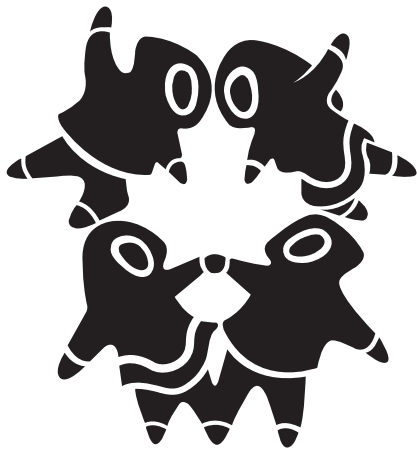


# **Backgrounder on Inuit and Education**

**For Discussion at Life Long Learning Sectoral Meetings, November 13 and 14<sup>th</sup> in Winnipeg and November 18 and 19<sup>th</sup> in Ottawa**



**ᐃᓄᐃᑦ ᑕᐱᓃᑦ ᑲᓄᑕᑦ**  
**INUIT TAPIRIIT KANATAMI**

**Prepared by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami**

**October 20, 2004**

**Ottawa, Canada**

## Table of Contents

<b>Section</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Historical Perspective</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Areas of Importance and Areas for Action</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>12</b>

## Introduction

Numerous reports commissioned in the last several decades have called attention to the gap between the educational status of Aboriginal Canadians and that of non-Aboriginal Canadians and made concrete recommendations for fundamental change to reduce these inequities. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples recommended sweeping changes to the way in which territorial, provincial and federal governments deal with Aboriginal people, their land claims and self-government. The target year for substantial positive results for Canada's aboriginal people, including the Inuit, is 2016. The Conclusion of the Commission's report noted that the Canadian government officially attempted by means of formal education since 1920 to "assimilate" aboriginal people, that is, to eradicate aboriginal cultures. The resulting damage done to aboriginal people in the intervening years by such education is still evident today. Inuit did not escape the "assimilation by education" strategy. To ensure that education in Inuit land claims areas does no more damage, does not further erode Inuit cultural identity but does aid in restoring language and culture, strategies must be found to assist Inuit of these areas to devise appropriate education systems in order to prepare Inuit to strengthen themselves, their families and communities.

Recent decisions by the federal government, such as the development of an Inuit Secretariat within the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, and the commitment to Inuit-specific approaches in the implementation of new federal commitments are viewed as positive steps by Inuit.

As one of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, Inuit deal with unique realities in education delivery. The history, geography, culture and political structures of Inuit regions demand innovative responses. Inuit want to work with federal, provincial/territorial governments, non-government delivery agents and with other Inuit to share knowledge and resources. For many years, Inuit have advocated Inuit-specific initiatives. "Inuit-specific" refers to planning, policies, programs and services, developed with meaningful participation of Inuit organizations to reflect Inuit realities.

The Inuit population is young and growing at twice the rate of the general Canadian population. The Inuit population is expected to reach more than 60,000 by 2016. In 2001, the median age in Canada was 37.6 years; for Inuit, it was 20.6 years. More than 57% of Inuit are under 25 years of age.<sup>1</sup> This "generational divide" illustrates how important strong educational initiatives are to the future of Inuit

Inuit have a distinct culture, language and strong values of self-sufficiency, resilience and adaptability. Historically Inuit taught their children largely through modeling, by being with children who watched indirectly and learned through observation. Children learned at their own pace. Modern education is much more structured and utilizes formal and direct educational methods that are distant in approach from the way Inuit teach their

---

<sup>1</sup> 2001 Census, Statistics Canada

children.<sup>2</sup> For Inuit education systems to be successful harmony between traditional teaching and Western teaching methods must be developed.

Lifelong learning for Inuit and Inuvialuit in the four land claim areas of Nunavik, Nunavut, Nunatsiavut and Inuvialuit may be achieved by means of research-based, well-planned education systems that provide active support for lifelong learning in all its aspects and phases. These include the current child and youth education in elementary, middle and high schools, young adult and adult education in post-secondary programs and college, but the phases are not yet complete for total lifelong learning. Early childhood education (ECE) and education in youth and adult remedial, correctional and recovery programs need to be addressed so that all the phases of lifelong learning in land claim area education systems coordinated in a coherent manner. These non-traditional educational areas to be included are of particular importance as they deal with vulnerable students entering or re-entering the educational systems and the manner in which they enter or re-enter is crucial to their continued success in the systems. In such education systems Inuktitut and English bilingualism, that is, literacy as well as language and culture, would be integral parts of all educational programs fostering an Inuit workforce and population that functions well in their own languages as well as in English. Such restructured education systems embracing the total developmental lives of Inuit would enable them to fully participate as informed, responsible citizens leading productive, socially integrated lives in their communities, proud of their language, heritage and skills. Finally, through the results of such envisioned education systems, meeting the employment obligations to Inuit land claim area agreements in their public service would become possible.

