

Language and identity in an Indigenous teacher education program

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ABSTRACT

The Inuit Bachelor of Education (IBED) and the associated Inuktitut language training, developed by the Nunatsiavut Government, has been an opportunity to explore the relationships between cultural identity and learning an Indigenous heritage language as a second language. Language holds the collective knowledge of a group and cultural identity is one's own perception of connection to the group. A group of preservice teachers are being interviewed twice a year for three years. This study uses narrative methods to give voice to the pre-service teachers' experiences through their personal stories of learning Inuktitut. The narratives thus far reflect how language learning may contribute to an increased awareness of, and connection to, one's Indigenous group. The strengthening of cultural identity can enhance wellbeing, which has implications for the learning of these pre-service teachers and the impact on their future students. This is a preliminary report from the on-going research.

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Introduction

The Inuit Bachelor of Education program is a collaborative initiative between the Nunatsiavut Government, representing one of the four regions of the Inuit homelands in Canada, and Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN). A noteworthy feature of this teacher education is an Inuktitut language program concurrently offered by the Nunatsiavut Government as part of their language rejuvenation strategy.

This exploratory case study examines the personal experiences of five Inuit education students learning Inuktitut through this program and reflects on how the learning impacts their cultural identity. In this article, I provide excerpts from the stories of these participants, discuss some of the emerging themes of the data, and consider the effects these future teachers might have on the cultural identities of their students.

There are two research questions in this study: (1) What are the emotional and psychological experiences, related to learning Inuktitut as a second language, for the Inuit Bachelor of Education students who are also students in the Labrador Inuktitut Training Program? and (2) How is the cultural identity of these students impacted as they learn Inuktitut?

Language is more than a mode of communication; it is a "conveyor of culture" [1, p.613] and "a repository for all of the collective knowledge and experiences that a people, a society, or a nation has" [2, p.22]. Language

and culture are social determinants of health and their loss through colonization has resulted in poorer health outcomes for Aboriginal peoples [3, p.1–2]. The erosion of Indigenous languages is a legacy of both Canada's residential school system [4] as well as the national domination of the French and English languages [5].

Cultural identity is a psychosocial determinant of health [6,7] and comes from the sense of belonging as well as the value and emotional significance a person attributes to membership in a cultural group [8,9]. Berry reported that cultural identity was not only extremely important to participants in a study undertaken for the Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, but that it was "at the core of their existence" [10, p.3]. In referring to residential school survivors, William Mussell, educator and chair of the Native Mental Health Association of Canada wrote: "For most learners, the process of discovering or rediscovering their personal and cultural identity was crucial in initiating the journey toward wellness" [11, p.337]. In defining wellness, Elder Jim Dumont stated that a connection to one's language and land are two aspects central to wellness [12].

Traditional language is "the foundation of a collective identity" [7, p.4] that can foster identity for Indigenous youth [5]. In a study with Inuit youth, Tulloch [13] found that Inuktitut was a way to show youth that they belong. The language was valued as a symbol of Inuit identity and not speaking Inuktitut made it harder for youth to communicate and

participate in community. In researching the identity of Inuit youth, de la Sablonnière et al. [14] emphasized the importance of identity clarity and suggested that the destruction of identity clarity was the most disruptive aspect of colonization for the Inuit. Hallett et al. [15] demonstrated a link between cultural continuity and suicide rates in Aboriginal communities located in British Columbia, Canada. The researchers noted that in communities where less than half of the community members could converse in their heritage language, suicide rates were six times higher than in communities where members had a conversational knowledge of the language. Oster et al. [7] found that cultural continuity is “intricately linked” with Indigenous language and is fundamental to the health of the First Nations communities in their study. In her study of language learning and identity, Nicholas [16] noted that Hopi youth, in the southwestern USA, “realized the necessity of language in feeling and becoming ‘fully’ Hopi – attaining emotional and psychological well-being” [16, p.361].

Development psychologist, Michael Chandler, studies identity formation and its effects on the health and well being of Indigenous youth. In reference to the changes these youth are experiencing, Chandler asks: “how are Indigenous persons to locate or put into words and actions whatever constitutes the gravitational center of their own persistent indigeneity” [17, p.86]?

According to the 2016 Canadian census, an average of 64% of Inuit across the four Inuit regions of Inuit Nunangat can speak an Inuit language [18]. However, only 21% of people in Nunatsiavut, one of the four regions, can speak their regional dialect of Inuktitut [18]. The importance of Inuit language is evident in the work of the National Committee on Inuit Education [19]. “Inuit view the need to learn the Inuit language as not only the most viable model for their schools, but also a human right” [19, p.77]. Natan Obed, President of the Canadian Inuit organization Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), champions the Inuit language and has remarked that even when there are few speakers, the language is “a testament to our cultural and societal strength” [20, para. 1]. Language loss impacts self-identity and well-being [21] and, thus, the endangerment of Inuktitut could signal a potential negative influence on well-being and the ways in which the Inuit of Nunatsiavut are able to relate to their community and culture.

