

Inuksuk High School (Iqaluit, NU) Shaking the Movers Report, 2021
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The hum of student activity is a welcomed sound in the halls of Inuksuk High School in Iqaluit, Nunavut. Students had returned to full time classes in the fall but have now again returned to part-time and online learning as of January 2022. This has occurred several times over the past three years due to public health measures in response to COVID-19. Students are eager to attend school and participate in the various opportunity's schools provide. The passion for learning and local engagement are finely represented by four young Nunavummiut, Penelope Armstrong (gr.12), Emma Carpenter (gr.12), Avarayna Reardon (gr.10) and Katie Yu (gr.10) who participated in a *Shaking the Movers* event, facilitated by Jay McKechnie (Guidance Counsellor) to discuss issues facing youth in the territory.

What are the most pressing issues facing Nunavut youth right now?

Suicide & Mental Health

Almost instantly, once the youth gathered to discuss topics relevant to them, the topic of suicide and mental health was quickly identified as a major concern. Nunavut continues to experience a profound crisis of suicide and poor mental health outcomes.¹ Youth are well acquainted with the root causes of these issues and can easily identify many social determinants of health that contribute to this ongoing crisis, such as unresolved trauma, housing, and substance misuse.²

Of course, COVID-19 is an issue facing the global community, but it is the suicide crisis that is omnipresent in the lives of Nunavut youth and is truly alarming. In 2021, a full calendar year of COVID-19, Nunavut recorded no deaths from COVID, whereas 22 youth under the age of 25 died by suicide.³ The sense of loss resulting from suicide has a profound impact on youth, as Avarayna poignantly relates in her plea for government action, "As a teen myself seeing my peers take their own life is not right and when they die a part of us dies with them."

Nunavut Education

It is probably no surprise that a main area of focus for students are their experiences with the Nunavut education system. Students are acutely aware that education has not always benefitted the Inuit majority of current day Nunavut. Just a few generations ago, many Inuit attended residential schools designed to propel assimilation and acculturation agendas. The history of colonialism in Nunavut sits in tension with the belief that education is integral to the rights of youth and the quality of life in Nunavut. The value of public education is articulated by Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), titled *The Right to Education*, that states,

"education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities. Education has a vital role in empowering women, safeguarding children from exploitative and hazardous labour and sexual exploitation, promoting human rights and democracy, protecting the environment, and controlling population growth."

¹ https://rcynu.ca/sites/rcynu.ca/files/RCYO_MHReview_EN_Web.pdf

² https://www.itk.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ITK_Social_Determinants_Report.pdf

³ Jay and Penelope serve as Board Members on the Isaksimagit Inuusirmi Katujjiqaatigiit / Embrace Life Council

However, Nunavummiut (people of Nunavut) continue to experience many issues of inequality in education. Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), an organization tasked with carrying out the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (NLCA), brought this to public attention in a 2019 report that highlights many serious concerns, one of which is the lack of Inuktitut (Inuit languages) in schools. Inuktitut is an essential component of creating successful schools and communities. Yet, the use of Inuktitut in Nunavut is declining, especially among young people and is further complicated by the fact that most teachers (80% in 2016) are non-Inuit and unable to teach in Inuktitut.⁴

Arguably the most devastating part of the current education system is how it has stifled the potential of Nunavut. With an Inuit majority, and self-government framework outlined in the NLCA, Nunavut has the potential to lead in the reconciliation of Indigenous rights and education. Instead, Nunavut continues to grapple with many poor life outcomes well above national averages (e.g., Nunavut's child poverty rate is 31.2% whereas the Canadian average is 18.6%).⁵ Youth believe the education system needs to do a better job reflecting and supporting them in ways that are relevant to the North for improved academic outcomes.⁶

COVID-19 & Education

We have experienced three disrupted academic years because of COVID-19 protocols. The Government of Nunavut has made little effort to ensure a measurable level of recovered learning, which has allowed for gaps in the necessary knowledge required for students to meet the curricular outcomes at the senior level. Students were initially expected to write departmental exams just as they had in “normal” years. For the time being, these exams have been cancelled. Of course, these are exceptional times and yet there has been little action to accommodate the academic needs of students resulting from disruptions to learning.⁷

The long-term impacts of these disrupted years of schooling remain unknown. Through our discussions, youth were keenly aware that being successful in education will allow them to find stable employment, increase their social mobility and lead to further academic success. The youth also identified graduating from high school as increasing the chance their children will graduate from high school, making the connection that these three years of interrupted schooling will not only have adverse impacts on current students, but may also have an intergenerational impact as well. The youth observed that education is more about graduating and employment, it is about gaining a love, and fostering appreciation, for lifelong learning. Furthermore, the socialization aspect of public education is key as it instills the values and attitudes necessary to become positive contributors in society.

How have youth addressed the above issues?

Hitting The Streets

Youth are not intimidated to take to the streets to voice their concerns. Students recently walked out of school to the Legislative Assembly to raise awareness of suicide in Nunavut⁸ and took similar action to bring attention to climate change.⁹

⁴ <https://www.tunngavik.com/files/2019/04/NuLinguicideReportFINAL.pdf>

⁵ <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/nunavut-children-experience-the-highest-poverty-rate-in-canada-report/>

⁶ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/nunavut-education-curriculum-1.6086429>

⁷ https://gov.nu.ca/sites/default/files/learning_to_be_together_again_engwith_table_of_contents_and_cover_1.pdf

⁸ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/igluait-suicide-prevention-students-youth-nunavut-1.6252374>

⁹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/igluait-students-climate-change-1.5163398>

Youth believe there needs to be more available opportunities to learn about key support resources in their community and what services are available. Inuksuk High School students are often invited to participate in various working groups and discussions. There are a lot of opportunities for youth to participate but they often feel like token participants and not true collaborators with the adults. To be sure, youth feel they have the agency to participate as equal partners on issues that specifically relate and affect them.¹⁰

What barriers prevent youth from advocating for change?

