

Why do Inuit Students Drop Out?

Factors Leading to Dropout for Inuit Students

http://www.polarnet.ca/~netsilik/Capstone/Why_Do_Inuit_Drop_Out.html

No student should have to make the choice to drop out. If we are concerned about justice, then it is the responsibility of each of us to address this issue (Wilson, 1991).

Despite the growing participation in post-secondary education, the level of education is still the single greatest barrier Aboriginal people face in joining the wage economy in the NWT (Jewison, 1995).

There is an alarming decrease in the number of students sitting in northern high school classes. It is distressing to see such a horrible trend developing across the Canadian north where there has been dramatic decreases in the number of students who attend school regularly. Jewison (1995) reports that about 76% of the students in the NWT leave school before graduating from grade twelve. The effects are seen even in the younger grades where there can be found non-attenders or students whose attendance is less than 40%. A dropout is defined in this paper as being any student who has left secondary school for whatever reason prior to graduating (Brady, 1996).

Despite the efforts of many to create community high schools in northern communities, students are not coming. Community high schools are new to many northern communities; in the past our students were sent to larger centers like Yellowknife or Iqaluit. New schools are being built and additions are constructed to include beautiful new facilities and initiatives like art rooms, music programs, new lockers, breakfast programs, cultural inclusion programs, computers, computer bulletin board systems and many other extracurricular and CO-curriculum incentives. Even so, dropout rates remain high and student motivation is low.

Numerous teachers are concerned and frustrated with the poor attendance and high truancy rates of our high school. We need answers. Research can help us to come to a better understanding of the phenomena of early school leavers or dropouts amongst Inuit. While researchers differ as to the causes of this phenomena, we know that the consequences of dropping out are many. Brady (1996) reports that early school leavers suffer higher unemployment rates, longer periods between jobs and lower wages. Now that the new territory of Nunavut is completed, there is more need to have Inuit students graduate and take on their new roles.

One of the biggest barriers to education for Inuit students is attendance. The population of Native students who exit the education system prematurely is noticeably higher than that of the general population (Brady, 1996). When students become non-attenders, the school no longer gets funding for that student. After the age of sixteen, students who are non-attenders are asked to make a decision: either to improve their attendance or dropout. Unfortunately, some students who were given many chances and opportunities to improve are still unable to attend regularly and have to be taken off the register. At-risk students under sixteen years of age are generally very poor attenders, coming to school only one or two days a week. It is impossible for them to find success at school when they miss so much of the daily learning that goes on in the school. There are many opportunities for these students to improve. The key is to have more Native students graduate from grade twelve and go on to some sort of post secondary education or training. The question is: What is causing the low attendance rate and consequently the low graduation rate among Native youth?

Little is written on this issue with regards to Canadian Inuit populations. Most of what is found describes experiences of North American Indians in the United States. One journal in particular, *Journal of American Indian Education*, is very helpful in discussing the dropout issue. Despite historical differences in the Indian and Inuit experience, due to their contact with Europeans, there are many similarities when it comes to student success in school. The term 'success' can mean that either students graduate from high school or they leave school in order to enroll in another educational institution leading to a job. Another approach to take in searching for information is simply to look at the dropout experience as a whole, disregarding cultural differences. There is no culture that does not suffer from instances of student dropout. Quite a few journals take on this perspective and have much to offer on the issue.

One soon finds that there are as many reasons for dropping out as there are students who drop out. There is an overwhelming list of reasons or factors, which contribute to dropping out. Mackey & Myles (1995) explain that much of the early research on the phenomena of Aboriginal retention and dropout identify socioeconomic factors such as family background and socioeconomic status as a main influence on dropout. However, more recent research explores the effect of school culture or school climate on the dropout situation (Mackey & Myles, 1995). There is also strong research that focuses on Cultural Discontinuity (Brady, 1996) which states that culturally based differences in the communication styles

between the minority students' home and the predominate Anglo culture of the school is a factor for dropout. Research has illuminated a number of influences or issues that address the problem of dropouts. Each of these so-called causes impacts the major stakeholders in different ways. In the case of early school leavers or dropouts, the main stakeholders are students, teachers, parents, and school boards or administration. When discussing influences on a problem, one tends to want to place blame for problems on a sector of society. However, the various factors that contribute to Native retention and dropout are many and overlap in the responsibilities of the stakeholders.

