On February 10th, 2014, Mary Simon, Chair of the National Committee on Inuit Education and Paul Quassa, Minister of Education for the Government of Nunavut met in Iqaluit to share their thoughts on education. The following is an edited transcript of their conversation, translated into English. A video recording of their conversation in Inuktitut will be available online soon.

Mary Simon (MS): To begin our conversation, I want to congratulate you for having been elected to the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut, and for your appointment as Minister of Education. We know today how important it is to have a good education, how important it is to finish your education; it seems especially important in this day and age. I want to start off by asking you for your thoughts on education.

Minister Paul Quassa (PQ): Thank you very much Mary. We know that education is a very important issue here in Nunavut. Well, that is to say, everywhere that Inuit live. We speak two languages now, English and Inuktitut. I would like to see it continue that both these languages are kept strong. We should not have a situation where one language has dominance over the other. As an example, there are greater portions of our populace who are going to school here in Nunavut. They are our future and we will always have to keep jobs in mind. Not only here in Nunavut, but if we look at the whole world, our people should be able to work anywhere. That is what I envision. If we are going to be able to work anywhere, we have to look at all aspects of education. We have to consider our strengths and keeping them strong. I strive for that.

MS: What you are saying is very true. At ITK we have been addressing educational issues since 2008. ITK created the Amaujaq National Center for Inuit Education in 2013 as a place where we can coordinate issues relevant to our education systems across the Canadian Arctic in the four Inuit regions. Whereas before English was the only language that we were made to speak in school or on school grounds — even when we were going to school in our communities — in Nunavut and Nunavik we are now teaching in Inuktitut up to grade three, which is good and we need to continue developing this in our schools. Today in Nunavik, after learning in Inuktitut up to grade three students have to switch to English or French, so in fact we have three languages to deal with.

What kind of future are we going to have and what is it like now? Perhaps you could speak to that. I am going to use as an example the curriculum we have in Inuktitut. If we are going to teach in our language that is standardized and in grades higher than grade three, we are going to need enough teachers that are Inuit or Inuktitut-speaking in order to do that. We need to strive for all of that.

PQ: I agree with you wholeheartedly, of course. As I said earlier, our languages have to be strong. Now here in Nunavut, we really feel that. We really want to enhance Inuktitut in our education system, and feel that there should be more of it taught. And we know it is very important to have teachers that can speak Inuktitut, and to have certified teachers. That is very important to us. We can see that it has to be a priority. Like I said earlier, Inuktitut and English
have to be given the same footing. It is apparent that curriculum is readily available in English subjects. We have seen in our territory that curriculum in Inuktut is only available if they are developed by the Inuit teachers themselves. This creates a roadblock. Teachers have to create their own teaching materials. We are seeing that this has to be fixed.

**MS:** It is very true, what you are saying. At ITK, we released a national strategy on Inuit education, which has ten recommendations in regards to addressing the priorities and gaps that exist in our education system. So what you are saying is very consistent with the work we have done at the national level. It is so important for us to work together and for ITK to support the jurisdictions that deliver education in the four Inuit regions. Even though Inuit ended up in different jurisdictions and we have different administrative structures, really without having any say in it historically, we still really need to work together on Inuit education. This will give us a bigger profile nationally, and give us strength in numbers to deal with the federal government. [Paul agrees]

Inuit acting together in regards to education, creating standards in our curriculum, will provide the kind of education we envisage for our children. We are not laying blame but it has been said by many, by mothers and fathers, by all parents, by all grandparents, that we have to support our children's education. At this time, we are trying really hard as parents to figure out how we can further support our children's education — to support their regular attendance and ultimately their completion of their education. We want our youth to have a good future as well as adults that want to go to school for the first time.

**PQ:** This is very true.

**MS:** Could you talk a bit more on this topic?

**PQ:** Parents and guardians are very important in our children's education. We are always thinking now about how we can further encourage parents and others to increase their support of their children's education. It has to be this way. Parents themselves are also teachers. They are teachers in their own homes. Children do not only learn in school; they also learn in their homes. How can we get the parents more involved? That is a struggle of course. Now we are trying to show examples in our homes as to how we can encourage parents in our communities to become more involved in schools. Parents definitely have to be more involved along with district education authority members and school staff. It takes many different people to get involved with children and youth getting an education but parents, especially, have to be involved along with educators and other role models.