### **Historical perspective**

To understand the current challenges facing Inuit in the area of education, it is necessary to review some of the rapid social changes that have impacted Inuit over the past fifty years. Fifty years ago, the majority of Inuit continued to live primarily in small semi-nomadic groups relying upon the resources of the land and sea for sustenance. Camp life centered on extended family groupings, which regarded the rearing of children as a responsibility of the larger group, and not solely that of the immediate family. Children could turn to any adult or older child for comfort or food or to learn life skills. Older children assumed many childcare responsibilities early in life and learned critical parenting skills as they themselves were growing up. Elders were revered for their wisdom and knowledge including their valuable advice and expertise in the area of child rearing and parenting.

This situation changed dramatically when Inuit were moved to communities at the request of the federal government with the promise of health, education and housing services. It was at this critical juncture when Inuit society began to unravel under the stress of rapid change. The extended family was no longer the key social unit as government agencies began to assume many responsibilities of health, education, and

---

<sup>2</sup> 2005, ITK, Inuit Early Childhood Development Issues Discussion Paper

justice and was the repository of essential resources. As well, southern culture began to inundate the north and began to heavily influence the younger generation in particular. In turn, these changes undermined the traditional role of elders and began to impede the transmission of knowledge and values between generations.

With the establishment of a wage economy and continual inundation from southern media, Inuit social ties have become strained and language usage has declined. Inuit society continues to be in a process of rapid transformation. The traditional role of elders has altered and the responsibility for child rearing has become more focused upon the immediate family. Combined with chronically high levels of unemployment and poverty, radical structural shifts in the harvesting economy, rapid population growth, mounting social problems, and a weakening of informal social support mechanisms, the ability of Inuit families to raise their children as well as they wished continues to be under serious pressure.

To further exacerbate these challenges, residential schools were responsible for removing Inuit children from the families for extended periods of time. The critical bond between parents and children, and the subsequent transference of essential skills and knowledge including parenting skills, was broken for many Inuit. Many of the survivors, and their children, continue to be impacted as a result of the residential school experiences and have indicated that their ability to raise their children as well as they can has been seriously compromised. While not all Inuit were negatively impacted as a result of their experiences at residential schools, this issue adds another element to the many challenges that have faced Inuit parents in their efforts to raise their children as well as they can.

Subsequent to the missionaries who introduced organized learning, formal education in the form of “Federal Schools” operated in major centres in Inuvialuit, Nunatsiavut, Nunavik and some parts of Nunavut by the late 1950s. Many students travelled or were sent from their home communities for long periods of time to attend schools that aimed to assimilate them into the contemporary Canadian lifestyle. At school, Inuit were actively discouraged from using their first language in favour of English. In the early 1960s, schools began to be built in all communities of the four land claim areas and were completed in 1968. Thereupon, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police enforced attendance of Inuit school-aged children, so that their families moved into the communities from outpost camps to maintain contact with them. The curricula followed by the new community schools were based on that of southern Canadian mainstream schools and spoken Inuktitut continued to be discouraged until about the mid-1970s.

Subsequent to the missionaries who introduced organized learning, formal education in the form of “Federal Schools” operated in major centres in Inuvialuit, Nunatsiavut, Nunavik and some parts of Nunavut by the late 1950s. Many students travelled or were sent from their home communities for long periods of time to attend schools that aimed to assimilate them into the contemporary Canadian lifestyle. At school, Inuit were actively discouraged from using their first languages in favour of English. In the early 1960s, schools began to be built in all communities of the four land claim areas and were completed in 1968. Thereupon, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police enforced attendance

of Inuit school-aged children, so that their families moved into the communities from outpost camps to maintain contact with them. The curricula followed by the new community schools were based on that of southern Canadian mainstream schools and spoken Inuktitut continued to be discouraged until about the mid-1970s.

