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## Exploring the Intersection of Education and Indigenous Status from a Social Determinants of Health Perspective: Parent and Family Engagement in Secondary School in Nunavik

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# Exploring the Intersection of Education and Indigenous Status from a Social Determinants of Health Perspective: Parent and Family Engagement in Secondary School in Nunavik

## **Abstract**

In Canada, Indigenous Peoples' health and wellbeing is linked with the legacies of colonization. A social determinants of health model shifts focus from individual-level health contexts to broader socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental conditions associated with population health outcomes. Education is a key social determinant of health, closely tied to both positive health outcomes and socioeconomic status. In communities across Canada, educational success remains out of reach for disproportionately large numbers of Indigenous youth and adults. This qualitative study examined the intersection of two social determinants of health—Indigenous status and education—by exploring educational engagement in secondary school for Inuit parents and families, secondary school students, educators, and other Inuit community members in an Inuit community in Nunavik, northern Quebec.

## **Keywords**

Inuit youth, academic retention, family engagement, social determinants of health

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## **Exploring the Intersection of Education and Indigenous Status from a Social Determinants of Health Perspective: Parent and Family Engagement in Secondary School in Nunavik**

In Canada, Indigenous Peoples' health and wellbeing is linked with the legacies of colonization: consequences of the Indian Act of 1876, disregard for land claims, forced relocation, and the formation and enforced attendance of residential schools. The results have shaped Indigenous Peoples' physical, mental, cultural, and community health outcomes (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012; Reading, 2015). Across Canada, Indigenous Peoples have higher mortality and morbidity rates and higher rates of preventable chronic and infectious diseases, as compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts (Waldram, Herring, & Young, 2006; Yi, Landais, Kolaheedooz, & Sharma, 2015). These disparities with regard to individual and community health outcomes have contributed to the increased attention paid to the ways in which the social environment impacts the health of individuals, families, and communities.

While health inequities have traditionally been connected to biomedical determinants, social factors have been identified as important sources of differential health outcomes (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). The social determinants of health model advocates a shift in focus from individual-level health contexts to the broader socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental conditions that are closely associated with health outcomes in the population (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). There is general consensus across these models that social determinants account for the myriad conditions that shape individuals', communities', and regions' health overall—in particular, the extent to which an individual stays healthy or becomes ill; the extent to which a person has the physical, social, and personal resources to identify and achieve personal aspirations, meet needs, and cope with his or her environment; and the quantity and quality of resources that a society makes available and accessible to its members (Galea & Vlahov, 2002; Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2010; Raphael, 2009; Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). Studies examining social determinants of health have included multiple elements in their models, including income, education, Indigenous status, gender, occupational status, employment status and working conditions, food security, housing, membership in a racialized group, access to health care services, addictions, and disability status (Denton, Prus, & Walters, 2004; Kosteniuk & Dickinson, 2003; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010; PHAC, 2010; Raphael, 2009).

Education is a critical social determinant of health (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2005; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010) and is closely tied to both positive health outcomes and socioeconomic status, as those with higher education levels are more likely to be healthier than those with lower education levels (PHAC, 2010). Literacy, for both children and adults, contributes significantly to positive health and wellbeing for individuals, communities, and society more broadly by providing people with critical knowledge and skills, which can develop into effective environmental mastery (PHAC, 2010). Moreover, educational achievement improves access to opportunities for income security, job security, and job satisfaction; thereby providing substantial benefits from both an economic and social justice-based perspective (Suhrcke & Kenkel, 2015; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).

As such, Indigeneity and education are intersecting social determinants of health; in communities across Canada, educational success remains out of reach for disproportionately large numbers of Indigenous youth and adults. This study examined the intersection of these two social determinants of health—Indigenous status and education—through the exploration of educational engagement in secondary

school for Inuit parents and families, secondary school students, educators, and other Inuit community members in an Inuit community in Nunavik, northern Quebec. Key project objectives included:

- a. To better understand the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples and their respective intellectual and cultural traditions;
- b. To contribute to the expansion of research capacity and expertise of Inuit community members through the training of students engaged in the study; and
- c. To increase awareness of traditional Indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems in contemporary educational contexts.

The study was intended as an initial step towards facilitating meaningful educational engagement for Inuit families, secondary school students, educators, and other community members with the long-term goal of using the findings to develop interventions designed to increased student retention rates. The primary question guiding the research was: In what ways do key stakeholder groups in an Inuit community in Nunavik conceptualize academic success and family engagement in the secondary school system?

## **Literature Review**

### **Education as a Social Determinant of Health**

Education contributes a unique element to one's social status trajectory, which includes aspects that make it critical to health; it intersects with other social determinants to influence health in all stages of one's life course, beginning in childhood (Arim, Tam, Bougie, & Kohen, 2016). For example, the relationship between children's educational performance and their parents' education levels would be weakened if affordable and high quality early learning programs were available in Canada (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). The absence of such programs has a major influence on vulnerable children's intellectual and emotional development.

Educational achievement sets the scaffolding for building social status at the start of adulthood, functioning as the main bridge between generations and also as the primary path of upward mobility (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003). Education accomplishes this through its influence on occupation and occupational status, wages, personal and household income and wealth. Education can also promote the adoption of healthy behaviors, increase options and awareness of options for addressing ill health and stress, and offer either freedom from economic hardship or a buffer in difficult economic times (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). One's income potential is directly related to one's accrual of abilities, skills, and educational experiences in childhood, which is directly linked to one's ability as an adult to find employment. Thus, education is considered a key mediator in this association, one that is firmly shaped by family context in childhood and becomes a key determinant of one's income in adulthood (Benzeval, Judge, & Shouls, 2001).

