

Becoming Arctic Ambassadors: Preparing Inuit Youth for Leadership on Expeditions and Beyond

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Abstract

This case study identifies the components of an environmental education and leadership development program that are uniquely important to engaging a specific group of learners: Inuit youth from across the Circumpolar Arctic. The introduction of a community-building pre-program, customized to the perspectives of these youth and held prior to joining a larger expedition, made a significant difference to their participation in the program. In seeking to engage, prepare, and support Indigenous youth to become environmental change leaders, this research suggests they benefit from the safety net of a peer community, allowing them to engage more fully in revealing their identities, sharing their gifts, expressing their dreams, and exposing their challenges. As a result of the pre-program, they benefitted more comprehensively from, and contributed more fully to, the larger expedition's program outcomes.

Résumé

La présente étude de cas dégage les éléments particulièrement importants que devrait intégrer tout programme d'éducation et de développement du leadership en environnement pour rejoindre un groupe précis d'apprenants : les jeunes Inuits de l'Arctique circumpolaire. L'introduction d'une activité préliminaire de développement de la conscience communautaire adaptée à la réalité de ces jeunes avant une expédition de plus grande envergure a fait une énorme différence dans leur participation au programme. Pour encourager et préparer les jeunes Autochtones à devenir des modèles dans la protection de l'environnement et la lutte contre les changements climatiques, la présente montre les avantages qu'apporte une communauté de pairs : un filet de sécurité pour exprimer son identité avec plus de confiance, mettre ses talents au service du monde, exprimer ses rêves et oser exposer ses difficultés. Grâce à l'activité préliminaire, les jeunes ont retiré de plus grands bénéfices du programme d'expédition et mieux contribué à l'atteinte de ses objectifs.

Keywords: Arctic education, Inuit education, Indigenous youth, leadership development, experiential learning, environmental education, community building

Mots-clés : éducation dans l'Arctique, éducation inuite, jeunes Autochtones, développement du leadership, apprentissage par l'expérience, éducation relative à l'environnement, développement de la conscience communautaire

Introduction

Climate crisis has already significantly affected Indigenous residents of the Circumpolar North and can be expected to continue disproportionately affecting them (International Panel on Climate Change, 2018). At the same time, Arctic peoples are saddled with many other complicated challenges: food insecurity, insufficient housing, and ongoing gaps in wellness indicators, or social determinants of health (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2014). There is an urgent need to grow the resources available for environmental education in the Arctic, echoing Leanne Simpson's (2002) call with respect to Indigenous communities across Canada. Greater supports are also needed for potential future Northern leaders; those forced to navigate the unique web of problems associated with settler colonialism, intergenerational trauma (Crawford, 2014), and climate catastrophe (Watt-Cloutier, 2016). Arguably, to reach the greatest number of people, environmental education and land-based learning in the Arctic must occur through the public school system and Arctic-based post-secondary programs. While improving public education is a national priority for Inuit (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2011) and northern Indigenous graduation rates are improving, changes to public school systems, such as Nunavut's, continue to appear incremental and slow to meet the needs of youth (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2018, p. 19; Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2013; O'Gorman & Pandey, 2015). In the meantime, some of the most talked-about programs for Inuit youth exist outside the formal public school system. One such program is Students on Ice (SOI), a non-formal, polar expedition-based environmental education program. The research aim upon which the present article is based was to identify the key dimensions of SOI's program that significantly support Northern participants and thereby have the potential to facilitate their leadership development.

Based in Gatineau, Quebec, Canada, SOI takes students on ship-based educational expeditions to the Polar Regions. I became interested in conducting a case study of SOI's program because of its central aim of community-responsive youth leadership development: "we are dedicated to inspiring and supporting youth and providing them the necessary tools to instill positive change in their communities and around the world" (Students on Ice [SOI], 2021a). On Arctic expeditions, SOI strives for a minimum of 30% participation by youth from Circumpolar regions, such as Alaska, Northern Canada, and Greenland. These youth, who I refer to as "Northern" participants, are almost exclusively Indigenous, and most are Inuit. In 2015, SOI launched an Arctic Youth & Partnerships Program to maximize the benefits of SOI activities for Northern youth during the expedition and beyond it:

One of SOI's long-term goals is to instil in the next generation of leaders a thorough understanding of the Arctic, its history and complexities, in order to set a high standard for sustainable development, healthy communities and environmental stewardship in Canada's North. (SOI, 2021b, para 3).

