

Aboriginal Family Literacy

A project report submitted by **Katherine Gullion**

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Preface

The Aboriginal Family Literacy Project, a partnership between Lakeland College's LEARN (Literacy Education and Reading Network) program and the Lloydminster Native Friendship Centre, was initiated to develop a program that would meet the literacy needs of the Aboriginal community in Lloydminster.

Studies show that preschool children, who come from rich literacy environments, have already begun to develop the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are conducive to success in reading (Homespun, 1991). With this theory in mind, a program to encourage parents to integrate literacy activities into their daily routines, while providing individual skill development to the participants, is seen as an effective way to address the high illiteracy rates of Aboriginal people in this community.

Records show few, if any, inquiries by Aboriginal people into the literacy program at the college. Transportation, child care, costly supplies, tuition fees, and course content are some of the concerns of potential participants. Therefore, a student-centered program that provides meaningful, relevant content, and is offered in the non-threatening, informal atmosphere of the Native Friendship Centre should encourage participation. A program should also acknowledge and affirm the language and experiences of the participants and it should eliminate costly barriers that prevent people from attending. Thus, the Aboriginal Family Literacy Program, *Building the Fire*, began.

The program was delivered by Katherine Gullion, Literacy Instructor, and managed by Tamara Topolnisky, Literacy Co-ordinator of LEARN. Gullion developed the program and course content, recruited participants, documented information, liaised between partners, provided child care and transportation, corresponded with community agencies, and wrote the interim and final reports. Topolnisky initiated the project and partnership, secured funds from the National Literacy Secretariat, oversaw the administration, monitored the development of the program, supplied resources and materials, and provided assistance and support on a regular basis. The Friendship Centre leased space for the project, provided clerical assistance and financial administration, accommodated the students' need for privacy, and provided support throughout the program.

The goals of the program were as follows:

- encourage parents to read to their children everyday;
- improve the students' reading, writing, and/or math skills;
- build confidence in each student to continue his/her literacy and/or employment goals;
- increase cultural pride and self-esteem in each student;
- enable parents to be positive role models for their children and in their community;
- empower students to make positive choices that would affect the quality of their lives and their children's.

This final report presents all aspects of the program that made it successful in this community. Although it offers relevant information for anyone who wishes to provide an Aboriginal Family Literacy Program, it is not an account of all the resources, methods, and approaches that can be used. It is encouraged to continue to research, experiment, and discover materials and ideas that meet the specific needs of the community being served.

The first section of this report provides information on the structure of the program. The second section reports on and offers suggestions for preparation, instruction, and course content; and the final section discusses student assessment, documentation, and program evaluation.

Section I - Program Structure

Duration

The program began October 15, 1995 and ran until the end of May, 1996 for a total of 7 months. Classes for students began November 1 and ended April 30 with the certification ceremony on May 4. The rest of May was used to write letters to community support groups, evaluate student files, develop the book of students' stories, and write the final report.

All the students agreed that the length of time was appropriate and during a good time of the year. Many students had commitments during the summer months, and September is also a difficult month since children are starting school. Other students suggested the start date be in the middle or at the end of September.

The 3 week break at Christmas and the week break at Easter allowed the students to meet other commitments at these times and still remain enrolled in the program. Because of the role the extended family has in raising children, the students preferred these breaks so they could travel to see family members. If this accommodation was not made, students would either miss too much class time or they would drop out to meet family obligations.

Location

The program was delivered in the Native Friendship Centre in Lloydminster; most Aboriginal people are familiar with this organization. The Friendship Centre is centrally located, and it provided an informal setting unlike the traditional institutional classroom that holds many negative memories for some of the students. The space at the Friendship Centre was rented, and furnishings for the learning area were provided, in kind, by Lakeland College.

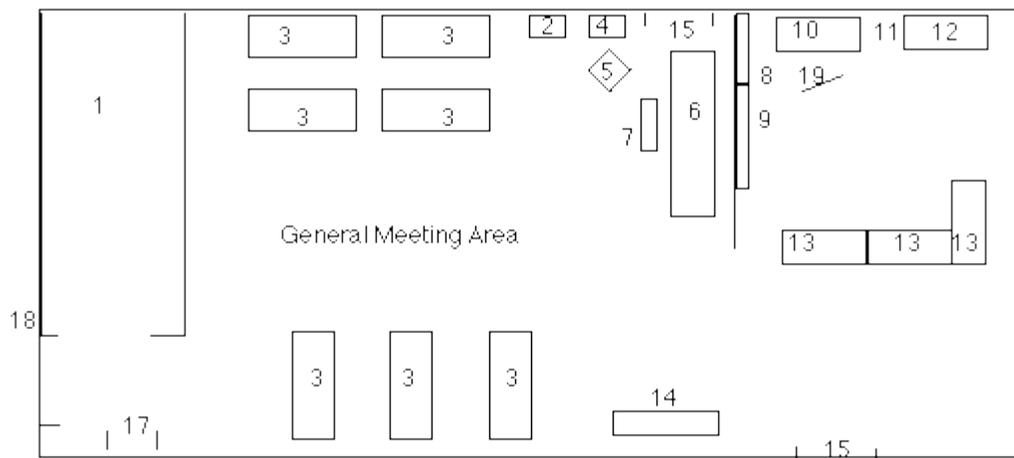
Learning Environment

Our classroom was sectioned with dividers at the back of a general meeting room. The back door to the Centre entered directly into the literacy corner.

The bookshelves had a variety of reading materials, and the walls were decorated with Aboriginal art, posters on families, and literacy.