During economic crises, having an education can facilitate one's ability to negotiate with one's employer, make one more resourceful, and improve one's chances of obtaining whatever one might need and/or improvising with what one has (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003). Education has also been found to make a

person more adept at societal and economic resource substitution (which is defined as using one thing in place of another). Those with more education have an increased capacity for resource substitution, which makes the absence of any one resource less harmful, while those with lower education levels are less skilled at obtaining and creating resources, thus increasing one's dependence on each standard resource (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003). As education contributes important effects to one's life trajectory, including comprehensive effects on health, increasing the educational attainment of Nunavik's Inuit population is a key societal goal.

### **Parent Engagement as a Determinant of Educational Success**

Decades of research has shown that engaging schools, parents, and communities in partnership improves children's educational outcomes (see Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 2001; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Lamb-Parker, Piotrkowski, & Peay, 1987; Lamb-Parker et al., 2001). A significant part of this engagement involves negotiating the "culture of schooling" (Weaver, 2007). This negotiation can be challenging for families from vulnerable populations, particularly for those in communities which, because of oppression, racism, and the historical intergenerational trauma from residential schools, find it challenging to interact with school communities and have feelings of distrust toward public educational institutions (Madden, Higgins, & Korteweg, 2013; Nekhwevha, 1999). Epstein (1987, 2001) developed a theory of overlapping spheres of influence with regard to educational engagement, hypothesizing that student performance is enhanced when stakeholders work together to support learning and development. This theory emphasizes the need for collaborative relationships among "parents, educators and community partners that help them to understand each other's views, to identify common goals for students and to appreciate each other's contributions to student development" (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006, p. 119). The goal is to develop greater congruence between the values, norms, and goals that are endorsed in the three spheres.

Research has shown that engaging schools, parents, and communities in partnership improves children's educational outcomes (Lamb-Parker et al., 2001; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Moreover, parental engagement has been theoretically linked to improved student behavior and academic achievement in schools (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Kingston et al., 2013). By establishing relationships with schools, parents gain important information about the academic and behavioral expectations the school has for their students, and they learn to become partners in helping children meet these goals (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Traditionally, parents' engagement in their children's education follows a "support model," whereby parents assist the work of teachers, both at home and in school. Yet, research has shown that parental engagement within this model often depends on their socioeconomic status and the role that education plays in their families (Brown & Beckett, 2007). For example, Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2001) found that low-income parents of colour tended to fall into a socially constructed role and "learn to think of themselves more as supporters, helpers, and fundraisers, than decision makers, partners and collaborators" (p. 87). Similarly, Friedel (1999) found that Indigenous parents accepted that schoolteachers and administrators were "experts" who knew what was best for their children. Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2001) suggested replacing a "support model" with a "partnership model" in which parents and teachers partner to build stronger school communities and families. This may be helpful in deconstructing existing perceptions that shape and delimit school-community interactions.

## **Social Determinants of Health for Indigenous Peoples**

In Canada, Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately affected by determinants that impact physical and mental health across the board (Baydala, Ruttan, & Starkes, 2015). Indigenous Peoples experience lower life expectancy, higher morbidity and mortality rates, and higher incidences of family abuse, alcoholism, injuries and deaths from injuries, living in substandard housing, unemployment, and exposure to environmental contaminants (Hoover et al., 2012; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2002; Plourde, 2007; Saylor, 2004). Life expectancy and infant mortality illustrate significant disparities. In 2001, the life expectancy for the total Canadian population, was 77 years for men and 82 years for women, compared to 71 years for Indigenous men and 77 years for Indigenous women (Statistics Canada, 2006); the estimated life expectancy for Inuit was 63 years for men and 72 years for women. Indigenous Peoples are more likely to die from injuries or poison, have 3 times the rate of diabetes than non-Indigenous Peoples in Canada (OECD, 2002), and have twice the incidences of disability (Veenstra, 2009) than other members of the Canadian population. Furthermore, the incarceration rate of Indigenous Peoples is 8.5 times higher than that of non-Indigenous Peoples in Canada (OECD, 2002). The suicide rate is also much higher for Indigenous youth than for any other group of Canadian youth, and Inuit have one of the highest suicide rates in the world (Fraser, Geoffroy, Chachamovich, & Kirmayer, 2015; Kral, Idlout, Minore, Dyck, & Kirmayer, 2014; Morris & Crooks, 2015).

Indigenous Peoples also experience lower graduation rates from high school and lower rates of higher education. In 2011, 48% of Indigenous Peoples aged 25 to 64 had a postsecondary qualification—in comparison, 65% of non-Indigenous Peoples in the same age group had some postsecondary qualification (Statistics Canada, 2015). Educational outcomes for Inuit populations were even poorer than for other Indigenous groups; only 36% of Inuit (aged 25-64) reported having postsecondary qualifications (Statistics Canada, 2015). In terms of parent engagement, studies have found a willingness on the part of Indigenous parents to be involved in their children's education, but parents' own educational experiences, many of which ranged from negative to traumatic, have engrained a deep distrust of the current educational system, and have created serious barriers to their effective engagement (Fisher & Campbell, 2002; Robinson-Zanartu & Majel-Dixon, 1996). The legacies left by residential schools have had a substantial effect on family-school relations. Previous studies found that a critical challenge to educational success was the history of trauma associated with a school environment (Ives et al., 2012; Yi et al., 2015).

