

MAMU TSHISHKUTAMASHUTAU INNU EDUCATION

INNU AIMITAU LET'S TALK INNU: SHESHATSHIU LANGUAGE FORUM

2023 | DEC 1



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Tshishkutamashutau
Innu Education

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Lots of people came together to make this community meeting a success. A great big thank you to our fabulous speakers for sharing their thoughts about Innu-aimun and culture and school: Siska Snow, Andrew Penashue, Manimat Andrew, Angel Jourdain. Shaia Davis's 2019 CBC radio podcast shed light about how it feels to lose your language. We got to hear the important voices of grade 12 students. A special thanks to Ashley Jarvis for helping with that. A big thank you to Paul Rich for helping to organize the event and leading us through the day. Anne Nuna did a tremendous job with the translation during the event and with this report. Marlaine Jourdain fed us well. Lots of people helped behind the scenes, including MTIE curriculum and finance staff. Teachers and Innu staff at school set it all up. Thanks to Brendon Caldwell for the sound system and Calvin Morgan for the Facebook Live feed. Tim Jack shared many good ideas in early planning meetings. Navarana Tretina filmed it. We are most grateful to community members who came, for their interest, listening, and sharing their thoughts for this very important discussion on how we can all work together to dream and keep the Innu language and culture alive.

This forum was made possible with Indigenous Languages funding from the federal Department of Heritage Canada.



FRANCESCA SNOW



I worked in 2 schools for 41 years teaching Innu. I loved my work. I was principal at Peenamin Mackenzie School. I founded the Innu curriculum centre and worked very hard at it. I worked with the Innu teachers. I started teaching at 18. I could speak but I didn't know how to write. I had to teach myself. Teachers need self-esteem to be able to teach.

The language is very important. I taught Innu Grades 4 to 10 with Manikatnen Nuna. I supported and really loved the kids. I wanted to make sure they were safe, that the language was passed on. After MTIE was set up, I stayed for 4 years. I really hope the school succeeds. Parents need to speak Innu. If they don't, the kids cannot succeed. Speaking needs to be the first priority.

Teachers have to teach Innu every day. Classes need to have no English spoken at all. When I was teaching, I would not listen to students speaking English in class, even if they don't understand. Students need to know that our mother tongue is very important, that they will not maintain our language if they are always on their devices. Kids also have to learn how to write it. Manikatnen used to teach that.

We have to put our language in our hearts. Elders are very important to help maintain the language and culture.

FRANCESCA SNOW

I'm not superwoman. I speak to my grandchildren in Innu and say to them if they don't listen, "don't blame me if you can't speak your language." If my children are not speaking to my grandchildren, that's not my job. They need to be learning the language right from the start when they're little. Every meeting I attend, I say we have to educate the students. It can't just be about games and sports. We need to get them outside.

We had 8 certified Innu teachers when I was at the school. We went to school to become teachers every summer, with our families. We did this so we could teach our kids their language. I could teach anywhere, but I chose to teach in Sheshatshiu. Innu staff need teacher training to teach. I did my lesson plans in school not at home. The kids were so respectful then. We were evaluated by the school board, even if they didn't understand me speaking Innu. At first I had fear, but after a few years I was not afraid.

We all need to respect each other and support the kids. Kids see everything that is going on. They are keeping an eye on us. They are unique kids, lucky to have 2 languages. To succeed the kids need to learn Innu. We need to make sure they are learning it, especially from K to 3. They need to be learning Innu right from the beginning when they are little, or they will prefer English, which is easy for them to learn. It is everywhere. They hear English in the stores, on TV, with their games, all around in the outside world. They need guidance to learn to work together. We need to support children with special needs. I had a student who couldn't hear, didn't know sign language. I would draw pictures, then he could see and learn the language.

The important thing is to respect each other. I am so proud to know two languages. I want the kids to feel the same. Community support is very important and Elders.





