

# Literacy as a Barrier to Employment

A LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION PAPER

*Addressing the Literacy Needs of Aboriginal People in Ontario*



Ontario Federation of  
Indian Friendship Centres  
and  
OFIFC-GREAT Initiative,

Toronto, Ontario

December 2005



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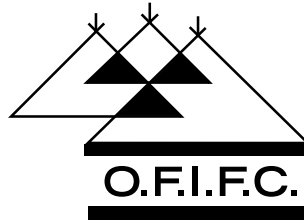
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Meegwetch.*

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# 1 Introduction

*Literacy is connected to some of the key challenges our communities and society face at this point in time: employment, poverty, further or higher education, health, child and family well being, as well as many other socio-cultural issues.*



*People are unemployed, are poor, are addicted, are ripped off and are discriminated against because they can't read. People get in trouble with Revenue Canada, employment insurance and other government programs because they can't read. People are in jail because they can't read. I know that people die because they can't read.*

DOROTHY SILVER, LEARNER,  
LITERACY ACTION DAY 1999

*Lack of education and confidence in myself are roadblocks.*

*I've taken all these tests but I'm still unable to read and write.*

CLIENT COMMENTS  
OG-I LABOUR MARKET ANALYSIS

The comments above best sum up the frustration, isolation, and problems individuals with low literacy skills face when trying to continue their education, find employment or just survive today.

Within the Aboriginal community, literacy skills development is an issue that has, unfortunately, often gone unnoticed and unannounced despite the fact that literacy is a foundational skill helping people, families, and communities survive and thrive in a myriad of ways.

The Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONCL) broadly defines literacy for Native people as:

a tool which empowers the spirit of Native people. Native literacy services recognize and affirm the unique culture of Native Peoples and the interconnectedness of all aspects of creation. As part of a life-long path of learning,

Native literacy contributes to the development of self-knowledge and critical thinking. It is a continuum of skills that encompasses reading, writing, numeracy, speaking, good study habits, and communicating in other forms of language as needed. Based on the experience, abilities and goals of learners, Native literacy fosters and promotes achievement and a sense of purpose, which are both central to self-determination. (George, 1998)

In fact, literacy is connected to some of the key challenges our communities and society face at this point in time: employment, poverty, further or higher education, health, child and family well being, as well as many other socio-cultural issues. According



to the International Adult Literacy Skills Survey (IALSS) study released in 2005, 48% of Canadians do not have the literacy skills needed to meet the increasing demands of modern life, where skills are the “key to success in our knowledge-based economy and society”(IALS, MCL backgrounder). This has far-reaching implications for Aboriginal people when considering that Aboriginal people already lag behind the rest of Canadians when it comes to educational achievement, standards of living, and health.

The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIFC) is addressing these needs in many ways through training and through various programs, including Literacy programs at individual Friendship Centres throughout the province. There are currently ten Native literacy programs housed in Friendship Centres throughout Ontario.

While the main objective of this discussion paper and literature review is to look at literacy as a barrier to employment, it is impossible to look at only one aspect of literacy skills development. One must also look at all of the pieces of the literacy puzzle and how they fit together in order to help learners succeed in their journey. This may include obtaining or bettering their employment, helping their children with their homework, or learning more about who they are as Aboriginal people.

Literacy is a set of foundational skills that many people in Canada struggle with on a daily basis. The implications of this struggle are many and far-reaching. Literacy therefore becomes a determinant of many things, including employment attainment and maintenance, and youth issues such as non-completion of high school and further education. It may also include justice issues, family issues such as communication and quality of life, poverty and stress, health, and personal capacity, which is the ability to develop agency and voice in one’s life.

A discussion of the interconnectedness of literacy issues will be provided in order to present a picture of the very important role literacy awareness and literacy skills development play for the individual, the family, and community. The following literature review and discussion paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the relevant resources available regarding literacy issues in the Canadian context generally. It also includes Aboriginal literacy issues specifically, including academic and non-academic resources and statistical evidence drawn heavily from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS), the International Adult Literacy Skills Survey (IALSS), as well as the findings from the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB), the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, the Department of Indian Affairs, and the Report of the Royal Commission on

Aboriginal People (RCAP). Also included will be relevant hands on resources available for literacy practitioners and learners to utilize on their own or in the classroom.

