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# Protecting embers to light the *qulliit* of Inuit learning in Nunavut communities

Joanne Tompkins,\* Alexander McAuley,\*\* and Fiona Walton\*\*\*

**Résumé:** Protéger les braises afin d'allumer les *qulliit* de l'apprentissage inuit au Nunavut

Le 1 juillet 2009, lors d'une cérémonie spéciale à Iqaluit, 21 femmes inuit ont reçu une maîtrise en éducation du leadership en apprentissage. Il s'agissait du premier programme de deuxième cycle offert au Nunavut par University of Prince Edward Island en partenariat avec le Ministère de l'Éducation du Nunavut, St. Francis Xavier University et le Nunavut Arctic College. Les auteurs de cet article ont enseigné aux Territoires du Nord-Ouest/Nunavut entre 1982 et 1999 puis ont participé à l'élaboration de ce programme de maîtrise en éducation comme professeurs et chercheurs. Ils tracent ici ses origines aux recherches sur la décolonisation des pratiques éducationnelles inuit dans la région de Baffin entre 1980 et 1999. Ils expliquent ensuite les buts et le déroulement du programme, en examinant de près les défis et approches pédagogiques mis en place pour y arriver.

**Abstract:** Protecting embers to light the *qulliit* of Inuit learning in Nunavut communities

On July 1, 2009 at a special ceremony in Iqaluit, 21 Inuit women graduated from Nunavut's first graduate degree program, a Master of Education in Leadership and Learning offered by the University of Prince Edward Island in partnership with Nunavut Department of Education, St. Francis Xavier University, and Nunavut Arctic College. The authors of this article, Northwest Territories/Nunavut educators between 1982 and 1999, and university-based professors and researchers who have since been involved in the planning and delivery of the Nunavut M.Ed., trace the roots of the program to decolonising research in educational practices in the Baffin region between 1980 and 1999. They then outline the design and implementation of the program with particular emphasis on its challenges and the approaches necessary for its success.

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## Introduction

In the past, Inuit carried embers from camp to camp in a *suppivik*, a sealskin pouch. The embers would kindle a new flame in a *qulliq* (plural *qulliit*), the seal oil lamp that sustained and warmed Inuit families for generations. While they could have used a bow drill to start a fire, Inuit preferred to begin with a supply of live embers as it was less time-consuming and susceptible to weather. Just as the *suppivik* brought fire from one campsite to another, so was the first graduate program offered in Nunavut between 2006 and 2009, a Master of Education (M.Ed.) in Leadership and Learning from the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) intended to help re-ignite the *qulliit* of Inuit education in the new territory. The *suppivik* metaphor emerged during a research meeting held in Iqaluit in 2005; however, the need for graduate education in Nunavut originated much earlier. Beginning with the initial discussions, this article traces the socio-historical roots of the program, outlines its design and implementation, and summarises some of the salient learning that has emerged.

While Nunavut grew out of a land claims settlement that made Inuit the largest private landowners in the world and created an Indigenous government by virtue of demographics, its creation paradoxically undermined progress towards Inuit-based education between 1980 and 1999 (O'Donoghue et al. 2005) and stalled positive changes underway (T. Berger 2006). As Lena Metuq (pers. comm. 2005), the longest-serving principal in the eastern Arctic, stated, "We took a step backwards by about fifty years." Metuq's comment originated during the research project *Pursuing a Dream: Inuit Education in the Qikiqtani Region of Nunavut from 1980-1999*, which was led by the authors of this paper and Inuit collaborators with extensive educational experience in the Qikiqtani region of Nunavut. Theoretically grounded in Inuit epistemology, Indigenous philosophy, poststructural analysis, and postcolonial theory (Battiste 1999; Bhabha 1997; Foucault 1984, 1994; GNWT 1996; Spivak 1990; Tuhiwai-Smith 1999), the project focused on decolonising practices in Inuit education. It also provided an opportunity to open the lines of communication and rebuild the relationships needed to create a long-term research agenda focusing on Inuit leadership and ways of being in the schools. There were several goals: create a plan to develop Inuit educational research capacity in Nunavut; explore the possibilities for helping Inuit educators complete graduate degrees; and, through their studies, contribute to the literature on Inuit education, where Inuit voices are largely absent.

