

Recognizing the Wealth of Knowledge in Inuit, First Nations, and Métis Communities

Mary Caroline (Carol) Rowan

Abstract

In this interview, Carol Rowan recounts how she moved up North to Inukjuak, because she sought to live and learn with Inuit. Following her union with Jobie Weetaluktuk in 1984, and the subsequent births of their three Inuit children, she developed pedagogical approaches informed by and rooted in Inuit ontologies and epistemologies. She discusses how written and spoken Inuktitut language holds culturally specific content. Moreover, she shares how living with land, engaging with Elders, speaking in Inuktitut, and using local materials of the place can serve to displace prevailing Western hegemony with deeper, more intimate understandings of local environments and lifestyles.

Can you tell us how you became involved in Nunavik early childhood education?

I wanted to go up North. A Professor at York University, Dee Appee, a developmental psychologist, befriended me at our church when my mom couldn't go because she had a new baby. Dee had four sons and no daughter, and she took me under her wing. She started to take me to puppet shows and events in the Toronto area where we lived at the time. And she would give me Inuit prints as gifts. I was very young, maybe eight or nine years old, and these prints came from Cape Dorset. They were the very early Inuit prints. So, I had these prints as well as a subscription to the *National Geographic Bulletin*.

My fascination with Inuit and with the Arctic, and with the prospect of exploring the Arctic terrains at some point, was nurtured as a very young child. When I graduated from Trent University with a Bachelor of Arts in History, I asked myself: "What am I going to do?" My two best friends were both going to Iqaluit to work and I wondered, "How am I going to get there?" I decided that if I became a teacher, then I would be able to travel North. That's how I first got North. I went to Bishop's University and got a Diploma in Education. Afterwards, I went to the Magdalen Islands for a couple of years, and then I went up North to Inukjuak on the coast of Hudson's Bay. And I really loved it. It was an amazing community!

I fell in love with an Inuit man and we had three children. By 1987, we were living in Iqaluit and I needed to find some childcare for my two young boys, while I worked. So, I ended up becoming involved in establishing the Iqaluit Childcare Association. From the moment that I had my second son, who was born in Iqaluit, I knew I would need to work, but I also knew that if he was going to benefit from childcare, I wanted him to be nurtured as he would be by my mother-in-law, Lucy Weetaluktuk. This would mean being fed the tenderest morsels of meat, and food from the tail of fish, and being carried on her back, and sung little songs—the aqausiit songs that are custom designed to be dyadic songs between two people. And so that's how I became involved in developing Inuit early learning and childcare, because I wanted my kids to be cared for in an Inuit way, informed by Inuit ways of knowing and being.

You moved into adapting learning stories approaches from the Māori culture and education. Can you tell us a little bit about that and how you brought that into the early childhood work that you were doing?

Margaret Carr from Waikato University has worked very closely with several Māori scholars, including Lesley Rameka. In 2009, I decided that I was ready for more learning. I had a Bachelor of Arts in History, and I had taught school and had become quite involved in Inuit early learning and childcare. But I decided I needed more. I was missing the theory, although I couldn't have known that then. So, I went back to school. I needed to get a couple of early childhood education courses, which I didn't have. And when I started those courses, it felt like I was on an I.V. The relationship between reading the literature and my quest for learning more about how things worked in early childhood, just linked up through those studies that I undertook at the University of Victoria. At that time, Margaret Carr was the world-renowned lead on learning stories.

I just became fascinated because I felt that learning stories provided a way to not engage in Euro-Western strategies of assessment that were based on a checklist, but rather, to use a storied approach to gain insights into a much broader understanding of relations with family, culture, and language. The work that I saw that was being done in Māori communities, provided an example for us in Nunavik, to meet governments' requirements for assessment, but in ways that better suited our own purposes.

Can you describe this approach in a bit more detail and give some examples of why it really seemed to work for you?

We started by asking the teachers to look for what interested children, with a simple prompt: "Look for children's interests." And the educators began to take pictures of children's interests, for one week. People looked for children's interests and then printed up some pictures. And we looked at them and said: "What stories are there? What do you see?" This was the work I did for my Master's research, when I was in Inukjuak, my husband's hometown, which is on the coast of Hudson's Bay in Nunavik. Interestingly, one of the early childhood educators had gone up the Hill. And she had gone up the Hill to where the local cultural committee had a "qumak," which is a moss structure, and a snow house, an igloo (illu).

