Chapter 5

What is the Problem with the School?

> Nobody has problems with the school, they just drop out (Survey, 1993:B9).

When formal schooling began in Sheshatshit, the priest held fast to the notion of the school as an effective means of assimilating the Innu. When the first residents of Sheshatshit started sending their children to school they believed that education would be a means for their children to benefit from the economic opportunities available to people who spoke English. Neither of these dreams were realised. The incongruity of the structure and content of a Western school system with the values and lifestyle of the Innu left a legacy of resentment and alienation. But attitudes towards the school today parallel the many changes occurring in Innu society; criticisms of the school are mixed with the recognition of its importance for the future of Innu youth.

Many of the difficulties with the school are, in part a result of the clash of cultures and values systems. However, today the deeply rooted troubles associated with community life permeate the walls of the school. The problem of formal education is exacerbated by the confusion of change in the cultural practices of the community and thus traditional

informal methods of education outside the school are breaking down as well.

5.1 The Establishment of the School

The missionaries first brought the Innu into contact with Western education and its implicit goal of transmitting values of language, religion and of Western civilization more generally. Prior to settlement, missionaries literate in Innu-aimun began to teach people hymns and to read the Bible during the summer. The present school is named after Peenamin Mackenzie, a strong matriarch, who gained a reputation among the missionaries for her dedication to teaching.

In 1952, when the first permanent mission was established, the Oblate missionary began teaching lessons in geography, math, English and religion, in the mission house during the summer months. Prior to the school coming under the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic school board, lessons were taught in Innu-aimun (Ryan, 1988:12). Like the first Jesuit priest, Pere Le Jeune, who spent a winter with the Montagnais in the early 1600s (Leacock 1980:27-28), this missionary saw education as the primary means by which to assimilate and control the Indian population. Although supportive of the Innu maintaining their language and practice of caribou hunting, he upheld the need to educate Innu children, believing that this was the door to the future.

Plate 1

Reproduction of a photograph of Father J. Pirson instructing a group of Innu students in the mission school circa 1956. Source: Innu Resource Centre Collection

Education is primarily a form of cultural transmission. Singleton (1974:27) points out that "culture itself is often defined in essentially educational terms ...as the shared products of human learning". For the Innu, the beginning of

formal institutionalized Western education is equated with their cultural decline. Western education has presented the Native child with a foreign language, culture and way of being; a system of thought and action which is in stark contrast to the child's cultural experience of the Native values of self-reliance, interpersonal relations, cooperation, expression and inhibition of aggression, and role expectations (Sindell 1974:74).

Innu parents were always strongly encouraged to send their children to school by the priest, but attendance was problematic from the beginning. The first priest in Sheshatshit wrote about his feelings of guilt regarding low attendance: only 21 out of 53 students were regular attendants. Frustrated by the Innu coming to the community to collect government relief cheques which were being used for making beer, he sought to have parents threatened with having their family allowance cheques withheld if their children did not come to school (Ryan 1988:134). An elder commented on this period:

> When the missionaries first arrived to convert the Innu way of life we were told by a government representative that there would be a family allowance for kids who go to school. Those who don't go wouldn't get the family allowance. The goal was to get money for the teachers. In the country we used to educate our children in the old way, that way was forgotten, that way they [the children] were receiving cultural education (Survey D:33).

There were also reports of physical threats and ear twisting employed by the priest to enforce attendance (Ryan 1988:133).

In 1954, the Newfoundland government formally recognized the mission school. In 1959 a small school house was constructed with government funds and the first teachers were hired. In 1960, the school came under the auspices of the Roman Catholic School Board and a standardized curriculum was introduced, English became the operating language, and the school began to follow the North American school year (Ryan 1988:12-13).

The present school was built in 1968 and initially covered grades kindergarten to eight. In 1970, grade nine was included. The handful of students who wanted to go beyond grade nine had to go elsewhere. Since 1980 students have been able to complete high school in the community if they choose to. The current school principal argues that reports (Cleary, Evening Telegram, October 19, 1991) of there being only fifteen graduates from the community since the school's inception is misleading as high school education in the community has only been available since 1980. Prior to this time the current school was not responsible for the low numbers of high school graduates because students would go elsewhere after grade 9 if they chose not to drop-out. A handful of students have gone to Goose Bay, Corner Brook, and St. John's to complete their high school education. Since the

introduction of grade 10, 11, and 12 there have been one or two graduates a year. This number is still relatively low given the enrolment.