## **Education as a Social Determinant in Nunavik, Quebec**

Nunavik, in northern Quebec, is home to more than 12,000 residents, spread out across 14 villages that lack road access to southern Quebec; of the 12,000, 90% are Inuit (Kativik Regional Government, n.d.; Statistics Canada, 2015). Inuit have inhabited the northern Quebec region for thousands of years, experiencing extraordinary social upheaval and transformation during the last century. Traditionally, Inuit of Nunavik were a semi-nomadic people with a subsistence-based economy (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2006). In the 1940s and 1950s, the end of the fur trade and subsequent movement of Inuit to permanent settlements undermined the traditional, semi-nomadic and subsistence-based lifestyle (Duhaim, 2008; McShane, Hastings, Smylie, Prince, & Tungasuvvingat Inuit Family Resource Center, 2009). The development of the residential boarding schools further divided Inuit families,

creating a dramatic example of parent–child isolation, family dismemberment and trauma, and cultural erosion (Stairs, 1992).

In the face of this, however, Inuit of Nunavik have achieved remarkable cultural continuity—Inuit control their own school board, Inuktitut is spoken by over 95% of the region’s Inuit population, and education is delivered in Inuktitut through Grade 3 (Duhaime, Lévesque, & Caron, 2015; Kativik School Board, n.d.a). However, statistics on health and social determinants of health reveal the serious challenges faced by residents. The current life expectancy in Nunavik is 66 years, and Nunavut’s infant mortality rate is 3 times the Canadian average (Marchildon & Torgerson, 2013; Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services, 2011). In 2011, unemployment was 14.1% in Nunavik for Inuit, nearly double the rate of unemployment in Quebec as a whole (7.2%), and the average household income is lower than in Quebec as a whole (median income before tax for Inuit in 2011 was \$20,826 vs. \$71,627 for non-Inuit (Duhaime et al., 2015).

Educational statistics also demonstrate ongoing challenges that take on special significance in the context of a region in which 1 in 3 residents is under the age of 15 (Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services, 2012). In 2011, approximately 60% of Inuit aged 15 and over had no high school certificate, diploma, or degree, compared to approximately 22% of the same age group in Quebec excluding Nunavik (Duhaime et al., 2015, see Table 6.2.3). For that same age group in the same year, only 10.4% had a university certificate, diploma, or degree equal to or above bachelor’s degree, compared to 23.3% for the same group in Quebec excluding Nunavik (Duhaime et al., 2015). This low level of educational achievement reflects student and parent disengagement from education (Steinberg, 1996). Continuing high drop-out rates will further the social exclusion of Canada’s Inuit population in northeastern Canada and ensure that the majority of jobs requiring higher education qualifications continue to remain out of reach for a majority of the region’s Inuit population, thereby contributing to high unemployment levels.

Studies have found high levels of academic disengagement of Inuit students in Nunavik (Berger, Epp, & Møller, 2006; Freed & Samson, 2004), and the importance of community and parental engagement has been recognized in Inuit communities. One recommendation made following the Nunavik Educational Task Force in 1990 was that “each school should be a true community school that makes parents a valued and welcomed part of the learning process and that helps people understand the potential and uses of education” (Vick-Westgate, 2002, p. 288). In a discussion paper written for the National Inuit Education Summit in 2008, parental and community involvement were highlighted as two ways to increase children’s regular school attendance (Taylor, 2007).

Despite many parents’ willingness and motivation to be involved in their children’s education, language barriers, differing expectations of teachers’ and parents’ roles, as well as mistrust of the school setting have been found to be contributing factors to low parental engagement in school life (Fuzessy, 2003). A study conducted in Nunavik with former members of the region’s school board examined potential factors affecting the ongoing underachievement of Inuit students (Fuzessy, 2003), and researchers found that perceived cultural dissonance between non-Inuit teachers and Inuit students limited the teachers’ capacity to fully empower Inuit students.

A lack of synergy between the structure of pedagogy and formal education in Inuit communities and Inuit experiences and realities often leave Inuit parents at a loss as to how they can partner with schools to support their children (Taylor, 2007). Mistrust of the formal education system due to many parents' own negative schooling experiences, often rooted in the history of colonization, and feelings of inadequacy when meeting with Inuit or *Qallunaat* (non-Inuit) educators are mentioned as possible obstacles to parental engagement in school settings (Fisher & Campbell, 2002; Taylor, 2007).

## Method

Building on knowledge and contacts developed through prior research in Nunavik, the research team partnered with Inuit and non-Inuit members of key social and political institutions in one Nunavik community to form an advisory committee to guide a study focused on parental engagement in schools. The Advisory Committee was composed of representatives from the community secondary school, school board, regional government, and an organization mandated to protect the political, cultural, and economic rights and interests provided by the 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. Initially, in addition to recruiting participants, the plan was for the Advisory Committee to develop the questions for all focus groups and interviews—except for the focus group with secondary school students—in conjunction with the research team. However, as a main study goal was to engage secondary students in the process of learning about community perspectives on an issue through group interviews, a decision was made, jointed by the Advisory Committee and the research team, to work with the students to develop all questions that would be used in the study. Thus, in the fall of 2010, with the support of one of the committee members who was an administrator in the local secondary school, study researchers co-developed interview questions with 14 Inuit secondary school students who volunteered to participate in the study. Two research team members worked with Secondary 4 and 5 students<sup>1</sup> over the course of a ½-day workshop, using various brainstorming exercises to develop thematic areas for focus group questions as well as specific questions that students wanted other participant groups to answer. Researchers then brought these student-generated questions to the Advisory Committee, which provided feedback in order to refine the questions and develop the interview guides used in all focus groups and interviews. Interviews were conducted in 2011 and 2012.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit the majority of respondents, identified by the Advisory Committee. Additional participants (i.e., school-leavers and one undergraduate student) were recruited using snowball sampling. The sample consisted of 29 *Nunavimmiut* and 6 non-Inuit. Focus groups exploring perceptions of strengths and challenges related to academic retention of youth living in the community were conducted with Inuit secondary school students (1 group,  $n=14$ ), Inuit Elders (1 group,  $n=6$ ), non-Inuit teachers (1 group,  $n=6$ ; Inuit teachers were also invited, but declined to participate for undisclosed reasons), and Inuit youth school-leavers (1 group,  $n=4$ ) using semi-structured, open-ended questions. Individual interviews exploring the same topics were conducted with an Inuk undergraduate student ( $n=1$ ) and Inuit parents ( $n=4$ ). All focus groups and interviews were

