, camera, or handheld devices. However, we were unable to get much feedback from them about the research process. The teachers showed varying levels of interest. Some were more vocal than others. For some, the research meant additional work, and for the sole benefit of the researcher. We acknowledged these concerns and tried to prove ourselves through our actions rather than promises. We looked for opportunities to create reciprocity. We tried to incorporate in every research activity an element that could be beneficial for the participant. We sought participants' expertise on specific issues and tried to slowly include participants in steering the process and orientation of the research. We frequently made adjustments to reflect participant needs and priorities. But we were often reminded that the legitimacy of the research could not be taken for granted. It was an ongoing process of redefining and renegotiating the purpose and orientation of the project.

Several authors have emphasized the importance of adopting a "relational approach" as a key component to secure legitimacy and trust (Butz, 2008; Dickert & Sugarman, 2005; Fletcher et al., 2011; Letendre & Caine, 2004). Relational approaches are often described in terms of being honest, humble, informed, open, patient, and willing to learn; respecting different cultures, traditions, and local rules; respecting availabilities and the local calendar (Nickels et al., 2006); and, as a result, building a trusting, long-term relationship. However, developing and maintaining a relational approach requires time and continuous presence in the community. This is often a major challenge for university-affiliated researchers who must balance their teaching commitments and research in the field during the same semester.

We therefore made every effort to keep in touch with the participants (both students and teachers) between field visits. For example, we initially developed a blog, which we hoped would foster interaction and reciprocity. However, we soon realized that the teachers were juggling many different tensions among one another that

generated competing stories (Clandinin, Murphy, J. Huber, & Murray Orr, 2010). Hence, they did not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences with all of their colleagues. So we abandoned the blog and opted instead for biweekly informal exchanges and follow-ups with individual participants. We only managed to do so with non-Inuit teachers; e-mail exchanges did not seem an acceptable means of communication for the Inuit colleagues. As a result, with these participants our interactions were limited to our field visits that occurred only once a semester. Also, our inability to speak Inuktitut remained an important obstacle. On a few occasions, we had to rely on the help of an interpreter. This, of course, interfered with the fluidity of natural conversation and relationship-building. It took us more than two years to reach a mutually positive relationship with the Inuit teachers, enabling us to all work together on the specific issues they had identified.

Throughout the research we tried to respect, uphold, and integrate in our behaviour Inuit values and beliefs, such as those highlighted by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007): promote equality, consensus, and unity; be generous, responsible, and respectful; be humble, honest, unpretentious, and helpful; listen, observe, accept, and apologize; celebrate interconnectedness, cooperation, and teamwork; be adaptable, creative, resourceful, and patient; and take the long view and move forward. Our cultural understanding of listening, observing, being respectful, humble, and patient led us to not reveal much about ourselves to participants, at least initially. In retrospect, however, we realize that we should have made a concerted effort to better introduce ourselves and tell participants more about who we were before expecting them to share who they were with us. As the relationship progressed, it became easier to obtain feedback on our behaviour and the research process. We were happy to learn, rethink our methods, adapt, and improve. Moreover, patience, resilience, perseverance, endurance, and a sense of improvisation (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007) helped us to continuously adapt our processes and tools and move the research forward in the most responsive and inclusive way possible.

We wanted to initiate and maintain a conversation with the Inuit teachers about the role and relevance of research in their context, and we found ourselves at a crossroads, trying to make a link between Western academic concepts and Indigenous approaches. The research concepts and approaches are typically articulated through Western-centric terminology, making it very difficult to find equivalent terms in many languages, including Inuktitut. Through our interaction with Inuit teachers, we realized that they still had many misgivings about what the research was or could do.

So we tried to link the important values of participatory research to the principles of Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ), or Inuit traditional knowledge, that “embraces all

aspects of traditional Inuit culture, including values, world-view, language, social organization, knowledge, life skills, perceptions and expectations” (Nunavut Social Development Council, 1998, as cited McGregor, 2010, p. 34). These principles include (1) *Piliriqatigiingniq*, working together toward a common purpose (importance of the group over the individual); (2) *Avatimik Kamattiarniq*, environmental stewardship; (3) *Pilimmaksarniq*, skills and knowledge acquisition (central to the success of Inuit survival in a harsh environment); (4) *Qanuqtuurunnarniq*, being resourceful to solve problems; (5) *Aajiqatigiingniq*, consensual decision-making and being able to think and act collaboratively, to assist with the development of shared understandings, to resolve conflict in consensus-building ways, and to elicit and respect various perspectives and worldviews; and (6) *Pijitsirniq*, the concept of serving (central to an Inuit style of leadership: the understanding that each person has a contribution to make and is a valued contributor to his or her community; National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2009–2010).

