



In traditional Inuit life, an individual's sense of identity and worth arose from competence in the skills and behaviours that were necessary for daily survival, and others' assessments of that competence – good hunter, skilled seamstress, effective shaman, and so on.

With the arrival of Qallunaat, and especially in the last 50 years, new expectations and competencies were introduced. Inuit understand that in order to survive as a dynamic culture in today's world, they must retain the best of the past but also acquire what is needed for the present and the future. A positive identity is dependent on the ability to participate fully and on equal terms in all aspects of life.

When people are not able to participate fully and independently in the world, they may develop what has been termed a poverty identity. Although we generally think of poverty in terms of income, the concept has been expanded.

One form of poverty is capability poverty – the inability to take care of our own needs for food, housing and other basic needs of life. In this context, people are deprived of the knowledge and skills to be productive or acquire what they want and need. They are then, to quote researcher Julia Preece, “locked into a vicious cycle of low skills that prevent better paid employment, thus perpetuating the cycle of need for the next generation.”

The other form of poverty relevant to this discussion is participatory poverty. This is defined as restrictions on the things that people can be.... their role in life. This includes restrictions on their ability to participate in community life and to be involved in decision-making. In other words, people are not able to be what they would like to be, nor do they have meaningful opportunities to influence community life.

When we are at the lower levels of the skills and knowledge needed to provide for ourselves, when we are not able to be what we want to be, when we do not have a valued role and voice in the community....we may see ourselves as incapable, lesser, and dependent. Others may see us that way too, reinforcing the poverty identity.

A crucial element of independence and full participation in today's world is literacy. Literacy empowers. It is thus a critical factor in personal and group identity formation.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development states that

“Change is a defining feature of modern life. Technologies change, the organization of work changes, terms of trade change, communities evolve and social roles change as individuals negotiate the life course. Hence change is unavoidable. It obliges individuals, families, schools, firms and nations to adapt. People and institutions that have the ability to adapt are resilient; they survive and have a chance to flourish. In contrast, those lacking the ability to adapt become vulnerable and dependent. The ability to change depends, to a large extent, on the pool of skills upon which individuals, institutions and nations can call.”

