In the winter of 2008, I was visiting at the Tasiurvik child care centre in Inukjuak, Nunavik and snapped a series of pictures with my digital camera. The photos featured a five-year-old boy in the process of tying his shoelace. In the first couple of frames we see the boy pulling on the lace with one hand and holding his shoe in the other. In the following sequence of pictures a young girl appears. At first she watches the boy and the shoe and then she offers assistance. Subsequent images feature the girl as she tries to help the boy by knotting the lace and fixing a bow, unsuccessfully. In the last photo the boy, sitting across from his female friend, has pulled the bottoms of his pants over his untied shoelaces. Later in the afternoon, with the children’s educator and the centre’s pedagogical counselor, we examined the images and wondered together about the stories the pictures told and the implications they might hold for learning. We discussed possible activities to plan in response. Several weeks later I showed the same set of photos and others to my colleague at Kivik Regional Government (KRG). We discussed the power of photographs and the potential of narrative forms of assessment to inform classroom practice; as well as to demonstrate to federal and provincial funders innovative child care practices developing in Nunavik.

Eighteen months later, inspired by the potential of teacher taken photographs and stories, KRG obtained funding from Health Canada through the Aboriginal Head Start Urban and Northern Communities program to investigate the possibilities of narrative assessment. At the same time, I enrolled at the University of Victoria to pursue a Master’s in Child and Youth Care. Learning stories became the topic for my thesis.

I was first introduced to learning stories as a means of narrative assessment through the work of Margaret Carr (2001; Carr and Lee, 2012) who has written extensively about learning stories, which are composed of pictures of children in the action of learning, accompanied by narrative text. In the mid 1990’s early childhood leaders in Aotearoa/New Zealand created a curriculum called Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996), which was based on a bilingual/bicultural Māori and English framework and series of exemplars. Te Whāriki continues to be a model curriculum for early childhood globally. The content is arranged in five strands: well-being, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration, and it positions early childhood experiences within a social context. This narrative methodology shifted early learning and child care away from a graduated developmental focus guided by pre-determined checklists to a more socially-oriented curriculum accompanied by narrative strategies for assessment. For example, in the opening paragraph I told the story about the boy trying to tie his shoelaces. After sharing the photos and accompanying story with the teacher and pedagogical counselor, we developed a plan for knot making and bow tying activities, to be shared with children in that playroom in the following day and weeks. Narrative strategies recognize children’s strengths and are holistic. They involve reciprocal relationships between people, places and things, and connect deeply and meaningfully with families and communities. The photos and accompanying stories feature children in the process of successfully negotiating daily life in the community and at the child care centre, and in response to reflection and discussion are used to inform classroom planning and curriculum.

Significantly, this Aotearoa/New Zealand work was being used with great success in Māori communities. Te whatu pōkeka, Kaupapa Māori assessment for learning: early childhood exemplars (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009) is a curriculum support document, which sets out Māori specific considerations. Ritchie and Rau’s 2008 research demonstrates that the strength-based approach to assessment positions teachers to incorporate Māori values and beliefs in their daily practice. Rameka (2007) describes how the Kaupapa Māori approach, “privileges and empowers Māori children and insists that constructs of the powerful, rich Māori child be at the heart of understandings about learning and assessment” (135). Rameka’s work demonstrates how, because of the socio-cultural focus, the combination of the Te Whāriki curriculum and learning stories enabled Māori educators to be open to learning from local knowledge and understandings, and to connect families more meaningfully with the education process.
by making visible children’s daytime learning activities and dispositions.

In 2005, then President of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) Jose Kusugak, addressed a group which included then Minister of Human Resources, Ken Dryden, on the subject of Inuit early childhood development, saying, “We believe that children have the right to child care that is culturally and linguistically appropriate, incorporating the values and traditions of their parents and communities.” (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami 2003: 4). These words echoed direction provided at the Avataq Elders’ conference in 2000 (Rowan, 2010). Later in specifying activities to meet Inuit Quality, Universal, Accessible and Developmental Care (QUAD), the 2005 Inuit Early Learning and Child Care discussion paper called for activities, “To promote and support the creation of Inuit-specific teaching material…” (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2003: 34). I wondered what educators in Nunavik would think about the possibilities learning stories might hold for strengthening Inuit approaches to early childhood practices and informing curriculum in Nunavik and how these could meet policy direction from our Elder’s and leaders.