**MS:** In various communities, community members have different jobs and different responsibilities. For example, there is the police force, healthcare, and social services, as well as other areas of course. People with different responsibilities should get together on a regular basis and talk about the issues that are affecting their community and try to find solutions, which in the end will help children to stay in school. I think it would be much better if we work together in our communities to help one another figure out ways to keep our children in school.

**PQ:** Of course. If young people who are getting an education can see that there are different career opportunities in different fields in the workforce in their communities, I think they could see their futures more clearly. This would encourage them to continue their education. Like I said earlier, parents, teachers, local education committees — all the different people involved in education — have to be resources, to be of help. Parents have to be more involved. We have to take a closer look at our laws with respect to education. We have to look at how we need to address the Education Act.

**MS:** Will you be reviewing it now?

**PQ:** We will have to review it very soon. Our government will be discussing our plans.

**MS:** How do you feel to date about the laws that you now have [in Nunavut] where the languages are given the same footing in education?

**PQ:** It is written clearly in our legislation [Nunavut’s Inuit Language Protection Act (2008)] that all our languages have to have the same strength. And that Inuit Qaumajotagaqangit has to be a foundation. We have seven guiding principles in Nunavut. The laws have to be followed properly. If Inuit Qaumajotagaqangit is going to be used as a foundation, as we said earlier, educational tools in Inuktut have to be more developed and standardized across the board. Even though we don’t live in the same communities, there is more availability in terms of curriculum now. We are able to trade and share curriculum and tools among ourselves. This new Education Act, which was
enacted in 2009, is being looked at more closely now. It is apparent that we have to look at many different aspects of it.

**MS:** We often mention the National Committee on Inuit Education. Kathy Okpik is an active member there. As we mentioned earlier, the Inuktut curriculum only reaches up to grade three today. Once students have reached grade three here in Nunavut, they then have to learn in English. It is the same in Nunavik, but in Nunavik we also have the option of switching to French after grade three. Sometimes we have youth that are trilingual. Once they have reached grade four, they have to turn to English when they still cannot speak it well. Many youth say they end up getting more confused about what they are learning when they have to switch to another language. This seems to make it more difficult for children to learn in school so we really have to deal with this as soon as possible.

A lot of youth say that they quit school at grade eight or nine because they have given up on their education. You mentioned earlier that Inuktut teachers have to create their own teaching materials. People who are trying to become teachers have to make their own curriculum. We have had to do that, too, in Nunavik. When it is like that in communities, there ends up being a vast amount of different standards of curriculum being taught. For example, in Nunavik, grade three students in Inukjuak and those in Aupaluk can be taught the same subject at the same level but with a different curriculum. There are no set standards across the board. The different education jurisdictions are working on addressing this but it continues to be a heavy burden to some.

**PQ:** We are very cognizant of that and I think we know what we have to do to address it. For example, from kindergarten to grade three or even further, having two languages can be a barrier itself. When I went to school, and maybe it was the same for you too, we were only taught math in English. How can we address teaching math in Inuktut? Sometimes when speaking Inuktut, there are no terms for math properties even though math seems to be a universal language. I think we will have to take a closer look at that. Like I was saying earlier, how can we review our legislation in order to better address these challenges?

**MS:** Could you elaborate a bit more on something that you have mentioned? Once we have properly prepared curriculum materials, it will be apparent that some of the material being learned will have to be only in English, while some of it will only be in Inuktut. If we embraced an education system that allowed students to take their subjects in Inuktut to the highest level possible and were able to graduate high school by taking some subjects in Inuktut and some subjects in English, that would be a better situation because we are using our mother tongue as a teaching language to the highest extent. This would help bridge language-retention in both languages. I think that is good food for thought.

**PQ:** While living in any community, it is often heard that it gets confusing while being caught in the middle of learning in two languages. Yes, we have to fix
that. How can we put more effort into teaching in Inuktitut in our schools and how can we improve it? In Nunavut, we have two different methods of writing in Inuktitut: Syllabics and Roman Orthography. We have to examine the feasibility of these systems. Like you mentioned earlier, if I am in a school somewhere, there should be standards that are the same as other schools. They have to be on equal footing. Sometimes it becomes apparent when someone comes here from a different community there are slight differences in language.