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<sup>1</sup> High school in Quebec is Secondary 1 through Secondary 5, followed by Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel (CEGEP) for two years. Secondary 4 is equivalent to Grade 10 and Secondary 5 is Grade 11. Thus, an undergraduate university degree is three years if the student was educated in Quebec. For those students who feel that they need additional support before CEGEP, there is a Secondary 6 program such as the one in Kangiqsujuaq.



audio-recorded except for the Elders' focus group, where an interpreter was used and the researchers took notes. It should be noted that all secondary teachers were invited to participate in the teachers' group; however, only non-Inuit teachers attended.

Interview and focus group questions focused on four primary domains: challenges to school completion; experiences in school; challenges to negotiating home, school, and cultural contexts; and resources for addressing challenges. The focus group with youth school-leavers also explored reasons for dropping out of school and perceptions of supports that could have contributed to retention. The parent interviews and the focus group with Elders explored educational needs for students and families, their own educational experiences, their experiences with their children's schools, barriers to participation, expectations and hopes for children's education, and how they see their engagement with education. Focus group questions with teachers explored their efforts to engage parents, how they conceptualize parent and family engagement in education, ways they could be supported in facilitating family engagement, their perceptions of Inuit parents and families, and their perceptions of education's role in Inuit communities.

Researchers employed thematic content analysis to interpret the qualitative data. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Open coding was used first, followed by more selective coding. For thematic analysis, coding consisted of breaking the text into small pieces and then interpreting it using data-developed frames, an asset-based theoretical framework, and previous empirical research (Grbich, 2007). NVivo qualitative data analysis software facilitated this work. Researchers co-coded the transcripts, discussing similarities and differences in their interpretations. These initial findings were shared with the Advisory Committee for feedback. Discussions produced categories that emerged from the data as well as those that related specifically to study goals of exploring educational engagement and academic retention.

## Findings

There was general agreement among all respondents that education—either formal education in the Canadian system and/or cultural education—is an important factor in shaping the overall health of the region. They also agreed that many challenges present in modern-day Inuit communities, such as substance abuse, suicide, domestic violence, and early pregnancy, shape students' experiences in the classroom and function as a hindrance for students' academic success. Such challenges are also a part of the social determinants of health model. Each group of participants had slightly different perceptions of parental roles in education, particularly concerning how to be engaged. The following sections present major themes from participants, broken down into the following categories: students, school-leavers, teachers, and parents and Elders.

### Student Interviews

The focus group of secondary students consisted of 14 students who had all helped to create the interview questions. Student focus group participants and the post-secondary student interview participant spoke about the support and motivation they felt for attending school, particularly from relatives and peers, the school, and the community. They were motivated not just by parents, but also by grandparents, boyfriends or girlfriends, and friends to stay in school. They also noted seeing other students drop out and observing the consequences of that decision, which they perceived as being

negative. These observations served to push them harder and to set goals for the future. For one student, her sister's school-leaving experiences were a strong motivation to stay in school:

I stayed in school because I saw my sister dropping out, trying to get a family already, so I kept on going and going.

Some expected to still be in school in 10 years (i.e., in college or medical school); others thought they might still be unemployed in Nunavik. Participants most often spoke of support from relatives and peers. The post-secondary student participant noted that parental encouragement was the most important factor in helping students remain in school:

Encouragement and support. The main one. And telling them ok, we'll always be there for you, I know you are having a hard time and its difficult, but stay there and do your best. That will boost students up.

However, students did not feel that their parents were directly involved in their education: In other words, parental encouragement did not translate into engagement with the school. For some parents, there was the barrier that they themselves had not completed secondary school, which, in the eyes of one student, could make it harder for parents to be role models for secondary school completion:

The first thing I would say would be role models, but most parents too haven't finished high school either.

Some students also identified "engagement" as the behavior of parents who spoiled their children, with some even giving them a "payoff" to attend school. Students noted that this type of "engagement" was often to children's detriment. One student described this as a vicious cycle:

You don't need to spoil kids just to go to school, because they are just gonna ask more and more, and then the parents are gonna get fed up. That's how the students are gonna get dropped out.

Students identified commonly cited challenges as barriers to success in school, such as early pregnancy, substance abuse by students and family members, and overcrowded, inadequate housing as well as not being challenged enough. It was this last barrier that echoed among participants as particularly frustrating. For example, several students noted that they believed students their own age in southern, non-Inuit Quebec communities knew more because their teachers had higher expectations than the teachers in their community. They felt teachers in Nunavik adapted the curriculum for the students, in a sense, "dumming it down" for them. When asked what the school could do to help students, several wanted to be challenged more and, specifically, as one student noted, to be given:

Harder work! Because down south, Quebec, 16 year olds pass Secondary 5, but we're older than that, and it feels like we're dumb. [laughter] A little more harder work!