Language is a “key aspect of identity and culture, because of the knowledge it transmits” [22, p.59]. Inuk Sarah Townley is the retired coordinator of the Inuktitut language and Life Skills programs for the Labrador School Board, which encompasses Nunatsiavut. She speaks about the importance of knowing Inuktitut. “For me, really if I didn’t have the Inuktitut language,

who am I? Where would I be?” [22, p.59]. She continues: “Losing the language would be like a disconnect for the person, spiritually, mentally, physically, the whole person, head and body. If I didn’t have that, I wouldn’t know what to do. ... To be well rounded you have to have that Inuktitut language” [22, p.64–65].

If, as Little Bear explains, it is “[t]hrough learning and speaking a particular language, [that] an individual absorbs the collective thought processes of a people” (23, p. 78), then how does a language learner’s cultural self-identity change as the language is learned and what is the nature of the change? These questions are at the root of this current study.

The Nunatsiavut Government has a language strategy that includes a language program for adult learners. The Labrador Inuktitut Training Program (LITP) is being offered, for the first time, to a cohort of pre-service teachers in the community-based Inuit Bachelor Education Degree (IBED) program in Goose Bay, Labrador. The LITP is a concurrent program provided to the IBED students by the Nunatsiavut Government and all of the students are Nunatsiavut beneficiaries. Upon entering the program, the students described themselves as non-speakers. A few of the students had a limited understanding when hearing the language spoken and some had Inuktitut classes as children in school.

Researcher location

A protocol in Indigenist research is to situate one’s self within the research and in relation to the people and place [23]. I am Memorial University’s Faculty of Education lead in the Inuit Bachelor of Education program (IBED). I have lived and worked in Labrador since the program’s inception in 2014. My family is Mi’kmaq from southwestern Nova Scotia where there are very few remaining fluent Mi’kmaq language speakers. I am a retired educator and school administrator who worked in the Nova Scotia public school system. In that role, I advocated for Mi’kmaq language to be offered in schools and for it to be recognized as a second language alternative. In the region in which I taught, French was and still is the only second language alternative and is a required course through many of the grade levels. I am fluent only in English, although I have studied French and, more recently, have taken two introductory Mi’kmaq language courses. My four children self-identify as Mi’kmaq and English is their first language. Two of them also speak French and are learning Mi’kmaq. My six grandchildren also self-identify as Mi’kmaq and have English as their first language. All six also speak French and five are learning

Mi'kmaw. Both my family and work give me vested personal and professional interests in Indigenous language rejuvenation and Indigenous identity.

Methods

This research is framed within an Indigenous research paradigm, based on a subjective process for developing knowledge [24, p.9] and an understanding that life is about stories. “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” [25, p.153]. Narrative methodology is grounded in oral and storytelling traditions [2,25,26] whereby “[s]tories are who we are. They are both method and meaning” [27, p. 108]. The way in which one makes meaning of lived experiences is embodied in first-person narratives [28]. Narrative methodology validates subjective experience and honours first-person voices [29]. The ethics review committees of both Memorial University and the Nunatsiavut Government approved this research.

The research began in late 2015. Students who are interested in participating in the research are being interviewed twice a year, for three years. The interviews are conducted by a research assistant and take place one-on-one using open-ended, guiding questions intended to draw on the personal narratives of participants. Pseudonyms are used when quoting the interview participants. The narratives will be analyzed for: common themes amongst the participants, changes to the individual participant’s narratives over the three-year period, and the explanations or “thinking through” as each participant articulates her experience learning Inuktitut [30]. Conference presentations by the IBED students and a film about the students are also sources of data.

Conference presentation. In 2016, the IBED students presented at the Inuit Studies Conference. One of the students, Tracey,¹ spoke about her family, learning Inuktitut, and Elder Sarah Townley who was an instructor and co-ordinator in the language program.

“Ilinnialaugit kut (‘We learn Inuktitut’). In my family (*ilagijaga*), my grandmother was Anânatsiaga Shiwaki. The Shiwak’s family name came from *Sikoak* meaning “the first thin ice.” In our family, over the generations, we lost Inuktitut. The Inuit are very family-oriented and our core beliefs about family and kinship have been kept in the language. However, we are the most southerly Inuit in the world, and we were in close contact with non-Inuit. My family members historically travelled so far that, by my generation, the connections to culture and language were very tenuous. I am excited because of this opportunity with Nunatsiavut and our

Inuit Bachelor of Education program to learn Inuktitut. When our Elder, Sarah Townley, is teaching us Inuktitut, her eyes sparkle as she activates the synapses in my brain with exercises that vitalize the language; learning that way makes the language real. We move our bodies. We touch things. We name them. She inspires us to use our brains and, in this way, Inuktitut comes alive” [31].

