IDENTIFYING THE LEARNING NEEDS OF INNU STUDENTS: CREATING A MODEL OF CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT

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Abstract / Résumé

This article discusses the methodology and findings of a major assessment project of Innu children in Labrador. The project was commissioned to identify the learning needs of these children so as to facilitate an enhanced school system, responsive to Innu language and culture. The researchers developed a methodology which carefully blends qualitative and quantitative approaches, within a paradigm of culturally defined inclusive schooling, to obtain a wealth of information on the learning needs of these children. Amidst the flurry of concern for culturally appropriate assessment, these researchers provide tangible, field-tested information on how schools can use assessment to enhance education.

Le présent article traite de la méthodologie et des résultats d’un important projet d’évaluation des enfants Innu au Labrador. Le projet visait à cerner les besoins en matière d’apprentissage de ces enfants en vue d’améliorer le système scolaire pour qu’il soit plus sensible à la langue et à la culture des Innu. Les chercheurs ont élaboré une méthodologie qui mêle soigneusement des approches quantitatives et qualitatives au sein d’un paradigme d’enseignement intégrateur et culturellement défini pour obtenir de nombreux renseignements sur les besoins en matière d’apprentissage de ces enfants. Dans un contexte de préoccupation à l’égard d’une évaluation adaptée à la culture, les chercheurs proposent des données tangibles et vérifiées sur le terrain sur la façon dont les écoles peuvent utiliser l’évaluation pour améliorer l’éducation.
Introduction

Education of Canadian Aboriginal Students

The educational struggles of the Innu have paralleled, in many ways, that of their national peers in Canada's Aboriginal populations. The 1867 British North America Act and the 1876 Indian Act empowered the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development to provide for the education of First Nations children (Nesbit, Philpott, Cahill & Jeffery, 2004, p.1). However, it quickly became obvious that federal initiatives, including residential schools, were not only failing to educate Aboriginal children but were instruments of "cultural genocide" (Burns, 1995, p.54). A subsequent 1969 Government of Canada document "The White Paper" attempted to address this failure by presenting a major policy proposal to integrate the education of Canada's Native youth with that of the provinces. It was intended to address the imbalance between Native and non-Native learners by defining education of Aboriginal youth as being a provincial responsibility (Goddard, 1993). Brooks (1991) in reflecting on the document (and the subsequent reaction to it) referenced its lack of sensitivity to Aboriginal language and culture. He writes that "very little was done to accommodate Indian cultural differences in the integrated schools" (p.173) and that Native language use continued to be discouraged.

In response, the First Nations community, led by the National Indian Brotherhood, released a 1972 paper titled Indian Control of Indian Education (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972) which called for greater control of education by local bands. It marked a policy change in education that, in the ensuing years resulted in greater shifts of responsibility for education to band councils. "The paper represented a major First Nations initiative to reclaim control over Aboriginal education and a philosophic departure from the existing federal association between education and cultural assimilation" (Nesbit, et al. 2004). The Canadian Education Association (1984) reported that while the shift towards Aboriginal controlled education was an important step, "a significant discrepancy between the expectations of Native people and reality has developed" (p.13).

This discrepancy, coupled with poor scholastic performance for Aboriginal youth, would continue in the ensuing years, despite being well recognized at provincial and federal levels. A 2004 report to the Council of Ministers of Education comments on this discrepancy:

There is recognition in all educational jurisdictions that the achievement rates of Aboriginal children, including the completion of secondary school, must be improved. Stud-
ies 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 rate of poverty, the highest rate of drop-outs from formal education, and the lowest health indicators of any group. (p. 22)

Adding to this concern is the mushrooming size of Canada's Aboriginal population which has nearly doubled in the last 20 years and is expected to increase by 34% in the next 20 years. The last eight years have seen a 33% increase in the number of band operated schools, the majority of which are primary/elementary facilities with 55% of Aboriginal adolescents who attend high school do so in non-band managed schools. Despite these changes, there continues to be only a slight fluctuation in high school completion rates for Aboriginal youth, from 21% in 1996 to 23% in 2002. Likewise, the same time frame has seen only a slight increase in post secondary completion for Aboriginal students (33% to 38% of those enrolled). These sobering statistics and their effect on the country have been noticed by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (2004): “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 frame estimated to close this gap has increased slightly from about 27 to 28 years” (Sect., 5.2).

