

## **Key Informants Perspectives on Education Success, Supports, and Barriers in Nunavut Education**

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Article abstract

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# Key Informants Perspectives on Education Success, Supports, and Barriers in Nunavut Education

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## Abstract

In Nunavut, data for 2012–2014 shows a high school graduation rate of 34%. Little has been published about the causes of secondary students' absenteeism and the methods for attracting students back to school. This study explored the barriers and supports to education success from the perspectives of school staff, students, and parents. Interviews and sharing circles were conducted with 141 participants in six communities. The results revealed barriers and supports in relation to the learning environment, staffing issues, and overarching system. Participants identified specific recommendations that can inform future policy and programming to improve attendance and graduation rates in Nunavut schools.

*Keywords:* Inuit education, Nunavut education, Indigenous post-secondary students

## Résumé

Au Nunavut, les données pour 2012–2014 indiquent un taux d'obtention du diplôme d'études secondaires de 34 %. On en sait peu sur les causes de l'absentéisme des élèves du secondaire et sur les méthodes pour les inciter à retourner à l'école. Cette étude a exploré les obstacles et les mesures de soutien à la réussite scolaire du point de vue du personnel scolaire, des élèves et des parents. Des entrevues et des cercles de partage ont été menés auprès de 141 participants dans 6 communautés. Les résultats ont révélé des mesures de soutien et des obstacles relatifs au milieu d'apprentissage, aux problèmes de recrutement du personnel et au système global. Les participants ont formulé des recommandations précises qui pourraient guider les politiques et les programmes futurs visant à améliorer les taux de fréquentation scolaire et d'obtention de diplôme dans les écoles du Nunavut.

*Mots-clés :* éducation chez les Inuit, éducation au Nunavut, étudiants autochtones postsecondaires

## **Introduction**

Since the creation of schools in the North by the federal government after World War II, responsibility for the education of Inuit in the Eastern Arctic has been managed by the Northwest Territories, local communities, and then the creation of the territory of Nunavut in 1999 coincided with the creation of the Department of Education (McGregor, 2010). Despite this relative autonomy in school administration, notably with Districts of Education Authorities (DEAs) at local levels, the development of a culturally relevant curriculum for Nunavummiut remains a critical issue (Berger, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2019). An annual mean of 34% of the 17- to 18-year-old population in Nunavut received a high school diploma during these years (Nunavut Bureau of Statistics, 2015). School enrolment data demonstrated that, historically, Grade 11 was a year that students were either leaving high school or being held back a grade (Nunavut Bureau of Statistics, 2018). A three-year average of data from 2003 to 2005 showed a 53% drop in enrolment between Grade 10 and Grade 11 in Nunavut schools (Nunavut Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

Little research has explored secondary schooling in Nunavut or causes of student absenteeism, methods for attracting students back to school after a prolonged absence, and impacts of social factors on school completion (Mike, 2009; O’Gorman & Pandey, 2015; Walton et al., 2014). In the research that we reviewed, there were no studies that included comprehensive perspectives on education success from all three regions of Nunavut: Qikiqtaaluk, Kitikmeot, and Kivalliq, as well as all key stakeholders in a school system: school staff, high school students, youth who have left school without graduating, and parents. Our objective in the present study was to explore the barriers and supports to education success for Nunavut youth and high school graduates from all perspectives and present this feedback in a practical format to inform decision-making processes.

## **Nunavut Education Context**

The education system in what is now Nunavut emerged in the 1950s and is intricately linked to a history of assimilation and imperialism (Aylward, 2007). Before 1955, when the federal government announced a policy to educate Inuit children, there were only a handful of missionary-run seasonal schools in the Eastern Arctic. According to McGregor (2015), Inuit interactions with the school system were established out of the federal

government's concern for sovereignty and resource development. A secondary concern for welfare led to the provision of education (Milloy, 1999, as cited in McGregor, 2015).

Federal schools were not intended to replicate residential schools in southern Canada, but in practice they were similar (McGregor, 2015). It was common for the earlier years of education to be available in most communities, with older students being sent to regional centres (e.g., Yellowknife, Churchill, or Iqaluit) to finish their final years of school, living with family, host families, or in communal dorms/hostels. It was not until 1995 that the government mandated that all communities should have high school programs, and it was not until 2005 that all Nunavut communities had Grades 10 to 12 available to all students (McGregor, 2015).

