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## Approaching Educational Empowerment: Guidelines from a Collaborative Study with the Innu of Labrador

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# Approaching Educational Empowerment: Guidelines from a Collaborative Study with the Innu of Labrador

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the journey toward self-managed education for the Innu people of coastal Labrador who, after an arduous struggle, have finally attained autonomy from the Canadian government. While the paper briefly explores the broader context within which Innu education has evolved, particular attention will be given to the role served by a recent research project in both documenting the specific educational needs of the people and presenting a process to guide change. What emerged from that study was a wealth of data including community attitudes to education, as well as indicators of attendance, ability and achievement of the entire population of school-aged children. The study documented significant learning needs among the school-aged population despite average cognitive ability and a desire to achieve well in school. A plethora of policy recommendations was presented to guide the creation of Innu-managed education as well as to establish a template for the creation of a bicultural model of education, one in which traditional culture and native language were prioritized. This paper explores the five-year impact of that study on both policy and practice for Aboriginal education in coastal Labrador. As such, it informs the establishment of policy and pedagogical approaches for educators attempting to balance contemporary educational opportunity with retention of core cultural values.

## **Keywords**

Aboriginal education, self-management, culturally appropriate assessment, Innu of Labrador, bicultural education, policy formation, Indigenous education

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## Introduction

The 2009-2010 school year will be a significant one for the Innu of Labrador, Canada, a year that marks the official beginning of self-managed education. Following a long and often difficult process, the Innu are among the last Aboriginal people in Canada to attain land-claim settlement from the federal government and, with it, the right to self-determination. These people, indigenous to northeastern Canada, live predominantly in two coastal communities, Sheshatshiu and Natuashish, both of which are located on the north east coast of Labrador. The Innu, now numbering approximately 2,500 people, have survived for over 6,000 years in a traditional nomadic lifestyle that relied on migrating caribou herds (Burnaby & Philpott 2007). Over the years they have endured the harsh climate, fluctuations in animal herds, and encroachments of other tribes including, more recently, European settlers (Press, 1995). In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the arrival of the Hudson's Bay Company precipitated a process of momentous change for the Innu. Company posts along coastal Labrador encouraged the settling of the nomadic Innu into communities and introduction to formal schooling, thereby radically altering their lifestyle. These changes triggered challenges and hardships that have plagued the Innu people ever since. Financial difficulties, social problems unequalled in North America, loss of cultural identity, and the collapse of self-reliance in these communities have resulted in the epithet of "Canada's Tibet" (Samson 2000/2001).

At the start of the new millennium, the Innu were actively engaged in land-claim settlement with both federal and provincial governments, which would include self-management of their schools. The Innu were well aware of the fractured and ineffective system of education for which they were about to assume responsibility; and, they were understandably skeptical of the effects of formal schooling on their language, culture and social well-being. Likewise,

government negotiators were equally aware of the history of band-managed education in other parts of Canada and apprehensive about the capacity within Innu communities to tackle such challenges effectively. All stakeholders did agree that a new system of education would have to be anchored in the actual needs of Innu youth.

To that end, a team of researchers from Memorial University of Newfoundland was invited by the Innu to conduct a wide-scale assessment of the educational needs of their children so as to provide objective information that would predicate change. Beginning in 2003, the project was conducted in two phases that would inform and guide the process toward educational autonomy for these people. The initial phase entailed the largest assessment endeavor of the learning needs of Aboriginal youth ever conducted in Canada, in that an entire culture of children (908 in all) was assessed for ability, achievement, risk factors, and attendance profiles. The second phase, stemming from the findings of the first, resulted in a series of program and policy recommendations that would respond to the needs of these children and establish a bicultural model of education. It mapped for the Innu a process by which to build capacity for self-management of education, one that was realized in September, 2009.

This paper discusses this process. As such, both the assessment methodology and the resultant policy and program recommendations hold particular ‘lessons learned’ relevance to Aboriginal peoples in other regions/countries engaged in similar processes for autonomy. We begin with a discussion of the broader context within which Aboriginal education has evolved as well as a brief history of the Innu experience with schooling. It presents a précis of the project’s methodology and findings. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the recommendations which helped the Innu realize educational autonomy and policy change.