Since IQ originated in Nunavut, the terms were not quite familiar to the Inuit teachers in Nunavik. However, the definition of IQ terms spoke to the teachers and allowed us to initiate a conversation about the relational dimension of the research: the purpose, process, and results. We tried to summarize key aspects of the research ethics in images that we presented to the participants during a focus group. The usual ethical terms (i.e., participatory approach, inclusion, participant protection, etc.) were adapted to reflect the participants’ perspectives (e.g., “power sharing” became “[you] decide”) to support a sense of agency amongst participants. Moreover, we tried to link them to IQ to foster a discussion about everyone’s understanding of those concepts and how relevant they are for the participants.

Figure 1 represents what taking part in a participatory research project means for participants. Inspired by the IQ concepts of *Piliriqatigiingniq*, *Aajiqatigiingniq*, and *Avatimik Kamattiarniq*, we emphasized and translated the concept of “inclusion” as “everyone’s voice,” “power sharing” as “decide,” research as “advocacy tool,” and “validity of data” as “tell your story.”

Figure 1 also presents separately the ethical concepts linked to the research results, as this was an issue frequently raised by participants. The concepts of “research relevance,” “transparency,” and “access to results and ownership” were translated into “information/knowledge sharing” and “changes (impacts).” These concepts were inspired by those of *Pilimmaksarniq* and *Qanuqtuurunnarniq*. We linked the continuously negotiated relationship of the research to the IQ concept of *Aajiqatigiingniq*.

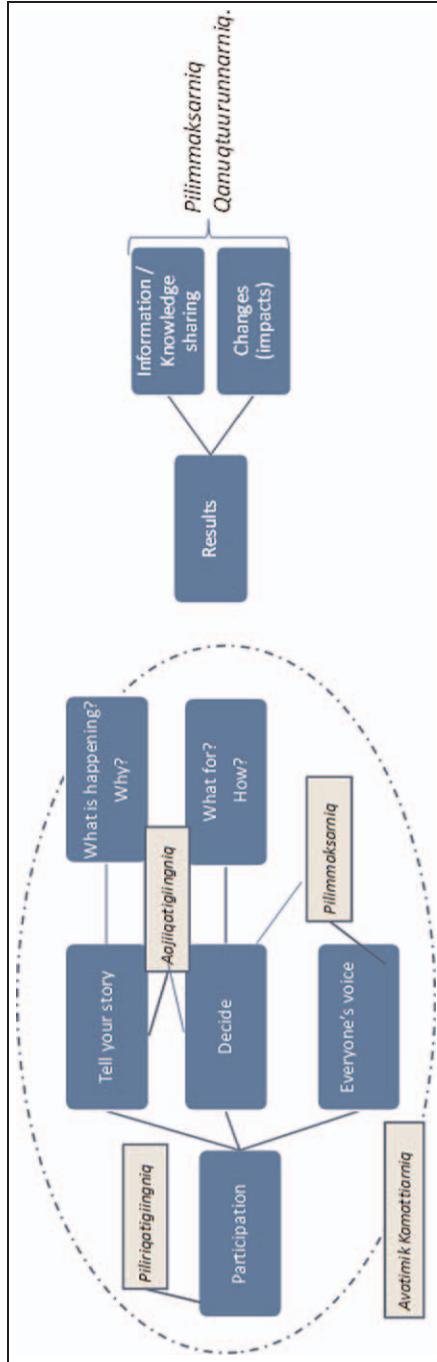


Figure 1. Participatory Research With Links to IQ



**Figure 2.** Ethical Principles in Research

Figure 2 represents ethical principles usually promoted in academic research. We opted for “respect” to emphasise what we meant by “ethics” and to highlight the importance we attached to the relational dimension of ethics in research. While the list of concepts represented in these diagrams is by no means exhaustive, they brought attention to our duties and their rights (i.e., “informed consent,” “confidentiality,” “transparency,” “ownership,” “participant protection”). These notions were translated, respectively, into “willing to participate,” “information protection,” “access to results,” “participation,” and “well-being.” It was an attempt to verify whether we could link some of the more conventional Western-centric ethical concepts with Indigenous approaches.