The staff at the centre respected the students' privacy by having their coffee breaks in the office area instead of the usual general meeting area.

DIAGRAM OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT



- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Kitchen | 11. File cabinet |
| 2. Children's toys | 12. Computers |
| 3. Tables | 13. Student tables |
| 4. Stereo | 14. Bookcase |
| 5. Big chair | 15. Back entrance |
| 6. Couch | 16. Dividers |
| 7. Coffee table | 17. Bathroom |
| 8. Bookcase | 18. Offices |
| 9. Supplies/material | 19. White board |
| 10. Instructor's desk | |

Fees

Lack of funds, for supplies and tuition, is a common barrier to literacy programs for Aboriginal people. *Building the Fire* was a free program, and materials were supplied. Because this program was not a post-secondary course, First Nation bands would not provide financial support. Saskatchewan Social Services (with the exception of child care expenses) would not provide funds because the program was not full time. The students were either single mothers or men on social assistance, and a free program made it possible for them to attend.

Child care

Most of the students had pre-schoolers at home. This, too, is a common barrier to any adult literacy program. There are two ways to deal with child care. One way is to set up a child care program (in the same building as the literacy class) with a professional child care worker who will provide a quality program and assist with the family literacy activities. This would require a great deal of preparation, and it would add expenses to the literacy program for the furniture, toys, supplies, set up, and wages. There are resources available, should this be the choice.

The other alternative, the one used in this program, is to find community child care programs and baby-sitters so the students can investigate and choose one with whom they feel most comfortable. The program should pay for child care or, as in this case, Saskatchewan Social Services will pay for the students on social assistance. With either service, there must be no cost for the parents since this would make it impossible for them to attend the program.

It is very important to find child care workers who are either Aboriginal or have knowledge of and experience with Aboriginal children. Finding appropriate child care is essential to the success of any program since most parents will not continue if the caregiver does not meet their expectations. Social Services requires attendance records of those participants who receive child care funds.

Transportation

This has been an issue that elicits different opinions. Some community professionals stated that if students wanted to attend the program badly enough, they would find their own transportation. The same professionals believed that providing transportation enabled the students to remain dependent on other sources for their daily activities.

However, with most of the students in this group, joining a literacy program was something they 'might try'. Once they had attended for a period of time and experienced the positive benefits, they then felt the program was something they really wanted.

It can not be assumed that a person with minimal education, who is financially dependent, and has no vehicle will have the same coping strategies as an employed person with a reliable vehicle and a strong support system. This misconception only sets students up for failure. On the other hand, meeting these needs encourages success, success builds self-confidence, and self-confidence is the greatest resource for solving problems and empowering individuals.

Had there been no transportation provisions in the beginning of this program, many students would have dropped out. When starting a new experience, some people, especially those with low coping skills, apprehension, and fear, are ready to quit at the first signs of difficulty. Lloydminster has no public transportation and some students lived further than a 30 minute walk. Limited financial support, poor weather, age, health problems, improper footwear and clothing, and/or young children are just some of the reasons why provisions for transportation increased attendance.

Research on literacy programs shows that when transportation is provided, there appears to be better attendance than in programs that do not provide it. From the beginning of this program in October to the end of January, transportation was provided to all students. Either the instructor or taxi cabs picked up and drove students home. After 2 months, it became clear that transportation funds would run out before the end of the program. This concern was discussed with the students; several suggested they could use toboggans to transport their children to the babysitters and to the program on warmer days. Those without children, and within a 30 minute walk, said they would walk on warmer days. The students actively participated in solving this problem. It was encouraging to listen to their suggestions.

These students went from total dependence for transportation to total independence. For the last 3 months, transportation was provided when the weather was extremely inclement or a student's car broke down. As the students' self-esteem developed, so did their ability to cope with transportation problems and other barriers that would have easily prevented them from attending.

Enrolment

This program had an open entry and exit policy. Because of the individual skills component and the flexible family literacy component (both are discussed further on), people could join at any time to the beginning of the last month.

An advantage to this policy is that people who do not hear about the program in time, or are not ready to begin at the start date, can still join. This policy made it possible for two students, who, due to family circumstances, left the program in December and were able to re-enter in January and February. Three other students joined the program in December, and another joined in February. The last student entered the program in March.

Attendance

There was no daily attendance policy for the first 4 months of the program. Students came when they chose, but were encouraged to attend on a regular basis. Regular attendance made it more possible to plan group activities, individual activities, guest speakers, and field trips.

Some students' attendance became quite irregular. The other, more regular attendees, found this frustrating and wanted to implement an attendance policy. Even the poor attendees supported and stressed regular attendance. The need to make a commitment to the program was discussed in the group. It was agreed that everyone has personal concerns, children's needs, important appointments, and several other issues that need attention but should be dealt with on days, or at times, when there are no classes. The group agreed that attendance less than 90%, unless previously arranged, would result in the student losing his/her seat in the program. This policy was implemented in March and April.

Two things happened.

1. Three students, two who joined the program in November and one who joined in March, were obviously not in the program for legitimate reasons. They lost their seats after missing more than 10% of class time. Transportation and child care were not the reasons for poor attendance. It was clear to the group that these three students joined only to convince their social workers that they wanted to improve their literacy skills.
2. The other, more important, outcome of this policy was that the remaining five students, who were in the program since the beginning, made the commitment and had attendance of 90% and over. All of them finished the program and attended the certification ceremony.

All the students agreed that there should be an attendance policy from the beginning of the program. This issue could be discussed at the beginning of the program and a decision made with the students. If funding for the program is from social services, human resources, or any other community organization, then an attendance policy will be required to ensure that the funded seats are not empty.

