

THE EXPERIENCE OF TRANSIENT QALLUNAAT WORKERS IN EDUCATION HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES IN NUNAVIK

Béatrice Monfette
Magalie Quintal-Marineau



Institut national
de la recherche
scientifique

The Experience of Transient Qallunaat Workers in Education, Health and Social Services in Nunavik

AUTHORS

Béatrice Monfette, M.A.

Institut national de la recherche scientifique

Magalie Quintal-Marineau, PhD, Professor

Institut national de la recherche scientifique

PAGE LAYOUT

Lydia Risi, Ph.D. candidate

Institut national de la recherche scientifique

Research report

Institut national de la recherche scientifique

Centre Urbanisation Culture Société

September 2025

Scientific responsibility: Magalie Quintal-Marineau,
magalie.quintalm@inrs.ca

Institut national de la recherche scientifique
Centre Urbanisation Culture Société
385, Sherbrooke East Street
Montréal (Québec) H2X 1E3

Phone: (514) 499-4000

Fax: (514) 499-4065

www.inrs.ca

Research project funded by the Social Sciences and
Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)
and the Fonds de recherche du Québec (FRQ)

ISBN 978-2-89575-478-7

French version also available:

L'expérience des travailleur·euses temporaires Qallunaat en éducation, en santé et
dans les services sociaux au Nunavik

ISBN 978-2-89575-477-0

Legal deposit: Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 2025

© All rights reserved

Abstract

The Nunavik labour market is largely structured around transient workers from southern Quebec, a dynamic resulting from the legacy of colonialism in the Canadian Arctic. Despite the challenges this presence poses for the organization of the labour market and the relationships between Inuit and *Qallunaat* (non-Inuit), an understanding of these work experiences remains limited. This report presents the results of a master's research project aimed at gaining a better understanding of the experience of Qallunaat employed in care sectors (education, health and social services) in Nunavik.

The results are based on interviews with 21 former Qallunaat workers and reveal that their experiences are characterized by: 1) a temporary opportunity, both personally and professionally, 2) gaps between initial aspirations and the realities encountered, 3) a tension between challenges and benefits, 4) colonial dynamics that place them in a position of authority over Inuit, and 5) a feeling of being essential to the Nunavik labour market. The report concludes with 14 recommendations to address the issues raised by these findings.

This project offers new insights into the temporary roles of Qallunaat workers and their relationships with Inuit in Nunavik's care institutions, emphasizing how colonial dynamics benefit Qallunaat workers while excluding Inuit from employment opportunities in their own homeland. The report outlines potential actions to enhance the revitalization of relationships between Inuit and Qallunaat in care institutions.

Keywords:

work, transient, Qallunaat, Inuit, Nunavik, care, colonialism, relationship, experience

Table of contents

3

List of table and List of figures

4

Introduction

5

Qallunaat workers: What are the issues?

6

The renewal of colonial relations: An institutional issue in Nunavik?

7

A project on Qallunaat workers: What are the objectives?

9

The results: What observations emerge from the interviews?

22

Recommendations

26

References

List of tables

8

Table 1. Profile of participants

13

Table 2. Challenges and benefits of the experience

List of figures

4

Figure 1. Nunavik map

14

Figure 2. Three main factors prompted participants to return South

16

Figure 3. Réactions des Qallunaat et facteurs d'influence

The experience of transient Qallunaat workers in education, health and social services in Nunavik

The Nunavik labour market is characterized by a significant presence of Qallunaat workers, understood as non-Inuit workers from southern Quebec, Canada. Despite the challenges associated with their often temporary roles, there is limited understanding of their work experiences and impacts. This report presents the results of a research project aimed at gaining a better understanding of the experiences of Qallunaat workers in the care sectors (education, health and social services) in Nunavik.

Nunavik’s labour market: What is the profile of the area’s workers?

Nunavik, one of four Inuit territories in Canada, lies north of the 55th parallel in Quebec. Although Inuit represent nearly 90 percent of Nunavik’s population, they hold only about 50 percent of the regular full-time jobs of the region, primarily in low-skilled or unskilled positions. In other words, most full-time, skilled and well-paid jobs, particularly in education, health and social services, are held by Qallunaat. The proportion of Qallunaat workers has also increased since the early 2000s due to the rise in jobs requiring a post- secondary degree or a certificate of competency (KRG, 2011; Duhaime et al., 2021; Lévesque & Duhaime, 2021).

However, the presence of Qallunaat workers in Nunavik remains complex to measure due to several challenges: the high mobility of these workers, the relocation of many jobs to remote work in the South with only occasional visits to the North, and the lack of systematic and coordinated data collection by Nunavik institutions. As a result, this proportion is often underestimated.

Figure 1. Nunavik map



Source: Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services, 2024

Qallunaat workers in Nunavik: What are the issues?

Although difficult to quantify, the presence of Qallunaat workers is highly visible to the Nunavimmiut, who interact with this largely temporary population on a daily basis. This situation poses multiple challenges for both the organization of the labour market and intercultural relationships between Inuit and Qallunaat.

Nunavik regional organizations attribute this to numerous issues, such as high staff turnover rates, under-representation of Inuit in various jobs, culturally and linguistically inadequate services, and manifestations of discrimination and racism against Inuit (KI, 2016; NRBHSS, 2021).

The renewal of colonial relations: An institutional issue in Nunavik?