My parents were Lizette and Pien Penashue. I will say what I think about education. My parents would usually take me to nutshimit in the fall, from middle of September to December, then back in March to return in June. Between those times in nutshimit, I would attend school. My brother used to tell me it was good to go back to school even if I didn't follow the school calendar.

I want to say that it's important that we don't forget our culture. Today I see our kids speaking English. We are afraid of this. It seems like English is our first language now. We need more Innu taught in school, one classroom that is just Innu. Students need to learn tipatshimuna. I have a radio station and I tell stories in Innu-aimun, stories that were passed on to me by my parents. People tell me they like to hear these stories. Students need to learn where we come from. They are our future leaders.

The Band Council and Innu Nation need to be part of education. They need to be invited to the school to talk to the students, to tell them what's going on, to talk about self-government, land claims, where we are at with negotiations, how other organizations are also taking part in talks with governments. They need to know where we stand, so that when they leave school, they can plan for their future.

My grandchild speaks English. That frightens me. What is being taught in school? I worry. I want students to understand our struggles. I want to tell them not to forget their language, their culture and stories. When I was a leader, I liked to share the story about a priest who was here. He told the people that nutshimit was not good, but my father took us to the interior anyway.

I hope the non-Innu teachers are listening to our stories today. I really want to see Innu-aimun and culture taught in the school.

MANIMAT ANDREW

I want to congratulate all the Innu teachers who taught at Peenamén Mackenzie, including the late Manikatnen, my sister. You hardly ever heard English spoken at Peenamín. There was not so much technology in school or at home back then. As a parent and teacher I am worried about Innu-aimun being lost. Some people are still trying to save it.

I am trying to teach it, and find myself in the middle, with some students speaking English and others speaking Innu, I am being pulled on both sides. We need parents involved, leaders, the community needs to be in the school to help share language, culture and stories.

I was at a conference once with other Innu and we were speaking Innu-aimun. An Elder from another First Nation asked us what we were speaking. She was very emotional hearing us speak our own language. She told us she was very envious that we could still speak our language. “Keep it alive,” she told us, because her people have lost their language.



ANGEL JOURDAIN

GRADE 12 STUDENTS REPORT



Students said Innu-aimun and culture are important because culture teaches us who we are, the things we enjoy, and connects us to our own people, our ancestors and those we love. If we lose our language, we let people who tried to steal our culture and put us in residential schools, win. Language needs to be taught to the next generation. Culture is the way we have to continue to live for years and years. What is a person if they don't have their culture. They are like a lost soul.

Students want more: more Innu-aitun, more immersion (no English), more cabin and culture days, more hands-on, more traditional foods, more Innu staff involved in teaching, more posters, more Innu music, more Innu-aimun at home, more elders in school, more visits from community organizations, more working together, more sessions like this.





WHAT CAN WE DO TO KEEP LANGUAGE AND CULTURE ALIVE?

It's starts at home:

Many people talked about how learning language and culture starts at home. Children need to be hearing it all the time, learning Innu at a young age when it is easiest to learn. Parents and families need to be speaking it, attending cultural events like the gathering, and teaching history and culture. More families need to be spending time in nutshimit with children and grandchildren. They need to encourage and support the children speaking Innu, praise them, teach them the Innu alphabet, help them with Innu homework, keep a copy of the Innu dictionary at home. Resources sent home from school could help parents teach their kids.

Parents can help their children be open to all cultures and proud of their own. They need to send the children outside to play, and limit the use of their children's ipads, cell phones and computers and talk to each other. They need to know about the dangers of technology addiction.



Shaia Davis

Imagine being in a roomful of people who share the same blood as you, but you know you'll never be part of the bond they share with each other, because the hole in your chest always sets you apart from the rest of your family. Being an Innu girl who only speaks English, I know what that feels like... Elders in my community speak little English. This causes a rift between them and those like me who speak only English. Elders like my grandmother have so much knowledge of the land, which is what keeps our culture alive. Imagine how it feels for children who don't know the language and can never be part of that experience... If we lose our language, we lose a piece of ourselves which could be lost forever... There is hope to keep our language alive. We just have to be willing to work for it.

