

# Serving the Inuit offender

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**L**abrador Inuit have been reading and writing in Inuktitut for well over two centuries, first in syllabics and later in the Roman orthography. However, the establishment of boarding school dormitories in central Labrador caused a break in the passing on of the oral tradition by the Elders. Often, the boarding school system caused one to lose one's language and culture, thus, causing a broken spirit and a loss of Inuit identity. Some Inuit boarding school students became demoralized, turning to drowning the trauma with alcohol and drugs. In the prison classroom setting, a product of the boarding school system may be encountered.

**I**n the prison classroom there are five types of Inuit that a teacher will encounter; the traditional Inuk who is more unilingual Inuktitut and unicultural, a steep challenge; the bicultural and bilingual Inuk who knows his culture and the Euro-Canadian culture; the unilingual English speaking Inuk who knows his culture; the foster home/adopted Inuk who is unilingual English and more unaware of his culture; the unilingual English Inuk who lives the traditional, cultural and customary ways of the Inuit. Each of these groups require a slightly different delivery style of teaching. In some institutions, the teachers and Inuit Liaison or Elders have established reciprocal respect. They appreciate each other's expertise and knowledge. One ten-minute consultation will eliminate a month's concern.

Inuk inmates who have been involved in the boarding school system are more likely to display anger, frustration and agitation. Historically their school experience has not been pleasant. Sometimes these people will return to their home of origin no longer fitting in, having become "Euro-westernized". This brings about another sense of not belonging, resulting in inner turmoil and rage. Fortunately, many never forget their culture, heritage and Elder teachings, which has contributed to reclaiming their identity today.

It was in the early to mid-1960's that Inuit first went outside of Labrador to attend universities, schools of nursing, marine college and community colleges. The culture shock was phenomenal and traumatic. The homesickness for the daily use of Inuktitut, traditional country food, our Inuit families and Inuit ways of responding and reacting to stimuli was forever present. In the prison school environment, one can observe an

Inuk missing and craving for these familiar things. In this mode, the Inuk may become despondent and listless with the spirit energy being very unstill. Those in institutions need to be supportive and express understanding. Inuit are very resilient and will eventually spring back to being more like themselves.

Despite the availability of better education, Labrador Inuit who become incarcerated in federal prisons have quite limited classroom education. In the Inuit culture, the admired qualities were to be a good hunter/provider and animal-skin seamstress. Parents often took young Inuit men out of school to contribute to the survival of the family and the clan system. With unemployment being so high, they had to help in the pursuit of wild game and fish, fetching and cutting wood, and living in harmony with what the four seasons brought. This is still the case for those who largely live the hunter/gatherer, subsistence way of Inuit life.

Another contributing factor to lack of education is alcoholism dysfunction in the home environment. These youth become high risk for absence from school and delinquency. It is difficult to study while dealing with consistent family violence in the home and moral and spiritual support is not there address school problems. So, comes the dropout to the prison classroom setting. This has become more predominant as the Labrador way of life abruptly shifted from earth-based economy to a money-based one.

Some young Inuit inmates have reached the prison classroom with undiagnosed learning disabilities, having fallen through the cracks long ago. Also having been "on the land people", it is difficult to adjust to the confinement of a square cement room. Having been free spirits all their life, they are not only imprisoned by incarceration, they are imprisoned and abruptly removed from their land and all it represents. Most Inuit offenders do not see family members for the duration of their incarceration. A kind teacher may be the brightest spot of the day. It is important for correctional staff not to mistake this for inappropriate attachment.

Some Inuit may show symptoms of Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE). The proper assessment and diagnosis is difficult to mobilize and access in corrections. There must be effort made to arrive at a correct learning disability assessment in order to

effectively plan out the proper approach to education delivery. There is a need to make reports and assessments more culturally-specific, culturally-appropriate and culturally-relevant. Staff need to be receptive and open-minded enough to seek the Elder's and Native Liaison's expertise and knowledge. The endeavour to do this has a major positive influence on the Inuk's case plan and reintegration.

Inuit inmates are often assessed as low functioning. They can track animals, conduct a successful hunt, and provide food, shelter, warmth, clothing, comfort and education for the family from the land. In his own element, this Inuk is highly functional! The very one viewed as low functioning in the Euro-western culture, in a blinding blizzard may very well save others. In this situation, culture and society, who is low functioning? The Inuit have learned to speak your language, live your culture, understand your thinking and analysis, maybe it is time the Euro-western people learn, understand and be receptive to the Inuit ways.

The attitude from the dominant society has been that Inuit were unintelligent savages. However, there are Inuit in the prison classroom who have been to university, who are brilliant enough to continue but who have been constantly demoralized. With on-going encouragement, some have gone back to university or college. Correctional staff should be encouraging to these Inuit inmates, this may be the conduit for an Inuk to get the courage to return to secondary education.

Inuit must be taught using approaches that are relevant to their society and reality. If this is not accommodated, one is often met with a blank face. The Inuk student can probably not relate to, or identify with, anything the teacher is presenting. It is like listening to a foreign language when one does not understand it. Inuit offenders may doodle because Inuit listen and learn best when doodling. It is constructive to quietly approach the Inuk, asking if he/she understood, acknowledging the look of puzzlement or confusion. The Inuk may appear to be day dreaming or inattentive. Learn to distinguish the difference. For example, if he/she is looking out of the window or up at the ceiling, this can be misinterpreted as inattention, boredom or disinterest.