Colonialism is a structure of domination based on the dispossession and erasure of Indigenous peoples and their territories (Wolfe, 1999). It is not limited to specific events like residential schools, deportations to the High Arctic, the so-called Sixties Scoop and Millennium Scoop, or the killing of sled dogs. As a system of power, colonialism is perpetuated by mechanisms that maintain and renew the structure producing these events, while preserving the unequal relationship between the state and Indigenous peoples. Contemporary manifestations of colonialism may thus evolve into new forms as they persist (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Moreton-Robinson, 2016).

Nunavik's care institutions, initially developed by Qallunaat, played a significant role in the colonization of Inuit Nunangat. Indeed, these institutions have been part of colonial strategies aimed at settling, assimilating and integrating Inuit into Canadian society and the neoliberal economy (Paine, 1977; TRC, 2015; Gebhard, et al., 2022). Criticized for various past colonial events and practices, these institutions still adopt models from the South and remain largely structured around the presence of Qallunaat workers. The significant proportion of these workers and the resulting challenges reveal ongoing colonial dynamics in Nunavik, which are expressed in more nuanced ways.

A project on Qallunaat workers: What are the objectives?

Several Indigenous organizations and inquiry commissions have called for an increase in the number of Indigenous workers, particularly to ensure culturally safe services (e.g., TRC, 2015; Commission Viens, 2019). Despite institutional efforts to promote the hiring and retention of Inuit workers, the latter remain under-represented in most sectors while Qallunaat continue to occupy most specialized and decision-making positions in Nunavik's institutions. This under-representation is often attributed to “perceived inadequacies” among Inuit, including deficits in training, skills or motivation. In contrast, there is insufficient focus on the mechanisms that lead to the significant presence of Qallunaat in regional organizations, which may also explain the under-representation of Inuit.

In that context, this research aims to explore the experience of Qallunaat care workers in Nunavik to shed light on the mechanisms that maintain their presence and perpetuate colonial dynamics in the labour market.

To explore these experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 former Qallunaat workers from the health, social services and education sectors in Nunavik. Participants were recruited through a call for participation posted on social media. Three criteria guided their selection: 1) their field of employment, 2) the length of their professional stay in Nunavik, which had to be at least six months, and 3) the end of their employment relationship in Nunavik. (See Table 1).

Table 1. Profile of participants

Charcteristics		Number of participants
Gender	Man	7
	Woman	14
Age at interview	25-34	10
	35-44	7
	45-54	3
	55 and over	1
Total years in Nunavik	0 to less than 2	7
	2 to less than 4	6
	4 to less than 6	5
	6 to less than 8	2
	8 and over	1
Employment sector in Nunavik ¹	Education	6
	Health	8
	Social services	8
Participant employment communities (by size)	Puvirnituq, Kuujjuaq [> 2000 inhabitants]	12
	Kuujjuarapik, Inukjuak, Salluit [1000-2000 inhabitants]	10
	Akulivik, Ivujivik, Kangiqsujuaq, Quaqtuaq [< 1000 inhabitants]	4

1 One participant held positions in both education and health, which is why the total number exceeds the number of participants.

The results: What observations emerge from the interviews?

The analysis of the interviews revealed five main findings. The experience of Qallunaat workers is characterized by: 1) a temporary opportunity, both personally and professionally, 2) gaps between initial aspirations and the realities encountered, 3) a tension between challenges and benefits, 4) colonial dynamics that place them in a position of authority over Inuit, and 5) a sense of being essential to the Nunavik labour market.

1. A temporary experience and opportunity

The experience of Qallunaat workers is characterized by a temporary opportunity, both personal and professional, in Nunavik. Their personal motivations align with a temporary planning of their stay, which is reinforced by structural realities that support this temporality.

The personal motivations of Qallunaat workers to come to Nunavik stem from a combination of reasons and circumstances. Their main motivations, however, can be categorized into three profiles, which resemble those observed in international

work contexts (Silverman, 2005): the quest for adventure, the desire to meet or save Inuit, and the pursuit of personal benefits. These profiles are influenced by mythical and exotic representations of the North and its people as well as a desire for novel experiences. Employment was often viewed as a chance to have a unique, albeit temporary, experience before relocating back to the South.

“When I went, I followed a desire from way back to visit the North. The first visit was purely a desire for adventure and discovery. I went there like you go on a trip, with no intention of ever working in Nunavik for real.”

(Joëlle², health).

“It piqued my curiosity, and I thought it was a great opportunity because a plane ticket costs \$7,000 [...]. I thought it was a good idea to go through work. It was really out of curiosity.”

(David, education).

Even prior to arriving in Nunavik, Qallunaat workers plan their stay to be temporary, fully aware that their experience will be short-lived. This stay is often viewed as a phase that

² All names used in this report are fictional. All interviews were conducted in French, except for one and were translated by the authors for this report.

aligns with favourable timing with their professional and personal lives. They have no intention of settling in Nunavik and instead focus on building projects in the South during this period.

“The initial idea was to do one year. It was with the prospect of coming back, it was really to experience the North.”

(Léonie, social services).

“All these years, I told myself that my life wasn’t up there, so that’s why you have to make choices at some point to come back.”

(Célia, health).