In addition to alarming indicators for education, the general health and social well-being of Canada's Aboriginal people also continues to lag behind national averages. The gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and other Canadians is seven years, with Aboriginal youth having a suicide rate eight times the national average. Sixty-two percent of Aboriginal youth smoke (compared with a national average in 2000 of 24%) while a comparable number of Aboriginal youth perceive alcohol abuse as being a problem in their communities. Forty-eight percent of Aboriginal youth report drug use as being an issue and the incarceration rate among Aboriginal people is five to six times the national average (DIAND, 2000). Statistics such as these are sobering reminders of the disparity in Canadian society and the pronounced problems that continue to limit educational opportunity for Aboriginal youth.

The Innu of Labrador

In many ways the Innu of Labrador typify the extreme of this disparity and offer a unique glimpse into both the magnitude of the concern as well as the long-term implications for youth. The Innu stand out among North American Aboriginal groups as being, most likely, the last to come into intense contact with Euro-Canadians (Burnaby, 2004). For over 6,000 years these people lived a peaceful nomadic lifestyle, living off the vast
resources of land along north eastern Canada, following the caribou herd and eventually establishing a fur trading relationship with the Hudson's Bay Company. It was this relationship, coupled with fluctuations in the caribou herd, which led the Innu towards establishing more permanent bases on coastal Labrador (Mailhot, 1997). The move towards a more sedentary lifestyle was the beginning of a challenge to this way of life in which their rural, clan-like existence that was central to their culture, spirituality and sense of wellness would begin to erode (Press, 1995). Government initiatives towards colonization would fuel this erosion as the 20th century brought rapid development to Labrador including forestry, mining and hydroelectric development. A provincial policy to integrate the Innu into White culture further fueled this movement and by the mid-1960s to the mid 1970s the Innu were settling in two communities – the newly established trading post in Davis Inlet and, further south, in the community of Sheshatshiu (Mailhot, 1997).

The effect of this colonization was immediate and devastating, ultimately leading to pervasive social problems including poverty, chronic unemployment, alcohol and substance abuse, neglect, family violence, physical/sexual abuse, and adolescent suicide (Press, 1995). These issues would escalate over the ensuing decades to the point where the Innu of Labrador would eventually be referred to as “Canada’s Tibet” (Samson, 1999).

It is against this historical and social backdrop that contemporary education has developed for the Innu. Central to the provincial government’s agenda was the education of Innu youth. Roman Catholic missionaries, who had been proselytizing in the area since the late 1800s, established the first school in Sheshatshiu in 1954 and in Davis Inlet by 1963, with the expressed goal of encouraging assimilation into the dominant Euro-Canadian culture (Samson, 2000/2001). Subsequently school attendance became mandatory and English became the language of instruction. Innu-aimin, the Native language of the Innu, remained in oral form only despite previous attempts by Catholic priests to implement a written version (Mailhot, 1997). The Innu were not only discouraged from speaking their language in school but were actively encouraged to abandon their traditional lifestyle, spirituality and worldview in favor of that espoused by the missionaries. The resultant discord was immediate and the erosion of self and cultural identity that began with settlement into contemporary communities was exacerbated. Many Innu report physical and emotional abuse in the newly established schools, which further fueled the disconnect that was occurring (Press, 1995; Samson, 2000).

The ensuing years would see schools move under the jurisdiction of
the Labrador Catholic School Board with varying initiatives being undertaken to address the now obvious cultural mismatch between the school and the community. Some attempts were made to use Innu-aimun as the language of instruction in primary school, a process that was complicated by the absence of a written version of the language and Native speaking teachers. “Culture days,” Native teacher’s aides and attempts to introduce “Elders” into the school community were also initiated despite the overwhelming perception in the community that school was a foreign environment that was attempting to transform Innu kids into white children (Samson, 2000/2001). School attendance continued to be alarmingly low with schools in both communities producing few graduates.

