Tumiralaat Child Care Centre (Ottawa) and Pirurvik Preschool (Pond Inlet): Model Child Care and Preschool Centres that respect the rights of Inuit Children

Hon. Landon Pearson

Most people who are seriously concerned with doing what is best for children have long accepted that access to quality early childhood care and education makes a significant contribution to their health and well-being, especially those who are growing up in poverty, who are marginalized or who are living under other adverse circumstances. In Canada since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (1969) child care has been positioned as a right for working parents, especially mothers. Only recently has child care begun to be recognized as a child’s right. Article 18.3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which Canada ratified in 1991, establishes the right of the children of working parents “to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible.” This right is now understood to apply to all children who could benefit and not just to those whose parents or guardians work as enriching children’s lives is both a public good and a public responsibility.

The two preschool programmes for Inuit children (one in the North and one in Ottawa-Vanier) that are featured in this article are inspiring examples of what happens when Inuit children’s rights are respected. This is because they are both based on the principles of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ), the ages-old experience-based wisdom of the Inuit people, which conform remarkably well, as far as children are concerned, with several articles of the CRC. Most important is Article 30 which affirms the right of the indigenous child “in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language”. Article 29, the aims of education, corresponds not only with Inuuquatigiisiarniq (respecting others, relationships and caring for people) but also Tunnganarniq (fostering good spirit by being open, welcoming and inclusive). Non-discrimination is a cross-cutting principle of the CRC.

Ajiiqatigiinniq (decision making through discussion and consensus) allows for the voice of the child (article 12) and Avatittinnik Kamatsiarniq (respect and care for the land, animals and the environment) is almost replicated in Article 29.1e of the CRC. “The development of respect for the natural environment”. Finally the educational methodology of both programmes is based on the IQ principle, Pilimmaksarniq (the development of skills through observation, mentoring, practice and effort). Visitors to the
child care centre (Tumiralaat) at the Inuit Children’s Centre in Ottawa (Vanier) on a hot summer’s day would add, delighted by the sight of lightly dressed toddlers covered in mud, a reference to Article 31, the right to play!

Karen Baker-Anderson, the thoughtful, caring and committed director of the Inuit Children’s Centre, described Tumiralaat, as well the other components of her Centre, this way to her visitors that warm day. The day care “offers children connections to their culture and connections to each other, elders and adults.” “Cultural identity matters enormously to the children who attend” she went on explaining that no matter what the family is faced at home the Centre gives them “a place to celebrate the beauty of childhood”. In addition to Tumiralaat, the Centre also runs a Headstart programme (Sivummut) which features an Elders’ visiting programme and an after-school programme for ages 7-13.

As for the preschool programme in Pond Inlet, Nunavut, Pirurvik, (A Place to Grow), it is best described below by Tessa Lochhead, one of its co-founders.
The Pirurvik Preschool (written by Tessa Lochhead)

The Pirurvik Preschool opened its doors on January 14, 2016 with the full support of the Pond Inlet District Education Authority and the Nunavut Department of Education. This Early Childhood Education (ECE) program is for children ages 2.5-4 years old and comes during a time of a great demand for ECE in Nunavut. The current Government of Nunavut has stated education as their number one priority under their *Sivumut Abluqta* mandate and highlights ECE as a specific objective in supporting vibrant communities. It is a common claim that ‘children are the future’, so preparing children, and their parents, for a successful start in life and school is an important part of looking toward the horizon of possibility. This is underscored by the fact that Nunavut is a territory of young people with 31 percent of the population under the age of 14. The youth of Nunavut need to be supported in forming a strong sense of individual and cultural identity and acquiring the necessary literacy skills required for their educational careers and beyond.

![Fig. 2: Alashua is excited to use the drum!](image)

Nunavut faces many challenges in regards to education. The Nunavut education system is tasked with bridging Inuit societal values with southern academic standards. It
is widely recognized that ECE programming that is evidence based and culturally relevant has a positive impact on the learning outcomes of students throughout their foundation in their cultural identity and language in order to increase their sense of confidence and identity so as to become resilient and proficient students. The Pirurvik Preschool satisfies these needs in an exciting and dynamic way.

**Method- IQ & Montessori**

The Pirurvik Preschool provides Early Childhood Education that is child centered and based on the *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ) principles and is enriched through the use of Montessori materials. Our goal is to provide a culturally relevant learning experience. We are guided by the IQ principle *Pilimmaksarniq*, which allows children to learn at their own pace. Children follow their own natural curiosity by choosing topics that interest them. The learning materials are ‘hands on’ resources and allow for self-directed development with teachers acting as facilitators by providing the appropriate support. Students are thus internally motivated to learn based on their individual interest in each activity. This experiential approach to leaning creates a classroom of engaged and happy children.