Following is a chart of enrolment and attendance from November to April.

	Students Entered	Total # Students	Left Program	Total Days	Possible Hours	Actual Hours	Average Attendance
Nov.	8	8	2	13	58.5	41.5	71%
Dec.	1	7	2	7	31.5	18	57%
Jan.	1	6	1	11	49.5	33	67%
Feb.	3	8	1	10	45	27	60%
Mar.	1	8	3	10	45	36	80%
Apr.	0	5	0	10	45	41	91%

A single parent of pre-schoolers left the program because he did not trust baby-sitters; he wanted to wait until his children were in school. Three students had marital problems and left town, one broke his leg and did not return, and three lost their seats because of poor attendance. Two others left in November but returned after Christmas. Students who were in the program for less than one month were not included in this chart. At times, there were up to 11 students enrolled.

Group Size

Most of the people entered this program feeling insecure, nervous, and terrified to express themselves in a group. The small group dynamics allowed for more personal interactions that developed into support and encouragement with each other. This took some time and, as the program progressed, the students became more confident and willing to share their ideas. A large group does not lend itself to this kind of interaction.

The students felt most comfortable with five to six students in class. The group usually consisted of three to eight students. The larger the group, the less students were willing to share their ideas. With this in mind, ten should be the maximum number of seats.

Student Profile

After several months into the program, it was possible to develop a profile of the participants. Although most fit into this profile, programs in other communities might invite a different group of people with different needs. Entrance into an Aboriginal literacy program should not be based on this profile. It is presented to indicate the specific group of people served in this program.

Profile:

- social service recipient
- age range: between 18 - 50
- no vehicle, no driver's license
- literacy level between pre-primary - grade seven
- female
- school experience ended at approximately the grade six level
- has been out of school for at least 10 years - some for 35 years
- poor social skills
- 60% are Cree - English is their second language
- 75% have pre-schoolers at home
- 100% are unemployable because of many reasons, one of which is low literacy
- have inquired into the program because he/she wants to improve his/her literacy skills
- 100% are Aboriginal

Tutors

Initially, tutors were to be a big part of this program, but as it evolved the students preferred the same tutor each day. Most literacy tutors work two hours a week; in this type of program several tutors would be required to provide assistance on a daily basis. Continuity with the same tutor is crucial to progress and would be difficult to achieve with a different tutor each day. As the students became more relaxed, new outside people posed a threat to their comfort level. It was important for the students to work with the same tutor each day.

There are two ways to ensure this. One is to hire a qualified assistant to be in class at all times. This would provide the help and continuity necessary for success and a comfortable environment. The other option, the one used in this program, is to find a tutor who is willing to offer a couple of hours each program day. A LEARN tutor came in three days every week. When she left for a paid position, another LEARN tutor offered several hours of help each day for the remainder of the program. The tutors became an integral part of the program.

Instructor

The role of the instructor evolved as the program evolved. Within a small group, it is sometimes difficult to not become too involved with the students' personal lives. As they began to feel more comfortable with each other and with the instructor, they began to share their personal issues and problems. At times the instructor found it very difficult to not offer assistance outside the program. It is essential to the success of each individual that the instructor provides encouragement and support, and is understanding and approachable, while at the same time, maintains a teacher-student relationship.

It is also important for the instructor to share some of his/her personal life struggles with the students. This allows them to realize that many people, including professionals, have problems that are not specific to any culture. An example of this is when the instructor told the students about her first marriage, and the problems she had while going to university. She also expressed some of the hardships she had as a single parent. One student said she really enjoyed listening because she did not realize she could have the same kind of problems as the instructor. The instructor related to the students as much as possible so they would not feel judged or intimidated. It was important for the students to feel they were valuable individuals with a great deal to offer in the development of this program. If they felt less than this, they may not have remained in the program.

If the instructor is not Aboriginal, then he/she must have experience with and knowledge of Aboriginal people. Although this instructor was not Aboriginal, she had been actively involved in Aboriginal politics, education, and spirituality for the past 10 years. She taught Aboriginal children for 5 years and lived in Aboriginal communities. Her husband is a First Nation Aboriginal and her daughter is Metis. The instructor's respect for and knowledge of many Aboriginal issues allowed her to interact with the students more successfully. It also helped to break down some of the existing fears and expectations of white teachers that some of the students had from their childhood school experiences.

Flexibility is also a key characteristic of the instructor since different needs and different interests within any group must be acknowledged and affirmed. The following example stresses the importance of flexibility: One of the activities in the family literacy component was to write a story about the birth of the students' first child. It became apparent, the day after the activity was introduced, that two students found this assignment extremely difficult because their first child had died. This was early in the program and these students had not yet realized they could reject the assignment. Had the instructor stressed the completion of this activity, these students would not have returned to the program because of their pain and feelings of powerlessness. At the same time, the other students were excited about this activity and they continued to work on their stories. One of the two women chose not to do the activity and the other woman, a few months later, asked if she could read a poem she had written about her son that died. It was a poem she shared with great pride. Flexibility changed this very negative activity into a very positive one for this student.

For this type of literacy program to be successful, the instructor must also have a sense of humor. Laughter always invites participation. The staff at the Friendship Centre commented on the fun the literacy learners seem to have since their laughter is heard throughout the Centre every time they meet.

With all these qualities, each equally important, the instructor can provide a friendly, supportive, caring, and non-threatening environment that accommodates learning.