## **Aboriginal Education in the Canadian Context**

Within the context of contemporary Canadian society, characterized as multi-cultural and diverse, is wide recognition of the failure of education for the growing Aboriginal population. Recent census data (Statistics Canada 2007) places this growth rate at 45% in the last 10 years and predicts continued growth of 34% in the next twenty years. Of greater relevance to educators is the young age of these people, given that 48% of the Aboriginal population is school-aged youth. Coupled with rising immigration rates, predictions are that by 2017, 23% of Canada's population will be from a visible minority. While this will redefine Canadian educational services (Philpott 2009) it underscores a need for redress of the long-standing concerns for Aboriginal education.

In Canada, the British North America Act of 1867 assigned to the provinces/territories responsibility for public education, creating separate, albeit parallel, histories. However, responsibility for educating the Aboriginal population rests with the federal department of Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC). By 2007-2008, with a budget of 1.2 billion dollars, INAC operated 515 schools for 109,000 students, 60% of whom were enrolled in reserve-based, band-run schools (INAC, Personal communication, October 2008). Questions about the quality of education in these schools began as early as the 1960's, when Aboriginal people themselves were voicing concern for inequities in educational services for their children (Hawthorne 1967). As a result, a federal government policy paper titled *The White Paper* (Government of Canada 1969) presented a response plan that would assign to the individual provinces sole responsibility for the education of Aboriginal children. Philpott et al., (2004a) argued that while the "intention [of the plan] may have been the development of equity in educational opportunities for all children, many Aboriginal leaders interpreted it as an attempt to facilitate assimilation" (52).

Goulet (2001) supports this observation, and views the history of Aboriginal education as reflective of the struggle for self-determination against the effects of colonization: "Aboriginal education has a legacy of assimilationist policies that were guided by the ideology of cultural deprivation and deficit" (69). In discussing the inappropriateness of this approach and the resulting oppression, Goulet writes:

Social struggles are enacted in classroom practice where Aboriginal students can encounter an ethnocentric curriculum, authoritative relationships, racist attitudes, and prejudicial beliefs about inferiority or deficits. Conditions such as these are intolerable for Aboriginal children, who are made to feel stupid when they cannot learn under these circumstances and fail in school. Some resist the oppression and so do not participate and drop out of school (68).

Following *The White Paper*, the National Indian Brotherhood (1972), in a report titled *Indian Control of Indian Education*, outlined its own plan to reform education by assuming self-management of its schools. That report heralded the establishment of self-managed education, where individual bands were federally funded to assume responsibility for the operation of their community schools via culturally appropriate and language-sensitive educational models. However noble this goal, the ensuing years did not result in significant change in educational outcomes and, by 2004 the effects of this separate model of education led the Council of Ministers of Education to conclude:

There is recognition in all educational jurisdictions that the achievement rates of Aboriginal children, including the completion of secondary school, must be improved. Studies have shown that some of the factors contributing to this low level of academic achievement are that Aboriginals in Canada have the lowest income and thus the highest

rates of poverty, the highest rate of drop-outs from formal education, and the lowest health indicators of any group (22).

That same year, the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (2004) echoed this distress: “We remain concerned that a significant education gap exists between First Nations people living on reserves and the Canadian population as a whole and that the time estimated to close this gap has increased slightly, from about 27 to 28 years” (Section 5.2).

This struggle for self-determination and effective education was not only occurring in the broader Canadian context, but among Aboriginal people as a whole. Pewewardy (2002) argues that globally, Aboriginal history holds continuous failed attempts to impose "...white man's education and educational processes on Aboriginal children despite overwhelming evidence that these peoples have definite cultural values and traits that affect learning and academic achievement" (25). So pronounced is this "achievement gap" for Aboriginal youth that Sleeter and Grant (2009) write:

The fact that schools do a better job with students who are white, middle class, and native English speaking than with students of color, students from poverty communities, and second-language learners is not new. But the achievement gap has sparked discussion of this problem among many educators and community leaders, who in previous years had taken gaps for granted (47).

