

# Insight from Nunavut Educators Using Appreciative Inquiry

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*The purpose of this paper is to document some successful features of public schools within Nunavut, according to the personal experiences of a group of 14 principals, vice-principals, and teachers. At the start of this paper, I explained my research positionality, depicting my personal history and background related to this study. From a total of 24 individual interviews, three themes surfaced: culturally vibrant programs, the array of professional development offered to educators, and student self-pride and involvement in school activities. To conceptualize the findings, I applied the 4-D cycle of appreciative inquiry (i.e., Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny) and explained how effective change can emerge within a school system. Appreciative inquiry is a change process of identifying what is working well, deciphering why it is working well, and therein, emulating more of those positive attributes.*

*L'objectif de cet article est de documenter quelques-unes des caractéristiques des écoles publiques au Nunavut qui - selon les expériences personnelles d'un groupe de 14 personnes composé de directeurs, directeurs adjoints et d'enseignants - sont les mieux réussies. Je commence par expliquer mon positionnement comme chercheuse, évoquant ainsi mon histoire et mes antécédents personnels par rapport à cette étude. Trois thèmes ressortent des 24 entrevues individuelles : des programmes dynamiques sur le plan culturel, des possibilités en matière de développement professionnel pour les enseignants, et l'orgueil des élèves et leur et la participation aux activités scolaires. Pour présenter les résultats, j'ai appliqué la démarche des 4D de l'enquête appréciative (c.-à-d. découverte, devenir, décision, déployer) et j'ai expliqué comment le changement peut véritablement avoir lieu au sein d'un système scolaire. L'enquête appréciative est un processus de changement qui consiste à identifier les éléments qui fonctionnent bien, comprendre les raisons de leur efficacité et imiter davantage de ces aspects positifs.*

Nunavut has a population of 35, 944 of which the Inuit represent about 86% (Statistics Canada, 2017). From 2011 to 2016, Nunavut showed the strongest population growth in all of Canada (Zerehi, 2017). Statistics Canada (2013) explained that Nunavut populace is young; the territory has a medium age of 21. About 36% of the Inuit population in Nunavut is children between the ages of 0 to 14, and about 60% of Nunavut's population is between the ages of 15 and 64. The remaining 3 to 4% is 65 years or older. This paper focuses on the young, burgeoning school-aged population. More specifically, the purpose of this paper is to document some successful features of public schools within Nunavut, as perceived by 14 principals, vice-principals, and teachers who taught and lived in this territory. In addressing this aim, three dominant findings surfaced: culturally vibrant programs, the array of professional development offered to educators, and

student self-pride and involvement in school activities. The 4-D cycle of appreciative inquiry was used as framework to discuss the findings.

This research is significant for many reasons. First, no known research has articulated solely positive data from Nunavut educators with regard to Nunavut's education system. Second, because the median age of Inuit people is so young, the majority of Nunavut's Inuit population is currently enrolled in Kindergarten to Grade 12 education. Consequently, the findings of this study relate to a large group of Inuit. The results of this study have the potential to supply insight to empower policymakers and educational leaders with innovative ideas for the continual enhancement of Inuit student success.

### **Positionality: Family and Indigenous Relations**

Before relaying the details of this research, it is important to state that I am a non-Indigenous person conducting research about Indigenous people. This statement may be contentious for some readers, and, therefore, it needs to be addressed. Do I have the right, as a non-Indigenous person, to conduct research about Inuit issues? I do not know the answer. However, in articulating my positionality, it is my hope that the reader will be in a better position to answer that question for him/herself.

### **My Family: The Gift of Life**

My positionality begins with respectful acknowledgement of my parents and their ancestors. Born in the 1920s, both my mother and father were first-generation Canadians who settled in Saskatchewan (see Preston, 2012). Although my parents' first language was German, it was almost never spoken in my home. After World War I and World War II, in North America, some people did not perceive Germans in a friendly manner. In turn, my parents spoke English to each other and to their children, because it was acknowledged as the safe, prestigious language. I know little about my German ancestors, their wisdom, or life experiences. Nonetheless, I believe that, tacitly, I am intimately close to my heritage via the gift of my ancestral DNA.

