The Voice of Nunavut
Education, youth, and the future of a territory

BY ANTOINE PASTRÉ

Small, thin, a simple cover: the book I'm thinking of is almost insignificant in its proportions: barely wider than the palm of my hand, as thin as a small agenda. It is neither its portability, nor the esthetics of its cover that make it special: rather, the weight of its message. The book I am talking about isn't the one you are currently holding in your hands, but rather its main inspiration: a short essay on contemporary China[1] that I like to call a *companion*; one of those bedside-table books that, when routine settles in too much, helps me focus and disables the noise that comes as a result of profound changes underway in other parts of the world.

The book is a useful reminder to me of how important mastery of a language is for the future of a nation. Clearly, concisely and with a sense of urgency, it lays out the case study of a country unable to retain its original (classical) language, and the long-term consequences of such a loss. China is described as "three times mute": losing the ability to talk about its present, its recent history and its ancient past. It is a country that dreams of its past, while having lost its memory. This situation creates a paradox. While China is more and more present on the world scene, it is as if the country was absent: we (the West) do not hear its *voice*[2].

The book describes a situation relevant to Canada, specifically a region located on the *edge* of Canada, in which the preservation of language and, more gener-

ally, the issue of education are of crucial importance for its future.

This part of Canada at risk is the territory of Nunavut ("our land" in the Inuit language), in the Eastern Arctic. In 1993, after almost 20 years of negotiations, the Inuit and the federal government signed an agreement which drew the outline of a new piece of land in the country, and created a public government led by a majority of Inuit. In 1999, the territory was officially celebrated and regarded as a model. It was supposed to be Canada's governance gem, a masterfully crafted work of public administration that would serve the Inuit in the best way.

However, in the process, something had been overlooked: the ability of the Inuit to govern and affirm themselves in their own terms, through their own language. After all, the idea of Nunavut originated precisely from the idea of preserving its native language, Inuktitut[3]. Yet today, more than 10 years after its creation, although it has a government, policies and legislation in place which officially attempt to support Inuktitut, it lacks two essential features of any sustainable society: the protection of its language, and its own education system[4]. This deficiency — which is already a significant problem and will become even more of a concern[5] — is concealed by a widespread misconception: we are told there is roughly an 85% Inuit majority which, therefore, ensures they will not lose control of their affairs. But in spite of holding the majority of the population, the retention level of Inuktitut is by far not equivalent to that percentage[6]. As Annis May Timpson has put it, "the government of Nunavut, despite clear efforts to operate symbolically, technologically, and politically in ways that recognize and promote the Inuit language, will have to overcome the multiple factors working against the achievement of such objectives"[7].

The good intentions are there, it seems feasible, but somehow this goal has been out of reach.

The focus on language and education in the Eastern Arctic demonstrates the intent of this issue of *OS/OS*: to go beyond the policies that so often obscure what is actually happening *on the ground*. So how do we look at education in Nunavut from down here in the South? How do we go beyond the *microscope perspective*[8] to get a real sense of the education processes as they unfold? And how do we get access to "what works, what doesn't, and why?"

In the same way we accompany our mechanic in the garage to listen more carefully to the engine of our car in order to better perceive what the problem might be, we need to "get in the workshop" to really get a sense of the development process of the education intended for the youth of Nunavut. To do that, we will devote a significant part of our focus in this issue of *Our Schools*

to a specific experiment taking place right at the centre of the country, in a city where politics are in the air.

Nunavut Sivuniksavut (NS - "Our future Nunavut") is a unique school based in downtown Ottawa. It offers an eight-month college program to Inuit youth from Nunavut who want to prepare for the educational, training, and career opportunities that are being created by the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement[9] and the new Government of Nunavut. It is an extraordinary experiment in bridging the divide between North and South, and a place where Inuit youth learn how they can best contribute and be part of this country.

The NS component of this issue will provide a glimpse into the workshop of *education for the North*: the curriculum, ways of teaching, and material taught is specifically designed for students who, for the most part, will go back in their communities up North. NS is a place where students learn how to better see and understand what the policies meant for them are about, but also how they can shape the future of their territory. NS is the *back room* where students learn to question the territory conceptualized two generations earlier, but actually created during their lifetimes.

That intent and that spirit behind it is captured in the cover photograph: the haircut of a recent NS graduate, Danny Ishulutak says "ajungi" (in full — "ajungi-ttugut"): "we are able to". NS is about enabling the youth of Canada's North to take pride in who they are, and, in turn, to help Nunavut become an integral, culturally-rich and defined part of Canada.

To set the stage for the challenges of education in the Eastern Arctic, Greg Poelzer gives us an overview of the socio-economic situation for Nunavut. He sheds light on the key economic problem of supply versus demand, goes through the policy problems and solutions, and helps us make sense of what is required to build a functioning and functional education system in the North. Post-secondary education appears as a key priority among many others.