This made them feel unprepared in terms of higher education and job market participation, and hurt their self-esteem.

Students described characteristics of teachers they liked: those who took the time to get to know them, explained subjects and materials in detail, had an engaging teaching style, and were motivating. Unpopular teachers were described as those who were nagging, never asked questions, or were afraid of students. They cited enjoying “interest” classes (i.e., music, cooking, sewing, carpentry), and lamented that they had been removed from the curriculum:

They took [interest classes] off the schedule, and like, everybody would be here, I mean, not just because of interests, but everybody was here, and it had more good teachers and everything, and it was fun . . . funner than now.

While students wanted to have teachers who made an effort to get to know them better, there was also hesitation and mistrust on their part. In particular, students spoke of how they suffered as a result of high teacher turnover. The post-secondary student expressed this, stating:

When there’s a lot of turnovers, there’s not much we could learn.

Furthermore, participants in the student and teacher focus groups explained that there were no substitute teachers to fill teaching vacancies so students were sent home during classes when there are no teachers. This problem was exemplified by the post-secondary student who recalled a situation where:

There was this culture teacher . . . but this teacher, I don’t know, he stopped working, and all the boys when it was time for culture, they went home.

Students also desired greater language advancement in French and English to increase employment opportunities in southern Quebec communities. Overall, students wished for greater guidance regarding options after high school; several students were concerned about what they felt was an absence of effective preparation for post-secondary education. When asked about what they thought college would entail, one student replied:

It sounds harder, or something. It sounds so hard, I don’t know. It feels like I’m not gonna make it.

There are no post-secondary opportunities in Nunavik, requiring students to go to southern Quebec for further education and thus leave their families and communities. One student, when asked if she felt prepared for college, responded:

No . . . no. I’m so scared to be on my own.

The post-secondary student referred to how secondary schools could offer more support to students who are transitioning from high school to postsecondary education:

I wish there was more of a booklet that says, here’s what [university] offers, and they say you need to take Level 2 for the first year and Level 3 on the second. I wish they informed us that. I was so lost when I was trying to make my courses and my schedules.

Students described wanting additional support for subjects to enable them to pass the exams required for college, such as “extra work, extra time” suggested by one student and “afterschool prep, stuff” by another. When a third student disagreed with those suggestions—“that’s like detention”—another student retorted, “But you’re learning.” Students noted that one teacher offered a voluntary afterschool session for students interested in strengthening their knowledge of that particular subject.

Students expressed pride in their cultural education and wished there were more cultural accommodations for them in school, such as the goose break given to Cree students. They were proud of their ability to succeed in Inuktitut and wished to preserve this in school. Several voiced the desire to continue more intensive study of Inuktitut, with the same amount of time devoted to Inuktitut as English or French in Grade 4 and higher. One student felt that although their education was in English the school needed to help students improve their English proficiency since some who graduated were not able to go straight to Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel (CEGEP)<sup>2</sup> after Secondary 5:

Some of us, we didn't pass the [Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)] test to go to college, so some of us must go to Wakeham Bay to go to Secondary 6. Some of us passed our TOEFL.

Arsaniq School in Kangirsujuaq, also known as Wakeham Bay, has a post-secondary preparation program, which is considered Secondary 6. From 2015 to 2016, there were 6 students enrolled in the program (Kativik School Board, n.d.b).

### **School-Leaver Interviews**

Those who had dropped out of school had a wide range of experiences with school. Some recalled once enjoying school, and cited parental support or their own perceived success or intelligence as motivating factors, along with socializing with friends. Reasons participants left school included bullying, early pregnancy, and succumbing to substance abuse. All expressed regret that they had left school.

The school-leavers described bullying, by both boys and girls, as a central reason for dropping out of school.

[I] really liked the work and all that, but it was just that [my] classmates were teasing [me] and all that. [I] really wanted to graduate but [I] couldn't concentrate on work . . . I told them I don't have to be beautiful or anything in any way to graduate, I can do this and they said, no you're not. Say whatever you want, I continued, I kept telling those girls, and I got tired of it and just decided to drop out.

Three participants also spoke of substance use, both by students and by members of their family, as an issue that negatively affected staying in school. One youth who had dropped out of school shared:

When I got into drugs, I didn't want to do anything. I mean it, anything. It felt like drugs were the only thing that kept me going but I was like, “this is stopping me from education.”

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<sup>2</sup> A CEGEP is a publicly funded pre-university college in Quebec's educational system.

Another school-leaver described how her family life interfered with her ability to stay in school:

We were in school because every lunch, we go home, our mother's drinking and nothing to eat. Kinda hard for kids like us. Nothing to do. Always have to be at our aunt's house or grandma's house to eat, or friends at their house to eat with them. It was kinda embarrassing at that moment.

Tensions between Inuit and *Qallunaat* teaching styles, as well as tensions between groups of students of different backgrounds and ages, served as demotivating factors for staying in school. Grouping together students with different educational abilities and ages made some feel behind, while others did not feel challenged. One school-leaver described this phenomenon:

In my age group, we were in high school Secondary 3, 4, 5 together. It was a challenge when you were in Secondary 3 to be in the same class as Secondary 5. We had a lot of mix of Inuit and *Qallunaat*, it was difficult, a challenge for the group to work together with the other groups . . . When you are in a classroom when some are 12 and some are 18, they treat you like a kid, it's frustrating. Even if you are almost at the same level, like you ask a question, it makes you not want to ask questions and just be quiet. That's how I felt.