A full-time SOI staff member, Caitlyn Baikie, a young Inuk and SOI alumna from Nain, Nunatsiavut, coordinated the Arctic Youth & Partnerships Program from 2015–2018. SOI also involves a notable proportion of Inuit leaders, Elders, and Northern residents as expedition staff. These efforts show that SOI recognizes how few accessible opportunities exist for Northern youth to see other parts of the Arctic region, to participate in leadership development opportunities, and to build a network of other young Northerners (SOI, 2021 b).

Evidence of SOI's successful programming can be found through anecdotes collected by SOI itself, which are made available on its website (SOI, 2021 c). Evidence can also be found in reflections of SOI educators and students that appear in other studies (Glithero & Ibrahim, 2013; Green, 2010; Raffan, 2014; Reis et al., 2015; Wyatt, 2012). Finally, ongoing participation by high profile Canadians, including well-known Northerners, on expeditions also demonstrates evidence of SOI's learning outcomes. Anecdotally, the program is successfully engaging Northerners in experiential education with lasting impacts on them as individuals, as well as on their ability to act as leaders. However, through this research I sought to document how SOI goes about designing an educational expedition that reportedly aligns with Inuit learning goals. I also aimed to consider whether this match was confirmed by the Northern youth and educators who were involved in the program. Given the disengagement of many Inuit youth from formal schooling (O'Gorman & Pandey, 2015) and the goal of SOI specifically to nurture Northern change-makers, I sought to evaluate whether SOI has unique features that align with the needs of Northern Indigenous youth. Were they features that other educators could learn from?

This case study illustrates how the introduction of a community-building pre-program, customized to the perspectives of Indigenous youth who participate in it prior to joining the expedition, made a significant difference to their participation in SOI in 2016. In seeking to engage, prepare, and support Northern Indigenous youth to become environmental change leaders, this research suggests that they need time to connect with their peers from other similar communities, opportunities to practise articulating their world views, and space to develop pride in Inuit language and culture as they go on to engage with the wider world.

Research Context

As someone who grew up in Nunavut and lived there intermittently, I had long heard about SOI. Just as I was beginning a post-doctoral fellowship in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa in 2015, I crossed paths with some SOI educators. We found common ground in our curiosity about the following questions: What dimensions of educational expeditions have the most significant impacts on Northern youth in terms of supporting personal growth, education, and leadership skills? What encourages engagement with important Arctic

issues such as climate change, among others? What best facilitates learning from the perspectives of Northerners about the North? SOI staff and I began to co-construct a research project to be conducted on the 2016 Arctic expedition. The full results of my study can be found elsewhere (McGregor, 2017; see also McGregor, 2018), based on methods that are discussed further below. None of my original research questions specifically focused on the pre-program—the topic of this paper—because it was newly introduced in 2016 and those of us involved did not anticipate that a separate analysis of it would necessarily be relevant. The positive impact of the pre-program became an unexpected answer to my research questions regarding the most important components of the entire program for Northern youth. Here I report on those findings by addressing the following question: What was the rationale for, and design and outcomes of, a new component of the Students on Ice expedition experience, the Northern youth pre-program?

Research Methodology

I conducted ethnographic-evaluative research through a combination of qualitative methods to uncover common meanings, perceptions, embodied experiences, and relationships held by SOI participants, to the extent such a discovery is possible (always partially, never completely). Based on the intention to describe this program from multiple perspectives and in-depth, this research can be partially viewed as ethnographic, that is, as producing knowledge that is relational, contextual, linguistic, and narrative. Identifying impacts of the educational experience may support SOI's leadership team to better evaluate what educational outcomes they are achieving (intentionally and unintentionally) and how they are achieving them. This pragmatic purpose illustrates how the research may be viewed as evaluative. In the table below, I list the methods I used to collect data and the number of participants that were part of each method. These methods were used to inform the entire research project, not just documentation of the pre-program.

SOI extensively and publicly documents expeditions through participant blogs posted on the website, as well as through professional photography, videos, student profile writing, and public presentations by students about their experience both during and after expedition (SOI, 2021d). Thus, I worked with SOI to design the methods involving students, particularly the workshops and small group interviews, in ways that would be consistent with these practices and educational goals. Although this article is not a comprehensive representation of all of my findings (see McGregor, 2017; 2018), data presented in this article with respect to the pre-program have been sourced from and informed by each of the above methods.