The educator had taken pictures of a group of her children, who had marched up the hill and gone inside the snow house and outside it, and later assembled the photos to make a story with them. We talked over her stories with a group of educators and asked, "What are the implications? What do we learn from your story? And what do you want to do next?" And she said, "Well, in the igloo there's a qulliq," which is a stone lamp that's lit using seal fat or, in these days, Mazola corn oil. And she said, "This little girl wants to seek the qulliq lit." And so we talked about the possibility of lighting the qulliq in the playroom amongst the group of educators during this evening meeting. And they said, "Yeah, let's make this happen." And it happened. Because of the way we were working, I had invited the board members and there were administrative people there, too. And the Chair of the Board said, "We have to do this. We can be sure we could hire an Elder. We can find money. We can support this work." So we knew that we were going to get a qulliq lit in the childcare center.

And finally, after three weeks, we had arranged for the Elder to light it. Because my husband is a filmmaker, I had assembled a film crew. My daughter happened to be in town, and the people from the regional government were coming and it was all terrific. Meanwhile, once I arrived at the childcare center, the Elder had called to say her grandchildren's teacher hadn't shown up at school, so she was not going to come.

After 40 minutes, the early childhood educator finally decided to do it. And she lit the qulliq, and children came from the different classes and we filmed the event. And once the lighting was completed, the early childhood educator turned to me and said, "I'm a real Elder now. I'm a cultural teacher now." So, the work with the learning stories actually did three things. First, it provided us a way to access Inuit cultural knowledge through early childhood practice, through this process of documentation, reflection, and planning. We were able to organize an event and make it happen inside the classroom, which actually ended up being really incredibly empowering to the early childhood educator, who became a holder of cultural knowledge. The learning stories were all written in Inuktitut.

Second, now you may or may not know, but there's very little written for young children in Inuktitut. That was 10 years ago. Today, there is more, but there's still very little available. However, these stories featured the children in their community and were put in binders, which could be taken home. They were hung on clotheslines in the classroom, posted on walls, pinned up above cubbies, and posted throughout the child care centre. And they're in Inuktitut. I watched parents reading and laughing together as they were learning about their children's lives in a program. Meanwhile, they're reading all in Inuktitut, which meant that the Inuktitut language was living as a vibrant workplace language, to the extent that the early childhood educators were asking for grammar classes so that they would write better, and speaking to each other and seeking word nuances. This gave us access to Inuit cultural knowledge—it gave us a very vibrant way of making printed Inuktitut live inside the childcare center and in the community.

And so that's language, that's culture. And the third thing the learning stories did was provide us a way to build relationships, because all of a sudden, when the parents are reading about what their child is doing at the childcare center, above the child's cubby, their view of the work of an early childhood educator shifted. And their understanding about their child as an engaged, capable, interested person was made accessible. And so, the work of the learning stories really was very important, especially in those three ways.

What were the challenges? Can you describe one or two?

First of all, working with syllabics was a big challenge. We had been very fortunate to receive some pretty good money from Aboriginal Head Start, so that the early childhood teachers could have laptops with which to manipulate the pictures and type up their texts. However, the keyboards had Roman letters on them, so we would have to paste up a syllabic chart until I managed to find some stickers for the keys. The early childhood educators in the early days had to learn how to use the laptop and upload the pictures. This was in 2011, some 10 years ago. But after all that, they had to write in Inuktitut and then transpose the syllabics on the wall to the keys that were in Roman. That was pretty complicated.

Another challenge I illustrated was the story about the qulliq lighting. It takes time to make things happen. Some of the realities of a small or medium-sized Northern community mean you can't be sure who's going to be where on any particular day. But we had an amazing amount of really good support in the community. The educators took up the work and the parents were pretty excited, and seeing the children open their binders, lie on the floor, and read the Inuktitut stories in pairs together, was to me a dream come true.

What are some of the major lessons you've learned about teaching and learning in the North?