Over three days in May 2005 in Iqaluit, the *Pursuing a Dream* project brought together some of Qikiqtani's most respected Inuit educational leaders and teachers for extended focus group discussions. Exploratory and developmental, the discussions revealed three major themes: an urgent need to revitalise Inuit education in Nunavut; a clear call for decolonising practices to rebuild the strength, confidence, and leadership capacity of Inuit educators; and a rejection of colonising attitudes and practices that regrettably had seemed to gain new strength after the dissolution of the Nunavut Boards of Education on July 1, 2000. Comments from participants indicated their resistance to further colonisation and their determination to move ahead and implement an educational system based on Inuit culture and worldview:

If [*Qallunaat* ('non-Inuit')] do not understand, I'm sorry [...] that's your problem, not my problem. That's how I deal with it now. Either you're with me or you're against me. It's your choice [...] I will not waste my energy on your ignorance or on your power over me [...] I will not waste my energy [...] I stopped playing *Qallunaat* games (Lena Metuq, Principal, Attagoyuk School, Pangnirtung, May 2005).

'Cause when you're told what to do all the time you cannot think for yourself, even though you can. You cannot think, "What am I going to do?" "What's going to happen?" [...]. Even if you want to share it's really difficult [...] 'cause there's hardly any leadership [...] somebody to say "OK, let's get going" and take your point of view. We don't have that anybody [...]. When you don't get much support you feel so alone [...] it's hard (Annie Manning, Order of Canada, Teacher, Cape Dorset, May 2005)

I think it's having people who believe we understand what we need, within our own culture, within our own values. But in *Inuuqatigiit* ['from Inuit perspectives'] schools, even though we have themes and we build on it, we're not the sole keepers of the knowledge, the elders are [...]. It's the same with *Inuuqatigiit*. We need the people who have gone through it and lived through it and understand the importance of it to teach us so that we can pass it on. And I think that's what's missing (Jukeepa Hainnu, Principal, Quluq School, Clyde River, May 2005).

The participants also noted a number of decolonising initiatives that had strengthened Inuit-based education while developing and deepening leadership capacity among Inuit educators between 1980 and 1999. The initiatives included: the K-9 (kindergarten to Grade 9) *Piniaqtavut* program of studies that integrated Inuit culture and issues (Baffin Divisional Board of Education 1989); the writing and publication of books in *Inuit Uqausingit* ('Inuit languages'); *Inuuqatigiit: Curriculum from the Inuit Perspective* (GNWT 1996), a powerful curriculum document based on the Inuit worldview; workshops on cultural grief and decolonisation conducted throughout the 1990s by Freirian therapist and researcher Elizabeth Fortes; *Sivumut*: the first Inuit-led educators' conference (Arnaqq 2008); and *Tuqqatarviunirmut Katimajit*, the Educational Leadership Project (Nunavut Education Councils 2000). These initiatives were decolonising in that they enabled "Inuit educators to develop voice, ownership, and authority and claim their places as leaders in a system striving to become Inuit-led" (O'Donoghue et al. 2005: 8).

As one of the first research gatherings of Inuit educational leaders since the creation of Nunavut nearly six years before, the *Pursuing a Dream* project also enabled them to identify and reflect on unanticipated harm to Inuit education. For example, to cut costs, one of the new government's first acts had been to dissolve the Divisional Boards of Education (Paul Okalik, pers. comm. 2002). The Boards had struggled for 15 years to integrate parental and community expectations into the formal education system (O'Donoghue et al. 2005: 10) and their dissolution destroyed an important Inuit-driven structure that had provided leadership. Another setback: Nunavut government departments recruited many qualified Inuit teachers, "often stripping schools of senior Inuit leaders and role models" (*ibid.*). Already an impediment to Inuit leadership (Nunavut Boards of Education 1995; O'Donoghue 1998), the domination of *Qallunaat* in middle- and upper-level educational positions was exacerbated as many

additional *Qallunaat*, often with little or no previous Northern experience and no familiarity with the context or history of Inuit-based education, took over key positions at both the school and regional levels (T. Berger 2006). One research participant summarised the disappointment, frustration, and grief of the remaining Inuit educators: “Nothing was there anymore. Everybody was gone. It was start from scratch. Ideas and beliefs were gone. You needed your job so you remained silent” (O’Donoghue et al. 2005: 10).

