If we tore down the barriers would we still be equal: Nunatsiavut Students and Post-secondary education

Jodie Lane

Nunatsiavut Government

Abstract: This paper attempts to look at the potential Inuit people of Nunatsiavut possess when it comes to earning a formal education. The potential is there right from the start, but what is amazing to witness is how varied people's experiences are simply due to factors beyond their control. We all want to think positively and believe that we are on an even playing field. The sad reality, however, is that we are not. Whether it is the education levels of our parents, our first language, or the supports we receive in the schools themselves, some students are just destined to do better than others. But how can the institutions work with us to help even things up? How are they able to intervene and encourage even the most wary of students? How do we Indigenize the academy?

We cannot simply label someone a success based on one variable because success is a subjective term and has been so broadly defined. Is someone 'successful' because they have a good job or lots of money, but are struggling to pay the bills? Is a single mother labeled as unsuccessful because she chooses to live apart from the child's father? Is a student considered a success because they make it through a semester having just scraped by?

We have a way of wanting to place people into categories, so that we can better justify how we will treat them, or better yet, help decide if we will even interact with them at all. Judgements are made the moment we meet someone new, whether we like to think that we are open-minded or not. The same holds true for students leaving home to pursue an education – young adults released from the protection and comfort of their parents' watchful eye, warm home, and often, open wallet. We like to think the best: that they all will be successful (however you may wish to define success), and will end up with a meaningful career, and then eventually a comfortable life. Reality, however, soon sets in and some students, regardless of upbringing or academic background, realize that the path that they have chosen is not for them. Maybe it's their first impression, maybe it's timing. Maybe they went for the wrong reasons in the first place, and are being true to their desires. Maybe they were forced to go and do not want to disappoint. Whatever the reason, we end up with a student dropping out or "withdrawing from studies".

For Aboriginal students, the measurement of success is a lot different. For us, simply graduating high school is cause for celebration, as, according to a report by the Canadian Council on Learning, "68% of Inuit young adults living in rural settings in the North had not completed high school, a rate twice that of Inuit residing in large cities (34%) (CCL, 39). The graduation rate for students in Nunatsiavut is quite high at 83%, compared to the national Inuit average. However this does not mean that completion of post-secondary studies is a given, or that graduation comes without a price.

When we consider how many students have graduated from Level III, the final year of high school, in Nunatsiavut, and compare that to the number of those young people who have attended post-secondary

studies, here is where we see our biggest gap. Yes we may be able to get our students through the secondary system, but helping them make the leap into a successful post-secondary career is something else.

Why is it that some Aboriginal students can easily make the transition and others struggle? Once we answer this question, we can better close the educational gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians and therefore level the playing field when it comes to economic prosperity. This is a question that we need to answer sooner rather than later, and one that we can answer by starting from the beginning.

Early Childhood Education

There are many challenges facing Inuit students in Nunatsiavut and these begin at a very early age. The first five years of a child's life are extremely crucial for brain development. This is a very small window of time in which we as parents and educators have not only to start the process of learning, but also instill a love of learning. I am a firm believer that parents and care givers are, by far, the most important educators, however, we cannot do it alone. First of all, we are not created equal, nor have we navigated through life on a level playing field. Some of us are formally educated, while others are functionally illiterate. Some of us have experienced other cultures first hand, through travel, while some of us have never left the comforts of our home community. So, unfortunately, this uneven playing field affects our ability to teach our children. This is not to say that parents need to have a university degree in order to educate their child, but rather that the attitudes toward learning – the content, methods, and values of education – are different between parents of different educational and experiential levels, and this therefore influences what is passed on to the child.

What does this all mean? It means that now more than ever, early childhood education is so crucial to our children's development. Our problem? We do not have enough daycare and child development spaces for all of the children who could benefit from additional engagement and stimulation to that which is received at home; in fact, in Nunatsiavut we do not have enough spaces for those who may receive little to no stimulation at all. This amounts to many children being left behind, and when children are left behind right from the beginning of their educational journey, they spend the rest of their lives trying to catch up. Some succeed, but many do not.