Many Inuit parents and elders, particularly in small communities, could not comprehend why their able-bodied older children, their helpers, had to sit about in school learning nothing useful for their lives, as they saw it. As soon as children were of legal age to leave school, many families encouraged their children to join their parents in hunting and maintaining their families. Particularly in larger communities was schooling and learning English considered desirable because their Inuit/Inuvialuit parents could send their somewhat educated children to labour jobs to earn wages. In this way adolescents helped support their families with their wages while other family members hunted and performed the other family duties: childcare, preparing skins for sale, sewing and carving. In addition, the daily shift of authority from parents and elders at home to teachers in school often confused the students, often resulting in a loss of respect for their parents, elders, their language and traditions. The school drop out rate was very high as students struggled to balance the new school demands with conflicting family demands while attempting to become adults.

#### **The Province of Québec (Nunavik)**

Nunavik can be said to have had the most progressive education system right from the start in the early 1960s by the inclusion of Inuktitut language instruction in the school curriculum. This was due to the language-friendly education policies of the Quebec government of the day. After the first modern comprehensive land claims settlement was reached between the Province of Quebec and the Northern Quebec Inuit Association in 1975, the Kativik Regional Government was formed for Nunavik within Quebec. The first Inuit Teacher Training Program, supported by McGill University, Montreal, took place in Nunavik as well, setting a compelling example to the people living in the other land claims areas where Inuit/Inuvialuit were only used as imported teachers' interpreters and helpers. The other land claim areas today aspire to the well-organized Nunavik early childhood education system in all their communities with well-run daycare/pre-schools that offer Inuktitut programming to the young children in their care.

#### **The Province of Newfoundland and Labrador (Nunatsiavut):**

The Inuit of Nunatsiavut in Labrador had contact with Europeans since at least the mid-1700s, if not earlier, far longer than the people of the other land claims areas. Still, they were generally ignored by Canada until Newfoundland and Labrador joined the Canadian confederation as its newest province in 1949. The Inuit of Nunatsiavut were among the last aboriginals to move to permanent settlements in the 1960s when their children began to attend schools. Some efforts have been made since the 1970s to include Inuktitut in Nunatsiavut schools. Negotiations for Nunatsiavut, the last land claims area settlement of the four Inuit/Inuvialuit land claims areas, began in 1977. On May 26, 2004, the Inuit of Nunatsiavut voted to ratify the Final Agreement of the land claims settlement of Nunatsiavut in Labrador. The provincial and federal governments have yet to complete the process for settling the Nunatsiavut land claim.

### **The Northwest Territories and Nunavut Territory:**

The Inuvialuit and Nunavut land claim areas after 1968 were not as fortunate as Nunavik. The fledgling Northwest Territories (NWT) government, which did not possess the provincial resources and powers over their affairs as the Province of Quebec enjoyed, administered these areas during that period. In spite of all the positive initiatives undertaken for traditional language and cultural inclusion in the curricula of their schools, the education systems of these areas were chronically under-funded.

Although in 1976 legislation was passed by the NWT government to have Inuktitut/Inuvialuktun taught in the Inuit/Inuvialuit schools and the 1990 NWT Official Languages Act ensured that Inuktitut and Inuvialuktun, along with seven other aboriginal languages, stood equal to English and French within the NWT, the NWT government did not, or could not, provide the funds sufficient for adequate Inuit teacher training or for the training of personnel in learning materials production to support Inuktitut/Inuvialuktun literacy and language programs in the two education systems.

In 1984, the Inuvialuit settled their land claims. Under self-government within the NWT Territories the education system of Inuvialuit began to evolve from its early beginnings to include Inuvialuktun in school programs and established daycares/preschools in their Inuvialuit communities.

In 1999, Nunavut became a territory and educators who cared about Inuktitut literacy expected that the issues of embedding Inuktitut literacy and language training in the education system along with all that is needed to ensure success would finally be met. This was not the case. In a territory where 72% of the population speak Inuktitut and where children learn best in their first language, it is a strong desire to have Inuktitut as a language of instruction from K-12 with English taught as a second language.

## **Areas of Importance**

### **Literacy**

Literacy is the cornerstone of education and includes not only reading and writing but the fluency to be able to communicate fully in a language. Inuit need to be fully able to not only read and write but fluently speak their traditional language as well as English/French. As one of the strongest aboriginal languages in Canada, Inuit are to be applauded for the strength of their language but further support is required to ensure that the language remains strong.

The importance of first language literacy training in the student's dialect to the well being of Inuit and the success of other language learning cannot be overemphasized. Language skills need to be taught with supporting materials that are understandable by the students. Not only are there minimal appropriate learning materials but a lack of expertise to

develop and produce them. This hampers not only literacy and language programs but all learning programs. Dedicated Inuit have produced Inuktitut learning materials for use in classrooms and learning programs. These and other entrepreneurs need to be trained and supported in order to continue to produce quality Inuktitut materials.