This *pilimmaksarniq* approach to education is facilitated by the resource rich Montessori method of learning. As reflected in the IQ principles, children are recognized as individuals and are left to make decisions for themselves. Both IQ and Montessori put the emphasis of learning in the hands of the child by trusting her to know what she needs. This approach to ECE compliments the educational values of the community of Pond Inlet as it builds confidence and independence at a critical age of development.

Language development is key to ECE instruction and the classroom resources aim to promote and enrich Inuktitut literacy and include: Inuktitut sandpaper syllabics, large moveable Inuktitut syllabics, Inuktitut Sounds bags, and small moveable Inuktitut syllabics.
Fig. 3: Leetia and Seanna enjoying skinning sealskins together.

**Ikajuqtigiinniq – Partnerships that Work**

The Pirurvik Preschool was born from a dream between two community members, Karen Nutarak and Tessa Lochhead, who shared a vision of providing culturally relevant ECE programming that would prepare students for educational success. Karen, who is from Pond Inlet, has been a long time educator and advocate for education in Nunavut. Tessa, originally from Ottawa, has been teaching in Nunavut since 2007. During the 2012-13 academic year, Tessa completed Montessori training and recognized the intrinsic connection to the IQ principles. This began the wheels in motion to bring their dream to fruition.

Over the next several years, Karen and Tessa worked diligently in presenting this idea to the various stakeholders of education in Pond Inlet and Nunavut. The term Montessori can produce strong reactions in those who are unfamiliar with the method. In the North, this is further complicated by the history of colonization. There is an understandable hesitation in importing educational models from the south. However, as
seen in other parts of the world and Canada, Montessori is a student centred approach to learning that crosses all cultural and pedagogical boundaries. Through their shared leadership and educational backgrounds, and by supporting community concerns through many consultations, Karen and Tessa fostered the IQ principle of *ikajuqtigiinniq* (working together for a common cause) in creating a preschool that reflects the needs of Pond Inlet. The vision of improving education in Nunavut is something that anyone in education understands and supports. However, it is often difficult to articulate how IQ can be used in a school setting. The Montessori method offered an exciting opportunity to harness the strengths of students by giving them the opportunity to watch, learn, and do in a way that reflects traditional ways of learning. It took some convincing, but to observe a classroom full of 2.5-4 years olds who are fiercely engaged in learning is a measure of success that any parent, community member, or educational authority can be proud of.

Another exciting dynamic is that the Pirurvik Preschool initiative is a partnership with the Nunavut Arctic College (NAC). The NAC is providing a full-time Early Childhood Education Diploma program (2-year program) in Pond Inlet during the 2015-17 academic period. The Pirurvik preschool is an extension of the Arctic College ECE training by providing a location and learning environment for the NAC practicum requirements. The preschool serves a double role of providing ECE while also building capacity in education as the students can seek full time employment upon graduation. The ECE students are supported in their practicum placement by their instructor Jedidah Merkosak and Karen Nutarak who is the NAC Administrator and Pirurvik’s Preschool Co-Director.

Pirurvik Preschool represents the collective efforts of the community of Pond Inlet to provide meaningful educational experiences for youth. It has reinforced the idea that by working together, through patience and consultations, great things can happen by creating partnerships that work.

**A Place to Grow**

This community based, culturally relevant, child-centred approach to education serves many needs in Pond Inlet. Pirurvik is indeed a place to grow for Inuit children, teachers in training, literacy, community capacity, and the dreams of Nunavut. *Qujannamiik!*
Conclusion

The wisdom of the Inuit people (IQ) is a great resource to draw on for designing early childhood centres for all Indigenous children as well as for others in our increasingly diverse society. Respecting their rights, as the two settings described in this article do, can lighten the burden of trauma carried by so many children and, by building trust, release their humanity to the benefit of us all.

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i This article is based on an interview with Karen Anderson, Inuit Children’s Centre, Ottawa conducted by Landon Pearson and Virginia Caputo on June 21, 2016. With thanks to Tessa Lochhead for writing the section on the Pirurvik Preschool.

ii Photographs reprinted with permission from the Ottawa Inuit Children’s Centre. For more information see: http://www.ottawainuitchildrens.com/program-overview/tumiralaat-child-care-centre/ and Tessa Lochhead, Pirurvik Preschool.

iii http://www.gov.nu.ca/information/sivumut-abluqta

iv http://www.nunatsiaqonline.ca/stories/article/65674nunavut_youngest_place_in_canada_statscan/