Research in Inukjuak, Nunavik took place over eight weeks during the winter and early spring of 2011. I set out to investigate what learning stories might contribute to supporting local knowledge generation and sharing; cultural identities; language identities; and relationships between educators, children and families (Rowan, 2011, 2013). I worked closely with educators and support staff at the two community child care centres called Tasiurvik and Pigiursaviapik, throughout the project. We held a weekly dinner and discussion group, during which we shared a meal, discussed theories and practices connected with early childhood education research and practice, and planned activities for the following week. It was during these sessions that the educators created their first learning stories and began to read these stories aloud in Inuktitut to their peers.

Another research activity involved in-class visits. During the first week community co-researchers Maaji Putulik, pedagogical counselor at Tasiurvik, and Aani Augiak, child care counselor from KRG, and I visited playrooms and took photos of children demonstrating “interest” in their daily learning activities. Specifically, we looked for photo opportunities that featured children wholly engaged in: meaningful activities, solving problems, demonstrating learning, interacting with people and things, and connecting with local knowledge(s) and Inuit culture (Forman & Pufall 2005; Rowan 2011).

Soon the educators began to take their own pictures. The research team visited playrooms during naptime and while the children slept, we quietly worked with the educators as they learned how to upload photos to their computers, store them in files and then select images for learning stories. Eventually most of the educators learned to type using the syllabic chart as a reference, and how to use publishing software. All of the stories were written, typed, and shared in Inuktitut using syllabic text. These interactive sessions offered an opportunity for the research team to informally interact with educators and to think together about how best to connect educators, computers, photos, and words to create learning stories.

Outside of the Monday night discussion groups, the co-researchers worked with individual educators in response to their inquiries, interests and requirements. As the project evolved educators began to support one another more and more, both with Inuktitut language word verifications and technical computer questions. At the conclusion of the research phase, a local learning stories support committee was established, in order to keep the stories growing. And, inspired by their new writing projects, many of the educators also asked for Inuktitut grammar lessons.

The main sources of data for the project were the 59 Inuktitut-language learning stories, created by the educators at the centre. In addition to these, I kept a daily journal, documenting my observations both in-class and in my interactions with the educators and co-researchers. I also recorded narrative conversations with five educators and the two co-researchers. These materials formed the basis of my Master’s thesis. (Rowan, 2011) In January 2012 Annie Augiak went to another community, Kangiqsujuaq, and with the participation of Maaji Puutulik and KRG support, prepared a second Nunavik community to adopt the methodology we had used in Inukjuak. In February of 2013, Health Canada funded a Regional Training Workshop, which was organized by KRG and held in Kuujjuaq. This event provided three days of training for Aboriginal Head Start educators from all of the AHS sites in the province, on the learning stories approach to culturally and linguistically specific assessment.

Learning from Learning Stories

Each child at the centre has his/her own binder. The front cover of the binder features a photo of the child’s face and name printed in syllabics along the
spine. Inside the binder there is a one-page biography of each of the child’s two educators and a one-page child information sheet, which is completed by the parents and includes details about the child’s saunig (bones) namesake and sanajiq (dresser), identifies the child’s favorite country food and camping place, and includes the names of family members. The rest of the binder will be filled with Inuktitut stories, which feature the child alone or with friends and classmates. The intention is that the binders will travel between the home and school. In most playrooms the binders are situated on child-accessible shelves so that the children may pick them up and read them as they wish.

Learning stories almost always start as a series of photographs taken of children immersed in their daily activities at the centre, or in the community. These photos serve as the inspiration for the accompanying narrative, written by the educators. Once the stories are completed, they are always printed and inserted into these binders. Sometimes the educators also place the stories on the wall above the children’s cubbies for parents to see and discuss. In the babies’ room there is a wooden photo frame, in which four stories can be displayed at once. It is delightful to watch a one-year-old standing at eye level with the frame examining the stories, in which they are featured through a combination of photos and syllabic text! One educator hangs the stories with clothes pegs on a clothesline slung across her room. Occasionally, the stories are even shared among classrooms.