Timing	Method	Number of Participants
During pre-program	Pre-expedition workshop with Northern students to document expectations	28 students
During pre-program and expedition	Ongoing participant observation	
During expedition	One-on-one interviews with staff members	9 staff
	Small group interviews with a variety of students (2 to 5 students/interview, 7 interviews)	22 students
	End-of-expedition workshop with Northern students to collect reflections	9 students
After expedition	Follow-up phone calls with Northern students to collect reflections	5 students
	Analysis of SOI documents (application forms, post-expedition student and staff surveys)	

Table 1. Data Collection Methods and Participants

Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by the University of Ottawa ethics review board (REB #03-16-06). It did not require review by the Nunavut Research Institute (2018) because it occurred as part of an educational program (p. 5). In accordance with SOI advice regarding their program culture, expectations, and spirit of participation, no compensation was offered in return for participation. All participants in the research completed consent forms and were given the choice to be identified by either a pseudonym or their real name in reports and publications. Those whose names appear in this manuscript requested on their consent forms to have their real names identified alongside their quotations. They were contacted during the drafting of this manuscript to review their quotation, suggest any minor edits, and (re)confirm whether or not they would like their name included. A few quotes are included without attribution because I could not reach the individual for confirmation of permission in the context of this particular publication (though their consent form did allow for use of the quote in my research).

The Indigenous student participants were top of mind in research planning, especially because SOI can be an intense experience during which students may feel vulnerable as they stretch outside their comfort zone. In several conversations with SOI staff members, especially with Caitlyn Baikie, we agreed to guide the research in such a way that we would, we hoped, prevent concern or discomfort

on the part of SOI participants. For example, I did not attend any sessions on the topic of youth mental health, as a precaution against being perceived to be documenting activities when personal or confidential information could be shared. A Letter of Introduction was included in orientation packages provided to participants (staff, students, and parents of students) in advance. I introduced myself and the research during the Northern pre-program, and again on board the ship with all participants. Students were told that data concerning them as individuals (e.g., quotations) would only be collected if they chose to participate and signed a consent form.

SOI staff members and I agreed that it was important for students and staff to have a voice in the research and to articulate the growth they experienced for themselves. Students are exposed to a wide range of learning experiences during SOI; in such a rich context, participation in research was seen as another learning opportunity. For example, participation in the research could give students practice reviewing and filling out a research consent form. However, we agreed the research should not actively enhance, shape, or change the education program, nor should it alter student participation in it. Thus, research activities were designed to be reflective, and efforts were made to ensure participation in the research did not require students to miss out on other opportunities (e.g., small group interviews were not conducted during programmed time).

Limitations

The rate of participation in each method varied, consistent with the SOI culture of student choice. Students with the highest needs, those who were struggling with their feelings, or those who were least likely to take initiative to seek educator support may also have been those students who chose not to participate in the research. I was unable to ensure representation of the whole group of Northern students in each method; for example, noticeably fewer male Northern students participated. Furthermore, the extent to which long-term impacts of SOI on the Northern youth can be identified from this research is limited. A small number of follow up calls were held with some students, but what they said about anticipated impacts on them after the expedition does not necessarily mean those impacts came to fruition. Further study would be needed to correlate an SOI experience with long-term outcomes. I was solely responsible for analysis of the data and constructing the findings, and several full-time SOI staff members were invited to read and comment on drafts of my final report (McGregor, 2017). Some might view that as a missed opportunity to involve more SOI staff or SOI participants in contributing more comprehensively to the research outcomes. As mentioned above, however, participants who are named in this article were invited to offer comments on a draft of this publication.

SOI Expeditions: Once-in-a-Lifetime Experience

Participation in SOI makes youth feel important and special right from the get-go because program admission is competitive, expensive, and very diverse (in 2016 there were 118 students from 9 countries, including Canada, from which there were participants representing 11 provinces and territories). SOI applicants, the majority of whom are 16–18 years old, must be registered students (high school or post-secondary). They are required to fill out a written application form, apply for scholarship funding, and provide two references. Students are admitted on the basis of their desire to learn, leadership potential, involvement in the community, passion, and vision for making change. The fee for travel was \$11,900 CDN in 2016, and 77% of all students, including 100% of Northern students, received scholarships to cover those fees. For these reasons among others, students are very aware that this is a rare opportunity. In 2016, there were 45 Northern youth (33 females, 12 males), representing 38% of the registered students, with 40 who self-identified as Inuit, 3 as First Nations, and 2 as non-Indigenous. These participants came from Alaska (1), Northwest Territories (outside Inuvialuit) (3), Inuvialuit Settlement Region (2), Northern Manitoba (1), Nunavik (8), Nunavut (20), Nunatsiavut (7), and Greenland (3). For some, the trip represented one of only a handful of trips they had taken outside their home community. For many, it was first time leaving Canada, which required that they obtain a passport. A few had already travelled extensively in Canada, been to Greenland, or had been on international cultural exchanges.