I came into this world as the youngest of seven children. As a youth, my life focus was to become a teacher and to learn about the wonders of the world that my farm life of milking cows, tending chickens, and cleaning pig pens did not appear to offer me. I always had an interest in other cultures and the worldviews of my local and global friends. In my early 20s, my aspirations were met when I became a teacher. For the first part of my teaching career, I taught in a First Nations community in Alberta. Then I left Canada, and, for about 10 years, I taught Kindergarten to Grade 12 students in Taiwan, Egypt, and Kuwait. I got married and had a beautiful son. Throughout this entire journey, I view/viewed myself as a person guided by an all-loving, all-connecting, all-powerful awe-force.

These descriptions of my life are the biological and axiological roots that ground me in and to this research. These personal portrayals are my truth. Indeed, the only real truth associated with this research is my story. Due to the focus of this paper, in what follows, I communicate a few of the Indigenous experiences that also root and ground me in and to this research.

### **My Indigenous Relations**

As mentioned above, in my early 20s, I taught in a First Nation community. Later, as a graduate

student, I was contracted by a branch of the Saskatchewan government to complete a number of Indigenous research projects. About five years ago, I moved to Atlantic Canada and had the honor of being introduced to a Mi'kmaq Elder. Shortly after our meeting, I was given the opportunity to teach an Indigenous education undergraduate course with him. Extending from our professional and social experiences, for eight months, I became a student in a Medicine Wheel course that he instructed. As a part of my Indigenous teachings, I had the honor of participating in many of his sweat lodge, smudging, and pipe ceremonies. Due to the sacred time spent with this Elder, I gained an understanding of the concepts of respect, honesty, trust, and love. Through his teachings, I acquired my sacred bundle, which, through morning rituals, I consistently use to bolster my physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. Predominantly through being a listener and observer during his teachings and ceremonies, I learned a number of Mi'kmaq songs, which I can sing in Mi'kmac. I am extremely grateful for these Indigenous experiences because they have colorfully enriched my life.

### **My Nunavut Relations**

Another part of my lived Indigenous learning involved opportunities working in Nunavut and being with Inuit and Nunavut educators. During the writing of this paper, the University of Prince Edward Island (in conjunction with the Government of Nunavut, Department of Education) offered a Certificate in Educational Leadership in Nunavut (CELN) to school principals and educators who live in Nunavut. For several years, I was the Academic Lead for this program, a position that helped me establish relationships with many people living in communities across Nunavut. I taught a CELN course delivered in Iqaluit, and I travelled to various communities across Nunavut during additional courses. As well, I taught online graduate courses to many Nunavut teachers and principals. While forming relationships with the Inuit and non-Inuit living in Nunavut, I attempted to listen and observe. In my silence, one of the things I heard and saw was that Nunavut and its Kindergarten to Grade 12 students experienced much success. I heard many educators tell me that they wanted to read about positive things that were happening in Nunavut schools. That message was the genesis of this article.

### **Literature Review: Successes within Inuit Education**

In attempting to relay past literature that aligns with the purpose of this research (i.e., communicating successes within Nunavut schools, according to educators), there is paucity of data. However, in broadening the scope, there is literature that reflects constructive aspects of Inuit education and Indigenous education, in general. For example, Alyward (2012) explained, “Education needs to be firmly anchored in Nunavut communities, on the land, outside classrooms, such that cultural and linguistic maintenance is possible” (p. 223). That is to say, curriculum, pedagogies, and school-related activities need to be in harmony with the traditional Inuit culture of the students in order to better support student success (Preston, 2016a; Simon, as cited in Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2011). Berger’s (2007) research showed that Inuit parents and caregivers want the presence of Inuit culture, language, and Elders in schools. Research on the topic of educational leadership in Nunavut indicates that effective school leaders promote teamwork and are people-focused (Preston, Claypool, Rowluck, & Green, 2015). Adopting a generalized review of quality education, Preston (2016b) recognized that successful Indigenous

education is a holistic concept that is reflected within four main areas: (a) strong early childhood programs, (b) the existence of Indigenous pedagogy, language, and culture throughout Kindergarten to Grade 12, (c) the existence of postsecondary educational opportunities imbued with Indigenous perspectives, and (d) the existence of productive federal, provincial/territorial, and Indigenous community partnerships.