The duration of stay for Qallunaat workers is also shaped by the labour market’s structure, which promotes temporary experiences. Recruitment processes set up by Nunavik institutions focus on attracting individuals looking for a temporary experience, presenting job opportunities that emphasize the chance to explore a unique location and that feature flexible, short-term contracts. Thus, the duration initially planned by participants is largely consistent with administrative factors such as the length of their contract or their northern leave. The organization of work, including vacations, also facilitates a temporary attachment to Nunavik. This arrangement is based on a clear separation between their professional

life, which takes place in the North, and their personal life, which remains in the South.

“What was available at the time were substitute positions, so I offered myself to cover the vacations. [...] The second time, they offered me to stay, so I requested a northern leave. It’s one year at a time. I extended it to the maximum of four years.”

(Brigitte, health).

This organization of northern employment around temporary experiences influences the attachment that Qallunaat workers develop towards Nunavik and the Inuit. It also shapes their relationship with the region, which they see primarily as a place to work rather than a place to live, impacting the temporary nature of their commitment to Nunavik.

2. Gaps between expectations and realities

The experience of Qallunaat workers is characterized by discrepancies between their initial aspirations and the realities they encountered. These gaps arise from idealized expectations and a lack of preparation for working in an intercultural and colonial context. Upon arriving in Nunavik, Qallunaat workers have idealized expectations of their experience and

stereotypical representations of Inuit. Their three main expectations are to: a) have enriching cultural experiences involving the constant presence of Inuit, b) make connections in order to learn from Inuit, and c) have a positive impact on Inuit lives. These expectations are often based on their personal motivations for coming to Nunavik.

a) **Anticipating deep cultural experiences**, Qallunaat workers expect to engage in “traditional” activities and assume Inuit to be readily available to guide them in their culture. This expectation, rooted in stereotypical representation of Inuit culture, often leads to disappointment when participants do not experience what they had envisioned.

“I was hoping, I thought the cultural experience was going to be deeper. I naively thought that if I went on a trip somewhere for four years, I would really become integrated.”

(Joëlle, health).

b) Hoping to **develop strong connections with Inuit**, Qallunaat workers are disappointed by the separation between the two population groups. They also underestimate this division, believing that mere willingness is enough to bridge the gap. This desire for connection, fueled by being drawn

to a certain exoticism of the North and the Inuit, also translates into aspirations for reconciliation. This expectation is generally unmet, as most workers are transient in Nunavik and primarily make connections with other Qallunaat.

“The people I was hanging out with were mostly Qallunaat. That was my main disappointment. I thought that after several months I’d make a few Inuit friends.”

(Romy, education and health)

c) Hoping to **help and positively impact the lives of Inuit**, Qallunaat workers strive to distance themselves from the image of the “saviour,” even though it often pervades their narratives. This perspective is shaped by the belief that Inuit “need help,” a notion reinforced by portrayals of the North that emphasize social issues. Some research participants experience failures in their attempts to help, leading to feelings of helplessness or a reassessment of their attitude. Conversely, difficult experiences reinforce the “saviour role” for other participants.

“I became interested in Nunavik because of the courage I read about and the distress I saw. At first, I still had some pretension of wanting to save people. I wanted to meet those who are isolated but had survived, and whose stories speak to all the

distress and pain. I felt called by that need.”

(Charlie, social services).

Workers highlight a lack of preparation upon arriving in Nunavik. This preparation is usually informal and rarely systematic, relying on personal initiative to deepen their competencies and knowledge through personal experience and research.

“It was hard because it was another culture, another language. We didn’t have any Inuit cultural courses, no cultural safety training. We were never given any information about it. No one came to tell us how things work, what traumas we might face. It has to come from you, it’s your personal background, your intellectual curiosity, actually. But otherwise, our managers don’t talk to us about it.”

(Célia, health).

Therefore, most Qallunaat workers arrive in Nunavik with a limited understanding of the colonial context. The main knowledge participants had about colonialism or Inuit correlated with widely publicized social issues, with limited focus on their contemporary cultural practices. The inconsistency and insufficiency of training, along with a lack of awareness of the historical and ongoing injustices

faced by Indigenous peoples, further reinforce this misunderstanding.

The workers we met highlighted their lack of culturally relevant knowledge and competencies needed for their roles. Failures in achieving desired results in interventions or communications lead them to reflect on whether their professional practices acquired in the South were relevant and adequate. However, because they are positioned as experts and their practices are viewed as universally valid, given their roles and qualifications, tends to limit the questioning of the cultural relevance of their methods and practices (Johnston and Tester, 2015).

“I feel that, at the beginning, I didn’t have what it took to do my job well. [...] At some point, after having a few discussions, I realized that it didn’t make sense and that the approach I was using wasn’t the right one if I wanted people to engage with what I had to offer. I adjusted my practice a bit and I think that helped.”

(Brigitte, health).

Both personally and professionally, Qallunaat workers face disappointments. The gaps between their expectations and reality reveal the myths and colonial prejudices surrounding Inuit culture and the labour market in Nunavik.

3. A tension between challenges and benefits

The experience of Qallunaat workers is marked by a tension between challenges and benefits. While the challenges are mainly professional, the benefits are often linked to leisure. Even though these challenges lead most workers to return to the South, they retrospectively tend to view their experience positively because of the benefits they gained.

Table 2 outlines five key factors influencing workers' experience.