WHAT THE SCHOOL BOARD & SCHOOL CAN DO:

Many people said children need to be learning more Innu-aimun and culture in school. They had many suggestions on how to do this. Some suggestions were about creating Innu resources to be used in school or at home. These resources need to be authentic and relevant, and appropriate for each grade level. Resources could include: audio and visual resources, like 1) flashcards with the Innu alphabet, or pictures and Innu words, 2) posters, like for months of the year or Innu crafts like asham, 3) an Innu map in each classroom, 4) t-shirts and other gear with Innu-aimun; 5) English resources translated into Innu, 6) Innu dictionary app on devices, 8) resource kits for families to teach pre-school kids. It was said elders need to be involved in developing resources.





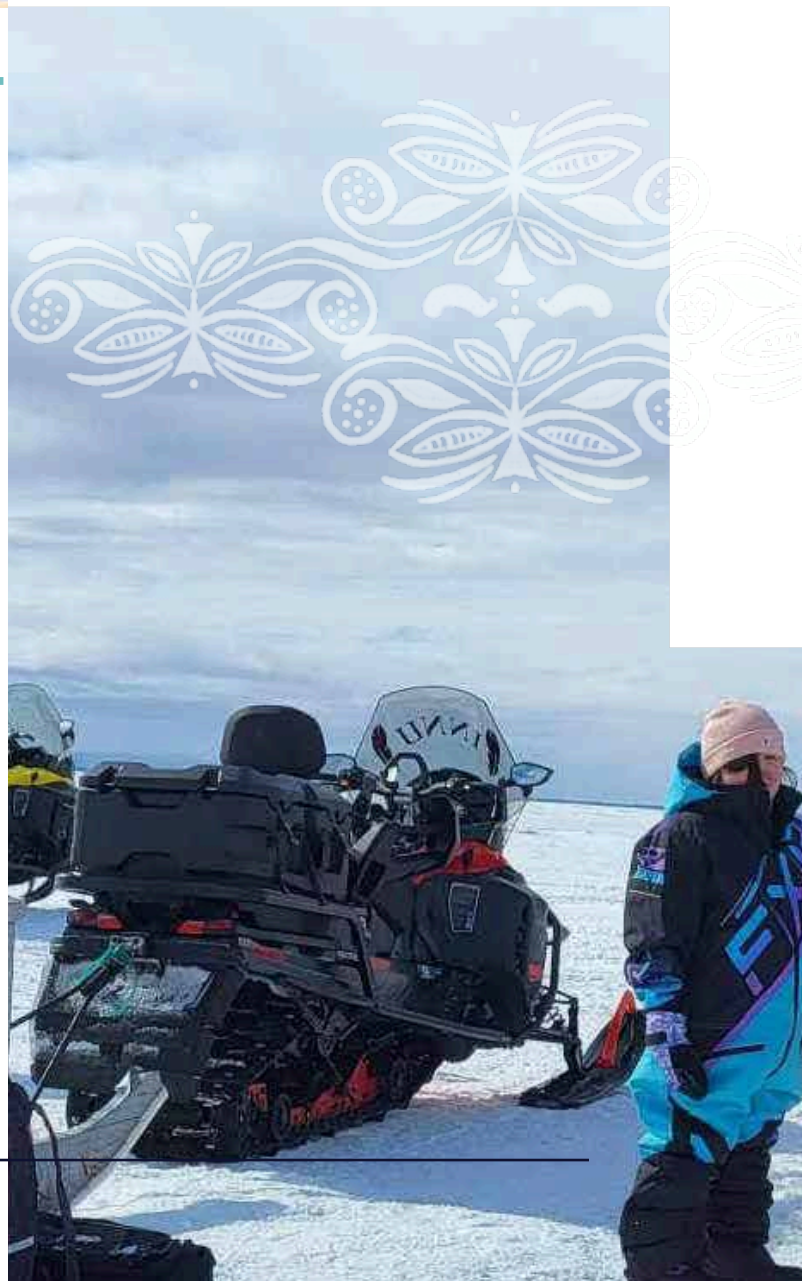
education, to learn about Innu culture. Postsecondary education needs to be promoted, and elders need to be involved in PD.

