

## Inuit education in Alberta and Nunavik (Canada) L'éducation inuit en Alberta et au Nunavik (Canada)

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[See table of contents](#)

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### Article abstract

During the reorganisation of education in Nunavut that led to the passing of Bill 21 in 2009, reliance on curricula developed in other parts of Canada was mentioned and sometimes perceived as problematic. In this article, I describe how Inuit concerns have recently been integrated into education policies and programming developed by the Alberta government. To examine educational issues that concern Inuit students at southern schools, I have compared Alberta's efforts and activities with those of the Kativik School Board in Nunavik (Northern Quebec) where the education system is trilingual with programs in Inuktitut, French, and English. The comparison shows how curriculum content, languages of instruction, and administrative control interrelate in the Canadian context. In particular, curricula seem to be more spiritually focused in Western Canada than in Nunavik or Nunavut.

# Inuit education in Alberta and Nunavik (Canada)

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Michelle Daveluy\*

**Résumé:** L'éducation inuit en Alberta et au Nunavik (Canada)

Durant la réforme de l'éducation au Nunavut qui a mené à la promulgation de la loi 21 en 2009, l'utilisation de cursus scolaires développés dans d'autres parties du Canada a été soulignée et parfois jugée problématique. Dans cet article je décris comment les Inuit ont été récemment intégrés dans les politiques et programmes éducationnels du gouvernement de l'Alberta. Dans le but de souligner les enjeux de la scolarisation des Inuit dans le sud du pays, je compare le processus en cours en Alberta à celui de la Commission scolaire Kativik du Nunavik (nord du Québec) où le système d'éducation est trilingue avec des programmes en inuktitut, français et anglais. Les liens entre le contenu pédagogique, les langues utilisées pour l'enseignement et le contrôle administratif des systèmes d'éducation au Canada ressortent. À partir du contraste entre les systèmes d'éducation autochtone et inuit au Canada, je démontre que la spiritualité est omniprésente dans l'ouest du pays mais pas au Nunavik ni au Nunavut.

**Abstract:** Inuit education in Alberta and Nunavik (Canada)

During the reorganisation of education in Nunavut that led to the passing of Bill 21 in 2009, reliance on curricula developed in other parts of Canada was mentioned and sometimes perceived as problematic. In this article, I describe how Inuit concerns have recently been integrated into education policies and programming developed by the Alberta government. To examine educational issues that concern Inuit students at southern schools, I have compared Alberta's efforts and activities with those of the Kativik School Board in Nunavik (Northern Quebec) where the education system is trilingual with programs in Inuktitut, French, and English. The comparison shows how curriculum content, languages of instruction, and administrative control interrelate in the Canadian context. In particular, curricula seem to be more spiritually focused in Western Canada than in Nunavik or Nunavut.

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## **Introduction**

Few studies focus on Inuit education across Canada. Most work about education compares specific cases in Northern Canada with others in such places as Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, or the United States. Any proposed plans must, however, take into account the broader cultural context in which change and programs are to be implemented. Hence, during the reorganisation of education in Nunavut that led to the passing of the Education Act (Bill 21) in July 2009, reliance on curricula developed in other parts of Canada was mentioned and sometimes perceived as problematic. In this article, I describe how Inuit concerns have recently been integrated into education policies and programming developed by the Alberta government. Inuit, First Nations and Métis are cooperating with that government to produce material that fosters a better understanding of Aboriginal issues (e.g., ATA 2006; Alberta Education 2005) and programs that bring Aboriginal content into the public school system (Alberta Education 2002, 2007, 2008). To examine educational issues that concern Inuit students at southern schools, I have compared Alberta's efforts and activities with those of the Kativik School Board in Nunavik (Northern Quebec) where the education system is trilingual and where programs in Inuktitut, French, and English are available in all communities. The comparison shows how curriculum content, languages of instruction, and administrative control interrelate in the Canadian context.

The article starts with an overview of Inuit schooling in Canada before the 1970s. It is followed by sections on the inclusion of the Inuit among Alberta's Aboriginal peoples, and the development of Aboriginal curricula in Western Canada. Then, Inuit-controlled education in Nunavik is discussed. Finally, Aboriginal and Inuit education systems are compared.