## Literature Review

### Successes and What Works

There is an emerging field of literature on curricula, pedagogy, and learning outcomes in Nunavut. Key determinants of education success in Nunavut identified in previous studies include socio-economic conditions, culturally relevant instruction, teacher retention, Inuit school staff, high levels of literacy, and family support (Lewthwaite & McMillan, 2010; McGregor, 2013; McMillan, 2015; Mike, 2009). For example, research by Anoe et al. (2017) found that family and community leadership is key to Inuit bilingual education success in the context of residential schools, which disrupted these relationships by removing children from their families and often their language and culture.

In Nunavut there has been a long-term commitment to improving curriculum and pedagogy to ensure it is in line with *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (Government of Nunavut, 2008; McGregor, 2012) (sometimes translated into Inuit Societal Values). While there is recognized room for improvement in Nunavut education, such as improving Inuit language education (Aylward, 2010), one recognized pathway toward school success has been the positive impact of Inuit culture and language on educational outcomes. This is highlighted in most literature on education in Nunavut, including for studies investigating the needs of both students and teachers (Anoe et al., 2017; Aylward, 2010; Berger, 2007;

Berger & Epp, 2007; Rodon et al., 2014). This is because Inuit ways of knowing and being are relational and holistic (Healey & Tagak, 2014). As Aylward (2004) highlights,

The person, language, culture, and environment cannot be separated and academically addressed as individual pieces. Having Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit be the lens through which we view all educational efforts necessitates a realization that the learning process is sustained through connections to community values, beliefs and practices. (p. 2)

A study on Inuit post-secondary students' perspectives on their educational experiences and successes found that key factors for success included having support, a strong high school background, and previous life and work experience (Rodon et al., 2015). In addition to the benefits of community and culture, individual motivations played a strong role in post-secondary educational success. The desire to achieve personal goals was a key part of facilitating post-secondary engagement for Nunavut students. Students involved in that research reported valuing instructors with knowledge of the North, a cohort environment, and academic, family, and employer support.

## Barriers

Within the literature, a recognized barrier to educational success is the colonial history of education and an ongoing lack of Inuit control over education. Berger (2007, 2009) contends that individual, systemic, and pan-Canadian Eurocentrism has hindered change in Inuit education, and that non-Inuit teachers have a role to play in caring and facilitating change. A report by Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, the organization representing Nunavut Inuit, and researchers (Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2019) highlighted the systemic discrimination against Inuktitut speakers and the failure of the education system in Nunavut to build on Inuit cultural learning pathways but also stated, "education in Nunavut has a history of *cultural genocide, linguicide, econocide and historicide, and this continues* [emphasis in original]. Education does not prepare Nunavut youth for fighting the very serious ecocide in the Arctic" (p. 68).

Research on the perspective of Nunavut educators shows that they face barriers to supporting student success effectively, as there is little support for them in orientation or retention (Berger & Epp, 2007). Inuit curriculum authors experienced challenges from

non-Inuit when resisting the status quo and dealt with personal and community legacies of colonialism, such as having attended residential schools themselves and confronting the ways missionaries have shaped education for Inuit (Aylward, 2009b). A survey with non-Inuit secondary school educators in Nunavut found that they believed there is a significant role for Inuit language and culture; specifically a need for increasing the role of family and community, and concerns about student engagement (Aylward, 2009a).

Little research has explored the perspectives of secondary school students themselves, but there is more research on the views of post-secondary students. In a 2015 study by Rodon et al., Inuit post-secondary students identified barriers to Northern-based post-secondary education as limited program options, lack of academic challenges and facilities, a lack of housing, and high cost of living. Barriers for southern-based post-secondary education identified by Rodon et al. (2015) included: adjusting to a new environment without support, lack of access to Inuit language speakers/cultural practices/traditional foods, different higher education standards, institutional racism, and irrelevant curricula. Other concerns identified centred on the challenges of studying with young children and a lack of sufficient funding. While this study focused on secondary education experiences, the perspectives of students at a post-secondary level can provide a fuller picture of educational experiences. They can also shed light on issues faced after high school, and how these challenges might be alleviated at the secondary level.

Generally, existing literature from the perspectives of students, education staff, and the wider community asserts that success for Nunavut students at the secondary and post-secondary levels is a balancing act. It requires matching student motivations with community-based resources and ensuring both Inuit and non-Inuit educators are supported in teaching culturally relevant curricula.