In addition to the literature review and discussion of literacy issues in Ontario for Aboriginal people, there will also be a discussion of the important role literacy plays in the various programs at Friendship Centres throughout the province. Literacy skills development and awareness is not just restricted to the literacy program itself, instead it flows through programming, be it an employment program, pre-natal program, youth program, justice program, cultural program, or education and upgrading program. This discussion is based on various telephone interviews made with OFIFC staff and Friendship Centre staff, pertinent anecdotal evidence gleaned from interviews, the author's extensive knowledge of the Native literacy field in Ontario and Canada, and will also include relevant findings from the O-GI Labour Market Analysis.

Finally, there will be eight concrete recommendations from the discussion that can aid the OFIFC in the continuation of its' relevant and necessary programming at the provincial and community level.

Unfortunately, literacy services are under-funded in Ontario as well as in the rest of Canada. Even though Ontario is one of only two provinces where

literacy core funding is available, funding is still insufficient to address the needs of learners. Literacy issues often do not show up on the radar of policy analysts and decision makers at the local and provincial levels, resulting in this crucial work being undertaken by overworked, overwhelmed program coordinators, and unpaid, dedicated volunteers. It is up to those who are aware of the wider reaching implications that low literacy skills have for individuals, communities, the economy, and societies, to educate and inform others of the importance of continued and relevant support for literacy.

Dorothy Silver, a learner who spoke at the 1999 Literacy Action Day in Ottawa summed it up perfectly when she said, "you might think that you can't afford more for literacy. But...if you think literacy is expensive...try ignorance."

It is hoped that this discussion paper will help with this critical need for further awareness and education and will aid in the continuation of current literacy services for those who require it to better their lives not only for themselves but also for their families and communities.

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Aboriginal is a term that includes First Nations People both status and non-status, Inuit, and Metis.

## 2 Aboriginal Literacy Issues: A Provincial and National Overview

*Literacy fosters a sense of purpose, promotes achievement and aids in the further development of self-determination for individuals and for communities. Literacy constitutes the wide range of skills necessary for improving one's quality of life.*



### Definitions of literacy: a Canadian and an Aboriginal perspective

The official definition of literacy for Canada comes from the International Adult Literacy Skills Survey (IALSS) and is defined as the “ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities — at home, at work and in the community — to achieve one’s goals and develop one’s knowledge and potential” (OECD, 2005).

While this is widely accepted as the “official” definition for literacy, and it does cover generally what being literate in today’s society means, it misses a lot of what the Native literacy community covers in its more holistic definition of literacy. Namely, that literacy fosters a sense of purpose, promotes achievement and aids in the further development of self-determination for individuals and for communities. Literacy constitutes the wide range of skills necessary for improving one’s quality of life.

To describe this approach more fully, it is important to understand the concept of balance. Such is the case with an holistic approach to literacy, the Mental, Physical, Spiritual, and Emotional growth and learning a person does in each of these quadrants is equally important. An holistic approach has also been defined by many Native literacy practitioners as a culture-based approach to learning. These stages of learning are described as Building (Mind), Preservation (Body), Awareness (Spirit), and Struggle (Emotion) by educators at the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) in their Medicine Wheel Model of Learning (Hill, 1995).

Through this approach, the broader definition of learning can include such concepts as the learning being “directly related to the individual’s primary ‘calling’ or purpose in life” and all knowledge being valuable with no knowledge base being viewed as more professional or “better than anyone else’s.”

As a result of this approach to learning and skills development, literacy, for many in Aboriginal literacy programs, encompasses both quantitative and qualitative outcomes, therefore allowing the learner to achieve a holistic, well rounded, and relevant educational experience. This experience provides them with the opportunity to go on to take advantage of other educational challenges or readies them to tackle the work world with confidence and skill.