Generational Tensions

There is a generational gap between youth and the adults in their lives which creates barriers to advocating for change. As Ms. Pearson notes in her opinion piece for this year's STM events, "young people have knowledge that is unique to their generation. They know far better than the rest of us how to make good use of the electronic media." Yet this strength also presents a struggle to connect. The adults in the lives of youth often have little knowledge of their experiences as they are vastly different from past generations. This not only occurs in terms of social media but also regarding their worldviews, which has been greatly shaped by their access to diverse perspectives and information through various forms of media.

When young people speak up on matters of concern they can be demeaned and belittled. The disregard and/or disrespect shown by adults when youth speak up, was on clear display when a newspaper article profiled Katie as a litigant in a lawsuit to lower the voting age.¹¹ Vitriolic comments on social media is quite widespread but when it is directed towards youth it causes grave concern for both its violence and its lack of understanding and empathy. But as the youth in this report demonstrate: the youth voice will not be silenced.

What type of supports would help youth to get more involved?

The Need to Connect in Person: Closing the Social Distance Gap

Youth demand more in person opportunities to learn new information. COVID-19 has interfered with these opportunities almost entirely and youth are concerned that they have not only missed out on experiences that would normally happen during a school year, such as assemblies and travel, but possibly other opportunities that they don't even know about. There is a huge array of experiences available virtually, but these do little to compare to the interaction amongst peers that makes learning relevant, enjoyable, and fulfilling. Virtual opportunities are also less accessible in the North because of limited internet bandwidth, which also makes it harder to connect with others outside of Nunavut. Some extracurricular activities that would have continued online in the south have completely stopped in the North because of COVID restrictions.

How have the rights of children been impacted by COVID-19?

Was shutting down schools the right call?

¹⁰ <https://www.nnsi.com/news/igluut-youth-look-into-ways-to-improve-nunavut-suicide-prevention-strategy/>

¹¹ <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/igluut-teen-taking-ottawa-to-court-to-lower-voting-age/>

The school system has not been adapted to make up for the gaps in knowledge caused by public health restrictions and this been left to the burden of youth. Some students have completely dropped out of school because of the seemingly impossible task of catching up on missed learning.

When COVID-19 hit, we instinctively looked to government for leadership and direction. We followed their advice including shutting schools, a decision that is virtually unprecedented in history. As Avarayna argues, what the government did not seem to see, or anticipate, was “how greatly shutting down schools would affect the youth.” Young people were not consulted and thus the rights of children have been impacted by COVID-19 because they have not had a voice in any decisions that have directly impacted them. A common refrain is the ‘youth of today are the leaders of the world tomorrow’, and so those in positions of authority need to recognize the needs of students. To do this, a helpful starting point would be to ask students what they need.

In terms of the online/distance learning model that Nunavut has reverted to at various times over the past three years, youth have identified some teachers are better than others at recognizing the needs of students. For example, the remote learning model only highlights the rampant disparity in the North. The technological inequity in the North is profound as access to the Internet and other resources (e.g., computers and physical space), is vastly different among many households. Some teachers either are not aware of these issues or were unwillingly to adapt to the various circumstances of students in their courses causing more stress and hardships in an already difficult situation.

Extracurricular Activities

As the pandemic prolongs, in-person school remains inconsistent. Penelope spoke about the lack of sports and other extracurricular activities as being detrimental to the overall wellbeing of youth. An ongoing repercussion of COVID-19 is the lack of extracurricular activities and the precautionary measures that limit the number of people and types of activities allowed to take place when schools reopen. These activities play a critical role in the welfare of the student population in Nunavut schools. This is attributed to the sense of community fostered among young people and adults. As today's society moves toward more technology-enhanced lifestyles, the need for human connection is increasingly important. Youth are highly vulnerable to the effects of modern technology as they become target audiences for social media platforms¹² and the high use of social media can lead to poor mental health and declines in life satisfaction¹³. In contrast, school promoted activities allow students to work in group settings with their peers and find a supportive community. Moreover, extracurricular activities move away from a solely academic environment creating a more positive high school experience for a variety of students. Schools provide students with a general base of knowledge; this being said, many students will create unique life paths not supported by this traditional school model. Students can utilize these activities to carve out personalized high school experiences to help their careers and interests.

An ‘academic-only’ experience may give one a narrow point of view, pressuring students to ignore work-life balance. These activities broaden students’ mindsets allowing them to pursue passions and find a sustainable lifestyle. Lastly, they equip individuals with necessary life skills, empowering them to grow outside the school setting (e.g., goal setting, leadership, and teamwork). Attaining success and satisfaction through activities that students are passionate about can help improve self-confidence and self-esteem. Overall, extracurricular activities create a safe space to make mistakes and learn critical

¹² <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/facebook-instagram-kids-1.6190656>

https://www.pewinternet.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2018/05/PI_2018.05.31_TeensTech_FINAL.pdf

¹³ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/tween-and-teen-health/in-depth/teens-and-social-media-use/art-20474437>

lessons that can be transferred to the rest of one's life in high school and beyond. Without the positive aspects after-school activities, students are missing out in a crucial element of their development.

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