
THE KICTERIMITISOWIN COMMITTEE:

Action Research to Support High School Retention¹



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This text is dedicated to the memory of France Robertson, for having marked the Indigenous movement in Quebec.

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Context

In a context of increasing urbanization and mobility among Indigenous people in Quebec, a growing number of Indigenous children attend Quebec public schools in urban areas (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2013). With a lower graduation rate, without the support needed to succeed, and struggling with difficulties that are neither identified nor addressed, many Indigenous students drop out of school, especially in upper secondary level (Statistics Canada, 2015).

There is a difficult educational pathway for First Nations people who have moved out of communities to settle in urban areas. Research shows that several factors influence academic perseverance and achievement of urban First Nations students: the lack of appreciation of Indigenous language and culture, the gap between urban and community schools, variable and unequal involvement of parents in the progress and academic success of their children, as well as the

lack of qualified Indigenous staff (Blanchet-Cohen and Lainé, 2015). All of these factors pose significant challenges to the motivation, attendance, and retention of Indigenous students in school.

In Joliette, a city that is home to a growing number of Atikamekw people, educational success of young people is of particular concern. According to the Lanaudière Native Friendship Centre (Centre d'amitié autochtone de Lanaudière – CAAL), few young people complete their high-school diploma before the age of 18, with the majority experiencing repetitions in their schooling.

Schools often do not understand the needs of Indigenous students, who are oriented towards immigrant services, such as francization, and there are few services specifically designed for them. Yet, many writings attest to the importance of valuing culture for learning (Battiste, 2013, Crooks, Burleigh, Snowshoe, Lapp, Hughes and Sisco, 2015).

Faced with this situation, the CAAL, with the support of Concordia University and under the auspices of the DIALOG network, established an action-research project to support a continuous process of actions and reflections, engaging secondary school students as actors generating solutions for their success¹. Below, we present the approach and activities of the Kicerimitisowin Committee (which means “pride” in the Atikamekw language), an experience that helps to highlight key elements of support for school perseverance among urban First Nations students.

Action research as a lever of change

The CAAL, like other Native Friendship Centres throughout Quebec, offers a program of support for education and plays an important role of liaison between youth, school and the family in urban areas (Blanchet-Cohen and Lainé, 2015). The objectives of the research partnership were to define, experiment and promote innovative initiatives to encourage the retention of First Nations youth. The methodology advocated for action research focused on collective reflection and the identification of actions with young participants that could contribute to improving their academic situation and their commitment in general. Thus, the activities organized within the framework of research are solutions considered by Indigenous youths to answer the problem of school disengagement which they experience.

Three elements characterize the approach used by the team:

1. Taking into account the current and historical context in which young people are involved

We approached the project from an ecosystem point of view, that is to say by considering all the factors that influence the educational path of Indigenous students with, in the background, the historical aspects of the reality of Indigenous people in Quebec.

Among these historical realities are the intergenerational impacts of residential schools where, for decades, education was used for cultural assimilation (Simpson, 2014). Thus, the development of Atikamekw students is influenced by their family reality, their school environment, the links they establish with the community and, more broadly, by the policies and programs that are intended for them.

The ecosystem perspective also emphasizes that the strength of the links between these different spheres is critical in establishing quality support for targeted youth (Ma Rhea, 2015).

2. Involving young people in research and activities

As a starting point, we wanted to involve young people in identifying challenges and solutions. Action research has been favoured as a method of stimulating the active participation of Indigenous students in defining problems and solving them as actors in their own learning and as stakeholders in their development.

Our goal was to create a context of openness where young people would feel comfortable expressing their ideas and engaging in a process of change that directly affects them. Action research is also consistent with the rights-based approach, dissociating itself from deficit approaches that have dominated past practices and that place Indigenous people both as victims and passive recipients of services.

3. The contribution of community mobilization for a school-family harmonization

First of all, the project focused on conducting activities inside and outside the school walls. This choice stems from the observation that the greater the incoherence and lack of communication between the family and school spheres, the more difficult the transition between home and school will be for the young ones and the more detrimental it will be to their academic success (Cherubini, 2014). This is also consistent with the ecosystem perspective, since First Nations students exist and navigate in a complex network of relationships and systems. This determines the significant contribution of the community environment in strengthening the links between First Nations families and the school. First Nations community-based organizations provide for outreach to families who may otherwise feel disengaged from the school with which they have no connection or even a hostile relationship (Regroupement des centres d’amitié autochtones, 2016).

