

## Article

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# Language, culture and community among urban Inuit in Ottawa

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Donna Patrick\* and Julie-Ann Tomiak\*\*

**Résumé:** Langue, culture et communauté chez les Inuit urbains d'Ottawa

Cet article traite des expériences sociales et des besoins d'une communauté urbaine inuit à Ottawa. Notre recherche s'appuie sur les données d'entrevues recueillies lors d'un partenariat de recherche avec le Centre pour enfants inuit d'Ottawa. Elle cherche à comprendre comment les cheminements sociaux, historiques et géographiques doivent être pris en considération lors de l'analyse des besoins d'élaboration de programmes urbains de langue et de culture inuit. Nos conclusions confirment l'hypothèse voulant que les communautés ne sont pas des entités fixes ou unifiées et que les questions de logement, langue et discrimination solidarisent les Inuit vivant en ville tout en leur créant des barrières. Les programmes de langue et de culture dirigés par les Inuit sont au centre du développement de la conscience communautaire et de l'augmentation de l'accès aux emplois et aux services de la ville.

**Abstract:** Language, culture and community among urban Inuit in Ottawa

This paper discusses the social experiences and needs of an urban Inuit community in Ottawa, drawing on interview data gathered as part of collaborative research with the Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre. Its aim is to trace the role of social, historical, and geographical processes in urban Inuit experiences and to assess how they must be considered in an analysis of Inuit language and culture programming needs in the city. Our findings support the notions that communities are not fixed or unified entities and that issues such as housing, language, and discrimination both unite and create barriers for Inuit in the city. Inuit-run language and culture programs are central to community-building and to increased access to employment and services in the city.

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## Introduction

In 2001, the Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> Peoples Survey of Canada reported that “parents of 60% of Aboriginal children in non-reserve areas believed it was very important or somewhat important for their children to speak and understand an Aboriginal language” (Norris 2007: 24). Since the time that this survey was taken, this number is likely to have increased, given the continued growth in urban Aboriginal populations (Statistics Canada 2008) and in national and international initiatives to revitalise and promote Indigenous languages (Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures 2005). In this paper, we investigate the linguistic and sociocultural processes that shape the lives of urban Inuit in southern Canada, presenting and analysing the results of interviews with Inuit living in one Canadian city, Ottawa. Our goal in doing so is to achieve a greater understanding of these processes—in particular, how Inuktitut language learning and use figures in the lives of urban Inuit. An examination of these processes not only contributes to a wider body of urban Inuit research (this volume and Kishigami 2002a, 2002b, 2004) but, we believe, is crucial for any analysis of Inuit language learning needs and programming in urban centres.

The research to be reported here is part of an ongoing project which investigates the experiences and cultural, linguistic, and social needs of Inuit living in Ottawa. This investigation has included documenting and seeking to understand issues related to Inuit migration and community development. While linkages between Inuit language and identity have already been the focus of research in the Arctic (Dorais 1997, 2006; Dorais and Sammons 2002; Kaplan 2001; Langgaard 2001; Patrick 2003; Tulloch 2004), documentation of language attitudes and linguistic practices in southern Canadian cities is still lacking. Similarly, while the efforts of Inuit and other circumpolar peoples to create international communities have prioritised concerns about Indigenous language use (*e.g.*, ICC 2005; Tulloch 2005), little has been said so far about the processes of community formation in southern urban centres.

In what follows, we first provide an overview of the social and political context of Inuit in Ottawa and a description of the methodology of our research project. We then present and analyse excerpts from our interview data, considering why Inuit have moved to Ottawa and other southern cities; what linguistic, social, and economic barriers exist for Inuit living in these environments; and how access to Inuit language and culture has become important for many Inuit in Ottawa, particularly those raising families. We focus on the important role of community organisations and especially the Inuit Head Start Program, originally funded by Health Canada and more recently by the Public Health Agency of Canada. Finally, we examine the strategic use of resources available to promote community belonging and support, and the persistence of Inuit linguistic and cultural practices.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Aboriginal” encompasses First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, as specified in section 35(2) of the *Constitution Act, 1982*.