Yes, this is a National problem. But keep in mind that the national non-Aboriginal population has a higher educational attainment than the Aboriginal population as, according to the 2006 Census, "40% of Aboriginal young adults aged 20-24 had not completed high school, compared with a rate of 13% for non-Aboriginal young adults" (CCL, 38). Keep in mind my previous point about parents educating their children and you will see just how necessary and urgent the need is for us to have more early childhood education services available in Nunatsiavut, and across the North.

So what does this deficit in early childhood education services really mean? What does it matter? All children will eventually start school. Kindergarten is not limited by the availability of space. Yes, all children can go to Kindergarten, but what it boils down to is an uneven playing field from day one of a child's formal education. Children who attend daycare or some form of structured child development, prior to entering the public school system, are proven to be better prepared and therefore perform better, on average, than those that stay at home. "The RHS [2002-2003 First Nations Regional Health

Longitudinal Survey] reported that children who attended the early childhood program showed better performance once in the elementary school system; 18% of First Nations children (aged six to 11) living on-reserve had repeated a grade in 2004 compared to 12% for children who had attended an Aboriginal Head Start preschool" (CCL, 33).

Formal education

There are many debates on formal education and if it is the way to go. Historically, Aboriginal people have taught their children themselves and had little dependence on outside sources to educate the next generation. Traditional Inuit ways of living are still being taught in Nunatsiavut, as in many other Aboriginal regions across Canada. However, this is no longer the primary source of education for our children. The traditional lifestyle is no longer enough to provide sufficient income for the modern way of living. Goods and services cost money; money has to be earned by way of a job. To ensure that one can land a job and keep it, one must, nowadays, have some kind of formal education, preferably at the post-secondary level. Even high school graduation is often not enough.

But how do we get there when many of your young people are struggling to even make it to Level III, let alone graduate? And for those that do graduate, how can we ensure that, not only do they continue on into post-secondary studies, but that they see it through to the finish?

Choosing What to do Next

When a young person has finished high school and actually has the option of applying to college or university, what makes him/her actually choose to do it? In today's world, with all of the terrifying statistics about low Aboriginal academic achievement, overrepresentation in prison and underrepresentation in the workforce, what hope does that give our young people? It's hard enough for the average student, Aboriginal or not, to pick up and leave the comforts of home, not knowing what to expect. But for our students, it's even worse.

Making the decision to apply to school is sometimes just as hard as actually applying. Many students feel that because they grew up in a small community and struggled with their studies, that they are unable to handle that college or university has to offer. This holds true even more so for those that have graduated from the general stream of high school. There is often little faith in not only what they have learned, but also in their ability to learn at a new level. Sometimes they quit before even trying.

But when the decision is made to take that first step and apply, most are pleasantly surprised to learn that they are what the school is looking for and that they are welcome to try. It is an amazing sight to see, the expression on a young person's face as they bring you their acceptance letter (or conditional acceptance letter, as the case may be): the sense of relief, paired with pride and accomplishment, even though it is only an early stage in the game. But it is pride nonetheless.

As the application process continues and more paperwork than you can shake a stick at is submitted not only schools, but funding agencies as well, the momentum builds and this further fuels the final push to pass exams and graduate. An effort welcomed by the teachers indeed! And as the days of the final exams come and go, the stress levels begin to rise again, as now it is a waiting game. Did I get in? Did I get funding? Emotions are high as one by one students begin to receive their transcripts and acceptance

letters. Some pass. Others sometimes miss the grade by only a few percentage points. Plans are changed in the blink of an eye and, for some, back-up plans are put into action.

For those who were successful in earning a seat at college or university, they are now faced with new emotions, often times mixed. Does this mean I am going? How am I going to handle it? What am I going to do? But at the same time, many are excited to leave home and experience something new; a world that they have lived vicariously through the internet and television for years.