## **Research Gaps**

While there is an abundance of literature on Nunavut secondary and post-secondary education experiences, much of it is fragmented and includes participation from limited groups of stakeholders (primarily educators or post-secondary students). Knowledge gaps also exist around causes of student absenteeism, methods for attracting students back to school after a prolonged absence, and the impacts of social factors on school completion. Within an Inuit research epistemology, a holistic approach is needed (Healey & Tagak,

2014). The current research study builds on previous studies by including students, school staff, parents, youth who have left school without graduating, and a wide array of interested community members based in Nunavut (Cherba & Healey Akearok, 2019; Healey Akearok, 2017a, 2017b; Ratel et al., 2019; Rodon & Lévesque, 2014).

## Methods

### Positionality Statement

This research was undertaken by the Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre. Qaujigiartiit is an independent, non-profit community research institute founded by Nunavummiut (people from Nunavut). The research centre receives mandates for study from Nunavut communities, including for this research project on education determinants. As education is a social determinant of health, it is an important area of study for a community health research centre. Qaujigiartiit uses the Piliriqatigiinniq Partnership Model for Community Health Research (Healey-Akearok & Tagak, 2014). *Piliriqatigiinniq* is the concept of working collaboratively for the common good. Qaujigiartiit developed this model so that research could be conducted to reflect the beliefs and approaches of communities in Nunavut. The project leader for this study is Inuk, and the team working on this project included a mix of Inuit and non-Inuit researchers. All team members have experience working and living in Nunavut. Three of the authors of this manuscript were on the research team for this project and two authors helped create reports from the data.

### Research Questions

Based on the literature review, the following research questions were established:

- What are the barriers to education success for Nunavut youth and high school graduates?
- What are the supports to education success for Nunavut youth and high school graduates?
- What are the pathways to post-secondary school for young Nunavummiut?



This study was conducted as part of a larger multi-year mixed methods research project to explore the determinants of secondary school completion and pathways to post-secondary education in Nunavut. This article reports on the results of the narrative interviews and sharing circles in six communities in the three Nunavut regions that participated in the project. The study was funded by the Nunavut General Monitoring Program and involved a partnership of institutions including Aqqiumavvik Society, Coalition of Nunavut DEAs and Laval University. Qaujigiartiit sent letters to every local community's DEA sharing information about the research project. The first six of the community DEAs to reply with an invitation to work in their respective high schools were chosen for participation in the study.

School staff was introduced to Qaujigiartiit staff and the study goals at staff meetings near the beginning of the school week when Qaujigiartiit staff was in each respective school collecting data. Staff were informed about the project and invited to volunteer to take part in interviews. Qaujigiartiit research staff were available in the schools for four to five days during normal working hours. Grade 12 students were introduced to the project by the school principal, a teacher, or guidance counsellor, and invited to volunteer to take part in sharing circles. Interviews with other key informants were advertised through the community radio station, fliers in public spaces, and on Facebook community advertising pages. Not all staff in every school chose to participate in the interviews; staff participation varied from community to community. Community members participated voluntarily after hearing about the project through local advertisements and word of mouth.

The research project was evaluated by Qaujigiartiit's research Ethics *Katimajit*, a community-based ethics committee. Furthermore, the project was respectful of each of the ethical guidelines set forth by the organizations that represent Inuit, guidelines governing research in Nunavut, the guidelines of Laval University, and guidelines for Canadian research with Indigenous peoples (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2018; Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2006).

Narratives were collected through semi-structured interviews (Kovach, 2009). Interview guides were developed in collaboration with our partner at the Coalition of Nunavut DEAs. Interviews were conducted in English and took anywhere from 10 to 60 minutes, depending on how much each participant had to share. The interview guides included questions about student interest in and access to post-secondary schooling, school systems in

Nunavut, and cultural influences on student pathways. Participants signed consent forms, all interviews were audio-recorded, and every interview was confidential. Food and tea were shared to show participants that we respected them and wanted to ensure their comfort.

Sharing circles were conducted with Grade 12 students during school hours, based on the drawing-voice method (Lavoie & Benson, 2011). These perspectives were included and reflected in the overall recommendations that resulted from the study. After asking students to draw their own representations about post-secondary education, discussions focused on students' experiences and representations concerning school, post-secondary education, Inuit culture, and future projects. The researchers asked questions to start the discussion and gave each student the opportunity to answer it and continue with their own interventions in group discussions. The number of participants in each sharing circle depended on the size of each school, varying from two to 12. Each sharing circle lasted between 30 to 90 minutes and was conducted in English.