The findings of this research focus on the things that are working well within public schools in Nunavut. However, just because the results of this study reflect constructive aspects of Nunavut education does not infer that all past and present experiences faced by the Inuit were positive. Largely due to historical and ongoing colonial dominance, the Inuit currently face a host of horrific injustices. In 2013, the employment rate for working-age Inuit was 59%, as compared to 76% for non-Indigenous people in the same age group (Statistics Canada, 2013). Suicide rates for Inuit youth are 11 times the Canadian national average and are among the highest in the world (Government of Canada, 2016). In 2012, 41% of Inuit, aged 15 and older, lived in households that experienced food insecurity (Ruiz-Castell et al., 2015; Statistics Canada, 2014). In northern Canada, the basic needs of food, housing, and clothing cost a lot more, as compared to the southern parts of the country. For example, during the writing of this article, within Northern Canada, the cost of 3.5 L of orange juice was \$26, the cost of a large package of baby diapers was \$80, and the cost of a frozen turkey was \$200 (Greenslade, 2015). To exacerbate the issue, Peritz (2014) reported, the median annual income for the Inuit who live in Nunavut is \$19,900, as compared to \$86,600 for non-Indigenous people living in Nunavut. People with low or poverty-level incomes commonly experience less-than-ideal health, a higher prevalence of disease, and shortened life expectancy (Tjepkema, Wilkins, & Long, 2013). The deliverance of education in Nunavut is complicated by underlying factors such as housing shortages, household food insecurity, below national average health status of people, and social issues such as youth suicide, pregnancy, and substance abuse (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2013). Although exact numbers of Grade 12 completion vary, Statistics Canada (2013) stated, among Inuit, aged 25 to 64, 41% have at least a high school diploma. This number compares to 88% in the same age range for non-Indigenous Canadians. To address this issue, improving educational outcomes for Inuit is the driving force for the National Center for Inuit Education (2014) and other organizations. These challenging issues promote a need for improvement; thus, data for this study were gathered in the hopes of influencing productive, positive, and influential change.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Conceptual Framework: Appreciative Inquiry**

In general, appreciative inquiry is about influencing behaviors, practices, and change through a gateway of positive language and narrative stories (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavaros, 2008; Drew & Wallis, 2014; Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). At its philosophical core, appreciative inquiry is about documenting the best characteristics and traits of people and their organizations and then using that constructive data as a springboard to elicit positive change. This process is grounded in the notion that reality is socially constructed, emphasizing that each person understands and values the world via his/her individualized, contextualize experiences articulated through the role of language, dialogue, and personal stories (Watkins et al., 2011). When leaders build upon employee-identified, positive features of

a workplace, overall, the people within that organization have greater appreciation for change that might result from their feedback. Notably, the process of appreciative inquiry differs greatly from approaching change through identifying problems and attempting to fix weakness—a popular strategic approach emphasized within many organizations (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

Appreciative inquiry is often conducted through what is referred to as a 4-D Cycle of Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Cooperider et al., 2008; Lewis, Cantor, & Passmore, 2011). In chronological order, the discovery phase involves a team discovering what is working and using these successes to catapult toward eliciting additional ideas or dreams. After the team envisions, they design the outcome of these dreams and work toward a delivery phrase, sometimes also referred to as the destiny phase.

I use appreciative inquiry as a positive, constructive way to discuss or conceptualize the findings. Some researchers might view this act as an unfitting application of appreciative inquiry. I respond by indicating that Cooperrider's (1986) initial work with appreciative inquiry theory originated from a constructive, postmodern, re-imagination of research (Bushe, 2012), a similar philosophy that I incorporate within this discussion. Appreciative inquiry theory was meant to be a liberating approach to exploring an extensive array of creative, positive possibilities (Cooperrider, Barrett, & Srivastva, 1995). With regard to any theory, Wenger (1998) reminded researchers that a theory is merely a perspective. "It does not tell you what to do. Rather, it acts as a guide about what to pay attention to" (Wenger, 1998, p. 9). In turn, I apply the basic philosophical tenets of appreciative inquiry theory as a guideline to discuss the findings of this research and to imagine the potential influence of these results.

Although appreciative inquiry has been commonly referred to as a type of methodological framework, Reed (2007) stated that appreciative inquiry need not "fit" into a particular methodology, per se (p. 45). Reed believed that this theory has potential to contribute to research-derived knowledge in a multitude of ways. Watkins et al. (2011) described appreciative inquiry to be "a theory that can be a perspective and approach to any model or method in the practice for organizational change" (p. 2). Additional researchers view appreciative inquiry as a theoretical approach that can be used to analyze change (e.g., Fifield, 2014, Sugarman, 2002). The data findings for this research reflect the first cycle of appreciative inquiry—discovery. In conceptualizing the findings, I restate the results of the study (i.e., Discovery) and apply the Dream, Design, and Destiny cycles to imagine and exemplify how effective change can emerge within a school system.