So it was that *Pursuing a Dream*, initially intended to explore and document decolonising practices in Inuit education, unearthed a larger issue. Motivated in part by the participatory research process and wanting to overcome their isolation and alienation of the past few years, the participants “urgently called for rebuilding vision and morale, regenerating hope, and regaining political focus and Inuit voice” (*ibid.*: 11). Thus emerged the *suppivik* metaphor. It was indeed time for the embers to be carried forward to light *qulliit* in the communities. In Lena Metuq’s words, “The dreams have to be regenerated [...] rejuvenated [...] it can happen [...] I need people here with me who can help start it [...] people that have the same dreams and ideas [...] not just to be together but actually to do something [...] to build towards something” (in O’Donoghue et al. 2005: 115). On the last day of the meetings came a passionate request “actually to do something” in the form of a graduate program for Inuit educators: “I have waited for over 20 years to complete my master’s, so please go back to UPEI [University of Prince Edward Island] and bring one back to Nunavut” (Peese Pitsiulak, pers. comm. 2005).

Soon after returning south, the researchers received unanimous support of the Faculty of Education at UPEI to offer a Master of Education in Leadership and Learning in Nunavut. Negotiations with the Nunavut Department of Education and other partners began. In their report the researchers wrote:

Inuit educators and leaders need the time, space, power, and control to collectively forge their own directions in education. Without critical awareness, and a conscious, intentional and specific decolonising focus, colonial and neo-colonial forces may continue to undermine efforts to create an Inuit school system in Nunavut (O’Donoghue et al. 2005: 5).

The M.Ed. program was intended to provide just such a space.

### **Background to the M.Ed. program**

*Pursuing a Dream* gave voice to the urgent need for graduate education in Nunavut. This need was already clear in a jurisdiction in which 85% of the population was Inuit with the majority speaking one of the *Inuit Uqausingit* as their first language, and with a large number of graduates holding Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degrees from McGill University’s Native and Northern Teacher Education program (Nunavut Boards of Education 1995; O’Donoghue 1998). *Pauqatigiit*, a comprehensive survey of 89% of all Nunavut educators (N=669), demonstrated that in 1994 49% of Nunavut

educators were Inuit but most were classroom assistants or language specialists; just 26% were qualified classroom teachers and only 6% were in positions of authority (Nunavut Boards of Education 1995). By comparison, 71% of *Qallunaat* educators were classroom teachers and almost a quarter, 24%, held positions of authority in the school system. As indicated previously, this gap widened with the creation of Nunavut five years later (Walton et al. 2007). Berger (2006: 4) found the same kind of gap throughout the Nunavut public service:

[O]nly 45% of the employees of the Government of Nunavut are Inuit. This figure was more or less achieved early on, as Inuit took up mainly lower level (e.g., administrative support) positions in government, and has not been improved upon for the simple reason that only a few Inuit are qualified for the executive, management and professional positions that make up the middle and upper echelons of the public service. The result is that, although most of the elected members of the Government of Nunavut are Inuit, the great majority of the higher level positions in the public service are held by non-Inuit; in fact, these latter constitute a large part of the 15% of residents of Nunavut who are not Inuit.

The *Pauqatigiit* survey also showed that in 1994, despite their interest in graduate level education, Inuit educators were significantly less interested than their non-Inuit colleagues in taking courses at southern universities or by distance education. They identified Inuit languages and culture as the elements most lacking in their teacher education and wanted graduate courses to be offered in Nunavut, expressing a preference for two-week modules in a part-time program. They described absence from the community, family responsibilities, difficulties with speaking out in groups, and lack of confidence in academic skills as challenges to continuation of their professional education. Eighty-two per cent of the Inuit respondents were women.

At the time of the 1995 *Pauqatigiit* survey, distance education or attendance at a southern university were the only choices if a Nunavut teacher wished to pursue a graduate degree in education. The Northwest Territories Teachers' Association (NWTTA) provided a handful of funded, full-time educational study leaves for educators through its professional improvement program prior to the creation of Nunavut; afterwards this role fell to the Nunavut Teachers' Association (NTA) Professional Improvement Committee. While some Inuit teachers used these funds to upgrade their teaching qualifications to the B.Ed. level through the McGill University credited Nunavut Teacher Education Program (NTEP), relocating family members to southern Canada was not an option for most. McGill University had offered some graduate level courses in Iqaluit, Arviat, and Pond Inlet during the mid-1990s with the understanding that participants would complete the master's degree in Montreal. Not surprisingly, no Inuit educators ventured south to complete their degrees, until Jukeepa Hainnu (from Clyde River) brought her family to Charlottetown for the 2006-2007 academic year and graduated from UPEI in May 2007 with an M.Ed. A participant in *Pursuing a Dream*, Hainnu felt that she had already waited too long and decided to complete the regular one-year, on-campus residential program rather than enrol in the new part-time program. The next year, Naullaq Arnaquq (from Iqaluit) also completed an M.Ed. at UPEI (Arnaquq 2008). Hainnu and Arnaquq's determination and

dedication broke new ground for Inuit education and demonstrated the “hunger for learning” referred to by O’Donoghue (1998).