## **Inuit schooling in Canada until the 1970s**

In 1929, the Anglican Church opened the first Inuit residential school at Shingle Point in the western Canadian Arctic (General Synod Archives 2008). At that time, Aboriginal children had to leave their community for long stays away from home to receive basic formal education. Family ties were cut for many who, after returning home, would often no longer speak their mother tongue, which had been prohibited at boarding school. Health and education gained more prominence in the North after 1939, when the Supreme Court ruled that the federal government was responsible for the well-being of the Inuit. After the Second World War, when Canada wanted to play a more active role internationally, the federal government could no longer justify its *laissez-faire* policy on Aboriginal peoples. From 1948 to 1962, it established health services and schools in many northern communities (Dorais 1979: 71). Within this framework, it continued to delegate its educational responsibilities to religious orders (Anglican, Catholic, or Moravian, according to the place). Their overarching objective was to proselytise, since education was also a path to conversion. Active campaigning against traditional spirituality in residential schools started in 1890 and continued until 1951 (ATA 2006: 21). Among the Inuit, the goal was to replace shamanism with the

religion of the missionaries. Many educational activities nonetheless took place locally and in the language of the Inuit, since the priests and ministers often spoke Inuktitut (Patrick and Shearwood 1999: 250).

A 1950 international symposium organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on the use of vernacular languages in education probably influenced the views of some people working for the Canadian federal government. Then:

As early as 1960 [...], R.A.J. Phillips of the Northern Administration Branch of the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources proposed that Inuit children be taught in their Aboriginal language for the first two years of schooling. Furthermore, teachers should be ‘thoroughly familiar with the Eskimo language,’ as it was then called (1960: 4). To this end, Phillips called for teacher training for Aboriginal people. He argued in favour of these proposals for their ability not only to permit a smooth transition to learning in English or French but also to preserve the Inuktitut language (Patrick and Shearwood 1999: 251).

Subsequently, and more specifically in Northern Quebec, competition between the provincial and federal levels of government became palpable (Nalukturuk 2006). A parallel system of education was created in 1964 under the aegis of the General Delegation of New Quebec, a provincial agency. The Education Commission of New Quebec, founded in 1970, supervised the construction of a provincial school in each of the villages (Dorais 1979: 73): “The provincial system [...] had an embryonic program for introducing Inuktitut as a language of instruction, and introduced the concept of parent committees” (Nalukturuk 2006: 1).

In Northern Quebec, Inuit could attend the school of their choice. The federal schools used English, while the provincial schools had French from Grade 3 onward; in kindergarten and for the first two years of school, local interpreters translated for teachers who could not speak the language of their students. Many parents, however, were suspicious of the Quebec government and most of the children were enrolled in federal schools (Dorais 1979: 73). Thus, by 1970, English had become the key language of communication in Northern Quebec, much to the detriment of Inuktitut. A similar trend was noted at that time in Western Canada:

In Alberta, the indigenous languages of the province’s First Nations peoples were very strong until the mid-1970s. Since then, the number of fluent speakers has been steadily declining. This is due in large part to the higher number of First Nations students enrolling in provincial schools. Most of their parents attended residential schools and did not want their children to be taught in the same way they were taught: that is, isolated from their communities and punished for speaking their own language. So, they encouraged their children to speak English, and their own language took second place (ATA 2006: 44).

Yet, in the 1970s, First Nations started lobbying for official language recognition on the grounds that their languages had been used in treaties with representatives of

Canada (TFALC 2005: iii, 43). First Nations also sought responsibility for education, which remained under federal administration until 1973.

### **Inclusion of Inuit among Alberta's Aboriginal peoples**

According to Alberta's Education Department, the province has at least 199,000 Aboriginal people (ATA 2006: 46). This figure includes several distinct Aboriginal groups: "46 First Nations, 8 Métis Settlements and many urban Aboriginal communities including Inuit" (*ibid.*: 34). The amalgamation of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit as Aboriginal peoples dates back to the 1982 Canadian Constitution. Nowadays, policy documents routinely indicate that the terms Aboriginal and/or Native peoples refer to Inuit, First Nations, and Métis. This has been the rule at the national level and was countered to a certain extent by the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures. Indeed, its report started with a rejection of the word "Aboriginal" as used in the mandate from the federal government and insisted on distinguishing between Inuit, First Nations, and Métis (TFALC 2005: i).

In Alberta, "Native and/or Aboriginal people" initially replaced "Indian," e.g., the 1999 Native Education Review Committee (Alberta Education 2002). Then, "First Nations" was adopted for peoples previously referred to as Indians. Alberta also happens to be the only province that has passed legislation specifically for Métis people (ATA 2006: 5). The Settlements Act grants Métis lands through letters patent (TFALC 2005: 54). Accordingly, the terms "Aboriginal and/or Native peoples" often refer to both First Nations and Métis in Alberta. The Métis were further recognised in 2003 with the Powley Decision of the Supreme Court of Canada. In Alberta, then, Métis and First Nations are routinely understood to be different, if only as being of mixed European and North American ancestry versus Indians, even though brought together under umbrella terms like "Aboriginal and/or Native peoples." More recently, Alberta policy documents have also unambiguously included Inuit. As we will see in the next section, Inuit are slowly becoming active participants in the development of these policies, although they have been systematically acknowledged in policy and legislation for some time (Alberta 2002, 2005, 2007, 2008).