The Piliriqatigiinniq Model method of data analysis was used (Healey & Tagak, 2014). Through this model, the understanding of the concept of *Iqqaumaqatigiinniq* ("all things coming into one") is that when something is thought about deeply enough, ideas, meanings, solutions, or patterns will crystallize. Immersed in the narratives, reading and rereading transcripts and thinking deeply about concepts led to the identification of recurring themes over several months. NVivo software was used to help organize the themes. Themes were related to school systems in Nunavut, school success for high school graduates and youth in Nunavut, and interest in and pathways to post-secondary schooling for young Nunavummiut.

## Results

Interviews involved 55 school staff (including administrators, teachers, guidance and school community counsellors, student support assistants, and administrative assistants), 10 youth who left school without graduating, 21 parents of youth in school and out of school, and 15 interested community members. In addition, we conducted a sharing circle in each of the six schools with Grade 12 (final year) students, totalling 40 students.

The following results discuss the main findings, starting with the importance of the pedagogical model and culturally relevant curriculum in Nunavut. Then, we highlight

the need for strengthening supports and resources for teaching excellence. The final section describes the supports necessary for student success.

## The Importance of Pedagogical Model and Culturally Relevant Curriculum

**Continuous progress model.** Nunavut education currently works within a *Pivallianginnarniq* (continuous progress) model of student progression, which focuses on individual competency by having educators work with students according to their academic performance, rather than strictly according to their age or grade level (Nunavut Department of Education, 2008). Participants in this study discussed how continuous progress functions as a form of social promotion, with many teachers referring to it as social promotion or social passing. Social promotion is a model historically used in Nunavut that has been criticized by educators and Elders for diminishing high expectations and standards of excellence for students (Nunavut Department of Education, 2008). Students were seen to arrive in high school lacking the skills needed to be academically challenged and unable to access or succeed in higher academic courses. One staff member shared the practical impact on students

Another thing I would like to see ended is social promotion. Because this is part of the reason why students are not performing as well or they're not coming to school because...if you didn't come to school for six years and all of a sudden you walk into school and you're in Grade 9 but it's all in English but you don't know how to read or write English...you're not going to come back to school... and that is the reality of the situation. (School Staff Member)

Another school staff member gave an example of the detriments to student learning they observed with the continuous progress model as it currently functions.

And by the time they hit Grade 10, now they're 14–15 years old and they've been socialized and normalized to believe a certain set of actions bring success. And now we need to turn that on top of them and say, "No, those aren't, you know, good anymore"...and that's unfair to the student. We need...to have very clear standards for students in all levels. (School Staff Member)

Grade 10 is a milestone in the Nunavut education system, as students begin taking credited courses (many from the Alberta curriculum) that they are required to pass before moving on. They must also then take standardized departmental exams to graduate. The implementation of this model was seen to be unfair to student learning, teacher workloads, and parents who were previously unaware of the challenges their children may be facing.

Participants discussed how they believed the current model of continuous progress contributed to a climate of student failure, impacted learning success, and contributed to students leaving without graduating. Several reasons were articulated as to why continuous progress does not function as intended: high teacher turnover rates; unrealistic expectations for educators implementing differentiated instruction without adequate student support; ineffective administrators and regional school operations staff; and poor record-keeping, leading to student progression functioning like social promotion. Poor attendance was also highlighted as a reality that impacts progress.

***Nunavut-specific and culturally relevant curriculum.*** Nunavut currently operates with a blended curriculum, including some courses and exams from other regions, and some made-in-Nunavut programming. Participants questioned the relevance of the Alberta curriculum and departmental exams in the Nunavut context. It was expressed that Nunavut should have a culturally relevant curriculum that considers Inuit ways of knowing and being, as is already supposed to be the case according to existing government education policies. One participant stated “I feel like right now, we are still going to school to learn to behave like, I guess, Qallunaaq [non-Inuit] and how to integrate into Canada’s society as ‘civil’” (Community Member). From this perspective, the southern-based aspects of the curriculum are seen to function as a tool of assimilation that does not respond to the culture and lifestyle of Nunavut residents. As one participant stated,

I think one of the things...that puts these students at a disadvantage is, from K–9 they’re using the NWT curriculum and then immediately from 10–12 they jump into the Alberta curriculum, and English is not the predominant language...and so you have situations where all of a sudden you’re asking students to complete the same courses that students in Calgary and Edmonton and Grand Prairie are doing, and they have to do it in a second language and the courses aren’t modified...I see that as a very big barrier for a lot of these students. (School Staff)

Other participants identified that there would be advantages to having a Nunavut-specific curriculum that would ultimately have a positive effect on student success. One school staff member outlined possibilities for this type of programming.