Rekindling the idea of graduate education was a goal that flowed from the findings of *Pursuing a Dream*. A master’s program for Inuit educators could act as one catalyst to revitalise Inuit education. It would support the development and mentoring of Inuit educational leaders and generate hope. Researchers and collaborators alike believed that such a graduate program could let Inuit educators “explore more deeply their own experiences as educators, reflect on best practices in Inuit education, and examine the broader philosophical questions related to decolonising education in Nunavut” (Tolley 2007). It was likewise believed that a cohort of Inuit educators with graduate credentials would be well-positioned to accept leadership positions in the school system, thus reversing a historical and current imbalance and ending their under-representation. Inuit educators had long awaited access to graduate degrees that could narrow this socio-economic gap (T. Berger 2006; O’Donoghue 1998).

Participants and researchers in *Pursuing a Dream* also believed that such a graduate program would bring Inuit voices, research, and experiences to the larger academic stage. In 2005 no Inuit educators in Nunavut had yet completed a graduate degree in education. Despite a growing literature on Inuit education (Aylward 2006; Balzer 2006; P. Berger 2008; Clark 2005; Demchuk 1992; McAuley 2004; McGregor 2008; O’Donoghue 1998; Tompkins 1998; Tumblin 2001), some of it co-authored with Inuit scholars (Lee 1996; O’Donoghue et al. 2005; Tompkins 2006; Walton et al. 2006), virtually no writing or research has been conducted or published by Inuit from Nunavut. As a result, Inuit voices are largely absent from the national and international landscapes of Indigenous education. Inuit in Nunavut have much to share with Inuit in other jurisdictions, with First Nations peoples across Canada, and with Indigenous peoples around the world, as well as with the academic community in general.

Discussions to develop an M.Ed. program took place between UPEI, the Department of Education of the Government of Nunavut, St. Francis Xavier University (StFX), and Nunavut Arctic College (NAC) in the winter of 2005-2006. Drawing on a successful and flexible M.Ed. outreach program developed at UPEI, the expertise and Nunavut experiences of members of the UPEI Faculty of Education (Walton and McAuley) and StFX School of Education (Tompkins) and significant financial and in-kind support from the Government of Nunavut, the Nunavut M.Ed. program was developed for implementation in the fall of 2006. The relatively short time (May 2005 to October 2006) from conceptualisation to implementation reflected the levels of trust, the ease of communication, and the almost total absence of red tape and bureaucratic stalling due to the researchers’ extensive prior relations with the Nunavut partners as well as the small size of the Faculty of Education and the ability of Nunavut government agencies to work very quickly.

## Design and implementation

In the spring of 2006, 27 Inuit educators from the three regions of Nunavut enrolled in the first Nunavut M.Ed. All were women. While many held formal leadership positions ranging from program support teachers and assistant principals at the school level to an executive director at the regional level and an assistant deputy minister at the territorial level, all were involved in community leadership. Ages ranged from early 30s to mid-50s, with about one-third being survivors of the residential school system. All but one were mothers, several were grandmothers, and two became great-grandmothers during the program. They all spoke *Inuit Uqausingit* as their first language. Although all were Inuit, they were in many ways members of a diverse group, united by a passion for Inuit education and the desire to create an Inuit school system. Over the course of the program, six individuals chose to leave before graduation, primarily because they felt that personal or professional commitments did not allow sufficient time for their studies.

The Nunavut M.Ed. is a three-year (2006-2009), 10-course, part-time program designed to respond to the busy and demanding lives of Inuit educators who work full-time in Nunavut communities scattered across the northeastern fifth of Canada. It is built on complementary principles deriving from *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*, Inuit ways of knowing, being, and doing (Government of Nunavut 2005; n.d.) on the one hand and from principles articulated by the Faculty of Education at UPEI on the other. Identified and compiled through work with Inuit elders, the former principles encompass such things as *Aajiiqatigiingniq* (consensus decision making), *Pilimmaksarniq* (skills and knowledge acquisition), *Qanuqtuurungnarniq* (being resourceful to solve problems), *Piliriqatigiingniq* (working together for a common purpose), and *Avatimik Kamattiarniq* (environmental stewardship). The latter principles are complementary: caring, equitable, and just relationships and practices; communities of creative and critical thinkers who value diversity; environmental responsibility and sustainability; cooperation and collaboration; and commitment to life-long learning and world mindedness (UPEI 2009).