While the failures of a colonization approach to education were apparent on a national level, the effects on the Labrador Innu were devastating. Finding themselves plunged into the alien culture of communities and a Euro centric educational system, parents and Elders over only a few decades lost their connection with the land and assumed less active lifestyles, growing increasingly dependent on government bureaucracies. Alcohol abuse, family violence and depression became prevalent and contributed to alarming rates of suicide. A 2000 study Influences on the Health and Behavior of Sheshatshiu Youth (Sheshatshiu Innu Band Council, 2000) reported that close to three-quarters of youth showed high levels of distress and that 40% had contemplated or attempted suicide, a rate that is seventeen times higher than for their provincial counterparts (Newfoundland and Labrador Centre for Health Information, 2005). The social problems were more pronounced in Davis Inlet where the government-established community was situated on an island without adequate supplies of water and with limited access to traditional hunting grounds. A 1995 document, Gathering Voices: Finding Strengths to Help Our People (Innu Nation and Mushuau Band Council, 1995) documented major concerns for the community of Davis Inlet. A documentary by the Canadian Broadcasting Company exposed significant solvent abuse among youth on Davis Inlet which raised such public concern that the federal government intervened. In June 2001 the Government of Canada, represented by the DIAND, Health Canada and the Solicitor General, initiated the Labrador Innu Comprehensive Healing Strategy as a “joint holistic approach that moves beyond dealing with symptoms to addressing root causes”. In the ensuing years, millions of dollars would be allocated to enhancing quality of life, including the building of a new community for the Innu residents of Davis Inlet (DIAND, 2004.)

Today, both Labrador Innu communities are showing signs of hope.
A 1999 Agreement in Principle with the provincial and federal governments helped initiate the process of transition towards self-government. In December 2002 the Mushuau Innu began a move from the isolated community of Davis Inlet into the newly created community of Natuashish, which brought reserve status to the Band. Agreements also articulate co-management of natural resources, including lucrative mining and hydro development opportunities. Similar agreements have emerged to encourage the Innu to assume greater responsibility for health and community services. Today the Labrador School District, under separate contract with the federal government, co-manages the community school in Natuashish with the Innu people. Meanwhile the school in Sheshatshiu continues under provincial jurisdiction until reserve status is created, and the School District welcomes and encourages greater participation of the Innu in the management of the school (C. Fleet, personal communication, February, 2005).

The Purpose of This Study

It is this process of devolution of responsibility for education to the Innu that led to this assessment project. At the written request of the Innu people, a call for an accurate and thorough identification of the learning needs of Innu youth was made. Both communities had long-standing concern about educational outcomes, and provincial public documents showed that in the ten years prior to the study only three Mushuau Innu youth and twelve Sheshatshiu Innu youth graduated high school (Philpott, Nesbit, Cahill & Jeffery, 2004a). Likewise, provincial records also showed alarmingly low attendance rates of less than 50%. There was also significant concern about a perceived high rate of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and the social issues surrounding it. Despite this, the Innu people felt that their children were well behaved, cooperative, intellectually capable and eager to achieve in school. The dominant concerns were a culturally insensitive model of education and a clash with language where English was the language of school instruction, despite Statistics Canada (2001) identifying the Innu as being among the most successful Aboriginal groups in Canada at retaining their Native language. Before the Innu assume responsibility for educational services to their children, they wanted a thorough profile of the learning needs of their children that could both direct interventions and serve as a baseline for future comparison. In January 2003 provincial and federal negotiators agreed and a team of researchers from Memorial University of Newfoundland began their work. In the ensuing years, 908 Innu youth, comprising approximately half of the full Innu population, would be assessed with the final report released in December 2004. The study would
quickly become seen as the largest educational assessment of Aboriginal youth in Canada in that a wealth of data was collected on an entire culture of youth. While these data would have a prominent impact on education, the methodology used in collecting them would hold great interest among other educators of Aboriginal youth in Canada.

