

The Cost of Learning

LITERACY COUNCILS TACKLE CHALLENGES OF THE NORTH

by Adam K. Johnson



The teaching of culture plays a major role toward achieving literacy.



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Left to right: Ezra Kasarnak, Nora Makpah, Leah Idlout and Damarisee Innualu enjoy a game.

Just a few days into her new job with the Nunavut Literacy Council (NLC), Rankin Inlet's Gloria Kowtak has a feeling she's stumbled onto something special. "So far it's working really well and I'm really enjoying it," she says from the council's office in the community of 2,400. She also throws in terms like "change" and "make a difference" when describing her new tasks.

Kowtak is the new Inuktitut literacy development co-ordinator for the Council in Rankin. For the last couple of years, the McGill-trained instructor has taught Grade 1 at Nanisivik elementary school. After a recent maternity leave, she says she was looking to do something a little different. As we speak, she's taking a break from creating activity sheets for preschoolers to help them learn Inuktitut. "We have the numbers one-to-10 in Inuktitut, shapes, colours, days of the week, months of the year, matching opposites, weather. Just the different themes that would be important for (schools and daycares) to have."

It may seem basic, but these exercises will be a vital link to connect young children with literacy in a territory where both English and Inuktitut are official languages. Making these early connections in all of the North's languages is a large part of the mandate of the literacy councils in both the NWT and Nunavut. And according to some data, this is the part of the country where it's needed most.

For many educators, Statistics Canada's International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey is the defining measure of literacy levels in English and French. It measures abilities in reading, writing and problem solving on a scale of 1 to 5 — Level 1 means a person has difficulty with any written material, while Level 5 denotes academic-level comprehension. Ideally, most people surveyed would be Level 3 or above — which the survey defines as "the level that experts believe people need to get a job in today's knowledge-based world."

Nationally, 42 per cent of Canadians aged 16 to 65 don't meet these requirements, a figure the survey's editors deem worthy of attention. In the NWT, that number is only

slightly higher at 42.6 per cent — but among the aboriginal population, that number jumps to 69 per cent. And in Nunavut these numbers increase dramatically — 60 per cent of all working adults score below Level 3 in the territory. For Nunavut's youth, that number grows to 80 per cent.

In the Nunavut case, Statistics Canada acknowledges that the large proportion of Nunavummiut who speak English as a second language contributes greatly to these numbers. However, a survey done by the Nunavut Bureau of Statistics in 2001 found just 64 per cent of Inuit surveyed stated they could read and write Inuktitut syllabics "very well" or "relatively well." Only 53 per cent stated they could read and write well or relatively well in Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun using Roman orthography (standard lettering).

So, there's a problem, but the causes vary depending on the source. Aside from second language issues, factors potentially to blame include limited education resources, isolation, racism, learning disabilities (such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)), overcrowding and an outright "failure of the K-12 system" according to one study.

But as Kim Crockatt, executive director of the Nunavut Literacy Council, points out, at least both government agencies and non-profit groups like the Council now have the hard data to recognize and deal with literacy issues. She says it wasn't always this way. "We had information but it was pretty much anecdotal," Crockatt says from her office in Cambridge Bay. "You can't lobby for change if you're working



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with anecdotal information. Now we have information right across the country. The next step is to put a price tag on what it would cost to raise literacy levels and what the economic benefit (from investment) would be.”

And they’ve got it. Shortly after this interview, policy research firm Data Angel released a report that contends investment in literacy is the best way to boost Canada’s lagging economy. The 64-page cost/benefit analysis estimates an investment of \$6.4 billion (the amount needed to bring Canadians “up to speed” in adult literacy) over 10 years would result in major gains — between 80 and 250 per cent annual return. These returns are based on estimated increases in income from those who upgrade their skills (resulting in higher income tax revenues) and savings in EI and social assistance, among other factors.

While the numbers may be a bit pie-in-the-sky, Crockatt says more hard data is just what the doctor ordered. “It’s mind-blowing, actually,” she says of the huge numbers the report lays out. “We feel now that we have all the information we need to make a very strong case to the federal government to gain support for adult literacy.”

Not that Councils in either territory have been sitting on their laurels in the meantime.

While literacy numbers in the Northwest Territories appear to be a bit better, its issues can be even more complicated. To start, the territory boasts 11 official languages (English, French, Cree, Dogrib, Chipewyan, South Slavey, North Slavey, Gwich’in, Inuvialuktun, Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun) several of which are on the decline. The NWT Literacy Council tries to promote literacy in all of them.

Reached in Yellowknife, community literacy co-ordinator Lisa Campbell and research co-ordinator Helen Balanoff lay out the council’s strategy in the NWT — a model that both territories follow.