While poor educational outcomes are recognized, Miller-Cleary and Peacock (1998) discuss the added effects of failed practice on culture and identity. They argue that the effects of colonizing approaches have been extremely destructive to Aboriginal identity and have fuelled the systemic problems that have become associated with many First Nation communities such as substance abuse, violence, and self-destructive behavior.

### **Aboriginal Education: the Innu Context**

In the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, one such Aboriginal group are the Innu, an Algonquian language-speaking group of Amerindians, who lived and hunted inland in the north eastern region of Canada, in both Quebec and Labrador, along the north shore of the St. Lawrence River. Shifting patterns of animal migration, coupled with an exceptionally harsh climate and rugged terrain, eventually led to a group of Innu becoming more isolated from their Quebec cousins. These Labrador Innu lived largely through harvesting from the land within their community rules of governance and traditional knowledge resources (Mailhot 1997). The first documented contact between these Labrador Innu and Europeans occurred in the early 1700's when the Innu, who were engaged in caribou hunting inland, began trading along the Labrador coast. As these European trading posts became more established, missionaries started arriving to serve employees of the posts, as well as to convert the Aboriginal people. By the 1860's, most Innu had been converted to Christianity at these missions, which involved religious observances and some efforts towards the teaching of literacy. While records indicate that these missions were successful in teaching some Innu to read English by 1851, by 1893 the missionary endeavours had diminished with the Innu then being served by Catholic priests from Newfoundland (Mailhot 1997).

Prior to joining Canada in 1949, Newfoundland and Labrador was a colony of England and "...much of its early educational system was reflective of British standards and religious pedagogy" Philpott (2002, 1). Following confederation with Canada in 1949, the Newfoundland government followed its Canadian counterparts and assumed responsibility for education of its citizens, including Aboriginal people. It would not be until 2002 before Innu leaders would successfully negotiate "Indian Status" with the federal government as a pre-requisite step toward



official land settlement and reservation status, which would lead to their eventual autonomy. In the years following confederation with Canada and official recognition by the federal Government, provincial government services for the Innu, including education, reflected a philosophy of assimilation that exacerbated the erosion of traditional hunting and lifestyle practices for Aboriginal people. However, early promises of improved government services such as employment, education, and health care quickly evaporated as the economic marginalization of Aboriginal people left them in a dependent state, compounded further by the loss of their traditional lifestyle. Physical isolation from their hunting land, limited supplies of fresh water, substandard housing, and inadequate sewer services quickly produced deplorable living conditions for the Innu, which eventually garnered international attention (Armitage 1997; Mailhot 1997; Samson 2000/2001).

Despite these extreme social conditions, one fact about the Innu of Labrador is envied by the vast majority of Aboriginal people in Canada: virtually all of them are speakers of their traditional language, Innu-aimun. The 2001 Canadian census data indicate the almost complete fluency in Innu-aimun of the populations of Sheshatshiu and Natuashish (Statistics Canada 2003). However, despite the fact that almost all Innu children are raised in households and communities where Innu-aimun is spoken as the first language, they were still being educated in English-only schools. This language conflict typified the long-standing clash between the reality of Innu children and the provincial model of education offered in these communities. Under provincial jurisdiction, English-medium schools were operated in both Innu communities by the Labrador Roman Catholic School Board, staffed by English-speaking teachers. Thus, Innu students would enter school fluent in their native language and meet teachers fluent only in English. Instruction in the provincially prescribed curriculum was in English, with scant and

inconsistent attempts at mediation in the first language. So blatant were the resultant concerns that education, particularly issues relating to school attendance and success, would eventually become a dominant item in self-management negotiations. Attendance at the schools had been reported to be near 40% for at least a decade, and fewer than 20 students had graduated from high school. More alarming than low school attendance, however, was wide-spread substance abuse by children, including gas sniffing so rampant that it also made international headlines. Even more traumatizing was the staggering fact that 40% of the youth reported having attempted suicide (Philpott et al., 2004b).

Innu leaders were painfully aware of these statistics and the growing negative perceptions many of their people held toward formal education. The cultural mismatch between the community and the school was widely recognized, though unaddressed. These concerns were also recognized by both provincial and federal governments since numerous studies had laid blame on governments for critical neglect of the Innu (e.g., Backhouse & McRae 2002; Tanner, Kennedy, McCorquodale and Inglis 1994). As negotiations for self-government continued, the Innu wanted these issues identified and addressed, since self-management would require enhanced educational opportunities for their youth.

