

From Decolonization to Conscientization: Implementing the Alaskan Inuit Education Improvement Strategy

Utqiagvik, AK Think-Tank Report



Participants:

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ICC Alaska Decolonization Conscientization

Think-Tank Report - October 26 & 27 2016 @ Utqiagvik, AK

INTRODUCTION

On October 26 and 27 ICC Alaska held a Decolonization Conscientization Think-Tank as part of its Inuit education strategy. There were 16 participants from various regional villages and Utqiagvik present to discuss the topic of Inuit education, the impacts of colonization, and to think about the future of education for Inuit youth in their region. During the two-day workshop there were many discussions about the impacts of colonization, language preservation and how decolonization thinking can help Inuit to change education systems for the better in their region. It was inspiring and humbling to be a part of and there was an element of healing in the air.

The beginning conversations had the group thinking about how colonization had impacted them personally and how we can begin to move beyond the current frameworks we find ourselves a part of. The discussions also focused on how we can break down the frames and world views of colonization that have shaped so much of Inuit life in the last century and become ingrained to a point that has detrimental and devastating effects on the identity and lives of Inuit youth. In this way it is about a systemic unfreezing, reshaping, and reintegration of the traditions that make Inuit whole and healthy. Decolonization is about re-forming the children and Conscientization is about re-forming the system.

OPENING ACTIVITIES

We started each day with an invocation and a check in. Our initial check-in asked the participants to share why the meeting was exciting to them and what they hoped to get out of it. In general people were excited about the topic and the chance to work through the Inuit education strategy in a thoughtful group. The participants also expressed a general sense of wanting to learn.

Our icebreaker was an introductory activity where each participant interviewed a partner to discuss how decolonization had impacted them, what can we gain from decolonization thinking, and they shared a positive about themselves that they rarely share. I asked participants to share this because in our Inuit culture it is very hard for us to brag about ourselves, so to start

ICC Alaska Decolonization Conscientization

Think-Tank Report - October 26 & 27 2016 @ Utqiagvik, AK

off sharing something that makes us a little uncomfortable helps us to build trust and a safe open environment for healthy discussion. The ideas from the icebreaker activity are captured below.

Icebreaker Interviews:

Impacts of Colonization

1. The loss of language was a huge impact
2. Losing the language and the contribution to the break-up of the family unit, perpetuated by school and the church
3. Being forced out of your home and way of life
4. Learning to live indigenously and holistically
5. Having to intertwine our culture and language in a corporate structure
6. Educational system, provided no choices, and we were taught by outsiders that didn't know our way of life or thinking
7. It was a positive that we learned English and the knowledge how information is organized and how to deal with it
8. Losing the sense of Identity

What we gain from decolonization thinking

1. We can get our language back through immersion schools and building Iñupiaq institutions
2. We can build a stronger family foundation
3. We can develop our own sense of identity and Iñupiaq worldview
4. We can diminish the fact that we always must prove our Iñupiaq-ness
5. We can develop our own teaching credentials that place elders and people wise in Iñupiaq ways of life in the highest teaching positions
6. We can create community based learning environments that are built on Iñupiaq values and around our seasonal calendar
7. We can build community based discipline systems to keep ourselves and our community members accountable

ICC Alaska Decolonization Conscientization

Think-Tank Report - October 26 & 27 2016 @ Utqiagvik, AK

Once we were through the opening activities we spent time developing a proper context from which to work.

SHARED LEARNING: SETTING THE CONTEXT

To create more basis for context we participated in small group work in the afternoon to help us have an idea of where we all were coming from, we needed this context and foundation to be able to set the tone for strategy work on day two. The intention of the small groups was to help ground the group in reality and build trust as well as highlight positive momentum by sharing the stories of how challenges were overcome and where the region is experiencing success in education. Below are the transcribed points from the small group discussions.