People had recommendations about programming and staffing. A number of people wanted to see Innu immersion for K to grades 2 or 3. Others said there should be more Innu-aimun classes at all grade levels. The language needs to be spoken and heard throughout the day. People asked for more Innu teachers, having Innu CAs working more in the classroom, a CA for each classroom, as well as teachers

TRAINING & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

There was talk of the dangers of addiction to iphones and ipads, but others said these devices could also help teach language and culture by creating Innu apps and games. One suggestion was to create an Innu cartoon or animation (like an Innu Dora) of Innu activities like setting up a tent, hunting or cleaning an animal. Another idea was for the school board to create digital Innu content using Innu talent so kids can see themselves on screen.

Many suggestions were made about training and PD (professional development). Innu staff need training to learn how to teach Innu-aimun. PD could be provided for all staff to learn basic Innu-aimun to use every day in their classes. More advanced Innu-aimun classes could be provided for speakers. Innu teachers could teach non-Innu teachers. Some people said non-Innu staff need PD, including land-based



and CAs, or two CAs team-teaching. Relationship-building is needed for Innu and non-Innu staff to better work together. Several people mentioned reviving the music program, with students learning culture and language through music. Another suggestion was to organize resources so they are easy to find in the library, with an Innu coordinator to help out. We should offer early childhood programming in Innu run by Innu.

Other ideas included connecting with other Indigenous schools with successful language programs, and adapting a program called ASLA (Accelerated Second Language Acquisition).

Some suggestions had to do with planning and scheduling. Cultural activities with Elders or Innu experts need to be scheduled more often, at least once a month. They need to be more focused with learning goals. Weekly or monthly meetings are needed to share ideas, give input on past activities and plan future ones. Staff needs planning time for their classes.



WHAT THE SCHOOL BOARD & SCHOOL CAN DO

Curriculum Centre & Innu Classroom

Some people wanted to see the Innu wing brought back in the school, with a curriculum centre and a classroom just for the Innu-aimun teacher. Others said Innu-aimun and culture should be taught in all classrooms and subject areas. Everyday Innu-aimun could be spoken by everyone.

Audio-visual aids could help students see and hear when they are learning. Some thought Innu staff need to speak more Innu to students, and students need to be praised every time they speak Innu. Make the school safe to speak Innu and build student confidence. Announcements on the PA could be in Innu and a recording of students reciting an Innu prayer could be played on the PA every morning. Some people thought students should be assessed for their Innu-aimun and given a mark on report cards. Another suggestion was to have a reward system, such as giving tokens to students for speaking and writing Innu. Innu spelling tests, Innu homework and students essays on culture, how to read Innu signs, e.g. tsheshkeikan were other ideas. Students can be asked to translate into Innu in class.



People made suggestions about specific cultural activities: more field trips, including to the cabin with Elders or Innu experts; cultural walks and expeditions; nutshimiu cultural immersion (with no devices), students learning fishing and hunting, setting up camps, doing crafts, and sharing stories. These activities with elders could also happen at the school. People want to see students learn about the importance of each animal, how to hunt, clean, cook and use the different parts; about Innu spirituality, such as beliefs about the Animal Spirit Master and how to respect the animals; about woodworking and snowshoe-making and the Innu timeline (for high school students).



Other ideas for school events included: setting up an Innu Cultural Ambassadors Club or a student Council, leadership training for students; holding Spirit Days and a bring-your-parents-to-school day; an Innu emcee at the Christmas concert; older students being a teacher day; buddy reading in Innu program; radio programs on culture and with reports on school cultural activities and achievements. One group suggested holding Innu cultural days with only Innu people. Another idea was to have a competition for students to come up with a school chant in Innu for sports and other activities.