Identifying barriers

When you live in a small, isolated community, even if you are fortunate enough, like I was, to be able to travel out to larger centers a time or two, you become accustomed to certain ways and take many things for granted. When I left my home community of Makkovik for university, I quickly learned that not everyone is honest, nor does everyone know who you are and can therefore be sensitive to your insecurities. They do not necessarily know about Aboriginal people and our ways, but are quick to judge you as someone eating up taxpayers' money by getting a free education. Lesson learned: be careful who you share information with and also to be prepared to stand up for yourself.

When we think about barriers to education, we often think about the obvious ones which include, but are not limited to: financial, geographic, academic preparedness, level of confidence, and fear. Then, when we take a step back, we must not forget about the education of the parents, culture and language and lack of motivation. Put these all together and they combine to create a strong, solid wall that is determined to hold our students back; to keep them from proving that, despite the many excuses they can use for not pursuing an education, they are capable and deserving of the same opportunities as everyone else. So, just as this wall has been built brick by brick, let's take a minute to tear it down and have a look, brick by brick.

Financial

Many people have the assumption that, because Aboriginal people have access to government funding for post-secondary education, that all of our financial woes have been miraculously solved. This is simply not the case. If you ask any student who has accessed funding through either of our programs administered through the Nunatsiavut Government, they will quickly set you straight citing high rental cost as probably the number one reason for their financial stress. Sure, food and other amenities may cost less in the larger towns and cities to the South, but there are also so many other things to spend your money on. In addition to rent, utilities, and food, students are now faced with transportation costs, for example, that they may not have expected or budgeted for. One cannot always walk to school, to the grocery store, or to a friend's house to study, as they probably could have in their home communities. In addition to this, there is simply more things to buy in these larger centres. Extra cash is quickly eaten up by a night out with friends, a trip to a restaurant, or an unexpected purchase when picking up essentials.

We also cannot ignore the availability of alcohol (although this can fall under many of the barrier categories) and the snowball effect this has on young people who have a new found freedom with no one watching their every move. Combined with a guaranteed deposit into their bank accounts each month from their funding agency, this is often a time bomb waiting to go off by way of the student being unable

to control spending, consumption, and thereby affecting their studies to the point of being forced to leave school.

But what can we do? It's not that easy to convince the government to fork over a few billion more dollars for our education, and equally futile is the plea to landlords to lower the rent for students. And true, not all students are in dire need of the essentials while at school. In fact, many are doing just fine because of the help they get from home. And chances are, those parents who are able to help out financially are the ones who themselves have some form of post-secondary education and are making a decent income. I have no statistics to back this up, just thirteen years of experience with students from all financial backgrounds, and I know who is struggling and who isn't. So what does this tell us? If anything, it gives us hope that, if we can keep these students in school and help them to graduate and become more employable, their children will be the next generation of post-secondary students and have parents more financially secure and therefore able to help them out, thereby increasing their chances of success.

Geography

It's a long way from Nain to St. John's, and sometimes even when the physical distance may not be that great (Rigolet to Goose Bay for example), the fact that students cannot go home every day after classes is often enough to deter them from even attempting to further their education. Some students have never left the comforts of home, and when faced with the expectation that once they complete high school, the next step is to leave home and go to college or university, they can experience a great deal of stress. It can be argued that there are even students from more urban areas that have never left their comfort zones either, for example a student growing up in St. John's and never having gone further than the overpass that leads to rural Newfoundland. The difference lies in what they learn in their comfort area that can be taken with them should they have to leave home to go to school. Students growing up in Nunatsiavut do not encounter crosswalks, escalators, public transportation systems, or even see uniformed police on a daily basis. They may have never had to ask for directions, travel great distances alone, or even converse with strangers (e.g. ordering food in a restaurant, speaking to a bank teller, or registering for classes). Daily tasks that students from urban areas take for granted can often be huge stressors in the lives of new students and it is important to recognize that, in addition to adjusting to a new learning environment, the act of even getting to their new location is often a feat in itself.

