INNU CULTURE RECOGNITION IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

The passage from yesterday to tomorrow / becomes today / the unique word / of my sister/ the Earth. Only thunder absolves / a life lived. “The North Calls Me” Joséphine Bacon, Innu Poet

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Youth from Aboriginal communities are experiencing a loss of identity (Poirier, 2009), since all too often, their schools are copies of Quebec public schools with values and ways of doing things not reflecting theirs. According to Canck (2008), this results in low perseverance and completion rates. It then becomes difficult for a child to feel integrated in both his home community and in the mainstream Western society. For Poirier (2009), young Aboriginals on reserves are subject to a double stigma: the loss of traditional transfer of knowledge modes and the high rate of school failure hampering their integration into the labour market. However, this observation on failure rates can partly be related to educational or pedagogical approaches used. If academic success is defined as “the way students develop their “being in the world” while learning, socializing, and by obtaining qualifications” (Boyer & Guillemette, 2015, p. 37), it also results from the linkage between social expectations and practices, and this, holistically to live and participate actively within their community (Picard, 2012).

Battiste (2002) and Kanu (2007) emphasize the importance of the relation between autochthonous cultural educational traditions and contemporary educational practices. Kanu (2007) adds that school results are better when the program and the teaching-learning process become compatible with the students’ own culture and socialization concepts. According to Castellano (2014), it seems that linkage of cultural and educational practices becomes an important issue to foster Aboriginal youth success. Then, thought must be given to the contribution of Aboriginal cultural dimensions within our schools.

Johnny-Pilot Elementary School is located in the Innu community of Uashat mak Mani Utenam. The clientele is steadily increasing and we find 258 students and a team of 30 staff members of which 50% are Innu and are teachers (42%): four at the preschool level, one who teaches the Innu language, and three at the elementary level.

Considering each Innu’s footprint within his community, we find it important for us to take ownership of the words below sometimes using “I”, sometimes “we”.

As principal of an Innu school, I wonder specifically about the place of the cultural component in the school that I manage. How to support success and perseverance of young Innus from my school to offer them the means to master the skills valued by the majority society in a contemporary context while providing the means to participate in the maintenance, enhan-
cement, and transformation of their Elders’ expertise and soft skills? And if this second criterion, that of culture enhancement, was simply and directly connected to the first, that of success and perseverance?

As a master’s student, I have been considering this cultural issue with the in-school team members by making connections with theoretical dimensions on the importance of Aboriginal cultural dimensions.

**CONTEXT**

Johnny-Pilot Elementary School is located in the Innu community of Uashat mak Mani Utenam. The clientele is steadily increasing and we find 258 students and a team of 30 staff members of which 50% are Innu and are teachers (42%): four at the preschool level, one who teaches the Innu language, and three at the elementary level.

Until recently, the school-team members were organizing on average two or three cultural activities each year. Innu is the language used at the preschool level and it is taught as part of the program from first to sixth grade. These courses are part of the curriculum developed by the Tshakapesh Institute (2011) in accordance with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEES) training program which contains development of the skills communicate orally, read various texts, and write various texts.

Although some efforts are already invested in cultural terms, we consider it important, if not essential to question ourselves on ways to better support and assist students for them to structure their identity and contribute to the development of their pride of being Innu in this modern world. With the in-school team members, we decided to enhance the place of cultural, traditional, and contemporary Innu dimensions in our school.

**SOME THEORETICAL ELEMENTS GUIDING OUR REFLECTION**

The text from Poirier (2009), entitled “Les dynamiques relationnelles des jeunes autochtones” fed the reflection on the plural and multiple realities of Aboriginal youth. Poirier conveys understanding between 2000 and 2009 as to the meaning of the concept of meshing of ancestral and contemporary cultures. If ancestral culture appealed to the ways of living when Innus were nomadic, contemporary culture requires us to place ourselves in the here and now. Furthermore, Poirier states that by taking into account “tradition and modernity, we take into account the social, cultural and identity universes in constant evolution” (2000, cited in Poirier, 2009, p. 30). She later reflects on “the concept of modernity [whether it] is also a tradition among others” (2004, cited in Poirier, 2009, p. 30). Again according to her, “it is not uncommon to hear young Aboriginals say they know nothing about their culture [here understood in the sense of traditions]. As if culture belonged the past, culture as an inherited reality rather than a lived, interpretive experience” (2009, p. 30).

In the light of these words, we recognize that young Aboriginals evolve in two worlds, or at least they must prove themselves within a coexistence that is not always simple. More specifically, it is about ways to live within the Innu culture, between the past and the present, as in Western culture way of life of the allochthonous majority. This makes us aware that in a context of loss of identity, it becomes crucial to increase visibility through autochthonous values while increasing the success rate.