Section II - Program Content & Instruction

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Section II - Program Content & Instruction

Forward

Three points of concern that are crucial to the success of any Aboriginal Family Literacy Program are discussed in this next session. The instructor must provide Aboriginal content, be aware of sensitive issues, and create an atmosphere that builds positive self-images.

Aboriginal Content

One of the goals of this program was to build self-esteem through cultural pride. Although it is important for the instructor to have knowledge of Aboriginal cultures, he/she must not assume that all Aboriginal people think the same way about their culture. This is a common misconception non-Aboriginals make. An equivalent assumption: Every Canadian thinks the same way about Canadian culture. All viewpoints must be respected. Since some Aboriginal students are not interested or involved in Aboriginal spirituality, then the cultural content must be chosen with consideration for these students as well.

No matter what the students' cultural viewpoints were, it was disturbing to learn that so few of them felt pride in their Aboriginal heritage. One student commented, 'Being an Indian never did me any good.' Another student expressed embarrassment about being Aboriginal. These students, while in grade school, had very few experiences, if any at all, where Aboriginals were represented in text books with dignity and respect. This, added to the prejudice they experienced in mainstream society, did nothing to build their self-images as a valuable group of people, let alone as a valuable group of Aboriginal people in Canada. Although the lack of cultural pride and self-identity is not unique to this group of students, it must be stressed that this group, by no means, represents all Aboriginal people. The literature in this program represents and affirms the significance of this group in history and in present day Canada.

Since learning about Aboriginal cultures, histories, personal stories, religion, politics, and family dynamics is a passion of the instructor, she was excited to present a variety of Aboriginal literature to the students. It was encouraging to see the enthusiasm and interest with which they selected reading materials and wrote personal stories.

Another important cultural component to any literacy program, adult or family, is that the literature be meaningful to the reader. Studies show that children, as well as adults, learn best when they can read material with familiar content. Until recently, most Aboriginal children were seldom exposed to storybooks about their lives. The books they read were about "white" families who ate different food, spoke a different language, and participated in different cultural activities. These books had no meaning to the child on the reserve.

The students in this program signed out storybooks for their children on a regular basis and, although there were a variety of books, the books with Aboriginal content were the most popular. Providing Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal content, at various reading levels, is a key component to an Aboriginal program.

Sensitivity

In any literacy program, certain subjects must be broached with care and sensitivity. All of the students in this program had battled alcoholism, or were battling it, either as an alcoholic, or as a child or spouse that was living, or had lived, with an alcoholic. Some students had lost a child either by death or through the foster care system. All of the students were single parents and living on social assistance. The importance of the instructor remaining non- judgmental and supportive throughout the program must be stressed.

These and other experiences such as spousal abuse, child sexual abuse, abandonment, and extreme poverty were topics discussed in some of the literature. At times, these stories elicited discussions either in the group or privately with the instructor. Although most students shared their personal experiences, some more than others, it was important for the instructor to not become a counsellor figure to them. Balancing between being understanding, concerned, and supportive, while not becoming too involved with their personal lives and wanting to help, was difficult at times.

It was equally important to respect those who did not want to disclose any personal information. It was also important to be informed about community agencies and support services available to students.

Building Confidence

Most of the people who entered this program did so, with the intention, to make changes in their lives. Many had reached a level of frustration trying to break the cycle of poverty in which they existed. Improving reading and writing skills was seen as their only way to a better future. Their biggest obstacle was their lack of confidence. It was realized, during the last month of the program, how much the students' self-esteem and confidence had developed. This was possible because each one was encouraged and his/her efforts, successful and unsuccessful, were affirmed in a positive and non-threatening manner.

The most valuable outcome of this program was the increased confidence with which the students discussed their future plans. One woman, who had struggled through the adult upgrading program several years ago, felt she did not have the skills to succeed in college. After participating in the Aboriginal Family Literacy program, she reaffirmed her goals of college, and her enthusiasm influenced her two adult daughters. One of them registered to upgrade in the fall at Lakeland College and the other found employment.

Another student, who was at a grade three level of comprehension and skill development, said she did not feel so stupid anymore. She said she knows she can learn and she knows she will succeed in getting her grade twelve. She felt her greatest accomplishment was that she did not give up when things were hard; she completed the program.

A single parent of four children, who could barely look at anyone let alone speak in front of a small group, also said she feels very good about her ability to learn. She said that she can stand up for herself instead of allowing family members to take advantage of her. Although finishing her grade twelve is still scary to her, she knows she can do it. She said, "Before they were just dreams. Now I'm going to work on them to make them come true."

Another woman, who completed the program, said she has always wanted to get her grade twelve so that she could give her children a better life. She now feels that she can do it. She plans to attend college in Red Deer this fall.

The young man in the program, who can not read (Fetal Alcohol Syndrome), said he never knew anything about his culture when he started. After being read to by the tutor for several months and after telling stories orally, this student learned that he can experience literature even though he can not learn to read (professional diagnosis explained the damaged part of the brain and why he can not read). He enjoyed the stories with Aboriginal content the most. He became an active participant with his tutor, and he confidently expressed his opinions about the stories they read together.

The relevancy of course materials, the nature and character of the instructor, and the atmosphere in which learning takes place are all equally significant to the success of an Aboriginal Family Literacy Program.

Section II - Program Content & Instruction Preparation

Assessment Files

Organizing and preparing materials prior to the start date eliminates confusion, provides direction, and is necessary for a quality program. Each student should be interviewed and their literacy skills assessed by the instructor. A variety of forms are needed at the beginning and at the end of the program for each student's assessment. It is time efficient to compile these forms into files for each student before the program begins. A master copy should be kept in the instructor's files for easy access since students enroll throughout the program. *Badar's Reading and Language Inventory* (1983), and *Taylor's Literacy Portfolio Assessment: A Resource for Literacy Workers* (1994) were used.