Native literacy program coordinators throughout the province of Ontario work hard at fostering supportive learning environments that take into account these approaches to skills development. In George's *The Holistic/Rainbow Approach to Aboriginal Literacy*, she states that:

Aboriginal literacy practitioners continually seek ways to nurture the spirit, heart, mind and body — for themselves, and for the learner. They provide a welcoming environment (they do not replicate the educational institutions, the system that did not work in the first place), and treat the learner as a whole person, an individual with skills and strengths that he/she may not yet have recognized. Practitioners develop an invitational approach to literacy, a process by which people are cordially summoned to realize their relatively boundless potential. (George, 1998)

## **Barriers to learning and living with low literacy skills in Canada: implications for Aboriginal people**

In Native literacy programs throughout Canada, the learner is at the centre of the program. Literacy becomes about true empowerment as learners actively participate in determining and realizing their goals, and succeeding.

The road to success in the literacy program can be and is sometimes very hard. There are multiple barriers to learning for First Nations people. These include but are not limited to: poverty, unemployment,

racism, and classism. While the goal is to understand the barriers Aboriginal people face when working at skills building and improving their literacy skills, it is important to also understand that Aboriginal people lead rich, fulfilling lives in many ways. It is also important to provide a broader socio-cultural context from which to explain how Aboriginal people end up with low literacy skills in the first place.

The barriers to learning that many Aboriginal people face today reach back and are entrenched in the relations between Aboriginal people and the government of Canada. These barriers are related to economic, political and social disparities, not to any inherent trait that Aboriginal people have. A history of colonial and paternalistic dominance that continue to this day are factors that make up the many barriers to success with education and finding employment today.

The current situation faced by Aboriginal people is a multi-barriered one which involves many individuals and families relying upon social assistance. In Ontario, this means mandated literacy screening for adults over the age of 18 and involvement in upgrading programs that may or may not meet the needs of the individual.

Ontario Works (OW) recipients must participate in a mandatory literacy screening test. (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2006) If results show that literacy levels are not at a level deemed to be satisfactory to seek and keep employment, the individual is required to participate in a literacy program. The rationale of this program is to expose the OW recipient to literacy programming in the hopes of improving their chances of getting and keeping a job. This mandated learning can result in individuals being unwilling participants in upgrading or literacy programs that may or may not be addressing their needs appropriately. Literacy skills development and learning cannot be mandated. As a result, these learning situations are often doomed, and may result in the individual feeling doubly stigmatized and not helped by OW to realize their potential (George, 2004).

As a result of these issues, both historical and current, many people are left with a distrust of the edu-

cation system and the state. Unfortunately, this is the reality we are dealing with today when we talk about social inequities and barriers to learning.

What is being done to address these inequities? The Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential skills presented a report outlining the need in Canada of a pan-Canadian literacy strategy. The committee speaks to the need for a fully literate Canada and outlines what the various levels of government can or should do to fulfil this goal. The committee believes that:

All Canadians have the right to develop the literacy and essential skills they need in order to participate fully in our social, cultural, eco-

nomie, and political life. Every person must have an equal opportunity to acquire, develop, maintain and enhance their literacy skills regardless of their circumstances. Literacy is at the heart of learning. A commitment to learning throughout life leads to a society characterized by literate, healthy and productive individuals, families, communities and workplaces. (Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills, 2005)

The next section provides an overview of the various Native and non-Native organizations and

# 3 Who's Out There?

## Relevant Resources for Practitioners and Learners

*In the past 15 years, there has been steady growth in the Native literacy field with regard to support organizations, resource development, training and professional development opportunities.*



There has been steady growth in the Native literacy field with regard to support organizations, resource development, training and professional development opportunities in the past 15 years.

The following organizations are considered the “main” organizations that support Native literacy practitioners and learners in Canada. This is not an exhaustive list but rather a good example of the types of organizations available.

### National Indigenous Literacy Association

The National Indigenous Literacy Association (NILA) is a relatively new organization based in Winnipeg, Manitoba that represents Indigenous literacy practitioners, learners, and educators in Canada. NILA is “the eyes, ears and voice of Aboriginal literacy in Canada, and reflects the spirit and values of Aboriginal peoples and nations in all of its work. NILA emphasize Aboriginal culture-based quality in our services and respect in all our relationships. NILA supports the development of holistic approaches to literacy education and partnerships and links with quality Indigenous education initiatives wherever they are found” (NILA, 2005).