SOI provides a high student–educator ratio. The 73 educators on board include a handful of staff employed directly and full-time by SOI, but the majority are recruited specifically for their expertise in sciences, arts, culture, expeditions, medicine, politics, or other areas (most participate on their vacation time). This includes some individuals who have national prominence or even celebrity status; it is not lost on students that they get to travel for several weeks with people whom they would not likely run into in their everyday lives. Among educators in 2016 were 14 Inuit, 3 First Nations or Métis, 9 non-Indigenous who live in the Northern regions noted above, and 47 non-Indigenous educators who live elsewhere in Canada or internationally. Among the Inuit educators were 1 female and 2 male Elders who shared their extensive knowledge and skills. A mental health counsellor originally from Nunavut tirelessly attended to the emotional needs of all students, particularly the Northern students, in both English and Inuktitut.

Travel in the Arctic is inherently unpredictable to begin with, given changeable weather and ice conditions. Likewise, opportunities that arise (e.g., wildlife sightings) can shift curricular plans in an instant. “A typical SOI day” is a contradiction in terms. One of the mantras used repeatedly by Expedition Leader, Geoff Green, to ensure a successful expedition is, “Flexibility is key.” The program takes place on an ice-class cruise ship. Each day begins with wake-up at 7:00 a.m. and ends around 10:30 p.m. Participants gather together twice

daily for briefings in the morning and evening. Core activities might include the following: 1) Arctic Hours—students choose to attend one of three presentations by education staff; 2) Ship-Based Workshops—students choose to attend one of eight workshops (e.g., introduction to photography, traditional sewing, drum dancing, mental health matters, science lab analysis, song writing); 3) Outings to the ice, sea, or land (travelling by Zodiac)—students choose one of several workshops offered by education staff on land (e.g., outdoor painting, Arctic plants walk, storytelling, seashore biology walk, fishing, qajaqing, stand-up paddleboarding). The expedition plans also feature community visits in both Greenland and the Canadian Arctic to connect with residents of the region on both sides of the Davis Strait. Evening briefings include inviting students to share the best moments of the day, a short story or presentation delivered by educators, background information on the activities that will follow the next day, special photographs or videos of the journey, and musical performances by musicians and collaborating students. I share these details to convey that with such an emergent and shifting curriculum, students soon recognize that they must always be ready to seize the moment. With hesitation, they could miss something truly special.

Typical Northern Student Journey: SOI's Rationale for a Pre-Program

I sought to identify the assumptions guiding SOI's efforts to tailor their education program to Northerners. While generalizations do not apply in every case, the following is a description of the typical Northern student experience on SOI expeditions prior to 2016, based on synthesis of staff interviews. (While I tried to consistently refer to these youth as "Northern" in order to be inclusive of anyone who resides in the Arctic, a majority of Northern youth are Inuit. Several staff specifically noted they were thinking of Inuit youth as they talked during our interviews). These assumptions are relevant to consider closely because they led to the introduction of a Northern student-specific pre-program in 2016. They are also pertinent because they provide insight into the conditions that educators and program coordinators from other contexts (e.g., post-secondary programs) might face in supporting Northern youth.

Northern participants are often leaving their communities for the first time on their own. They arrive in Ottawa, where the expedition begins, and find the big city overwhelming and intimidating. The weather is hot, they are meeting many people at one time, they feel homesick, and they are not used to adults they don't know telling them what to do. At first, Northern youth tend to be (or are perceived by others as) quiet, observant, reserved, insecure, nervous, or shy. This is how one participant, staff member Caitlyn Baikie, explained it to me:

I'm thinking of the 15- and 16-year-olds, most of them are coming from a place where everyone around them, their entire community, is their lifeline. Everybody that they see, whether they're related by blood or not, they're still family. It is

who they are. We've plucked them out of that for the first time, and we take them to the south where it's very intimidating. For somebody that's doing it for the first time, and at such a young age, and taking them away from that lifeline and where they get their confidence and sense of self from—that's a lot on its own. For any student coming here ... everybody will be so confused on how to make sense of this. The northern youth have this added layer of complexity and it requires understanding from SOI of where they're coming from for them to feel ok, to feel confident, to really get something out of it. Then we're taking these youth back to a place that's familiar, but still unknown, so how does that make sense?

