

# **On Living and Learning in Igloolik, Nunavut: A Conversation with Raigili Amaaq**

Colleen Chau and Raigili Arnaaq

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this interview, Raigili Amaaq describes her experience attending the Igloolik Federal School in the 1970s and 1980s. She compares her past experiences as a student to her current experience working at that same school (now called Ataguttaaluk Elementary School) as a Guidance Counsellor and Community Liaison during the 2000s. In conversation with Colleen Chau, a second-year Qallunaat (Southern Canadian) teacher, Raigili ponders the nuances of working with Inuit and non-Inuit staff, prioritization of Inuit culture in the school system, and her hopes for the future of education in Nunavut. This interview took place in March 2022. It is an extension of a conversation between Colleen and Raigili about teachers using a trauma-informed approach within their classrooms. The interview was used as a talking point to orient new staff to work in Nunavut schools and provide context for certain practices or student behaviours they were encountering at AES.

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*Igloolik, Nunavut, photo by Rene Hernandez Dias*

**Colleen Chau:** Can you tell me about yourself, Raigili? Where were you born and raised? Where did you go to school and how long have you worked at Atagutaaluk Elementary School (AES)?

**Raigili Amaaq:** I was born in Frobisher Bay in 1973. It is now called Iqaluit, Nunavut. I was raised here in Igloolik and in Taloyoak. Maybe two years later [from when I was born], we moved back here [Igloolik] and then I started school here up to Grade 8. I have been with Ataguttaaluk Elementary School since 2006. I have done this position, II, for around nine years. I have been doing other positions like substitute teacher, classroom teacher, and Inuktitut teacher since 2006. So, the students that I have taught have graduated and are starting to graduate. I have seen a lot of children growing up in Igloolik.

**Colleen Chau:** I know you are an integral part of the community, both inside and outside of the school. Could you explain how else are you involved in the community aside from AES?

**Raigili Arnaaq:** I am on the board of directors of Igloolik Coop. I am also the chairperson of the Igloolik Housing Association. I also have a taxi business, which has not been running right now due to circumstances. We are waiting for a particular tool to come in [to fix the car]. Our car has been parked since January.

**Colleen Chau:** What is your experience with the education systems in Nunavut as a student? Were you homeschooled or did you attend government school?

**Raigili Arnaaq:** I do not remember attending kindergarten, but maybe I was too young. I remember attending Grade 1 and beyond. It was not a day school; it was here (AES) before the renovation. It was federal government teachers before it became the Government of Nunavut. The territory is quite young. I remember Grade 1, 2, and 3 teachers were Inuit teachers. My first Qallunaat<sup>1</sup> teacher was in Grade 4.

**Colleen Chau:** This is like the current system we have at AES (where students are taught in Inuktitut in Grades 1 through 3 and have their first English immersion/Qallunaat teacher in Grade 4). How did you find the transition and were there a lot of differences?

**Raigili Arnaaq:** My parents were older so there was not any English at home, just when television came in the mid to late eighties. We had to learn English from our Grade 4 teacher. The first thing I remember needing to learn to say was "I need to go to the washroom." I guess it was a big concern for me.

It wasn't too different. The school didn't have all Inuit staff. We knew that there were Qallunaat staff like the principal or whatever. And I had friends growing up who were in the same class, or I would visit, and their father was a Qallunaat.

**Colleen Chau:** What is your experience with a traditional education? Even though you were attending a federal school, did you still have time and were allowed to learn traditional skills?

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<sup>1</sup> *Qallunaat is an Inuktitut word that translates to white person; however, the word is also used to refer to an outsider or non-Inuit person in Nunavut who is not always ethnically white.*

**Raigili Arnaaq:** I wasn't in a boarding school. My older sister was, but I was attending a regular elementary school like what we have today. [Traditional learning] was just an everyday thing at home. It wasn't like a thing you have to learn [with someone teaching you]. It was just the things that we saw.

I think that is how we Inuit learn though: through watching. Our father going hunting and bringing back his catch and our mother preparing skins and sewing skins for the winter.

**Colleen Chau:** It reminds me of last year when we opened the Cultural Center and had Elders coming in to run programming. I found it interesting how the Elders weren't standing at the front explicitly "teaching." Instead, we had Elders doing things and the students naturally coming to sit beside someone to observe them.

**Raigili Arnaaq:** As we got into higher grades (when I was a student), there was a portable school which is now the Head Start building. We would come here and do sewing with Elders. It was called the Tech Center and girls would learn to sew and boys would learn to make qamutiik, knives, and ulus. It was the same kind of thing then.