English/French literacy is also important in Inuit communities so that people can interact with those outside their communities and successfully gain employment. English and English as a Second language training is a priority need for a population whose present literacy level is below the national average. Inuit specific English/French literacy documents needs to be created.

Funding of community literacy and language programs also presents a difficulty. Single year, proposal based funding allows for little continuity in the programmes. There is also a lack of coherent or consistent planning and design. The lack of adequate facilities, learning aids and instructors only enhances the problem.

The issue of literacy in Inuktitut and English/French at all levels of learning, from infancy through adulthood, must be addressed.

#### **Areas for Action**

- Innovative programs to train Inuit educators in all segments of the industry
- Infrastructure and connectivity requirements to increase the production of learning documents in Inuktitut
- Support for Inuit learning or improving English/French skills
- Streamlined multi-year literacy funding to allow for consistency of programming

#### **Early Childhood Education**

Future success is based on learning in the early years. Although daycares exist in most Inuit communities there is still a lack of Inuit specific daycare and early childhood services beyond daycare. This lack of programming is due to funding, staffing and infrastructure. Difficulty obtaining funds from various government departments, and the year to year structure of most funding programs impedes communities' abilities to create sustainable programs. Staffing early childhood programmes remains an issue due to lack of training, training opportunities and comparatively low wages and benefits, although some successful on site early childhood training has occurred across the North. Most daycares and early childhood programs are operated by a board of directors with no link to one another. This results in inconsistency in language and cultural programming.

A wide range of issues affect children in their early years and highlight the importance of excellent early childhood programming. Priority issues identified by Inuit include parenting; Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder; nutrition; hearing impairment; appropriate support and care for women during childbearing; and lack of school readiness.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

### **Areas for Action**

- Federal, territorial, provincial and municipal funding for children's programs 0 –6 needs to be pooled and made more readily accessible, possibly through a single-entry, one-window approach.
- Access to appropriate, reliable, consistent, experienced, qualified professional services at all levels must be secured for Inuit children, now.
- Action must be taken to ensure that Inuit culture, lifestyles and language thrive.
- Inuit in all regions should have equal opportunity to access children's funding.
- Education is age appropriate and grounded in an understanding of the value of the acquisition of culturally relevant foundational skills, which incorporate school readiness. Legislation and Regulations affecting licensed programs are based on Inuit lifestyle and climate.

### **Schools – Elementary through Secondary**

Inuit presently participate in a school system that has been drawn from southern Canadian school system models, although Inuit staff do work in the schools, the majority of teachers and principals are non-Inuit and the curricula is based on southern models. Elementary, middle and secondary schooling is available in most communities but there are few opportunities for at-risk students to experience positive learning successes throughout all levels of public schooling resulting in an alarmingly high drop out rate.

The drop out rate of Inuit adolescents at the high school level far exceeds the national average, stressing families, contributing to the social ills that trouble communities, often leading to crime and suicide. These drop outs are the future troubled parents of unfortunate children who must bear with them as they attempt to succeed at school. Statistics show a higher proportion of female Inuit attaining high school certificates. Although there are 3 times more Inuit who have not completed their high school diploma when compared to Canada as a whole (age group surveyed 25 to 34 years)<sup>4</sup> there is currently no consistent and ongoing campaign that exists to encourage students to remain in school to gain their high school diplomas. Learning beyond the traditional academic structure, such as traditional, vocational, artistic and recreational skills is not available at present for most Inuit students. Such programs may currently occur in some schools but usually on an ad hoc basis and often lack a learning plan with coherent learning objectives. Interest and successes in such programs may encourage academically faltering students, thus discouraging the student from dropping out. An added benefit may be that students become better able to make choices for continuing their education for related careers and occupations.

There is currently little support for Inuit students to aid them in determining their educational and career path. Inuit need to know what opportunities are available and how to prepare for and access them.

<sup>4</sup> 2001, Statistics Canada

### **Areas for Action**

- Strategies to encourage students to complete their education must be developed and applied. This could include building on vocational, traditional and cooperative education.
- Active career/work counselling to prepare for future employment and education
- Strategies to encourage and support all Inuit entering all fields related to education
- Research into the current state of the education systems in the four land claims areas to form the documentation necessary to undertake short-term and long term planning
- Resources to build, foster and advance a solid foundation for the inuit languages as spoken throughout the entire education system

### **Post Secondary, adult training and college programs:**

It is not surprising that there are also a low number of Inuit who go on to complete trade certificates, college certificates/diplomas or University degrees given the low number of Inuit high school graduates. The reason for this is twofold: skills are not always at a level acceptable to many post secondary institutions due to early drop out, low literacy skills or the unavailability of certain courses at the high school level; as well as travel outside the community. Few courses at the college level and limited courses at the University level are offered in the land claims areas. There are insufficient qualified Inuit trades people, despite interest and aptitude.