Story themes	What is working well?	Where do you see hope?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Having to leave and come back into the village was a challenge for many• Having to teach themselves the language• Being educated and credentials but not being accepted by western or Inupiaq people• Being ashamed to be Iñupiaq• Frustrations with not being fluent	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Technology is helping to teach the language and traditions• Iñupiaq learning framework in the NSBSD• Youth have a determination and drive to learn and keep culture, language and traditions alive• School programs that teach our history• Involved grandparents• Heritage center• Current programs that are making an impact• Public support funding and other resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our young people are well educated, well grounded, good hunters, and willing to learn• Iñupiaq are adaptable, we have survived in harsh environments• Elders that are willing to teach• Integration of the two ways, western and Iñupiaq

The main themes from this dialogue stem from the effects of colonization and how indigenous peoples were forced into systems and told that their ways were not the right ways, and in many ways today still experience that. Much of the discussion highlights the regions focus on Inupiaq values, traditions, culture, and the loss of language that came with colonization over time. There is hope in the younger generation, current momentum, the fact we still have fluent Inupiaq speakers, and that there are models being put in place for education systems

ICC Alaska Decolonization Conscientization

Think-Tank Report - October 26 & 27 2016 @ Utqiagvik, AK

that integrate the Inupiaq way of life.

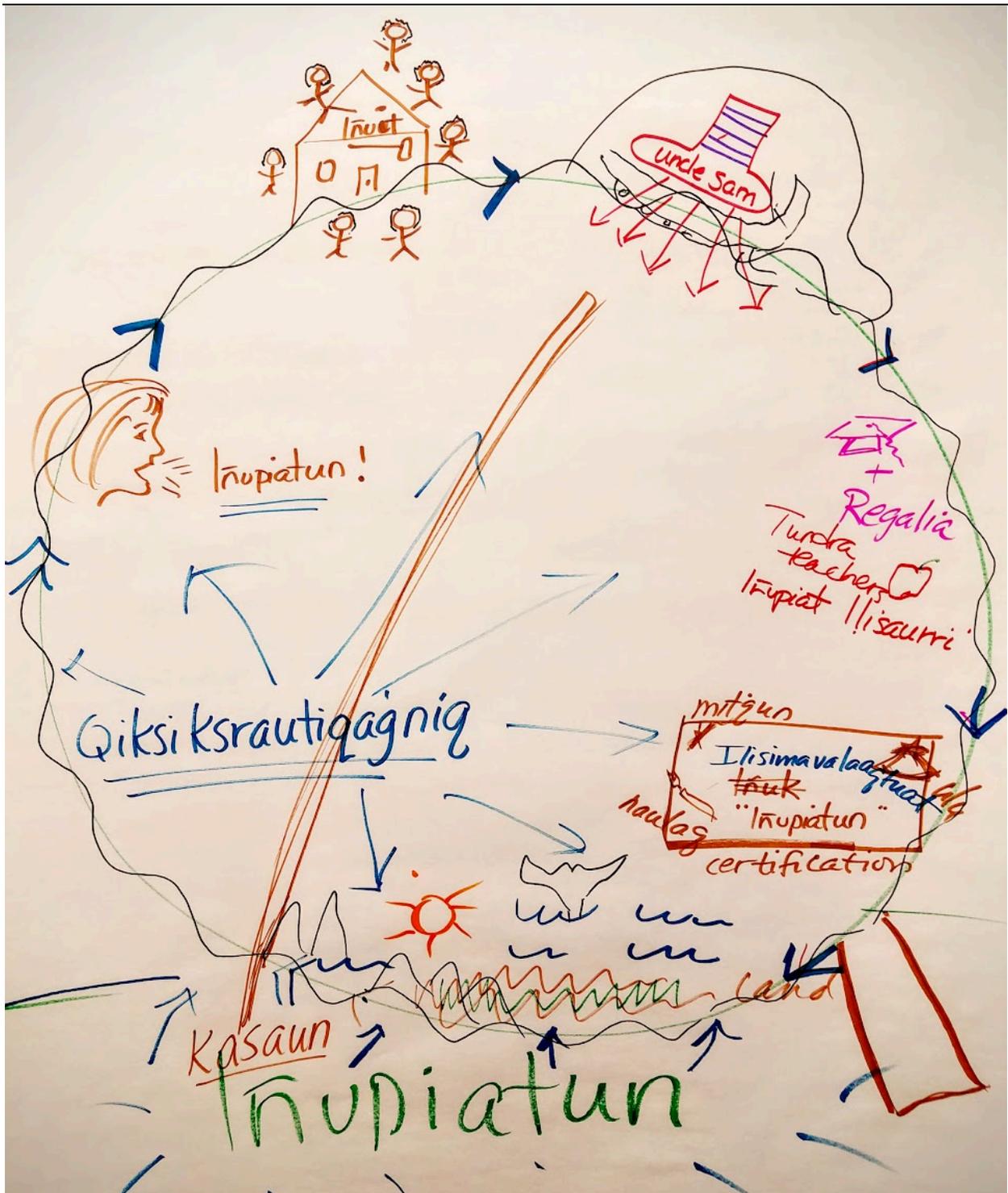
Visioning workshop

After we set the context, we spent time discussing what a vision for the future could look like if we had the perfect conditions and systems in place. The participants were broken up into four groups to brainstorm and develop an image of their most perfect future. These images were to be representative icons of what the perfect future would look like. Additionally, the exercise has the effect of aligning the participants to what is important to them and how to go about moving towards their aspirations. Below are the images and a summary of themes.