Not surprising, given their history with formal schooling, Innu parents, like many Aboriginal people, display varying degrees of skepticism for education and its non-Aboriginal curriculum. In *Gathering Voices*, a publication by the Innu Nation (1995), a strong denouncement of past educational provisions for Innu children is difficult to miss. The introductory words are dramatic and clear:

There are many problems with the school. The school has done a lot of damage to our culture and our children. It has really changed our lives. The school is not working as it is supposed to.

The biggest problem is that our children are not learning their culture in school. They are learning the white culture. This is a foreign culture. The school has prevented us from learning our own history. Too many of our children are dropping out (65).

Deep resentment toward school experience is stored in the memory of many traditional Innu. Some described their first days of schooling in terms of "cultural shock", a time when Innu children "were placed in a strange environment, their freedoms were curtailed, they were removed from their parents and they were addressed in a foreign language" (Samson 2000/2001, 92).

While skepticism is understandable, it is clear that the view of education as a negative force contributing to cultural destruction is not universally shared by Aboriginal parents. Some parents, having seen the demise of the traditional lifestyle, resignedly concede that new educational directions might enhance their children's chance for life in a broader cultural context. While neither rejecting the traditional culture, nor favoring a reduction in cultural links in curricular content and planning, many parents perceive themselves as people in transition and are willing to consider at least some elements of nontraditional curriculum.

Despite concern for cultural erosion, it must be said that Aboriginal people have always valued education by ensuring provisions for schools were outlined in all of the treaties signed with the federal government (MacPherson 1991). Such a consistent focus on negotiating educational provisions for their children implies more than a passing interest in schooling on the part of the Aboriginal signatories as well as the non-Aboriginals. Likewise, countless documents reiterated the importance of establishing schools that would respect and preserve Aboriginal languages and cultures, while preparing children to be independent in the broader Canadian society (e.g., Hawthorne 1967; Assembly of First Nations 1988 & 1990; Hughes 1990; Royal

Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996; Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures 2005). Subsequently, it comes as no surprise that Innu negotiations for self-government would include self-management of their schools.

It was during this process of negotiating for self-management (which would include an enhanced educational system for their youth) that the Innu requested the federal government conduct a wide-scale assessment of the learning needs of their children. They wanted to ensure that the resources needed to address the dramatic problems with education would be provided and that policies and programs would be anchored in the actual needs of their children. The research project which ensued was conducted over a three-year period and the final reports were released in 2004 and 2005. The initial assessment phase of the project proved to be the most comprehensive study on education in Innu communities to date and the largest assessment project of Aboriginal youth in Canada's history. The project documented not only achievement outcomes and cognitive ability of students but also community attitudes, perceptions of and aspirations for education. It identified significant learning needs among the school-aged population of Innu youth, including low school attendance and limited academic achievement. It also raised significant concern for an exceptionally high rate of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Despite these concerns, the majority of Innu children were identified as demonstrating average cognitive ability, appropriate patterns of behavior, and a desire to achieve well in school. The children displayed diverse strengths that were not being exploited in current pedagogical approaches.

### **Methodology**

The goal of the research team was to gather input from all stakeholders, while striving to remain objective. Sensitivity was accorded to the political wishes of Innu leadership,

government policies, and the economic realities within Canada. The project included extensive surveys of parents, students, and teachers on their perceptions of and aspirations for education. It included individual interviews and focus groups, specifically aimed at optimizing input from Innu families, leaders, and service providers, as well as observations of the researchers themselves. Finally, a careful blend of qualitative and quantitative indices of cognitive ability, academic achievement, social/behavioral concerns, and developmental risk factors were collected for all 908 Innu children.