The portfolio assessment package will vary with instructors. The following forms were used in this program:

- registration and background information;
- reading comprehension and miscue information;
- reading behavior information;
- word identification (grade level);
- writing samples;
- writing inventory checklist;
- basic math skills assessment;
- record form for adult books;
- record form for children's books;
- personal goal identification

Collecting Materials

Finding appropriate reading material takes imagination and initiative, especially when the range of abilities is anywhere from pre-primary to grade nine. It is important to know the resources in the community. Schools, libraries, and the community college are places to find materials. Second-hand bookstores, garage sales, and local donations are other resources to use to develop a library with a variety of reading materials.

Be selective and up to date as much as possible. The students' awareness of outdated materials, such as Dick and Jane readers donated from the school, will not motivate them to read. There were several outdated materials donated to this program that were not used. They were not even visible in the classroom.

Reading materials should be at a variety of reading levels, with content that is interesting to adult learners. Specific materials such as children's books, Aboriginal literature, specific program workbooks, and instruction manuals, should be ordered in advance to ensure availability. At least 10 sets of 11 children's books were ordered for the family literacy component. Math textbooks were borrowed from the high school and college, and dictionaries were purchased from the second-hand book store before the program began.

Students' supplies were also purchased in advance. Several items were included: pens, pencils, erasers, paper, binders, and notebooks. General supplies such as staplers, rulers, markers, glue, pencil crayons, and scissors were also available to the students and their children.

Collecting resources and creating materials is an ongoing process since different students' needs arise and new resources are developed and made available.

Tutors

The LEARN program sent tutors as needed. The coordinator of LEARN was informed of the particular student's needs and a list of potential tutors was given to the instructor. This was great as it lessened the instructor's work load.

Advertising in the local newspaper or inquiring into the community volunteer organization are other ways to meet this need. If there are funds available, a paid assistant is another alternative. The extra assistance is necessary, and community resources should be known and contacted before the start date to insure assistance. Since consideration must be given to compatibility when matching a tutor with a student, it might be necessary, in some cases, to assess the student and then find a tutor.

Schedule

Consistency in the schedule allows the students to plan ahead and organize their personal schedules. A copy of the schedule should be prepared in advance and distributed to the group on the first day. Students in this program preferred longer hours and fewer days to less hours and frequent days. This way, transportation costs were less since students attended only 3 days a week. Changes in the schedule were made throughout the program to accommodate the needs of the group and the individuals. Below is the schedule which was specific to the content used in this program. There were a variety of activities that fit into this schedule on any given day.

Weekly Schedule

Tuesday 11:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

- Family literacy activities
- Individual reading/response writing
- Adult Challenger Series (individualized skill development)
- Story writing
- Computers - math, grammar, typing and word processing programs

Wednesday 9:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.

- Group reading/writing skill development
- Adult Challenger Series (individualized skill development)
- Individual reading/response writing
- Math (individual skill development)
- Computers/literacy games

Thursday 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.

- Math
- Adult Challenger Series (individualized skill development)
- Story writing
- Computers/literacy games

Every third Tuesday - library visit with children

Community Awareness

Ads in the local newspapers and on television and posters in public buildings were some of the methods used to advertise this program before it began. Meetings with the Saskatchewan Social Services Supervisor and letters to the students' social workers provided information about the program which assured the necessary support. Word of mouth, in a small community, is another effective way to promote awareness of new programs. Articles in the local newspapers kept the community informed of the events in the program throughout the year.

Child care

Arrangements for child care should be done before the program begins. By compiling a list of phone numbers for local baby-sitters, daycares, and dayhome programs in advance, the students can discuss the choices available at the initial interview with the instructor.

Funds for child care should either be secured through the program budget or through social services before child care workers are employed. If social services funds child care, it is important to find out the procedure and expectations for payment to eliminate confusion and insure prompt payment. If child care is offered in the same facility as the literacy program, then a trained child care worker should be employed and the child care program developed before students arrive.

Transportation

Arrangements with the local taxi company were made by the instructor to guarantee co-operation in case students needed to use cabs. Students and/or volunteers who transported other students needed to be reimbursed for gas mileage. Provisions for transportation need to be made before and throughout the program with appropriate forms available for the drivers.

Section II - Program Content & Instruction

Instructional Approach

When this program began, there was no specific curriculum and no materials other than the family literacy books. Many of the materials for instruction were collected as the needs of the students were learned.

Response to the individual interests and literacy needs of the students requires different approaches to instruction. When appropriate, students were taught specific skills as a group and then they were given an assignment. Expectations of the students varied depending on abilities. Other instructional approaches included one-to-one tutoring, small group activities, student teaching student, individual activities, field trips, and guest speakers.

As the program evolved, the students began to take ownership of their own learning. They expressed their needs and concerns openly and began their work with little assistance from the instructor. They felt more confident seeking help from the instructor or from classmates. With individual programs, it was difficult for the instructor to help everyone when they needed it. They relied on each other for help when the instructor was unavailable. A non-threatening atmosphere was necessary for the students to feel at ease, especially those with very low skills.

It is important for all students to feel they are valuable contributors to the group. Even the student with the lowest skills will have something directly or indirectly to share or teach. Learning should be a reciprocal process.

Section II - Program Content & Instruction

Course Content

Family Literacy

There is an abundance of literature on family literacy. It is not important to discuss the theories for, practices of, or materials in family literature at this time. A variety of resources are listed in the bibliography.