**Culturally Appropriate Assessment**

The literature on the appropriateness of educational assessment for children of unique cultural/linguistic backgrounds is extensive. A thorough review of this literature was conducted prior to the study (Philpott et. al., 2004b) identifying that concern is not unique to Canada's First Nation's population. Indeed, concern for educational assessment for all children has moved to the forefront of the educational debate thanks, in large part, to the reform movement that swept education during the 1980s and 1990s (Black & William, 2003; Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Zigmond & Baker, 1995). While this reform movement had a significant impact on educational delivery, curriculum redevelopment and educational assessment in North America, Mittler (2001) documents it as a global trend towards enhanced opportunities for all children, regardless of learning needs or cultural background. In 1998 the release of *Gathering Strength – Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan* (DIAND, 1998) paralleled this call for a shift towards greater accountability for academic outcomes for First Nations youth. The report built on early documents such as *Our Children – Keepers of the Sacred Knowledge: Minister's National Working Group of Education, Final Report* (DIAND, 2002) which made a series of recommendations to “foster excellence in First Nation education and improve the educational opportunities and outcomes of First Nation learners” (p. i). Central to this was the report’s fourth recommendation which called for specific focus on “…assessment review, and remediation of student achievement levels” (p.40). The issue of culturally appropriate assessment of Canada's Aboriginal youth had become topical.

While educators in Canada were calling for documentation of achievement of Aboriginal students, the accuracy of standardized assessment practices of students with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds was being debated (Samunda, 1975; Cummins, 1984; Armour-Thomas, 1992). Issues such as the cultural appropriateness of test instruments’ content, a lack of facility in English, norm group similarity, cultural value of testing, examiner bias, as well as nonequitable social and educational opportunities (Lewis, 1998; Gopaul-McNichol & Armour-Thomas, 2002) all raise concern for the appropriateness of traditional testing practices, especially standardized, quantitative measures. What surfaces is a call for culturally fair assessment that is non-discrimina-
tory and attempts to “ensure that judgments made about behavior of individuals and groups are accurate and that the decisions made do not intentionally or unintentionally favor some cultural group over another” (Gopaul-McNichol & Armour-Thomas, 2002, p.10). Samunda (1998) cautions that this involves more than selecting instruments which are marketed as culturally fair as often such instruments have only slightly culturally reduced content bias, but instead calls for a broader view of assessing a child’s development. Padilla (2001) builds on this and calls for “…a paradigm shift...wherein the study of a specific ethnic group, especially if comparison is likely to be biased, should not examine students from a perspective of their failures in the educational system; rather it should concentrate on how to achieve success regardless of the task or level involved” (p.23).

This call for a paradigm shift towards a broader view of assessment is not unique to the debate on culturally fair assessment. Sattler (1992) argues that more comprehensive assessments should be a priority not only for minority students but for all students given that multiple indicators afford a more holistic perspective on a child’s functioning. He cautions against assessment being seen as “…a test score or a number...that each child has a range of competencies that can be evaluated by both qualitative and quantitative means” (p.5). Sattler (2001) builds on this by outlining the four pillars of assessment to include careful selection of quantitative instruments (norm-referenced tests) as well as qualitative measures such as interviews, observations and informal measures. This approach seems particularly well suited to students from diverse cultures. Gopaul-McNichol & Armour-Thomas (2002) state:

> It is unreasonable to expect that any one measure would provide satisfactory answers to the questions consistent with a bio-cultural perspective of human development. Rather, an assessment system comprising both qualitative and quantitative measures is likely to provide comprehensive information on the developing person’s psychological functioning. (p.38)

Lewis (1998), commenting more directly on assessing First Nations students, posits that the goal of a comprehensive assessment is to increase the accuracy of measuring students’ functioning level and ability. He calls for a “multifaceted approach that is predicated on the notion that single score and single procedure assessments are inappropriate when evaluating clients from diverse educational or cultural backgrounds” (p.229). Lewis goes on to challenge the notion that assessment is a process that one person conducts, calling instead for a team approach, representing diverse disciplines, ensuring a variety of insights
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into a child’s strengths and weaknesses. According to Lewis, the team can gather information through testing, observation, and evaluation of archival information. “Triangulating the assessment process in such a fashion will lead to diagnosis and remediation based on a consultative process, leading to more beneficial outcomes [for students].” (p.230)

This call for a careful articulation of approaches is particularly salient when exploring educational achievement levels, where curriculum standards are provincially set and, often for First Nations students, fragmented by poor attendance. Standardized assessment of educational outcomes needs to be carefully balanced against what the students have been actually taught (Sattler, 2001). A similar, though more heated debate ensues when researchers attempt to measure cognitive ability where multiple views of cognition compete in educational circles. Senior (1993), in a review of literature concerning the measurement of intelligence within Canada’s Native population, cites Berry (1986) who describes cognitive ability within the context of one’s culture: “I conceive intelligence, as presently used in psychology, to be a culture-bound, ethnocentric, and excessively narrow construct” (p.148). Berry cautions against using quantitative scores to describe ability, emphasizing that standardized tests are culturally biased and that the scores they yield invite inappropriate assumptions. He states, “As psychologists, we should admit that we do not know in any absolute or a priori sense what intelligence is in other cultures, and until we do, we should not use our construct to describe their cognitive competencies, nor our tests to measure them” (p.149).