The organization was originally a committee made up of several elders, literacy practitioners, and learners from throughout Canada who were experts in the field of Adult literacy. The original committee was struck as a result of findings from a survey conducted by Beverly Ann Sabourin and Associates (BASA) that found First Nations literacy practitioners and learners all over Canada wanted a national network or organization to address their specific needs. The findings of the survey were developed into a report entitled *The Language of Literacy: A National Resource Directory of Aboriginal Literacy Programs* (BASA, 1998).

In April 2000, NILA (which was at that time called the National Aboriginal Design Committee) coordinated the first ever National Aboriginal Literacy Gathering in Morley, Alberta. Thanks to the hard work and openness of literacy practitioners and learners from all over the country, the gathering was a success and helped to form the goals of the organization.

The work of NILA has “increased awareness at a national level of Aboriginal literacy needs and perspectives, and initiated key links with numerous national and international literacy stakeholders and potential partners” (Anderson, 2003). The goals of NILA are as follows:

1. **To provide a forum on Aboriginal literacy**  
Facilitate networking, communications and liaison for stakeholders in Aboriginal literacy, thereby supporting the development of a strong movement of Aboriginal people and organizations involved with Aboriginal Literacy education.
2. **To be the voice of Aboriginal literacy**  
Provide leadership for and speak on behalf of Aboriginal literacy interests to inform governments and the public about issues related to Aboriginal literacy in Canada, and establish a presence in the wider national and international community.
3. **To facilitate literacy development initiative**  
Manage, coordinate and partner in research and development initiatives addressing Aboriginal learning environments and approaches to literacy education. These initiatives will be grounded in Aboriginal cultures and relate to Aboriginal concerns. (Anderson, 2003)

NILA continues to grow to meet the expanding needs of the field. NILA is also considered one of five national literacy organizations that represent the literacy needs of Canadians. On Literacy Action Day in October of each year, NILA staff and board members represent First Nations literacy practitioners and learners to lobby for increased literacy funding

and visibility at Parliament Hill while visiting and lobbying various Members of Parliament from all parties.

## Ontario Native Literacy Coalition

In Ontario, the voice of literacy practitioners and learners belongs to the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC). Based in Owen Sound and in existence since 1988, the ONLC represents twenty-seven (27) Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities funded Literacy and Basic Skills programs. Programs are both on and off-reserve, urban and rural. The ONLC vision is to foster culturally-appropriate learning environments for Native learners in Ontario. (ONLC, 2006)

The ONLC endeavours:

- to advocate and lobby for stable funding as well as a better understanding of the issues facing the Native literacy practitioners and learners,
- to develop and share relevant resources such as curriculum and training resources,
- to provide professional development training for literacy practitioners,
- to provide resource information, conduct research in the new and growing field of Native literacy, and
- to develop strategies that will respond appropriately to needs expressed by the field.

## Ningwakwe Learning Press

Ningwakwe Learning Press (NLP), formally the Ningwakwe Clearing House, was originally a project of the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition. NLP is a Native literacy publishing company with its roots in the Native literacy field both provincially and nationally. NLP’s main goal is to develop, publish and distribute learning materials that contribute to the achievement of adult Native literacy learning outcomes in Ontario.

Developing and publishing many quality literacy resources each year, NLP responds to the needs of the field, including the needs of learners and literacy

practitioners. Culturally appropriate materials developed include books for families to read together, a healthy living series written by a Métis family physician, curriculum resources, books for teens, learner writing anthologies, as well as workforce development resources. NLP resources are all available for purchase on-line. (NLP, 2006)

## AlphaPlus Centre

Another resource that is helpful with regard to literacy provision as well as resources is the AlphaPlus Centre. The AlphaPlus Centre is, among other things, a provincial literacy library, and a resource support for literacy practitioners and adult educators throughout Ontario.

AlphaPlus also develops and maintains an on-line curriculum for learners called AlphaRoute which includes curriculum developed specifically for Native learners based on the teachings of the Medicine Wheel, and provides various training activities for literacy practitioners, both in person and at a distance via computer.

AlphaPlus Centre has four Field Consultants that serve the needs of the four funded literacy streams in Ontario: the Native, Deaf, Francophone, and Anglophone streams. The Native Field Consultant works to ensure that the needs of the Native literacy field are responded to in an appropriate and culturally sensitive manner. The field consultant is available to train literacy practitioners, help with program development, and provide information about the services available at the AlphaPlus Centre.

