Introduction

Tara graduated from Grade 12 in Rankin Inlet with the goal of becoming a teacher; however, she needed to improve her oral and written Inuktitut before taking the Nunavut Teacher’s Education Program (NTEP) in Rankin Inlet. Gwyn left high school early, then described herself as “not doing anything” prior to taking the Miqqut program. Nina was a stay-at-home mom. She wasn’t particularly looking for work or to enroll in a learning program, but when she saw Miqqut advertised, she saw it would help fill her family’s immediate needs for warm winter clothing. Tara, Gwyn and Nina had different educational backgrounds and learning goals, but a common need. None of them could move forward in the ways they wanted to within the formal learning opportunities in their home community. When Ilitaqsiniq – the Nunavut Literacy Council – offered an innovative traditional skills and literacy program in Rankin Inlet in January 2012, they, along with 12 other young women, signed up.

The Miqqut Program

‘Miqqut 2’ was a non-formal traditional skills program with embedded literacy. It was modeled on promising practices developed in other ‘made-in-Nunavut’ programs, including Somebody’s Daughter, Reclaiming our Sinew, and Traditional Skills Workshop. Cultural experts taught traditional skills alongside literacy instructors who led language-related activities directly linked to the cultural focus. Daily activities were identified and evolved as the program progressed, as participants selected their own items to create and literacy instructors developed activities (pre-planned or spontaneous) directly linked to participants’ interests. The program ran full-time (9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday to Friday) for four months in Rankin Inlet’s middle school library.

Elders taught in Inuktitut, literacy instructors used Inuktitut and English, and participants, whose language backgrounds varied, were free to use and develop skills in either Inuktitut or English, or both. On a typical day, participants would read silently, look through photographs for ideas, create and adjust patterns, sew by hand or by machine, document their progress in their learners’ portfolios, and participate in literacy activities as a group. Teaching took place through direct instruction, modeling/observation, and one-on-one mentoring. The group would come together for brief periods, then go back to self-directed work. The high teacher-participant ratio (five Elders and two literacy instructors for fifteen participants) facilitated this one-on-one interaction and participant-directed progress, which were both key to the program’s success. A focus on cooperative learning encouraged participants to look to and provide each other with support. For example, Inuktitut-speaking participants could be seen helping less fluent speakers follow the Elders’ directions.

The Miqqut program offered a holistic learning environment. Instructors were carefully chosen for their personal attributes of compassion and caring as well as for their recognized expertise in sewing and teaching. Instructors created a safe learning environment through an orientation in which participants and instructors alike set parameters for the course, through ongoing encouragement of participants, and through respect for participants’ different starting points. Instructors supported participants to set, and then move toward, their own goals. These non-formal components of the program’s process all contributed to developing a promising model for re-engaging young Inuit learners.

Community-Based Research

Ilitaqsiniq documented Miqqut’s process and
outcomes using a Community-based Research methodology. Staff members Quluaq Pilakapsi, an Inuit Elder, along with Adriana Kusugak and Gloria Uluqsi, accredited bilingual teachers from the community, joined the Miqqut instructional team as cultural and literacy instructors respectively. Serving also as community researchers, they conducted a series of entrance, exit, and six-month post-program interviews with each participant. They also recorded observations of activities and progress through fieldnotes. Ongoing dialogue with the full research team, which included other Ilitaqsiniq staff and an academic research guide, guided analysis of program outcomes. From all accounts, participants blossomed in the course, surpassing their own expectations, and developing competence and confidence in unexpected areas.

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Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit

Miqqut’s focus on Inuit traditional skills – in this case, sewing and clothing production – motivated most participants to join. So-called ‘traditional’ skills, part of Inuit qaujimajatuqangit,3 are still very much linked to identity and survival in the North (Tagalik 2010). Participants were attracted by the opportunity to gain warmer clothing for their children, spouses, and themselves. Nina said, “I needed to learn how to make my own stuff. And no one would be able to do that for me if my kids need warm stuff.” They were also motivated by the opportunity to learn the traditional practices that have been developed and passed on over centuries by their ancestors. For different reasons, young women like Tara had not had the opportunity to learn fully from their own mothers and grandmothers. They wanted to provide for their families, and be able to teach their own daughters when the time came.

The loss of Inuktitut among younger Inuit and other cultural changes have broken down contexts in which younger women used to learn from the Elders. Inuit Elders, as cultural experts, are the natural teachers for traditional skills. They are also the most respected teachers in Inuit communities, and those from whom many Inuit are most motivated to learn. As they taught sewing, they also shared their own life journeys – stories of resilience, seasoned with humour and grace – that inspired the younger seamstresses to become stronger as women in their community. Tara reflected, “The days I remember the most was when we were interviewing the Elder instructors and they were telling us about how they learned to sew and just giving us advice on life and I really enjoyed those days.” For many participants, the best part of Miqqut was the opportunity to spend so much time with the Elders, benefiting from their diverse wisdom from sewing to being a healthy woman, an engaged community member, and a loving parent. The connections the young women made with the Elders continued long after the program ended.