Incomplete high school combined with low English literacy skills make it difficult to enter and succeed in the system. Those wishing to undertake skills training, career development courses or trades training are still frequently compelled to travel away from their home communities. Promising practises that diminish the need to travel away from home territory and take into account literacy skills are required. Nunavut offers a classroom section for apprentice carpenters in Iqaluit and includes additional help for those having difficulties communicating in English.

Presently there are not enough trained Inuit to fill the positions necessary to govern and service their land. Inuit are underrepresented as professionals serving in their own lands such as in the areas of health, environment, social and legal services. Far too often Inuit obtain positions that require less skills and training and receive less remuneration. Highly skilled positions are frequently filled by people from southern Canada. Inuit need to be proportionately represented in all employment areas at all levels from entry level positions to senior management.

### **Areas for Action**

- Innovative programs to encourage Inuit to re-enter the education system and that support their success in obtaining further education.
- Ongoing continuing education, staff development and skills training for Inuit in all employment sectors including trades, education, health, environment, justice, etc are required.

- Creative programs that allow Inuit students to obtain higher levels of study without being removed from their communities or regions and that are inclusive of language. This could include, but is not limited to, distance education, community based programs, etc.
- Comprehensive financial support provided for Inuit for post-secondary education not dependent on residency
- Innovative literacy programming for all students
- There is a need for skilled adult educators

### **Barriers to Learning**

Many parents, themselves poorly educated and often suffering the effects of residential schools, are unemployed. Home management skills such as nutrition, health, family budgeting, parenting, family relationships and human rights have often been lost and go untaught. Ill able to afford hunting equipment and unable to stretch income support to meet all the family needs, families are often unable to provide their children with the food and clothing necessary for them to be prepared to learn at school. Houses are chronically overcrowded in Inuit land claims areas leaving young learners with no quiet place in which to do homework. 53% of Inuit live in overcrowded housing, versus 7% of all Canadians.<sup>5</sup> Should members of the crowded household also bring substance abuse, emotional problems or physical abuse issues to the young learner's life, the children will also have mental health issues to surmount<sup>6</sup> before being prepared to learn.

Within the school system and the community there is little support for people with learning disabilities and physical and mental challenges. One of the learning disabilities is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Students are often not identified and therefore strategies to help them succeed are never developed and funding for additional support cannot be secured. Expertise to identify, diagnose and support people with learning and intellectual difficulties is scarce. To further the challenges for Inuit students the formal school system does not teach the same way Inuit traditionally teach and learn which makes it difficult to acquire and retain information. Learning challenges are further exasperated by the low literacy rates in the languages' instruction.

Inuit in the correctional system experience unique educational challenges. These facilities offer no coherent, consistent continuous literacy or job training programs. Many young Inuit leave such institutions and programs without discernable improvement and face few prospects for work or positive lifestyle changes.

### **Areas for Action**

- Develop a school system that is sensitive to the needs and methodology of both formal and traditional knowledge acquisition

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

- Ensure that Inuit students have proper, culturally sensitive support for adequate housing, nutrition, clothing and school supplies.
- Ensure that students and their families have adequate resources to deal with their mental health issues.
- Increase the support for students with learning challenges so that they can succeed
- The justice system needs to be examined and programmes to support inmates so that they can successfully return to communities are needed.
- Cooperative working relationship to provide data to address the challenges for inuit

### **Conclusion**

The educational systems for Inuit share common concerns although they do not share a uniform history of educational development. The general overview of these systems identifies these concerns which, in turn, raises a variety of points for further discussion touching on all phases of lifelong learning, from early childhood education through elementary, middle and high schools, to graduation from colleges, post-secondary and adult remedial/recovery programs. Of particular concern is the provision of a well-planned, coherent process of lifelong education, which addresses the learning needs of Inuit. The necessity for Inuit as well as English literacy and language learning to be provided throughout the educational systems cannot be overstated. No less important is the matter of training sufficient trained Inuit teachers and educators. The Inuit education systems are now unable to provide equitable and quality programs to their students. Also, considering the high student drop out rate, it is imperative that ways and means be developed to retain students to program completion with every possible mode of support and encouragement. Finally, the imperative to meet the land claims area's employment obligations cannot be met without education systems designed to promote the individual achievement and excellence that should accompany pride of heritage and language of Inuit.