**MS:** Our schools were brought into our communities from a system outside of our culture and language, and it did not relate to our culture or language. Now we have an opportunity to develop a school system that we can call our own, even though we entered into a system that was already established. By working together we can make the changes we want so it becomes something that Inuit take ownership over and call their own. Today, we have begun to administer and manage our school systems. We know that it has to continue improving. There are indications that our Inuktitut language is becoming weaker and weaker. In order to keep it strong we have to use it in our schools as a teaching language in grades higher than grade three, in our homes, and in our communities. The need for recognized standards has to be implemented up to the highest level of education. I see that for all the Inuit of Canada. Up to the highest level, even surpassing Canada’s standards if possible. We can try to do that but only when all the Inuit are using the same writing system, because as you said, there are great differences: in Nunavik we use Syllabics, in Nunavut and the Inuvialuit region, there are two writing methods (Syllabics and Roman Orthography), and in Nunatsiavut they also use the Roman Orthography.

The National Committee on Inuit Education has been given a mandate to create a taskforce to look at this and consult the Inuit on their thoughts regarding a standardized writing system across Inuit Nunangat. This would not have any effect whatsoever in the different dialects. This is already happening. This taskforce will report back to the National Committee on Inuit Education. I know now that I am an elder that we don’t want our language and written word taken from us, so we have to take great care in how we move forward.

Many people do not want it to be changed [to a standardized system]. We are not trying to change what is being used now. I don’t want people to feel that we are changing it, but perhaps [a standardized system] could be taught through the education system. We have to take great care in making these types of changes. It would strengthen the foundation of our school systems where we can start sharing our curriculum across the Inuit regions. We could publish books and so on.

**PQ:** Yes that is what we think. The people who are trying to get a higher education learn fast. Also, when we look at different lands like Akukittuit/Kalaliit Nunaat (Greenland), if we look at them, we see that they have a standardized system — one writing system even when they don’t all speak the same dialect. I would like to explore where we can find a system that works well for us. There are examples
from Nunavik, Alaska, and Greenland, where can we glean from within their education systems something that we can benefit from. If we are going to consider how we can move forward, we have to look at different options.

**MS:** Other Aboriginal peoples besides Inuit have gone through the same thing. At one point the Maori of New Zealand almost lost their language but have recovered it by utilizing a standardized system. Their expertise has been brought forth from different sources. I think that we can do that too.

**PQ:** Yes, we can learn a lot from them. If we look at all of Canada when all of the Education Ministers meet we can learn from these resources, or from experiences overseas. We have to remember that our old way of life, and that of our children and grandchildren, is not at all the same anymore. Now there is new development in our lands like mines, for example. While these are now becoming more prevalent, we have to monitor education and be very aware that there will be employment opportunities in different fields of work.

Also, here in Nunavut, we have to showcase what we are proud of in respect to education. There are many people who have completed their education in the health and law fields, for example. We should showcase these successes to inspire our young people.

**MS:** This can definitely happen, if we can take care of the path education is taking. There is now a large number of youth in Inuit Nunangat. Youth under the age of 25 make up over 50% of the Inuit population today. Although we have addressed some of the educational needs in our regions, we have not addressed issues like mental health and social work to a satisfactory level. These also impact children’s ability to learn in school.

Students need to learn more about what their options are when they become young adults and are looking for jobs. In other words the resource development sector may have a lot to offer, but it has a life span. We need to talk about how their work experience and training in the mining sector can be turned into a very useful job in their community when the mining job is finished or they decide to leave early. For instance, if someone has trained to become a plumber, or electrician, or a chef, for example, they can find these jobs in their communities or create their own businesses. We have to better support the educators in our communities so they can have career fairs and so on with the students. I don’t think we tell them often enough about their future options. We have not said this enough to date.

**PQ:** Yes I agree. On that note, students who are just entering into the education system like early childhood education, daycares, these are things that we have to think about in education. For example, we hear that when children are around 4 or 5 years of age, they learn so much faster. If we start to educate them from that age to get a good education I think it would be very beneficial.