Body language is one upon which an Inuk highly depends. It may cause misperception and frustration. For example, one of my clients misinterpreted a white man's severe and pronounced tic as a condescending gesture after which he saw or heard nothing, a total mental block.

There are times when the Inuk will need to process from English to Inuktitut. The teacher may be going too fast with the material for the Inuk, enabling him/her to fall behind. Much frustration is likely to accompany this process. Correctional staff need to take time to show Inuit offenders concern because they may not make others aware about what is troubling them until they quit school for no apparent reason.

Inuit are visual and tactile learners. The workmanship and talent in the Inuit's craft is an indication of this. When a young man has watched his father hunt, shoot and harpoon a seal all his life, by age 13 or 16, it is now his turn. Inuit learn by watching and observing. An Inuk teen, at age 16, can dismantle a broken ski-doo, put it back together with homemade adjustments and go hunting in the bush with it. If someone tries to teach him about cars, he'll be lost because he doesn't have, nor need, a car. One must modify the approach to suit the Inuk's reality.

Many Inuit inmates have been taught to be humble by the Elders and the immensity / magnificence of our homeland, which molds and shapes us. To be singled out to read or provide an answer to a question makes one a focus of attention, when, in humility, one has peacefully and acceptingly done what has to be done for the survival of the clan. In a society, which is egalitarian, equal and cooperative, being targeted raises a sense of confrontational helplessness. It leaves the student confused, but he won't volunteer the state of his predicament because he has not been asked - a practice of respect. In the eyes of the more traditional Inuk, the white man has always made the decisions, which were right and final. This left him/her thinking that things were out of one's hands and control. An adaptation and adjustment period to this new kind of life pattern must be given to the Inuk. An example of this is the practice of having no eye contact from the Inuit coming from remote areas. If not understood, this can be misperceived as hiding something or not being truthful when, in fact, it is a show of respect.

There is intergenerational pain and trauma which, has been caused by the Canadian government in the dislocation and dispossession of Inuit, sometimes called "the Arctic exile". The specific needs of this group of Inuit in prisons are not acknowledged or considered in case planning, including in the classroom setting. The needs of this group of Inuit are scar-ridden. When one is aware of the psychological and spiritual trauma of that, it becomes easier to understand the behaviour of this group of Inuit in the class. This trauma is not usually recorded in the Offender Management System and is rarely mentioned in

the community assessments by the parole officer. When teachers can't make sense of some of the reactions and responses, they should visit the Inuit worker. There are only a few across the nation who are doing healing work from the abrupt umbilical cord severance from one's hereditary homeland. More education to the non-Inuit of the Arctic Exile must be given and received. With this group of Inuit inmate students there may be more anger, distrust and uncooperativeness. You may be seen as an extension of the government, which has caused the trauma and upheaval.

Inuit tend to live for today, making it difficult to plan for the future. The feeling is that whatever isn't here yet will be dealt with when the time comes. The clock is quite irrelevant in the North as everything is governed by the weather. One will go hunting weather-permitting, the air ambulance will arrive and depart weather-permitting, the passenger/freight boat will arrive and depart weather-permitting, and one will go fetching wood in the country weather-permitting. Upon first admission to incarceration, an Inuk student will often arrive late for school. Adjustment time to a clock-oriented way of life must be accommodated, at least for the first month of admission.

Another important factor to consider in the southern classroom is the unbearable heat. One is used to the wind, sun, rain and snow embracing one's being. Inuit inmates tend to be the most contented and spirited in the winter while they are in the south. One can often see Inuit in short-sleeve t-shirts in the winter. One cannot learn or grasp anything very well when the body and spirit are in discomfort. Sitting closer to an open door may give the Inuk a bit of circulation and breeze. Even a quiet fan may make all the difference to his attention span.

Another element of interest in the Inuit's adaptation to the school environment is the diet in prisons. When one craves the physical, mental and spiritual nourishment and nurturance of

traditional country foods, sometimes one cannot think of much else. In the North, eating and daily feasting with family, direct or extended, is a spiritual experience.

An Inuk student may attend class hurting from bad or sad family news. If not asked, he will not volunteer his news. You'll probably hear about his dilemma from his classmates. Often Inuit will not volunteer information until asked. One needs to be ever observant and mindful of very subtle changes.

The Inuit inmates are excellent at healthy sports competition. If you want to open a door, ask about their sport activities and Inuit games. Ask about his culture, he knows it best of all. An Inuk will also remain monosyllabic until his trust in you is grounded.

Another one of our strong characteristics is our sense of humour. The Inuit may burst out laughing just as you are passing by. Perhaps a movement, a gesture, a gait reminded them of a very comical individual back home. One may encounter an outburst of giggling when the topic was really serious in English but interpreted in the Inuit mind, the answer is absolutely out of this world. Thus, you may encounter one lone Inuk laughing when the non-Inuit are dead serious. This may be misinterpreted as being aloof, brazen, disrespectful or absolutely neurotic. The Inuk may make a very inappropriate gesture in the south but very appropriate back home. Winking, for example, can be used for mutual agreement on a matter but being fresh and flirtatious in the south.

Another aspect to remember is that Inuit are not First Nations. Inuit are a different race with our own language, culture, traditions and customs. Although, we are all First Peoples of Canada, it is important to acknowledge one's identity. ■

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