The school has made adjustments to accommodate the problems of poor attendance and drop-outs. After finishing grade nine, students are able to complete individual courses without being associated with a particular grade or age group. They go at their own pace, and this helps students who are in their early 20s and\or have a child.

The view of the school's potential to provide jobs and a means of integration into the wider society is still held amongst some hopeful parents in Sheshatshit. However, in many cases, these hopes have been coloured with disillusionment from past experiences. As one parent commented:

> Lots of things I don't like about the school, the way white children go to school. I never went to school, I learnt everything from the country. Children at Peenamin Mackenzie School are having difficulties and problems about their own life. We didn't have those problems, but today kids are into vandalism etc. We were educated in the Innu way, we were able to support our families. The school promised our kids education and jobs, but these have not materialized (Survey, 1993:A4).

The elders see that the school has replaced the knowledge of the past with a new educational system which produces unemployed youth who lack traditional skills and the motivation or interest necessary to acquire them.

The problems surrounding the school represents a deeper conflict of world views which has largely been misunderstood and taken for granted by missionaries, provincial administrators and other interlocutors of the past.

5.2 A Contrast in World Views

The cognitive location of the school in Sheshatshit, not unlike its actual physical presence, resembles a monolithic structure, displaced in the Labrador wilderness, surrounded by nomadic tents which flap in the wind. Its physical presence serves as an analogy for the contrast between Aboriginal and Western ways of seeing the world. Western approaches to both the content and method of education have been based on the teacher passing on standardized and "packaged knowledge" about the world, in an institutional setting, to the student. Freire describes this often sterile process:

> The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to 'fill' the students with the contents of his narration - contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance (1972:45).

This Western model aims to transfer its abstracted cultural knowledge and to assimilate children of all backgrounds into the order and progress of the dominant society. The model focuses on the idea that children are empty

vessels and can be filled with knowledge which can later be measured and evaluated in the form of exams which students may pass or fail.

It is no longer possible to characterize a monolithic Western or Aboriginal world view in a world where Westerners are integrating Aboriginal ideas and spiritual practices into their lives and Aboriginal groups, are incorporating Western ideas and values into their lives. However, we can explore in broad terms the overall contrast in learning approaches between Western and Aboriginal societies in order to illustrate the effect schooling has had on Innu society over the last thirty years.

In contrast to Western educational systems, life and learning was not compartmentalized for Aboriginal peoples. Their ways of being were permeated by and in accord with each other and the environment. The concept of <u>being</u> in Aboriginal thought does not have a static definition, but rather is always "in the process of becoming" (Ross, 1991:163-164).

In his writings on the Cree and Ojibway, Ross points to the conviction "that life is a process of slow and careful self-fulfilment and self-realization". Everyone has a duty in this respect and must reinforce this process in their interactions with each other.

> The process of maturation continues until death, and no one ever becomes all that they *can* become. The duty of all people, therefore,

> is to assist others on their paths, and to be patient when their acts or words demonstrate that there are things still to be learned. The corollary duty is to avoid discouraging people by belittling them in any fashion and so reducing their respect for and faith in themselves (Ross, 1991:27).

Prior to formal schooling, daily life experience in the country provided the means through which children acquired skills. As in most pre-literate societies the family was the dominant educational institution (Havighurst in French 1987:13). In a recent book on First Nation Schools, Kirkness describes traditional education prior to contact as being "an education in which the community and the natural environment were the classroom and the land was seen as the mother of the people" (1992:5).

Among the Innu there exists a strong ethic of non-interference in child-rearing practices. One does not dominate the other, nor the environment. Each person has the capacity to be a leader. Children are brought up to respect and practice non-interference and to view this approach to social relations as "decent or normal and to react to even the mildest coercion in these areas with bewilderment, disgust, and fear" (Wax and Thomas, 1972:35). The individual freedoms produced by non-intervention and the free choices of others suggest a lack of rules and structures of constraint in Indian society. However, Ross points out that a "highly structured society was able to maintain that structure, yet deny, to

itself as well as others, that it possessed any rules for telling people what they could and could not do" (1991:134).