One of the things that came out of the interviews that I did at the end of my Master's research was that the learning stories gave us a way to access cultural knowledge. I went on and did my PhD, and there we worked together with two Elders and some of the early childhood educators and the administration to go further and to think with land, water, snow, and ice. I call it "Nunangat" pedagogies, which mean to get outside of the Euro-Western constructed early childhood center, and try to be with land. And it was, in fact, a lesson learned that it's 100 meters from the child care centre to the shore. You can get outside of the 10-foot fence and go and walk 100 meters to the shore and to a world of possibilities. We had a younger Elder that we called the cultural Elder or cultural educator. And then we had our older Elder. We said to the younger Elder, "You know, we're gonna do this. We're gonna make this happen. What is it that you want to do?" And she had 20 ideas. Immediately, we had a list of all these things that she wanted to do. She wanted the children to go fox trapping; collect willow branches; make a sealskin bag; go cod fishing. And so, I learned that when you kind of get some funding together and you get some resources organized; you can turn to people in the community to say, "What's important, what matters?" And what would you like to do?", that people have really good ideas. And then it's a matter of listening very carefully to those ideas and trying to figure out how to make them happen. And by documenting what's happening with photos, and then by making stories or films, we've made some videos and so on, you have a way to record what's going on. And then to think further, to reflect, assess, and plan for the future.

Are there implications about teaching and learning, more generally, to be gleaned from this pedagogy that would be useful to teacher education programs, researchers in schools in other areas that are aren't Northern, but Southern?

The Nunangat pedagogy is about thinking with land, water, snow, and ice—in other words, it's about going outside. So, what does it mean? It means that as humans, you start to realize, we're not really choosing when we go outside. All of a sudden it's the environment that makes choices for you. One example of that is when I was doing my PhD research and working very closely with this Elder educator and she wanted to go get willow branches and it was a very windy day. When I arrived at the childcare center, I said to the director, "I don't think we're going to go today. What do you think?" And she said, "No, I don't think so, but why don't you go check with Elisapie and see what she says." So I go check Elisapie and she says, "YEAH, we're going! It's good because it's snowing outside and the wind is blowing the snow off the branches. So we're on our way!" One implication is that as humans we're not really in control at all. We might like to think that we are. The environment is of great

importance and, in fact, it makes many choices for us, including what we can reasonably do on any particular day. So that's one implication.

The second implication is about engaging with Elders. It's all part of counteracting Duncan Campbell Scott and John A. McDonald's ideas about residential schools and about removing Indigenous children from their families which perpetuates . . . The residential school system and colonial education undermined families and cut them off from their young children and discredited and made inaccessible culturally specific place-based knowledges.

Engaging with Elders is a very important way to recognize the wealth of knowledge that is held inside Inuit, First Nations, and Métis Communities by knowledge holders and by Elders. And by engaging with Elders, we find strategies to live Indigenous knowledges inside educational practices. One recommendation that I have made, and that I stand by is, I don't really want to be involved in any projects where there are no Elders involved. I think if you find the money, you'll make it happen. You bring in your Elders, who are knowledge holders. From the moment you start to think, you're going to put your pen on a funding application, and you don't let them go until you're all done, unless they move on and you don't have them to work with because maybe they've died, or something else has happened. But you really do need to have Elder participation throughout the whole project from step a to step z—that's an important lesson learned.

Using Indigenous languages, the language of the community, the local language of the place. In the little summary I gave you of the learning stories, I tried to illustrate just how easy it is to bring in a written language into people's lives, but it takes real thinking. But when you're engaging with Nunangat, then there's all this language and some of it has been lost. Some of it wasn't accessible to people our age who were inside these residential schools, when their families were outside gathering willow branches.

During residential school times the language that goes with those gathering practices was not made accessible. Not only the language, but also the process, the places, those deep understandings. I've come to think that Inuit and, more broadly, Métis and First Nations knowledges, have to be lived to be accessible. There is so much meaning embedded in language, that it's absolutely critical. It kind of makes me angry in Quebec when we're so focused on French and then English, but we don't even speak about the 11 other Indigenous languages in our province. And why not? Inside those languages, there is rich knowledge that we're missing out on.



Mary Caroline (Carol) Rowan has spent the last 40 years travelling and working between Inuit Nunangat and Montreal, Quebec. Her interest is in living Inuit ways of knowing and being through pedagogy and curriculum, in places where young children and families are engaged. The trail has involved working in communities with Elders, parents, children, and teachers. This work has led to the construction of child care centres, the adoption of policy, the development of organizational manuals, and the creation of curricula. It has involved teacher/parent education, the making of Inuktitut language children's books, the assembling of learning stories, and a proposal to adopt Nunangat pedagogies as strategy to think with land, snow, and ice.