There were two programs researched for this project : *Homespun* (Brooks, Alberta) and *Come Read With Me* (Regina, Saskatchewan). Although many of the children's books are similar for both programs, *Come Read With Me* is not as structured as *Homespun*, it works better with an open entry and exit policy. *Homespun* has a specific set of children's books, none with Aboriginal content, with specific activities for each book and a specific order in which each book is used. The parent handbook reading level was too high for this group. When the instructor initially distributed the parent book she immediately realized it was inappropriate; it intimidated most of the students. She stopped using the *Homespun* program. *Come Read With Me* is more flexible and the parent handouts less intimidating. The activities are not set up in any specific order and the list of books include several with Aboriginal content. This program was used and the students flourished with it.

Both programs are excellent resources to develop family literacy; however, be selective in determining what the specific group needs. With either program, the instructor should attend a workshop to learn how to implement the program and purchase the materials.

The family literacy component taught the parents to be actively involved in their children's preschool literacy development. The students met with the instructor each Tuesday for 2 or 3 hours. Several exercises with each book were done in the group; this encouraged the parents to do the same with their children. They took the assigned children's books home and did activities with their children for the week. The students who did not have any young children at home worked on computers or other individualized assignments during family literacy sessions. After a couple of weeks in family literacy, the parents expressed their children's excitement to see the storybook for the week. They expected a book each Tuesday and some students said their children demanded a story everyday - sometimes several times a day.

Along with the sets of storybooks used for *Come Read With Me*, several children's stories, with Aboriginal content, were available to be taken home at any time. These books were signed out on a regular basis throughout the program. Taking home more than the assigned book was evidence that the students enjoyed reading to their children.

Since most of the students had few, if any, books in their homes, visits to the public library, every 3 weeks, provided parents with a variety of children's books. This activity turned into a fun experience for both the students and their children. Every third Tuesday, the students and their children met at the centre. They visited the library for about an hour during which time several books were signed out after they were read to the children. The group returned to the Friendship

Centre where the students made a nutritional lunch for everyone and then participated in arts and craft activities with their children.

This activity provided positive role modelling for the children and guaranteed quality time with their parents. The trip also encouraged responsibility for the books on loan for a 3 week period. The library visits proved to be a free and fun way to entertain children outside the home.

Individual Program

Students' skills were assessed and were portfolios developed that outlined their strengths and weaknesses. Opportunities to improve specific skills were integrated into a variety of activities.

Journals

Students were invited to keep a journal. This was an optional activity to encourage free writing. The journals were not marked, but they were used as a means of assessment. Examples of writing from the beginning of the journal were compared to entries throughout and at the end of the journal. It provided examples of the writers' attempts to use the skills they were learning.

The journal was also a means through which students voiced their concerns about the program and/or their personal lives. It was an effective way for the instructor to communicate with each student privately.

Free Reading

Students were encouraged to free read at least 30 minutes each day. There was a variety of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal books: fiction; non fiction; poetry; novels; and short stories. Students could sign any of the books out at any time. The readability of each book was recorded for the student. The most popular stories were of Aboriginal people and other literacy learners. There were several copies of some of the novels which allowed students to read the same book at the same time. This encouraged terrific discussions about characters, themes, events, and opinions. Each week, students had to fill in an activity sheet on something they read. They had to identify the title, author, three unfamiliar words and the definitions, the sequence of events, and their opinion of the literature.

Story Writing

Story writing was a very difficult and intimidating task at first. Once the students realized they had opinions to express and experiences to share, they undertook the writing assignments with less anxiety. Their stories provided meaningful content through which to teach specific writing skills. With each written assignment, students became more responsible for editing their own work.

Adult Reading Series

The students were placed in a skills workbook at their appropriate levels. The *Challenger Adult Reading Series* (1985) was useful. The series is a five book program of reading, writing, and reasoning skills designed to meet the needs of adult students. The diverse content was considered motivating and interesting to the students. One student said, "I didn't know all this stuff I'm learning in these stories." The students worked in their workbooks at their own pace. They were encouraged to do homework and to complete a unit each week. They corrected their own work, and assistance was provided when needed. All the students completed at least two books in a 3 month period.

Math

Each student's basic math skills in fractions, decimals, numeration, measurements, multiplication, and division were assessed. Instruction was provided to a group of students, then they progressed through assignments at their own speed with a varying degree of assistance. Students with lower skills were on separate programs and required more one:one instruction.

It is important to know where to find resources such as manipulatives and textbooks. The instructor borrowed supplies from the local elementary school. She found the math textbooks from the College's upgrading program to be useful. Several math textbooks were also borrowed from the local junior high school.

Preparing math worksheets takes time; a file of master copies will eliminate doing the same work more than once as students reach different levels at different times.

Computers

Two computers were donated to this program. They were older models but served the purpose. Students learned basic keyboard skills and they worked through grammar and math programs. They also enjoyed printing some of their stories. The programs they used allowed for individual skill development. The students kept track of their own progress and challenged the next level when they felt ready. None of the students had ever used computers and, at first, they found them intimidating. It was exciting to see the first users teach the other students.

Group Activities

Group activities provided opportunities for the shy students to develop their verbal skills and become more active participants. With the encouragement from the group, these students gradually gained more confidence and began to share their ideas. A variety of group activities also made the program more interesting.

Newspaper Article

Newspapers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, with different readability levels were provided on occasion. Students were asked to cut out articles of interest, read them, and answer comprehension questions - who, what, when, where, and why - about the articles. This exercise encouraged students to read the available newspapers, and it provided an opportunity to develop comprehension skills.