Even though these five areas include both challenges and benefits for Qallunaat workers, the difficulties primarily arise in the professional setting, while the benefits are mostly associated with leisure activities. Professional challenges are exacerbated by issues surrounding intercultural relationships and geographical dislocation, as workers navigate an environment lacking familiar references and where their identity is

Table 2. Challenges and benefits of the experience

	Challengess	Benefits
Organization & logistics of the job	High turnover rates, labour shortages, lack of employer support, conflicting priorities and values of managers, disorganization of services creating frustration and helplessness	Stimulating variety of tasks, flexibility, freedom, and autonomy
Working conditions	High workload, empathy fatigue, burnout	Bonuses and salary, vacations
Relationships between Inuit & Qallunaat	High turnover rates creating mistrust and frustration, overburdening of Inuit colleagues, communication and language challenges, racism, discomfort, and unease related to the position of power, difficulty maintaining connections when returning South, distance and division	Friendships, sharing of knowledge and skills, access to activities on the land, changing stereotypes
Relationships among Qallunaat workers	Too frequent social activities, cliquishness and gossiping, interaction limited to the same people	Solidarity and mutual aid among colleagues, strong bonds (sense of community), frequent social activities
Geographical dislocation	Isolation from southern network, inconsistent access to basic services, fewer resources than in urban areas	Peace and quiet, access to land and nature, family life

largely shaped by their professional role. Their job often results in feelings of exhaustion and helplessness, whereas the land and the activities practiced there provide relief from these challenges. When professional difficulties become overwhelming, the level of relief experienced diminishes, prompting workers to contemplate returning South.

“I love Nunavik, I love the region, I love the people. But I hate the work environment, which I find to be extremely toxic, but everything else I love.”
(Raphaëlle, social services).

“My best moments were all the activities I did on the land [...]. We often say that the land is healing. It’s unique. So, it’s really the activities on the land, just going fishing or going for a walk.”
(Thomas, social services).

Workers’ decision to return South is influenced by the transient nature of their experience and the challenges they encountered. Although Nunavik offers them professional opportunities such as competencies and knowledge acquisition, as well as a flexible work environment with attractive conditions, it is primarily the challenges faced in employment that led them to return South. Even though their experience was initially intended to be temporary, their departure is hastened by professional challenges, such as exhaustion, which commonly affects about three-quarters of the participants. The three main factors that prompted participants’ return to the South are illustrated in the Figure 2.

“I had to take two work leaves during my three years. I think that really reflects the reality of working in the Far North.”
(Mylène, education).

Figure 2. Three main factors prompted participants return South



Workers' retrospective assessment reveals this tension between challenges and benefits. The vast majority have mixed feelings about their experience, viewing it as both one of the most rewarding and one of the most challenging of their lives. Despite this ambivalence, they ultimately perceive their experience positively, contributing to both their personal and professional growth. In many ways, their stories remind of international aid work, where white individuals are offered the opportunity to shape their identities through their humanitarian and benevolent actions (Heron, 2007). Indeed, Qallunaat workers do perceive this experience as a form of professional fulfillment that allows them to transform themselves and to become "better people."

"I often tell people that the North brought me my best moments, my worst moments and brought out the best in me and sometimes the worst. It's such a rollercoaster of emotions. On Saturday, you're having the time of your life, and then on Monday, you arrive at the office and it's like 'ugh' [...] It's really the two extremes all the time."

(Myriam, social services).

"It's a rewarding experience. As I said, there are more positive aspects in the end than negative ones, even

though it's a really difficult job. But you take away more good things"

(Mathilde, health).

Overall, the daily life of Qallunaat workers is marked by a tension between challenges and benefits, which can become overwhelming, ultimately prompting a return to the South. This return can be viewed as a strategy to escape the difficulties encountered. In hindsight, however, the workers tend to emphasize the benefits they gained from this experience.

4. Ongoing colonial dynamics

The experience of Qallunaat workers is shaped by a colonial dynamic that position them in authority over Inuit. However, addressing these dynamics elicits varied reactions among participants.

Three factors influence these colonial dynamics in the daily experience of Qallunaat workers.

a) Qallunaat workers are constantly in hierarchical relationships with Inuit due to their job positions.

The Nunavik labour market is characterized by a strong segmentation, with Qallunaat consistently holding more specialized positions and Inuit relegated to support roles or viewed

as auxiliaries. This segmentation creates hierarchies and privileges that structure interactions between Inuit and Qallunaat. The expertise and qualifications of Qallunaat workers enable them to access key roles and responsibilities, whereas Inuit are typically seen as “doers” or underlings, a phenomenon that has already been documented (Plourde-Léveillé and Fraser, 2021; Fraser et al., 2021).

This division and hierarchy can be explained by an organizational structure that prioritizes formal qualifications (such as diplomas) and a subjective understanding of competence. While competence and merit are socially and culturally constructed, they often function as tools of domination and exclusion (Fraser et al., 2021). These findings are consistent with research indicating that Indigenous workers are often relegated to the peripheries of the labour market and assigned to “cultural” tasks such as translation, social bonding with peers and cultural facilitation for their non-Indigenous superiors (Lahn and Ganter, 2018). This employment structure in Nunavik tends to prioritize Qallunaat interests while keeping Inuit in auxiliary positions.

“You can never ignore that when you’re in the North. [...] The fact that you’re constantly in a power dynamic with people, even despite yourself, makes it a bit complicated. You feel that you’re seen differently because we have money, we’re educated and

we’re here in a professional context. [...] So, we’re in a hierarchical position, but it remains uncomfortable at times.”