The First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Services of the Department of Education overview matters of interest for all concerned (Government of Alberta 2009). This approach seems to have followed the federal tendency, but there are limits to its effectiveness. In particular, Inuit, First Nations, and Métis have quite different administrative arrangements with the federal government. These arrangements affect priorities (TFALC 2005: 43-54) and preferences for channelling of program funding either at the community level or through a national agency (*ibid.*: iii). Difficulties also arise in terms of general objectives for all involved. For example, teaching students "[...] to be respectful and to function appropriately in any culture" (ATA 2006: 35) may fit an umbrella model but remains misleading since communication skills are developed through interactions rather than obtained in a pre-existing non-variable kit or one-size fits-all program.

Perhaps the Inuit have been incorporated into policy development because of Alberta's proportionately larger urban Aboriginal population: between 33,000 and 41,000 in Edmonton; 19,800 in Calgary; and 2,300 in Lethbridge (*ibid.*: 2, 46). Estimates of the number of Inuit in Alberta vary but, in line with the urban concentration of the Aboriginal population, most reports focus on urban Inuit (Elias in press). In Alberta, then, many Inuit, First Nations, and Métis share a similar urban lifestyle and undoubtedly a certain number of common concerns.

### **Aboriginal curricula in Western Canada**

Nowadays in Canada, education comes in principle under provincial or territorial jurisdiction but exceptional cases remain, like reserve lands, where direct federal administration still exists. Education also often continues to be funded at the federal level rather than locally. Furthermore, there are too few degree-granting institutions in some parts of the country. Because of decentralisation, programs vary to a certain extent across the country but there are many similarities as well. In Western Canada, a protocol for collaboration in basic education has existed since 1993. It originally included four provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia), and two territories (Yukon and the Northwest Territories). When Nunavut was created in 1999 it joined in and the collaboration is currently referred to as Western Northern (TFALC 2005: 96; WNPCBE 2009). Through this consortium, a common curriculum framework for Aboriginal language and culture programs has been developed. As a result, there is some common ground between the northern territories and the Western provinces on programs for Aboriginal languages as a second language and programs for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) languages and cultures.

In Alberta specifically, the framework for these efforts was proposed by the Native Education Policy Review Advisory Committee in the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework (Alberta Education 2002). The 1984 Ghitter Report had led to the creation of the Native Education Project before the committee was mandated to update the education policy of the Alberta government. In 2003, the First Nations, Métis and Inuit School-Community Learning Environment Project went ahead (Alberta Education 2008). The policy is now being implemented and a number of programs on Aboriginal languages as a second language and FNMI languages and cultures are in place in Alberta (details are in ATA 2006: 51). Every year, the Department of Education assesses two schools pursuant to its FNMI policy (Alberta 2008, 2007). So far, program delivery in Cree and Blackfoot are well underway and four schools have been specifically studied: Leroi Daniels in Edmonton; St. Francis of Assisi close to Calgary; Bishop Routier in a northern Métis settlement; and Cardston Junior High on the country's biggest First Nation reserve (Alberta Education 2008, 2007). The Alberta government's policy is quite successful considering that "The Native Education Policy Review process was designed to respect the governance, treaty, and constitutional rights of First Nations authorities for Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools and post-secondary institutions located on First Nations land" (Alberta Education 2002: 4). Clearly, the original intent was more specific than the ensuing labelling of policy

documents may lead us to believe. Over time, Métis and Inuit have gained prominence in Alberta's education plans.