AlphaPlus also hosts a literacy research portal which is available to everyone who requires information about existing research on literacy issues. The services available by the AlphaPlus Centre are too numerous to mention here, so it is strongly suggested that the reader visit the website or book a visit to the library which is based in Toronto. (AlphaPlus Centre, 2006)

## National Adult Literacy Database

The National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) is an excellent resource for those needing more information about literacy in Canada and internationally. The database compiles information about literacy and adult education from all over the world. Thousands of reports, statistical findings, and learner writings can be found on the website.

Hundreds of education centred organizations also have their websites hosted by NALD, making information sharing economically possible. Information about literacy and adult education events from all over the world is housed on the site and can be easily searched. Finding out about upcoming literacy events, read project reports, or researching available resources is easy with their search tools.

While NALD is not specifically an Aboriginal organization, it is an excellent resource for Aboriginal developed resources as well as providing information about Aboriginal literacy programming and research in Canada.

# 4 What's Out There?

## *A Review of Relevant Resources for Administrators, Literacy Practitioners and Learners*

*There are many great research projects, papers, materials and books outlining Aboriginal education issues, solutions and resources.*

This section will highlight some of the key reports that contain specific recommendations related to Aboriginal literacy. Many reports have been prepared which have examined First Nations education. However, literacy issues and initiatives are often not addressed specifically and are tacked on to the end of a discussion of education, if at all. Literacy is a separate and dynamic issue all of itself and should be addressed as a unique concept but also included in the overall life long learning approach to education.

There are many great research projects, papers, materials and books outlining Aboriginal education issues, solutions and resources. This resource review includes selected books, journal articles, government publications, websites and other documents that cover the areas of interest for Aboriginal literacy. It is organized into the following sections:

1. **Resources for Friendship Centre staff, administrators, literacy practitioners and policy developers**

This is literature that provides background knowledge and recent development and recommendations in the literacy field.

2. **Resources for Literacy Programs**

Practical material for daily use by literacy practitioners and students (adult and youth).

### **Resources for Friendship Centre Staff, Administrators, and Literacy Practitioners**

*The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 3 — Gathering Strength* makes forty-three detailed recommendations on education in Chapter 5, but only two of these directly address literacy.

Aboriginal authorities and all provincial and territorial ministries of education fund programs for Aboriginal youth



who have left secondary school before graduation to enable them to resume their studies with appropriate curriculum, scheduling, academic and social support; encourage co-op initiatives by offering funding inducements to secondary schools that develop active co-op education programs for Aboriginal young people;

And collaborate with Aboriginal governments and organizations to facilitate integrated delivery of adult literacy, basic education, academic upgrading and job training under the control of Aboriginal people.

*The New Agenda: A Manifesto for First Nations Education in Ontario.* The chapters of the Chiefs of Ontario Manifesto range from philosophy and history, to early childhood education and funding formulas, and every other aspect of education. There is largely a political component to this document, and many parts may be useful as a basis for funding and lobbying initiatives. This is a great first place to start in reviewing the key issues, concerns and recommendations in Aboriginal literacy and education today. There were twenty-four contributors who produced distinct papers. The following are reviews of two of the documents that focus on literacy issues.

*First Nations Literacy in Ontario, by Priscilla George.* This document, written by the foremost Aboriginal literacy professional in Canada, starts with explaining literacy and its impacts. It reviews current programs and funding in Ontario for Aboriginal literacy programs, literacy programming in schools, host organizations, best practices and provides recommendations to further the Aboriginal Literacy movement in Ontario. In the document, George writes that:

More often than not, First Nations literacy practitioners feel that their host organization and the First Nations leaders place a higher priority on other issues, such as self-determination, economic development, healing and wellness (Elders, families, youth, residential school syndrome...), etc. There seems to be a failure to

fully appreciate that literacy is a foundation to more effectively address those issues.