For a cultural base, the program should go back to what we had around 2008 or so. We had a stream of Nunavut-developed courses, which integrated varieties of traditional knowledge with a variety of worldwide knowledge and put the two together.... We've drifted away from that. I think bringing that back would help the students. It would increase our graduation rates and I think it would provide a valuable, relevant education to our students. (School Staff Member)

This participant's statement refers to a time from 2000 to 2013, during which the Government of Nunavut undertook a unique, made-in-Nunavut approach to curriculum development that aimed to replace resources from other provinces and territories (McGregor & McGregor, 2016). This approach intended to integrate Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit into the curriculum through a structure that reflects the holistic nature of Inuit knowledge. However, McGregor and McGregor (2016) highlight how human resources issues prevented the Department of Education from developing and implementing more resources. Despite these issues and other challenges, the work of Inuit curriculum developers during this period was transformative in its efforts to integrate Inuit knowledge into the education system; however, developers were burdened by unrealistic timelines and capacity issues. In this study, school staff member comments highlighted the importance of these initiatives.

***Distance learning options and more challenging courses as a step forward.*** In some Nunavut communities, certain courses were not available due to staffing issues and low demand. Participants indicated a need for more distance-learning options which could address the need for more challenging courses and diversity of programs. One school staff member discussed how a lack of distance education inhibits student opportunities to attend post-secondary education.

It's a graduation, but it's not a legitimate graduation. None of them have the ability to go to university.... If these kids were streamed, the class size was a little bit smaller and they were given the teachers that would be able to deliver programs for them, then I think they'd be able to do it. But the other thing is that there's no

distance education here. And there should be some distance form of education, so if there's not a teacher for chemistry here, students that want to, can do it online.  
(School Staff Member)

Online distance education was seen as a way for students to meet higher education goals and potentially attend post-secondary education.

Alongside distance learning, participants indicated a need for more challenging courses in schools. Reasons for this included not feeling stimulated, feeling bored, and wanting to be better prepared for post-secondary school. This was clearly conveyed by youth.

Interviewer: If you could change anything in the school system what would you change?

Participant: More advanced courses. We don't get [as] much work as people from down south and that would be one of the biggest challenges that we face or whatever. It's hard to get into college with the courses we take in high school. (Youth)

Participants shared that they believe that some students are not challenged by teachers and administrators because they have lowered their expectations of students to enable them to pass courses to increase graduation rates. It was also offered that some youth are leaving school without graduating because they are not being academically challenged at the high school level, which leads to boredom and withdrawal from the school setting. Challenging courses can be difficult to offer in schools with limited teacher capacity, but school staff reiterated that distance-learning options could be beneficial in such cases. We have not found any existing literature on distance education in Nunavut at the secondary level, but some research touches on it at the post-secondary level. Some students have said they would prefer on-site instruction in the south vs. online instruction in the North (Rodon et al., 2015). In a study of the online portion of the Nunavut Master of Education program (which was a blended face-to-face and distance-learning program), McAuley and Walton (2011) found that an online environment was considered essential for distance learning and created positive space for students to learn from one another.

## **Strengthening Supports and Resources for Teaching Excellence**

*The importance of local community and Inuit teaching staff.* A second key finding in this study was that staff require additional support and resources to be most

effective in their teaching. Participants discussed a need to retain school staff, indicating that it impacts institutional knowledge retention, consistency of program and curriculum delivery, teaching and learning success, graduation rates, and staff, student, and community relationships. This was articulated by one school staff member.

Our students have a very hard time trusting, especially outsiders. So, if you come from the south to teach, you are an outsider. If you don't take the time to get to know the students, their families, their backgrounds, then there's that lack of respect. There's that lack of trust. And you're really not going to have a successful teaching year. (School Staff Member)

Teachers and administrators who were in a school over a long period of time were seen to have built up trust and relationships that supported student success.

Similarly, participants indicated a need for more Inuit and local teachers to help address teacher retention, improve delivery of Inuktitut and Inuit cultural programming, improve learning success for students, and improve staff, student, and community relationships. One school staff member felt this would help with empowering students to become teachers.

High schools are definitely not strong with Inuit staff. We've got two, three teaching staff, that are in the classroom. And it's not inviting. Like kids don't go and say, "Oh I'm going to be a teacher; I'm going to be part of this." They don't envision it because it's a bunch of white teachers teaching them. (School Staff Member)

Some participants stated that Inuit teaching staff can better relate to their students and understand the community context. The Nunavut Teacher Education Program (NTEP) (Nunavut Arctic College, n.d.) was seen as having the potential to impact teacher retention positively and support local community and Inuit teaching staff. Suggestions for NTEP were provided, including offering it in every community and creating programs for students to teach at the secondary level.