Novel Study

This was an interesting activity. The students enjoyed listening to stories read out loud by the instructor. Copies of the reading were made available to the students who wanted to follow along. Those who wanted to just listen, did so. This activity was more successful with content that was humorous and/or about life stories to which the students could relate.

There were several follow-up activities: students responded to the reading in their personal journals; students completed a set of comprehension questions, either in smaller groups or individually; and/or discussions were elicited within the group that led to many topics.

It was important to encourage students to voice their opinions about the literature they read. Many of the students initially felt that all written material had to be correct and they had to like it. Personal opinions, about the content and the author, were expressed more frequently as the students become more confident. All opinions were acceptable unless they were offensive to other students.

Grammar Exercises

When specific writing skills, such as apostrophes and quotation marks, were taught, anyone who felt ready was encouraged to participate. The students worked through a series of rules and examples together and then completed an exercise to assess their understanding of the skill. The answers were discussed as a group. The students enjoyed marking their own work and frequently wanted more assignments of this traditional nature. They would often ask for worksheets to take for homework.

Letter Writing

This activity presented itself to thank a guest speaker. It was a meaningful exercise and an effective way to teach letter writing skills.

Student Interviews

In partners, students interviewed each other about their lives. Prior to the interview, they developed a list of questions to elicit information from their partners about their childhoods, families, interests, futures, and concerns. Once the information was gathered from the interviewee, the interviewer then wrote it in the form of a story. There were two objectives for this activity: develop skills in using paragraphs; and develop skills in gathering and recording

information. The best part of this activity was the laughter, interest, and dialogue between the partners.

Self-esteem Activities

Students were asked to list five things they liked about themselves. They had the option to share this information with the group, or keep it to themselves. This was a very difficult activity since most people are only familiar with self-criticism. To invite participation, the instructor shared five things she liked about herself. This activity led to a discussion about self-esteem, where and how it is developed, and the impact parents have on its development. Activities to build children's self-esteem were also shared. Several handouts were distributed, and the students expressed their amazement at the thoughts and emotions this activity evoked.

Another successful exercise was goal identification. The students were asked to outline their short and long term goals and their present activities to meet these goals. This activity allowed the students to see how their immediate choice to develop their literacy skills would enable them to reach their short and long term goals.

On different occasions, students with specific skills were invited to teach the rest of the group. One student taught bead work and everyone made earrings. The instructor purchased the supplies and the student led the group. This activity promoted leadership skills and validated the student's expertise as a beader. Other skills Aboriginal students might share are bannock making, ethnic dancing and singing, hide tanning, fishing, art, and trapping. The list is endless. It is important to tap into these resources. Interview forms provide an opportunity for students to list their interests, hobbies, and specific skills.

Field Trips

Field trips encourage student participation and provide a variety of learning experiences. There are many possibilities to integrate field trips into a literacy program. local libraries, colleges, universities, art galleries, museums, and special events are some of the many places available in most urban centres. Most field trips only require a bag lunch and transportation.

Three trips were arranged in this program, and the students were actively involved in the planning and preparation of each one. A full day trip to North Battleford introduced the students to the Alan Sapp Art Gallery. Alan Sapp, an illiterate Aboriginal artist, tells his story of life on the reserve through his paintings. Several, that depict Sapp's childhood experiences, evoked memories of similar experiences the students had while they grew up. The level of interest, amount of dialogue, and personal story writing from each student made this trip worthwhile.

The visit to the local Lakeland College and the tour of the Adult Upgrading program provided answers to the students' questions. The students also had the opportunity to see, first hand, other adult learners working on assignments. They dismissed some of the fears they initially associated with an educational institution.

The most anticipated field trip was the overnight trip to Edmonton. The students visited the Space Science Centre, the Provincial Museum, and Grant MacEwan College's Aboriginal Education Centre. They were also introduced to live theatre. Although everything they saw was interesting and informative, the tour through Grant MacEwan seemed to excite them the most. Upgrading and going to college become the main topics of conversation. For all the students, this trip seemed to justify and reaffirm their commitment to continue their education.

Guest Speakers

Guest speakers can provide valuable insight and knowledge especially when they have experienced the same reluctance, fears, changes, and life struggles as the students.

Ken Severeight, an Aboriginal literacy learner from Yorkton, Saskatchewan, shared his story with the group. The students, along with family members and friends, listened while Severeight shared his story of coping with illiteracy, alcoholism, unemployment, and low self-esteem as an Aboriginal. Because the students could relate to his story, they were encouraged by the challenges he had and the changes he made that brought him to this program as a literate, confident, non-drinker, and skilled speaker.

Severeight's presence encouraged not only the students but their guests as well. The following day, the instructor was informed that one of the student's daughter, who heard Severeight's speech, enrolled in the college's upgrading program that morning. The guest speaker had an overwhelming effect on the students and their guests.

Section III - Assessments, Documentation & Evaluation

Student Assessment

Students' skills were assessed at the beginning and at the end of the program. Some of the assessment materials were inadequate. Initially, the only available tool was the *Badar Reading and Language Inventory* (1983). Many of the graded reading passages were useful, but some were so uninteresting and unfamiliar they were not appropriate indicators of comprehension.

It is recommended that parts of *Badar Reading and Language Inventory* (1983), *Taylor's Literacy Portfolio Assessment* (1994) and the *Challenger Series Placement Tool* (1985) be used along with the instructor's personal recording strategies. Anecdotal records were useful to record specific strengths and weaknesses observed during formal and informal assessments.