### Legitimacy of Research: Lessons Learned

Many factors impact the building of relationships between researchers and participants. Geographical and cultural distance, as well as our inability to speak Inuktitut, were constant reminders of our position as outsiders. Added to these constraints were local tensions and dynamics that influenced research participants. Teachers juggled tensions with their jobs, personal lives, and relationships with colleagues or school administrators and tried to strike a balance between the students’ needs and curriculum requirements. Promoting and maintaining a relational approach is essential to conduct research in an Aboriginal context. However, the line of friendship needs to be balanced carefully to avoid potential problems. For example, given that every work environment has its own politics and cliques, if researchers are perceived to be close to an individual or a certain group, some stakeholders may

question their neutrality and respect for confidentiality. Researchers should also be careful not to create unrealistic expectations by making promises they cannot keep.

### Teachers' Feedback

At the end of the three-year project, we presented some of our reflections on the research process to the teachers. An interactive voting system was used to get their views on various topics. Teachers used individual handheld devices to anonymously indicate their preferences. This system allowed for all the teachers to take part in the activity. It was a particularly effective way to draw out the "silent ones" because they could vote anonymously. The compiled votes for each question were immediately presented to the group, which enjoyed the spontaneous feedback. The convergence or divergence of responses generally created a discussion.

When asked about whether "the aims and intentions of the research were sufficiently transparent and clear to you?" all teachers responded "yes." However, during the discussion, they suggested that it would have been helpful to have an interpreter present at all times and to translate all materials into Inuktitut because "some words were pretty hard to understand." They also noted that the messages should have been kept short and sweet. Some said that they didn't understand some points but were afraid to ask.

## **Legitimacy of the Process: Informed Consent and Voluntary Inclusive Participation**

"...just tell us what you want from us, what you want us to do"

—Statement we heard from several teachers when we tried to discuss the various options or validate the orientation of the research

### Informed Consent

Several issues are identified with respect to participant consent criteria. The well-known requirement to obtain individual consent is often associated with the need to obtain collective consent given by the community (Blanchet, 2006; Patterson, Jackson, & Edwards, 2006; Piquemal, 2001, and Smith-Morris, 2007, as cited in Fletcher et al., 2011). When seeking collective consent, the question of the representativeness of the people in charge of giving such consent can easily become an issue (Butz,

2008). Once we secured the consent of the school administration to conduct the research, we also sought individual consent. To comply with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements, we prepared consent forms that we simplified and shortened, and we made them available in French, English, and Inuktitut. Because TCPS2 (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2014) and ITK & NRI (Nickels et al., 2006) have provisions to allow for oral consent in Aboriginal communities, we placed greater emphasis on oral consent.

Questions regarding consent are not limited to the initial phase of the research. Indeed, consent can be perceived as *continuous* because a participant can withdraw at any time (Blanchet, 2006; McHugh & Kowalski, 2009; Piquemal & Nickels, 2005). *Negotiated* consent requires an extensive dialogue with the participant to reach an individual agreement (Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007; McHugh & Kowalski, 2009). With *progressive* and *nonbinary* consent (participants/nonparticipants), participants can take part in the project at any time, progressively increasing (or not) their levels of participation (Butz, 2008). Consent that is *iterative* highlights that the terms of the agreement need to be regularly renegotiated (Mackenzie et al., 2007).

As mentioned earlier, to ensure an iterative, progressive, continued, and negotiated consent, we developed, adapted, or retained various research instruments. Participants were given the option of participating in the activities of their choice and were reminded that they could change their mind at any time regarding the nature or the extent of their participation.

## Informed Consent: Lessons Learned

For some researchers, the usual IRB process to obtain informed consent does not necessarily secure proper consent from potential participants (Letendre & Caine, 2004). For Butz (2008), the existing procedures only ensure the protection of the researchers and their university. Therefore every effort should be made to uphold the intent of the informed consent concept. In this project, adopting an iterative, progressive, continual, and negotiated process was beneficial for both participants and the research. However, the process can be both intellectually and emotionally demanding. Although we explained and insisted on the voluntary aspect of participating in the research, almost no one turned us down initially. Yet the lack of availability of some participants made us realize that because the approval of research came from the school administration, most teachers must have felt “strongly encouraged” to participate. As a result, we should examine more closely how we convey the voluntary nature of the research.

## Teachers' Feedback

To the question: "Did you feel that the research was imposed on you and you were forced to participate?" some teachers chose the answer: "I felt strongly encouraged [by the school administration], but was comfortable." Others selected "ambivalent, but didn't mind," and still others responded that "they were willing." None of the teachers (Inuit and non-Inuit) felt they were forced. They felt free to participate or not in the research.