As stated earlier, previous research in the phenomena of dropout has focuses on socioeconomic status as a primary factor. Socioeconomic status is a major influence on a student's educational success. Brady (1996) reveals this strong correlation between the economic situation of Native students and their inclination to dropout. Native students who come from single parent, low economic status homes are twice as likely to dropout than other students (Brady, 1996). Jewison (1995) confirms that poverty is one major cause of developmental delay and that Inuit students face other challenges including those caused by living in overcrowded homes. In some cases language problems are linked to social economic status factor like the parents' lack of education and lack of reading materials at home (Mackay & Myles, 1995). There is an abundance of young parents in the north and one questions the abilities of teenage mothers and fathers to role model learning in the home. Lack of parenting skills and home support becomes another factor which contributes to the issue. Although, socioeconomic status is of significant importance, it is not the only factor which contributes to the dropout phenomena.

Further research identifies the Cultural Discontinuity hypothesis (Brady, 1996) which states that there are culturally based differences in the communication styles between the minority students' home and the predominate Anglo culture of the school which lead to conflicts, misunderstandings and failure for students. Research by Brady (1995) focuses on the structure and climate of the school which causes students to dropout. One of the purposes of secondary education is to instill the values, attitudes and beliefs of the majority; these values tend to be those of the middle class (Brady, 1996). Unfortunately, this Cultural Discontinuity is experienced as conflict and results in reduced academic performance, behaviour that brings students into problems with teachers and the leaving of school. Any student who does not adopt the dominant values or conform to middle-class standards will not thrive in the school system.

Wilson (1991) supports the Cultural Discontinuity theory by stating that serious conflicts result when students are taught by people from cultural backgrounds different than their own. Wilson (1991) goes on to report that since education is communication, understanding the cultural context of learning is important (Wilson, 1991). The issues arise in the understanding of nonverbal behaviour that is used to transmit information. Inuit people use many nonverbal signals in their communication. For example, facial expressions are used to express negative and affirmative responses instead of the non-Native ways of nodding or shaking the head for 'yes' and 'no'; these signals are not easily comprehended by non-Inuit people and can be misconstrued easily.

In the past, Inuit students were often sent to southern, nonnative dominated schools and spent little of their childhood within their own culture. This practice resulted in many students who had negative experiences with education and thus dropped out. Today many community high schools have been established. However, Nunavut is still forced to conform to the southern standardization system from Alberta. Thus, Cultural Discontinuity concerns are not resolved by simply having community high schools.

Inuit parents are relatively new to the idea of an outside authority educating their children. It has been approximately fifty years since Inuit families settled in communities year round. Inuit families were nomadic and children were taught by example from parents and elders. While most parents respond favourably to southern teachers teaching their children, they show concern over the loss of the Inuktitut language and Inuit culture in the youth. (School staffs are mainly teachers hired from the south, although a higher number of Inuit teachers are graduating from the three-year Nunavut Teacher Education Program (NTEP). These Inuit teachers are currently being required to work on a Bachelor of Education to remain employed.

In my experience parents report that they are confused about the pedagogical approaches used to teach their children. In the past, some parents were forced to attend residential schools for their education (although few students managed to graduate) and they are thankful that their children can stay home. However, many parents report that they are unable to get their children to go to bed at night and wake up for school in the morning. While the discipline at residential schools was very strict parents today seem to have difficulty imposing discipline on their own school-aged children.

Cultural conflict is most at work in the classroom, reflecting the fact that teachers are key agents in the socialisation of children from cultures different than the dominant (Wilson, 1991). In a study of

Canadian Sioux Indian students, Wilson (1991) discovers that student performance is related directly to different structural setting, both institutionally and culturally for which all of the students were totally unprepared. The students, who were studied had done very well in the elementary reserve school prior to transferring to the nonnative dominated city high school. The elementary school respected Indian spiritualism and had many Native people as members of the staff. In contrast, the city high school had a huge Anglo European population and a teaching staff of 75, all nonnative. There was little if any communication or visitation between the city and the reserve. The Indian students were the only persons who had to live in both settings: an Indian reserve and a predominantly nonnative city. To receive a high school education, students were forced to move between the two cultures of these areas even though these communities were extensively different. Students had clear ideas about why they were facing failure. They felt isolated in the school, isolation from the system, from the nonnative students and from the teachers. Because of this isolation, Indian students spent most of their time with other Indian students who were also living through this traumatic situation (Wilson, 1991).

