

Reflections of Alternate Education for Inuit Adult Education

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Abstract

Interest in alternative adult education among Inuit people in Canada is increasing. Adult alternative education targets those who have already dropped out of school. Adult alternative schooling for Inuit encompasses a different education system that does not follow traditional learning methods. The education system has introduced learning strategies that aim to increase the benefits while limiting the negative impacts on adults. Some of the structural modifications that take place in adult alternative learning for Inuit include individualized teaching, which is impacted by the small student-teacher ratio, positive teacher-student (adult) interactions, flexibility in scheduling, and structuring education around the Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ) principles. Such features enable adult alternative schooling to provide many benefits to this type of learning environment.

Keywords: alternate education, Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit, First Peoples Principles, Nunavut, Canada

Introduction

My career as both an administrator and classroom teacher, working primarily with Indigenous populations for over 20 years, has enabled me to utilize two lenses, the non-Native and the Indigenous lens, when it comes to the work that I do. When it comes to Holistic education involving Indigenous students, I view the term 'education' as a broad umbrella term under which each student learns not only academically, but socially, spiritually, and culturally. Indigenous students learn with and through one another and view the world as everything having a connection and purpose. Everything in the world has meaning, value, and life. What students learn must have cultural relevance and meaning. This is possible through learning outside of the classroom through experiential learning opportunities or out on the land cultural learning.

Land education has become an invaluable learning strategy for Indigenous students. As a White, non-Native teacher, I need to participate in land education courses to undergo transformational learning, where the connection to learning from the land becomes more evident and increasingly important. Land education builds on the place-based

learning that immerses students in communities, taking a firsthand approach to learning.

One important aspect of land education is that it expands the concept of the classroom to include places, peoples, environments, and communities. This requires me, as a White, non-Native teacher, to step outside my comfort zone. At my school, these cultural land trips occur twice per year, once in the fall and then again in the spring. These land trips are an important part of each student learning at my school. It is the hope that what students learn out on the land with the Elders becomes part of the regular classroom learning which then adds to the curriculum content taught throughout all grade levels and subject areas. These types of learning opportunities need to continue to happen as situating learning only within the traditional classroom reproduces the assumptions of Western thought that these students have acquired throughout their entire educational experience and does not give students an active, participative, and experiential part in their own cultural learning. These programs add to their learning and add to their understanding of who they are as Inuit peoples and how their ancestors have survived by passing down

these traditional methods or ways of survival for generations. These programs also give students the sense of who they are and keeps their identity alive and thriving. Therefore, these learning opportunities cannot remain in formal classrooms but must include “classrooms” in the broad sense, in which educators learn to use the land as a resource of lost knowledge. Land education seeks to transform the ways that I, as a White (kabloona) understand my own positionality with relationships to the lands.

Reflections of Alternate Education for Inuit Adult Education

Twenty-first-century alternative adult Inuit learning is viewed as Indigenous knowledge in response to economic, environmental, and social injustice. This has emerged from an analysis of Canadian 21st Century learning outcomes that are on par with the Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) principles. Alternative adult learning is not a recent addition to the existing public education systems in Canada. It refers to the different approaches to teaching other than the state-provided mainstream education (Bennett, 2011). It entails the other schooling programs that are not a part of the traditional school setting. This type of schooling was developed to meet the needs of adult learners. For alternative education to have positive long-term results, it should offer individualized attention and a low student-teacher ratio (Nee, 2008). The perspective of alternative schooling is highly fragmented making it challenging to effectively analyze its outcomes on the individuals.

The main philosophy of alternative education aims at helping at-risk students to attain education in a supportive, nurturing, and non-judgmental environment (Kim & Taylor, 2008). A traditional education system may work effectively with many students but there are special populations that do not function well in that setting. Alternative schooling is beneficial in that it provides a wide range of services to at-risk populations (Inuit adults) by modifying the curriculum to accommodate the needs of the affected people. An effective alternative schooling should focus on educational, social, and emotional elements for their needs to be fully met (Nee, 2008).

As reflective research, this paper offers a look at how Inuit adult students are being challenged to search for alternate education options and the policies that support alternate education in Canada. After a review of the advantages of alternate education, I conclude with a reflection of how the taxonomy from Indigenous knowledge as 21st-century education (Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017), the Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit Principles, and the First Peoples Principles of Learning are woven throughout my teaching practice as a Canadian holistic educator in the North.