**MS:** That is a very important thing. Many children start going to daycares when their mothers are working. The daycares say that they don’t want to just be a babysitting service but they want to foster the education of little ones. That is why they want to have better-educated caregivers in daycares. We have to address that better. The running of the education system and the running of daycares is separate, and there are currently no linkages between daycare and kindergarten. I think it is important that both systems know the children who are entering their schools, to make sure teachers are aware of the children’s needs if the have any learning challenges. That, too, has to be addressed more. There also has to be more cooperation between daycares and teachers.

**PQ:** Yes. People just entering the schools have to be better introduced into the system. We are addressing that now. How can they be better introduced into the educational stream?

**MS:** Daycares are not funded enough. [Paul agrees] I use Nunavik as an example because that is what I know best. Daycare workers often lose hope because of the lack of resources. When children are small, they want to keep learning even if they are not with their mother. We have to take good care of them. They often say that there is a lack of educational material that is culturally relevant, because we feel there is the need to use Inuktitut.

From birth to reaching the age of entering daycare, the daycares are the ones who are dealing with them all the time, everyday, five days a week. What foundation do they have? Do they have a foundation in Inuktitut? Do they have a culturally relevant foundation? Do they have a foundation in Qaujimajatuqan? These are important questions to consider.

**PQ:** Here, we have mandated, for example, that if a new school is being built, it must have a daycare. Like we discussed earlier, our youth are having children of their own and we are directing this at those...
who want to continue their education. New schools are going to have to have a daycare. It is because we want the youth to continue their education. And when existing schools are going to be added to, there has to be a daycare. It is always keeping in mind the youth who have children. Even adult education centres should have daycares. The intention is to try to keep students more in contact with the school. But we always have to keep in mind what we discussed in the beginning: parents. Parents are also teachers. [Mary agrees] They have to be fully included too. We are not trying to divide.

**MS:** We are trying to unite them.

**PQ:** Yes, if we can unite them more.

**MS:** Teachers and mothers and fathers have to work together in the students’s education. I would like to return to that. I wanted to ask if you had any thoughts. Since we started last year in Nunavut, when Eva Aariak was still Premier, we were asked by a lot of people how we could support our children better when we don’t understand what they are supposed to be learning? If we don’t know whether or not they are learning, how can we support them?

And when our house is too small and we are too many and it is too loud in the household, how can we foster their education if they have homework. They have voiced this to us. Having tried to think on this I can only comment based on my experience. My children have gone on to higher education and even when they need help, I don’t always know how it is that I can help, especially mathematics. I have tried to support them within my house, making sure they are well fed, making sure they get adequate sleep, and trying to support their education by making sure they attend regularly. In any way, support of education can mean many things.

These educational materials that are written, that are produced are not the only way. The support that we give our children, like you said, starts with us. We are the parents; we are the teachers since our children were born. We can instill in our children good learning skills by supporting them in different ways. Also within the community, the mother and the father should not just wait for answers on how to help because they can think for themselves. [Paul agrees] It makes one want them to really understand. We are not trying to say that [the parents] won’t do it properly, that is not what it means. We are only talking about how we could further support our students by wanting them to advance their education.

**PQ:** Today, for example, if we go back a little bit, my parents were never educated in a school, whereas, I went to school. Perhaps for them, it meant even more. Today, for those of us in our generation that have gone to school, we know what they do there, what they have to do there. It would seem that we are better able to relate to our students. Is that understandable? [Mary agrees] My parents had never entered a real school such as what we have today. For them, it probably meant more for their children to go to school on a daily basis.

**MS:** Without being able to speak English as well?

**PQ:** Yes. That is the way it was. Today, we are better educated. And I think we understand better that even when you take your education to grade twelve, you can learn even more. I think we understand that better now. That is, more of us Inuit now. We have to strive harder as parents to encourage [our children] because we understand better now how it is to go to school. Also, for example, there are more opportunities for parental involvement now, such as local education committees, for example. Parents can also be resources in community education bodies; they can help make decisions, such as which teachers will be hired, and how long the school year will be. They are in a position to make decisions now. There are these things, which we in the communities can use. For example, we have ample tools now that we can use. We have ample tools now in our communities. If we could utilize them more...