The provincial government carried out extensive consultations before updating its education policy, thus earning credibility and probably explaining some of the influence of the Alberta curriculum to this day on the Northern Western protocol for collaboration in basic education. Although Inuit are mentioned in the policy, they were not represented on the committee that put it forward. Perhaps most Inuit were busy with the creation of Nunavut, which was occurring as the review process started. More likely, establishing a working relationship with Alberta's 46 First Nations was, in itself, already quite demanding at the time. Including Inuit in the development of educational resources has had very limited impact. For example, in a substantial 215-page report (Alberta Education 2005), Inuit are mentioned only five times. Twice, information on Inuit is reproduced with permission from other publications produced by non-Inuit agencies, i.e., the Kanai School Board, one of the First Nations in Alberta (*ibid.*: 5), and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, a department of the federal government (*ibid.*: 154). In another section, Inuk singer Susan Aglukark is presented as a role model (*ibid.*: 98). Inuit are also mentioned under financial support for post-secondary education but the information on how to obtain such support is much more detailed for First Nations (*ibid.*: 136). Finally, Inuit appear in the in-depth discussion of appropriate use of cultural knowledge in the classroom through proper protocols with elders: "Some examples of situations that involve protocols include: giving tobacco (Cree) or blankets or towels (Inuit) to an Elder when seeking their knowledge or counsel" (*ibid.*: 76).

The value of the 2005 Alberta Education document is not disputed here. On the contrary, it provides a wealth of information on numerous First Nations in Alberta, classroom issues of relevance to Aboriginal students and their teachers are squarely addressed, and very specific tools for classroom interaction and learning are provided. But information about Inuit is limited and used strategically. For example, Inuit clearly differ from First Nations when it comes to the appropriateness of giving tobacco products. This is partly because Canadian Inuit do not normally offer elders cigarettes or tobacco. In this specific instance, proper protocol from a First Nations perspective does not correspond to Inuit ways of interaction and values. Proposing an alternate gift (towels) positions the Inuit as different and, as a result, they are dissociated from a mandatory ritualised First Nations procedure. Erasure and minimisation of facts, values, and priorities in policy documents have been described in a number of cases (e.g., Irvine and Gal 2000; McElhinny 2007: 80-91) while less has been done to suggest alternatives within established contexts of collaboration. Flagging gift-giving as part of a pre-existing set of norms is an example of appropriating an ongoing process. In so doing, the Inuit have gained a foothold for further discussions with First Nations, Métis, and Alberta government representatives.

Inuit have contributed to later documents sponsored by the Alberta government. For example, this was the case with Amoudla Sattaa in a publication by the Alberta Teachers' Association in 2006. As a consequence, the Inuit are presented more

thoroughly, albeit still succinctly, in five separate sections: Inuit land claims (ATA 2006: 19); the Inuit worldview (*ibid.*: 26-28); Inuit spirituality (*ibid.*: 31-32); Inuit traditions, values, and languages (*ibid.*: 36); and, finally, Inuit symbols and their meanings (*ibid.*: 37). Three of the sections seem awkward at first glance. This perception is probably due to their brevity (the Inuit worldview is summarised in two paragraphs and Inuit symbols and their meanings are restricted to two, the inuksuk and muskox-like figures) or the writing style (Inuit mythical heroes such as Naarjuk and Nulijauak, as well as personal names, are listed almost in point form under “Inuit spirituality”). The muskox reference is one way of strategically inserting the Inuit into material that was actually produced with First Nations and Métis in mind. Indeed the document is entitled: *Education is our Buffalo*, a powerful metaphor for First Nations, and arguably the Métis as well, but not for the Inuit. As far as Inuit are concerned, the muskox is certainly more prevalent in their traditional environment. Using an animal that means something to at least some Inuit surely makes the document more relevant while underlining the differences among the authors. The format of such documents is fairly rigid (Riles 2006) and the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit contributors were probably requested to adhere to an agreed-upon list of categories that were deemed essential and sufficient for all. Given that First Nations and Métis have a much longer working relationship with the Alberta government, some of the chosen categories may be more relevant to them. Perhaps the distinction between worldview, spirituality, and values works well for them but is not necessarily so clearly determined from an Inuit perspective. Or perhaps the contributors had only so much time to provide all the required information in the suggested format.

It is debatable whether the concerns of the Inuit could be fully addressed in a policy that had so little input from them, but in due course they and the Alberta government will no doubt develop a working relationship. For the moment, there have been valuable gains in curriculum content per se. For example, the Grade 3 social studies program has been standardised across the province and currently covers three Canadian localities in different geographical areas. All yearlong the students study the Acadians of Meteghan in Nova Scotia, the city of Saskatoon in Saskatchewan, and the Inuit from Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut. This outcome reflects the Aboriginal content that Alberta Education (2005: 64) now promotes in its public school system. As we will see in the following section, it certainly is a change from the times when curricula from southern Canada, Ontario specifically, were the norm for all federal schools in the Canadian North (Daveluy 2008; Dorais 1990: 210). Inuit are now systematically included in Alberta’s curricula, and to some extent in education policy design.