Wilson (1991) also speaks of the enormous trauma of prejudice and racism that the students dealt with regularly. They faced racism, behaviour patterns different from their own, alien cultural norms and economic stress. Despite educational testing proving otherwise, teachers from the city high school felt that Indian students simply could not handle the work and they usually were placed in vocational or special education classes. Counseling was inadequate for Indian students and they were encouraged, often wrongly, to take low-level courses or special education classes. Indian students felt undervalued emotionally and thus undervalued their education. The process of streaming students into course levels also discriminated Native students; these students were placed into low level courses consistently because everyone assumed that they were incapable of handling university bound work (Brady, 1996). As a result of this repeated racism, students simply wanted to escape and minimize school contact.

Reyhner (1992) reports that critical factors associated with higher dropout rates include "large schools, uncaring and untrained teachers, passive teaching methods, inappropriate curriculum and inappropriate testing/student retention, tracked classes, and lack of parent involvement" (p. 44). Reyhner (1992) cites an ethnographic study of Navajo and Ute dropouts by Dehyle (1989): students who experienced minimal individual attention or personal contact with teachers felt neglected and believed that the teachers disliked or rejected them. This attitude and lack of respect for students transfers into a dissatisfaction for school and often result in dropping out.

In the high school, rarely did the teachers speak directly to the Indian students in class. Often the teachers were brief in giving explanations to Indian students but would spend more time with other students in a similar situation. Wilson (1991) reports that the students were sensitive to the racial prejudice in school and felt that the teachers would have preferred for them not to have been there. When observed in the classroom on the reserve by Wilson (1991), the teachers moved around the room, respectfully conversing with students and in most cases, contact was made with each student present. In the high school, during the course of one class, the teacher spoke to only four students. This type of behaviour towards Indian students is blatant indifference and this negative attitude is role modeled for others in the class. Practices of the teachers and administration are internalized by the students of the school and are perpetuated further.

Brady (1996) reports that often students had to deal with racial slurs by their peers. Students Brady (1996) studied spoke of areas in the school where Indian students were not to be; if found in these areas, they were verbally assaulted. Wilson (1991) confirms these findings by writing that when Indian students were walking in the hallways, peers would comment "I smell a strange smell in the hallway" (p. 370). Also, when Indian students came to school with new clothes, their peers would make welfare cheque jokes. Many times students from low-income homes were looked down upon by their peers (Brady, 1996).

Ledlow (1992) reveals that many teachers in these schools did not live on the reservation nor had even visited the place where their students lived. There is an element of cultural discontinuity or a clash of cultural perceptions within these schools. However, Ledlow (1992) argues:

There is simply not enough evidence to conclude that cultural discontinuity plays a significant role, but there is overwhelming evidence that economic and social issues which are not culturally specific to being Indian (although they may be specific to being a minority) are very significant in causing students to drop out of school. (p. 30)

From this research it would appear that the cultural racism is only one element in a complex web of factors that students face when dropping out. Cultural discontinuity does not explain fully the dropout situation among Canadian Native students. It fails to explain why the dropout rate varies depending on the economic circumstance of the student's families (Brady, 1996). Brady (1996) offers a new Cultural

Discontinuity Theory which is expanded to include the student's social economic status rather than just the ethnic background of the student.

Caine & Caine (1997) would argue that any type of stress or high threat environment would lead to downshifting. Downshifting affects students in ways that prevents them from doing well academically or socially. Without a sense of success, it becomes logical to assume that students will not want to remain within the school system. Caine & Caine (1997) describe the consequences of a high threat situation which results in what they term as downshifting. Students who face continuous threats of racism and a loss of cultural identity go through a process of downshifting which leads to dropping out or to escape.