(Jérémie, social services).

b) Qallunaat workers enjoy privileges stemming from their geographic origin and their employment.

By working in Nunavik, Qallunaat workers have access to various benefits, including housing, isolation and remoteness bonuses, travel benefits for trips back to the South, food transportation, and more. Despite Inuit calls to address disparities, new collective agreements continue to generate tensions and conflicts, perpetuating significant socioeconomic inequalities that favour Qallunaat.

On the one hand, these disparities stem from the geographical origin of Qallunaat workers, as specific measures are implemented to attract them to Nunavik. On the other hand, their typically more specialized jobs provide them with access to advantageous working conditions. Skills recognition, which is based on the acquisition of diplomas and formal qualifications, influences this access. Furthermore, prerequisites for professional positions have been tightened since 2012, restricting access to clinical activities exclusively to professionals with specific

diplomas. With access to post-secondary education still very limited in Nunavik, Inuit have fewer opportunities to acquire the formal qualifications necessary for obtaining specialized positions.

“We get lots of big bonuses because we go up North and we’re far from our families, and we get big salaries. Inuit teachers don’t get these bonuses, Inuit nurses don’t get these bonuses because they live at home.”

(Xavier, education).

c) Qallunaat workers embody a colonizer figure as a result of the colonial legacy and the functioning of Nunavik institutions.

The narratives of Qallunaat workers reveal that they represent power and a continuation of colonization in their daily interactions, both at work and beyond, which influences their relationships with Inuit. The reputation of the institution they work for is a crucial factor in this dynamic. Indeed, institutions with a negative image in the communities directly impact the perception of workers, leading to distrust towards them. This distrust is fueled by negative social representations of the services, which are themselves shaped by the legacy of colonial institutions, hierarchical relationships with Qallunaat professionals and recent events such as the death of Joyce Echaquan (Fraser & Nadeau, 2015).

The segmentation of the labour market, where Qallunaat predominantly occupy decision-making roles, perpetuates a hierarchical and unequal relationship reminiscent of colonial control and dependency dynamics. Additionally, past and ongoing experiences of insecurity within care services further reinforce the perception of the Qallunaat worker as an extension of the colonizer in Nunavik.

“You’re always reminded that you aren’t from there and that you’re a continuation of colonialism [...] Sometimes you shouldn’t take it personally. The criticisms are there because of what we represent, because of history, because of colonization, because of the difference in privileges.”

(Romy, education and health).

The “extractive” nature of Qallunaat’s professional experience further reinforces these colonial dynamics and fosters mistrust from Inuit. Their mobility encourages patterns where they come to Nunavik to seek experience and benefits, only to return to the South. The high turnover rates associated with this mobility lead to various relational challenges, including a lack of accountability among Qallunaat workers, which can result in instances of power abuse.

Through the experiences of Qallunaat workers, many situations illustrate

these colonial dynamics, though their reactions and interpretations vary. Four types of reactions have been identified, primarily influenced by two key factors (see Figure 3).

The relationships that Qallunaat workers develop with Inuit outside the professional context—primarily revolving around assistance and challenges—lead them to reconsider their victimizing portrayals of Inuit. These connections stimulate curiosity about the realities Inuit face and deepen their empathy, prompting them to reassess their behaviours or interactions. In the workplace, the relationships that Qallunaat workers cultivate with their Inuit colleagues are also crucial for recognizing their skills and contributions.

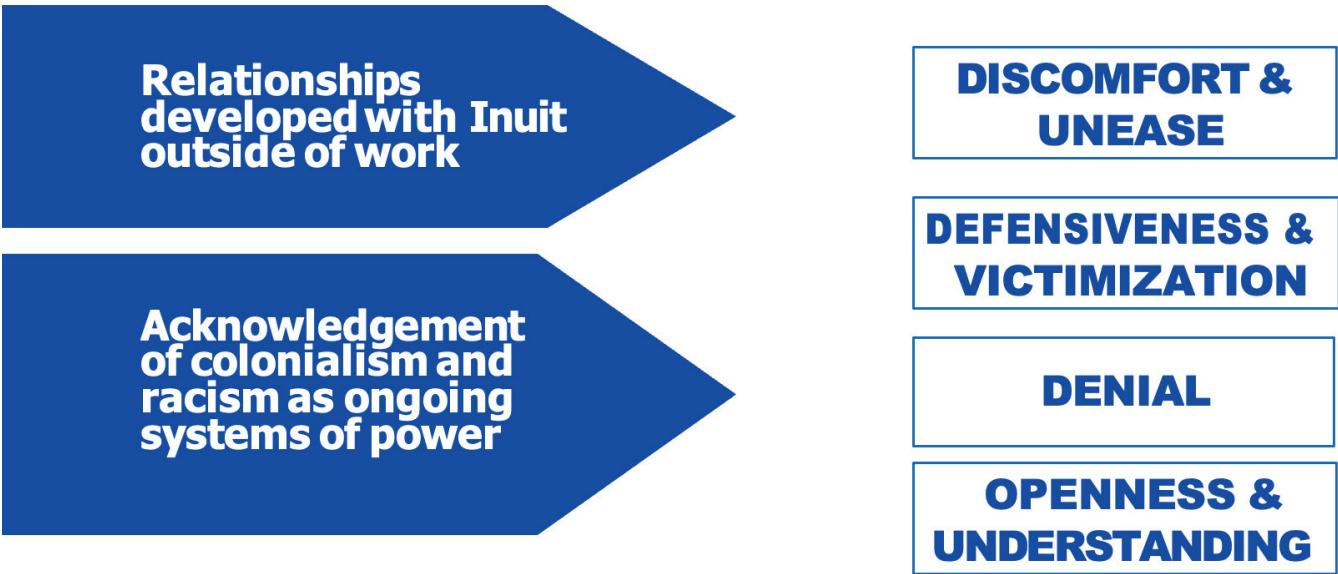
“I have a lot of friends, which is why I stayed for several years. [...] I’m really happy because otherwise, what you