The learning story process, however, does not end when the story is printed and displayed. Guided by the Early Learning Framework (ELF) (Government of British Columbia 2008), we followed the seven-step cycle of pedagogical narration, which recommends educators: “record ordinary moments; interpret ordinary moments to make learning visible; share description with others; add to deepen interpretation; link your pedagogical narration [with] the framework; evaluate plan and start the process again.” (Government of British Columbia 2009: 14)

Together, the educators and researchers used our Monday night discussion groups to reflect on the potential implications for learning contained in the stories documented, and consider future activities. While doing so we directed our attention to the connections between the learning stories at the centre, and local Inuit practices and values.

Very often, such as was the case with the story of Simeonie (below), these discussions prompted a desire to seek further advice from local Elders, encouraging intergenerational dialogue and learning.

### Simeonie

Simeonie is on top of the hill.

Simeonie slides—wwe, wwe— it’s fun!

Simeonie was happy to slide down, his classmates went with him.

The pictures, which accompany this story feature a boy dressed in a beautifully sewn, handmade bright blue parka, with matching snow pants and mitts. In the first frame the boy is seen at the top of a snow bank, considering the steep edge. The second image shows the boy sliding down the bank on his bottom. From this perspective, viewers can clearly see the distinctive mukkuk (the peak of a parka’s hood) and thick black fur that encircles the boy’s face. Finally we see the boy’s back as he climbs back up the hill, where several children appear to be moving around. The story, originally written in Inuktitut, captures an ordinary experience of children playing outdoors but it also prompted educators to initiate conversations with local Elders about the boy’s mukkuk.

Simeonie’s story prompted extended discussion in one Monday night meeting about the mukkuk. We spoke about parkas’ peaks as being used to identify Inuit affiliation with specific places and about instances of Inuit being rescued from drowning after being pulled out of the broken ice by someone who grabbed onto the mukkuk. These conversations served as encouragement to seek further clarifications from community Elders, and to recognize and plan activities to find out more about mukkuk, thus serving as a meaningful way to access Inuit knowledge(s).

Another story depicts a group of very young children – about 14 to 15 months old - taking turns trying to help a classmate remove her shoe. The children are seated on a mat and one by one the children offer to help:

### Stuck Shoe

Elisapee sits on a mat, holding her Educator’s shoes and thinks, “I am going to wear these.”

Emily wants to try them on—she can’t remove her own shoes. They’re stuck!

The educator suggests, “Maybe Maina can remove your shoes?” Maina tries to pull the shoe and she says, “Ee pa.” The educator then says, “Johnny, help her too.”

“Maybe Elisapee can help you take them off?” “Maybe
“Maybe, Sandra can help you”? Sandra said, “It’s stuck!”

Then Maina says, “Maybe I can try again to take it off – Ee Pa! Now it’s off.” Emily is happy.

As the Monday night discussion group participants studied this story, we marveled at the cooperation and collaboration of these very young children who, in the end, succeeded in removing the shoe and solving the problem. We wondered if this was a great example of ways in which many Inuit, even at a very young age, come together to solve a problem with patience, persistence, determination, and a good spirit.

What are some outcomes of the project?

The learning stories project began as an effort to develop and consider a culturally and linguistically relevant means of child assessment. As the work proceeded the learning stories became active Inuktitut language materials, relationship builders and Inuit cultural knowledge recognizers and promoters.

1. Creating culturally-embedded literacy

In thinking specifically about the Inuktitut language: educators involved in the project reported that after introducing learning stories into their classrooms, children were speaking more Inuktitut, using new words, asking about word meaning, employing place names, recognizing their own names in syllabics, and reading Inuktitut language stories in their binders alone, with friends and with family members.

Educators were writing more in Inuktitut themselves, and they were reading out loud in Inuktitut to children and peers. Some began to reconsider the content of their classroom walls with the aim of increasing Inuktitut language content. One educator completely revised her wall calendar replacing the commercially prepared apples, leaves, and trees of the South, with seal skin boots, mittens, ulus, and other symbols connected with Inuit knowledge. As we saw in the story of Simeonie, educators also began to ask colleagues and Elders to confirm Inuktitut word meanings and for editorial advice. Some reported gaining consciousness about their own use of mixed Inuktitut and English at the child care centre.

