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## LES SORTIES EN TERRITOIRE : A PROGRAM BESTOWING UNIQUENESS UPON KASSIMU MAMU SCHOOL IN MASHTEUATSH

The following article, written from the testimonies of two members of management, presents the peculiarities of the training program *Sorties en territoire*, well established in Kassimu Mamu High School, Mashteuiatsh.

Ms. Melissa Launière, School Principal, and Ms. Christine Tremblay, Director of Education and Labour have been working for two decades on the development of a project for adolescents to explore in depth the Pekuakamiulnuatsh Territory (Innu) lifestyle. They granted us an interview on the wealth of experience encountered in their educational environment. They first explain the various steps taken to establish a comprehensive training program resulting in a possible certification. Through concrete examples, they present the components of the *Sorties en territoire* program. The positive impact on the youths of secondary Kassimu Mamu High School is finally identified, which leads to future prospects related to this innovative approach and anchored in the traditions of the Mashteuiatsh community.

**Initially, how did the idea of offering this field experience to students emerge?**

*In 1997, we noticed that in our small school many of them were struggling with significant learning difficulties and behavioural disorders. Under the ISPJ program (Social and professional integration for young people) in effect at the time, a group of teachers had the idea to organize in-territory excursions.*

*The main goals were to stimulate the students' interest, develop their autonomy and responsibility, and rekindle their relationship with their traditions. During the first years of implementation, the outings were only available to young people from social and professional integration groups. There, they acquired numerous practical skills when in nature. However initially, the activity was not structured and lessons were planned according to the group's day-to-day experience. Year after year, more and more youths wanted to participate. To satisfy the high demand, the program was gradually organized in line with specific objectives and training content to work in nature with youths.*

**Over time, how was today's comprehensive training program developed?**

*The territory outings were soon beneficial in our students. We observed a direct impact on their academic motivation and an appreciation of their cultural identity. Feeling more concerned; they wanted to be the pride of their community and even fostered a desire for community involvement, which depended on school success. Thus, from a simple informal field trip, the project has become the emblem, the uniqueness of our institution.*

**How many students participate in these outings?**

*Before the 2000s, about twenty youths took part in the in-territory excursions. A few volunteer teachers and resource people from the community accompa-*







**Several partners support you in planning activities. Can you introduce them?**

*We now have a reflection and coordination committee composed of school staff, community transmitters, experts from the heritage and culture sector, and public works employees. Since it is important for us to reach decisions by consensus, we discuss the mode of operation and choice of workshops. We are concerned that the workshops offered in the territory correlate with the experience of Elders. We wish to train young people to enable them to relay the teachings, to perpetuate their culture, and in this regard, they must take responsibility. Above all we want to keep alive the reality of our predecessors. At school, a team of coordination experts is in charge for planning the excursions to the last details.*

**The Sorties en territoire program requires complex logistics. Can you describe some steps necessary to organize each outing?**

*Such a program calls for a great deal of preparation and planning. We are talking about two to three weeks of full-time work to organize every outing. There is considerable mobilization of human and material resources and we must make sure that nothing is overlooked. To do this, we have developed detailed planning documents outlining the steps for each excursion.*

*On-site research also involves a lengthy process. In recent years, we selected the Laurentides Wildlife Reserve as the sector privileged in the fall, more specifically Rivière aux Écorces where a cultural community gathering is held annually. Most popular, this outing overlaps the community hunt. Youth join in their community gathering, reinforcing their sense of identity and cultural belonging. During winter and depending on the year, families choose the date and place of expeditions and they are glad to welcome us in their territory.*

*According to the tradition and our values of respect, we always request permission and acknowledge hospitality. There are sometimes restrictions determined by location accessibility, in order to ensure students safety. The spring excursion, always held at Pointe-Racine where the annual community geese hunt takes place, does not last as long as the other two. On that occasion also, the students take part in community hunts and contribute to the preparation of food.*

**One thing is certain: a whole process of roots and memories awakening occurs during these outings.**



### Is your program established on theoretical support?

Actually, no. We developed this program from square one and it reflects our community. It is a one-of-a-kind project mainly based on experience built gradually over twenty years. We are proud of its uniqueness and we are not aware of similar programs elsewhere.

### Do you tap into traditions?

Of course! We respect the transmission mode of Elders who share with us their knowledge and wisdom. Some of them model the lessons as they wish, while others are more vocal and explain things. There are no preferred teaching approaches. Because not all students experience life on the territory with their families, the program provides an introduction to those who would otherwise not have had the chance to access it.

### What are the main skills developed by the students following this training program?

Hunting, trapping, fishing, finding one's bearings and tracking are traditional activities in which students participate during the excursions. The nature of the activities offered varies according to season and transmitters that available. The central notion is still the respect, of the self, of others, Elders, environment, etc. Youths hold their own alongside their peers, learn to work in teams, solve conflicts, all of which develop their social skills. Another feature of this experience is that the nature of relationship between young people and teachers is very different than in school. Bonds appear. It is obvious that students have more freedom to express and reveal themselves. However, we insist on applying the school code of life based on Aboriginal traditional lifestyles. Also, an interesting phenomenon: the roles are reversed; it is now our young people who teach new educators about outings in the territory operations.

### Have you developed ways to assess students' learning during excursions?

As it is more of an extracurricular experience; we want to ensure that the excursions in territory emancipate from the school framework. So there

is no formal evaluation as such. Nonetheless, each participant receives a grid of desired learning and a personalized record sheet on specific objectives to attain. Moreover, resource teachers assess the student's achievement of these objectives. A grade for participation is attributed on every report card. The challenges facing every student are also recorded. In addition, the organizing committee prepares a detailed summary on each excursion. Finally, in a perspective of improvement, youth and interveners provide an evaluation of the outing.

### Can you describe the positive effects of the training program on the students' school perseverance?

The Sorties en territoire is a great success for our school. The sustainability of this project has fostered the establishment of meaningful pedagogical practices better aligned with the learners' needs. Indeed, the territory outings have a tangible impact on student retention as well as on the strengthening of cultural identity. Also, some students, who stand out less in school, thrive in nature and have the opportunity to demonstrate their skills. It is an identity enhancement engine for these young people who finally take their place among their peers. In general, it proves rewarding for youths to be part of this experience in mutual-aid. Each outing establishes powerful links and a growing sense of belonging and influences the quality of their involvement in school. Proud of their culture and wanting to become ambassadors of their community, they willingly invest more in further learning. Thus, life in the school increasingly reflects life in the territory.

### In conclusion, could you tell us what the future prospects are for the Sorties en territoire program of Kassimu Mamu High School? Given its benefits, is it transferrable to other communities or social and educational settings and thus become a school retention key element for more young people in search of "roots"?

Several communities that have an interest in our program and who see its potential for their schools have approached us. Official documents are under preparation to facilitate the implementation process of this project in other communities. Exclusivity: a video on the experiences of three seasons