In a seven-year ethnographic study of Navajo and Ute youth, Dehyle (1992) found that students who dropped out felt unwanted and faced institutional racism. In the questionnaire, students reported that their teachers did not care and that the school was not related to American Indian cultures. The "school leaver perceived a cultural insensitivity or indifference on the part of teacher" (Dehyle, 1992, p.26). Lin (1988) confirms these findings by reporting that hostility against them and the sense of isolation are greater for Indian students than nonnative in a predominately nonnative college.

Some school practices create a climate that alienate minority and disadvantaged students alike (Brady, 1996). The lack of understanding on the part of the school staff with the respect to cultural conflict contributes greatly to student failure (Wilson, 1991). The school climate and culture becomes another important factor in student dropout. Mackey & Myles (1995) found that there was insensitivity by the school community to the students' variety of English and their need for extra time to master new idioms. This insensitivity undermines Native students' sense of self-esteem and identity. Wilson (1991) states that students' limitation in academic performances are consequences of macro structural factors. These factors are the basis of schools in which no place is made for ethnically diverse students or as Brady (1996) found, low social economic status students. Schools have an organisational structure in which these students, who do not conform to majority norms, fail. Students in a study by Wilson (1991) dropped out of school because it was the most adaptive coping strategy at that time in their lives.

It is often thought that students choose to leave school because they do not like learning. Dehyle (1992) found that many Indian students left school due to being "pulled out" because of family and community pressure or through being "pushed out" by an refusing Anglo society. Indian students are faced with the pressure of being "Indian" and doing well in a nonnative school looks bad on their sense of family. Dehyle (1992) reports that in the Navajo culture teasing is used as a means to maintain a position of cultural solidarity and social control; students who did well in school were objects of jealousy instead of pride. Many felt that institutional racism imposed a job ceiling in their community whether or not they completed high school (Dehyle, 1992). Wax (quoted in Swisher & Hoisch, 1992) states:

Many state explicitly that they do not wish to leave school and see themselves as 'pushouts' or 'kickouts' rather than 'dropouts.' As a Sioux youth in the sample put it, "I quit, but I never did want to quit." (p. 23)

Students who dropout often feel a victim of others' misunderstanding.

With respect to Netsilik School, these terms are worthy of discussion: pullout, pushout, kickout and dropout. Family pressures and responsibilities, like hunting, baby-sitting or looking after elders, does result in some students being 'pulled out' of school. It is less harder to determine the number of students who feel pulled out due to a threat to their Inuit self-identity. Push-outs are defined as those students who are pressed to leave school by teachers and a curriculum that rejects the Inuit culture. From my knowledge, this may be the case for some Inuit students who were forced to attend residential schools in former years. Although we are a long way from having a the ideal Inuit school, there is less confirmation of this type 'push-out' student in the present structure of community high schools and the promotion of Inuit culture in the school. Kickouts are those students who are forced to leave such as in cases where they are expelled indefinitely. This action requires the local District Education Authority (DEA) to be in agreement; this type of kickout action has never been done at Netsilik School. Some students report that they are kicked out of school; this is an incorrect name for the situation. In these cases when students over the age of sixteen have become non-attenders (with less than 40% attendance) are removed from the register. These students claim they have been kicked out of school but it is clear that their decision to dropout of school was motivated long before their names are deleted from the register. Finally, the dropout is an umbrella term for all students who decide to leave school prior to graduation. It may mean that pullouts, pushouts, and kickouts are dropouts - but not all dropouts are pullouts, pushouts, nor kickouts. Indeed there may be other terms

to define the different situations but it is important to realize that there are many factors to dropout and that each situation is different.

Cultural Discontinuity, does play an important role in the dropout of many Native teenagers, if the term is used as an umbrella term for other factors including social economic status, racism and school climate. However, the theory of Cultural Discontinuity falls short of explaining the dropout phenomena completely. The students of our community high school are all Inuit and they do participate in many culturally related activities during school day. Also, the majority of students are from low-income households so there are not many acts of peer discrimination on the basis of economic situation. Thus, there are other factors beyond the cultural discontinuity theory and social economic status that contribute to the dropout status.