## Researching urban Inuit

The rate of urbanisation among Inuit is the lowest among Indigenous groups in Canada, with fewer than 30% living in cities and fewer than 20% living outside of the four territorial regions of Nunatsiavut, Inuvialuit Settlement Area, Nunavik, and Nunavut (Norris and Clatworthy 2003; Statistics Canada 2001). Nevertheless, Inuit urbanisation and urban populations have been increasing steadily. Currently, the Inuit population in southern Canada is estimated at about 5,000—an estimate based on available census data but also on the recognition of those who work with urban Inuit that growth in this population has been underreported (Tungasuvvingat Inuit 2005). This underreported growth is clearly reflected in the estimated Inuit population of Ottawa. Although the 2001 census reported 455 Inuit living in Ottawa—the largest urban Inuit population in the country—the current Inuit population, according to the Ottawa Inuit community centre, Tungasuvvingat Inuit (TI)<sup>2</sup> is over 1,000, and continues to increase.

The present community-based research project offers a preliminary investigation of this growing and changing Inuit community in Ottawa. The project is based on a research partnership between a Carleton University research team and the Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre (OICC), a community-run centre which houses the Sivummut ('Going Forward') Head Start Program and the Inuit Family Literacy Program (which does not yet have an Inuktitut name). In the spring, summer, and fall of 2007, our team interviewed 20 members of the urban Inuit community: 16 women and four men, two of whom were non-Inuit parents of Inuit children. Interviews were based on a set of semi-structured questions that were collaboratively agreed upon with Inuit employees at the OICC. Interviewees were selected using a "snowballing" method, where Inuit from the OICC and other Inuit organisations in Ottawa were approached to be interviewed. These people then suggested others who might be interested in participating in the project<sup>3</sup>. In addition to the interviews, we held a focus group evening with seven Inuit parents of Inuit children (five women and two men), to give them an opportunity to address some of our guiding research questions in a group setting. These questions centred on programming needs, community-building processes, and barriers to employment and social and cultural well-being.

Participants in our study were roughly between the ages of 20 and 55. All except one had Inuit children (and in two cases, grandchildren) in their care. The majority of those interviewed were employed either full- or part-time; two were students at a local college and university and four were unemployed. Of the 25 Inuit participants in the interviews and focus group, four had lived in southern Canada all of their lives, with three having family in Nunatsiavut (Labrador) and one having family in Nunavik (Northern Quebec). The rest had come from various Nunavut communities and had been in the South between two and half and 20 years, with the average being about

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<sup>2</sup> Established in 1987, Tungasuvvingat Inuit operates as a community-based resource centre.

<sup>3</sup> Following the protocols of our research methodology, names are not used in our presentation and analysis of the interview data.

eight years. While our sample is relatively small and focuses on Inuit with children involved in activities at the OICC, it still provides a clear overview of some of the issues facing urban Inuit from different linguistic, social, and geographical backgrounds as they attempt to construct a “community” in a southern urban centre. What our sample does not include are those Inuit who are in Ottawa only for a few weeks or months at a time (perhaps visiting family or friends or seeking medical treatment). That is, it is limited to those Inuit, primarily with children, who have made Ottawa their home.

One of the most striking points of commonality among the Inuit participants in this study was their inability to travel with any frequency to northern communities to visit family. Each of them returned only once or twice over the course of their time in the South, due to the prohibitive costs of travelling North. Thus, the kind of mobility usually attributed to diasporic communities and other urban Aboriginal groups does not apply to urban Inuit<sup>4</sup>, who are in a situation similar to the migrant peoples whom Hage (2005: 463) has described as “not really spend[ing] that much time ‘moving.’” In the following section, we draw on our interview data to outline the reasons why some Inuit move south and some factors that unite and others that distinguish members of the Inuit community.

### **Southern migration, tensions and community**

Inuit move to urban centres in the South for a variety of reasons, related to health, employment, education, and family. Some stay in the city for very short periods of time, while others have lived in Ottawa most or all of their lives. As is the case with Inuit living in other cities, such as Montreal and Winnipeg, many Inuit arrive in Ottawa to receive medical treatment and some end up staying in the city once the treatment has finished. A relatively large number of Inuit come for post-secondary education, to attend programs offered by Nunavut Sivuniksavut<sup>5</sup>, the Inuit Art Foundation, Algonquin College or one of the universities in the Ottawa area. Some have moved south for more permanent and better-paying forms of employment with national Inuit or other Aboriginal organisations, or with the federal or territorial governments. Others are in Ottawa for family or personal reasons: to be with parents or siblings, to seek better education opportunities for their children, or to flee abusive or otherwise difficult situations in the North. Yet, the “promise of a better future” (*ibid.*: 474) unites most of the Inuit coming to the city, much as it unites other migrant populations.

In addition to Inuit who have left the North, there are those who have been raised in the South, either as a result of their parents moving south for work or through

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<sup>4</sup> See Tomiak and Patrick (forthcoming) for a more in-depth analysis of migration, diaspora, and indigeneity in Canada.