Halfway through the expedition, or later, Northern students tend to extend their new relationships to other students or staff, beyond the other Inuit participants. Later in the program, they begin to take initiative, start conversations, express themselves more outwardly, and show their personalities. As a result of the expedition, Northern students are said to develop more confidence, feel the encouragement of people outside their families or communities, express more pride in their identity, culture, and where they are from, see more options for their future, or express more of a sense of control over their destiny.

The staff narratives were not exclusively deficit-based with regard to Northern students. Staff also spoke of these students' unique strengths and commonalities. They said that many Northern students possessed curiosity, a welcoming spirit, and a sense of humour. They demonstrated expertise in Northern life and animals, a willingness to teach Inuit language, and a sense of place, connection to the land, and love of the land.

Staff members also helped to identify the unique needs Northern youth bring to SOI expeditions. They require more support in terms of time, sourcing clothes or items for the trip, and social/emotional coaching before the expedition begins. During the expedition, they are said to benefit from interactions with other Inuit on board who help them feel comfortable. They are also said to benefit from culturally appropriate counsellors, staff who understand and respond to their homesickness, peers and staff who understand or relate to the intensity and degree of difference in their experience, and opportunities to observe peers responding to situations outside their comfort zone.

The role of Northern youth as representatives of their own communities, and of the Arctic region generally, is both a challenge and an opportunity for them. One participant and staff member shared that they think youth sometimes start out wondering why other participants are so excited about a place (their small, isolated home communities or regions) that they usually perceive as boring or limited. However, seeing new parts of the Arctic, or seeing it through visitors' eyes, makes them feel special to be from the Arctic. Some also often have iconic northern experiences—like seeing a polar bear—which they may not have had before. Shirley Manh, a long-term full-time SOI staff member and participant, explained:

Also, the curiosity of all the other passengers ... all the other students and staff who haven't been exposed to the language, the culture, the food, the land, everything. I hope that part of that is because we've tried to instill a curiosity in them. Yeah so that "collision of curiosity" makes Northern youth feel like they now have this privileged position in life, which they probably didn't feel like they had before. "Wow, now I'm in a position to tell people things, to answer questions and to share. I'm in a position where I feel proud of these things." I can't say it for everyone but certainly, a lot of the students probably have not felt that very often in their lives.

I asked Ashlee Cunsolo, a staff member and participant who was particularly sensitive to the Northern students, specifically about whether she thought the expectation that students become "Arctic ambassadors" puts pressure on them to speak to others on behalf of their communities or about their homelands, culture, society and priorities, alongside simply learning and making it through the expedition. She responded, "Northern youth have a much larger burden on this expedition, from the pressure of being the Arctic ambassador in their own homelands, being away from the land, family, and community, being on the ship, confronting their own experiences with colonization. It's a lot." Another staff member and participant said the onus should never be on an Inuk to teach about their reality—like "tokenism due to identity," as she put it. However, she added that Inuit tend to be welcoming and inclusive, and that they enjoy sharing information for a common goal. She noted that SOI provides a stepping-stone to learning how to do that.

All of these findings could be informative for, and help to orient, educators who seek to support Northern youth in other programs or contexts. However, specific to the SOI program (which is limited to several weeks), staff interviews revealed that SOI educators are concerned about finding ways to draw Northern students out early in the expedition to maximize their experiences. One staff participant characterized the sense of discomfort at the beginning of the expedition as being so strong that students "lose out on the experience." Another said Northern youth comparatively show their growth more than students from elsewhere. They added that, because it tends to take a bit longer for these youth to demonstrate their growth, it is also more rewarding to be part of that experience. These observations begin to explain how the Northern youth learning journey is different from other youth, and why a pre-program specifically for Northern youth was seen to potentially have value.

Northern Student Pre-Program

In 2016, SOI piloted a pre-program for Northern youth who were participating in the expedition. This event took place prior to the arrival of other students for the expedition. In subsequent years, it was given the Inuktitut name *Saavittut*, meaning "taking off from the shore." It was developed in collaboration with, and hosted by, the post-secondary program Nunavut Sivuniksavut (NS), in Ottawa.