Highlights of the Kicerimitisowin Committee

We present here elements that invite in-depth reflection to understand the stakes of school retention amongst Indigenous urban youth. These elements emerged from the activities and discussions held with some twenty Atikamekw young people aged 13 to 17, and with the school professionals who took part in the project from September 2016 to August 2017.



The importance of reinforcing identity pride to increase well-being at school

Of all the project's scope, it is the identity aspect that emerges most vividly from the discussions and activities we organized. For the majority of young people, the Kicerimitisowin Committee made it possible to express their cultural identity or to learn more about it. Thus, the transmission of Atikamekw culture was at the centre of the activities planned by the young participants.

Addressing culture and identity pride necessarily raises questions about what it means to be Atikamekw today. Apart from the normal phenomenon of seeking meaning and identity, which is common to the development of all adolescents, young Atikamekws in Joliette must navigate between the traditional elements of an ancestral culture and more contemporary elements of First Nations identity, which they themselves contribute to building. As a generation inscribed in modernity, they are both carriers and creators of culture. Having a space at school to allow cultural negotiation and to develop the modern expression of indigenism seems essential to create an inclusive context, a prerequisite for school retention.

Without a culturally safe space at school, an essential element of inclusion is missing to make it a truly enjoyable learning environment.

Providing culturally safe spaces at school and in the city

The Kicerimitisowin Committee activities took place inside and outside the school, allowing to consider young people in a holistic approach, not limited to academic training only. At school, most of the activities chosen by the youths were aimed at promoting Atikamekw culture, reflecting the need for identity recognition and enhancement of young people by the school. Outside of school, youth gathered for longer activities, including community suppers at the CAAL, a one-day workshop on leadership and exploration of various modes of expression, or a weekend on the territory of the Manawan Reserve and another at the Camp Mariste.

In response to discrimination, isolation and shyness, these young people propose the creation of spaces within the school where it would be possible to gather and promote opportunities for discussion and intercultural encounter. Without a culturally safe space at school, an essential element of inclusion is missing to make it a truly enjoyable learning environment. Thus, the promotion of culture has

its place as a vector of retention and academic motivation, as it acts in an underlying way to reinforce young people's perception of both themselves (learning about their culture) and their environment (the school as a welcoming place, open on their culture).

Prospects for the future

Through the implementation of school and out-of-school activities, the CAAL was able to support young people by creating the necessary bridges between two primordial spheres of their development, that is, between school and community. The Kicerimitisowin project points to some winning elements to support the school perseverance of Indigenous urban youth. Here are a few:

Providing a voice to young people

The participatory approach in which young people are seen as actors in their own development is a winning approach since, considering their strengths and interests, it fosters motivation. The participants in action research play the role of experts of the issues concerning them. When it comes to young people, it is important to create areas of freedom so that they can make their voices heard and discover their strengths. One of the successes of the Kicerimitisowin project has been to offer such an area to young people, shedding light on promising avenues supporting Indigenous school perseverance, particularly highlighting the direct link between cultural enhancement in school and school retention. The process has allowed students to become aware of their potential as agents of change, it has also highlighted a major obstacle to perseverance, namely the lack of self-esteem and self-confidence. Recognizing this obstacle, we encouraged programming that promotes the development of self-esteem and self-confidence to build motivation upstream.

As part of this project, we have opted for a format focusing on one-time activities that can overcome this barrier and provide youths with a sense of rapid accomplishment that lasts over time.

Providing a place to culture

It is well known that the threefold mission of Quebec schools (to qualify, socialize and educate) is to create a living environment that is inclusive and open to diversity. Cultural enhancement appears to be an essential aspect for the creation of a climate of inclusion that could better promote the development of a sense of belonging of Indigenous youth within their learning spaces. A young person explains: "[Being proud of our culture] allows us to move along in our school progress, it allows me to improve myself in what I do in class". A school professional notes: "[...]