The report of the first phase, *An Educational Profile of the Learning Needs of Innu Youth*, (Philpott et al., 2004b) immediately received national media attention. It documented the profound failure of traditional educational institutions to connect with this culture and pinpointed where concentrated interventions were needed. The report of the second phase, *Enhancing Innu Education*, (Philpott et al., 2005) reflected exhaustive reviews of research and proven programs. It presented recommendations for policy and programs that would respond to the needs of these students and begin to build the capacity for self-managed education. Collectively, the reports documented need, directed interventions, guided policy change, and initiated service while prioritizing the unique culture and language of the Innu people. Five years later, the Innu would assume responsibility for the education of their youth and, with it, inherent stewardship of their language and culture.

### **Findings: Effecting Policy Change**

Both phases created a baseline of the individual needs of these students and suggested the creation of a bicultural model of education that would balance culture with broader educational opportunity. It called for the creation of an Innu school system that was empowered with the

ability and the knowledge to begin this process, while accepting the many challenges and issues it faced. In beginning this process, the report cautioned:

When Aboriginal people try to sustain and maintain their culture while surrounded by another, the challenges are prodigious. Schools, like many other institutions, promote policies, practices, programs and ethos of the dominant culture. To counter this, Aboriginal people must be valued for who they are and their curriculum must nurture inclusiveness. Success rates are increased when the curriculum reflects the understanding, uniqueness and culture of Aboriginal people (Philpott et al., 2005, 30).

Subsequently, the report listed a number of dominant challenges in moving toward this goal including: responding to the needs of current students; planning for the needs of future students; creating an effective and sustainable bicultural model; embracing the strengths and complexities of language; accepting the implications of current literacy levels; attempting to limit the negative impact of social instability; and, recognizing the correlation between attendance and achievement. What follows is a discussion of each of these cautions.

### ***Responding to the Needs of Current Students***

The magnitude of the change recommended by the reports would necessitate long-term planning and capacity building, while responding to the immediate needs of existing students. The report presented a disturbing picture of the standing of the existing school system.

A pattern emerged from the research data indicating that most children began falling behind as early as the first grade and continued a clear pattern of falling further behind grade/age expectations as they continued through school... In the area of reading for example, 80% of seven year olds are one to two years behind grade level and the grade level discrepancy continues to increase to a point where 85% of 15 year olds were at least five years behind. A

similar pattern is evident in mathematics, namely approximately 56% of seven year olds are one to two years behind and 100% of 15 year olds are at least five years behind (Philpott et al., 2004b, 14-15).

Likewise, attendance was equally alarming: The vast majority of those who attend school do so sporadically. While a third of the full population do not attend school at all, another 17% do so less than 20% of the time. The remaining students attend 54% of the time in Natuashish....and 45% in Sheshatshiu. ....School drop out begins at the primary level and continues into adolescence with the result that only 30% of Innu youth enter high school where they then attend 20% of the time (12).

Such patterns appealed for an immediate response designed to increase attendance, remediate performance, and optimize instructional opportunities. Recommendations were made for interventions which began immediately.

### ***Planning for the Needs of Future Students***

While an immediate response to the needs of current students was noted as a priority in the study, the implementation of a long-term planning process was critical. As indicated earlier, concern for the academic achievement and attendance patterns of Aboriginal students is not unique to Innu communities but appears systemic to the Canadian context as a whole. Nonetheless, the report called for discussion, reflection, and careful consideration of alternatives which will take time and warrant review so as to create long term and sustainable educational change. It suggested that such a process must be collaborative in nature, with all stakeholders sharing responsibility to support Innu leadership in acquiring the skills necessary to manage their own education system effectively.

### ***Creating an Effective and Sustainable Bicultural Model***

The data articulated a need for a bicultural model of education in which Innu youth would be taught in their native language, yet acquire proficiency skills in English as a second language, affording them greater career opportunities. Defining and endorsing a bicultural model affords a tangible goal by which to facilitate self-management within a reasonable and expeditious time frame. Cahill et al., (2004) build on the work of Peavy (1995) in articulating this approach within the Aboriginal context:

Aboriginal cultures should not be considered static. Just as European and North American cultures have evolved over the centuries, those of Aboriginal populations have responded to changing circumstances, events and technologies. There is also diversity within Aboriginal communities. Some Aboriginal people may adhere to traditional way of life while others choose to embrace the values and practices of the dominant society. Some may be committed to neither culture and others may feel comfortable in both cultures, i.e., they are *bicultural* (131-132).