## **Inclusive and Voluntary Participation (Diversifying Research Methods and Allowing for Intermittent Participation)**

Adopting a participatory approach is strongly recommended when undertaking research in an Indigenous community (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2014; Nickels et al., 2006). This aims to protect participants and the community, to increase the legitimacy and benefits of the research, to share responsibility (Dickert & Sugarman, 2005), to recognize each other's rights and responsibilities (Kenny, 2004), to enable a better identification and inclusion of the population's preoccupations and expectations (Nickels et al., 2006), and to ensure a better inclusion of local ontology and epistemology through the adoption of locally adapted tools and the local interpretation of research results (Letendre & Caine, 2004). Adopting such an approach requires preliminary field research (Caine, Davison, & Stewart, 2009; Nickels et al., 2006) involving the community in interpreting and making sense of the research results, reporting, and evaluation (Nickels et al., 2006) and including local leaders and elders (Kenny, 2004) and/or other members of the community because they best represent the community and participants' interests. In every case, the allocation of roles and responsibilities should be made explicit throughout the process and everyone's contribution has to be clearly stated in the research communications and results reports (Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies, 2003). Adopting a participatory approach does not mean ensuring the full participation of the entire community at every stage of the research. The level of participation should be perceived as a potential continuum, in virtue of which participation can and should be adapted to the local capacity and willingness to participate (Nickels et al., 2006).

When we first arrived at the school, we introduced ourselves and the study to the teachers at a group meeting. The aim was to first verify the relevance of the project and its acceptability to the group, as well as to give the teachers opportunities to raise



questions and concerns. We did not want to separate participants according to their mother tongue. However, we noticed it was difficult for the voices of Inuit teachers to emerge in the mixed group. As a result, during a second meeting, we separated the groups by language, hoping to create a more suitable environment for open discussion. We then observed that in the focus group with Inuit teachers, age played an important factor. Many younger teachers, as a sign of respect for their elders, refrained from speaking much in front of the older teachers. It was in this way that interviews became part of the inquiry process to create a space where individual voices could emerge and complement the focus group conversations.

Reaching those who were in the habit of interacting less than the others in a given group remained a challenge. The confident, outspoken, and extroverted teachers would take the lead in expressing opinions or suggesting solutions. It was important to disrupt the usual, established interpersonal dynamics and make a space for the quieter voices to emerge at their own pace.

### Inclusive and Voluntary Participation: Lessons Learned

Reaching an appropriate level of participation is an issue in research because it combines multiple dimensions. For example, trust may be challenging to achieve when trying to represent everyone's voice. Indeed, some participants may have different opinions from those of the group leaders, and it may be challenging for them to share their diverging viewpoints with strangers. The use of various tools and methods, added to complexity of the research process and analysis, may have caused too much uncertainty to motivate participants and help them visualize the future impact of the research. Also, because their participation was voluntary, it raises the issue of how to keep the participants motivated, especially in a longitudinal study. Using incentives (e.g., financial compensation or in-kind incentives such as meals, gifts, etc.) is the usual preferred option, which we discuss further in the following section. We also struggled with how to make the research significant to all participants, given their individual needs and priorities.

### Teachers' Feedback

When asked whether we (the researchers) provided a safe and trusting environment, all non-Inuit teachers agreed, but 30% of Inuit teachers chose "not always, sometimes I felt you were here to judge." Despite our many efforts to create inclusive participation, in response to the question "Do you feel we provided the

means to encourage participation of all?" a few teachers felt that we did not succeed.

## **Legitimacy of the Results/Benefits**

“... too many people ask us what we want... we answer  
the same thing... but nothing changes.”

—Inuit teacher's (I10) contribution to the  
discussion about the benefits of the study

Research benefits remain intangible for many participants, and for many authors research can even be harmful. Louis (2007) evokes Crazy Bull's words “knowledge for knowledge sake [is] a waste of time” when he states “if research does not benefit the community by extending the quality of life for those in the community, it should not be done” (p. 131).

Kendall et al. (2011) draw from the Australian experience to explain that the challenge for non-Indigenous researchers and practitioners is to use methods of research that lead to acceptable, sustainable, and efficacious solutions within Indigenous communities. As they note, “researchers must adopt new ways of seeing that respect local Indigenous ways of knowing and insuring that knowledge remains in control of the community” (p. 1719). To decolonize our approach and methodology, Smith (2012) suggests we adopt a sufficiently broad approach so that local knowledge, values, and conceptions of the world can be integrated.