Academic Preparedness

We can sit around all day and point fingers at one another and lay blame, but the bottom line is that our students, the ones that do manage to navigate through the secondary school system, are often ill-prepared for post-secondary studies. Why is this? Why is it that many students from Nunatsiavut finish high school only to be faced with a bridging or upgrading year (or two) at college before gaining access to the desired program, when students in other areas seem to be able to go right on in? What did we miss? Is it the school system? It is the same system across the province, so why would groups of students perform differently? This is an argument worthy of greater attention, but for the purpose of this paper, let us just note that many of our Nunatsiavut students are not prepared academically for post-secondary studies and require transitional programs to bring them up to par with other applicants.

Lack of Confidence

It is amazing to witness our youth doing something that they love, with such passion and confidence that you are certain that they will succeed. This is the case in Nunatsiavut in many areas, such as sports. That same passion and, more importantly, confidence, often disappears in the classroom however. Academic preparedness and lack of confidence go hand in hand and they both feed off one another and keep the cycle going. Students lack confidence in their academic abilities, and this affects their desire to even try at times. Then, after high school is over, because they may not have the best grades, their confidence level falls even lower. I often hear students ask, "If I only barely passed my high school courses, how could I ever get through college?" This mental block can oftentimes carry into the first year of post-secondary studies as well, until they prove to themselves that they can do it.

Fear

Fear has the ability to paralyze even the strongest of students. There are many fears that our students face, from the time they apply to college or university right up to when they are actually in school. Fear of not getting into the program they apply for, fear of not earning all of their high school credits, fear of disappointing their family, teachers, and themselves. Sometimes what other people think, or what we assume they will think of us, consumes our thoughts and can hold us back.

Too often the fear of the unknown can seal the fate of many students, as they have already convinced themselves that they cannot do it. We are our worst enemy. Many students feel that it is easier to quit while they are ahead and not even attempt to go away to school. That way, there is no danger of disappointing anyone if or when they fail. But there is another danger here: the danger of never realizing their potential.

Family Responsibilities

In addition to these barriers, a number of young Aboriginal people have children of their own that they need to factor in when deciding what to do after high school. The fact that they even graduate is cause for celebration, but they know that their time in school shouldn't stop there; even if they are unable to go right away. The key is to continue to remind these youth that there are options for them and to ensure that they know you are there for them. They need to be aware that there are support systems and that people believe in them.

Perceptions of Aboriginal people

There are so many stereotypes out there about Aboriginal people ranging from our work ethic to intelligence to struggles with addiction. Too often people judge others based on what they believe is fact, when it simply isn't. And when young, vulnerable minds hear such false statements enough, they begin to believe that they are true, so that when the time comes to make decisions about their future, they are poisoned with these stereotypes and made to feel that they won't be able to succeed at college or university because they are stupid, or lazy, or "just going to drink their cheque anyway!"

It doesn't take much to taint a student's feeling of self-worth but it does take a long time and a lot of work to restore it. We can have all of the resources and tools at our disposal to aid in educating our young people, but we can only do so much. We can teach our children morals and values, pride in their culture

and language, do what we can to increase their sense of self-worth, and most importantly, let them know that they are loved no matter what. But we are limited. We cannot control outside factors such as the people they interact with, and that includes those at the institution they choose to attend.

The real test comes when students choose to actually take a leap of faith and accept their offer of admission to school. It is at this point in time that we as educators and parents can hopefully begin to see our hard work paying off. But there remains a delicate balance between the confidence we have instilled in these young people and the harsh realities of the world that can easily strip that confidence away.

Conclusion

Any institution has the power to offset this balance, either positively by way of supporting the students and embracing their uniqueness, or negatively by forcing them to conform to rigid regulations and policies that do nothing more than mass produce cookie-cutter graduates. I think that it is safe to say that all post-secondary institutions believe that they positively influence any student that walks through their doors. However, it takes more than just having a mandate on paper to actually pull this off.