**Colleen Chau:** You mention that you did not attend a residential school, but that your sister did. As both a community member and as part of the school staff, what have you noticed are the impacts of residential schools in the community and on the children?

**Raigili Arnaaq:** I think there is a lot of trauma in the community because of things like Residential School, Day School, and the Catholic mission. And people find ways of coping with trauma in different ways positive and negative: alcohol, drugs, sex, sports, art, sewing, music... My late friend drank until the day she died, and she had attended Residential School. She was always travelling around for work doing translations... But she was living in the South not in the community anymore.

**Colleen Chau:** I guess when I think of the impact of Residential Schools, I am not talking about just being in Igloolik, but more like the impact on the people.

**Raigili Arnaaq:** I think that I see impacts in the children now more than the generation who went to the schools. The hurts that people had... are still living in the families today.

**Colleen Chau:** I agree. Intergenerational trauma from Residential Schools is such a real thing that can be traced in Inuit and Indigenous communities and a lot of the issues our students face stem in some way from Residential Schools like abuse, neglect, alcoholism, food insecurity, and poverty...

On my part, I can sense a distrust in the school system because of people's experiences in Residential School.

I can think of two specific incidents: Last year, I had an Elder (and Residential School Survivor) working as a Student Support Assistant (SSA) in my classroom. She was quiet and just observed how I acted with the students and incidents throughout the day. At the end of the day, she pointed at one of the boys in my class and told me that he was her grandson, and she was happy that I was a good teacher. She had asked to work in my class for that day at the beginning of the year because she just wanted to see how I was, and it was a poignant moment when she said she was happy her grandson was with me.

On the other end of the spectrum, I had a parent who very obviously had a lot of fear towards the school system. I had called this parent after their daughter had missed consecutive days of school to check-in with them. This parent cried on the phone with me about feeling safer keeping his daughter home rather than at school. I think that was a realization for me that although those schools are closed and it has been years, that a lot of the memories and traumas live on and have impacts on our students' day-to-day lives.

**Raigili Arnaaq:** Yes... Residential Schools are over, but a lot of the things continue today.

**Colleen Chau:** People are still looking for answers, I think. Even this summer, I know an elderly lady in the community had only just received confirmation of her daughter's death and burial in Chesterfield Inlet. She had posted on the community Facebook that her daughter was finally coming home and she had looked so happy. It was around the same time that they started uncovering bodies at Kamloops and other communities...

Let's look at you working in the school now, what are the differences you find working with Inuit and non-Inuit staff?

**Raigili Arnaaq:** I don't think we are all on the same page anyway because of such numbers of turnover of staff. Consistency was really good years ago and plans were made and met [ . . . ] without as many delays or complications. I think the administration and the turnover impacts the school a lot. We get a lot of different people; some are too easy going and some come and try to change everything.

**Colleen Chau:** I think it has a lot to do with relationships and trust though, no? It can be hard to constantly have new faces come in and make big upheavals of how the school is run.

**Raigili Arnaaq:** I think that the generation that makes up our staff today are able to stand up for themselves now whereas the ones before it was hard; there was Residential School, Day Schools, Catholic mission and all these other obstacles they had to go through. I think we can stand up for ourselves and maybe we Inuit have a hard time accepting all these new faces and changes whereas the Qallunaat staff can accept the pace and changes easier.

**Colleen Chau:** And I'm happy people have been willing to stand up for what they believe and to question

changes or programming that is put in place. On that note, do you think there is also a difference in the way that Inuit and Qallunaat communicate?

**Raigili Arnaaq:** I think some of our people are not the kind to speak out. I learned to stand up and not be afraid anymore once I sat in this chair. I had to advocate for the students and the community. I am the liaison for the school and community, and it needs to be vocal. I think that some do not have the strength to sit on that chair yet.

It is just like how if someone came and wanted to make changes without understanding all the backend work that goes into it. The way it seemed was so... It is like if I decide to go fishing, it is not like I can just hop on my skidoo and grab my qamutiik and go fishing. I need to prepare for my trip: make sure the qamutiik is stable, the skidoo is running well, prepare the grub box and ice pick, and the fuel. It is not like we can just go and have fish. It is not that easy... We tried to do a lot of things to get the school fixed, we had a Health and Safety Committee and put in papers and... [shrugs]. Everything has to go through systems.

**Colleen Chau:** Talking about systems and Inuit culture, how do you find the way that Inuit culture and traditions are emphasized or not emphasized in the system? Do you feel that Inuit culture and traditional skills are prioritized enough?