In a similar vein, Gopaul-McNichol and Armour-Thomas (2002) argue for a cultural perspective on intellectual functioning that relies on Vygotsky’s socio-cultural model of cognitive development. This is underscored by the realization that within the First Nations population there is significant diversity of cultural backgrounds, social experiences, and language differences/linguistic variations.

What emerges in this debate is support for a multiplicity of approaches that reflect broader views on student outcomes that parallels the debate on measuring achievement, encouraging educators to carefully select and blend quantitative, formal instruments with qualitative, informal measures. Sternberg (1998) supports this multiplicity of approaches to measuring intelligence and encourages educators to think broader than a test score—“[to] take into account people, tasks, and situations, not only in cross-cultural or multicultural measurement, but in all measurement” (p.199). He presents a triarchic model of intelligence that includes measures of analytic, creative and practical abilities while employing “at least two different modalities of testing” (p.203).

The need for exploration of the literature on appropriate assess-
ment practices for Aboriginal children, as well as proven models, is significant. Prior to this study the authors conducted a review of current assessment practices in Aboriginal schools in Canada (Philpott, et. al., 2004b). Through an extensive survey, educators outlined a lack of direction, limited knowledge, and an over reliance on standardized measures despite the awareness that results are misleading. In this context, the significance of a large scale study on a full population of Aboriginal children is dramatic not only as that culture moves towards self management of education, but for other educators who strive to develop sound pedagogy for First Nations youth.

Model of the Study

It is within this debate on a new paradigm of assessment, certainly for children from culturally diverse backgrounds, that this study on the educational needs of Innu youth was designed. The goal was not to diagnose learner diversity but rather articulate a base line for intervention, identify areas where support was needed, and document student need against the reality of the Innu experience with education. The researchers wanted to identify current levels of need within the authentic context that education occurs in these communities. This authentic approach to identifying the impact of current practice is best articulated by Goodwin and Macdonald (1997) who, in arguing for a broader view of assessment that complements the global paradigm of inclusiveness, state:

We believe also that authentic practice is grounded in basic assumptions: the right of every child to a rich and meaningful education; the responsibility of schools and teachers to interrupt negative and harmful patterns of behavior in educational and societal contexts that demean and marginalize children of color; the role schools must play in introducing children, especially poor children and children of color, to "cultures of power"; and the worthiness of all children. (p.212)

Subsequently, the project had the considerable goal of exploring a number of dominant areas of concern including attendance, achievement, cognitive ability, language use, attitudes, perceptions and aspirations for education, and risk factors such as fetal alcohol related problems. In keeping with the above views on assessment, a multiplicity of approaches was used to attempt to gather such a holistic perspective on education. Qualitative indictors included individual interviews with community leaders, educators, teachers and students. As well, a number of focus groups with were conducted and researchers recorded observations on visits to the schools and communities. Surveys were con-
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Conducted with teachers, students and parents to gather their perceptions and aspirations on issues ranging from language use, attendance concerns and career goals. All surveys were translated into Innu-aimun and orally administered by community members as the majority of Innu can not read their own language. Interestingly, the survey had to be re-translated for each community as the Innu language is so dialectically diverse.

