

# DECOLONIZATION: A SOCIETAL EDUCATION PROJECT AND MUTUAL ENRICHEMENT



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## CONTEXT

You have undoubtedly heard talk of decolonization, Indigenization, and Indigenous Studies, and thought to yourself: “This doesn’t concern me, there aren’t any (or are merely a few) Indigenous students in my institution.” Think again – decolonization concerns you too, and in fact, every member of Quebec society. The concept of inclusion provides insight as to the necessity of decolonization, while experiences at John Abbott College demonstrate how decolonization can be achieved.

Years ago, I came to the realization that First Nations, Inuit<sup>1</sup>, and Métis Nations are overlooked and little-known in Quebec society, and furthermore, that Indigenous youth face major challenges when they pursue higher education. This realization took root when I met five Inuit post-secondary students who participated in a conference workshop I facilitated about Indigenous issues.

Located in the Nord-du-Québec administrative region, Nunavik is an Inuit territory with 14 villages that are populated by approximately 12,000 inhabitants. These villages are not interconnected by road access, nor are they connected to the province’s southern region. Like many other Indigenous communities, no form of post-secondary education has been established within the territory, and as a result, Inuit students who seek to pursue higher education must board a plane, leaving behind their homes and loved ones. This educational pursuit also requires them to adapt to urban life, and pursue their studies in a language that is not their own. I was particularly moved by one of the students’ story:

“We have to change our entire lives, and we have to change our language in order to receive an education; I feel that there’s something very wrong with that.” (Lachapelle, 2017, p. 4, Unofficial translation)

This helped me truly comprehend that while Indigenous students are at home in Quebec, they are required to abandon their cultures and identities in order to pursue higher education outside their own communities. This truth left me quite shaken – and so I embarked on a doctoral program in Anthropology, where I focused on the plight of Inuit students in Quebec’s post secondary educational system. Throughout the course of my career, in the context of CÉGEP Marie-Victorin’s “Exploration et intégration – Inuit” program (2011-2012), I have had the opportunity to share the anthropological perspective and intellectual mindset with Inuit students.

## INCLUSION RATHER THAN INTEGRATION

Fuelled by my research and experience as a professor, I reflected on the concepts of integration and inclusion. The notion of integration I reference is one where standardization is the ultimate goal (Schnapper, 2007). In an educational context, this is built on the principal that every individual has the right to an education, and that measures are required to ensure each student’s integration within Quebec’s education system. The latter are pre-established standards and norms, which notably are in direct opposition to the notion of inclusion, a concept and practise I espouse deeply – especially in light of Quebec’s educational system for youth. Educational inclusion is based on the necessity of creating a safe space for alterity, a space which can be used as a tool to elevate and improve the education system as a whole (Prud’Homme et al., 2011).

Over the course of my research, I noted the multitude of obstacles faced by Inuit students pursuing higher education (difficulties adapting, marginalization, academic issues, drop out rates, etc.). These stem largely from the expectation of integration, which dominates Quebec’s educational system and thus permits little space for First Nations students to be themselves (Lachapelle, 2017, 2016). The concepts of integration and inclusion originate in the domain of special-needs education, and are therefore associated with disabled or handicapped students. Moving forward however, these concepts must also take into account issues related to multicultural education (Gosh and Galczynski, 2014) an aspect that is not yet widespread: there is still a great deal of development and implementation work to be accomplished.

<sup>1</sup> As per use in Inuktitut, “Inuit” is a proper name, is considered plural, and has no gender. The singular form of Inuit is Inuk, and the latter term will be used within this article, as appropriate.



In my thesis, I envisioned inclusion as an alternative to integration, and chose to use decolonization as a means of approaching and nurturing reflection about questions of inclusion and multicultural education. Within inclusion, I see a concept that can be readily applied to higher education as a whole, regardless of students' origins. Currently, the concept of inclusion rests on the idea that a strategy designed for one group could somehow also benefit another population - even if the latter was never even a consideration during the conceptualization process.

### DECOLONIZING EDUCATION

What exactly is decolonization? Decolonization is a long process that seeks to end the colonial domination that permeates all sectors of society (Smith, 1999). The concept is rooted in the idea that Indigenous Peoples are subject to systemic discrimination that has arisen from colonization, and that we must overturn this situation of dominance. In this respect, decolonization aims to reinstate Indigenous perspectives and cultures, traditional knowledge and way of life, while returning these in every way possible to equal standing with those held by the non-Native majority. Note that the concept of Indigenization is often employed when discussing Indigenous education; this refers to adapting pedagogical practices in response to Indigenous knowledge and traditions (Ottmann, 2013; Guenette and Marshall, 2008; Pete, Schneider and O'Reilly, 2013). While this concept is gaining popularity (notably because of its use in reference to education in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report; TRC, 2015) – there is a genuine risk of engaging in an Indigenization process without engaging in essential, bone fide decolonization efforts. Without real decolonization, Indigenization efforts are superficial at best.