encounter at work are people in crisis, and that’s normal, but that’s not the nice side. [...] So, I think it’s about giving yourself the opportunity to be in positive contexts with them, and to really get to know them for real.”

(Raphaëlle, social services).

Recognizing colonialism and racism as systems of power prompts Qallunaat workers to critically examine their practices and social positions. When these colonial dynamics are perceived as relics of the past or the result of ill-intentioned individuals, some workers may feel detached, believing these issues do not directly affect them. This perspective—viewing colonialism as a series of regrettable past events—restricts their reflection on their current responsibilities and roles.

Figure 3. Factors of influence and Qallunaat’s reactions



“At the school team, we always try to balance between those coming from the South and those coming from the North. But there is always a bit of this look towards those coming from the South, a look at what happened in the past. We must break through that and move forward instead of looking back.”

(Oscar, education).

Colonial dynamics in Nunavik are not merely remnants of the past; they continue to persist in the daily interactions of Qallunaat workers and are maintained by systemic mechanisms. Consequently, being a Qallunaat worker in Nunavik reflects the colonial history of the region and is manifested in a hierarchical relationship that is also tied with a range of ongoing privileges

5. A sense of being essential

The experience of Qallunaat workers is marked by a sense of being essential to the Nunavik labour market. This feeling is rooted in the perception that Inuit are “in need” of Qallunaat.

Qallunaat workers perceive their presence and contribution as vital to Nunavik, especially during the sociopolitical transition involving the transfer of services to Inuit control. Participants mention various timelines associated to this transition.

While waiting for this transition to be realized, Qallunaat workers consider their presence and contribution as crucial for delivering services to the population. They believe that without their involvement, Nunavik’s institutions would struggle to function effectively, resulting in significant consequences.

“I think that realistically, the presence of white people is essential. We can’t just leave and let them figure it out on their own. Lives are being saved, children are going to school and learning things. In short, there are many things that exist thanks to the presence of white people. [...] It’s like a necessity because it’s essential, but we need to find a way to eventually get rid of it.”

(Joëlle, health).

“I think the positive is just a band-aid thing. We need certain people to fill certain jobs, and since we need them now, the easiest thing to do in the short term is to import [labour]. But I think in the long term, we need more sovereignty and more cultural services that are not appropriated and more relevant to people’s real needs.”

(Alice, education),

Qallunaat workers also view their contribution as essential **for enabling this transition**, providing Inuit with the necessary tools to manage and

deliver services in the region. They see themselves as mentors, holding the expertise required to guide Inuit, who are often perceived as unable to manage it on their own.

“My perception is that they need skills to recover from colonialism, to take charge of how they want to manage their own affairs. That’s the positive. The big negative is that there is very little being done to transfer that skillset, and that just perpetuates the dependency relationship towards the Qallunaat.”

(Mylène, education).

Some Qallunaat workers consider their presence in Nunavik essential, regardless of any potential transition. They view their role as entirely positive and struggle to envision alternatives to the current situation. For these participants, the significant presence of Qallunaat is considered a necessity and a widely accepted reality, leaving little room for debate.

“I couldn’t say it’s negative [the presence of Qallunaat], because if we weren’t there, they would have no access to care. Sometimes we ask interpreters, wouldn’t you like to be in our shoes? But no, they’re not interested [...]. It seems like we’ll always need to go there.”

(Mathilde, health).

Workers hold an abstract view of this potential sociopolitical transition. The abstract, almost mythical nature of its discussion, appears to primarily alleviate their discomfort and legitimize their presence amid uncertainties about their impact in Nunavik. Despite doubts and criticisms, participants reassure themselves by considering their presence as either temporary or, at the very least, essential.

The belief in the indispensability of Qallunaat workers in Nunavik influences their identity and shapes their relationships with both work and Inuit. Some see themselves as essential even before arriving, motivated by a sense of duty or a desire to help Inuit. Others adopt this perspective over time, influenced by the notion that Inuit are “in need” of Qallunaat, specially because they occupy roles centered on assistance.

The idea that Inuit are “in need” is shaped by an image that portrays them as unable to overcome their challenges or fill positions within Nunavik’s institutions. This perspective, viewing Inuit as lacking resources and requiring assistance, reflects an underlying belief in the superiority of Qallunaat knowledge systems and identities (Memmi, 1957).

On one hand, Inuit are perceived as victims needing assistance from Qallunaat workers to overcome their challenges. This perception develops among workers through their experience, especially as they witness the difficult realities and injustices faced by Inuit. It reflects a “white saviour” mentality, where Qallunaat see themselves as essential for rescuing Inuit from their suffering (Heron, 2007; Johnston & Tester, 2015).