Quantitative data was collected by administration of a number of carefully selected testing instruments. A number of instruments were reviewed for consideration with the majority being discarded as inappropriate for reasons such as content bias, language of administration, limited norm group and cultural relevance to the Innu experience. The Screening Instrument for Targeting Education Risk (SIFTER) was selected as a broad measure of learning need. Other standardized, quantitative instruments were selected while a number of qualitative approaches were developed for use. Qualified professionals were hired to administer these instruments, with preference being given to individuals who were familiar to the Innu children. To this end, the Labrador School Board released staff members to assist with the testing in an effort to ensure greater comfort level among the children. Retired professionals were also hired and new assessors who were hired were trained, oriented and monitored to ensure this comfort level among the children. Parental consent forms were translated and obtained for all children assessed on cognitive ability measures. Data was then collated using Microsoft Access and analyzed using Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS). The data that emerged from interviews, observations and focus groups was analyzed using Soft Systems Approach (Checkland, 1999). The researchers combined data from statistical analyses with the qualitative data collected to provide a comprehensive view of students’ needs and strengths. The findings of the study were not used to categorize students but rather to indicate possible paths that might be used to develop more effective teaching methods and a more appropriate curriculum model.

**Dominant Findings**

Given the breadth of data collected it would be impossible to document, or even summarize, the findings in this article. Instead examples of the dominant themes will be reviewed with particular focus on those that most immediately affect education. Particular focus will be given to the correlation between quantitative and qualitative approaches, to lend direction to other educators in assessing the learning needs of Aborignal youth.
Attendance

At the outset of the study, key informants articulated grave concern for poor school attendance among Innu youth. In large part, the study was undertaken to document the magnitude of this concern, the patterns that might be evident and contributing factors for it. To this end, the school registers were collected for the five years prior to the study and were reviewed for the two years during which the study was conducted. Results were analyzed against the data base of school-aged Innu youth that was developed using Band Council and other lists (e.g., school records, Health Labrador lists). Qualitative data were also collected and analyzed from the interviews, focus groups, observations and surveys.

What emerged was a startling picture of school attendance. Of the 908 school-aged youth in Innu communities:

...a third of the full population do not attend school at all, another 17% do so less than 20% of the time. For the population who do attend, attendance approximates 54% of total school time in Natuashish (including a 10% increase following the establishment of the new community and school). Attendance is an even greater concern for Sheshatshiu where it has dropped below 45% reaching a low of less than 20% in the spring of 2004." (Philpot et al., 2004a., p.12)

The report goes on to identify that drop out begins in primary school and continues into adolescence to a point where only 30% of Innu youth enter high school, where they then attend only 20% of the time. In addition to the patterns of limited attendance and early dropout, there is a seasonal pattern to school attendance that parallels traditional lifestyle of spending time on the land. However, the qualitative data indicated that most children do not miss school due to departure from the community. Fewer families are spending time on the land yet children choose not to attend school at these seasonal points. On any given school day, children can be seen playing in the community despite the school being opened. A culture of acceptance had emerged for school truancy where parents reported giving their children the choice of attending and teachers often voicing uncertainty about how to begin to address the issue.

A small population (less than 5%) of Sheshatshiu children was identified as attending schools in neighboring communities (Northwest River and Goose Bay). These children tended to have attendance rates that typified provincial standards (above 85%) despite their needing daily transportation. Interestingly, these children were often those of Innu community leaders, who voiced a desire to have their children well-educated and who were leery of the quality of education in the community school.
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The report goes on to identify a number of factors that contribute to low attendance including a pronounced language clash with the school. Seventy-five percent of parents and 67% of students reported that they “mostly” or “only” speak Innu-aimun at home, and 70% of primary aged children were identified as being at moderate to high risk on the SIFTER for communication concerns. Despite this, less than 45% of teachers reported using translators in their daily instruction or in dealings with the home and only 10% had any training in English as Second Language (ESL). The school environment also surfaced as a deterrent to attendance, often being seen in the community as “foreign,” devoid of culturally relevant curriculum, and having little to no relevance in their lives. In discussion of these findings, the report is clear in stating that “low attendance for Innu youth is symptomatic of a larger issue – a mismatch between the cultural paradigms of the school and the community. Without question, attendance issues present the most significant obstacle to education for Innu youth” (Philpott, et al., 2004a. p.14).

Achievement

In light of the emerging pattern of school attendance, great concern was expressed for obtaining achievement indicators. If children attend school so sporadically, and if language clash is as pronounced as it appeared to be, obtaining indicators of scholastic progress needed careful consideration. Qualitative indicators were obtained by having each teacher estimate the current grade equivalent for each child whom they felt they knew well enough to rank. In all, indicators were obtained on 75% of the population who were attending, which was 50% of the total school-aged population. Following this, the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement (KTEA) was selected as a quantitative indicator, being well recognized in Newfoundland schools, with recognized high reliability/validity factors. Raw scores were translated to grade equivalencies, allowing for a criterion-referenced approach to identifying acquisition of English language learning – the language of instruction in these schools. In total 70% of the population attending were administered the KTEA, representing 47% of the total school-aged population. Both sets of scores were entered into the database and analyzed.