This research assumes a qualitative methodology, where the data represent how people construct meaning from individualized life experiences that resulted from social interactions (Patton, 2015; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Schwandt, 2007). Otherwise said, this qualitative research was conducted via the lens of social constructivism. Somekh and Lewin (2011) defined social constructivism as a "process by which phenomena in the social world are formed and sustained by social structures and interactions rather than being constants that conform to natural laws (p. 329). By socially interacting and working with students and other educators, participants of this study recognized and articulated what they understood to be the successful features of school programs and their school environment.

Because a social constructivism stance was applied to the study, the results are descriptive, rather than prescriptive. In other words, the findings discussed in the current study represent the perceptions of small groups of Nunavut educators. In turn, the contextualized findings are not meant to be generalizable or directly prescribed onto all teachers and all schools in Nunavut; however, the findings of this study may be transferable. Readers are welcome to make

connections between the findings of this study and their own experiences, if the readers are experiencing similar contexts of this study. For instance, policymakers, administrators, and teachers who work within Inuit schools across the Arctic might find certain parts of the results of this study helpful and applicable to their situation.

Another important philosophical aspect of this research is that the study aligns with features of respectful Indigenous research. Namely, how were relationships, respect, and relevance for the research conceptualized? At the time of the research, the author of this article was employed at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI). From 2009 to present and as mentioned above, UPEI has offered a Certificate in Educational Leadership in Nunavut to school principals and educators in Nunavut. Also, from 2009 to 2012, UPEI offered a Masters of Education to two cohorts of Inuit graduate students. Due to these programs, during this research, UPEI and Nunavut educator relationships were well established in many communities across Nunavut. In particular, associated with these programs, the author taught a face-to-face course in Nunavut, travelled to various communities across Nunavut during additional courses, and taught an online graduate course to many Nunavut teachers. While teaching students, the author listened and took note of the stories she heard and read with assignments. Many interview questions were created based on her students' in-class comments. The fact that academic and social relationships were established with participants before data collection is an important aspect of conducting respectful Indigenous research (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009).

### **Participants and Data Analysis**

Data collection for this research was semi-structured individual interviews, informed by a list of guiding questions created prior to the interview. The questions were created to elicit experiential narratives from participants and honor the unique life stories of participants. It is important to note that most questions embodied appreciative inquiry features. Examples of such questions included: "Describe an Inuit student in your school who is experiencing a high levels achievement and wellbeing", "Within your school culture, describe types of positive relationships that exist between/among students, teachers, administrators, parents, superintendents, and directors", and "To help improve the educational success and wellbeing of Inuit students, if you could have any type of educational supports you wanted, what would they be?" The open format of semi-structured interviews allowed discussion to emerge between the participant and the interviewer (Mason, 2002). Through the process, understanding and meaning were co-produced, supporting the social constructive dynamic of the study. The semi-structured interviews were not only intended for knowledge collection, they were a way to build rapport, trust, and reciprocal conversation between participant and researcher, an integral aspect of respectful research with Indigenous people (Kovach, 2009).

The data reflected 24 semi-structured individual interviews involving educators living in Nunavut. Participants represented principals (x 8), vice-principals (x 2), and teachers (x 4). At the time of data collection, participants possessed from five years to a lifetime of experience living and/or teaching in Nunavut. To find participants, purposeful sampling was used (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2015). In total, 14 participants volunteered for the study. Originally, each participant was to be interviewed two times; however, due to time and geographical restraints, some participants were interviewed once. In alliance with a travel budget, nine interviews were conducted in person, 13 interviews were conducted over the phone, and two interviews were in the form of written answers to the interview questions. Four

participants were Inuit and 10 were non-Inuit. Eight participants were female, and six participants were male. In adhering to research ethics protocol, the identification of the participants' communities and personalized data are not provided. Also, to promote confidentiality of research participants, pseudonyms are used in place of real names. See Table 1 for an overview of participant details.

After the interviews were completed and transcribed, the interview transcripts were analyzed through content analysis (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). In employing this method of analysis, each transcript was read and reread several times, focusing on understanding the content of the transcripts. Guided by the research purpose, tallies were kept of the main topics of discussion. The frequency of similar topics and the overlap in common words were of particular interest. In essence, each transcript was analyzed to uncover overarching answers or categories addressing the research purpose. Then these chunks of data were reviewed again by reading all interviews and to uncover larger thematic groupings.