Similarly, some authors call for the recognition of epistemological differences (Louis, 2007) and for the opening of the Western epistemology of science to make room for Indigenous knowledge (Patterson et al., 2006), integrating local practices and methods of research (Loppie, 2007), adopting different points of view (Kenny, 2004; Letendre & Caine, 2004), and respecting local value judgments of what is right or wrong (Castellano, 2004). This approach encourages researchers to make an effort to understand local values, history, culture, and beliefs (Kenny, 2004) to develop adapted tools and involve Indigenous researchers who are fluent in the local language (Letendre & Caine, 2004). Knowledge ownership and construction are intimately linked to the protection of participants and communities. Local consequences of misrepresentations because of the production of false information about the whole community or some of its members (Louis, 2007) can be particularly harmful for the population involved (Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies, 2003).

This is why we opted for the unpopular measure in academia of postponing publication of articles until we had the opportunity to present and validate the research findings with all participants and stakeholders. We did not want our “text” or “research” to cause harm. We understand the concept of research outcomes is tied to two main dimensions: the benefits of the research and its constructed knowledge. We acknowledge that these dimensions overlap because the knowledge arising from research activities can be a type of benefit. However, the first dimension is focused on the political legitimacy of the research benefits, whereas the second concerns the epistemological legitimacy of the constructed knowledge.

Knowledge protection is of great concern in Aboriginal communities. The concepts of “ownership, control, access, and possession” (OCAP) of communities’ knowledge (Schnarch, 2004, as cited in Fletcher et al., 2011) are now included in ethical guidelines (Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies, 2003; Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2014) as a way to emphasize collective ownership of local knowledge.

Research impacts and benefits for the participants and larger community are a crucial issue to numerous codes and authors. Researchers should maximize the benefits the population can derive from the research (Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies, 2003), while taking into account the relevance and temporality of these benefits (Schnarch, 2004, as cited in Fletcher et al., 2011). The concept of reciprocity is important because researchers try to give back in a concrete way to participants and the community for their involvement in the research (McHugh & Kowalski, 2009; Tilley & Gormley, 2007, as cited in Fletcher et al., 2011). However, some questions arise regarding the nature and level of reciprocity. While individual financial compensation has been recommended (Nickels et al., 2006), there is no consensus about it because the use of money can be negatively perceived, for example, as impacting the relationship-building process, or linked to a negative perception of money. Lechopier (2010) also questions individual versus collective compensation. Indeed, participants should be individually acknowledged for their participation, as should the community as an all-encompassing entity. Even when the inclusion/exclusion of participation is linked to scientific criteria (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2014), the exclusion of community members could be seen as an injustice (Lechopier, 2010), especially if financial or other individual benefits are involved.

Because benefits could be seen as an important incentive to participate in a study, they should not be disproportionate and should take into account participants’ perceptions of risks and benefits (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2014).

This raises the question of the appropriate level of incentives, which would create enough motivation to participate but would not cause participants or the community to ignore the risks they are facing through their participation. Relational reciprocity (Letendre & Caine, 2004) is a way to bring reciprocity to community members, especially the development of individual capacities, through the establishment of certain types of relationships. It could be seen as an interesting form of reciprocity because it would enable local empowerment (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2014; Nickels et al., 2006) at both the individual and community level (Nickels et al., 2006), especially increasing members' autonomy (Mackenzie et al., 2007).

At the beginning of the project, we planned to include a small monetary compensation for teachers participating in the research. We also created a virtual space for their exclusive use, hoping that it would help to develop relational reciprocity. However, we soon realized that the two approaches were not suitable for the context. The relationship of trust with teachers developed gradually over time and allowed us to better understand their evolving needs and the priorities of different groups.

As mentioned earlier, we shared the findings at every stage of research with the teachers and the school administration so they could use the findings to discuss and define the following research stages. A recurring theme, often highlighted by the Inuit participants, was the need for developing resources and finding strategies to increase the learning of Inuktitut. Although this was not formally part of the initial research project, efforts were made to address this specific request by involving a linguist towards the end of the project and working collaboratively with the Inuit teachers in identifying lived challenges tied to Inuit education and brainstorming around possible solutions. An applied linguist with previous experience in the revitalization of the Inuktitut language in Nunatsiavut (Gatbonton, 2014) was invited to accompany the research team in February 2014. She worked with Inuktitut teachers, building on existing lessons and materials and exploring how, with minor adjustments, activities could be transformed into meaningful and rich Inuktitut language acquisition opportunities for and with students. That collaborative exploration led to an interest in such work by the school and the teachers, who requested further activities of this nature. This led to the design of new research proposals and follow-up activities.