It takes a whole community to raise a child. Mackey & Myles (1995) found that parental support and home-school communication were second to language difficulties as factors that contribute to early school leavers. In studying Native and nonnative dropouts from Ontario, Mackey & Myles (1995) reported that inadequate English language skills contributed to a Native youth's decision to leave school. They state that weaknesses in basic English literacy is characteristic of all dropouts, irrespective of ethnicity. These language problems were most likely linked with parental support issues including parents' lack of education, a deficiency of reading activity and materials at home, a lack of encouragement to read at home, the dominance of television for home entertainment, and poor or nonexistent library facilities on some reserves (Mackey & Myles, 1995).

The level of parental support, interest and encouragement contributed to Native students' decision to remain or leave school (Mackey & Myles, 1995). Mackey & Myles (1995) found possible reasons for this lack of support and interest; they found that many parents are unfamiliar with schools and are intimidated by the educational system. Some parents consider the formal education of their children should be exclusively in the hands of educators. As such, they feel alienated and do not contribute to the process (Mackey & Myles, 1995). In some cases, nonnative staff have been reported as having discouraged parents from participating as educational partners (Mackey & Myles, 1995).

With respect to Native parents, their lack of encouragement and support for education may be rooted in bad experiences they themselves have had previously. Many Inuit parents have faced hardships in their personal schooling. Many parents faced deep cultural upheaval when sent to church operated schools in the south. It may be possible that these same people, when raising their own children, do not value the educational system based on their previous negative experiences. Mackey & Myles (1995) state that some parents believe the decision to stay in school should be left to the child.

Despite an overwhelming amount of literature indicating that minority students underachieve because of lack of motivation and having no desire to excel, the study by Rindone (1988) found that this does not appear to be the case; family or stability of traditional values is the way to academic success for high achieving Navajos. Stable family life with traditional values becomes an important determinant of achievement in high school; parents and family were able to motivate and encourage children to succeed (Rindone, 1988). These findings support what Caine & Caine (1997) would believe to be true about the learning environment of the student; in considering the student as a whole being, the value of a supportive home and family is crucial. Mackey & Myles (1995) found that parents of dropouts lack the skills to motivate their children. Brady (1996) confirmed these findings in that he reports that dropouts are frustrated academically and tend to be motivated more extrinsically than intrinsically when compared to successful students. He goes on to interpret that dropouts are motivated by a different set of considerations than more academically inclined students. Dropouts are short-range goal setters who are motivated by the immediate rewards of a job than the rewards of good grades in the classroom (Brady 1996). Perhaps parents need to support their children in the area of motivation in order to ensure success for their child in school.

Effects of home-school communication impact Native dropout. Mackey & Myles (1995) found there to be a distant relationship between the Native community, lacking in both quantity and quality. There are cultural and psychological barriers as well as physical barriers; many of the nonnative educators never visit the reserve from which their students originate nor do they understand their culture. Many Native homes do not have telephones and any communication which does occur is initiated typically from the school, and it is usually negative in nature. Various parents complain that they never hear anything positive about their children (Mackey & Myles, 1995). Poor school-community communication is reported as contributing to high dropout rates (Mackey & Myles, 1995).

In many circumstances within Inuit communities over the north, teachers live alongside the Native people. Inuit communities like Taloyoak differ from Indian reservations because the school and its teachers are encouraged to become part of the community. Nonnative teachers live alongside local Inuit. Even so, as a teacher it is challenging to communicate with parents especially those parents who

do not speak English. Schools must make a conscious effort to involve elders and community members as partners in education.

Elders and parents may have explanations for situations that tend to lead to dropout because the practices stem from traditional life. These explanations need to be articulated. For example, there is a noticeable difference in attendance rates when compared to seasonal changes. Northern communities of the arctic experience 24-hour daylight from April - August and 24 hour darkness from November - January. This dramatic shift in daylight and darkness contributes to poor sleep patterns in all people living north. There is a change in student attendance and motivation in school during both extremes. Many students will stay up all night in both the light and the dark periods. This is not just a youth trend; adults often stay up for nights on end just to experience the feeling. Traditionally Inuit needed to have this flexibility of sleep patterns due to the need to travel when the weather and the snow conditions were good, not necessarily when it was the right time of day to move. Perhaps this cultural aspect has filtered into the psyche of the modern Inuit. Nevertheless, students are not coming to school ready and able to learn; they are overworked and exhausted. Sleep deprivation hinders effective learning. Elders and parents may be able to explain such traditional practices which might result in obstacles for learning in modern institutions.