Recognizing this dilemma, we retain two goals corresponding to Poirier’s proposed guidelines (2009): adapting school contents to the realities, expectations and Aboriginal knowledge (Aboriginal cultural contents, including languages); recognizing, within educational structures, contents and teaching formulas that are better suited to the learning reality of young Aboriginals.
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The process implementation requires a close collaboration with the entire staff from the Johnny-Pilot School. A school participatory council (SPC), consisting of representatives of each preschool and elementary cycle and the direction, already existed within the school. The PSC mandate is to reflect on the school’s educational and teaching practices, it became a privileged venue for sharing and thinking. From a consultation process and with SPC members’ openness on this project, we thought about the place of Innu culture in our school. To do this, we questioned the way to meet the learning profiles of students attending our environment. We made an inventory of our current cultural practices while identifying those that we would like to see emerge. Finally, we characterized the desired practices as whether they are Innu educational practices, Innu Aitun, or pedagogical practices in response to student profiles. Table 1 shows some examples of the benefits of this approach for each cycle.

The inventory of Innu Aitun practices and of pedagogical practices was formulated and integrated into the institution’s success plan according to three axes and converted into objectives:

Axis 1: Clientele knowledge and pedagogical interventions
Objective: Adapting pedagogical interventions of teaching staff based on specific clientele characteristics.

Axis 5: School retention
Objective: To develop and implement specific ways to promote Innu identity.

Axis 6: Interdependence
Objective: Realize and accept that we all need each other.

CHART 1 : Inventory of our current cultural practices and those that are plausible

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of what we are already doing</th>
<th>Examples of what we could do</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Week, Shipit outings, Innu themes during discussions or various work, Innu music, alphabet with cultural images, etc.</td>
<td>Meetings with Elders and artists for knowledge transmission, Programming schedule of cultural activities, Activities promoting the sense of belonging at school and in the community (traditional meals, Innu music streaming), Transmission of Innu values (respect, sharing, interdependence, etc.), Cultural activities with staff for transmission to students</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycles</th>
<th>Pedagogical Practices</th>
<th>Educational Practices Innu Aitun</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>Pre-reading and pre-writing in Innu language in preschool / exchanges with CAA (Innu Aimun)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1st cycle</td>
<td>Daily usage of simple Innu words (keyword posters)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reading and writing situations dealing with Innu culture (keywords, vocabulary word association, etc.)</td>
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<td>2nd cycle</td>
<td>Activities on the history of Uashat (for example, visit to the old post)</td>
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<td>Use of second language teaching approach</td>
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<td>3rd cycle</td>
<td>Communication in Innu language as soon as possible</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Activities and sports competitions imbued with Innu culture</td>
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Without our school falling into folklore, we considered the cultural dimensions to define the success plan benchmarks engendering pride and the sense of belonging to Innu culture. Since then, several cultural activities integrated into the curriculum took place, whether at school, in nature or in a traditional winter camp at the heart of our community. In this sense, the school is taken beyond its walls and responds to the development of the Innu identity (Axis 5). Furthermore, in an interdependence development perspective, educational activities such as school brigade during recess or tutoring (4th graders accompanying 2nd graders) give meaning to our Innu values (Axis 6). Finally, we question the pedagogical approaches most likely to meet the learning styles of our students (Axis 1).

CONCLUSION  Who dares wins!

The ultimate goal of this project is to further adapt our school, as we have known it for a long time, towards a school that better meets the needs and context of Innu people. As part of our approach, the school-team members were mobilized to think and act accordingly while the success plan became the anchor point of this reflection. In this project, as the principal, I play the role of leader, which brings me to exert leadership on the basis of a shared vision, mobilizing people to achieve the institution’s mission and thus, ensure educational and pedagogical development with a prospect of success for all.

This project inspires the pride in being Innu while the collaboration of all becomes a winning condition. If interdependence was previously a matter of survival in the forest, it is now a way to save our identity as Innu people in this modern world. In the light of Josée Bacon’s poem, “Le Nord m’interpelle”, isn’t the present moment becoming a pillar of contemporary evolution of Innu culture?

NOTE

1 Educational practices observed through actions combined and initiated by all actors in the school, to promote the optimal development of all students attending it (Guillemette 2014 p. 31). Pedagogical practices refer to knowledge acquired from teachers’ practices and validated by research to which are grafted teaching, learning, educational and evaluation practices (Legendre, 2005, p. 1066).

REFERENCES