“Our mandate is to support literacy development,” Balanoff says. “We do the training part.” This includes promoting family literacy, training adult educators, running community workshops, developing new classroom materials



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Learning Inuktitut at the Whale Cove Daycare sure looks like fun.

and building an interactive online presence. The goal is to provide the raw materials and training needed to encourage literacy in the communities and let the benefits spread organically — from teacher to student and from parent to child. It’s as simple as encouraging parents to speak to their children in their aboriginal language, or as complex as *Northern Edge* — an online magazine the council develops to share resources and literacy news from around the territory.

And, Campbell adds, that’s not all: “We do lots of things — we head up NWT literacy week each fall, run Family Literacy Day as well as Aboriginal Languages Month. Along with that we develop radio and TV ads about literacy development and family literacy.”

While the aims of their work have been consistent, the scope of what the Councils feel they can accomplish has grown a great deal over a relatively short period of time. Both Literacy Councils, like many around the country, have a common root: 1990, the United Nations’ International Year of Literacy. Seed funding from the federal government leading up to the year was used for a literacy conference in the Northwest Territories — which at that time stretched from the Yukon border to Baffin Island. From that conference, a literacy council was eventually created. Staff and resources steadily grew until 1999, when Nunavut was created and the Council was split in two.

“The work we do is very rewarding in the sense that we can see our accomplishments,” Campbell says. Both she and Balanoff have been working in literacy for nearly a decade, coming from the teaching world. “We do training, and we get a call back the next day — all of a sudden programs are up and running. It’s been a really good learning experience.”

Nunavut literacy development co-ordinator Cayla Chenier has been with the Council for eight years. She started working at the Rankin Inlet community learning centre 12 years ago and says she jumped at the chance to specialize in literacy development. “The response is always really positive,” she says of her work in the communities. “People are very much interested in language issues and literacy development in Nunavut, especially with children.” Plus, she says it’s nice to feel like she’s making a difference. “It’s a cause I believe in, certainly. I think literacy is one of those fundamental issues. It’s



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Parent-child interaction provides an opportunity to learn together.

an issue of levelling the playing field so everyone has equal access and is able to attain their highest potential.”

Crockatt herself has been around since 1997. “I used to be a librarian here in Cambridge Bay,” she says of her start with the Council. “I realized that the people using the library were mostly people from the south — not many locals. I really had concerns about that and I wanted to find way to engage local people.” She says the library started running culturally based literacy programs that gained some traction with the community. And when a job with the Literacy Council popped up, she grabbed the opportunity to spread her ideas around the territory.

However, working in the North is not without its challenges. Aside from the apparent and growing need for literacy support, the sheer cost of functioning in the territories can limit the councils’ effectiveness.

“One of the biggest hurdles is the size of the NWT and the cost of travel,” says Balanoff. “When we do training, it’s very expensive to bring people to Yellowknife and for staff to travel out to the communities. We’re also a very small organization. There are only six of us who work in the Literacy Council, so we have a capacity issue ourselves. “But if you go on our website, you’d be amazed at what a group of six people can do.”

On the other side of the border, Crockatt sees similar problems. “The needs are so great that it sometimes feels overwhelming,” she says. “We try to keep a focus on things that will support people working in the field and where the impact will be the greatest. Unfortunately there’s not a lot of money out there for actual program delivery. That’s not what we do. We can provide all the training, but community



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Left to right: Charlie, Mark and Wyatt Cameron enjoy reading together as a family.

groups can’t find funding to deliver the programs.” While the Council has some base funding each year from various levels of government, Crockatt says the NLC usually seeks out project funding — monies doled out on a project-by-project basis. It involves a lot of time and paperwork, she says.

However, Crockatt sees plenty to be hopeful about in the future. The new pulpit to pound via the hard data of surveys and studies is one thing. But Crockatt also says the Government of Nunavut seems to be looking more closely at the role literacy plays in economic development. “We sat in on the working group for the Nunavut Adult Learning Strategy,” Crockatt says. “We had a really, really big impact on what came out of that strategy; literacy as an issue on its own was the overarching theme for the strategy. It opened a lot of eyes, so I was thrilled with that for sure. Hopefully someone will pay attention and take a real hard look at (literacy funding). I hope that we can get some movement on it.”

Back in Rankin Inlet, newcomer Gloria Kowtak says she got into literacy for similar reasons to her contemporaries. As a teacher, she was often developing curriculum and activities to help her students learn their language – teaching aids she thought could have more widespread potential. “All the ideas that I had from being a teacher, I’m just bringing them into this new workplace and using them,” she says. “Right now in Inuktitut, there is not much material out there (for students). That’s why I’m really excited to be doing this... I’m just really looking forward to working here and making it a better place.” 