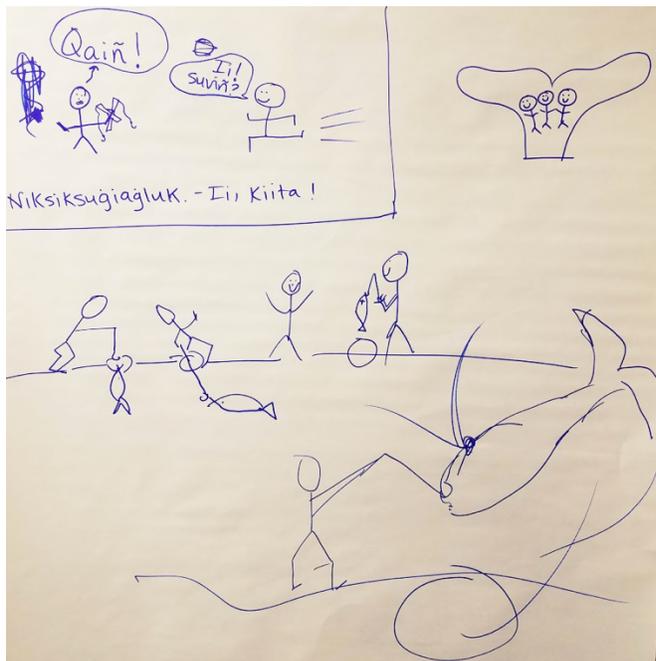
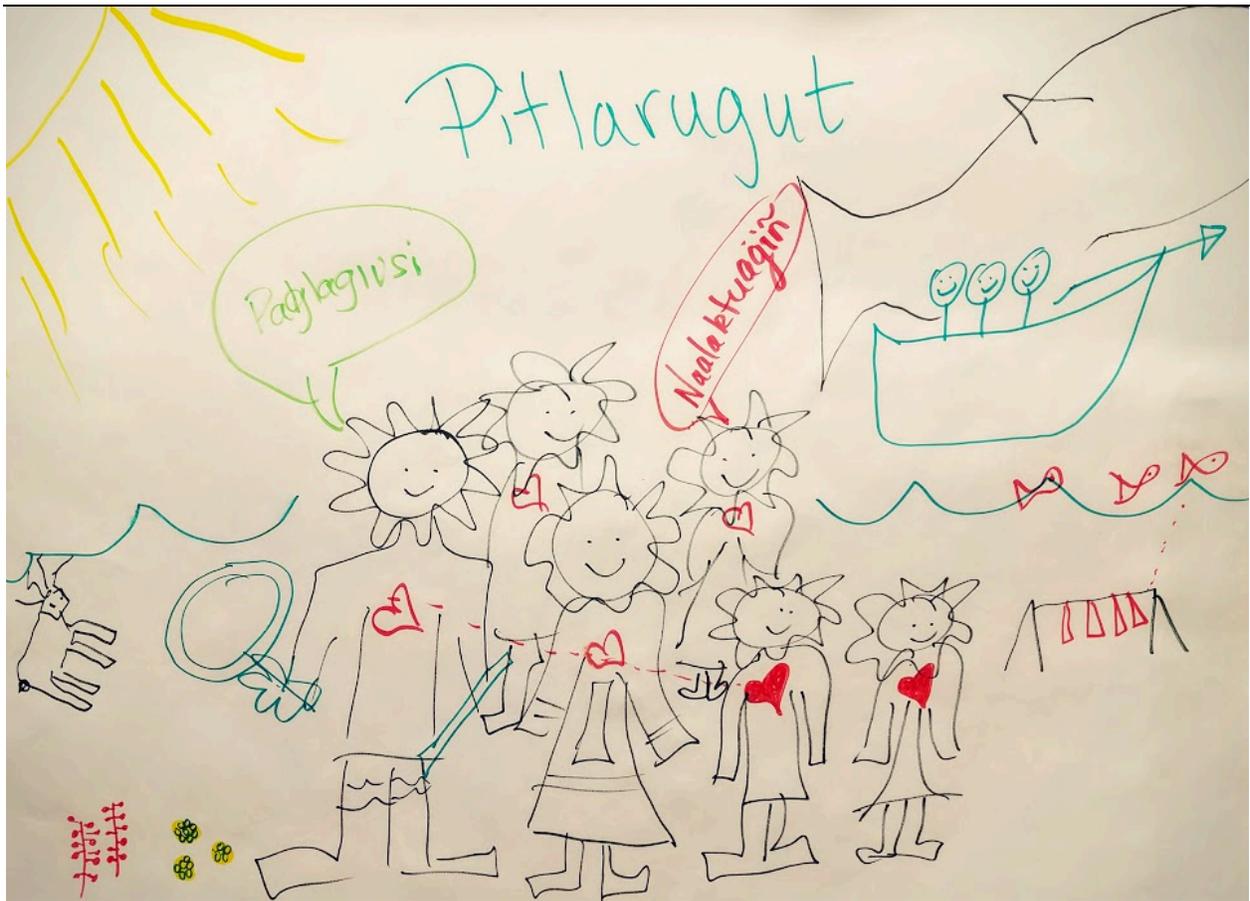
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Think-Tank Report - October 26 & 27 2016 @ Utqiagvik, AK