<sup>5</sup> Nunavut Sivuniksavut founded in 1985, offers an eight-month post-secondary (college) program for Inuit youth in order to prepare them for employment created by the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (1993).

adoption into southern families. Over the course of our research, several interviewees noted that tensions can arise between northern- and southern-born Inuit, given that linguistic and cultural skills and knowledge associated with the North are the ones that clearly mark Inuitness (*e.g.*, Dorais 1997; Dorais and Sammons 2002; Tulloch 2004). Inuit raised in the South (not unlike some Arctic communities where English is predominant) may lack the linguistic (*i.e.* Inuktitut) and cultural skills which have become desired symbolic capital among those wishing to connect with family members and communities and to be part of Inuit collectivities in the North. These forms of cultural capital include knowledge of how to “perform” one’s Inuitness, through throat-singing, drumming, or Inuktitut language practices. As one urban Inuk put it, “I grew up all across Canada and never met another Inuk until I came to Ottawa [...] [where] I learned to throat sing and drum dance.”

While southern-raised Inuit may be able to acquire singing and drumming skills, it is more difficult for them to master Inuktitut, given the rarity with which the language is used and the lack of language-learning programmes in southern cities. And although urban Inuit may lack these forms of desirable northern linguistic capital, they possess other language, literacy, and social capital that is valuable for urban life<sup>6</sup>. As one Inuk man noted, “A lot of people that come fresh from the North, their English may not be the greatest [...] [and] in Ottawa in particular a big barrier is [the need to be] bilingual for English and French [...]. There aren’t a lot of Inuit who speak three languages.” Sometimes Inuit who have lived longer in the South help others with language. This was true of one Inuk woman, who commented that she was able to help a woman who was “an excellent” worker, but could “hardly speak English.” With her knowledge of southern work-related literacy practices, the more southern-experienced Inuk was able to help the other Inuk “put her resume together” to obtain permanent employment.

Nevertheless, despite the tensions that may exist given the different values of symbolic resources for community belonging and material well-being, urban Inuit are relatively unified as a group. This sense of unity is based largely on the similarity of their experiences in moving from small communities to urban centres for a better life and on their common awareness that many Inuit are racialised and marginalised and face socioeconomic barriers in mainstream Canadian society. Of particular relevance here, and highlighted in our interview data, is that newcomers to the city often find it difficult to navigate urban space both physically and socially. Real problems for some are the dearth of affordable housing (which is somewhat ironic since housing shortages in the Arctic operate as a “push” factor for Inuit movement south) and the “undesirability” of the areas of the city where affordable housing is located. In addition, many newcomers to the city find that their access to services, and thus their ability to thrive in their new environment, is at times very restricted, as a result of geographic dislocation, sociocultural and linguistic barriers, and other factors (Tomiak and Patrick

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<sup>6</sup> “Urban” here refers to southern urban, although it is recognised that there may be parallels with Inuit in other Arctic “urban” communities where some Inuit speak little Inuktitut. Nevertheless, the gaps between southern and northern linguistic knowledge are greater for southern Inuit who are that much further away from Inuktitut-speaking communities and have more access to and need for standard forms of English and English literacy.

forthcoming). In the following sections, we address some of these factors in examining housing, language, discrimination, and social isolation in the city.

### *Housing and urban neighbourhoods*

The heterogeneity of our interviewees was reflected not only in the differing number of years that they had resided in the city and differing levels of education and employment, but also in their residence in different parts of the city<sup>7</sup>. Although those with relatively well-paying jobs lived outside of Ottawa or in middle-class areas of the city, the majority of those we interviewed lived in or to the east of the predominantly working-class area of Vanier, where most subsidised Inuit housing is located. As it happens, this subsidised housing is insufficient for the Inuit population of Ottawa, and the waiting list for such housing remains long. Moreover, given the general lack of affordable housing in the city and the apparent restriction of new housing initiatives in the Vanier neighbourhood, many Inuit, particularly those with small children, who wish to find housing in other, more desirable, neighbourhoods, saw little possibility of doing so. As one mother put it, no matter what new housing initiative existed, it was “still gonna be Vanier. What’s wrong with the South end or the west end or [...]?” These concerns were echoed by one Inuk father, who had this to say about his housing situation: “I lived in Vanier for 10 years [...]. I finally just got out; I’m paying market rent now. I’m on the waiting list for a 3 bedroom [...] but once I get up there, they’ll probably offer me a place in Vanier. I really don’t want to move back.”

