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Doctor of Education

Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

May 13, 2008

10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

427A Waterman Building

Title: Exploring Why Students Stay in School: Inuit Perceptions of  
Nutaaq Inuksuit (Modern Guideposts)

## ABSTRACT

Although the Inuit of Nunavut, Canada gained control of their educational institutions when the territory of Nunavut was formed on April 1, 1999 (Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Act, 1993), the high school graduation rates of Inuit students remain very low. Academic deficiencies exist in Nunavut, where from 1999 to 2006 only twenty-five percent of Inuit youths graduated from high school (Nunavut Department of Education, 2006). Inuit who do not remain in school have difficulty obtaining leadership positions in this new territory (Berger, 2006).

This research was designed to answer the question: “What modern guideposts (*nutaag inuksuit*) do Inuit perceive are needed to help more Inuit students complete high school in Nunavut, Canada?” Qualitative case study methods were used that incorporated “Inuit Traditional Knowledge” (*Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit*). Traditionally, Inuit relied on “guideposts” (*inuksuit*) to help them navigate their way through unfamiliar territory. Conceptually, this study will suggest guideposts which encourage Inuit students to complete school by combining traditional and modern (*nutaag*) knowledge. Living in the arctic for 14 years has made the researcher more aware of the importance of using a culturally sensitive methodology.

In the fall of 2007, 66 interviews of Inuit youth, adults, and “elders” in two high schools in the communities of Pangnirtung and Sanikiluaq were conducted. The findings from this research are grouped into four themes prescribed by individuals in Nunavut as important to this research: Home, School, Community, and Inuit Tradition. These findings identify cultural norms that interviewees perceived would help Inuit students to gain the academic and cultural knowledge they need to graduate from high school. Each community would develop their own unique conceptual guideposts based upon the identified cultural norms.

The cultural norms which have been identified by interviewees as helpful to Inuit students to graduate, but which they believe are no longer acknowledged in the educational system, are still present in everyday Inuit child rearing practices. A summary of these cultural norms as they relate to each the four themes of Home, School, Community and Inuit Tradition, are presented below, along with the Inuit phrases associated with each:

- 1) In the home, there is a need to promote readiness for high school, more parent involvement, and a closer home and school partnership. The Inuktitut phrase is: “Are we prepared and ready to go?” (*Atii?*)
- 2) In school, there is a need to further promote learning opportunities that value relationships and mentoring. The Inuktitut phrase is: “Remember I care about you and our relationship?” (*Ain?*)
- 3) In the community, there is a need to promote better communications and networking among government departments, businesses, and local organizations. The Inuktitut phrase is: “Are we in understanding and agreement?” (*Ii?*)

In relation to the Inuit traditions, there is a need go beyond just teaching traditional skills. Inuit youths need to learn how to apply cultural values, like “Inuit Traditional Knowledge” in the modern world. The Inuktitut phrase is: “Let’s go outside to the land together?” (*Ittaarlu?*)