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Think-Tank Report - October 26 & 27 2016 @ Utqiagvik, AK

The common themes for the visioning session are as follows.

1. Language immersion is a must win at all levels from infant to adult.
2. Schools that are calendared with the season's community needs in mind and that teach from traditional culture, Inuit frameworks, and values.
3. Teaching Inupiaq History from and Inupiaq perspective
4. Family ownership in the schools
5. Teacher's that are Inupiaq, 100% vested, and that care about the culture and communities deeply.
6. Developing our own credentialing systems for elders and teachers.
7. Building our own Iñupiaq learning institutions.
8. Valuing Inuit identity, instilling a sense of purpose, fostering spirituality in the youth.
9. Inupiaq values, traditions, respect and family as the foundation
10. Healthy homes, spaces and places to learn.

REVIEWING THE INUIT EDUCATION STRATEGY

The whole day on October 27th was focused on reviewing the ICC Alaska Inuit Education Improvement strategy. We worked in small groups to develop lists of practical and implementable ideas. I have summarized each strategies ideas below.

Strategy 1: Indigenization of Education Frameworks

- Use the community people and spaces as a basis for learning, involve the community in the education system
- Develop our own credentials for teachers, specifically so elders, culture bearers, language speakers can teach. "Certified" in our way of life.
- Continue to utilize technology as a tool to facilitate learning of language and to get our students the best academic teaching possible.
- Begin to bring back traditional teaching where aunts, uncles, and all family members know their role in the upbringing and education of children.
- Develop a reliable network and database of Iñupiaq teachers that are culture bearers and language speakers.
- Develop Iñupiaq education work groups and committees, from youth on up to Elders. For example an Inuit Education association
- Implement a healing and reconciliation process for the reason
- Find and present research that highlights the positives of being bilingual
- Present and dialogue more about colonization and its effects

ICC Alaska Decolonization Conscientization

Think-Tank Report - October 26 & 27 2016 @ Utqiagvik, AK

Strategy 2: Education Policy Influence

- Develop an Inuit education association or institution
- Implement AFN resolutions for support and representation
- Hold an education summit in the region, advisory boards and stakeholders gathered to strategize with the district, community building meetings, etc.
- Develop an alliance with the schools and Iliagvik
- Policy that supports high school students to understand how to be involved with and impact policy decisions, Mentorship program
- Regional elder's council
- Increased policy education and awareness
- All organizations collaborating to address issues at the policy level
- Look at what worked for the ANCSA corporate model that can apply to education

Strategy 3: Culture Based Curriculum

- Qargi.com, create a central database, clearing house or repository for sharing resources & curriculum for the region. Currently it is independent but it can be stronger if we centralize it and make it available online.
- Align the curriculum between organizations for seamless transition birth – adult.
- Expanding ideas about classroom design, informal space, and the environment to enhance learning
- Identify local people with capacity and skills to teach culture and traditions or to be used as a resource for age appropriate curriculum development
- Inuit Identity reinforcement and celebration
- Encourage each other to build the resources and curriculum
- Protect our intellectual property rights
- Elders Council through IHLC
- Summer camps to increase capacity and people capacity to perform language immersion
- Develop a sense of in-home family responsibility
- Gaming that teaches culture i.e. Never Alone