An appreciation of the values, aspirations, traditions, issues, and diversity within Aboriginal societies is essential to non-Aboriginal people who work with these populations. Educators in Labrador's Innu communities must help to prepare the Innu to live both as Innu and as citizens of the world. Undoubtedly, such a process will take time and careful planning. Rushing to impose change runs the risk of disempowering stakeholders, overwhelming the current system, and squandering resources on well-intended though unproven practices. Central to this would be an articulation by the Innu themselves of what "bicultural" means to them. Careful consideration needs to be given to how they view both languages and both cultures co-



existing, where they see the associated boundaries, and how they plan to establish and maintain a balance in this process.

The study, consequently, called for prioritizing the well-being of Innu youth through the establishment of an educational system that balances improved learning opportunities with the retention of Innu culture and language. The report suggested that an Innu model of education should be one that:

- is managed effectively by the Innu, under federal jurisdiction;
- is led and celebrated by the Innu communities through a Council of Elders;
- is inclusive of all students;
- is staffed by qualified Innu teachers;
- results in a sense of cultural pride for Innu youth;
- fosters healthy and safe environments;
- has a culturally relevant curriculum within a bicultural model of education;
- uses Innu-aimun as the language of instruction from preschool through elementary;
- provides junior high students a fluid transition into late English immersion program;
- offers Innu youth enriched career opportunities;
- produces high school graduates who are fluent in both Innu-aimun and English;
- embraces prevention programs to reduce rates of FASD significantly.

(Philpott et al., 2005, 8-9).

### ***Embracing the Strengths and Complexities of Language***

A review of current educational practices utilized with Aboriginal learners in other parts of Canada, makes it apparent that the goal in most (if not all) of these schools was to revitalize native languages threatened with extinction. Most Aboriginal students in Canada enter school fluent in English and specific programs are set in place to reintroduce their native language. The Innu have the opposite concern – entering school fluent only in Innu-aimun, necessitating an instructional model that follows the approach of late immersion into English. Although the Innu are among the most successful of Canadian First Nations groups with regard to retention of their language, there is great fear that this will change with the encroachment of English (Statistics Canada 2003). In *Gathering Voices* (Innu Nation and Mushuau Innu Band Council 1995) members of the Innu Nation made numerous references to the negative impact of English on retaining Innu-aimun. "If our culture and our language is lost, there is nowhere in the world where it will be found" (69); and again, "If the school doesn't teach our children our culture, in twenty to thirty years' time, our children will speak only English like in other places in Canada" (71).

Innu children are greatly challenged, when they are exposed to English as a language of instruction at school. Their language, Innu-aimun, remains in the oral tradition and continues to lack orthography. Like many indigenous languages which have evolved from their nomadic, rural origins, there exist tensions in the community about standardization (Burnaby 1985; Francis & Reyhner 2002). Burnaby and Philpott (2007) write:

Critically, the Labrador Innu have virtually no experience of literacy in their own language and therefore literacy in Innu-aimun has no practical role in communications in their communities. There has been virtually no accommodation to this linguistic reality

on the part of non-Innu who live and work in the community or provide services in the region. While publicly funded schooling was available to them in English, it was the same as that for other children in the province despite the clear language and cultural differences (280).

A significant focus of language-acquisition research is the vulnerability of threatened cultures in eroding their identity, when the second - and more dominant - language is introduced (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 1999). This literature is of particular relevance to the Innu, as they attempt to create a new system of education that will prepare their children to become fluent enough in English to make the transition to post-secondary schools, while retaining their own language and identity. A bicultural model of education will require a curriculum written in Innu-aimun (particularly during the initial years of schooling) taught by teachers fluent in that language. Language is the heart around which a culture survives, defines itself, and secures its roots to the past. Clearly, the failure of English-based education has played a role in the survival of Innu-aimun. However, once education becomes a more dominant influence in the lives of Innu youth, their native language will become even more threatened under the pressure of the dominant Canadian culture.