### **Inuit-controlled education in Nunavik**

Patrick and Shearwood (1999: 258) argue that the specific linguistic and political contexts of Northern Quebec have contributed to change in the education of Aboriginal peoples in general in Canada and that the Aboriginal language programs developed there have served as a model for the whole country. According to Drapeau and Corbeil (1992: 392), management of linguistic and cultural matters is highly decentralised for



Aboriginal groups in Quebec, except for a few nations like the Cree, Inuit, and Attikamek who each control their own school boards. Indeed, three years after the signing of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement in 1978, the Inuit and the Cree formally took over their education system. The School Board of New Quebec was split into two autonomous entities: the Kativik School Board (for Nunavik) and the Cree School Board. In Alberta, local administration of education came a decade or so later: 1986 for the Piikani; 1987 for the Nakoda and the Tsuu T'ina; 1988 for the Kainai; and 1989 for the Siksika (ATA 2006: 22-23). The creation of the Kativik School Board has had several consequences:

The JBNQA not only provided for the establishment of the KSB, it also gave it special responsibilities and powers to look after the specific needs of Inuit. It provided that in every community there would be an education committee, which is roughly like a parents committee in the South but with special powers. This was a gain for the Inuit who never had a say in their children's education (Nalukturuk 2006: 2).

Negotiations to create a Nunavik legislative assembly (Nunavik Commission 2001) are underway, but to this day the Kativik School Board remains "governed by the provincial Education Act for Cree, Inuit and Naskapi Native Persons, except where this law is inconsistent with Section 17 of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, in which case Section 17 of the Agreement prevails" (KSB 2009b).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Kativik School Board programs comply with the objectives of Quebec's Department of Education.

Although its student population is primarily Inuit, the Kativik School Board is a public institution that serves all Nunavik residents. It must, therefore, develop programs and teaching materials in Inuktitut, French, and English. Contrary to the national standard of bilingualism, Nunavik is seeking to institutionalise trilingualism through the school system and also in the framework of negotiations currently underway on self-government (Daveluy 2004; Nalukturuk 2006: 8). Managing a policy of trilingualism and meeting expectations are major challenges, particularly when human resources are both limited and dispersed over a vast territory. The Kativik School Board is not as challenged in this regard because it exercises powers and responsibilities that other school authorities do not necessarily possess (KSB 2009b).

According to Nalukturuk (2006: 3): "Like other organizations controlled by Inuit, the KSB has managed to expand its original jurisdiction over the years in order to better meet educational needs and challenges." However, from the beginning, the Kativik School Board has had its administrative centre in southern Quebec rather than in Nunavik. In the 1970s, this location seemed appropriate because of its proximity to the airport that Nunavimmiut ('people of Nunavik') must go through when travelling to and from the South. Health services and audiovisual production were also originally centralised in the South. With the passing of time, though, many have questioned this

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<sup>1</sup> Updates are regularly made to that Education Act. See [www2.publicationsduquebec.gouv.qc.ca/dynamicSearch/telecharge.php?type=2&file=/I\\_14/I14\\_A.html](http://www2.publicationsduquebec.gouv.qc.ca/dynamicSearch/telecharge.php?type=2&file=/I_14/I14_A.html).

decision. As detailed in Vick-Westgate (2002), distant school management has not encouraged ownership of the system by its users.

With the JBNQ agreement, Inuktitut was supposed to become the paramount language of instruction in all schools with English and French having the status of foreign languages (Dorais 1979: 74). In addition, French was to be introduced on a case-by-case basis in communities that wanted it, rather than over the whole territory. At the time, the debate was virulent on the need to impose French in Quebec. However, when the province became officially unilingual with the passage of Bill 101, the Inuit and Cree populations that had signed the JBNQ were exempted from the language provisions, these being aimed primarily at newcomers (Daveluy 2004). This is what I have described as the linguistic peace of 1977 (Daveluy 2005b). Note, however, that no provision of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement specifically concerns languages. Instead, the clauses guaranteeing health services and education programs in each of the communities have made it possible to maintain the Inuit language in Nunavik. In the original version of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, clauses 17.0.59, 17.0.63, 17.0.64, and 17.0.65 clearly establish the right of Inuit (and of Cree) to control education in their environment (Dorais 1990: 268). The relevant clauses were published in Appendix A of Vick-Westgate (2002: 256-259), who also stated:

At a time when Québec was establishing provincial control over education and, for the first time, instituting strict controls over languages of instruction and content of curriculum, it was granting the Inuit extraordinary powers to design and administer education in their communities (Vick-Westgate 2002: 76)