2. Fostering connections between families and the centre

The stories also provided a helpful vehicle for connecting with families. Through the stories parents became more aware of their children’s activities and abilities while at the child care centre. This resulted in an increased appreciation for the educators and children’s work, and created a greater sense of cooperation between parents and educators in the care and education of the community’s children.

3. Strengthening children’s sense of identity and place

At the Tasiurvik and Pigiursaviapik child care centres in Inukjuak, children now have access to stories written in the Inuktitut dialect of the place where they live, featuring images of the human and physical environment that surrounds them. When we started this project, there were fewer than 20 Inuktitut language stories and books in the centre’s playrooms (Rowan, 2010). Now, all 110 children at the two centres have perhaps as many as four learning stories in their binders, totaling close to 450 Inuktitut stories in the centre – a significant increase!

During my most recent trip to Inukjuak in February 2013, several children approached me in the Tasiurvik corridor, eager to show me their binders. A few minutes later, I saw two little girls, aged two years, lying on their tummies on the floor, studying a story in a binder. Learning stories are providing a new and growing source of deeply meaningful and relevant, community based, Inuktitut language material, and are actively contributing to Inuktitut language literacy in Nunavik. This is exciting stuff!

Policy Implications

In 2011 the National Committee on Inuit Education published its Inuit education strategy, which included a vision for Inuit education that would see the education system reflect these five goals:

- Be bilingual (in the Inuit language and at least one of Canada’s official languages) and founded on Inuit history, culture and worldview.
- Be community-based and empower parents and elders to support education.
- Restore the central role of the Inuit language.
- Embrace early childhood education, Kindergarten to Grade 12, post-secondary and adult learning.
I would like to suggest that each of the five goals listed above is addressed through the learning stories project. The learning stories provide access to Inuit culture, history, and worldview as evidenced in the discussion about the *mukkak* and deliberations around sharing in the story about the stuck shoe. The stories are providing a reason for educators to seek Elder advice and direction, and are giving parents easily accessible insights into the activities of both their children and their children’s educators. This is directly equipping parents, Elders, and families to participate in and support children’s educational lives beginning at a very early age. The stories provide a platform through which parents, educators, and children can communicate, share ideas, and consider future plans using the Inuit language.

The stories are written in Inuktitut. They are read quietly and aloud in Inuktitut. Educators have asked for grammar classes in order to improve their writing skills. Children can take their binders home – to read and to be read to. The stories are working to position Inuktitut as a viable workplace language (Taylor & Wright 2003), which is fundamental to restoring the central role of the Inuit language in Inuit communities. As Avataq (2012) explains, “Inuktitut is one of Canada’s great national assets. It deserves to be treated as a distinctly Canadian treasure…. To Inuit their language is a precious heritage worth every effort to preserve” (109).

This work embraces early childhood by capturing ordinary moments in children’s lives and using these moments to reflect, using the Inuit language, on their cultural meaning and importance. Finally, the work of the learning stories embodies evidenced-based practice. It engages with educators as researchers investigating children’s interests and activities, and goes further by providing a mechanism through which we can recognize and develop Inuit understandings, knowledge and practices in early childhood education.

In closing, the National Committee on Inuit Education recommends that educators and government work together to “Develop quality, consistent programming based on Inuit language, values and ways of knowing…” (National Committee on Inuit Education 2011: 81). Based on the discussion above, I suggest that the learning stories provide a viable tool through which Inuit values, language and knowledge can be accessed and lived at child care centres in Inuit Nunangat. What do you think?

Mary Caroline Rowan is a Vanier Canada Graduate Scholar completing a PhD in education at the University of New Brunswick. She teaches comparative education at Concordia University.

References

Avataq Cultural Institute (2012). *Illirjanuit-That which we treasure-La langue que nous Chérissons*. Inukjuak, Québec: Author.


Endnotes

1. Aotearoa is the Māori name for New Zealand.

2. All names have been changed to respect confidentiality.