There is a controversial and not unchallenged restriction on enrolment in the M.Ed. to Inuit educators. Reasons include the historical and contemporary imbalances that have limited Inuit access to leadership positions because of lack of qualifications and resulting marginalisation in decision-making (Nunavut Boards of Education 1995; O'Donoghue 1998). While maximizing the potential for a demographically representative school leadership in Nunavut, an all-Inuit cohort also provides the opportunity to work and learn in the *Inuit Uqausingit*, the first languages of the territory. As a result, it becomes possible to involve Inuit elders, most of whom speak only *Inuit Uqausingit*, and to deepen critical cultural knowledge by providing Inuit epistemological and ontological alternatives to mainstream perspectives.

The Nunavut M.Ed. holds as a central premise that “human relationships are at the heart of schooling” (Cummins 2001: 1) and the authors agree with Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) that decolonising projects demand a relational base between partners. This



premise plays out in a number of ways. First, although most course instructors are *Qallunaat*, all courses are led by professors with extensive experience living and teaching in Nunavut. However well-intentioned, *Qallunaat* are inevitably inheritors and bearers of a colonial legacy that privileges them in many ways that, if unnamed and unquestioned, could reduce the Nunavut M.Ed. to another exercise in disciplinary education. To decentre the *Qallunaat* perspective, at least to some extent, the program has drawn upon the expertise of two Inuit co-instructors. The first Inuk M.Ed. graduate, Jukeepa Hainnu, co-instructed in the Nunavut M.Ed. in the summers of 2007 and 2008. The second Inuk M.Ed. graduate at UPEI, Naullaq Arnaquq, joined the instructional team in the summer and fall of 2008 as well as in the winter of 2009. Students have commented that the presence of Inuit instructors opens up possibilities for deeper intellectual discussion about education in *Inuit Uqausingit*.

Despite a shortage of Inuit co-instructors, the program has compensated to a certain degree by drawing on the expertise of Inuit elders and guest speakers. Elders Mariano Aupilardjuk and Rhoda Karetak conducted sessions during the summer classes in Rankin Inlet in 2007 and Meeka Arnakaq from Pangnirtung conducted sessions in Iqaluit in 2008. Guest speakers have included Eva Aariak, now Premier of Nunavut, and John Amagoalik, known as the “father of Nunavut” for his unflagging efforts to create the new territory (Amagoalik 2007). Inuit co-instructors, workshop leaders, and guest presenters all act to counterbalance what might otherwise be the unquestioned dominance of mainstream Western perspectives in the program by stimulating and supporting rich and thoughtful discussions in *Inuit Uqausingit*.

The program also recognises that many of the older Inuit educators went through the residential school system and that their exploration of the impact of colonisation on Inuit educational leadership may reawaken traumatic memories that need to be processed. To address this eventuality, Elizabeth Fortes, a trained counsellor with expertise in cultural grief and healing, has been an important member of the instructional team.

Although the 10-course framework seems straightforward, it rests on a number of decisions intended to foster a coherent program as opposed to a sequence of stand-alone courses. The principles and instructional models outlined above give the courses in the program a uniquely Inuit focus, which the delivery modes also attempt to support. Seven of the program’s 10 courses are offered in an intensive week-long, face-to-face format because of the need to build a decolonising environment in which students and instructors can reconnect, build trust and solidarity, and reflect and dialogue freely. The face-to-face mode offers students a temporary respite from many of their personal and family responsibilities in order to consider issues in education and their roles as subjects, in the Freirean (2000[1970]) sense, in a complex, contradictory, and evolving system. Most face-to-face courses are supplemented by two- to four-week online lead-in/follow-up.

Given the immense distances, the high costs of bringing people together, and the uncertain travel conditions at various times of year, the remaining three courses are

offered during the winter terms via distance learning. The aversion to distance learning expressed by some Inuit educators (Nunavut Boards of Education 1995) and the erratic Internet connections in Nunavut that make recent advances in synchronous, multimodal technologies unreliable are offset by the potential to support community-building and deeper cognitive engagement between courses. Community-based mentors supplement the online support provided by course instructors during distance delivery.

In their interactions with students and by communicating with each other across courses to establish and maintain continuity, instructors focus on relationality and reflexivity, traits commented on in ongoing course evaluations. In addition to the formal course evaluations required by any UPEI program, students volunteer to complete surveys or to be interviewed at regular intervals to provide more refined feedback. An advisory student committee suggests changes to the evolving program and ensures that the suggestions are acted on.