My commitment to educational decolonization comes from a perspective that includes steps towards Indigenization. The approach that I support and engage with, is that of Marie Battiste — a Mi'kmaq researcher and key figure in Indigenous education in Canada. According to Battiste, decolonizing the educational system is rooted in the fact that education does not merely have one voice that only reflects the majority (Battiste, 2013). She maintains that decolonization is not just an Indigenous concern, but rather one that involves everyone in society. As part of their educational mission, institutions of higher learning have the power to play an important role in the decolonization of Quebec society, whether Indigenous students are present in classes or not. For genuine decolonization to take place, Battiste believes that Canadian provinces must

find a way to reconcile the current educational system with Indigenous cultural traditions, epistemology, pedagogy, and different ways of learning. As such, the decolonization project that Battiste espouses supports the notion of inclusion as defined above, because it redresses the predominance of one form of educational knowledge over others, and supports the fact that Indigenous Peoples can exponentially enrich the educational system as a whole.

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### DECOLONIZING JOHN ABBOTT COLLEGE

During my research (in particular after my discussions with Inuit students enrolled at John Abbott College), I noted that the school's efforts to decolonize were quite sincere. It became apparent that these efforts – tested over some 30 years – have the ability to inspire other higher educational institutions that seek to undertake their own decolonization initiatives. To gain greater understanding of the process, I spoke with Louise Legault<sup>2</sup>, Coordinator of John Abbott College's Indigenous Student Resource Centre, who provided me with insights as to the key aspects of their approach. Nevertheless, I would like to underline that when the college began their work to welcome Indigenous students, research and initiatives related to Indigenous education in higher education institutions were far fewer in number than they are today. As a result, the training that took place in the era evolved via trial and error and was developed with experience. Nonetheless, they represented real steps towards decolonization. Today, educational institutions can draw upon a wealth of studies and the expertise of establishments who have laid considerable groundwork.

As of the establishment in 1990 of a nursing program designed for Cree students, John Abbott College has welcomed a diverse number of students from various Indigenous Nations, most notably Inuit, Cree, Mohawk, and Algonquin Nations. Stakeholders and teachers alike who worked with these students quickly realized that they had unique needs, and this required a proactive response. In their efforts to welcome Indigenous students, educational staff quickly realized that integration remained a form of assimilation. Louise Legault asserts that it is inadequate to simply attempt to mould Indigenous youth so that

<sup>2</sup> I extend my sincere thanks to Louise Legault for her time and expertise.



they can function in a given school context; it is far preferable to cultivate a reciprocal relationship. The latter kind of relationship is embodied by John Abbott College and its students, and revolves around two key components: offering services to Indigenous students, and decolonizing organizational culture. As a result of this commitment, multiple initiatives were rolled out which questioned structures and practices; for the purposes of this article, efforts that targeted the decolonization of organizational culture are the focus of the following section. Take for instance several examples of services specifically designed for Indigenous students:

- **To promote student perseverance and academic success:** The creation of a DEC (Diplôme d'études collégiales) springboard that meets Indigenous students' specific academic needs. (Named Crossroads<sup>3</sup>, this educational path also includes courses in Inuktitut);
- **To promote academic community-building:** The availability of course pre-registration, in order to unite Indigenous students together in the same classroom, and the establishment of the Indigenous Student Resource Centre;
- **To promote Indigenous identities:** The implementation of social events and workshops that offer Indigenous students the chance to express and celebrate their Indigenous identities.

## START SOMEWHERE, EVEN IF YOU CAN NOT DO EVERYTHING IMMEDIATELY...

Whether they welcome Indigenous students or not, all higher educational establishments can begin the process of decolonizing their organizational structure. As a starting point, understand that decolonization takes place on numerous levels, and affects an institution's entire community. Professors generally are not well-versed in traditional Indigenous knowledge, nor are they familiar with Indigenous culture and learning methods. First Nations' history is not common knowledge in our society, and so an ethnocentric vision of the world remains dominant. So, where does one start the decolonization process?

John Abbott College's Louise Legault asserts that there is not a particular sequence to follow; instead, simply start somewhere – a point that will vary depending on the environment, means, and contexts specific to each institution. Initially at John Abbott College, only a few core staff were involved, a group that then developed into a critical mass, allowing for a greater number of measures to be enacted. Decolonization at this educational establishment now takes place at administrative, educational, curricular and social levels. Additionally, after having been proven over the course of numerous years, certain specific strategies are now carried out by the college itself.

### ADMINISTRATIVE AND GOVERNANCE STRATEGIES

- Development of an official statement of recognition that John Abbott College is located on un-surrendered Indigenous territory. This statement is read at every official event held by the College (for example, graduations) and some professors add it to their course syllabus and recite it in class;
- Adherence to the Indigenous Education Protocol for Colleges and Institutes<sup>4</sup>
- Creation of an internal working group focused on decolonization, which makes recommendations to the College's various departments;
- Involvement in the decolonization process by each department (for example, the library has assembled an Indigenous Peoples collection);
- Presence of Indigenous experts (whom are not College employees), sitting on the College's various committees;
- Involvement of Indigenous students in various committees and training activities.