Definition of Alternative Schooling

Alternative schooling refers to a non-traditional learning setting that caters to students’ needs which cannot be met in the traditional learning setting (Smith et al., 2008). Adult Education systems offer education that varies from traditional, special, or vocational schooling. Most of the alternative schooling emphasizes remedial education and serves students who have endured severe behavioral problems while in the traditional school setting. Alternative schools were established in Canada in the 1960s following the development of elementary and secondary schools under the authority of the public board of education (Smith et al., 2008). The term ‘alternative’ was adopted to differentiate those schools from independent and free learning institutions that preceded them.

The term ‘alternative’ is used to describe many educational placements since any setting outside the conventional public school is grouped under that category (Bennett, 2011). In other words, there are diverse types of alternative schools with distinctive characteristics dependent on the needs of the students. The first group of alternative schooling entails an adapted curriculum and teaching strategy (Morrissette, 2011). Such schools aim at preventing dropouts by offering extra support to the individuals who are struggling academically.

Furthermore, the second type of alternative schooling is discipline schools where the students are placed as the last chance before expulsion. This category is established for students who were expelled from regular schools. The third type of alternative school

serves persons with behavioral, social, and emotional problems which cannot be met in the typical school environment (LeGrand, 2011). Such schools can meet the needs of students in special settings with behavioral problems. While the stay in the alternative institutions is temporary for some, others stay until graduation.

At-risk Youths and the Challenges that Push Them to Alternative Schooling

At-risk youths are the people who are marginalized because of drug abuse, sexual exploitation, bullying, discrimination, and mental disorders among others (Kim & Taylor, 2008). High-risk youths have already disconnected from school, family, and the community compounding the risks of their well-being. Such aspects make it difficult for those individuals to be absorbed in the traditional school setting, increasing the probability of dropping out of school, becoming homeless, and participating in criminal offenses. Alternative educational programs are beneficial in that they help those populations to regain a better perspective of their lives. In a study conducted in 2008, the findings indicate that at-risk and high-risk youths who join alternative schooling reported elevated levels of school connectedness while improving their interrelations with teachers and peers (Smith et al., 2008). The programs are modified to provide specialist help, community connections, and additional support beyond academic assistance. The wide range of resources are helpful in that they meet the needs of the marginalized youths while giving them an opportunity to continue their education.

Based on the Canadian population, the Aboriginal populations are overrepresented in alternative schooling because they live on reserves, which hinders them from joining the traditional education system (Smith et al., 2008). Other barriers that prevent the Aboriginal youths from joining the traditional school setting entails the legacy of residential schooling and colonization (Pirbhai-Illich, 2010). The youths in alternative schooling report disengagement from schools because of behavioral issues. Nevertheless, students who join alternative schooling benefit from the opportunity by gaining a second chance to attain academic success. The negative aspects that concern

their lives drain the emotions of the individuals, a concept that is restored in the alternative schooling programs. Alternative education helps to overcome the problem of criminal involvement because they keep the individuals occupied. The teachers offer education and emotional support to the individuals thus increasing their engagement (Riley, 2004).

Canadian Policies that Support Alternative Education

Canada has adopted education policies that ensure the achievement of education for all children to promote the stability of society. The country relies on a school system that is set to enable all people to become literate and acquire knowledge, contributing to a healthy democracy (Colbert, 2009). However, that goal by the traditional education setting may be ineffective because of the eliminated population due to distinct factors like expulsion, mental health, and violence cases. The growth of alternative schooling is supported by the movement towards zero-tolerance policies from cases of violence resulting in the involuntary transfer of students for disciplinary purposes (Kim et al., 2010). That perspective is triggered by the rationale of alternative education that offers its support through specialized program delivery, individualized instruction, and increased counseling services.

Another piece of legislation that leads to the adoption of alternative schooling entails 'No child left behind' which focuses on high stakes testing and the concern for student behavior leading to their removal from the classroom (Kim et al., 2010). The policy requires continuing education for students who may be suspended or given a long-term expulsion. However, there is concern over the quick growth of alternative schooling without proven effectiveness to meet student's diverse needs. The educational goal of those schools is to help students to become independent upon returning to the traditional school setting or the community (LeGrand, 2011). That objective is attained through small enrollments and individualized instruction to focus on educational basics. The programs should be long-term with structured rules and continued monitoring of results.

Advantages of Alternative Schooling

There are numerous benefits related to adult alternative schooling. Students attend alternative schooling as a disciplinary consequence due to expulsion, suspension, or mental health needs. Although some students join alternative schooling by choice, a substantial percentage of them attend due to mandatory placement. The alternative institutions are beneficial in that they allow the teachers a flexible structure to deal with students. Morrissette (2011) proposes that the flexibility of the alternative programs permit the students to learn at their own pace and utilize their unique learning styles.