The five students who participated throughout the whole program had the most progression in their reading and writing skills. The students with the lowest skills progressed more than the students with the highest skills. Their improvement was more obvious regardless of the final assessment. The greatest progress was made in the level of confidence the students possessed when they left the program.

Students' progress was recorded on a daily basis. A separate book to make general reminders of their developments was used; the details were added to the students' files at a more convenient time. Each student had a file containing assessment information, anecdotal notes, dated writing assignments, and other relevant information.

Documentation

Several methods were used to keep track of various types of information.

- The students' journals and writing files were used to record relevant information throughout the program.
- A journal was used to keep track of the changes in and structure of the program.
- A daily activity book was essential for planning activities, listing materials, and tracking individual assignments.
- Daily attendance records were kept on each student; this information provided an overall picture of attendance at the end of the program.
- A list of books, materials, and furnishings from the college and local schools was used to keep track of borrowed and donated items.
- Sign-out sheets were an effective way to track storybooks and other literature that left the classroom.
- Photographs of the students participating in activities and newspaper articles about the program were compiled into binders.

Program Evaluation

Information from a variety of resources was used to evaluate this program. Students evaluated the program by answering questionnaires. Their responses to and successes with the literacy activities were recorded throughout the program.

Both partners met to evaluate the program and an interim and final report was submitted to the National Literacy Secretariat and to Saskatchewan Education. Responses from the community, to the news releases on the program, provided feedback and continuous support. A record of all inquiries into the program affirmed the need for this program to be a permanent service in Lloydminster. Letters from community organizations and government agencies indicated the awareness of and the strong support for this program.

Close

A program of Aboriginal family literacy evolved over a 7 month period with input from the students, the community, and the partnership. It proved to be a success in many ways. All the students acquired more experiences and stronger skills in reading, writing, math, computers, and family literacy. The program acknowledged and respected individual cultural beliefs and values; and it provided an abundance of literature and a variety of activities to develop cultural awareness and pride in each of the students. They met with other adult learners, with similar expectations and needs, in a non-threatening, informal learning environment.

The most valuable outcomes of the Aboriginal Family Literacy Program are that each student finished with a greater sense of self and a greater level of self-confidence (both are conducive to making successful changes); and each student understood the impact of and value in reading stories to his/her children.

With experiences teaching pre-schoolers through adults, the instructor has learned that when a person (child, youth, or adult) sees him/herself as a valuable and capable person, he/she is more receptive to learning and to taking risks that will make positive changes.

Building the Fire was a program that provided a stepping stone to future empowerment for each participant.

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- A copy of the students' book of stories is included. It is a tribute to their success.

Items of Interest



George, Ruby and Sarah Simaganis browse the collection of books at the library during a field trip of the aboriginal adult literacy program.

Aboriginal Students look to future

by Leanne Herter
Lloydminster Meridian Booster

Students in Katharine Gullion's class are nearing the end of a long hard road - destination literacy.

The aboriginal adult literacy program, offered at the Lloydminster Native Friendship Centre since October, will draw to a close with a Graduation ceremony on May 4.

What the students have gone through every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday to get to this point, truly proves their commitment and dedication to learning and breaking the cycle of illiteracy, said Gullion.

Some activities the class has participated in included a trip to the Allan Sapp art gallery in North Battleford. Sapp is an illiterate artist whose paintings really struck a chord with them.

"That's has means of communication. All of my students could relate to his story and his life," said Gullion.

Based on what they saw, the students then wrote about the emotions his paintings evoked.

Another field trip included a visit to Lakeland College to expose the students to the next step their educational journey may lead them to.

The students' children also became involved in the program. Every third week the children came with their parents to school and engaged in craft activities as well as reading. It is important for the children to see their parents as learners and role models which helps break the cycle of illiteracy, she said.

The program is designed as a stepping stone to further upgrading, employment, or to just give the students the confidence to sit down and read to their children.

To help foster interest in reading, Gullion has built a library focused on aboriginal content. The collection of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, children's books, novels and historical accounts encourages reading when it's something the student is familiar with.

"You learn from what you know, you start from what you know and if you can't relate to what's in the book, you're not going to learn a lot out of it." she said.

The students have been encouraged to attend classes and have received support from social services who provided babysitters. The program also provided transportation on cold days.

Gullion is pleased that five of her students have been with her since October with one new student added along the way. Three are already planning to continue onto an upgrading program.

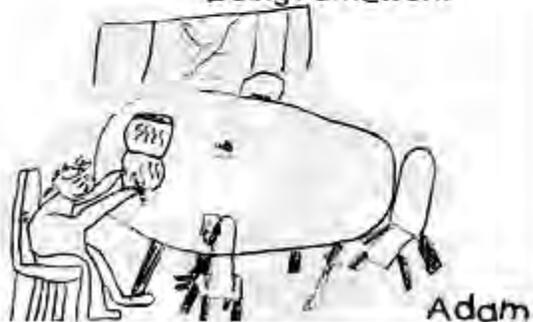
With one more field trip to Edmonton planned before the end of the program, Gullion said graduation has more significance than can be summed up on a piece of parchment.

"This program is seen as a stepping stone. They don't get a degree, they don't walk out with a diploma", said Gullion, "they walk out with higher self esteem, the knowledge that they know they can learn, and are capable of learning, and the confidence in knowing that there are choices, and opportunities out there."

Laurie Ann

My mom's name is Laurie Ann
And she goes to school with
My kokom, and they are in the
same class. I am happy
Because they go to school like
Me. I can't wait until we
finish school.

This is me and my mom
Doing homework



"THAT'S FUNNY KOKUM"

"THE CAT SAID MEOW"

-Derek Quinney