### Legitimacy of Results/Benefits: Lessons Learned

Not all participants were convinced of the benefits of this research. We tried to share the results (especially those that could impact their practice) with them on a frequent

and regular basis. To avoid limiting the type of information gathered and the range of respondents' perspectives, a variety of data collection tools were used to enable the expression of diverse viewpoints. The data was collated and summarized by the research team to ensure anonymity, but the overall results were shared regularly with various stakeholders who participated in interpretation/sense-making of the findings. This also helped to validate and adjust the next steps of the research.

### Teachers' Feedback

At the end of the research, we presented the cumulative results of the three-year research study to the participants to obtain their reactions and feedback. When asked "What do you think about the accuracy of the results?" more than 75% of all teachers (Inuit and non-Inuit) said that the results were an accurate representation of their reality and that they were useful and interesting. One teacher (Q7) said "it is good to know that students want to be taken seriously . . . it is interesting to see what they are thinking."

In response to the question "Do you feel that the results were inclusive of all views and opinions in the school?" more than 80% of the French- and Inuktitut-speaking teachers thought that the results were inclusive, but fewer did in the English-speaking group (67%), some of whose members had participated less in the research. When asked whether their expectations were met, two-thirds of the teachers responded "Yes, for the most part" and a third chose "Frankly, I didn't have any expectations." None said "No."

We asked about the behaviour of the co-authors of this article. The participants could choose one of three possible answers: (a) managed to remain open-minded, respectful, and sensitive to the context and reality; (b) were out of touch with reality; and (c) nice effort, but more was needed. A total of 75% of the non-Inuit teachers chose (a) and 25% chose (c). Among the Inuit teachers, only 60% chose (a), 15% chose (c), and 30% indicated that we were out of touch with reality. When we asked them to elaborate, we were told that it is what *qallunaat* (non-Inuit) do: They come and go without producing any results. We should mention, however, that this feedback was received prior to the Inuktitut language learning activity described earlier in this section.

### Conclusion

Doing research as non-Aboriginal and outsiders in an Aboriginal context remains a contested issue and must be dealt with great care and attention. Generating "ethical

space for decolonization” by facilitating the development of an “in-between space that connects Indigenous and Eurocentric knowledge systems” (Battiste, 2013, p. 105) remains very challenging. In this process, building a meaningful relationship with the different stakeholders becomes crucial.

In this paper, we described how we tried, as non-Aboriginal researchers, to enact the principles of critical Indigenous methodologies, which we grouped under (1) legitimacy of the research (relevance, perceived benefits, trust); (2) legitimacy of the process (informed consent and voluntary inclusive participation); and (3) legitimacy of the results/benefits. We also detailed our successes and failures, to demonstrate our compliance with ethical values as suggested by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007) and *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ), or Inuit traditional knowledge. In this process, adopting a relational approach is crucial.

We tried to illustrate that it is not enough to be well-prepared, well-informed, and well-intentioned. Our limitations and shortcomings as researchers from outside were real. The interconnectedness that is an integral part of the research within an Indigenous framework allowed us to grow and learn as researchers as we tried to bridge the Western research paradigm with an Indigenous approach. We found that there is a need for constant evaluation and reflection on the ethics in practice, both procedural and everyday ethics.

We hope to have conveyed the importance of promoting and maintaining a relational approach and encouraged a wider reflection and discussion within academia and funding agencies about structural limitations that hinder the relational dimension of research and ethics in research.

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## Notes

1. The term *Aboriginal People* refers to the indigenous inhabitants of Canada, including the Inuit, First Nations, and Métis people. The term *Indigenous Peoples* includes the Aboriginal or First Peoples of Canada and other countries (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, n.d.).
2. Because the ethical issues of doing research with youth were specifically addressed in an earlier article (Garakani, 2014), we have refrained from discussing it here.

3. A discussion about the specificities of these research tools can be found in an earlier article (Garakani, 2014) about research with Inuit youth in Nunavik.
4. To preserve the anonymity of participants, we assigned the letter “Q” to non-Inuit teachers (for both French and English sectors) and the letter “I” to Inuit teachers, followed by a random number, to help differentiate between different individuals. Of 27 teachers participating in this project, 7 were men. To ensure confidentiality when using a direct citation, we chose to exclude information about gender and the grade levels the teachers were involved with.

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