### **Emerging challenges and insights**

The Nunavut M.Ed. is unique because it offers graduate education without requiring Inuit students to relocate to a southern institution. In this there have been few other models to follow. The team of instructors and their partners have been “making the road by walking” (Horton and Freire 1990: 6), or to use a metaphor coined early in the development of Nunavut, “making footprints in new snow.” Logistical challenges abound in bringing graduate students together from across the large territory of Nunavut for face-to-face courses. The unique partnership of three postsecondary institutions and a department of education challenges traditional notions of competition and territoriality that seem prevalent within some universities at this time. The constant need to work collaboratively within and across institutions, cultures, and distances also creates time demands and frustrations, thus requiring much communication and dialogue.

The greatest challenge may be to maintain commitment to a rigorous, high-quality graduate experience that is relevant to the Nunavut context and allows *Inuit Qaujimatungit* (Inuit knowledge) and *Inuit Uqausingit* to flourish. The academic value of the Nunavut M.Ed. also compounds the challenges facing *Qallunaat* instructors who are committed to integrating *Inuit Qaujimatungit* and *Inuit Uqausingit* into all courses. University colleagues remind us to maintain the rigour and high standards of the graduate program. They question the time spent contacting, supporting, and mentoring individual students. The pervasiveness of essentialist notions of rigour and the trope of a “real graduate program” can also be seen in some students’ concerns that the program must not be watered down: they ask whether its teaching strategies and counselling supports are characteristic of programs in the south. Questions about sameness and quality seem ubiquitous. Hence, a *Qallunaat* instructor, while teaching the same course she had recently offered in Nunavut, was told by one of her students that it was somehow superior when taken at the southern university.

As *Qallunaat* working in southern universities, we are susceptible to the common wisdom of what qualifies as graduate experience, whether offered in Charlottetown or Iqaluit. As Nakata argues in his introduction to McConaghy (2000: viii), “Despite commitment and the best of intentions, [we] operate well within the conventions of discourse.” Thus to identify, interrogate, and resist the expectations laid out for us, we must establish space to work with Inuit students to ensure that Inuit learning is central and that the standards are also rigorous. Some success is evident, though further research will explore how well we have met this “balance of respect and challenge” (Watt-Cloutier 2000: 115).

Making Inuit elders and their knowledge central and not marginal to a graduate experience has been an evolutionary process and one that has improved over the duration of the program. Participant feedback from the first course has provided guidance:

I think having the Elders there was very, very helpful [...] but if we are going to be inviting community resource people, it would be really helpful to have an instructor plan that portion of the program and try to integrate that into the course. And perhaps, not just one day, but spread it throughout the course [...] Or spreading it out a bit and then integrating that part of the program into the rest would be really helpful (Master’s student in Walton et al. 2007: 23).

This particular feedback pointed out the trap of “adding on” Inuit cultural content rather than fully integrating it. Instructors in subsequent courses focused more closely on how elders would be involved in classes and how their knowledge could be related to the more conventional academic content.

The part-time nature of the program could potentially have undermined its coherence since a student could experience a series of separate, stand-alone courses with little connection between them. This was especially so with Inuit women who often support large extended families in demanding, non-traditional occupations while living in small isolated communities still dominated by colonising influences. Ongoing contact with instructors between courses via telephone, email, and the shared online space enabled students whose studies had been interrupted to fulfil course requirements that might otherwise have remained incomplete.

To document effectiveness and to provide a framework for continuous improvement, program evaluation and research are integral and take the form of documents developed as part of the program, coordinators’ notes, interviews with participants, Advisory Committee minutes, mid-point survey results, annual reports, and course evaluations. This process makes it possible to adjust courses on an ongoing basis and to ensure adequate supports for the graduate students. Reports are sent to the partners of the program to present its history. In addition, a documentary video, *Lighting the Qulliq: The First Master of Education Program in Nunavut*, was produced by Mark Sandiford in the spring of 2009 and presents a vibrant record of students’ experiences.

## **Attention to the learning environment**

The very first course showed that a safe learning environment was critical to program success. Possibly the case for any graduate experience, it is more important in an environment marked by colonisation. As Elizabeth Fortes notes in the 2007 annual report:

Participants expressed their desire for a more benign paradigm for schooling in contrast to the range of traumatic associations from their early residential school experiences. This course therefore offered new opportunities for those who experienced traumatic schooling to challenge their own competencies and develop a new model of self-directed learning. Intense moments of anxiety and grief-related emotions were shared by participants who helped each other to confront and name their historical legacies (Walton et al. 2007: 12).