The document also states that in order to have a successful Aboriginal literacy program, it must have most of the following characteristics: a predictable source of funding; a safe and welcoming learning environment; supportive community leadership; trained program staff and access to volunteers; learner-centred programming; culturally appropriate curriculum relating to the learners' community and culture; access to learning aids other than curriculum; and initiatives which minimize barriers to participation in the program — like day-care assistance, transportation to the program site and counselling.

The document highlights the fact that to date there is still no clear government and First Nation definition of Aboriginal literacy and that this is essential for the goal of First Nations control of First Nations literacy. It is clear by the findings presented here that Aboriginal literacy is a dynamic issue that is gaining more recognition but that there is still much work to do.

*First Nations Education Manifesto — Annotated Bibliography, by Lissa McGregor.* Eighty-five materials are reviewed in this comprehensive document prepared for the Chiefs of Ontario in 2005. It provides a detailed overview of important developments in First Nations education, with a very small segment on literacy. This overview includes a great deal of information from a number of different sources over the past twenty years. Areas of concentration include post secondary education, special education, First Nations School Boards and Authorities, First Nations Languages, Literacy, Native curriculum, Teacher Education, elders and governments roles.

*Ontario Social Studies Curriculum: Grades 1–6.* This guide provides approaches to social studies curriculum in general but the grade 6 unit focuses on First Nation Peoples and European Explorers. This new school curriculum started being implemented in September 2005. It is a relevant document reviewing

First Nation education for Aboriginal children in the province of Ontario. It also explores the way in which information about First Nation people is presented to non-Native children.

This curriculum guide can also be useful in identifying the gaps that exist in the knowledge base the public schools are mandated to fulfill. One example of a gap is:

One of the research and communication skills achieved by the end of grade six is “identify and explain differing opinions about the positive and negative effects of early contact between European and First Nations peoples (e.g., growth of First Nations people’s dependency on trade goods; impact of fur trade on the economy and environment; effect of attempts to convert the Huron Nation to Christianity)

There is no mention of the residential schools or government’s and churches’ role in the administration of the schools. Knowing what children are taught in schools today will assist First Nation literacy coordinators to fill in the gaps.

*Ontario Native Studies Curriculum: Grades 9–10.* This resource is intended to serve as a guide in developing courses and units of study for students in grades nine and ten. Contents include the course outline for grade nine ‘Expressing Aboriginal Cultures’ and focuses on art forms — painting, sculpture, storytelling, dance and music. The grade ten course outline, ‘Aboriginal Peoples in Canada,’ emphasizes historical and contemporary issues that affect the relationship between Aboriginal people and Canadian governments.

The overall expectations and diversity cited in this guide could make it a useful tool for literacy programming for students who are at a higher level or who are preparing for their GED. One strand of learning highlighted in this curriculum is identity.

Identity is a concept based on the question “Who am I”? The investigation of identity is a personal journey of discovery and realization, which is part of the maturation process of all students during the adolescent years. Historical events, such as the Indian

Act, have made the issue of identity a particular concern to Aboriginal peoples and all Canadians.

*In a Voice of Their Own: Urban Community Development,* by Jim Silver, Parvin Ghorayshi, Joan Hay and Darlene Klyne. This research paper is a case study of Winnipeg’s Aboriginal inner city community development. It contains a detailed theoretical and methodological approach that is based largely on open-ended interviews. Three important paths emerge from their research about overcoming barriers and empowering individuals and thus communities. The first is the importance of adult education for Aboriginal people. Secondly, the importance of Aboriginal organizations run on the basis of Aboriginal culture and the third is parenting as a source of empowerment, especially for women. A combination of these paths helped people to reclaim their lives and build on their strengths.

Even though this document was not focussing on adult literacy initiatives, literacy issues turned out to be the initial key to self-empowerment that led to successful community development.

Ironically, an educational system that has failed so many Aboriginal students at the elementary and secondary levels has produced more successes for adult Aboriginal students at the post-secondary level and adult education. The success of this ‘second chance’ education is in large part attributable to its introducing Aboriginal students to an understanding of the process of colonization, so that they have been able to situate their own difficult circumstances in the context of that broader historical process and have then been able to begin to rebuild their lives on the basis of a growing pride in their Aboriginal identity.

