Coming Down South to School

Northern Native Women in a Montreal College

by Linda Collier

Les étudiant(e)s Cree et Inuït du Québec déménagent vers le sud en grand nombre afin d'étudier au niveau collégial. L'auteure examine la perception des professeur(e)s et des étudiant(e)s autochtones de deux collèges québécois par rapport au système éducatif.

In Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue, a village in the West Island suburbs surrounding Montreal, stands John Abbott College. Part of the CÉGEP system (Collèges d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel) of Quebec, it provides a two-year pre-university and professional programs (nursing, aircraft maintenance, police technology, etc.) to secondary school graduates.

Mohawks from the nearby reserves of Kahnawake and Kanehsatake have attended the college since its inception in 1970. They have done so in small numbers, though, and have passed through relatively unnoticed. In January 1989, however, ten Cree women from the James Bay area enrolled in nursing, making up one third of the new intake. Their arrival, and the resulting culture shock they and their teachers underwent, led to the institution of a Cree Nursing Project at the college. Counsellors were hired to work with the Cree communities, students, and staff. So far, two students have graduated; others follow in their footsteps. Meanwhile, more Cree students have arrived to study in social science, business administration, and other programs. All the students come under the now broadened mandate of the Cree Nursing Program, with its expanded staff of counsellors. In 1990, the Kativik School Board, established under the James Bay Agreement to oversee the education of Inuit students, set up its own support program and registered all its students studying in English at John Abbott College (others studying in French are registered at a different Montreal college).

About 5,000 students attend John Abbott College, and of these, fewer than 100 are Aboriginal. Although Native students comprise only a small part of the student body, their impact on the teachers and other members of the college community has been considerable.

I have been teaching a Humanities course, "Indian and Inuit Views," on and off since 1977. The course deals with Native and non-Native history and interactions.

Between 1992 and 1993, I interviewed teachers at John Abbott College and Heritage College (in Hull, Quebec) to find out how they viewed their role as teachers of Native students.

Most teachers considered teaching Native students to be a positive challenge. However, some expressed ambivalence about the education process.

> There is a sense I have that in order to teach the kinds of things we do, we're asking them to betray the kinds of things they do. And there isn't really a clear resolution to that.

After having discussed these issues with teachers, I also wondered what the students think about their experience coming south.

Over half of the Native students in college are women. So, I asked the Native women students (Cree and Inuit) in my classes if they would be interested in discussing their experiences.

All the young women spoke of the difficulty of living in a place full of so many people they did not know. Imagine attending a college of 5,000 students when you have never been outside your community of 350 people. Some of the students had never left their communities until they went south to college. They had never been in a car (as opposed to a truck, or ski-doo); never taken a bus; never driven on a paved road; never taken an elevator or escalator; never had to stop for a red traffic light—something which several found highly objectionable. On the tundra, as one woman pointed out, you can go wherever you want.

Child care problems figure prominently in any discussion of obstacles to academic success of Native women in college. Native women tend to have their children at a younger age than non-Natives. Some women bring their children with them, which means their lives are more complicated than the average seventeen-year old college student. Some have left their children with relatives in their distant communities and may have to return at inconvenient times in the semester to see them.

All Cree and Inuit students work in a second language and a foreign culture when they attend college. They worry about "losing" their own culture as they absorb more and more southern ways of doing and being. On the days when migrating geese are flying over the college, the students feel their homesickness even more intently. In the North, schools take a break for the goose-hunting season.

The students I interviewed had successfully completed their semester. They all exuded a sense of purpose and a determination to succeed. As one of them pointed out, they know they can make a difference. They feel a sense of responsibility, of commitment to their communities. As their teachers, many of us also feel a responsibility, for it is these young women who will be the social workers, the teachers, the nurses, and the first Inuit Ministers of their own government in a few years to come.

Linda Collier teaches Humanities and Philosophy at John Abbott College in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue, Quebec.