ICC Alaska Decolonization Conscientization

Think-Tank Report - October 26 & 27 2016 @ Utqiagvik, AK

Strategy 4: Inuit Language Education

- Community building meetings to create dialogue, commitment, momentum, and unity around common goals
- Focus solely on language not tied to arts and crafts
- Language immersion from birth to adult
- Flexibility in working with fluent speakers/elders and make the paper work requirements easy
- Praise and support elders so they want to be active participants
- Space with control and administration by and for the Inupiaq people
- Independent culture schools
- Educators steeped in our history, culture, and language
- Eliminate dependency and entitlement, we can't wait for others, we are the ones to do it now
- Reclaim spaces for example Inupiaq only in the kitchen
- Utilize the indigenous language institute and bring them to our region
- Create an Inupiaq Language institute
- Integrate the Inupiaq language into all or our entity mission statements
- Capitalize on states current fiscal crisis to take control of our education
- More tribal funding can be captured
- Learn together at work 1 hour a week
- Make language learning programs and software available to everyone

Strategy 5: Educational Leadership Capacity

- Mentorship programs for our young leaders, encourage and support youth to participate
- Youth positions on boards, councils, panels, etc for greater presence and understanding
- Encourage post-secondary education with a cultural worldview
- Student government that models our system
- Growing our own - Inuit teacher, administrative, and leadership training available in the university
- Take ownership of our education system from the top down
- Inventory and use current available resources
- Elders and leaders can be more involved in the community and in the homes to motivate the youth
- Youth councils
- Support our current Inuit education leaders and encourage and acknowledge them

ICC Alaska Decolonization Conscientization

Think-Tank Report - October 26 & 27 2016 @ Utqiagvik, AK

Strategy 6: Traditional Parenting Skills

- Parenting schools and mentorship – hands on workshops for parenting and family relationships
- Claim children in OCS as our own
- Revive naming and other family based Inuit traditions (Relationships and roles)
- Family mentorship and subsistence activity teaching – Established families adopt younger families
- Community discipline by aunts and uncles
- Bring back the mother's club
- Build awareness to shift people's mindsets
- Story lesson times
- Advisory committee for language nest to develop parenting skills curriculum
- Video series of Inuit parenting skills
- Instilling Inupiaq values in the home and as the foundation for raising families

The strategy discussions were very robust and lively. The participants generated a lot of ideas. I left these ideas mostly in tact with the intention of leaving a clear record of the discussions and so that your regional group can begin deciding which of these areas are of main concern and priority. The summary and recommendations section offers suggestions for keeping momentum and sustaining this important work.

COMMUNICATION AND NEXT STEPS

To close the meeting, we asked what we would like to have happen next. While we had a few ideas the group really wanted to focus on setting another gathering for more participants as a summit type activity to prioritize their ideas and begin implementing the strategies and tactics that were discussed.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary the workshop was very well participated in, there were many practical and visionary ideas generated. If we are to create a movement, it starts at the individual level. Every individual we can have this conversation with is a potential advocate for improved Inuit education. While some changes require fundamental systemic changes, reallocation of system funding/resources, and much advocacy and support at the policy level, there are many of the practical/tactical ideas that can have immense and immediate positive impacts. My

ICC Alaska Decolonization Conscientization

Think-Tank Report - October 26 & 27 2016 @ Utqiagvik, AK

recommended course of action is outlined below.

1. Keep the group momentum going by continuing with conference calls and other online social media outlets such as facebook groups, linkedin groups or meetup groups.
2. Set a time for your first gathering to prioritize these ideas and begin implementing them.
3. Use this report to inform and build upon your good work, be iterative, try things, if they don't work, try new things until it does work, continue to build on what you already know is working.
4. Set a task in your first meetings to prioritize tactics and required resources by which ones are easy to implement and have the highest positive impact.
5. Categorize each area by systemic changes required, and changes that can be carried out in shorter timeframes with individual and small group effort.
6. Develop communication outlets to build more momentum and create passionate advocates.
7. Continue to have conversations with policy makers about putting funding and resources to areas in the education system that are not currently seen as a priority to begin to create the shifts required for a new framework and system to emerge that gets you to your vision.