NS is a two-year college-accredited program designed exclusively for Inuit youth. Students usually come from Nunavut, but the program is also open to applicants from other Inuit regions. SOI and NS share a large number of alumni (i.e., students who participate in both programs). SOI saw NS's educational philosophy and culturally responsive approaches as closely aligning with their own interest in preparing Inuit youth to become "ambassadors" for the Arctic. With this shared interest, SOI could count on NS to consider the range of needs Inuit youth have when leaving their home communities for an intense educational experience.

The pre-program was scheduled over two days. Due to limited flight options from small northern communities, Northern youth began arriving in Ottawa as early as five days before the pre-program (in addition to staying longer at the end of the expedition). In past years, flight arrangements had resulted in Northern students' early arrival, but this was the first year their time was leveraged intentionally for pre-program participation to advance their educational experience. Students were accommodated at University of Ottawa residences, ate in the university cafeteria or were provided catering, and walked together around Ottawa for daily programming. A few students knew one or two other participants who were from the same community, but for the most part they were meeting for the first time. Caitlyn Baikie took the administrative lead on behalf of SOI in planning, coordinating, and supervising the pre-program. Four NS instructors took responsibility for designing and facilitating most of the curriculum, with the exception of some presentations arranged by SOI. Eight SOI staff members also arrived early to assist Caitlyn with supervision and support. These were mostly Inuit or Indigenous educators, or other long-term Northerners, including me. Other staff dropped in occasionally. Caitlyn and the pre-program SOI staff were on duty from wake-up until bedtime throughout the pre-program.

The goals of the Northern pre-program, according to Caitlyn, were threefold: 1) provide a "softer landing" or easier transition into the SOI experience; 2) provide a toolkit for making the most of the expedition experience; and 3) help students see that they already possess a toolkit that they can share with others, along with sharing who they are. Caitlyn spoke with me about wanting youth to be proud of themselves and recognize the expertise that they already have. Specifically, she said, "I hope that youth will have a sense of confidence. I'm not expecting that they're all going to be so outgoing or outspoken. But no matter where they are, whether they're in their household, or travelling, or in a classroom in school, or their career, I want them to have that confidence."

Program Pedagogies

The Northern student pre-program curriculum occurred through rotating small group breakout sessions consisting of discussions and activities about themes of Northern life. Each session was facilitated by an NS instructor, or in some cases,

recent NS grads who were also participating in SOI as students. These older students modelled leadership skills on several occasions during the expedition as well.

During the pre-program sessions, students were invited to describe their world (food, art, hunting, environment, etc.). In doing so, they were comparing life in their own community to life in their peers' Inuit homelands (Alaska, Canada, Greenland). They were recognizing the significant similarities among Arctic communities, as well as the differences, while learning about each other in the process. They practised articulating that which is taken for granted around them—that which is “normal”—so that they might be able to share their knowledge with those visiting the Arctic for the first time and answer the many questions that visitors pose. The program also tries to support students who begin with vastly different family, home, school and life experiences. For example, some arrive with little in the way of Inuit language or cultural skills. SOI program participant David Gray, an educator and Northern expert who has participated in SOI since 2004, explained:

For the kids who don't have that background—they don't have parents or grandparents that teach them about traditional ways, they don't get out on the land. For those kids to come into NS with a bunch of other northern students, and go through some of the basics about their language, culture, traditions and knowledge. I think that's really important. It puts them on more of an even footing with other kids. And then they're encouraged to take what they're learning or what they already know, and share it with the kids they're going to meet on the trip from the south.

In talking about and comparing their experiences, students were also beginning to identify issues and challenges with regard to Northern life that need to change (e.g., food security, standard of housing). These conversations helped students prepare to participate in SOI's leadership development goals, where significant aspects of programming in the latter half of the expedition focus on making change in students' home communities. In general, I observed these sessions to be relatively easy for students to participate in, and likely familiar to them in relation to their school experiences. Some individuals were soft-spoken or reluctant to speak up while others showed disinterest, but the instructors were casual and unfazed by their varying levels of engagement.