Knowledge and learning were primarily experiential. The specific approach to the presentation of knowledge and facts by the Innu is illustrative of this. When speaking about animals or hunting grounds, the elders will not claim authority on any information that is hearsay, only on what they know from experience to be true (Armitage, personal communication, see also Armitage, 1989, 1992). The transmission of religious knowledge to Innu youth occurred through engagement in the activities of hunting and paying respect to the animal masters with an elder and/or parent while in the country. Aspects of religious knowledge may also be transmitted through discussion with parents or elders while in the community, however this form of transmission is less likely to be effective given the experiential component necessary for true acquisition of knowledge (Armitage, 1992:65).

This experiential approach to knowledge acquisition is reflected in a response to a survey question inquiring as to how much parents knew about the school. One parent responded by saying: "I don't know much about the school, if I am there, I will know what is going on" (Survey, 1993:A8).

The nature of any mode of knowing the world and acquiring knowledge is a dynamic process. Settlement and school

attendance have permeated the Innu world-view with ways of seeing and being that are in direct conflict with those which were traditionally considered to be Innu. The lightly-guarded, less institutionalized Innu way of knowing has become marginalized by the school system. Though the ethic of non-intervention and the need to learn through culturally-based experiences remain strong, many changes are now occurring with the introduction of television, computers and literacy to the younger generations. World views do not remain static and the cognitive location of the school in the community may still be in the process of becoming.

5.3 Voicing the Problems

The formal education systems imposed on Native peoples by the Newfoundland and Canadian government have "theoretically been organized on principles of democracy and responsiveness to local community needs" (Darnell, 1972:i). However, schools were clearly established as institutions of external domination since the power to control or have input into the institution did not lie with the community.

The present school, established in 1967, has an enrolment of approximately 318 students. There is a staff of 27, seven of whom are qualified Innu teachers, and five are Innu assistants. Two of the qualified Innu teachers work in the curriculum development centre along with two non-Innu staff.

The principal is from Newfoundland, and the vice-principal is Innu. Grades kindergarten to three are taught solely in Innu-aimun by Innu teachers who are graduates of the Teacher Education Programme for Labrador (TEPL) administered through the Native and Northern Education division of the Faculty of Education at Memorial University in St. John's. (The Native and Northern Education division at Memorial also offers a program leading to a Bachelor of Education for Native teachers.)

Inside the school, most of the signs are in Innu-aimun as well as all the bulletins and many of the posters. The school appears to be relatively well kept and neat. But the school, like the community does not always function in a constructive way.

5.3.1 Parental Involvement

During the school year, the hallways and classrooms echo with the sound of lively children; very few adults or parents from the community pass through the doors other than local teachers and staff. At the open house for parent-teacher interviews in the fall of 1992, only a handful of parents came, and most of the teachers spent the evening talking among themselves. The reason given by an Innu informant for the lack of parental involvement is that Innu parents are intimidated by this foreign institution and the presence of White teachers.

Survey interviews conducted with parents consistently revealed how little parents knew about what went on in the school. This problem, like so many associated with the school illustrates the wall of difference and misunderstanding that separates the two cultures. The parents feel shy and intimidated and stay away from the school. This in turn causes a sense of discouragement amongst the teaching staff. The non-Innu teachers come to doubt that the parents care about the formal education of their children.

5.3.2 Intervention

Several Innu parents expressed a real concern that the teachers (Innu and non-Innu) are not adequately involved in educating their children and feel as though the teachers do not care about their children. One family had taken all its children out of school for over a year because they were being teased and beaten up by other kids. The father said he was surprised that no one from the school ever came to the door or called after the children. The Innu vice-principal is responsible for making contact with community members whose children are consistently not attending. However, the vice-principal is caught between two value systems in opposition; to intervene or not to intervene is a sensitive question. Based on the dim view of enforced attendance by the priest from earlier years, the vice-principal must have opted for non-intervention. However, the father in this case expected

some intervention from the school because intervention is consistent with the school as a Western institution. This is a dilemma that confronts Innu staff working in the school and often results in inaction or non-intervention which is then misinterpreted by Innu parents.

The survey results reflect some of the contradictions in the expectations that several parents had regarding the teachers' role in the teaching and discipline of their children. Two extremes were presented: on the one hand, a few parents felt teachers were strict and sometimes too hard on the children, on the other hand the same parents often expressed the need for the teachers to play a much more active role in the disciplining of their children. Some parents also felt that the Innu teachers practised favouritism towards the children who were related to them. These children would be protected from the threats of other children, while those without kinship connections to Innu teachers would be much more vulnerable to being beaten up.