INNU
SPORTS

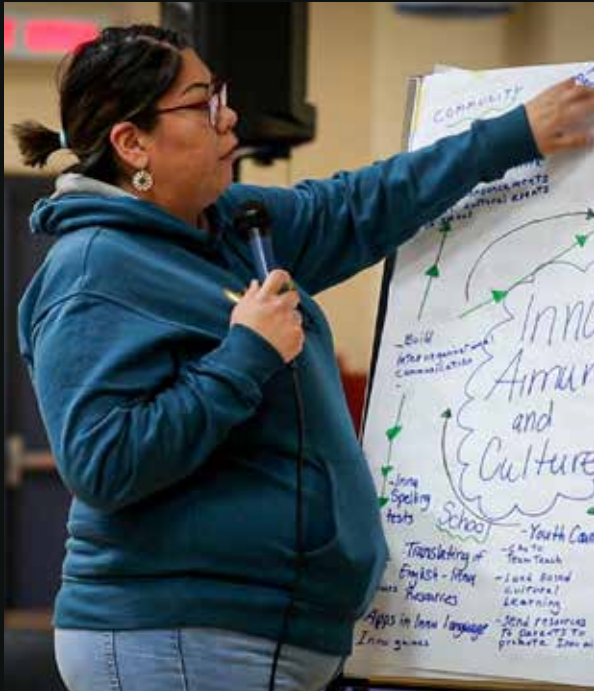


Some suggestions had to do with non-Innu teachers. It was said they should become more aware of Innu culture; make their classrooms more Innu with things like posters; and share good ideas and practises with Innu teachers. Some thought teachers need to attend cultural events, like the gathering. They should take language training, set goals for learning Innu phrases they can speak in their classes, and build a rapport with students so they are comfortable speaking Innu.

Community, Leaders and Organizations

People talked about how we need a community wide approach. People just have to start talking Innu, the students said. It is not just up to the school. Language needs to be promoted every day. Community needs to think of ways of bringing the generations together so that children have more opportunities to talk with Elders. We need to work as a team and have clear goals on how we will keep the language and culture alive.

There were a number of specific things the community could do to be using the language and practising the culture. People can participate in the outpost program; attend more meetings like this one, stay off your phone and speak Innu, write Facebook messages in Innu.



Community, Leaders and Organizations

People had many suggestions for organizations, such as: producing signs and posters in Innu, like in the store or clinic; celebrating the Innu culture together; offering training programs that are more humanistic and based in Innu culture with more Innu participation; partnering on cultural programs; contributing funding to the outpost program for all to attend.

Students want to see programs with Elders involved to teach the new generation.

They want more cultural activities like the gathering, ceremonies like sweats, walking expeditions in Sheshatshiu like the ones in Natuashish; culture and language classes involving both children and adults. One suggestion was for the band council to pass a resolution that Innu-aimun needs to be a part of everything we do. Social health organizations can offer nutshimiu outings for children, Innu parenting classes, or programs in Innu for youth in their interests/hobbies, like hunting. People need to think about how a cultural centre can help keep the language alive, and what kind of programming is needed for youth to be immersed in the cultural centre working with the school.

People suggested that leaders should be more involved. They need to consult more with the community on these issues, with all generations including youth. They need to visit the school to teach students about their role as leaders, what their organization does, about self-government, its future needs and what role young people could play. They need to talk about how to make the community a place that is safe for children, elders and families, where children can play and learn like the old days. One student said “ I’d like to have a space of land cleared out where the service did not reach and is quiet, somewhere safe but also natural. Where elders and people trying to sober up could go or just anyone could be, spend time together as a family and community again.”

It will be hard, someone said, but we need to keep pushing. We can do it! To work together, we need more sessions like this one.

NOTES