Community Building: An Emergent Strength

In addition to facilitated pre-program activities, there was a significant amount of time each day for youth to get to know each other socially or informally. During walks to and from NS, as well as during breaks and meals, students connected on their own terms. This led to the development of strong friendships and the exploration of common interests. SOI participant Genevieve Killulark, an Inuk staff member, described these connections as follows:

The stories that were shared during lunch breaks—they were the most powerful. They would give tidbits of information during formal programs and that would spark up conversation during breaks. In terms of programming, I would say practicing songs: that sense of group camaraderie. That sense of pride, like we're all in this together, we'll all learn this together, and share this together, with others. That was quite powerful.

I observed more than one occasion when someone seemed upset or felt homesick, and it was the support or initiative of another student that helped cheer them up and reintegrate them into activities. Especially as a result of an evening of sharing Inuit musical traditions from different regions, the youth seemed to develop a sense of community they could draw on to share with the larger expedition group. Caitlyn Baikie identified this community building as an unexpected outcome that could become a goal for the pre-program in future. She said it exceeded SOI's expectations and became a "toolkit" in itself for them to share with other students:

By having them at NS immediately they met 42 other individuals coming from a place just like them. That community was built. And now they're sharing that community. Whereas before it was about fighting that battle on their own, building community on their own. And that's hard.

Outcomes of the Pre-Program According to Students

The pre-program was mentioned a number of times in response to a range of indirect questions during small group interviews with students. The following are examples of comments that emerged. When asked to share a challenging experience during the expedition, a student said the pre-program was challenging partly because it prompted them to ask themselves, "Who am I as an Inuk?" They went on to say that learning about Canadian Inuit history made them thankful to be Greenlandic and then referred to some of the more difficult recent experiences of colonization. One student referred to Caitlyn as an "Inuk role model," explaining that Caitlyn's organization of the pre-program allowed the youth to learn about their culture. Another student said that, at the beginning of the pre-program, they thought, "this isn't what I want to do." However, following discussions about how important it is to be part of your culture, they felt more strongly about learning their culture: "I always thought the Inuit culture wasn't strong but I realized when I went to NS we are the strongest of the Aboriginal cultures out there."

Students also expressed renewed commitment to Inuit culture in their everyday life back home. When asked what they learned about themselves during the expedition, one student responded that visiting NS made them want to go there for school. They realized that culture and language are not as much of a priority in their home region as they are in others, and thought that NS might help them grow. Another student agreed they would like to go to NS but

didn't know if the courses would allow them to get a job. They hoped to have a job related to Inuit culture.

In a small group interview I held with students from Nunatsiavut exclusively, I asked whether the activities during the pre-program had been helpful to them. One student identified the session on Inuit history as particularly important. This is notable because it was delivered by two students who were both NS graduates and SOI participants in 2016. Another mentioned the session on different dialects of Inuit language as important. Lastly, a student said, "we already knew some of it." While this could be interpreted as a criticism, it also reflects one purpose of the program: to elicit from students what they already know that they may wish to share with people they meet. In the workshop held at the end of the expedition I asked students to name "a moment from the expedition you will always remember." One student wrote, "The time at NS pre-program because I saw new things, learned more about my culture." For the pre-program to stand out from the entire experience shows its power for this particular student. Finally, this quote from a well-travelled, older Northern student who participated in the pre-program exemplifies why such a program is warranted:

Inuit youth are so shy when they meet new people, and they opened up instantly. How they've been on this trip, it wouldn't have been that way without the pre-program. They're so open and excited to meet everyone, whereas in programs I've done before, and stories I've heard of the past, the Inuit youth usually take until the last day to really open up. I think it's really good that there's a pre-program.

Outcomes of the Pre-Program According to Staff

Staff shared the following examples of observable outcomes from the pre-program for Northern students, which they witnessed during the 2016 expedition. Many Northern students appeared more comfortable in new situations. They demonstrated confidence by sitting at the front of the entire expedition group during briefings, whereas in the past they would stay at the back. Even more notably, they eagerly and publicly asked questions of the Expedition Leader at the first briefing. Other examples included looking staff they had just met in the eye, taking the initiative to introduce themselves, striking up conversations, or asking questions. Staff noted that students referred back to what happened in the pre-program during conversations, showing they were still thinking about it later, or found value in it. The Northern students seemed to feel less homesickness when compared with previous expeditions, where it would carry on for a week. The Northern youth actively participated in musical performances in front of the entire group, showing a willingness to take risks and be vulnerable. Overall, their social interactions were characterized by less cultural "clumping," that is, where

Inuit students only connect with other Inuit students. They branched out from the social network they established amongst the Northern youth to create a larger network with the other youth. Lastly, staff attributed to the pre-program students' enhanced sense of pride (in where they come from and in sharing their experiences) when it was compared with students on past expeditions.