Another advantage of alternative schooling is the fact that the teacher-student ratio is small making it easy to receive one on one instruction. The small class size allows the teacher to develop healthy relationships with the students, making it possible for them to focus on corrective behaviors that may either be ignored or amplified in a traditional school program (Colbert, 2009). The learning structure in alternative education improves the social networks making the at-risk students feel safe. Alternative schooling is advantageous in that it meets the needs of at-risk students on the verge of dropping out of school including those with learning disabilities. The system serves as a way of reducing school dropouts which is a significant problem facing the education sector.

The setting has shifted from dealing with at-risk students to dealing with those with special needs that cannot be fulfilled in a traditional educational setting (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Unlike students with disabilities whose needs may not be fully met, alternative schools are beneficial to those without disabilities because they offer the support they need. There is a likelihood that students who fail in a traditional setting may do better in individualized environments within the alternative setting. Research indicates that many of the individuals who attend alternative schooling experience positive outcomes due to the individualized educational structure (Riley, 2004). This aspect is contributed by the personal relationships with the educators which may lack in the traditional school environment.

The alternative schools provide a wide range of programs that focus on responsibility, social issues, and positive peer relationships. In a different study, students in alternative schooling have reported increased rates of educational achievement, self-esteem, and self-actualization towards education (Brown, 2017). Alternative schooling programs emphasize effective learning, behavioral, and emotional well-being. Some of the institution's structure is modified to accommodate the student's special needs while providing considerable freedom to the individuals (Nee, 2008). The factor of democracy is a vital tenet in alternative schooling because they are more collaborative and less hierarchical as students take part in decision making, an aspect that helps the teachers to understand the areas to focus or the needs that need to be addressed.

Alternative education is advantageous in that these programs generate and sustain the community within them while reducing the rates of criminal offenses (LeGrand, 2011). That benefit is impacted by the idea of focusing on behavioral change. The long-term programs make the students feel affiliated within those systems hence gaining a sense of belonging and acceptance because they are not discriminated against. The attention they receive in alternative schooling is one of the factors that drive them out of the conventional schools. Bennett (2011) argues that the alternative schools have been successful in serving the individuals who are not served effectively in the traditional setting. For instance, with the founding of the SEED School in Toronto, alternative education in Canada has proven to be a considerable system in the larger cities (Portelli et al., 2011). That achievement has served to close the education gap while raising the graduation rates within Canadian schools.

My Experience as a non-Indigenous Educator in Canada's North

Indigenous education reform cannot happen without the actual knowledge, perspective, and voices of tribal peoples and communities. For this reason, I am bringing into my classroom Elders who will teach students basic math concepts in Inuktitut. This allows for instruction in both English and their native language and keeps their language and cultural identity

alive. Second, Indigenous education requires structural transformations of public schools. These structural transformations require shifts in who is present in the reform process. Therefore, it is my hope that as an educator in Canada's North (Nunavut) I now have the knowledge and understanding of the issues that need to be resolved and to hopefully be able to have many honest, open, professional conversations with all stakeholders to try and improve our current education model so that it becomes more inclusive and welcoming for Indigenous peoples throughout North America and beyond. Third, I am a White, non-Native (Kabloona) living and working in Nunavut as an educator, I need to become more deeply aware and skilled in recognizing colonialism as it is deeply rooted in our current education system and will need to become strong allies in promoting Indigenous culture. This will include developing trust and rapport with the Elders of my community so that they may feel a bit more 'comfortable' to have these sorts of conversations with me and be able to share their life experiences with regards to education and what they would like to see for the youth of today by coming into the school and talking honestly and openly with students. Fourth, all stakeholders need to develop strategies and direct funds to recruit, hire, support, and retain Indigenous peoples in their areas to become teachers, administrators, and advisors within public schools. This is essential and needs to become top-of-the-mind awareness for stakeholders. Investments in the recruitment of potential candidates to become teachers, administrators, etc. are of the utmost importance. These candidates, when hired, must feel supported to ensure that retention is not an issue like it seems to be today in many of the small northern communities in Nunavut. Honest, open dialogue about not only the benefits of working in the North must be part of the conversation, as well as the 'negative' aspects of making such a life change to pack up and move to the North. The honest, open sharing of all information needs to happen so that potential candidates can make the best-informed decision based on the information given.

21st Century Education and Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) Principles

The Government of Nunavut has created Inuit Societal Values as a way of ensuring that Inuit knowledge is included in everyday practices, including education; the Department of Culture and Heritage embeds the Inuit Societal Values into all their projects (Government of Nunavut, n.d.). From the Inuit Societal Values, These Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) principles are the "body of knowledge of the environment and the Inuit interrelationship with the elements, animals, people, and family (Government of Nunavut, n.d., para. 2).

These Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) principles include: (1) Inuuqatigiitsiarniq – respecting others, relationships, and caring for people, (2) Tunnganarniq – fostering good spirits by being open, welcoming and inclusive, (3) Pijitsirniq – serving and providing for family and/or community, (4) Aajiiqatigiinni – decision making through discussion and consensus, (5) Pilimmaksarniq/Pijariuqsarniq – development of skills through observation, mentoring, practice and effort, (6) Piliriqatigiinni/Ikajuqtigiinni – working together for a common cause, (7) Qanuqtuurniq – being innovative and resourceful, (8) Avatittinnik Kamatsiarniq – respect and care for the land, animals and the environment (Government of Nunavut, 2013).

Canadians for 21st Century Learning and Innovation (2015), outlines seven competencies for learning and leading: (1) creativity and innovation; (2) critical thinking; (3) collaboration; (4) communication; (5) character; (6) culture and ethical citizenship and (7) computer and digital technology. (Canadians for 21st Century Learning and Innovation, 2015; Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017).

The Taxonomy of 21st Century Skills and the Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit Principles

The seven competencies for learning and leading have been developed in research by the creation of a taxonomy that illustrates the connection between 21st-century skills and the Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit principles in education (Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017). This taxonomy outlines how skills are related to each of the Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) principles and how they can be utilized. In the following summary of

their taxonomy, I weave in my own ways of using the taxonomy in my own holistic education practice.

Creativity and Innovation – Qanuqtuurniq. In a 21st Century education system, creativity, and Innovation in the form of Qanuqtuurniq, being innovative and resourceful, are essential to life in the north and for Indigenous people where it is necessary for collaboration, flexibility, and perseverance (Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017). Gaps in students' education from K-12, due to being out on the land with family, learning the traditional ways of knowing, and being with nature, poses a conflict with the Western education offered in the current school setting. In education, it is often necessary for students to miss school for harvest and hunting-type cultural events on the land (Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017). This is one of the issues that exist in Canada's North. What needs to happen instead, is a balance between traditional education and the current education system. If this balance could be achieved, Inuit adults could not only keep their cultural values and traditions alive and could also incorporate these ways of knowing into the western education system. This I believe would assist students in making it possible for them to see the benefits of "western" education, while at the same time blending their cultural ways of knowing to make them feel comfortable enough to go back to school as adult learners to finish their education.

Critical Thinking – Qanuqtuurniq. Critical thinking involves "the ability to design and manage projects, solve problems, and make effective decisions using a variety of tools and resources" (Fullan, 2013, p. 9, as cited in Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017, p. 9). An example identified of Qanuqtuurniq in action is the ability to problem-solve (Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017). In Nunavut, I teach critical thinking skills both in mathematics and health courses. These skills are then incorporated into all grade levels and all subject areas in Nunavut schools, K-12. Many students realize the importance of these skills once they are on their own as adults.

Collaboration – Piliriqatigiinniq/Ikajuqtigiinniq and Aajiiqatigiinniq. The key to collaboration is "the ability to interact positively and respectfully with others in

creating innovative ideas and developing products" (Government of Ontario, 2016, as cited in Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017, p. 9). Talking circles are one way to allow people to collaborate to work towards a goal and problem-solve so that everyone can take part and express themselves in an honest, open way (Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017). I have participated in many talking circles with the Inuit. I have used them in my classes, especially during a crisis in the community or with an individual student. Students are willing to help each other when these situations arise. It has been my experience that many of the adult learners I have had conversations with, find this skill useful once they have completed their education and are out in the workplace as they can use these skills to help them solve "real-world" everyday problems.

Communication – Tunnganarniq. In my school trust, honesty, open communication, and respect are taught even before they enter the school system. These values are also part of the way the school operates every day, and these skills are ingrained in students at differing levels from K-12.

An example of how Tunnganarniq is used for effective communication is through developing relationships through team-building activities. Creating safe and caring schools that accept new people and respect differences is an act of fostering good spirits, being open and welcoming. (Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017, p. 11)

For adult learners who come back into the system to finish their education, respecting differences is an act of being open and welcoming. Returning adult learners understand the value of learning these skills as they are used in their everyday lives, both within the education setting and in the real world.