Because the face-to-face courses must be held in a regional centre in order to take advantage of the Nunavut Arctic College residences, the site and accommodation for the first and fifth courses were at the old Nunatta (Ukkivik) Student Residence in Iqaluit. From the 1970s to the 1990s this former US military barracks housed students from Qikiqtani communities who could not complete high school locally. Some of the graduate students had negative personal associations with Ukkivik akin to the traumatic residential school experience of Indigenous peoples elsewhere, and many of those unhappy feelings were triggered by being back in the same environment, albeit for an educational experience that was attempting to build on, rather than erase, Inuit identity. This re-traumatising effect had to be dealt with as part of the course. Program instructors are continually reminded, as classroom teachers need to be, that learning is a holistic experience involving body, mind, and spirit as well as cognition. Integral to learning and academic work, emotions need to be acknowledged and welcomed (Boler 1999). Having a counsellor on the instructional team, as well as the presence of elders during each course, reflects the commitment to promote the well-being of all participants.

As with any group of learners, issues of voice, power, safety, and privilege in the classroom had to be addressed. Protocols were developed as the courses progressed to ensure a diversity of opinion and experience and a hearing for all voices. The richness of an all-Inuit cohort brought with it a deep complexity that required very skilful facilitation to navigate respectfully. Despite extensive careers in Nunavut education, the instructors found it unexpectedly difficult to blend and respect Inuit and *Qallunaat* ways of knowing. As more Inuit co-instructors join the instructional team, their knowledge and experience will inform the negotiation of this aspect of the teaching. In addition, a document on effective M.Ed. approaches and practices is in development.

## **Writing for an academic program**

Student writing requires special attention. The instructors have found that mainstream educators entering southern graduate programs demonstrate a great deal of

anxiety about academic writing. This situation is compounded for Inuit graduate students by their second-language status. Many of them found writing in English to be a painful, assimilating activity during their schooling and others are intimidated by academic reading and writing. Early program courses drew from participants' personal lived experiences and emphasised narrative styles of writing. This approach highlighted the central place of identity in the program and a more accessible, less formal genre of writing less likely to generate anxiety than the more critical and analytic genres introduced later. A particularly helpful strategy used mid-way through the program was to review the writing process and examine some of the myths associated with it. Some of the Inuit graduate students assumed that *Qallunaat*, whose first language is English, never struggle with their writing. They believed that writing must be harder for Inuit because they have to express themselves in a second language. Knowing that they shared the same difficulties of many other graduate students alleviated fears and eased feelings of inadequacy.

As more Inuit joined the instructional team, the opportunity to write in *Inuit Uqausingit* provided a welcome venue for capturing deeper thinking about educational matters. As one student explained in a telephone interview on December 15, 2006:

[...] the master's course is in Nunavut for Nunavut students. I think that there has to be consideration for people who want to write in Inuktitut—any of the assignments, or at least a portion of the assignments, if not all of them. To be given that opportunity to write their thoughts. Because in a sense, students complete the program and they will be going back to their communities and most will go back to their teaching job or go back to their jobs and operate in Inuktitut. So, taking this course and then starting to articulate ideas and concepts and ideas from the course [in Inuktitut] and take it further. Which is in fact what an education course is supposed to do (in Walton et al. 2007: 22).

*Inuit Uqausingit* allow for different thinking from that of English (Dorais and Sammons 2002); their place in a graduate program for Inuit must be celebrated and expanded.

### **The place of identity**

Identity is central to the Nunavut M.Ed. For the opening session in the fall of 2006, each graduate student was asked to bring a personal *ulu*. The *ulu* (plural *uluit*) is the traditional woman's knife and varies in shape from community to community. Serving as a metaphor for academic and personal growth, the *ulu* symbolised the intellectual sharpening and enhancing of Inuit identity as opposed to its erosion. It reminded the students and instructors that graduate education strengthens and affirms identity and builds on the deep cultural understandings that often lie beneath the surface, waiting to be unearthed and articulated by experienced Inuit educators. As we already mentioned with respect to student writing, instructors wherever possible encouraged the graduate students to draw on their personal experiences, their narratives, and burning issues as topics of relevance to the work in the program. Transformative learning emerged from

the conscious examination, articulation, and negotiation of their identities as Inuit women. As one participant commented with surprise after the first three courses:

I did not really expect how the content of the course would be that way, but we were working with things that were meaningful and [we] have experience as teachers. We looked at things we believed in and what we saw as truths and these were our foundations throughout the course, which was very useful to us and very positive (in Walton et al. 2007: 23).