### **Thematic Findings**

The purpose of this paper is to document some of the successful features of public schools within Nunavut, according to the personal experiences of a group of principals, vice-principals, and teachers. In addressing this aim, the three core topics surfaced: cultural vibrant programs within schools, the professional development offered to educators, and aspects of student school involvement and cultural pride. In what follows, through the use of sub-themes, enriched descriptions of these thematic findings are provided. Because the findings of this qualitative study reflect the participants' language and personalized stories, the results include participant quotations directly extracted from interview transcripts and paraphrased participant experiences, which were embedded within the transcripts.

Table 1:

*Participant Description*

Pseudonym	Job Description	Gender	# of Interviews	Inuk/Non-Inuk
Becky	Principal	F	2	Inuk
Lucas	Principal	M	2	Inuk
Isabel	Principal	M	2	Non-Inuk
Evelyn	Principal	M	2	Non-Inuk
Jack	Principal	F	2	Non-Inuk
Neil	Principal	M	2	Non-Inuk
Chloe	Principal	F	2	Non-Inuk
Anna	Principal	F	1	Non-Inuk
Henry	Vice-Principal	M	1	Non-Inuk
Owen	Vice-Principal	M	1	Non-Inuk
Amelia	Teacher	F	1	Inuk
Kylie	Teacher	F	2	Inuk
Grace	Teacher	F	2	Non-Inuk
Steve	Teacher	M	2	Non-Inuk

## Culturally Vibrant School Programs

When asking participants to describe some of the successes of their school, one of the main words included within their comments was *culture*. More specifically, participants provided details about the Inuit language, Elders, and cultural camps.

**Language.** Most participants explained that culture is directly related to language. Both Henry and Jack believed that the language a person speaks embodies the spiritual essence of that person, and the spiritual essence of the person is embodied in his/her language. All participants explained how the Inuit language was promoted within their school contexts. Many participants indicated that they had an Inuit language program and promoted a bilingual school culture. Becky indicated, “We have Inuktitut computer-typing programs.” Neil explained how he successfully promoted a dual language system within the school:

The Inuktitut language is very important. Everything we do in the school, we try to do bilingually. When we send a note home in English, we send it home in Inuktitut. We always provide interpreters for the kids whenever we’re discussing things with them.

Participants talked about how Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun (hereafter referred to as Inuktitut) is taught in all schools in Nunavut. Other participants explained that one of the Nunavut Department of Education’s strategic goals is to produce fully English-Inuktitut Grade 12 graduates by 2020. On this note, Owen said, “One of those big pushes in bilingualism is to get our students to speak Inuktitut and be fluent in the [local] dialect.”

The majority of non-Inuit participants (i.e., Chloe, Grace, Henry, Owen, Steve, Evelyn, and Jack) appeared to support this bilingual goal by enrolling in conversational Inuktitut courses, themselves, so they could understand and speak basic Inuktitut. Jack said, “I did an Inuktitut course for five days with a local teacher.” Grace said, “I actually took the conversational Inuktitut course the first year.” Evelyn agreed that it was important for non-Inuit teachers to attempt to learn the local language. Although participants indicated that a strong focus on maintaining Inuit languages was a key aspect of culturally vibrant school programs, many participants added that a challenge was the lack of Inuit language-based resources within the school. Isabel supported the existence of the Inuktitut or English stream for all Kindergarten to Grade 4 students in her school, but she said, “The resources aren’t there for the Inuktitut stream.” She explained that to compensate for this, Nunavut Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun teachers are developing their own teaching resources and/or translating English resources. (It is important to state that, at the time of this research, the Government of Nunavut was working toward creating and supplying a host of language resources for Inuktitut teachers.)