“White people keep Nunavik running. If there were no white people, it wouldn’t function, or they would fall into exceptional poverty. There’s a positive aspect to this, but at the same time, it’s a situation of dependency—can it really be considered 100 percent positive? The idea is to try to empower the local people as much as possible, but it remains a considerable challenge because culturally, their approach to work and education is different there, and the challenges they face are enormous.”

(Jérémy, social services)

On the other hand, the belief that Inuit need Qallunaat workers is reinforced by the perception of a shortage of qualified workers in care and services in Nunavik. Workers often express that “there would be no one else” capable of performing their jobs. This viewpoint is rooted in the idea that Qallunaat workers

provide expertise to a population that, in their view, lacks the relevant skills and knowledge to fulfill these roles.

“I think they have no choice but to have white people, no choice but to have educated people making decisions. I think that, in some ways, they need to be guided. [...] There needs to be educated white people providing services. We have no choice [...]. They would like to manage their own affairs with their own staff, but everything would fall apart. [...] So, it’s certain that they need us.”

(Pierre, santé).

The belief that Qallunaat workers are essential hinders the recognition of Inuit autonomy and self-determination insofar as it fails to challenge the assumptions behind this perceived necessity and the colonial structures that favour Qallunaat skills over those of Inuit. This assumption that Qallunaat are better suited to perform care work in Nunavik shapes the labour market, as it excludes Inuit from their own institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT ACTIONS TO CONSIDER?

RECRUITEMENT AND DURATION OF STAY FOR QALLUNAAT WORKERS

1. Review recruitment objectives for workers

The findings of this research show that current recruitment processes prioritize the continuous influx of new workers by leveraging the appeal of “discovery” and “experience” of the North as an attraction model.

Implementing alternative approaches that foster a deeper attachment to the region could help lower turnover rates among Qallunaat staff.

2. Revise administrative mechanisms that limit stay duration or promote short-term stays

One reason Qallunaat workers return to the South is related to administrative factors, such as contract expiration or northern leave. The availability of short-term contracts also diminishes the duration workers intend to stay in Nunavik.

Revising these mechanisms could help facilitate longer stays

EMPLOYEE SUPPORT

3. Systematically document the support needed for each job

While significant effort is invested in recruitment, workers often report a lack of support regarding the challenges they encounter in their jobs. Even if they do not intend to settle permanently in Nunavik, these professional challenges can shorten their planned duration of stay and contribute to staff turnover.

Systematically documenting the support required for each job through exit surveys would yield valuable insights into the challenges faced and the reasons behind workers’ departures.

4. Develop concrete actions to address the causes of exhaustion

This research has uncovered various causes of exhaustion stemming from a combination of professional challenges, including high workload, staff shortages, significant emotional strain, a sense of

powerlessness to effect change, lack of employer support, workplace tensions or conflicts, and mandatory on-call shifts in some roles.

As exhaustion is the primary reason workers return to the South, implementing concrete actions to tackle these job-related challenges would aid in retaining staff.

PREPARATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF DECOLONIAL PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES

5. Implement systematic and mandatory training programs prior to workers' arrival

Despite some training being available in their sector, most workers did not receive any training before or upon their arrival in Nunavik.

Improving the preparation of Qallunaat workers through systematic training would help bridge the gap between their expectations and the realities of working in Nunavik.

6. Encourage awareness and understanding of the colonial context and its contemporary manifestations

The findings show that most Qallunaat workers arrive in Nunavik with a limited understanding of the colonial context.

Given that this lack of knowledge impacts intercultural interactions, providing training and promoting understanding of current colonial dynamics among Qallunaat workers would help them better grasp contemporary issues and critically assess their own behaviors.

7. Promote positive social representations of Inuit

The findings reveal that Qallunaat workers frequently arrive in Nunavik with stereotypical views of Inuit and their social issues. These victimizing representations are central to their sense of indispensability and contribute to unequal power dynamics.

Promoting positive social representations of Inuit would help challenge the stereotypes held by workers and foster a better understanding of Inuit realities and their contributions to the labour market.

8. Promote the development of cultural competencies

The interviewed workers highlighted a lack of culturally relevant tools for

facilitating effective communication and interventions in their work.

As cultural competencies enhance understanding and openness to the unique cultural aspects of Indigenous peoples (NRBHSS, 2021), encouraging the development of these competencies through training or field experience would make interventions by Qallunaat workers more effective.

QUALIFICATIONS AND DEFINITION OF SKILLS

9. Value Inuit skills and knowledge

The results of this study indicate that Inuit competencies and knowledge are frequently relegated to the cultural or community sphere. However, recognizing these competencies is crucial for successfully implementing a transition in services. While *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ), a term referring to Inuit traditional knowledge, offers holistic approaches to health and education, a similar perspective could be applied to create a comprehensive view of employment.

Acknowledging the contribution of Inuit skills and knowledge in the labour market would promote the inclusion of their perspectives and improve their access to job opportunities.

10. Limit the inflation of job qualification requirements

The proportion of Qallunaat in Nunavik jobs has risen since the early 2000s, particularly due to an increase in positions requiring a post-secondary degree or certification (KRG, 2011). These escalating qualification requirements contribute to the exclusion of Inuit from professional positions, as acquiring these qualifications through formal education is often unfeasible in Nunavik.