Film documentary. In a film documentary about the IBED program [32], student Jenni-Rose looks ahead to when she will complete the LITP program. “I do expect that I’ll feel a deeper sense of connection just knowing some of the language that my ancestors spoke. So I wanted my son to be able to experience that right from the start. I want him to know at a young age that this is important and this is where he comes from. In order for you to be confident and content as a person, it’s so important for you to understand where you came from.” [32, 22:34–23:03]. Doris is another student in the film. She talks about her dream of becoming an Inuktitut teacher, her pride in learning Inuktitut in school, and the role of the instructors in her life. “My Inuktitut teachers were my mentors and role models.” [32, 1:23–1:28] Selma Jararuse, an LITP instructor, says that learning the language is important. “I’m always proud of anyone learning Inuktitut.” [32, 17:46]

Findings

In this exploratory case study, I examine interviews from the first 2 years in the program. This is an effort to begin to understand the relationship between identity and language at a mid-point in the process. The following are interview excerpts of the five participants’ stories gathered over six interview sessions with each participant. The participants are all Inuit women ranging in age from 28 to 55. These initial excerpts set the context, in their own words, for how they understand identity and language. Pseudonyms are used for each participant.

Participant 1

Ann described her experience of learning Inuktitut as primarily about connections between language and the environment. She explains: “I have been imagining about learning [Inuktitut], but now it is more real. There is a connection to the land, sky, ice and a deeper understanding through learning Inuktitut. I have a deeper understanding of self and am getting more of a sense of how language reflects the environment. There is a real connection to the land experience.”

¹Students names are used here as they presented at the Inuit Studies Conference and co-published in the Inuit Studies Journal.

Participant 2

At the beginning of the program, Alice anticipated how learning Inuktitut might influence her. She said: “Not only will I have culture and bloodline, but I will consider myself more Inuit. It will show in my knowledge of the language...Language would make you more involved or connected with elders.” In describing the changes to her sense of self mid way through the program, Alice explained: “I feel like in the past, because I couldn’t speak Inuktitut, I was not as Inuit. Right now, I can pick out words of elders. I feel proud and more confident and able to make connections with family and community.” In discussing how knowing Inuktitut might impact her work as a classroom teacher, Alice explained: “I will definitely bring more language, culture, and Indigenous practices into the classroom. I would even feel more confident asking an elder to come into my class.”

Participant 3

Faye explained the ways in which she sees the learning of the language as a symbol of a person’s identity within the culture. She said: “It’s a big part of identifying as Inuk. It’s hard to see one without the other. I am embarrassed to be called Inuk because I don’t speak it. It’s like I’m disgracing the Inuit.” When asked, part way through the program, what effect the learning of Inuktitut is having on her sense of self, she responded: “I am not where I’d like to be with respect to self. I have a lot of pride knowing that I’m getting there. It gives me justification of who I am. I am Inuit because I can speak it (Inuktitut).” Faye also talked about how learning the language is influencing her relationship with others: “It’s having a huge impact [on my relationship] with elders. They are happy to see our interest in Inuktitut and I have a big spot in my heart for elders.”

Participant 4

Janice describes her experience as an Inuktitut student in the following way: “Learning the language is like putting [together] a piece of the puzzle that you didn’t know was missing.” She explains that learning the language is making her “...feel somewhat more whole.” In anticipating the consequences of language learning on her life, Janice says: “I think I will be more proud to identify as an Inuit woman because I will hold the knowledge of the language, and I am someone who can share that knowledge.”

Participant 5

Learning Inuktitut, as Jane explains it, is “a critical part” of her identity. In an early interview, she described her experience by saying: “In some ways, it is strengthening and I am reaching out for support [to learn].” But she said that she also feels “alienated” as she does not know very much of the language. “I sometimes shy away from community members [because of] conversations in Inuktitut.” In a later interview, she said: “I’m starting to see it as important but I’m still intimidated by it. It does strengthen a person’s sense of self and is a unique identifier because it is strength unto itself.” She describes her knowledge of Inuktitut as “add[ing] to how I could enrich children’s learning.”