**Elder presence in school.** In addition to the successful promotion of the Inuit language, another aspect of culturally vibrant schools was of the presence of Elders in the schools. Jack provided some historical detail regarding the importance of Elders: “In the 1950s, there were no formal schools. ... Their [the students’] school was the igloo, their home. In the home, the teachers were the family and the Elders, who taught them drum dancing, sewing, and hunting skill.” Neil talked about the important role that Elders played in the school. He said, “We have a school Elder and a school community counselor, both are local people. The Elder is trying to instill respect for the values of Inuit culture.” Kylie also talked about Elders and said, “We have a culture class three times a week. The culture class has two Elders ... They are beading, and they



are sewing.” Similar to Kylie’s comment, Jack shared how Elders were a part of his school’s culture programs:

In each school in Nunavut, we have culture class in high school and from Grades 7–9. In culture class, the boys and girls are separated. The boys go to shop class; they make their own komatik [dogsled], and then the other thing is the ulu [knife]. Then the girls do their sewing ... we involve Elders in these culture classes.

Steve said, “with the help of an Elder, he taught the students how to make a komatik (dogsled).” Anna said, “We invite in the Elders, and we do all sorts of activities in Inuktitut. They come and teach us drums.” Becky explained how important Elders were within her school. She said:

We have Elders in our school all year round. Sometimes, they do classroom presentations. When they are not in the need of presentations, they are counseling students who have social issues, because they know how to observe these kids more than us teachers.

These comments exemplified the participants’ belief that Elder are vital keepers of knowledge and tradition, therein promoting an essential place and case for the presence of Elders in the formal school system.

**Culture camps.** In addition to the culturally, socially, and spiritually important roles that Elders play within these Nunavut schools, all participants talked about a fall and/or spring culture camp where everyone from the school went out on the land for a few days. Steve explained, “We have a fall camp and a spring camp. What that entails is each grade and each student go out on the land for a day and participate in traditional Inuit games.” Neil explained that Elders often accompany the students during these outdoor events, and these Elders only speak Inuktitut to the students when out on the land. Kylie explained that she loved spending time talking with the students during these multi-day camping trips. She said, “The kids are so different on the land.” Becky also articulated a similar point when she said, “If we are going out camping [with the students], they may be struggling with writing, but, when they go camping, they have many strengths.” Lucas believed that cultural camps were vitally important learning experiences “for our students who grew up camping, hunting.” Lucas went on to provide a suggestion about this type of student-focused learning:

Open a cultural school on the land that students can go to, to work on a module or a course that cannot be done in the town. [For example, they can learn] how to hunt narwhals on the floe edge. How to butcher, clean, store, cache, and preserve maktaaq [skin] and meat for future use. We should open a cultural school in each community.

All participants spoke about cultural camps, and, when they described the event, their body language and word usage was positive. For example, they smiled, the spoken volume of their voice rose, they began to speak quicker, they laughed, and/or they accentuated positive words such as “good” and “fun.”

### **Professional Development**

All participants were grateful for the strong professional development offered through their school, the local Teachers’ Federation, and/or the Nunavut Department of Education. Jack

explained the three main types of professional development opportunities and provided examples:

Every year in February, we shut down the school for four or five days. We call it PI week, Professional Improvement. So there are three types of PI. One is called individual PI, another is called group PI (where some teachers together can invite someone to present something), and then there is a board-wide PI. They will talk about differentiated instruction, assessment, literacy, language, and culture. From the local, there should be some cultural part about the jewelry making, carving. There are local components of these PI activities. Now, for individual PI, the local Inuit teachers, they do their cultural activities, like sewing or making boil bowls for hunting.

In particular, Becky talked about her school-wide professional development and believed that, during these sessions, the priority should be on addressing student needs. She also said, “Then there are individualized professional development opportunities, where staff members decide what they need to learn to become a more effective teacher in Nunavut.” Evelyn explained that school and staff-chosen profession development consisted of a total of five days each, and the individual staff professional development needed to be approved by a teacher committee. Participants provided many examples of professional development. As a principal, Becky promoted staff-wide professional development programs, which supported respect for the land and included having staff members go out on the land to harvest berries. Isabel explained how she used her individualized professional development budget. She said:

I hired an Elder to show me how to make a parka, and she ripped the seams out of my parka so many times I had nightmares. It was amazing in the way she taught me. I also did a coaches clinic, differentiated instruction, and [courses for my] masters.”

Henry also spoke about the professional development he experienced: “We have done suicide prevention. We have done residential school training. We go on day trips as a staff and have an Elder teach us. There is so much that I forgot [all of them].” Amelia added, “Southern teachers who are coming up North got to know where they are coming to and need to make an effort outside of the classroom if you want to further connect with students.” In sum, many of the individualized professional development events were activities that helped educators develop or enrich relationships with local community members.