Notwithstanding such remarks, Vanier is, for many Inuit, very much their community: it is a dynamic, liveable space where TI and OICC, their community centres, are located, with the pan-Aboriginal Wabano Health Centre also not far away; and many Inuit are happy with their living arrangements and with what the community has to offer. In fact, one of our participants indicated his desire to move there, precisely for these reasons: “I’d like to move closer. I got my parents that live in Vanier. My wife’s mother actually lives in this area, too. It’d be nice to get a little bit closer to them.” As one Inuk woman also noted, “you know, Vanier’s not that bad, it’s just really [...] it drag’s you down. It can drag you down if you’re not a strong, focused person.” Given such resilience, Inuit demands for greater access to affordable housing appeared to outweigh concerns about its location—particularly in the context of concerns about homelessness, the lack of affordable housing, and addiction problems in the city.

As one woman noted about the downtown area, called Centretown, “being from [there] you see a lot of Inuit struggling with addictions or struggling to get a step ahead. Walking around Centretown you see a lot of them roughing it.” Many Inuit we interviewed who have adequate housing expressed a concern for less fortunate Inuit. One of them remarked: “I know that a lot of people who struggle in the city. There are a lot more challenges if you are struggling with trauma and addictions in your life, life

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<sup>7</sup> This spread of Inuit across the city has been found in Montreal (Kishigami 2002: 57) and characterises other First Nations and Métis urban communities (e.g., Maxim et al. 2003).

down here would be much harder than it would be up North. Because of the Children's Aid Society, the police, um, all these different things that come into a person's life when an adult is struggling [...].”

### ***Language***

The fact that the Inuit we interviewed had a range of housing experiences means, of course, that it is difficult to generalise across this group. As we have just seen, however, certain patterns and concerns clearly did emerge. Similarly, the experience of linguistic barriers was a common one, even if the specific nature of these barriers differed significantly from person to person, depending on their access to valued ways of speaking in formal and informal English- and French-speaking domains and in Inuit networks, where Inuktitut has become a key marker of Inuitness.

One key generalisation is that limited French and English language skills and limited ability to control the literacy genres associated with filling out applications and dealing with social services in the city severely restricted employment opportunities. Even those who were already gainfully employed sometimes could face language barriers or discrimination based on a perceived “accent,” as one woman noted: “When I came down here I had a strong accent and I found nobody understood me down here so I really had to change the way that I was thinking and I had to adapt to speaking without an accent. Nobody understood me at work. Finding friends was difficult.”

Moreover, even though speaking Inuktitut was often an asset, there were still significant barriers for those who spoke only Inuktitut, as noted by one woman who worked for an Inuit organisation: “if your primary language is Inuktitut, in some ways that's helpful, because there are jobs within federal and provincial Inuit organisations and service delivery agencies, such as ours, where Inuktitut is an asset, but overall it's hard to get a job in the mainstream if your primary language is Inuktitut.” Another barrier to employment was educational level. As the woman just quoted also observed:

The graduation rate or the education level of people living in the North is lower, substantially lower than people living in the South. So, in the North that's OK. It's based on experience. It's based on real life stuff as far as getting employment. But of course when you move down here and you're trying to get employment, a lot of it is education-based, so that provides some barriers as well.

### ***Discrimination***

Barriers related to language skills, educational level, and a lack of recognition of northern experience were not the only ones that urban Inuit faced. Another was racial discrimination, revealed in various stories that interviewees recounted. These stories suggested that the discrimination was real, and that it had required the development of coping strategies. As some interviewees noted, their ability to thrive as long-term residents in the city had required them to become “stronger” and to speak up when



racist incidents occurred. Others had recounted their children being told at school “to go back to China.” One woman mentioned an incident involving a bank teller, who had made derogatory remarks about Inuit after serving an Inuk woman:

[...] he said something to me like; “oh you guys are all the same,” or I don’t really remember what he said, but [...] that got me so angry inside, because she may have been intoxicated, but I wasn’t. I was there to pick up my money to go buy food for my kids and maybe that’s what he was referring to, like alcoholics. So when he said something to me [...] it made me so mad that I told him, “excuse me, we’re not all the same” [...] I said “don’t say anything like that, she’s Inuit, I’m Inuit, you’re white—there’s other white people out there worse than she is, so what are you saying?” I just had to tell him, you know. Like before I couldn’t [...] never used to say anything, but when I moved down here I learned I have to defend myself sometimes [...]. Like I can’t stay quiet and say nothing anymore. I have to protect myself and have to say something sometimes.