What emerged in the qualitative data of teacher estimated achievement levels was a clear pattern “…that most children begin falling behind as early as the first grade and continue a clear pattern of falling further behind grade/age expectations as they continue through school. For example 66% of seven year olds were estimated to be at least one to two years behind grade level, and this pattern of decline continued to a point where 66% of 16 year olds were at least five years behind” (p.14).
The results of the KTEA tended to support this pattern of diminishing achievement over time, showing it to be slightly more pronounced than teachers suspected. In reading achievement, for example, “80% of seven year olds are one to two years behind grade level and the grade level discrepancy continues to a point where approximately 85% of 15 year olds are at least five years behind” (p.15). The pattern held across other subtests of the KTEA. For example, math scores showed that “…approximately 56% of seven year olds are one to two years behind [while] 100% of 15 year olds are at least five years behind” (p.15). This pattern of eroding achievement was different for the population of Innu children attending school in outside communities. Those children (who had relatively acceptable attendance) tended to achieve at, or closer to, grade level.

The findings on achievement, while no surprise given the attendance data, paint a concerning picture for Innu communities. This concern is underscored by the reality that only the population of youth who attend school were assessed. Achievement levels would be assumed to be lower still for the one third of youth who do not attend school. It helps explain why, in the ten years prior to this study, fewer than 20 students graduated from schools in either community. The data identified “…grave concern for the readiness of current students to meet prescribed graduation criteria within the next five years” (p.15). As this culture moves towards self-management, the impact of these data becomes overwhelming.

**Cognitive Ability**

This careful blending of quantitative and qualitative measures also guided the assessing of cognitive ability. Again, the goal was to obtain a variety of indicators of need that could be used to guide intervention and program development. Qualitative approaches began with the researchers conducting teacher professional development sessions on cognitive ability, exploring evolving and contemporary definitions of cognition. Teachers were then asked to complete a Multiple Intelligence Checklist on each student, ranking them “below average,” “average” or “above average” in each of eight areas of ability. Interestingly, nearly all teachers reported prior training on Howard Gardner’s view of multiple intelligences and were able to complete forms for 79% of the student population. The data indicated that “…more than 80% of Innu youth show significant strengths in areas such as visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, naturalistic and inter/intra-personal intelligence” (Philpott, et al., 2004a, p.16). Eighty percent of children were ranked as being average in verbal/linguistic ability and 72% were ranked as average on
logical/mathematical ability. This tended to support the concerns expressed at the outset of the study as well as the findings that emerged from the interviews and focus groups namely, that Innu children were believed to hold diverse strengths not capitalized on in the current educational system.

In designing approaches to obtain quantitative indicators of ability, the researchers selected two non-verbal measures that are well recognized for their reliability and validity: the Test of Non-Verbal Intelligence – 3 (TONI) and the Universal Non-Verbal Intelligence Test (UNIT). Given the language concerns and the themes that emerged in the literature on culturally appropriate assessment, non-verbal measures were selected as being more appropriate for such a linguistic and culturally unique population. It was also the only time norm-group comparisons were made and particular attention was paid to interpretation. Parental consent forms were requested for each child (School Board policy). These forms were translated into Innu-aimun, articulating that participation was completely voluntary. In total, 333 consent forms were returned with 322 children being assessed via the quantitative measures. The data showed “...that Innu students, as a group, have average intelligence. There is, however, a skew towards the low average range” (p.16). The TONI reported that 72% of the students scored in either the low-average to average range with a mean score of 88. The second instrument (UNIT) reported that 76% scored in the low-average to average range with a mean of 96. Given that not all students had both instruments administered and that the UNIT is a more comprehensive measure, this discrepancy was not alarming. More relevant was the consistent pattern that quantitative measures were supporting qualitative measures. While this lends comfort to the research model it also speaks to the legitimacy of qualitative approaches and the need to train teachers on authentic assessment practice, knowing that it can be as accurate as even the most carefully designed quantitative approaches. While one approach does not need to replace the other, both hold utility in the education of children.