Several parents wanted the teachers to intervene more when the students are fighting and to do something about the air of intimidation that exists within the student body. "Maybe there is not enough discipline. Kids get teased and teachers don't do enough about it" (Survey 1993:B62). "I would like to see a change in the Principal situation. He is not hard enough on the kids picking fights" (Survey, 1993:A10).

5.3.3 Teachers

Some parents felt supportive of Innu teachers and saw them as being more patient and committed than the white teachers. However, other respondents expressed concerns about the racism among the Innu teachers. "The Innu teachers are racist towards the White teachers and they teach this to the children and take advantage of the fact that no one understands Innu-aimun" (Survey 1993:B58). One respondent also expressed concern that some Innu teachers would appear drunk in public and she was worried about the effect they may have as role models for the students (Survey 1993:B6). "There are so many divisions between what the parents want and what the teachers do" (Survey, 1993:B23).

> Before kids used to listen - the former teachers were older and the kids listened. Now the teachers don't care too much. Innu teachers just let things go, they don't seem to be involved with the kids (Survey, 1993:B6).

> I don't feel kids are being treated like before when they were treated with more respect. Long ago in my days I can remember when the child was saying things to other people and treating them with respect. Now kids don't know how to respect their elders and treat them with respect (Survey, 1993:B5).

5.3.4 Standards

A few survey respondents felt that the academic standards were too low and that Innu and the non-Innu teachers lacked adequate involvement in the learning processes of the

students. Many respondents said that the standards of the school overall were far too low in comparison with other schools. "Teachers aren't teaching enough" (Survey, 1993:B24).

> Students don't learn to read, they are not on level with other students in the province. Teachers are only here for one year. They get all the inexperienced teachers who are not really into it. School is too lax, it doesn't matter if you sleep in. You could miss a whole year of school and they would put you ahead anyway... (Survey 1993:A21).

Twenty-five percent of respondents complained that the school standards were far too low. Some respondents wanted to see an improvement in the educational materials. It was also pointed out that the text-books used were consistently out of date and the teaching materials were of a lower standard than what is provided for students in the neighbouring schools. "The school doesn't educate the children enough. Education is a token thing for them. Standards here are far too low and don't measure up. There should be more education here" (Survey, 1993:A24). Students who leave Peenamin Mackenzie School to study in other schools find the false standards humiliating.

> My sister used to go to school and when she got high grades she was sent to St. John's to continue in the higher grades. They found out that the grades she had weren't the grades they were supposed to be, she found it really hard (Survey, 1993:A35).

5.3.5 Attendance

The teachers are challenged to include both regular and irregular attenders in the classroom, which slows down the learning process for everyone. One teacher felt that this approach often resulted in infrequent attenders falling far behind while those who attend regularly may experience boredom (personal communication).

A non-Innu teacher explained:

> I guess it would be fair to say that teachers attempt to teach to the "norm" or average group in the class most of the time, doing their best to accommodate more able and less able students as much as possible (personal communication).

Several teachers felt that a central obstacle to effective teaching at Peenamin Mackenzie was low attendance and the cycle of low standards produced by it. The problem with attendance forces teachers to lower their standards. Attendance for the students is entirely optional as their parents are generally non-interventionist in their child-rearing practices. Excuses like "It's too cold", or "I feel lazy" are acceptable ones for many parents. Walking through the community on a sunny winter's day, I would see as many as 50 children out skating on the lake. When visiting homes with school-age children, inevitably the children would be there, playing, watching television or "hanging out". One teacher explained that since the students are not pressured to attend,

teachers feel they need to make their lessons much more entertaining than educational in order to keep attendance up (personal communication).

Last January, the grade six class attendance was 46 percent on average. No one was in the country at this time, or was absent with the principal's permission (for a breakdown of attendance records over the course of a year, see Appendix A). This is not unusual. A non-Innu grade four teacher reported a 33 percent attendance rate over a three-month period last year (personal communication).

During the fall and early spring when approximately one-third of the households in the community go into the country, children who accompany their parents are not considered absent. The school offers remedial programs for children who have missed time from being in the country, but most "country" students are accommodated in a regular class. Several parents expressed their dissatisfaction with the extent to which children who go into the country fall behind. The remedial program is often ineffective because the demand is so great that one classroom teacher is unable meet the needs of a group of students with varying levels of ability and patterns of attendance.