As the women created beautiful, functional clothing, these tangible products ‘documented’ each woman’s success. As women wore their sewing, other community members commented on their skills, which enhanced the women’s confidence and pride, and encouraged them in other new endeavours. As they spent time engaged in traditional practices, women also re-embraced Inuit values such as generosity, patience, resourcefulness, respect, and working together. In all these ways, Miqqut 2’s focus on traditional skills created a motivating environment for young Inuit, conducive to holistic learning.

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Literacy and Essential Skills

Ilitaqsiniq, the Nunavut Literacy Council Literacy, defines literacy as “a skill that enables people to interpret and effectively respond to the world around them. Based upon language development from birth, it includes the ability to learn, communicate, read and write, pass on knowledge and participate actively in society.” In line with this holistic vision of Indigenous literacies, instructors invited Miqqut participants to practice various forms of communication – oral and written, verbal and non-verbal, in English and Inuktitut, with varying audiences and through multiple media, including sewing and art. Literacy was directly relevant to the participants’ goals: learning specialized Inuktitut vocabulary for body and pattern parts; discussing and then writing down, in Inuktitut and English, the steps for making a parka; creation of sewing portfolios; speaking on the radio about the program, and so on. Through embedded literacy, the Miqqut program motivated participants to see how literacy is relevant to their lives and thus engage with new and expanding ways of expressing themselves and receiving information. Following the program, Nina said, laughing, “I write more and here I didn’t used to like to write.”

Literacy and culture are inherently linked. Research in other contexts has shown how programs

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3 Inuit qaujimajatuqangit is roughly translated as “Inuit traditional knowledge.” It encompasses the knowledge, values, attitudes, practices and skills that have favoured Inuit survival over centuries, and which are still relevant to living well today.}

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focusing on cultural and artistic production enhance literacy even when literacy is not deliberately targeted as a goal (e.g. Bhola 1990, Heath 2004). Meade (1990), Balanoff and Chambers (2005), and Lipka et al. (2007) have shown how Inuit traditional knowledge and practices are imbued with literacies and numeracies that go beyond reading and writing. For example, the lines and shape of a woman’s coat tell the story of where she is from. Traditional sewing by observing size and mentally transferring shape and proportion onto materials, knowing how to fit patterns together, where to gather and how much, and so on, are other examples of numeracies inherent in traditional clothing preparation. The National Aboriginal Design Committee (2002: 6) recommended that Indigenous literacy programs “place literacy into culture, rather than fitting culture into literacy” – in other words, draw out and teach literacy and essential skills through cultural programming. The Miqqut program did just that.

Within the literacy work, as with the sewing, instructors encouraged participants to set their own goals, but to gradually expand self-expectations. For example, participants who started out drawing in their journals were encouraged to add labels, then sentences, slowly building up to writing full thoughts. Gwyn was very shy at the outset, but she challenged herself to share a single word in group times. Encouraged by the non-judgmental environment, she gradually worked up to sharing complete thoughts. Others who started out as more confident speakers and writers were encouraged to expand into public communication. Tara, for example, spoke as Master of Ceremony for the community fashion show at the end of Miqqut 2. She would never have imagined speaking publically prior to Miqqut “because I would freeze and not be able to say anything and words wouldn’t come out of my mouth but after [Miqqut], I feel fine with speaking in front of people. I don’t feel like I’m being judged. That really helped me.” Observation of participants and their work showed how participants’ self-expression, confidence and willingness to communicate and use documents grew over the course of the program. As Campbell (2003: 142) stated, “Literacy is not an end in itself, but rather a means for participants to shape reality; accomplishing their own goals.” The practice of embedding literacy into the Miqqut program was one part of supporting participants to gain self-assurance to set and achieve personal goals.

The literacies participants developed helped them beyond the program, with their families, and in their communities. For Nina, being a better communicator helped her engage with her family: “I’ve noticed lots of things change with my family. We are a lot closer now. My girls love going to school and talk about school… I’ve learned how to be a better mother.” Through the program, participants developed life and work skills such as organization, self-discipline, timeliness, reliability, attendance, hard work, finishing what one starts, willingness to take risks helped participants to gain confidence to enroll in further education or apply for jobs. While almost all of the participants had described themselves as “doing nothing” prior to Miqqut, six months after the program two thirds of them had started new jobs or enrolled in further education. Miqqut drew in participants who might not otherwise have enrolled in or received what they wanted out of other types of adult education available in the community. This non-formal program served as a bridge to re-engage sometimes-marginalized young Inuit women in formal learning and the wage economy.