To make a learning environment, especially a heavily regulated learning environment, open to change, a number of actions must take place.

First, it is necessary for us to be the educators. Change cannot take place unless those that are demanding the change or that will be affected by it are meaningfully consulted. After all, those making the changes first need to be aware of what, if anything, actually needs to be modified. It also needs to be noted that it takes a lot of courage for any institution to admit that change is necessary or that they have not been serving all of their students to the best of their ability. It is through consultation that the institution will begin its own learning process about who they are dealing with, their unique strengths as well as their weaknesses.

Second, after recognizing and accepting that changes have to be made, it is necessary to commit to making those changes. Too often strategies are developed and presented with great excitement and enthusiasm, only to fall by the wayside at the first sign of resistance or by lack of motivation. Having people in the institution dedicate their time willingly will ensure that the right people are doing this for the right reasons, thereby decreasing the chances that those assigned the task of following through with the recommendations will lose interest.

Third, the institution needs to commit financially to the projects deemed necessary to carry out these changes that emerged through the original consultations. It is unrealistic to set a one-time dollar amount and think that all challenges can be overcome. However, it is more probable that significant changes can be made to positively affect student retention and success if the overall goal of Indigenizing the academy is broken down into manageable tasks which are more likely to be carried out.

Fourth, the strengths and uniqueness of the students need to be embraced. It is easy for Aboriginal students to feel out of place in such an unfamiliar and intimidating setting as college or university. Thoughts of self-doubt run through their heads as they try to justify why they actually decided to give it a try. They cannot help but compare themselves to others and many times incorrectly assume that the other students in their classes know way more than they do and are not struggling near as much. It is at this crucial early period when students first enter into a post-secondary institution and can easily second guess

their good intention and own abilities, that it be made known to them that they are first of all welcomed, but also accepted for who they are, and embraced by their new, albeit temporary, home.

It needs to be stressed to the students that not only is there much to learn at school but also that those at school (which include classmates as well as professors) have much to learn about these students. Welcoming Aboriginal students and inviting them to be as much a part of the learning process by way of being a teacher as well as a student places value on the knowledge that they already have. This, in turn, reinforces their own self-worth and, instead of tearing them down to conform to a set of norms, will build them up and help foster a confident learner that will build on their traditional values.

Finally, it is obvious to see that by reaching out to this demographic, by taking steps to make it more inviting for them to attend a certain school, a definite financial benefit is bestowed upon that particular institution. We in Indigenous organizations are not naïve about this, but I feel that as long as it is done in an open and transparent manner, it is beneficial to both sides. After these steps are taken, efforts need to be communicated to the Aboriginal population which the institution wishes to recruit. All of the special services – reserved seats, and accommodations made by the institution, for example – to make it more appealing to Aboriginal students need to be promoted. If not, many students that can avail of these services may end up not even knowing that they exist. They may choose a different school with less knowledge about or interest in Aboriginal issues, thereby affecting the students` post-secondary experience.

Overall, to Indigenize the academy is to make an institution more open and inviting to students with an Aboriginal background. It is not done simply by offering special services to fulfill a policy obligation, but rather by embracing these students, recognizing their strengths, talents, and what they can bring to the academy, in addition to providing the inviting environment and supports. As much as the academy can teach our students, the academy can learn an equal amount from them.

References

Assembly of First Nations. (2007). First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey (RHS), 2002/2003. Ottawa.

Canadian Council on Learning. (2009). The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada: A Holistic Approach to Measuring Success. Ottawa.

Statistics Canada. (2008) Labour Force Activity (8), Aboriginal Identity (8), Highest Certificate, Diploma or Degree (14), Area of Residence (6), Age Groups (12A) ad Sex (3) for the Population 15 Years and Over of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2006 Census – 20% Sample Data,Topic-based tabulation, 2006 Census of Population (Catalogue no. 97-560-X20). Ottawa.