5.3.6 Fighting

Though fighting is a major cause for non-attendance, teachers remained unaware of this problem because much of the

conflict is limited to verbal abuse and goes unreported. Much of the verbal and physical abuse occurs on the school grounds or the bus.

Fighting often escapes the attention of the non-Innu teachers due to their inability to communicate in Innu-aimun.[26] Fighting was identified by close to 25% of the parents as the main problem in the school; it was also identified again in approximately 20 percent of the responses as being the main difficulty children confront at school. The causes of the fighting were explained by a young parent (my questions appear in italics):

> They [the kids] talk about the problems they have in regards to other kids beating them up. Again I think this is from the problem that these kids are associated with at home. If they grow up in a family that sees violence or in broken down homes .... they are very ummm .... cause I used to do that same thing to the younger kids - I used to beat them up cause I felt like...
>
> *Because of violence in your home?*
>
> I would imagine that would have been the problem ... Yes. Cause you are very jealous when you have a lot of problems at your house. You grow up wanting everyone to feel as miserable as you are. So when you see kids laughing, having a great time, you know they are not hungry, they have been fed in the morning, they have parents, you know they are going to go back and have sober parents, food

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[26] This is also due to the general lack of communication between parents and teachers. Translators are made available for parents who want to talk, but this resource is rarely tapped.

on the table. Then you get jealous and you beat up on the kids who are ... who are doing better than you ... that's what happens.

So even if you see a smile or something, that's a symbol of somebody who is happy, regardless of what the reality is?

Not so much a smile, but you always know which ones are doing well.

How do you know?

You just do because you know the kind of type of family they have at home... everybody knows whose parents drink and whose parents don't drink, and who are doing well in their homes and stuff like that, who spends time with their kids and who don't.

So everybody knows, even small kids?

I think so ... I knew ... I knew who everybody was... I knew if their parents drank and if they didn't drink and the kids with parents that didn't drink always seemed much happier, much more content with life... I used to envy them.

How many kids on average had parents who didn't drink? Half and Half?

It's hard to say right now, maybe half, maybe a little more than half, it is hard to say right now but that's not the point, if you have kids, four or five kids who are having this, that's gonna affect everybody else...(Survey I:31).

I remember for example if someone said to me, you got a hole in your sock, I'd beat them up or, you know, your jacket is from the sale for example, you'd beat 'em up. If they said, for example, they had this meal program in school and the kids that they knew they were going to go home and have a meal at home didn't rush to have the meals for example, whereas we didn't have the same opportunities as they had, we knew that you know... I knew

> that we'd go home and there would be nothing to eat at home so for example if I rushed over, people would say "Well you must be hungry" and you would get very embarrassed and very hurt, and if you didn't beat them up, you held that against them and so you are always conscious of these things, having a hole in your sock, for example or hole in your pants, you were very conscious about everything about your self, and everything that was wrong with you and that played like all day with you. Try to teach math with that sensitivity or that concern - you can't do it (Survey J:31).

The home situation of this student did eventually change and by later reconnecting with his cultural roots, he was able to go on to be an accomplished student. However, concerns expressed by parents regarding conflicts in the school suggest that the above comments typify the experiences of many Innu students today.

5.4 Conclusion

The "problem" with the school, as publicly articulated by the Innu leaders, has been its imposition of an alien Western content and, even more importantly, Western educational methods on to the student body. Innu leaders tend to argue that the language, culture and approach to learning of Western cultural forms contrasts sharply with what Innu children need - and what the wider Innu culture needs if it is to survive. Yet the school "problem" is made more complex still by the dislocation and anomie that followed settlement, factors which have helped to undermine the effectiveness of the present

school system. Many families now find themselves entrenched in an abusive and alcoholic lifestyle, and are unable to provide the type of home life necessary for children to learn regardless of whether or not the education is culturally appropriate. The students from problem homes then create an atmosphere of intimidation for the children who have more comfortable home lives and are having their basic needs met.

The school itself has provided a marginal education for Innu students, fundamentally out of tune with their world view as well as the social problems confronting them at home. Formal education has also been inadequate in preparing Innu students for lives as blue or white collar workers.

Culturally appropriate education may not necessarily alter the attitude that parents and children have towards the school which is still seen by many as an essentially foreign institution. Despite the school's potential to serve as a means for the transmission of Innu culture, unless formal education and attendance become part of the Innu value system, the current difficulties will continue to undermine the school's effectiveness.