### PEDAGOGICAL AND CURRICULAR STRATEGIES

- Provision of pedagogical decolonization training with Indigenous experts;
- Availability of a variety of Indigenous activity components during PED days;
- Establishment of a decolonizing education reading group for employees;
- Support provided to professors (via guidance from Indigenous experts) who seek to decolonize their courses;
- Exploration and adaptation of educational decolonization initiatives, based on established programs elsewhere in Canada;
- Creation of a portal that enables professors to share materials, and which also promotes professional exchange;
- Creation of an Indigenous Studies course, open to all students at the College<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See: [johnabbott.qc.ca/academics/pathways/crossroads].

<sup>4</sup> The Indigenous Education Protocol for Colleges and Institutes focuses on Indigenous education, and by extension, the educational establishments that welcome Indigenous students. For additional information, please see: [www.collegesinstitutes.ca/policyfocus/indigenous-learners/protocol/].

<sup>5</sup> See: [johnabbott.qc.ca/academics/certificates/indigenous-studies].



## STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE SOCIAL CLIMATE

- Raising awareness concerning the truths and realities of First Nations' colonization and their assimilation (via conferences, speakers from members of Indigenous Nations, and so on);
- Inclusion of Indigenous components into various College-wide activities (International Women's Day, Climate Change Awareness Day, Indigenous Francophones honoured during La Semaine de la Francophonie, etc.);

## RESTORING THE TRUTH SURROUNDING INDIGENOUS NATIONS AND PEOPLES

An essential aspect of decolonization is raising awareness about Indigenous Nations' realities and truths within the higher education community as a whole, according to Louise Legault. Everyone needs to be aware of the context in which we live, and recognize the nature of our interactions with Indigenous Nations. As a society and as an educational community, we must recognize our own lack of knowledge about First Peoples. Post secondary institutions in particular have a pointed responsibility to combat prejudices and stereotypes – regardless of their form, and regardless of who they target. Legault believes that the onus falls on the dominant culture to become educated and approach Indigenous Peoples in the spirit of learning, listening, and fostering relationships. John Abbott College has done exactly that, and benefits have been reaped by the entire student and staff population, which fully justifies the maintenance of training, workshops, and conferences involving members of Indigenous Nations.

## DECOLONIZING IN CONCERT WITH INDIGENOUS NATIONS

During the decolonization process, working in concert with Indigenous Nations is absolutely non-negotiable - it would be unthinkable to proceed with such an endeavour without them. While no established formula exists, any legitimate decolonization process cannot be accomplished by simply swapping more accurate information for false information, or by merely rectifying discourse about Indigenous Nations. While the latter efforts may well be a suitable starting point, these modifications alone are not sufficient to change the deep-seated sense of alienation Indigenous Peoples often feel within the educational system, which maintains significant cultural bias towards them (Lachapelle, 2017). To counteract this, John Abbott College maintains close links with local

Indigenous communities and organizations (including Cree and Inuit school boards). For example, when training and assisting professors to decolonize their courses and programs, they are assisted by Indigenous experts who are not College employees. Therefore, the decolonization process is not limited solely to a particular interpretation of the literature, or by the integration of recommendations made by various stakeholders or Indigenous education experts: it involves those who are directly affected by the process: Indigenous Peoples themselves. If Indigenous groups are not involved, decolonization efforts are likely to be mere interpretations, and are likely to be misinterpretations at that. Thus, the involvement of Indigenous organizations (and the nature of that involvement) is an absolute requirement for a bone fide decolonization process.

## DECOLONIZING TOGETHER

Cultural change does not occur overnight, and decolonization is a long process. John Abbott College has chosen to work with others, and has not invented anything new – it benefits greatly from models and methods that work well elsewhere. For example, by supporting the Indigenous Education Protocol for Colleges and Institutes, it benefits from a thoughtful, well-developed framework created in collaboration with numerous and varied Indigenous experts in Canada. John Abbott College has adapted materials from various guides created by BCcampus<sup>6</sup> for its own needs, an important contribution given that British Columbia's educational institutions have placed far greater emphasis on including Indigenous Peoples in their educational system. The College also proactively supports, exchanges and shares its best practices via a jointly formed group of English-language CÉGEPs.

The latter group is particularly inspiring for the educational network as a whole, from Legault's point of view. Having discovered that other English-language CÉGEPs were also initiating measures to improve Indigenous students' post secondary experiences, these CÉGEPs have chosen to join forces, working together to help one another with this process. In this respect, the decolonization process that John Abbott College initiated has a much broader scope that extends throughout the CÉGEP network, and as a result, everyone benefits greatly from fellow institutions' experiences and expertise. This type of sharing and collaboration within the higher education network helps make decolonization a societal education project that extends

<sup>6</sup> See: Pulling together: A guide for Teachers and Instructors (Available in English only) [opentextbc.ca/indigenizationinstructors/chapter/reciprocal-exchanges-as-an-ally-advocate-and-supporter].





far beyond an educational institution's walls. This brings us back to Marie Battiste's assertion that decolonization is not solely an Indigenous endeavour, but rather a societal goal (Battiste, 2013). Everyone's efforts are required if we are to return Indigenous Nations to their rightful place in educational institutions, and in the post secondary educational system itself. ●

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