Character – Inuuqatigiitsiarniq and Pijitsirniq. The competency of 21st-century character, "qualities of the individual essential for being personally effective in a complex world include grit, tenacity, perseverance, resilience, reliability, and honesty" (Fullan & Scott, 2014, p. 6, as cited in Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017, p. 11). In Nunavut schools, the taxonomy describes the following:

Character skills are taught through health education programs. In Inuuqatigiitsiarniq and Pijitsirniq, the focus is caring for people, along with serving and providing for family and community. An example of this is the breakfast program at the school where I am a teacher. This program is established to ensure that hunger does not impact learning. (Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017, p. 11)

In my own school, the breakfast program provides a nutritious breakfast to approximately three hundred students daily. From Monday through Thursday, southern food is served, that is, food that is from lower Canada and not the traditional food of Nunavut. On Fridays, the Elders cook up a traditional stew, often of caribou. From my experience, students have praised this program and have stated that many would not have been able to make it through each day at school without this program offered as for some, it is their only balanced, nutritional meal of the day.

Cultural and Ethical Citizenship – Avatittinnik Kamatsiarniq and Pijitsirniq. Careful consideration for environmental issues is an important part of Avatittinnik Kamatsiarniq and Pijitsirniq (Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017). “An example demonstrating respect and care for the land, animals, environment, and caring for others as cultural and ethical citizenship, includes cultural awareness activities, bringing Elders into the school for traditional knowledge activities and planning community environmental initiatives” (Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017, p. 11). Included with Elders, often adults who come back to school to finish their education (up to age 21), are considered as role models for the regular student body and as such share their learnings and experiences and why it is important to finish school and graduate.

Computer and Digital Technology – Pilimmaksarniq/Pijariuqsarniq. “An example of how to support digital learning through Pilimmaksarniq and Pijariuqsarniq, is the development of skills through gathering, understanding, and using information” (Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017, p. 11).

“Inuit leaders and educators have guided the development of locally owned and operated

broadband networks, equipment, and the associated education applications in their respected communities. With these developments, people living in remote areas are innovating and creating choices in the delivery of new training programs and services. With digital tools and networks, parents and children are now able to remain in their communities to complete their education in familiar and safe spaces” (Beaton & Carpenter, 2016, as cited in Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017, p. 11).

This sense of security allows learners to either finish their education and graduate or go back to school and complete their studies as adults, depending on the individual’s circumstances.

The First Peoples Principles of Learning

For people of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit ancestry, Indigenous knowledge is understood as the knowledge that has always been true. This is known as the First Peoples Principles of Learning (First Nations Education Steering Committee, n.d.) and includes (1) learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors; (2) learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place); (3) learning involves recognizing the consequences of one’s actions; (4) learning involves generational roles and responsibilities; (5) learning recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge; (6) learning is embedded in memory, history, and story; (7) learning involves patience and time, (8) learning requires exploration of one’s identity, and (9) learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and only shared with permission and/or in certain situations.

The First Peoples Principles of Learning (n.d.) is the “dynamic way in which the residents of an area have come to understand themselves in relation to their natural environment and how they recognize that folk knowledge of flora and fauna, cultural beliefs, and history to enhance their lives” (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p. 3). The First Peoples Principles of Learning (n.d.), a classroom resource used in Nunavut schools and many areas of Canada, has become fundamental in understanding the learning needs of Indigenous

learners. Thus, it is not only important to reflect on the principles but to connect them to Indigenous Knowledge in creating the vision that reconciles the past and validates the experiences of First Peoples throughout.

Traditional Indigenous education is based upon these worldviews, "it is a holistic process where learning takes place across different spheres of human experience including spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental dimensions... Spirituality, relationships and the expression of traditional values are the heart" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 13). The taxonomy of skills and Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ) principles "[illustrate] a strategy for education learning across ability, age, and culture" Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017, p. 13).

Alternative schooling is designed to serve at-risk youths who face various challenges in attaining successful outcomes in the traditional education system. For Inuit, at-risk youths are forced out of school due to behavioral problems, substance abuse, and conditions like mental illnesses which make them feel marginalized in the traditional school setting. Alternative methods of schooling are beneficial in that they use individualized teaching methods that incorporate the individual's strengths and life experiences to build healthy relationships. Moreover, alternative education is beneficial in that it offers the at-risk population an opportunity to complete their education or a chance to go back into the school system.

Despite having its advantages, however, alternative education is associated with disadvantages, including failure to attain long-term outcomes like a behavioral change of the individuals. It is imperative that alternative schooling needs more development before they are recognized as legitimate places within education. Additionally, more research is necessary to evaluate the value of alternative schools and the overall impact it has on those individuals that attend. The wide goals associated with alternative education make it challenging to analyze its goals and outcomes on the individuals.

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