While NTEP was recognized as an important way to strengthen student outcomes by training more Inuit teaching staff, the program has faced issues with recruitment. A study by Berger and colleagues (2016) found that many students were interested in becoming teachers; however, significant barriers included language barriers (as instruction is in English), worries about academic preparedness, financial concerns, housing issues,

and a lack of awareness of NTEP. Almost half of participants said, if they were to become a teacher, they would want to teach Grade 7 and higher, but NTEP does not train teachers to teach at this level.

***Teacher retention, orientation and mentorship.*** Teacher retention was also discussed by participants in the context of teachers who are not from Nunavut returning to their home provinces eventually, and also in the content of teachers feeling unsupported and becoming burnt out. One school staff member provided a personal example.

I've really enjoyed my time in Nunavut...you know, I've been here for six years. I'd love to stay longer, but my time is coming to an end because I feel as though not only is there a lack of support for ourselves in government, but there's also a housing crisis and also a lack of support when it comes to health issues, especially mental health, and it can take a toll on a person, especially when you're coming up with the best intentions and you know, not trying to make all these changes.  
(School Staff Member)

Participants felt that a lack of institutional support for teachers, as well as an expectation that they fill roles outside of their teaching duties, contributed to high turnover.

Participants described several ways that teachers could be retained or supported, including through mentorship. School staff indicated that they would have benefitted from being paired with more experienced school staff at the beginning of each school year. One school staff member felt that teachers were “thrown to the wolves” in an unfamiliar environment and system. This reflects existing literature on the experiences of non-Inuit teachers in Nunavut (Aylward, 2009a; Berger & Epp, 2007).

***Student educator ratio and one-on-one learning.*** A further challenge facing teaching staff was the student educator ratio (SER) and lack of opportunities for one-on-one learning. Participants indicated a need to decrease the ratio by addressing the method for calculating the SER. Participants shared that learning success was impacted by large classes with students at diverse levels of learning and that students on individual education plans needed more support within the classroom environment.

Some participants discussed the need for the SER to include “non-attenders” (students who attend less than 40% of the time) in its calculation, as they need the most



attention and should be accounted for when hiring staff. Currently, non-attenders are not included in the staffing calculations. A school staff member described their issue with this:

A 90% attender, they know what they're doing...they have success, but the kids we don't get staffed for, they are the kids who are the hardest to teach, the most challenging, because they have the highest needs to address and we don't have funding for them. (School Staff Member)

In this participant's perspective, non-attenders could not receive the support they needed to get back on track. In addition to this, participants indicated a need for more opportunities for one-on-one learning for students with learning disabilities, particularly those with low confidence and self-esteem.

## Strengthening Supports for Student Success

**Early childhood education.** Another key finding was suggestions for supports that may strengthen student success. Participants indicated that early childhood education (ECE) was key to giving students a good start in their educational journey. This was considered essential to preparing children for kindergarten by providing structure and routine. One parent described this issue.

If we won't be putting our money into preschools, into improving childcare, and improving that entry into the school system, then in 10 years we're not going to be successful. That first step is key. If we don't care there, then we won't care about graduates. (Parent)

ECE was perceived as essential to ensuring future success by preparing children for progression into the school system.

**Trauma-informed staff and access to guidance and school counsellors.** Participants indicated that schools needed to be safer spaces for physical, mental, and emotional well-being by having more counsellors, and the school culture and staff needed to include trauma-informed approaches. School staff discussed the need for social and mental health supports in schools for students who have been impacted by trauma. One shared how trauma had affected their class environment: "So, if we can get the SCCs [School

Community Counsellors] trained [to make referrals to mental health services] I think that would benefit the school more.... It just becomes so overwhelming sometimes being a teacher” (School Staff Member). Connecting SCCs with resources outside of the school was viewed as a solution to helping students who needed specialized support.

In addition, participants recommended that schools have more guidance and school counsellors to address the needs of students who have been impacted by trauma. School staff identified how getting a guidance counsellor in their school was a longstanding issue, and that students in Nunavut were not experiencing the same level of support as students in other parts of the country.

Youth also shared how they felt school staff were not equipped to deal with their mental health issues. One shared:

[And] more teachers understanding that students go...out of class because they’re not feeling comfortable around people, like having the anxiety attack, they just want to walk away maybe, go take a breath or something—go and drink water. Still, they get mad at us for leaving class even though we have anxiety attacks. (Youth)

This participant felt that a smaller class size would make them feel more comfortable.