After this overview, we take a plunge into the school at the heart of this issue of *OS/OS*: Murray Angus and Morley Hanson, two founding pillars of NS, give us a thoughtful and indispensible insight into the school. They guide us through the methods and recipes for success that have made NS what it is today: a social innovation incubator. It works with the recognition that the earlier the ability to use certain tools is acquired, the better. And that is especially the case for language.

Navarana Beveridge further develops that theme in order to show how and why prioritizing early childhood language learning is a sound way to invest financially and culturally into the future of Nunavut.

We then dive a little deeper into the specificities of Inuktitut itself. Derek Rasmussen introduces us to the differences between pattern and conceptual languages. There is a richness and a level of precision that pattern languages can offer that is often forgotten, along with its inner value. Martha Kyak and some of the students in her class at NS offer us a glimpse into the process of reacquiring their mother tongue. In this piece, syllabics are scattered across the pages to illustrate what it may mean to lose and then regain such a contextually-rich language. Pushing the limits even further, Fabien Pernet introduces us to the beauty of the language. From the intricacies of its mechanisms, Fabien takes us to the essential purpose of learning such a language, and how it has the potential to fundamentally renew our relationship with the Inuit.

Moving beyond language, we then look at learning processes and ways of knowing. Pamela Stern breaks down the Inuit concept of "ihuma/isuma" — into creative, bodily kinesthetic, spatial and personal components — to show us that intelligences "do not line up along a continuum of less intelligent and more intelligent, but within particular contexts or settings". The continuum and transmission of knowledge between generations is further discussed by Frédéric Laugrand and Jarich Oosten in the workshops they created in Iqaluit in the mid-90s.

Still within the theme of the preservation of traditional knowledge, David Serkoak, an instructor at NS, tells us about his own path towards education and teaching, and his attempts to integrate Inuit knowledge into the education system.

How can "learning from the land" take place in an institution specifically designed for Inuit knowledge ? This is the question Hugh Lloyd will be answering in his piece on the brand new cultural school built in Clyde River, north of Baffin Island. Finally, Tommy Akulukjuk will prompt us to rethink such concepts as cold, books and philosophy: after all, we are so accustomed to their proximity that we tend to forget how narrowly we see them. In a certain sense, an Inuit perspective on these concepts is a breath of fresh air.

Putting this issue together has been a nourishing process in which the support of the CCPA has been immensely valuable. I want to acknowledge the support I have received from Erika Shaker, who has been present all along, had the patience of taking me through the work of editing, and turned this initially frail editorial into something much more readable. I also wish to thank Bruce Campbell, who was initially the one who expressed an interest in the North, and opened the doors of the centre to me. Diane, Kerri-Anne, Jason, Jennie, Melanie, Ed and Anskia composed a unique ecosystem: their

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I hope this collection of views will inspire, provoke, and refresh the way we look at the North.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Jean-François Billeter, *Chine trois fois muette*, éditions Allia, Paris, 2000.

[2] Very few young Chinese can read classical Chinese today. Also, the Chinese language has become envaded by neologisms. These factors amount to an invisible barrier to the understanding of the past. The past seems within reach, but it doesn't "echo back" anymore. All this brings an inability to criticize the present (c.f Billeter op. cit.).

[3] Paul Quassa, 2003. Interview with Annis May Timpson. April. Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, Iqaluit (in Annis May Timpson, cited below)

[4] See Derek Rasmussen, "Forty Years of Struggle and Still No Right to Inuit Education in Nunavut", *Our Schools/Our Selves*, v. 19 n°1, fall 2009.

[5] Inuktitut is supposed to become the working language of the government of Nunavut by 2020.

[6] As Aurélie Hot has written, "the Inuit language is losing ground at home, which is a major domain for intergenerational transmission. English is the mother tongue of 26% of Nunavut residents, but it is used most often at home by 44% of the population." (Aurélie Hot, "Language Rights and Language Choices : The Potential of Inuktitut Literacy", in *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes*, vol. 43 (2), Spring 2009, pp. 181-197). For numbers, see Nunavut Bureau of Statistics/Nunavummit Kiglisiniartiit, 2008. "StatsUpdate: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada; Focus in Inuit in Nunavut", *Publications*. Government of Nunavut.

[7] Annis May Timpson, "Reconciling Indigenous and Settler Language

Interests : Language Policy Initiatives in Nunavut", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol 43 (2), Spring 2009, pp. 159-180.

[8] c.f Tommy Akulukjuk, "Looking up through the microscope", in *Etudes/Inuit/Studies*, vol. 28, n°2, pp. 211-212.

[9] The Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (NLCA), signed in 1993, was the basis for creating the new territory of Nunavut, which was officially established in 1999.