### **Student Success Stories**

Participants were asked to describe Inuit students who were enjoying great success in school. In almost every description, not only did participants explain that the student possessed a solid academic record, many of these successful students were involved in fine arts, after-school activities, had parent support, and possessed cultural pride.

**Involvement in school and extra-curricular events.** When asked to describe a successful Inuk student, Evelyn spoke about a Grade 12 female student who was heavily involved in the school choir and was an Inuk throat singer. Evelyn believed that as this student developed her musical talent, this student simultaneously attained more self-confidence. In another school, Henry also spoke about a Grade 12 student. “She is a leader within our school, an incredible athlete, and on all kinds of committees.” When Chloe also spoke about high school success stories, she said, “The academically successful ones are the ones who have built a really

strong relationship with school. They're involved with sports, with school, and they are regular attenders." Neil talked about a Grade 5 student who not only was doing well academically, this student "gets involved in the afterschool activities." Chloe believed that the strong drama school program unleashed the hidden potentials of many students. She said, "Kids come alive with the Fine Arts. They are artists, actors, and musicians."

**Support from home.** Another common feature of successful students was parent support. Kylie spoke of one of her Grade 2 students. She said, "He is a hockey player ... He reads. He writes. He is creative, in the sense that he can make up a story on his own ... He is respectful ... Mom and Dad are very involved with his education." Grace thought of two elementary students who regularly "skip through the halls." She continued by saying, "Mom is super involved in the school." When reflecting on student success stories, Neil indicated that most of these students have support from home. Chloe said that successful students predominantly have parents who show up for parent-teacher interviews. When talking about a successful student, Lucas said, "This particular student also has full support from home, academically and physically." Owen spoke of a young student who was "a great kid from a loving family. He is engaged with his learning. He is very happy, and I think that is because he has the support at home." All participants except one, specifically referred to the importance of family support when describing these successful students. Kylie provided a short narrative about a student who did not have strong support from home. Kylie said, the parents of this student were in trouble with the law, and the student had "to live with her grandparents who had a really tiny house, but [name of student] came to school every day. She worked her butt off. She asked me when she was hungry if she could eat. She is so helpful."

**Strong cultural identity.** Another descriptive feature of successful students was that these students possessed a strong cultural identity. For example, Lucas said, "This student is proud of who he/she is, where he/she came from, and what the future may hold." Grace said, "Verbally, these kids can communicate in both languages and switch on a dime. They have no problem turning to the Elder, speaking in Inuktitut, and then turn to me to continue the conversation in English. Those kids know their tradition." Neil explained that the Grade 5 successful student he spoke of was very strong in the Inuktitut and English language. Evelyn provided more details about a group of girls who promoted their cultural identity through music and throat singing: "When they sing, I always cry, because I know the background of three girls in particular. To see them standing up there and singing with such cultural confidence." Evelyn added that many of the fine arts and extra-curricular activities support student travelling opportunities. She believed that these culture-travel events promoted the student's sense cultural pride. She said, "For our youth, travel gives them a chance to look at themselves differently, especially, if it is some kind of culturally based exchange. Then they see merit in who they are and in their culture."

### **Discussion: Attending to the 4-Ds of Appreciative Inquiry**

The four phases of appreciative inquiry are discovery, dream, design, and destiny. Herein, identification of successful features of public schools within Nunavut represents the first phase, discovery. Whitney (2010) described this phase as being the "search to understand the best of what is and what has been" (p. 7). Cooperrider et al. (2008) depicted the discovery process as appreciating what "gives life" to an organization (p. 5). As applied to this research, findings showed that participants were pleased with the vibrancy of Inuit languages, the presence of

Elders within the school, and the cultural learning opportunities employed through cultural camps. As well, participants valued the multiple types of professional development provided through Nunavut's educational system. As a final point, the discovery phase documented that successful Inuit students were those students involved in fine arts, involved in extra-curricular school events, had support from home, and had pride in their culture.