***Alternative educational options and older high school age students.*** Participants provided feedback on the various pathways to graduation and post-secondary school and indicated a need for more creative and innovative paths to receiving diplomas outside of the two current main pathways of academic and individual education plans. These paths could be made to reflect the wants and needs of Nunavut residents: “This is not the south. It’s completely different from the south and we should recognize that and treat it as such and come up with innovative new ideas to address that reality” (School Staff Member). Another school staff member articulated that they felt that the inability to access alternative educational options lowered the graduation rate and ultimately negatively affected Nunavut’s workforce and social assistance programming.

In addition, participants discussed the need for flexibility to accommodate the unique needs of Nunavut students, particularly those of high school age and those who are “aging out” of the education system but are actively working toward graduation. One participant outlined how this lack of flexibility and support affects vulnerable students.

I have a young relative who had a dysfunctional, emotionally and financially abusive family [that] forced her to move out on her own in Grade 11. She was working to support herself but the costs of living exceeded her earnings as a part-time employee at North Mart and she kept having to pick up shifts that interfered with school hours or her ability to do assignments. She attempted to speak to one of her teachers about accommodations that could be made so she could keep up and the teacher rebuffed her so callously [that] she never went back to the school. (Community Member)

Issues outside of school can have a significant impact on attendance and school success. These require additional consideration and compassion.

## Summary

This section has outlined the main results for this study, with a focus on pedagogy and curriculum, strengthening supports and resources for teachers, and supports for student success. In general, participants advocated for a school system that considered the Nunavut context by including Inuit culture and language, implementing mentorship supports for teachers, and creating a safe and supportive learning environment. The next section of this article will discuss contributions of this study to the literature and policy and practice.

## Discussion: Recommendations for Strengthening Supports for Nunavut Education

### Contributions to Literature and Practice

**Methodological contributions.** This study is distinctive in its effort to bring together various community members' perspectives. Often, Nunavut education research focuses on a single group, such as teachers or post-secondary students (Aylward, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Berger & Epp, 2007; Rodon et al., 2015). Instead, this study included current secondary school students, former students, school staff, parents and interested

community members. This contributes to a nuanced discussion of how the same topic can be explored from a variety of perspectives.

**Practical contributions.** This research contributes concrete recommendations provided by participants in relation to the learning environment, staffing issues, and overarching system that can inform practical considerations in future policy and programming (see Table 1). A significant number of these relate to systemic challenges around the representation and implementation of Inuit culture and language in Nunavut's school system. This has been an ongoing conversation for years, with students and staff expressing a lack of Inuit representation in schools and issues with imported curricula and Eurocentrism (Aylward, 2007, 2009b, 2010; Berger, 2009). Recommendations in this study aim to address this by making changes to the continuous progress model, increasing Inuktitut language use and teaching in schools, and supporting teachers in meaningful ways. Data from previous studies also indicate that programs that address the gap between students' personal goals and programs offered by high schools can improve attendance rates (for example, see a trades preparation program offered in Kugluktuk described in Walton et al., 2014).

**Table 1**

*Community Recommendations for Improving Education Success in Nunavut*

Issue	Community Recommendation
Challenging Courses, Student Educator Ratio and One-on-one Learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increase access to distance learning options.</li> <li>2. Advocate for improved connectivity within schools.</li> <li>3. Separate school internet policies from the more restrictive policies of the Government of Nunavut, which restrain access to relevant online pedagogical material.</li> <li>4. Adjust the student/educator ratio to accommodate for "non-attenders" in the calculation along with full-time equivalent students.</li> </ol>
Literacy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Address literacy levels in the home and the community including:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Literacy initiatives that encourage parental engagement and provide parents with the resources to do so.</li> <li>b. Increase efforts to ensure early childhood education opportunities are available in every community and are being accessed by all children ages 0–5 (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2011).</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