### *Accepting the Implications of Current Literacy Levels*

The assessment project identified the fact that school achievement levels lagged so dramatically that "the researchers [had] grave concern for the readiness of current students to meet prescribed graduation criteria within the next five years" (Philpott et al., 2004b, 15). It was critical for the communities to recognize that basic literacy does not imply university/college readiness. The few Innu candidates who had completed high school and who were interested in pursuing careers in education would need additional academic support to ensure university

readiness. Other Innu candidates would require literacy/numeracy training to reach high school equivalency levels and to prepare for university entrance. Current models and programs needed to be adapted and tailored to address the unique and substantive needs of Innu students.

### ***Attempting to Limit the Negative Impact of Social Instability***

The systemic social concerns that have plagued the Innu are well-documented. Given the demographics of the communities, however (half the population are school-aged and there is an exceptionally high rate of FASD) impact of these issues on future generations was profound. Community leadership, parenting skills, social stability and employment viability could be compromised for the next generation. Future generations would benefit by long-term supports given to the current generation. Breaking a cycle of social instability is a long-term process.

School attendance patterns are a strong indicator of the effect of social instability on the educational opportunities for Innu youth. Analysis of school attendance indicated a consistent pattern of dramatic drops in attendance, when social issues arise in the communities. It was important that the Band Councils recognize the link between social stability and educational opportunities for their children. Given that Innu schools exist within Innu communities and, as such, are subjected to social factors, efforts should be taken to ensure continuity of programming for these children during times of stress.

A pressing concern is the widely recognized problem of alcohol consumption in both communities. It would be naive to think that education could be effectively improved without addressing this issue. Alcohol consumption among Innu families was a dominant deterrent to school attendance, school readiness, and educational outcomes. Community leadership, in confronting this issue, is of critical importance to the education of Innu youth.

### ***Recognizing the Correlation between Attendance and Achievement***

While the attendance and achievement patterns of Innu students in schools within their communities were stark, patterns for a small population of Innu who were enrolled in school outside the community were revealing. Those students who, on a daily basis, commuted to neighboring communities (Goose Bay and Northwest River), had attendance *and* achievement records remarkably higher than Innu youth, who were educated in their community school. In fact, these commuting students performed on par with provincial peers. Those students were taught the provincial curriculum via the same instructional approaches as other children in the province, by teachers who spoke only English, and who had no appreciation of traditional Innu culture. While the researchers had significant concern for the ability of these students to retain their traditional language and lifestyle, the pattern, nonetheless, clearly identified low attendance as the single biggest factor limiting the education of Innu youth.

Limited school attendance is not unique to the Innu. In a related study (MacKay & Myles 1989) on school attendance rates for Aboriginal youth in Ontario, the authors identified attendance/drop-out patterns almost identical to those documented by the authors of the Innu study. Lehr et al., (2004) in an extensive review of school drop-out prevention programs concluded that effective programs are those that engage all stakeholders, especially the students, in diverse approaches to meet diverse needs. They outlined five areas that require specific programming: personal/affective, academic, family outreach, school structure, and career planning.

Given the magnitude of the issues facing education and Innu communities, expecting immediate and dramatic improvements in school attendance for the Innu was unrealistic. Instead, beginning a process to identify a number of solutions to address the diverse issues

contributing to low attendance was more realistic and, in the long-term, a more effective strategy.

### **Policy Formation and Recommendations**

The reports presented 61 recommendations to address the cautions annotated above. The thrust of the subsequent recommendations was a focus on empowering the Innu not only to address the immediate needs of their children but also to establish a bicultural model of education, anchored within their own culture. Three tiers of recommendations were presented:

1. *Level One* recommendations were designed for immediate consideration and implementation. They were responsive in nature and were designed to be set in motion with existing resources.
2. *Level Two* recommendations were designed to build capacity for future approaches. They build on the Level One recommendations by calling for immediate discussion, planning and a more careful consideration to ensure success in the short and long-term. They afford the Innu the opportunity to learn from the experiences of other First Nations educators and build towards an effective, culturally-appropriate model of education.
3. *Level Three* recommendations were designed for long-term implementation, following review of the impact of those initiated in Levels One and Two. They articulate what an effective model of Innu education might look like.