Some who left high school found adult education to be a good option, and others had opportunities for learning through training offered by organizations outside of Nunavik. Still, some respondents described leaving adult education or even college because they felt that it did not meet their practical needs, and they found work more compelling. Those who left adult education or college did so to work. There was still regret, however, over not completing secondary school. One participant still held onto the hope of finishing one day, but wrestled with the time required while also needing to work full time:

I was in adult ed. [education] in 2010, I wanted to graduate because a friend of mine had graduated and I was really proud of her. And I wish I could get that same graduation. Exams came and I kept failing, I don't know how many times, I kinda lost count . . . because my mom told me to work and I wanted to finish my education at the same time. I had to go work, and I didn't know what to do.

Respondents delineated several ways to support students to stay in school, starting with encouragement and prevention (i.e., birth control, substance abuse prevention education) at a young age. They also suggested a college in Nunavik so that traditional lifestyles could be maintained while pursuing further education. If that were an option, people would not have to leave their families and homes:

College in Nunavik would be awesome. Evening course. If there's a college for evening course for people that work, who want to get degrees. I really want more Inuit to finish their school. Their future.

They also recommended that teachers communicate more with parents so that parents have a clear idea of how their children are doing in the classroom.

## **Teacher Interviews**

The teachers interviewed were all from southern Quebec because Inuit teachers declined the invitation to participate in the focus group. Teacher participants described a range of classroom experiences ranging from very positive to very challenging. Challenges ranged from multifaceted educational roles to promoting parent engagement in a community with a difficult history with formal education.

Teachers saw their place in the school as being role models, motivators, and even counselors, straying from the traditional teaching role in the South. Teachers felt a great weight in terms of the many hats that they were expected to wear in order to provide an environment where learning could take place. One teacher stated:

You know if you have that parental support et cetera it makes a difference. The school for as long as I know has been sort of asked almost to be the parents. To be the teachers. In some cases to be the grandparents and the nurses. There's a lot of things that are asked, and I know it's common too in other schools. But without the foundation addressed here it's very hard for good learning. So it's like a vicious circle. If you don't do some of these other things that are important, the learning doesn't happen.

Teachers also saw themselves as needing to provide consistency and security for children who may not have it in other areas of their lives. Two teachers described how they approached their teaching roles by "setting a tone for the kids to help them navigate their way better in this environment" and "creating a sense of consistency too that allows them to just feel comfortable in that space for however long they're there for."

Teachers also touched on the issues of expectations of and from students, echoing some of the frustrations expressed by participants in the student focus group. Facilitating learning in an environment containing "a great range of abilities within a single classroom" was, according to one teacher, a significant challenge. One teacher noted that it was difficult to motivate all students consistently given community challenges that affected both students and teachers:

One of the challenges too . . . [is] how to maintain high expectations but at the same time deal with the various realities that confront children amongst themselves but also the staff and how you go about working and teaching in this environment. And that's sometimes very difficult. How do you maintain high expectations?

Teachers found that these roles were challenging and "not for the faint of heart," but could be rewarding if teachers felt comfortable changing their perception of their role to fit these needs of Inuit students. They described some frustration that parents rarely asked for help, although they expressed respect for parents who grew up with a completely different education system. One teacher described what he perceived as a lack of communication in the school as due to parents not seeing value in their children's education:

Parents don't demand very much, and that in itself is a problem . . . I've worked in all kinds of communities and in other countries of the world, but parents [. . .] when they see a value, when they want their children to be educated, they want to be involved in the school, and they want to

be there to ask the questions and to sometimes question what is being done . . . I very rarely get a parent here that ever asks me anything. And often times I'm the one that's calling to ask them and so I find that odd.

Another teacher attributed parents' lack of connection to the school as grounded in their historical relationship with education as it used to exist in the North.

A lot of the families don't have a background of going to school. The other thing too is the federal government and the provincial government here, in my background, they were the mama and the papa, the father and the mother, when they were here and believe me they never asked too many questions. A lot of stuff was done without a lot of consent, so there hasn't been the experience of advocating for your children in a certain way.

Teachers commented that those who did have parental support did better in class. They wished more parents found teachers approachable and came for Report Card Night. There was full agreement among the teachers that the key to success in the classroom was having a relationship with parents, which meant being approachable and taking the time to get to know students, their families, the land, and Inuit culture. One teacher noted that her experience seeing students on the land helped her better understand how to teach them and challenged what she had considered valuable education.

I remember there was this one time when I went out on the land with some of the kids, and they're different on the land. And they're beautiful to watch cause they're just free. They're wonderful. And then we went back to school and we were writing and it just struck me, "What am I doing? What am I teaching them?" It is finding a balance. It's hard.

If a central goal for the School Board is to increase the educational attainment of Nunavik's youth, given the difficult history that parents and grandparents may have had with formal education, the School Board and teachers need to be creative in their attempts to engage parents. One teacher suggested that the school:

Find some simpler ideas to invite parents in so perhaps they'll feel more comfortable when the parents' night comes around or something like that. And the kids whose parents do show up to things like that feel pretty good. They like to see their families come in. You're not going to do that 100 times a year, but there's ways that schools can reach out too.