In terms of languages, the negotiated arrangements have strengthened the use of Inuktitut in Northern Quebec. This partly explains why, over time, attitudes towards languages of instruction have changed in Nunavik (Petit 2003: 217). In 2004, out of 2,962 students in Nunavik, 1,153 (38.8 %) were enrolled in the French sector and 1,041 (35.0 %) in the English sector; the 768 others, making up 25.8%, were studying in Inuktitut. In comparison, in the year 1970, there were four times more children in federal schools, where English predominated, than in provincial schools, where bilingualism (French and Inuktitut) was in place (KSB 2009a). Multilingualism in Nunavik is thus well entrenched in the school environment. Inuit families seem to manage the addition of a second language of instruction strategically. Thus, in a household, children alternate between the two sectors of education: if the first goes to school in the French sector, the next will study in English, and vice versa. Inuit multilingualism is both individual and societal.

We cannot ignore Inuit efforts to promote bilingualism (Inuktitut-English) internationally (Dorais 1990: 256), as well as in Nunavut, although this territory is officially multilingual as well (Daveluy 2004). In fact, the only position that all Inuit seem to agree on is the undesirability of unilingualism:

We talk in Inuktitut with them [our children] and we maintain that by keeping it in school, we ensure its survival. But we also need a second language in order to be competitive [...] We cannot survive only on white education. We need both, our culture in order to survive in our environment and the white culture in order to survive in the modern world (FM call-in, Kangirsuk, January 26, 1991, in Vick-Westgate 2002: 162).

It is not insignificant that having at least one second language appears on the list of knowledge that Nunavimmiut desire. In Nunavik, two languages convey Western culture. By promoting the learning of French and English, the Inuit institutions of Nunavik stress their adherence to a broader entity, the circumpolar world, while expressing their specificity in relation to other Inuit. But are young Inuit in the same situation as other multilingual Canadians? For example, it has been demonstrated that bilingual English-speakers in Quebec (Martin 1984), and more precisely in Montreal (Daveluy 2005a), endorse the use of French if only to maintain their enviable position in the labour market, where knowledge of French is an asset. For what reasons should Inuit behave differently? Competition for available jobs in Nunavik is intense. In an officially bilingual country, and a trilingual region, French is an advantage for those who master its use. It would be doubtful to assume that Nunavimmiut do not take this into account. Young French-educated Inuit will probably not want to renounce the benefits of trilingualism. They have invested so much energy in acquiring their language skills that it would be surprising to see such assets abandoned, as if they had suddenly lost value. The yardsticks of language proficiency have become an issue in this debate, and the adequacy of language knowledge among Inuit has been questioned (e.g., Berger 2006; Consilium 2005). However, literacy (and writing more specifically) seems to have become the main concern in market-driven assessment of language skills.

Despite the use of Inuktitut in the schools, the 1980s saw rising discontent in Nunavik with the education system and, in particular, with the curriculum and its failure to maintain Inuit identity. It was time to determine whether the Kativik School Board had indeed the means to fulfill its admittedly broad mandate. The Nunavik Educational Task Force (1992) was asked to assess the situation and a heated debate emerged out of community consultations (Vick-Westgate 2002). The current system seemed to favour one path: obtaining a high school diploma in order to pursue further education (*ibid.*: 226-227). The *satuigiarniq* ('to re-appropriate or reclaim') process drew notice to alternative forms of learning in Nunavik. *Silatunirmut*, the final report of the task force tabled in 1992, clearly showed that the Nunavimmiut used this opportunity to understand the problem on their own terms. Several of the recommendations were bold and clear: we must provide the means to fulfill our ambitions. Beyond the question of languages of instruction, debate focused on the values held and acquired in the school system.

On the positive side, it is remarkable that over such a short time, two thirds of the population 15 years or older have attended high school or post-secondary institutions, including university (which is not necessarily the case for other Aboriginal groups in the country). The problem is that few have managed to earn a degree. We must also not

forget that post-secondary enrolment is much lower than for the province or the country as a whole (Makivik Corporation 1999: 9). Teacher training has also been quite successful. Inuit are much more numerous in these positions than when they were exclusively classroom interpreters. Since 1967, training programs have been available to meet the demand for teachers who can teach the first few grades in Inuktitut. However, there is still not enough staff. Moreover, Inuit have a different status *vis-à-vis* other teachers in terms of qualifications. High turnover of non-Inuit teachers also remains an issue. There is little continuity and these teachers spend most of their stay learning how to cope with their working environment.