Another perspective leads one to wonder how much emphasis should be given to keeping Inuit students in school. Mills (1959) encourages those concerned to see the issue from all perspectives and examine the reasons to stay in school and the reasons to drop out of school.

The most obvious stakeholder is the student. Students may choose to stay in school for a wide variety of reasons. Dropping out means: no diploma, low educational attainment, lack of skills, inability to read/write, limited job aspirations, lower qualifications, inability to go into post-secondary educational programs, and dependency on Social Assistance for income. However, students may choose to dropout for an array of reasons. They may have difficulties finding a baby-sitter or be pregnant as teen pregnancy is on the rise in the north. Students may want more time to hunt, look after elders or simply want some free time. Other students leave school because they are dealing with family problems or psychological problems (suicide, depression, grief). Many students are not ready (skills/abilities) for high school even though they are older students; they may dropout of high school to enter Adult Basic Education programs offered from Nunavut Arctic College. Other students drop out of school because they have found jobs elsewhere or have entered lower qualification programs. It may be hard to validate some of these reasons but for a student any one of these many reasons could justify dropping out of high school.

Parents are also affected by their children's decision. Parents may encourage them to stay in school because they want something better for their children and they may feel a sense of pride from having children who graduate. Parents may also be depending on their children to contribute to the family income and thus the child will need to find a job. Some parents may wish for their children to gain some independence from the family home. However, parents may counsel their children to drop out of school because they need help at home or need help to hunt for food. Parents may want the family to live on the land and learn traditional land skills. Students may need to contribute to the family income and, consequently, they are sent out to work. Some students are forced to dropout in order to deal with family difficulties or because the parents feel that they are having too many conflicts at the school.

Elders had much input into the restructuring of the educational system into community high schools. Many elders counsel students to stay in school because they see value in learning beyond traditional skills; they express the wish for teachers to teach their students things that they themselves cannot. The dream of Nunavut encourages elders to want students to be involved in Nunavut. However, some elders may not recommend students to stay in school. They may need help or want their children to spend more time learning traditional skills.

Obviously, teachers are affected by their students choosing to dropout of school. It is frustrating to have a class of fifteen dwindle down to three by the end of the semester. Having a large graduating class instills a sense of pride in a school. Generally, teachers want to see students succeed. Teachers find it very frustrating teaching poor attenders as well as those who are not serious about their education. High dropout rates may also influence the level of job satisfaction that teachers feel. Even though teachers want their students to stay in school, dropping out may be suggested to students if they are not serious about their education, simply distracting others, having too many conflicts and are not ready to be at school. Students who consistently fail make teachers feel ineffective.

Principals feel the consequences of a high dropout rate in their schools. They counsel students to stay in school for many reasons. Hopefully, they feel that staying in school will benefit the student. They may also want students to stay in school because school funding is related to attendance rates. A high turnover of staff may be the result of demoralising job situations where students are not succeeding

because of attendance. Like teachers, principals may feel that dropout is an option in situations where the student is not ready to be in school due to psychological, social, moral or other problems.

Community leaders and the Nunavut government encourage students to stay in school. Community leaders would like to see students independent, not requiring Social Assistance. The Nunavut government needs educated students to take over jobs in communities from outsiders and take Nunavut jobs in order to run the government with Inuit people. They have pride in Inuit modernisation and dislike having to upgrade people for every job available in government.

Finally, outside employment agencies may want educated people to work in the organisations. Like community leaders and the Nunavut government, these agencies do not want to do extensive training before they are able to maintain standards of a job. They also support students to stay in school so as to encourage skill development.

There are countless factors that contribute to dropout. For each student who makes the decision to leave school, there is a story. Unfortunately, there is not a single solution to the problem. "No student should have to make the choice to drop out" (Wilson, 1991, p. 369) so society must work hard to provide all students with a chance to succeed. Schools and the community must make an effort to cover all the bases so that no student falls through the cracks of the education system.

See also, *Clusters and Connections: Factors that Contribute to Inuit Dropout*. A discussion of the relationships between the various factors follows a visual representation of the factor clusters.

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Assignment Paper - I-Search: Out of Step: Inuit Youth and Dropout

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