Teachers have seen that parental engagement makes a difference to students, parents, teachers, and the broader community. Completing high school is an important goal for students, even if they do not feel that college is in their future. Some teachers felt that college was not necessarily the answer for all students, since it might not meet their needs as Inuit community members. However, all respondents recognized that completing high school provides positive options in the community and in the South, thereby allowing students to choose their own paths.

## Parent Interviews and Elder Interviews

This section is based on four interviews with parents and a focus group with Elders. Given the small numbers of parent and Elder participants, and the commonalities among the themes they discussed, we present analysis of the data for these two groups together.

Elders and parents we spoke with noted that their own school experiences were drastically different from the experiences of students today—they learned orally from those around them, and from their own parents and grandparents. Elders noted that their learning was highly participatory, and occurred mostly outside the classroom:

We learn from doing . . . not from paper or reading because that's what our ancestors were like, and we continue that education, that's how we learn.

They valued hunting as the key piece of their education, and saw it as crucial to pass down to youth. They also described teaching others through observation and storytelling.

Parents also noted the reduced respect they felt children and youth had today for both *Qallunaat* authority and parental authority. For example, one parent said that it used to be expected that parents ensured that children woke up early and were prepared for school each day—now, she felt that that was no longer the case, and the greater freedoms today's youth enjoyed were negatively impacting parental authority. She recalled that her mother would “wake us up even if we don't want to wake up.” When asked whether she did the same with her son, she replied:

I tried . . . [youth] are more free of everything. They're free to have friends, girlfriend or boyfriend. They're free to go to the store by themselves. I wasn't.

Elders expressed concern regarding what society was asking of today's Inuit youth, noting that the difficulties they faced, including dropping out of school, were because the youth were “not listening well . . . One person cannot have two ways of life being taught to them at once.” Another respondent noted that if they were learning two ways, they would not be able to learn well in both ways, in two cultures.

The Elders were also concerned that, because teachers in the secondary school are primarily from the South, they do not know the Inuit way of life. They wanted important pieces of cultural education to be included in the curriculum, such as building an igloo, and noted that these pieces were not being taught to youth. They cited family members as important bearers of this cultural education, for those who still knew it. Parents also expressed a desire for more cultural education, stating that culture classes in the school were commendable, but that they did not go far enough. Parents saw themselves as the primary cultural educators for their children, and noted that the different cultural contexts and value systems of *Qallunaat* teachers caused tensions in the classroom.

Parents expected schools to address the social realities of students, many of whom may suffer from learning disabilities, mental health issues, or substance abuse. They wished that teachers would reach out more than just to inform them of behavioral and/or academic issues. Thus, they saw communication with the school as primarily negative. Parents criticized the high teacher turnover, making it difficult for



both students and parents to develop relationships with teachers. Parents were not able to describe details of their children's school experiences or make recommendations as to what they thought the school could improve. There was interest in their report cards, but no participation in Report Card Night. All interviewees relayed a sense that parents were concerned about their children's educations but were at a loss as to how to help. Similarly, while Elders felt that community presence in the school was not frequent enough, they did not think that they knew enough about modern-day curricula to be helpful in school. At the same time, Elders recognized the inability to go back in time and acknowledged the importance of modern education, mentioning that children should attend school.

### Discussion

Adopting a social determinants of health approach means shifting the focus of health policy and service provision with regard to how a society organizes and distributes resources and the ways in which that organization and distribution impacts health outcomes, in multiple contexts, over one's life course (Raphael, 2009). These determinants are not mutually exclusive; they overlap, shape, and influence each other. Education is a key social determinant of health, impacting occupation and occupational status, wages and economic security, income and wealth, options for promoting healthy behaviors, and good health (Ives, Denov & Sussman, 2015; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). Individual income potential is directly related to the accrual of abilities and skills, which impact adults' abilities to find employment. Education is a key mediator in this association, and, accordingly, is a fundamental determinant of health over the life course (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003). The importance of promoting educational attainment is enhanced in an Inuit context, wherein health, socioeconomic, and educational outcomes lag far below the general Canadian population (Duhaim et al., 2015; Marchildon & Torgerson, 2013; Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services, 2011) and the legacies left by residential schools have substantially damaged family-school relations to the detriment of present-day educational achievement (Fisher & Campbell, 2002; Taylor, 2007).

Overlapping spheres theory and research suggests that collaborative relationships between parents, educators, and community partners can promote educational attainment by strengthening shared understanding of roles and responsibilities and by supporting the development of common goals, values, and norms across contexts students navigate (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). Participants in our study expressed shared perspectives and experiences that were consistent with overlapping spheres theory, highlighting both the perceived importance of congruence between school and family domains and the ways in which challenges to developing such congruence negatively impacted educational attainment. Students emphasized the important role that parents, as well as extended family and friendship networks, play in motivating educational success. However, they also noted parent disengagement from educational processes, and uncertainty about the best ways to support students' educational attainment. Both parents and teachers echoed these sentiments. Parents expressed a desire for more engagement with the school, but also uncertainty about how to do so. Likewise, teachers also expressed a desire for increased parent engagement, but indicated they were not sure how to facilitate engagement. In keeping with prior research, some participants partially linked parental disengagement with residential schools and a history of colonization (Fisher & Campbell, 2002; Taylor, 2007).

Teachers, students, school-leavers, and parents also highlighted the overlap between home and school spheres in discussing the impact of the social and economic realities students face at home on education.