A general finding of the study was that a success aspect of education in these Nunavut school was that the school environment and curriculum reflected Inuit language, culture, traditions. With regard to language, in particular, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (2015) explained that the vitality and regular usage of Inuktitut is vital to the preservation of Inuit culture and identity. Further contemplating this general finding, when students and parents see themselves within the curriculum and dynamics of the school, a decolonization process has begun (Battiste, 2013). Aikenhead and Michell (2011) stated, "Despite the ravages of colonization, many Indigenous people have retained a core worldview and philosophy of life that can be drawn upon to rethink how humans can live out their lives in relationships with all of Creation" (pp. 97–98). In line with appreciative inquiry, focusing on further promoting linguistic, cultural, and traditional Inuit knowledge has vast potential to influence large-scale change within school systems. Promoting a culturally compatible place, space, and case in schools and curricula is a constructive example of addressing some of the injustices that Indigenous peoples in Canada have suffered and are continually enduring. In other words, further embellishing Inuit culture within schools is about promoting Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, which, in the past, were chastised and almost annihilated via colonization.

Further probing into the concept of appreciative inquiry, fostering additional success within Nunavut schools and for Inuit students would involve creating strategic goals (the dream phase) grounded by the findings of this study. For example, could the length of cultural camps be extended from a few days to a month or more? Or, as imagined by Lucas, could a full year of cultural camp be equivalent to a year of mainstream school education? In such a fashion, "valuing the best of what is leads to envisioning what might be" (Cooperrider et al., 2008, p. 6). Another example of creating strategic goals based on the findings might related to envisioning how parental involvement might be promoted and more highly valued within schools. Could the school infrastructure be renovated so that a community room or meeting area be added, therein enticing more of a physical parental presence in the school building? This phase of dreaming is a way of growing the goodness that is already happening in Nunavut schools.

Whitney (2010) reminded researchers that a systematic approach to appreciative inquiry commonly involves discussions with many or all members of an organization, including external stakeholders and members of the local community. Similarly, Watkins et al. (2011) explained that appreciative inquiry is based on the notion that "we can create what we imagine when we open our minds and our social processes to the widest possible dialogue among the largest number of people who are involved and investing in our enterprise" (p. 282). Within Nunavut, there are 43 schools operating in 25 Nunavut communities (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2013). There are over 1,400 people who are employed within the sector of public education (Nunavut Department of Education, n.d.). This study involved 14 participants. On first consideration, as compared to the total number employees in Nunavut public education, 14 people might appear as a shortcoming of the study. In response, with fewer participants, specific details can be focused upon and articulated, especially with the confinements of a journal article. Moreover, though, this study represents a starting point or pilot study from which additional data can be collected and compared. In turn, this research may represent an exciting start of a

larger discovery phase, potentially collecting the constructive stories and thoughts of thousands of people. As well, to further interrogate aspects of the dream phase, as Whitney (2010) indicated, dreaming is “a time to envision possibilities that are big, bold, and beyond the boundaries of what has been in the past” (p. 8). Imagine the positive innovative strategic opportunities that might surface if appreciative inquiry data were collected from all 1, 400 Nunavut public education employees and from community stakeholders. By liberating people’s power through the documentation and analysis of large amounts of positive data, substantial change in Nunavut could unfold.

The third and fourth phases of appreciative inquiry are design and destiny. During the design phase, participants of an organization create a road map where the exceptional dream becomes ordinary (Cooperrider et al., 2008). In the case of the aforementioned example, Lucas’ year-round culture camp could become as reality. A committed culture camp team (indirectly or directly identified during the discovery phase) could be employed to plan the curriculum and activities for a year-round culture camp. Then, through the destiny phase, a year-round culture camp would be a reality experienced by students. With regard to the parent community meeting room, the design may involve the construction of a budget, the drawing of architectural plans, and physical construction of the addition. Through these examples, the destiny of school improvement is a transformative, collective act of constructive change. Watkins et al. (2011) referred to the overarching effect of appreciative inquiry as “sustainable transformative change in human systems” (p. 21).

### **Conclusion**

Instead of focusing on what is wrong, appreciative inquiry practitioners ask affirming questions and then document what is working. It is a process that can be used to identify useful information (such as best-practices) about any organization. The process uncovers what the strengths of the organization are, what the dreams of the people in the organization are, and the supports people envision as beneficial in achieving their dreams. The main purpose of appreciative inquiry is its potential for transformational change. In furthering implementing this concept and applying it to Nunavut education and best practice data, educational stakeholders might benefit by collecting and using productive knowledge and personal stories about their own system to assist them in providing a focus for difficult issues such as graduation rates, school attendance, and the need for more Inuit teachers to be employed within schools. In other words, using appreciative inquiry (whether exemplified in a planning, evaluation, or delivery stages) is a way to spotlight and perpetuate the best—an empowering and life-affirming process for any organization to experience.

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