**Raigili Arnaaq:** Going back three years ago, I think that communication went downhill. I was not informed that they were trying to convert the library into a cultural centre. All of a sudden, we had to move the library books out and it became a cultural centre.

For me, cultural activities are very important. Because we do not know if we are the only way for students to get their culture and traditional life. There are families with no means of transportation or camping gear. It is our job to teach the culture because it is important to keep the culture alive and so, it [the Cultural Centre] was created, but it is so poor. It is not fully running, only partially. It only runs half-days, and the wood workshop is not running. There is no funding. Or maybe there is, but there are deadlines and red tape. I don't like where there is . . . [red tape] for tradition and culture. It was taken away from us and now we need to beg for money to teach our children their culture and traditions. The weird thing too is that it [traditional skills and land-based education] is not written into our curriculum. It should not be like this.

Our students need to be doing things, not just cooped up all day in a classroom. They need to do the actual things on the land like ice picking and bringing ice to the Elders. That is showing respect: doing. They need to do it and it refreshes your mind and your soul.

**Colleen Chau:** To close off this interview, what is your vision of education in the North? What do we need:

more Inuit teachers and administration to combat the transience? More emphasis on culture and traditional skills?

**Raigili Arnaaq:** I think it is going to be that in the near future, when the Nunavut Teacher Education Program (NTEP) students graduate from their course, if they decide to stay [in Igloolik].

**Colleen Chau:** That is the hope and dream of having the NTEP program running in Igloolik, is that it produces more Inuit teachers who will hopefully stay, right? The hope is that a lot of these positions are not as filled with people like me.

**Raigili Arnaaq:** I think it doesn't really matter if they are Inuk or Qallunaat staff. Like communication is the most important . . . like what you and I do is communicate and look at the future. We are open to each other. It can be Inuk or Qallunaat who is not responsive; when there are issues and they are not communicating with you, that is the barrier. It doesn't matter if they are Inuit or Qallunaat.

**Colleen Chau:** That's true. But I don't mean like me in the sense of being Qallunaat. I think more about transience and staying in the community. Being a good teacher isn't about being Inuit or Qallunaat; I believe it is about being willing to communicate and the investment or commitment to the community and the job. We both know previous teachers who were here for only two years, but who were great teachers, and you can see the impact that they had on their class.

**Raigili Arnaaq:** Exactly. It is about being ready and having a plan to work with the students. It is about understanding that the children are children, and they may not behave in the way you expect or like.

**Colleen Chau:** That's true. For any new teacher coming to the North, it's important to understand the many things that impact our students inside and outside the classroom like trauma, poverty, food security, etc. And also, transience... This is such an issue in the North, but even this year, some of our classes have had up to two or three different teachers due to people leaving.

**Raigili Arnaaq:** Exactly. It doesn't matter if they are Inuk or Qallunaat. I commend our Qallunaat staff for coming up here to teach our children. I cannot imagine being away so long from my family especially with COVID. I go out for medical for three days and I get so homesick! I cannot imagine being away for the full year.

And about staying [in Igloolik]. We have all these Professional Learning Community (PLC) days. We could have someone like a Residential School Survivor come in and have them speak of how they were treated in the past. Or someone young coming in to give presentations on Inuit ways of life. We have people from down South coming and not knowing these things. It would be good if they had these presentations to the staff to introduce the culture. I think things like these could help us to keep our Qallunaat staff for much longer and to help the culture.

At the end of the day, we are all human. And we are all here for the children. The school is their safe place:

mentoring the children to do better and try better.

**Colleen Chau:** Thanks so much for speaking with me, Raigili.

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**Colleen Chau** is an educator currently based in Baker Lake, Nunavut. A 2019 graduate of the University of Winnipeg Education Program, Colleen was born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She has taught in Bangkok, Thailand; Igloolik, Nunavut, and now Baker Lake, Nunavut. Her passions include education equity, Indigenous/Inuit rights, and social justice community initiatives; she is currently pursuing a Social Justice Master of Education at Lakehead University.

**Raigili Amaaq** is a Guidance Counsellor and Community Liaison currently working at Ataguttaaluk Elementary School (AES) in Igloolik, Nunavut. She was born in Frobisher Bay (now known as Iqaluit) and attended a federal school in the 1970s and 1980s. Outside of her work at AES, she is a passionate advocate for the community on issues such as housing, food insecurity, trauma-informed approaches, and Inuit cultural practices.