Students and school-leavers described overcrowded housing, lack of sufficient food in the home, substance abuse by family members, and other challenges in the home as being barriers to educational performance. Teachers spoke of the burden of addressing and adapting to students' social realities, noting the need to play an almost parental role. Parents expressed expectations that teachers seek to adapt to social realities. Each group pointed to the inextricable links between home and school, and to the academic challenges that flowed from the disconnection between home and school contexts. Parents further pointed to a possible solution, expressing expectations that teachers communicate with them about more than just students' behavioral and academic problems.

In keeping with past research, which has emphasized cultural dissonance as a key factor contributing to high dropout rates and low student achievement (Fuzessy, 2003), participants in our study did note the impact of cultural dissonance on education in their community. Elders pointed to the difference in *Qallunaat* and Inuit teaching and learning styles, lamenting Southern teachers' lack of cultural knowledge. Parents also spoke of wanting more integration of cultural knowledge in education, identifying parents as the primary teachers of culture. Both parents and Elders noted a lack of respect from children, tying this to shifting cultural standards, and emphasizing the challenges this posed for adults seeking to support students' educational attainment.

However, our data pointed to an even more fundamental set of issues that must be addressed before cultural dissonance can be tackled. At the core of these issues is the problem of high teacher turnover. Students described a pattern in which teachers came to the community and left shortly thereafter. Teachers' leaving disrupted the course of their academic studies and resulted in a general lowering of academic standards. In addition, student participants shared that high turnover resulted in a reluctance on their part to develop relationships with teachers. Another outcome of high teacher turnover was an increased academic workload, as well as the need to provide emotional supports for students, among teachers who stayed. While the problem of turnover was pervasive, students expressed appreciation for non-Inuit teachers who had lived and worked in the community for extended periods.

One approach to addressing turnover could be to improve preparation and orientation for teachers who come from outside the community by supporting Inuit-designed cultural immersion for non-Inuit secondary school teachers (Ives & Loft, 2013). An in-depth orientation learning experience, such as cultural immersion, designed by Inuit and centered on Inuit ways of knowing, learning, and being could reflect "Indigenous forms of practice, that is, to provide professional services in a manner that is effective and consistent with local cultures and contexts—local knowledge, local traditions and local practices" (Gray, Coates, & Bird, 2008, p. 6). This kind of experience, adapted for non-Inuit teachers already working in Inuit schools or new to a community, could enable teachers to learn firsthand from community members through presentations, interactive workshops, and cultural activities, including experiences on the land.

Integration of land-based activities, which represented a common interest among participants, might also serve as a platform for the integration of culture and the engagement of community members in education. Culturally responsive and relevant educational approaches, including traditional, land-based education and technical education, could provide greater options for students struggling linguistically or academically. Such approaches could include outdoor, land-based activities, in some cases under the direction of Elders who may or may not have completed formal education. Activities such as camping,

berry picking, boating, hunting, and carving could provide a forum for the transmission of cultural knowledge. These activities can be overlooked by the current educational system, although they are seen by community members as having a legitimate place in schools and could serve to bridge the educational approaches of the North and South (Ives et al., 2012).

Students and school-leavers in our study noted a desire for additional guidance in preparing for post-secondary education. If reducing teacher turnover, integrating culture, and engaging community members through strategies like those discussed above mitigated the challenges that students and teachers reported, then they might result in greater capacity for the school to provide guidance on post-high school options and better prepare students to meet Southern educational standards. In addition, the development or promotion of post-secondary options designed for the North's specific needs and facilitation of Inuit language and culture-centered learning would also be of benefit. The territory of Nunavut, where 85% of the population identifies as Inuit (Statistics Canada, 2013), is home to Nunavut Arctic College, which seeks "to provide high quality educational opportunities to all residents of Nunavut" and also "seeks to promote and preserve the use of traditional Inuit knowledge and technology" (Nunavut Arctic College, 2015, para. 1, para. 7). Accordingly, provincial-territorial cooperation between Quebec and Nunavut could be one path towards developing additional post-secondary options for Nunavik's youth.

Participant reflections on education and on the challenges of navigating the overlapping social spheres that shape education must be understood in the broader context of social determinants of health. From this framework, addressing the challenges to educational attainment that were highlighted in our research is central to the broader goal of addressing persistent and pronounced disparities in health outcomes for Inuit of Nunavik.

### **Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This was an exploratory study involving a relatively small number of participants in 1 of the 14 communities in Nunavik. The inclusion of different groups of participants—teachers, students, school-leavers, parents, and Elders—allowed for validation of findings through triangulation across groups, but the transferability of findings is limited by the small sample size and non-representative sample selection. In addition, the use of focus groups naturally privileged the voices and perspectives of more vocal participants over others. A final limitation is that all teacher participants were non-Inuit; while invitations to participate were extended to Inuit teachers, they declined for reasons that are not known to us. Accordingly, research involving larger, more systematically selected samples, as well as research presenting the perspectives of Inuit teachers, is required in order to validate and assess the transferability of the findings reported here.

There is a need for further research that explores specific themes emerging from this study. In particular, additional research aimed at better understanding the factors that fuel high teacher turnover in Nunavik and at supporting the development of policies to combat such turnover is needed. In addition, research exploring the ways in which curriculum requirements mandated by the Quebec Education Ministry might integrate opportunities for Inuit families to work alongside teachers to promote mutual collaboration and facilitate mutual respect and understanding of both Inuit and non-Inuit styles of learning would also be useful. Finally, future research might also explore the potential for, and

mechanisms through which, land-based activities may contribute to the development of the shared goals, norms, and values that overlapping spheres theory notes are key to improving educational attainment.

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