Specific recommendations ranged from providing early childhood literacy in exclusive Innu-aimun environments, to establishing adult education opportunities. They outlined curriculum development, attendance enhancement programs, teacher training programs, and infusion of traditional culture into existing curriculum. They suggested a defined place for Innu

elders, effective communication with families, community social programs and career development opportunities. They guided the creation of capacity within existing Innu communities not only to assume control of education, but also to become responsible stewards of their culture. The recommendations also marked the beginning of the planning for actual transition of management of education from provincial/federal jurisdiction to the Innu themselves. This devolution would prove to be a five year project, culminating in September, 2009.

The findings of the research project and the recommendations forthcoming consolidated the shared sincerity among all stakeholders in naming and addressing the problems.

There are many logistical challenges in the delivery of education to children in a unique geographic, social and cultural environment. Meeting the needs of Innu students will demand the same sincerity, openness, commitment and collaboration demonstrated by educators and the community throughout this assessment process. Their keen interest in truly understanding Innu educational needs and their willingness to accept and share responsibility for past educational limitations, without assuming a blaming stance, has set the tone for improving educational opportunities for Innu youth (Philpott et al., 2005, 23).

### **Summary**

The years following the release of the research findings have ushered in rapid change for the Innu. Economic promise in Labrador, new leadership, and the completion of negotiations for self-management have given these people a new sense of hope. The people of Natuashish are well established in their new community, their children enjoy a new school (first opened in 2003), and the community decided to become alcohol-free in 2008. Sheshatshiu attained reserve status in November, 2006 and a 21.5 million dollar school opens in September, 2009. Both

communities are now funded by the Federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and are led by elected and autonomous band councils, who are responsible for the provision of services to their own people. September 2009 witnesses approximately 630 Innu children attending schools (whose annual budget is 6 million dollars), which are completely managed by Innu people, who continue to strive toward establishing *their* articulation of a bicultural model of education. Today, the Innu of Labrador speak of a brighter future, one that includes appropriate education for their children, health for their people, and a returning sense of pride in their culture.

The recommendations that emerged from the study reflect shared ownership and acknowledgement of the existing problems. Respectfully, the intention was to present these recommendations in a responsible way that would not overwhelm an already-stressed system. The goal of the researchers in writing these recommendations was to suggest a realistic map for the stakeholders to guide the Innu in implementing change. They recognized that the learning needs of Innu youth are both profound and urgent, and could only be addressed by fundamental change. Tinkering with the existing system would have had little, if any, effect, and by the time the futility of half-measures was realized, another generation of youth would be lost.

The impact of these recommendations and the plan that they suggested were explored in a 2006 follow-up study on the needs of students in one of these two Innu communities, that of Natuashish. At that time transitionally managed by the Labrador School Board, under federal contract, the school in Natuashish had actively pursued many of the programming recommendations contained in the initial report. Educators were interested in ascertaining whether attendance and achievement had improved and research was conducted to answer that question. The subsequent data identified dramatic improvements in reading, writing, attendance



and school participation in Natuashish. This was especially clear for the primary-aged children who had started school after the initial study had begun. That report concluded that "...students who only know school as it exists now in Natuashish, have attendance and achievement levels remarkably close to provincial averages" (Philpott 2006, 22).

The end of the 2008-2009 school year brought closure to a long and arduous process of struggle, growth, and change for Innu students and leaders. It brought an end to an external management of education that contributed to an erosion of cultural identity and community wellness. With closure comes opportunity and hope, not only for the Innu of Labrador, but for other Aboriginal people still engaged in a similar struggle. Closure, however, also brings a new set of challenges and a continued need for diligence. In the Canadian context, self-managed education provided by existing band-run schools has not resulted in dramatically increased achievement for Aboriginal youth. While educational and cultural autonomy for the Innu has arrived, so too has accountability. In accepting these responsibilities, the Innu of Labrador are guided by the dream of their Aboriginal counterparts, who also imagined a bicultural education system for their children:

An [Aboriginal] education system grounded in the wisdom of indigenous knowledge, that respects the vision of parents and elders and reinforces the teaching of language and culture will measure its success through the development of caring and respectful people who are valued contributors to their communities and live in harmony with their environment (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development 2002, 9).

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