Appropriate teaching materials were another major challenge. It took a great deal of work to create school material in Inuktitut since very little existed in that language in Canada. For the other two languages, the material had to be adapted since most of what was available had no meaning North of the 55th parallel. Among other things, the relationship with animals needed to be reworked, as most of the characters and stories generally used in elementary grades were inappropriate in this regard. For example, the Inuit show respect for animals by keeping their distance from them rather than by adopting a familiar and relaxed attitude. Pets or animals kept for company are also unusual. Caught between provincial criteria and its responsibilities to meet the needs of its student population, the Kativik School Board has a policy of copying the program of the Department of Education already available in English or French (Daveluy 2004).

In the early 1990s, self-government was openly discussed between Quebec Inuit organizations and the provincial government. A framework agreement for negotiations was signed in 1994 between the two parties, and the federal government joined the negotiation table the following year. Then, in 1999, Makivik Corporation and the Quebec and Canadian governments signed the Nunavik political agreement. This agreement established the Commission of Nunavik to draft the basis of a legislative assembly in Nunavik. After the release of the Commission's report in 2001, the Makivik Corporation, the Quebec government, and the Canadian government together negotiated a framework agreement to establish the Nunavik legislative assembly. In 2003, there was agreement to merge certain institutions and create a new form of government in Nunavik and the Kativik School Board has been active in this process. It has notably opposed the Commission of Nunavik's recommendations and report (Nalukturuk 2006: 3-5). Through a series of counter-proposals, the Kativik School Board has responded to the proposed merger of existing institutions. The existence of parents' committees would be guaranteed and other points are also emphasised.

Other changes are aimed at preserving financial and institutional benefits in terms of budget and control by a body of elected persons specifically dedicated to education. [...] Our objective is to ensure that any funding devoted to education be exclusively used to this end (Nalukturuk 2006: 6).

Whereas the 1960s Quiet Revolution profoundly changed the education system in Quebec (Heller 1994), the movement for Nunavik self-government seems just as focused on keeping some acquired rights in the proposed reorganisation of existing

structures. Nunavik is a telling example of how important, yet not sufficient, local control of education can be. Tensions over administration of Inuit education clearly show that broader issues are also at stake.

### **Comparing Aboriginal and Inuit education systems**

Even though there is still much concern about the survival of Aboriginal languages in Canada, it is now commonly accepted that the Inuit, Cree, and Ojibway languages will continue to be viable (TFALC 2005). Specific challenges remain (e.g., Inuvialuktun and Innuinaqtun in the Canadian western Arctic) but the gains have been noticeable.

[...] there is cause for hope for the survival and revitalization of First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures and languages today. There are pockets of the Aboriginal population that still have a sophisticated traditional knowledge base. It is through them and a renewed interest in traditional language and culture that a new order will be achieved. For example, some traditional languages and culture are being taught in First Nations schools on reserves and in some public schools. Elders and community members are being involved to ensure that there is local content in the curriculum (ATA 2006: 35).

By moving away from the rhetoric of endangered languages, it becomes possible to focus on designing education specifically for Aboriginal priorities. If we compare Alberta and Nunavik, similarities and differences become clear. Common features include oral education, the role elders play, and concerns about an outsider-imposed educational system. However, local conditions and values are not always the same. In Alberta, traditional Aboriginal education is based on worldviews: “[...] it is a holistic process where learning takes place in all four spheres of human experience: spiritual, physical, emotional and mental. Spirituality, relationships and the expression of traditional values are the heart of Aboriginal education” (*ibid.*: 26). The sacred circle is presented as a universal symbol (*ibid.*: 28) and the medicine wheel, talking circles, and circles of courage are instrumental to proper handling of cultural knowledge in general and in classrooms specifically (Alberta Education 2005; ATA 2006: 53-54). Emphasis is on rituals, dances for example, and protocol, as illustrated by the recommendation to avoid writing during ceremonies. Oral education is prominent:

Before the arrival of Europeans and the imposition of a foreign colonial education system, First Nations, Métis and Inuit had their own oral educational system, which ensured that children learned the cultural values and history of the tribe, and they had a foundational principle—respect others and live in harmony with the environment (ATA 2006: 34).