Another woman recounted a similar story of toughness in the face of discrimination:

One time, I was on the bus, going to work and this lady was really rude to me. I said, can you move your backpack, so I can sit there? And her remark was, “go back to China.” And I said, “excuse me. Go back where you belong” [mimicking voice of other person]. And I said, “you know what, I’m a First Canadian, I’m Inuk.” She’d get up and move away from me [laughter] [...]. [Now], I would speak up. For my people [...] a lot of Inuit wouldn’t say anything. They would just sit back, and not saying anything.

These stories suggest not only that Inuit in the city had had to develop personal and strategic resources to be able to respond to, and even educate, non-Aboriginal people who had expressed racist views about them, but also that they had come to see stereotyping and racism in the city as a problem that required them to come together to combat it.

### ***The social effects of barriers: Isolation in the city***

The problems that Inuit described related to poverty, housing shortages, linguistic barriers, and discrimination appeared to be further exacerbated by yet another problem: that of the social isolation that Inuit commonly experienced when they moved to the city. This isolation arose in part because of other barriers that Inuit faced in coming from small communities where “you know everybody, you can walk anywhere and [you don’t have] a lot of choices that you have to make down here [...]. All the vehicles, people, the weather, size of community.” As another Inuk woman put it, moving to Ottawa presented “[a] whole lot of challenges [...]. Getting to know the city. Getting to know the bus route, the area. Stuff like that [...] I didn’t like it at first [...]. I felt so alone, so far away from my family and relatives [...] [now] I have family living over here now [...] I got adjusted.” Despite the fact that, as one man put it, the city was “just mind-boggling,” “there are a lot of conveniences, in terms of jobs and access to health care. It’s a lot easier here. But the culture shock was huge [...] very

overwhelming.” As these words suggest, the promise of a better life nevertheless outweighed the shock of adjustment to life in the city.

As we have already seen, some Inuit living in Ottawa reported having limited access to the information and resources needed to receive services. Although the community centre Tungasuvvingat Inuit offered initial support, language barriers could be even higher for those who arrived in the city without the English fluency and vocabulary needed for coping with urban life. Moreover, urban mobility depended, in a very literal sense, on having adequate financial resources, since transportation in the city cost money and, unlike in northern communities, it was often impossible to “get a lift” or to travel by foot to access required services. This added to the psychological difficulties that some Inuit encountered in the transition from “knowing everyone” to feeling “isolated,” and losing their sense of groundedness and ability to negotiate the urban environment.

Another difficulty in accessing services—which included those related to school and after-school activities and homework help as well as government, healthcare, and banking services—was related to the difference between northern and southern norms of interaction. Such norms in northern Inuit communities—including those related to speech style, facial expression, gestures, and body language—differed greatly from those in southern urban environments; as a result, miscommunication and misunderstandings could easily arise. For example, some Inuit were reluctant to ask questions when interacting with people in authority; and Inuit children could be reluctant to ask questions in the classroom, a reluctance that non-Aboriginal southern teachers (unfamiliar with Inuit communicative norms) might interpret as an unwillingness to participate. In fact, as regards Inuit children in school, this mismatch between their cultural expectations and southern school culture had the potential to create problems for them, including feelings of alienation and ultimately greater school drop-out rates. As we shall see in the next section, the OICC has targeted some of these problems, with programming that has included the pre-school Aboriginal (Inuit) Head Start (AHS) programme and other language and literacy initiatives for urban Inuit.

The presence of social isolation among Inuit reveals a need for community centres and urban Inuit organisations, which can create a “small community feel.” As another woman noted: “this is isolation [...] Ottawa is a very big city. You come from a small community to come to Ottawa, so [we need] a place for people to come together and make that ‘small community feel’ again [...] it’s amazing.” The need for this “small community feel” was met to some extent by the Inuit community centres, TI and OICC, which were safe, welcoming, and accessible spaces for Inuit all over Ottawa. However, since they are both located in Vanier, they tended to serve Inuit from this area. These centres, and the AHS in particular, have been invaluable in the promotion of Inuit language and culture, as we describe below.