Perceptions and Aspirations

While the blending of quantitative and qualitative measures yielded a wealth of data, the results of the perceptions and aspirations surveys identified equally substantial findings. These data help articulate the social milieu that schools operate in and the place for contemporary schooling in the Innu culture. Likewise, it sheds light on the teaching environment and the readiness of teachers to work with these children. If education is to adequately prepare Innu children to function independently, these data need careful exploration.
What emerged from the data was a clear call for the establishment of a bicultural model of education. “More than 90% of parents who responded to the surveys want their children to be fluent in English and Innu-aminun and to retain their traditional lifestyle. A similar percentage of teachers expressed the same aspirations...95% of parents and 85% of students see education as having relevance for the future of individual students as well as for the community as a whole” (p.20). While education is seen as being important, the perception of the current model of education is less positive. Sixty-five percent of parents and 63% of students feel that school is helpful in preparing youth for careers while only 38% of teachers feel that education is facilitating career development. In fact, only 51% of students see high school graduation as being a tangible goal for them, despite 80% of parents wishing such for their children. Less than 40% of students see post-secondary education as being important (Philpott, et al., 2004a). While attendance and achievement are important concerns for an enhanced model of education in Innu communities (especially in light of average cognitive ability) career development emerges as a dominant and urgent theme as well.

**Directions**

This study presents a wealth of information on the appropriateness of educational assessment approaches for Aboriginal youth, identifying how a careful blend of quantitative and qualitative approaches can result in complementary findings. Perhaps central to that knowledge is the legitimizing of authentic approaches and the need to empower classroom teachers with the skills to identify the needs of their students which can be every bit as valid as even the most carefully selected standardized methods. While quantitative approaches have utility for educational assessment, Sattler's (2001) focus on interviews, observations and informal measures have equal value. This debate is particularly relevant for Aboriginal students where educators are struggling with how best to identify learner needs and measure outcomes among children of linguistically, socially and culturally diverse backgrounds.

However, for the Innu people, who have long struggled in the larger Canadian social context, this study has been a turning point in their history. Although accurate indicators of student need are crucial to beginning the process of change towards a culturally sensitive and effective system of education, so too is the validation of Innu parents’ knowledge of their children and the accuracy of their perceptions.

Perhaps the most significant finding of the study is that the results validate the perceptions and impressions that key informants—Innu leaders and educators—reported at...
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the outset: Innu youth are of average ability, consistently display diverse strengths and abilities, and lag in formal school achievement levels due, in large part, to poor attendance. This report serves to synthesize and validate these perceptions and articulate a baseline for intervention. It reveals the magnitude of educational need and, at the same time, begins to chart a course for change. (Philpott, et al., 2004a, p.23)

This validation is not only important from a perspective of assessment but, even more, for the beginning of the establishment of self-government. The years ahead will witness rapid change for the Innu as they make the transition towards reserve status and independent management of their social institutions. At the same time, the need for an effective educational system is paramount.

It is essential to create a school that validates and nurtures Innu language, culture and knowledge to provide Innu youth with the knowledge and skills they need for a range of career choices. At the same time, education must strive to prepare students to study and work collaboratively in the more individualistic, compartmentalized and regulated structure of mainstream society. Innu school must become both inclusive and bicultural to be compatible with Innu values, preparing students to function in both worlds. The sweeping changes needed to provide high quality education to Innu youth can only be planned and implemented by Elders, parents, educators and school staff who are totally committed to the inclusive, bicultural concept of school and society. (Philpott, et al., 2004a, p.22)

However, what is equally significant is that the issues which limit education in Innu communities are not unique to them and are, in fact, shared by most Aboriginal groups in Canada. Many of these groups have been involved in educational change and management for a number of years, experiencing various degrees of success. The knowledge gleaned by these educators could well support the Innu in beginning this journey. Subsequently, the sole recommendation of this study was that there be no recommendations, “...preferring that there be a dialogue among the stakeholders, most importantly inclusive of the Innu themselves, before decisions are made. Imposed change and educational approaches run the risk of further complicating existing problems” (Philpott, et al., 2004a, p.23).
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