Limiting the inflation of job qualification requirements would improve Inuit access to professional positions.

11. Promote the development of training and its accessibility in Nunavik

Limited access to training constrains employment opportunities and reinforces the notion of Qallunaat workers as indispensable in Nunavik.

As skills assessment currently depends on formal qualifications such as diplomas, enhancing the accessibility of training for Nunavimmiut would improve their chances of securing professional jobs while reducing systematic reliance on Qallunaat workers.

12. Define essential competencies in service delivery

It is commonly assumed that the necessary job competencies must be acquired through diplomas following southern models. This emphasis on formal qualifications benefits Qallunaat workers trained in the South while limiting job access for Inuit.

Creating a forum to discuss the essential competencies required for delivering culturally relevant and safe services, as well as methods for recognizing these competencies, could enhance service quality and promote greater Inuit inclusion in both governance and delivery.

POWER DYNAMICS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

13. Ensure fair distribution of benefits among workers

Job benefits are not always the same for Inuit and Qallunaat, despite efforts to reduce disparities. It is crucial to examine how to ensure fair distribution while considering structural constraints that limit Inuit access to certain professional roles.

Ensuring fair distribution of these benefits would help reduce

socioeconomic inequalities and alleviate tensions between Inuit and Qallunaat in the communities.

14. Establish a cultural safety framework in workplaces

The cultural safety approach was originally developed as a tool for social justice and now encompasses two perspectives, often presented without distinction: one focuses on adaptation and inclusion measures for non-Indigenous staff, and the other addresses structural conditions that lead to negative and insecure experiences for Indigenous peoples (Lévesque et al., 2019).

Implementing a cultural safety approach in employment would help transform relationships between Inuit and Qallunaat and improve Inuit experiences within services.

References

- Administration régionale Kativik (ARK). 2011. *Les emplois au Nunavik – Résultats d'une enquête menée auprès des employeurs du Nunavik en 2011*, Service de l'emploi durable.
- Alfred, T., & Corntassel, J. (2005). Being Indigenous: Resurgences against contemporary colonialism. *Government and Opposition*, 597-614.
- Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada (CVR). 2015. *Honorer la vérité, réconcilier pour l'avenir : sommaire du rapport final de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada*, Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada.
- Commission d'enquête sur les relations entre les Autochtones et certains services publics (Commission Viens). 2019. *Commission d'enquête sur les relations entre les Autochtones et certains services publics : écoute, réconciliation et progrès*, Gouvernement du Québec.
- Duhaime, G., et al. (2021). *Nunavik in figures 2020*, Nunivaat – The Nunavik Statistics Program.
- Fraser, S., & Nadeau, L. (2015). Experience and representations of health and social services in a community of Nunavik, *Contemporary Nurse*, 51(2-3), 286-300.
- Fraser, S., et al. (2021). Dissecting systemic racism: Policies, practices and epistemologies creating racialized systems of care for Indigenous peoples, *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 20(1), 1-5.
- Gebhard, A., et al. (2022). *White benevolence: Racism and colonial violence in the helping professions*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Heron, B. (2007). *Desire for development - Whiteness, gender, and the helping imperative*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Johnston, P., & Tester, F. (2015). The contradiction of helping: Inuit oppression(s) and social work in Nunavut, *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 26(3), 246-262.
- Kativik Regional Government (KRG) (2011). *Jobs in Nunavik – Results of a survey of Nunavik employers in 2011*. Sustainable Employment Department.
- Lahn, J., & Ganter, E. (2018). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in public service roles: Representation, recognition and relationships in Australian government bureaucracies, *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, 82, 133-148.
- Lévesque, C., et al. (2019). Innovation sociale et transformation institutionnelle en contexte autochtone. La Clinique Minowé au Centre d'amitié autochtone de Val-d'Or, *Cahiers ODENA*, 1.
- Lévesque, S., & Duhaime, G. (2021). *Employment in Nunavik: Profile and trends*, Nunivaat – The Nunavik Statistics Program.
- Kativik Ilisarniliriniq (KI) (2016). *Strategic plan 2016-2023*, Kativik Ilisarniliriniq.
- Memmi, A. (1957). *Portrait du colonisé, précédé par le portrait du colonisateur*. Éditions Buchet Chastel.
- Moreton-Robinson, A. (2016). *The white possessive: Property, power, and Indigenous sovereignty*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services (NRBHSSS). (2021). *Evaluation of health and social services system in Nunavik: The users' perspective*. Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services.
- Paine, R. (1977). *The white arctic. Anthropological essays on tutelage and ethnicity*. Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Plourde-Léveillé, L., & Fraser, S. (2021). Vers une décolonisation des ressources de soins et services sociaux: les travailleurs communautaires locaux au Nunavik, *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 112(4), 676-684.
- Public Inquiry Commission on relations between Indigenous peoples and certain public services (Viens Commission). (2019). *Public inquiry commission on relations between Indigenous peoples and certain public services in Québec: listening, reconciliation and progress*, Government of Quebec.
- Silverman, C. (2005). *Misfits, mercenaries and missionaries*, The New Canadian Magazine, 11-13.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). (2015). *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of truth and reconciliation commission of Canada*. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.
- Wolfe, P. (1999). *Settler colonialism and the transformation of anthropology: The politics and poetics of an ethnographic event*. Cassell.