## Creating “community”: The role of Inuit-specific programmes

Given the urban realities already described, the Inuit “community” in Ottawa cannot be understood as fixed or geographically bounded. Instead, it must be conceptualised more abstractly, in terms of social networks, cultural practices, and institutional landscapes (Howard-Bobiwash 2003; Lobo 2001; Proulx 2003; Weibel-Orlando 1999) and in terms of complex processes that have been expanding and redefining notions of Inuitness. As such, there has been a recognition among activists of a need for the construction of an urban Inuit community around key organisations that provide services for Inuit, and for the creation of spaces where Inuit cultural and linguistic practices can be validated. As attested by the first National Urban Inuit One Voice Workshop held in Ottawa in October 2005, there is considerable momentum to address the needs of urban Inuit communities across Canada (Tungasuvvingat Inuit 2005). Indeed, a key objective of this event—which was organized by TI and brought together Inuit representatives from across Canada—was “to create an effective advocacy mechanism to achieve an equitable share of Aboriginal funding to address the needs of Inuit living outside their land claim regions” (*ibid.*: 5)<sup>8</sup>.

At present, Inuit-specific services are underfunded; the funding that is available is often short-term (*ibid.* 2005; Urban Aboriginal Task Force 2007) and there is considerable competition among service providers for funding that is both adequate and stable. Most of the funding is allocated to the “Aboriginal” category in which Inuit concerns are largely marginalised. This problem is summarised in the report of the National Urban Inuit One Voice Workshop:

This “pan-Aboriginal” approach is felt to be simply a short form for First Nations: thus causing Inuit to continue to be treated as First Nations in program delivery. Inuit, a unique people with their own culture, language, and history, are often forgotten [...] Inuit are frequently not able to obtain funds due, as well, to this pan-Aboriginal approach as funds are often distributed on a per capita basis. Since Inuit are the smallest population of Aboriginal peoples in urban settings, they are frequently given a very small portion of Aboriginal funds. This pan-Aboriginal approach in services and programs is simply not working (Tungasuvvingat Inuit 2005: 7).

The need for Inuit-specific funding and programming was also stressed by the participants in our interviews and focus group discussion. As one Inuit community worker noted:

[One of the things that] is really difficult [is] when governments fund programs for Inuit, they fund them in the regions up North. [Yet] [...] the biggest growth for the population [...] has been for people moving to the South, and yet we are constantly fighting for dollars [...] [I]f we were up in the North, it would be easier to find dollars, I believe. So, it’s getting the urban population recognised as a distinct group who needs services. [...] People just are not aware of the urban population [...] mainstream services don’t work. So, that’s not the

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<sup>8</sup> As mentioned earlier, Statistics Canada chronically underreports the actual size of the Inuit population in Ottawa. This is an important point, because governments allocate funding based on census demographics. As the urban Inuit population grows, so does the need for services.

answer, the answer is definitely to come up with services that are specific to the population. And the argument is harder and longer, so therefore it takes longer to get the services. It's a constant fight to get that money.

Although tensions can arise among Inuit and other Aboriginal organisations in relation to funding issues, the Inuit community strives to be united in pursuing the goals of a sustainable community and community infrastructure. As one participant remarked, "I find that here in Ottawa it's a great community, because we tend to look at you as [...] they relate to you more because you're Inuit." Several participants talked about making efforts to reach out to Inuit whom they had met, regardless of the northern region that they were originally from.

### **Inuit Head Start, language programmes and the strategic use of resources**

Our community research partner, the Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre (OICC), plays a central role in the Inuit community in Ottawa in providing language and cultural programming. It serves a diverse Inuit constituency, and not only brings Inuit together, but promotes an otherwise largely neglected social goal: helping Inuit to cope in a challenging and sometimes discriminatory urban environment. The OICC administers and delivers the Sivummut Inuit Head Start Program, which has proven very successful in providing early childhood and family learning within a culturally sensitive environment. The Inuktitut word *sivummut* means 'moving forward,' and the goals of the program are closely aligned with Inuit concerns of maintaining and strengthening Inuktitut and Inuit cultural practices.

The Aboriginal Head Start Programming in Urban and Northern Communities prioritises the culture and language component and fosters Aboriginal children's knowledge of their own language. Projects are set up to "enhance the process of cultural and language revival and retention, with the ultimate goal that, where possible, children will aspire to learn their respective languages and participate in their communities' cultures after AHS" (Public Health Agency of Canada 2008). While AHS's programming involves "locally controlled and designed early intervention strategies [that] can provide Aboriginal children with a positive sense of themselves, a desire for learning, and opportunities to develop fully as successful young people" (*ibid.*), the OICC's mandate is to address Inuit needs in a southern urban centre, with supportive learning environments for both children and adults: "The mission of the Sivummut Head Start is to provide each child and parent with a supportive learning environment that promotes Inuit culture and language" (OICC 2006). In the interviews that we conducted, participants all commented on the importance of promoting Inuktitut and Inuit culture in Ottawa and the integral role of the OICC in providing children and families with opportunities to learn and speak Inuktitut. Indeed, the OICC provides much more than pre-school education, giving families an opportunity for learning. Many parents who did not possess the linguistic skills to transmit Inuktitut to their children commented on the importance of the language component of the program. According to the parents whom we interviewed, instruction in Inuktitut

greatly enhanced the educational experience of children and of the entire family. The following remarks from this Inuk mother raised in the South are representative of those that we received from Inuit parents:

My kids have both been attending since they were 18 months old [...]. It's so important for them to learn language, culture, that kind of stuff, at this early age [...]. It will stay with them forever [...] so later on, when they are older, they can go up North and stuff. [...] I know with my kids coming here and going to TI [the Inuit community centre], it gives them a great sense of community and belonging [...].

For many parents who did not grow up in the North, having their children enrolled in the Inuit Head Start program also made it possible for them to connect with Inuit culture along with their children. As one participant noted:

I come to Inuit Head Start to get closer to the Inuit, to become more aware of my culture, and to learn more. I have two daughters now and when my first one entered the program and started singing in Inuktitut and asking me to sing it with her and I didn't know I felt bad so I started coming here myself and started learning all the stuff that she's learning [...] [The cultural teacher] is always telling me "you're doing a great job; you're learning all the words" and [...] I can sing a few songs now, I can count higher than I've ever been able to, lots more words.

Acquiring "words" and "songs" may seem to be no more than a first step in language learning. However, in many urban contexts, the symbolic value and sense of connectedness that this brings far outweighs the goals of fluency that are more typical in other language learning contexts (e.g., Darnell 2004). As Bonita Lawrence notes in her study of urban aboriginality in Toronto, relearning Indigenous languages remains a serious challenge in urban settings. Lawrence (2004: 167, 236) points out that these efforts are often limited to speakers acquiring only a few phrases of these languages and do not involve sustained efforts at the community level to rebuild communities of speakers or the cultural knowledge embedded in the languages. Yet, language is often a key to reclaiming Indigenous identities. "[M]any urban Native people, whether they are mixed-race or not, are insecure about their identities primarily because of loss of language and culture" (*ibid.*: 177).

In addition to language learning, several Inuit parents we spoke with talked about the close relationship that they had with the OICC, which some of them identified as integral to family life. As one Inuk father pointed out, "I consider the OICC part of my family. I've been with OICC since the head start program started 11 years ago now. My son [...] he was in the first class that graduated. My daughter was also in the second or third class that graduated from here." For those Inuit more fully identified as "urban"—that is, those with limited knowledge of and exposure to the Arctic and the symbolic resources associated with the Inuit homelands—programs such as the Inuit Head Start provided ways to connect with and strengthen their sense of Inuitness. This is particularly well expressed in the following remarks of one young father:

I find that identity is a big [challenge] a big struggle. Like, it was for me, because I didn't know where I belonged. My Mom's [non-Inuk] and my Dad's Inuit. And I went to a school where I was the only Inuit in the school and my family got teased a lot. I just didn't know where I fit in until I started coming to the Head Start program and the Family Resource Centre [an Inuit-specific program offered by Tungasuvvingat Inuit]. It is getting easier now, but now my son is going to school where there is only two Inuit children, including himself. He's been coming to Head Start since he was small and he knows he's Inuit—he's got his identity. The Head Start program taught me a lot about my culture, our culture, and they also taught him as well. If it weren't for a place like this, I wouldn't know my culture at all.

Or, as another southern-raised Inuk put it, "I learned more about my culture here than I have anywhere else."

The importance of Inuit children learning Inuktitut, both through formal instruction and in the home, was also stressed as crucial for connections to be maintained across space and generations. For Inuit children growing up in the South, being able to communicate with grandparents who lived in the North was an important goal that several parents observed as a motivation to maintain or strengthen their children's language skills. As one Inuk parent explained, "first of all my mom doesn't speak English, she only speaks Inuktitut, so I don't want my kids to have a hard time talking to her if they want to. So, I try to speak to them sometimes and my mother talks, so I don't want to lose it." However, as one mother explained, a desire to maintain Inuktitut in the home was often frustrated by a pattern of language use whereby a parent used Inuktitut but children responded in English:

My kids [...] sometimes I speak Inuktitut to them and other times I speak English. When I first moved down here, I spoke [...] I tried to speak mostly Inuktitut, because I find they are losing their Inuktitut [...] they'll answer me in English at first. And today, two years later, they're asking me, what does that mean. [...] They can understand most of it. It's just, if I haven't said a certain word in a while, then they'll ask me, what does that mean.