The spiritual focus of curricula developed in Western Canada is not as prevalent in either Nunavik or Nunavut where *Inuit qaujimajatuqangit* (Inuit knowledge) tends to be promoted (see Lévesque 2004; Tester and Irniq 2008; Wenzel 2004). Among the Inuit, the distinction between formal and informal education is explicitly related to ways of learning. Petit (2003: 208) insists that *ilitsi-* (learning) refers to

experimentation rather than discourse. Briggs (1998) describes the still practised traditional socialisation of Inuit children, which Vick-Westgate summarises:

In traditional Inuit lifestyle, education was not separated from day-to-day living. It was not something you studied, it was something you did. The essence of education was getting ready to assume adult life roles. The pace varied with each child—there were no set ages for acquiring skills or precise paths that had to be followed. A child began to learn a skill when he or she began to pay attention, to notice how an adult did something and to try to imitate those actions. Successful learning was demonstrated by performance (Vick-Westgate 2002: 41).

The gulf between the two approaches is illustrated by the list of knowledge that the Inuit consider to be necessary: knowledge of space, time, energy and matter; their theory and their application to Northern and Western technology; Inuit culture, art and Inuktitut, including the history of Inuit in Nunavik; the natural sciences; the social sciences, including skills to understand the economic and social structures of Inuit and Western society; at least one second language; and academic and practical knowledge appropriate to individual needs (*ibid.*: 90). Relatively few of these areas are covered in formal school curricula. All Inuit are exposed daily to the shock of these structures as much as the culture shock in the school system, as indicated by a teacher from Kangirsuk: “The problem today is that parents are waiting for their children to learn on their own by watching and doing what their parents do, but on the other hand students are used to being taught in school and having their lessons handed to them” (*ibid.*: 164).

To address these issues, the Kativik School Board has relied on Inuit elders for the teaching of survival in the Northern environment, a subject that is integral to the curriculum. Elders participate in many activities, in the school itself, or in outings on the land. Nevertheless, it quickly became apparent that in practice it is very difficult to reconcile the presence of both worlds in the classroom and in camps. Targé (2003) deals with the transmission of Inuit knowledge in the system of formal education, using her analysis of elder participation in the school environment in Arviat (Nunavut). She highlights the impossibility of the mission assigned to elders in the school setting. For some, it is also their first contact with formal education. Other attempts at integrating elders into the formal school system are facing similar challenges all over Canada. Hence, insisting on establishing proper relationships with elders, as evident in Alberta policy documents, may be a way to prevent difficulties with individuals rather than the education systems. Indeed, development of education opportunities that better fit local norms remains a priority.

## **Conclusion**

As we saw in the first sections of this article, the Inuit are included among Alberta’s Aboriginal peoples, and in the development of Aboriginal curricula in Western Canada. We then turned to Inuit-controlled education in Nunavik, where the

formal education system has developed in specific conditions that have helped maintain Inuktitut. Indeed, the policies of the Kativik School Board clearly illustrate the institutional trilingualism of Nunavik. For some, the language question has dominated the agenda of the Kativik School Board to the detriment of most other strictly pedagogical concerns (Vick-Westgate 2002: 214). In so doing, the Nunavimmiut have inserted their own situational issues into those of the broader circumpolar world.

The last part of the article compared Aboriginal curricula in Alberta and Nunavik. In their education programs, Aboriginal peoples in Western Canada focus on their ways of being (worldviews) while Inuit in the East insist on their ways of learning. A striking difference arises in spirituality, which is emphasized in Western Canada but seems almost nonexistent in Nunavik. The difference partly exists because religion and education have been dissociated from each other in Quebec. In Alberta, most school boards remain associated with a specific religion and very few non-confessional schools exist. In such a context, spirituality appears much more relevant to discussions about education. Time and resources allocated to religions in existing Alberta programs allow for the inclusion of Aboriginal spiritual content where relevant. Squaring addressing spirituality can also be interpreted as a way to enhance mutual understanding with governmental officials in the Department of Education. Shared religious or spiritual norms certainly create common ground in a part of the country where the residential school system of various religious orders has severely damaged relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Many Inuit can relate to this experience and may grasp the healing potential of open discussions on spirituality. Even though the status of religion in schools is regularly debated in Alberta, there is no reason to foresee changes in the near future in this regard. Aboriginal people may thus continue to lobby for a spiritual approach to education until the colonial aspect of religion in the classroom has become clear to the Alberta government and population in general. Otherwise a province that has sought to become “a leader in Aboriginal education” (ATA 2006: 48) may not reach its goals.

From an Inuit perspective, there is clearly room for collaboration across Canada despite the impediments of differences between jurisdictions. Berger (2006: 45) suggests material developed in Nunavik could be used in the Nunavut-specific curriculum the territorial government was hoping to develop for 2009. The last round of amendments to the Education Act to incorporate *Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangit* certainly points to a trend towards an Inuit-designed education system in Nunavut.

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**188/M. DAVELUY**

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