Well-being Through Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit and Literacy

Learning from Elders, learning what was really meaningful for them, and approaching literacy as a tool for empowerment all contributed to Miqqut becoming a place of personal growth for participants. For Nina, taking part in Miqqut helped her to see herself (for the first time) as a capable learner: “I’ve always thought I was always ajuq (no good) but after I took the Miqqupt program I [know] I can do it now.” Miqqut 2’s focus on process – being welcoming, encouraging, and responding to participants as whole people – led to holistic outcomes. Gwen explained that she was only able to take risks, now, in communicating because Miqqut offered her the chance, finally, to practice speaking without being judged or assessed. Participants became more confident, happier, prouder of who they are, and motivated to live up to their own expectations of themselves. Participants said they are better people following the course. Some moved away from unhealthy life choices to more positive life choices. Such non-academic outcomes are seen across the country in literacy programs (Battel 2001), but seem enhanced in this traditional skills program.

Mental health research documents the healing power of reconnecting with traditional practices (Kirmayer, Simpson and Cargo 2003), and this power was seen among all the participants in the Miqqut program. Tara, for example, shared, “I feel more
whole as a person, as an Inuk woman, just knowing how to sew.” Antone et al. (2002: 8) wrote, “factors such as healing, reclamation of identity, language, cultures and self-determination, play a major role in the complex issue of Aboriginal literacy and learning.” Non-formal programming such as Miqqut provides a venue for holistic learning. As the program incorporated healing, identity, culture and literacy, improvements were seen in each of these intertwined areas of the learners’ lives.

### Conclusion

Non-formal traditional skills programs offer a promising model for addressing the whole person in Nunavut youth and adult learners. They invite learners to work on skills and practices that they see as highly relevant and to produce tangible products of which they (and their families) are proud. The creative activity, cultural connection and relationships among instructors and participants contribute to increased confidence, which in turn supports engagement in the community, education and the workforce. Success factors in these “made in Nunavut” programs such as learning that addresses participants’ perceived needs; hands-on learning; relationship, respect and safety; and addressing the whole person, echo those documented in successful adult education programs around the world (Vella 2002). They also resonate with documented strengths of Indigenous approaches to education, including linking learning and community (Canadian Council on Learning n.d.).

Limited research into traditional skills programs with embedded literacy in other Indigenous contexts identifies these as “invisible learning spaces” (Kral 2010b: 5). In the absence of the documentation of the process and outcomes of non-formal, cultural programming in Nunavut, programmers sometimes found it difficult to access adult education or literacy and essential skills funding for what were seen as ‘only’ cultural programming (Greer 2001). Moreover, those offering cultural programs such as traditional clothing production do not necessarily have the knowledge and tools to deliberately embed literacy, nor the awareness of the impact a literacy component could add. This research sheds light on the potential for engaging learners and maximising impact through embedding literacy in non-formal traditional skills programs.

Article 23 of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement sets out parameters for enhancing Inuit employment. However, the Conciliator’s report on achievement of the land claims’ goals found employment targets far from being met, and blamed inadequate, inappropriate educational opportunities (Berger 2006). The Nunavut Adult Learning Strategy advocates for more “non-formal, community-based literacy programs…to re-engage adult learners in life-long learning” (Government of Nunavut and Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. 2006: 41). Our research shows that non-formal culture and literacy programs are a promising venue to open doors to more equitable educational and employment opportunities in Nunavut.

While on the one hand, statistics show difficulties in recruitment and retention in adult learning in Nunavut, non-formal cultural programs are multiplying across the territory. This research suggests that cultural programs with relatively modest goals may actually be achieving much broader outcomes than they are targeting, or recording. It is hoped that this research might support programmers, instructors, and participants to articulate and possibly more actively pursue the breadth of literacy and well-being outcomes these programs offer. Perhaps understanding the impact of such programs may help policy makers and funders to make informed decisions supporting the Government of Nunavut’s goal of ilippallianginarniq, lifelong learning, as well as supporting the desires of many Nunavummiut to find a safe, stimulating, and relevant context in which to pursue their learning goals. Tara, Gwyn, and Nina, along with their diverse co-learners in Miqqut 2, certainly reached and surpassed their goals. In September 2012, Tara began the Nunavut Teachers Education Program’s (NTEP) foundation year. Through Miqqut, she reached her goal of improving her Inuktitut language and literacy skills for admission to NTEP while also following an unexpected journey into greater wholeness and happiness. She said, “I feel a lot more confident in myself in trying new things like not to be afraid to fail.” Gwyn, who said at the beginning of program, “I didn’t have confidence in myself,” found the confidence after Miqqut to (temporarily) relocate to Ontario and enrol in a heavy equipment operator course. Nina, like all the Miqqut women, filled an immediate need by creating warm winter outerwear for her family. But she also developed skills and confidence, which motivated her to think differently about her own future: “My life got easier after taking Miqqut Project. It got me doing something…It made me want to do more not just stay home doing nothing…Miqqut Project was the best! I’ve learned to write, to sew, be a better person, and it was always good.” This research shows the wisdom of investing...
in high quality non-formal programs with embedded literacy to ensure the best outcomes for diverse Inuit learners.

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