Thus, different parents had different reasons for learning Inuktitut and different strategies for accessing and using these valued resources. Regardless of these differences, however, the desire and need for language-learning was echoed by the vast majority of those we interviewed. As such, it was one of the key concerns related to urban Inuit identities and the sense of belonging and connectedness to Inuktitut-speaking family members, whether in the Arctic or in the southern city.

## **Conclusion**

In commenting on urban Aboriginal identities, Lawrence (2004: 231) notes that "urban Native people [...] have no collective land base, which, in addition to loss of language, is the most problematic aspect of urban Native identity." Drawing on Richard (1994), Lawrence notes that "the most immediate priority" for urban Native people "should be a focus on developing vehicles for language regeneration." One such vehicle that she suggests for those attempting "to teach languages in urban settings" is

resource-sharing across First Nations organisations “at an institutional level” to “maintain and further the use of Indigenous languages” (Lawrence 2004: 233). While this idea of “resource-sharing” among First Nations, not to mention Inuit, and Métis, organisations does make sense, it does not in itself constitute a real solution to the problem of Indigenous language funding. This is because Aboriginal organisations are already struggling financially to deal with on-reserve poverty, deteriorating health conditions, housing and other issues, and with costs associated with land claims and rights issues.

Nevertheless, urban issues are not completely overlooked. During a recent lecture at Carleton University<sup>9</sup>, Mary Simon, the President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) noted that the ITK, while focussing on the four land claim settlement areas of Canada, could not ignore urban Inuit issues. “This is an area,” she said, “that is growing and that needs more attention.” Simon also noted that Inuit often arrive in southern urban settings inadequately prepared for life in these settings. Moreover, lower academic standards in the North often made employment more difficult to come by; and language and cultural barriers existed that had to be faced and overcome. Finally, homelessness, she said, was now a major problem for many urban Inuit.

All of these points raised by Simon are echoed in our own research. Nevertheless, given the other pressing issues that ITK is faced with—including the assertion of Canadian sovereignty in the North and control of the North West Passage and “Inuit” waterways, climate change and environmental degradation, threats to animal (and human) populations in the North, chronic housing shortages, substance abuse, and social and educational problems, to name but a few—it is understandable that resources for urban Inuit are limited. Financial resources are also needed to promote Inuit action through ITK to address human and Indigenous rights issues and relevant legislation. Given all of this, one is hard pressed to find any room for “resource sharing.”

Of course, language rights and language promotion are hardly foreign notions in Canada. Since the implementation of official bilingualism in 1969, heritage language groups—settlers speaking languages other than French and English—and Aboriginal people have made regular pleas for greater resources to be allocated for the teaching and promotion of their languages. This struggle has been particularly long and difficult for Aboriginal groups, who recently participated in a national Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures. Its 2005 report makes a clear case for promoting Indigenous languages in a nation that has supported linguistic duality, based on the languages of the country’s two dominant groups of settlers (Patrick 2007). Yet, no funds have so far been offered by the current federal government to address these language funding issues. What is more, the Task Force document itself devotes only one page (*ibid.*: 36-37) to urban language issues in a document that is well over 100 pages. Clearly, more attention must be given to urban realities.

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<sup>9</sup> This lecture was given on October 24, 2007 to the first-year seminar for Aboriginal students at Carleton. We thank Patricia Reynolds for inviting us to this talk.

The phenomenon of Inuktitut language learning in urban settings is an important one, because it reveals the importance of language learning for both children and adults, which enables Inuit to connect in important ways to the territorial regions where family members reside. The importance of this language learning raises many questions for investigators of urban Inuit communities. These questions include the following ones: What language variety should be chosen for urban Indigenous language instruction? What are the consequences of choosing one variety of Inuktitut over another for urban Inuit<sup>10</sup>? How are teachers recruited, trained, and sustained in programming once it is under way? What kinds of French and English-language instruction need to accompany Inuktitut language programming in order to address the other linguistic barriers noted in this paper? What does literacy mean for urban Inuit and how can it best be taught? This investigation into the realities of urban life for Inuit in Ottawa thus represents only a first step in understanding the phenomenon of Inuit communities in southern cities.

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that dialectal variation appears not to be a concern in terms of the language of instruction of the Inuit Head Start. Inuit parents are primarily concerned with instruction in Inuktitut regardless of the particular variety that the cultural teachers provide. As one cultural teacher explained, “at first, I ask the parents, is it OK if I use my own dialect. Never ever has one parent said no.”



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