Conclusion

Arctic communities in Canada and across the Circumpolar North have many strengths. They also have significant needs, especially as climate change creates an increasingly unpredictable future. Young people who can act as spokespersons, facilitators, and leaders in their communities are needed now more than ever. Educational opportunities to develop those skills and capacities are highly valuable in a context strained for resources. SOI has intentionally worked toward supporting Northern youth to become change leaders. However, program participants noted that in years prior to 2016, the Northern students might not have gained from the program or contributed to it as much as they potentially could. The degree of difference in context (environment, social, cultural, language, etc.) between their home life experiences and the SOI expedition were challenging to navigate in the short period of a two- to three-week trip.

With the advent of the Northern youth pre-program in 2016, this hindrance was seen to change, as the quotations throughout this article demonstrate. Although the pre-program showed great strengths, there is room for improvement, as there would be for any first-time initiative. I made numerous specific, concrete, and largely logistical recommendations to SOI about improving the pre-program on the basis of data collected during this research, all of which can be found in the final report (McGregor, 2017, p. 35). Examples of the recommendations include the following: providing a specific hot-weather packing list to participants for their time in Ottawa; planning more physical activity during the pre-program; building in a process for individual goal-setting; and explaining that students can communicate with family during the expedition (by posting blog entries) to reduce anxiety about being out of contact. Despite these relatively minor and logistical suggestions, the approach taken by SOI and their institutional partner, NS, to invite Northern youth to articulate and reflect on who they are, and where they come from, is highly valuable in orienting them to their own strengths, fostering pride in their culture, and offering reasons to share their perspectives with others.

The opportunity for Northern youth to come together, introduce themselves, and form bonds before meeting youth and adults from elsewhere around the world on the expedition made a great difference to the participants' experience in SOI. Community-building and intentional cultivation of a sense of belonging endured through the rest of the expedition. According to my observations, that community was warmly extended by the Northern youth to those who

were visiting the Arctic for the first time. The pre-program created a safety net of commonality in a foreign situation, allowing youth to engage more fully in revealing their identities, sharing their gifts, expressing their dreams, and exposing their challenges. Although SOI has long been called a “life-changing” experience among SOI alumni, the Northern pre-program seemed to accelerate that potential in speed and degree for Northerners. SOI has since made the pre-program a permanent part of their expedition plans and successfully hosted it at NS again in 2017, 2018, and 2019.

Simpson (2002) has pointed out that few environmental post-secondary programs are appropriately customized for Indigenous students, that is, for their unique communities and the matrix of intertwined social and environmental issues they face. SOI is not accredited (although some students have received credit for their learning from their home institutions), but it engages Northern Indigenous youth in environmental education and leadership with the hope of supporting them to continue to post-secondary education or pursue other forms of personal development. Simpson (2002) has identified important characteristics of environmental education programs for Indigenous learners: centring Indigenous knowledge, including Elders as experts; grounding programs in Indigenous philosophies of education; utilizing Indigenous pedagogies and languages; connecting to the land; making space for resistance; and supporting decolonization. As a result of my research with SOI, I would add to Simpson’s list the importance of creating an intentional “soft landing,” or a welcoming community, in which Indigenous identities, experiences, and knowledge are affirmed prior to the start of programming or arrival of other participants.

The benefits of a community-building pre-program or orientation are relevant to educational contexts beyond SOI. This article is intended to shine light on some of the considerations necessary in enhancing programs for Inuit or other Indigenous youth elsewhere, including post-secondary access programs. As program coordinators and educators plan and design learning that is intended to empower youth, providing tailored student supports for Indigenous learners is essential (see also Crooks et al., 2010). Such efforts account for the ongoing legacies of colonization, marginalization, and racism which shape Indigenous student experiences to this day (Dion, 2016; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011). Students— especially those coming from remote regions or communities—are likely to benefit from affirmation before they embark on either the main journey or other high-stakes activities, such as coursework that is being evaluated for credit. This affirmation helps students recognize that their lived experience is valued and valuable because it is both unique and shared by others. To receive that affirmation and strength from a network of youth who can grow and flourish together is among the most important resources we can offer the next generation of leaders.

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