### **Decolonising cyberspace**

Running counter to the preferences of many Inuit respondents to the *Pauqatigiit* (1995) survey, the decision to integrate a distance-learning component into the Nunavut M.Ed. was more than a matter of expediency. While it did alleviate some of the logistical complexities of bringing people together for face-to-face courses, on a deeper level the distance learning design also sought to embody the decolonising focus of the program as a whole. While the program experimented with a number of synchronous, interactive, multimedia environments, its distance-learning core rested on *Knowledge Forum*, an asynchronous, online knowledge-building environment with an extensive history of use in the eastern Arctic (McAuley 2004, 2009; Tumblin 2001). Whereas many online learning environments embody to a large extent a knowledge-transmission pedagogy not that far removed from Freire's (2000[1970]) "banking" model, *Knowledge Forum* is the result of nearly two decades of online development to facilitate collaborative creation of knowledge (Scardamalia 2002). Although it supports user-submitted text, graphics, audio, and video notes, special strengths include its capacity to integrate them in both Inuktitut and English, and its flexibility in how contributions may be revisited, revised, and reused in the creation of new knowledge. From the outset, *Knowledge Forum* support was designed such that all courses would remain active throughout the entire program so that ideas and contributions from one course could act as resources for any other.

At a training session during the first face-to-face course in the program in November 2006, students were introduced both to the "Community/Agency/Ideas" theoretical framework that underpins collaborative knowledge building (McAuley 2004) and to the technical skills needed to work in *Knowledge Forum*, and used it as the basis for the first online course beginning in January 2007. The following summer, instructors began to use *Knowledge Forum* to provide introductions to concepts and topics that would come up in subsequent face-to-face courses. By its nature *Knowledge Forum* is a writing-intensive environment where participants have to build on to their peers' contributions with their own comments and critiques. Unlike most similar environments, however, it allows users to revise their original contributions based on feedback. As well as supporting course delivery, from a decolonising perspective, *Knowledge Forum* has created an online repository for much of the work completed throughout the program. The evolution of thoughts and ideas across the whole program

is available for retrieval, re-examination, and re-evaluation (Lena Metuq pers. comm. 2009). In addition,

*Knowledge Forum* allowed [students] to interact with each other and with the instructors regardless of time and space: it meant that a number of students were able to communicate to the course even while travelling on business. It allowed students to work on and submit assignments, comment on each other's work, and edit and revise according to feedback from their instructors and peers (Walton et al. 2007: 18).

Students noted: "we learned to share our views on line openly" and "we had access all the time to other classmates and our instructors by using the *Knowledge Forum*" (cited in Walton et al. 2007: 18). In post-program interviews, students referred to *Knowledge Forum* as "our life-line" and commented: "we learned as much from each other through *K[nowledge] F[orum]* as we did from our instructors."

*Knowledge Forum* has therefore become a unifying virtual space that extends across most of the program. It supports the growing sense of community and mutual help that develops during the face-to-face courses. Finally, perhaps most intriguingly and still to be explored in more depth, it demonstrates a shift from instructor-student discourse to student-student discourse. The *Knowledge Forum* database remains open to graduates at their request after graduation. Depending on how much they take up the ideas contributed there and the opportunity to maintain the collaborative relationships established over the program, it may continue to be part of the self-determination that lies at the heart of the Indigenous research agenda (Smith 1999: 117).

## **Conclusion**

On July 1, 2009, 21 Inuit educators from nine communities scattered across three regions received the first graduate degrees ever offered in Nunavut. This Master of Education in Leadership and Learning supports them as they carry the embers of learning to light the *qullit* in their own communities. They have integrated deeply held Inuit values, beliefs and knowledge, and Western education with their own research and scholarship. They are passionate about leading educational change in Nunavut. Bilingual and fluently speaking, reading and writing *Inuit Uqausingit* as well as English, they represent the promise of positive change.

In her address to the first Inuit Summit on Education held in Inuvik in 2008, Mary Simon, President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, stated, "We have our eyes firmly set on transforming our education systems. We must build on our successes" (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami 2008). With a second iteration scheduled to begin in September, 2010 the Master of Education in Leadership and Learning is poised to contribute to the transformation of Nunavut. Greater political consciousness, stronger critical writing and thinking skills in two languages, and deeper understanding of, and confidence in one's own identities, like the embers glowing in the *suppivik*, will continue to light the *qullit*, inspiring Inuit-based learning in Nunavut communities.

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