Issue	Community Recommendation
Continuous Progress Model	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consider a new model of student progression for implementation.</li> <li>2. The model should include adequate human and financial supports.</li> <li>3. The model should take into account the unique education needs in Nunavut including but not limited to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. English second language students.</li> <li>b. Low literacy levels in English and Inuktitut.</li> <li>c. Low attendance rates.</li> <li>d. High staff turnover rates.</li> <li>e. Cultural and language needs among school staff and students.</li> <li>f. Supporting excellence in education in Nunavut schools for students who are excelling.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
Bilingual Model	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increase appropriate Inuktitut instruction at all grade levels, with curriculum resources for educators.</li> <li>2. Ensure adequate levels of literacy in both English and Inuktitut at all grade levels.</li> </ol>
Teacher Retention and Community Relationships	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increase the number of Inuit school staff and teachers.</li> <li>2. Improve and increase delivery of the Nunavut Teacher Education Program (NTEP) by offering programs in every community. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Include courses in NTEP that prepare teachers to instruct at the secondary school level.</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Improve teacher retention and teaching success by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Creating mentorship programs for new teaching staff.</li> <li>b. Creating robust orientations to Inuit and Northern cultures and communities for teachers coming from outside the territory.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
Culturally Relevant Curriculum	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Develop and implement a standardized Nunavut-specific and culturally relevant curriculum for kindergarten to Grade 12.</li> <li>2. Create and staff several Curriculum Specialist positions to help educators navigate and understand the resources that are available to them.</li> <li>3. Develop and implement a Nunavut-specific departmental exam.</li> </ol>

The recommendations for improving secondary education success span throughout the entire educational journey. They also engage the whole community for the benefit of students. This echoes previous studies that engage Inuit secondary and post-secondary students on their educational journeys (Rodon et al., 2014; Walton et al., 2014) and work on the importance of family and community leadership as key to education success (Anoe et al., 2017; Aylward, 2004, 2009a).

Some of the needs for support expressed by the participants in this study align with those previously reported, such as personal supports promoting student well-being and strengthening Inuit language and culture (Walton et al., 2014). Inuit and non-Inuit

Nunavut educators have long felt unprepared and under-resourced to deliver culturally responsive material (Berger & Epp, 2007). The recommendations outlined here suggest addressing this by improving information technology through better internet access, and aiding teachers in accessing existing resources.

The recommendations in Table 1 are comprehensive and apply to many facets of the community, inside and outside the school. They require substantial effort from education and human resources officials, but also a concerted effort from other organizations and government departments to support families.

## Limitations and Further Research

**Limitations.** While this project was conducted in different regions of Nunavut, it took place in six of 25 communities. Communities in Nunavut have unique relationships to, and histories of, education that require individual study. Future research should seek to expand the dataset and collect more perspectives from additional communities.

Another limitation is associated with language. The researchers conducted interviews in English, and translation was available in some communities for community members outside of the school who could not converse in English. Translation was not made available for staff in schools, as they were all competent English speakers, even if it was not their mother tongue. Future research can include research assistants who can conduct interviews in either Inuktitut or English, without the need for translation.

While it was our intent to collect the stories of students who left school without graduating in this research, we are aware that despite our efforts, their perspectives are underrepresented in the data. Future research can focus on the collection of more perspectives of youth who have left school without graduating. While it is difficult to say for certain why there was a low level of participation for this group, we believe it could be due to a lack of confidence or desire to discuss these personal issues with a stranger or to answer a radio or social media advertisement for interviews. In the future, discussions with a trusted community member or in a sharing circle may increase representation.

**Remaining areas for further investigation: Attendance rates, food programs and literacy.** Participants discussed attendance as an indicator of student success and graduation, and students who attended school regularly from a young age were felt to be more

likely to perform well in school and graduate. However, there was no clear path forward identified by community members to address attendance rates. Contacting parents and going to students' homes to wake them up were some initiatives undertaken by participants, but this approach is not a sustainable plan for addressing attendance. Some participants felt that attendance was determined in the home through encouragement from family, and others felt that it was impacted by bullying from peers and/or school staff. Further investigation is needed on the issue of attendance and addressing it will require a creative and multi-faceted approach. A holistic social determinants of health approach is also needed to address issues that are not in the domain of the education system, such as housing, addictions, trauma, poverty, and food security (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2014). Other areas for further investigation were related to how food programs in some communities were not seen as effective, as well as better understanding elementary school students' low levels of literacy.

## Conclusion

This study applied *unikkaaqtigiinniq* ("the power and meaning of story") to share and collect narratives through semi-structured interviews with individuals in six communities in Nunavut. We found that community members have significant recommendations for improving systemic issues, pedagogy, curriculum, and relationships in the education system. They also have practical recommendations for strengthening supports for teachers and students to increase graduation rates and post-secondary attendance. Many of these recommendations require increased or reallocated resources to support students and those invested in their futures. We have determined several avenues for future research, including solutions for increasing attendance rates and the impact of food programs.

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