**MS:** Parents and youth who have completed their education must also help encourage our children to stay in school. They understand the challenges facing our students and understand the importance of finishing school. They really need to take up the responsibility of keeping their children in school along with the schools and community members.

**PQ:** We have to remember that our ancestors had a strong livelihood. Through this, too, we can take that strength and support our children in education. What we learn now, the education system we have now, can be used as tools as they are powerful. We can have a future. It is only by making our languages - English, Inuktitut and French - strong will we have strength. Those of us dealing with education are going to have to keep striving this way to keep our two languages (English and Inuktitut) strong. We will have to investigate to see why they are not so strong now.

We have to keep language strong from the beginning. But we will always have to remember children will have to think like children. When we grew up
we were encouraged to think as children do. When elders were speaking, we were told not to be there since we were children and have to remain that way. We will always have to remember that in a school, because they are children. They cannot be expected to think in adult terms. That is what I think personally. But if we are going to use Inuit Qaujimajatuqangat as a foundation, this is what we have to talk about.

**MS:** This is all very true, what you have said. How about all these people who don't go to school nowadays, there's many of them? How can this be fixed?

**PQ:** We will have to think about the purpose of education. Our education has to be more geared to the workforce. If students can be given more options and guidance as to the direction of their educational path (for instance, deciding to take the academic stream), they would be better equipped.

We used to go to school in Churchill where we would learn reading and academic skills in the morning, and in the afternoons we would be taught manual skills for working — vocational skills. I think that can be applied now. If we look at the rest of the world, education is delivered that way in some places, like Germany for example. Like we discussed earlier, I think we have to look into the different ways of delivering an education for something that can readily apply to Nunavut. If we look into the different ways that education can be delivered, I think that we can have more retention. That is what I think.

I know that there are many who quit school. But there are other avenues that can be used. For example, through an adult education centre, what we call the Arctic College. We have to explore these avenues. And even though we are the government and we administer education, we also have to develop partnerships with the Inuit organizations, the mining industry, and other sectors. We have to help each other and work in partnership. Nunavut is not only a government, and we have a diverse population with different entities. We have a mandate as to how we can steer Nunavut in the right direction. Even though we are different, we have a common aim. I think we can explore different possibilities.

As a government, we receive funding that is earmarked for these things as well as funds through partnerships. It should be discussed more and used more. **[Mary agrees]** Of course industry wants employees. Come, then, if you want employees. Working together we can make this happen.

**MS:** That is very true even if it is not said. I support what you have said because it is so true. I don't think that the governments can handle all that has to be done by them today. We have to work at this together. It is because I want to foster cooperation that I am here. This interview will probably be seen by many people as it will be available online at the Amivajjaq National Centre for Inuit Education and on ITK's website. It will also be translated into English in written form and made available in Northern Public Affairs. These are things that I really wanted to discuss. If there is anything else you wanted to say, feel free to do so Paul.

**PQ:** Thank you. As I mentioned earlier, we have now had an Education Act since 2009. We are fully aware that there have been people who have come here to do research and are fully cognizant as to what they are doing. When our students are the focus and are being mentioned, we have to monitor that and we have. And, I am going to keep striving to see how parents can be more fully involved. I think we have to do that everywhere in the world, **[Mary agrees]** because they are our future.

**MS:** The availability of real help from the federal government was made evident by the Prime Minister when he made the announcement to give substantial funding to First Nations education. Even though this announcement was not directed at us, we are Aboriginals, too. **[Paul agrees]**

We are not the same peoples as the First Nations who will be receiving the money but together the Prime Minister has to show confidence and support us financially as we move forward with our education. I try to think how we can cooperate on this. We can speak to this further any time that we are in Ottawa, I mean even if we don't speak about it today, it's ok. We have to speak of it anytime we get an opportunity.

**PQ:** Yes. I often think how something needs to be arranged, such as a task force. I am not sure what. **[Mary agrees]** I think there has to be something like that. If Inuktut is going to be strong, we have to explore it fully. Languages in school have to be strong. English, Inuktut, and French. Yes. Us Inuit, our language seems to be the same. **[Mary agrees]** Our language is important whether we are in Nunavut or Nunavik. Because it is our way, only through education can we show strength in language.

**MS:** Nakurmiik.

**PQ:** Qajjannamiik.