Analysis

The selected interview excerpts, from students in the LITP, are an indication of how the students are thinking about themselves as Inuktitut language learners and how learning the language is impacting their cultural self-identity. This is a preliminary report on the research and changes, as indicated through the narratives over time, may continue to develop. In this initial analysis, there are three themes emerging: how learners see themselves, how the learning contributes to connectedness, and how the loss of language led to a sense of alienation.

How the learners see themselves

Ann explains that she is getting a “deeper sense” of herself through learning Inuktitut. In her first interview, Alice described her expectation that, in learning the language, she would feel “more Inuit.” She is proud of who she is and confident as she learns to speak the cultural language. Faye describes her pride in learning Inuktitut and considers herself more Inuit because she can speak the language. Janice used the metaphor of finding a missing puzzle piece as she described learning the language and added that it make her feel “somewhat more whole.” Such positive feelings were present in Tracey’s description of herself as excited to learn the language, and she explained how she is embodying the language through the learning process.

How learning Inuktitut contributes to connectedness

The participants described how learning Inuktitut contributed to their sense of connectedness to people, place, and culture. Alice associated Inuit identity with knowing cultural ways, having Inuit bloodlines, and speaking Inuktitut. Language, she said, would connect her to elders, her family,

and community. Tracey connects the loss of Inuktitut to her family history, and she locates Inuit values in the language. Jenni-Rose anticipates that learning Inuktitut will provide a link between her Inuktitut speaking ancestors and her son, giving both mother and son an identity grounded in language and place. Faye said language and culture go together, adding that she is Inuit because she can speak Inuktitut. For her, learning Inuktitut is linked to her relationship with elders, who are happy about the language learning. This conveyance of positive feelings from an elder or language speaker to the learners is evident in Selma's statement that she has pride in anyone learning Inuktitut. Whalen et al. [33] suggest that by validating the worldview and values that language represents, communities can improve the self-identity of Indigenous language speakers. In an Inuktitut language and literacy program that was embedded in a traditional skills program, Tulloch et al [34]. found that rekindled intergenerational interactions and cultural learning could nourish participants' wellbeing.

Language creates a bond between people and place [35], as exemplified in Ann's description of Inuktitut connecting her to the land, sky, and ice of Nunatsiavut. The connection between language and place, as well as the importance of intergenerational connections, was highlighted in Jenni-Rose's description of wanting her son to learn Inuktitut because such knowledge creates a union of positive feelings and the place of origin.

Learning Inuktitut is one way the IBED students are becoming more culturally connected. The knowledge of one's heritage is an important part of cultural continuity and promotes a healthy self-identity within that culture [15]. According to Auger, such enculturation is a protective factor in wellness [6].

How the loss of language leads to a sense of alienation

The participants also spoke about their negative emotions related to language loss. Although it seems to be changing, Alice described her feelings of being "not as Inuit" when her language ability was very limited. Faye described being embarrassed about not speaking the language and said that she disgraces the Inuit if she is referred to as Inuit without speaking Inuktitut. In relating the history of her family travelling away from the Inuit homelands, Tracey explained that erosion of language and culture took place before her generation, perhaps giving insights into her own sense of disconnection to the Inuit culture. Although Jane describes Inuktitut as a critical part of identity and as a unique identifier, she stated that her limited knowledge of Inuktitut leaves her feeling intimidated and alienated. Given the importance, she places on the role of language in identity, her

narrative indicates the need for a deeper understanding of her thoughts and feelings. Lee found there was a mixture of pride and shame for youth learning their heritage languages. She wondered if shame might reflect the challenges of language learning, which could cause a person to feel shameful about him/herself [36, p. 317]. It will be important to reexamine this theme to determine if there is a change as students continue learning Inuktitut.

Implications of the research for health and well-being

Rejuvenating and strengthening the Inuktitut language is crucial in Nunatsiavut as only 21% of the population speaks Inuktitut [18]. As Inuktitut learners, the participants in this research have expressed the ways that learning their heritage language has impacted their sense of cultural connectedness. Health and wellness associated with the positive effect of collective identity is not only important for them as individuals but it is also vital given the role they will play as community leaders and as significant adults in the lives of children and youth. As future educators, they will be able to contribute to language learning either as Inuktitut language teachers or as classroom teachers who are able to integrate the language into all aspects of student learning.

Because language has a positive influence on health and wellness [37,38], then language rejuvenation initiatives, such as the LITP, can be understood as "a health promotion strategy" (37, p.78). Inuit suicide rates are the highest in Canada and those within Nunatsiavut are higher than in any of the other four regions of Inuit Nunangat [39]. As language revitalization can reduce alienation and increase connectedness, it is important to consider the ways in which Inuktitut language teachers can nurture youth's positive self-identity, their sense of belonging, and their well-being through language learning.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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