*Aboriginal Learners in Selected Adult Learning Centres in Manitoba,* by Jim Silver, Darlene Klyne and Freeman Simard. This report was based on interviews with Aboriginal adult learners and staff at five adult learning centres in Manitoba — both urban and on reserve. The objective of the study was to determine

what keeps the learners attending the learning centres and what contributes to their success. The study led the researchers to conclude that the main factors contributing to their success were: the holistic, learner centred teaching approaches; the strong social, emotional and practical supports provided to the learners; the highly personal and non-hierarchical atmosphere at the centres, the dedication and passion of the staff and the friendly, non-judgemental and respectful manner in which the learners were treated by the staff.

## Resources for Literacy Programs

*Native Learning Styles: Revised Edition, by Michael Johnny and Diane Hill.* This resource provides a solid definition of the holistic learning process, focusing on the needs of Native adult learners and makes recommendations on how to support a positive learning environment. It details the four Native learning styles and includes an assessment tool to determine which learning style an individual prefers. Determining how the learner learns is the first step in helping the adult learner embark on a more holistic educational journey.

*The Story of the Seven Fires, by Sally Gaikezeyongai.* The powerful 60-minute video is a condensed version of Sally's presentation in which she presents an historical perspective of the evolution of relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. She also relates these seven fires teachings to the listener's life and learning processes. The video could be a useful visual tool in explaining to communities and organizations the importance of supporting literacy.

The Teacher's Manual has a lot to add to any adult literacy program with its' practitioner tips, appendix of graphics used in the video, LBS learning matrix classification and extensive activities for the learner can be used to enhance the listener's self-directed learning process.

*AlphaRoute, from AlphaPlus.* AlphaRoute is an on-line literacy learning environment with four separate but virtually linked learning areas: Deaf,

Native, Francophone, and Anglophone. AlphaPlus Centre manages the AlphaRoute environment with the support of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Literacy and Basic Skills Section (LBS) and the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS). AlphaRoute provides learners with on-going guidance and support as each AlphaRoute learner works on-line with a trained AlphaRoute Mentor. Although the Native AlphaRoute does not have the same volume of lessons and activities currently as the Anglophone site, it remains popular with Aboriginal adult students who also have the opportunity to include the Anglophone site in their training. The sponsor, AlphaPlus, is currently developing new Aboriginal online curriculum.

This online atmosphere is especially youth friendly since it offers: an individualized training plan and a personal list of learning activities for each learner; an individualized portfolio that saves the results of completed activities for the learner and the mentor to view; a communication system that includes a discussion board, a chat feature, and internal email.

*Shki Mawtch Taw-win En Mook Native Curriculum Project, from Kenjgewin Teg Educational Institute.* The Shki Mawtch Taw-win En Mook Native Curriculum Project is delivered by Kenjgewin Teg Educational Institute in M'Chigeeng, Ontario. They have started a full Native-inclusive K-11 curriculum that meets the Ontario Curriculum standards. It is being piloted in the Rainbow District School Board in Sudbury, as well as at reserve schools in that area. The subjects include English, history, family studies, and health. The complete K-8 units that have been developed to date are available for purchase.

Their collection of resources — non-fiction, fiction, reference and professional — focuses on resources that deal with Native education, history and culture. A virtual library consists of links to General Internet Resources, Reference Resources and two special collections. The Native Webliography has alphabetized links about all kinds of Native interests from anthropology, arts and crafts, children's sites, language, law, to storytelling, women and youth. The second one is the Historical Document Collection.

Although the site is not yet complete, there are links to where they will be posting their curriculum outlines, and Kid's Corner with children's activities (word search, crafts, math helps, etc).



*Empowering the Spirit II: Native Literacy Curriculum, from Ningwakwe Learning Press.* The thirty culture-based lesson plans contained in this popular curriculum are designed for literacy practitioners or teachers either in a small group, classroom or in a one-on-one setting. It is a useful tool for literacy practitioners in providing culturally appropriate materials and in using culturally appropriate methodologies in their work with Native learners as various ages and literacy levels. Included is a description of the principles applied to address the needs of Native learners. Also provided in the document are all of the extra reading materials needed to complete the lesson which is a huge help to busy literacy practitioners.

*K-Net, from Keewatinook Okimakanak.* K-Net Computer Services was mandated by the Northern

Ontario Chiefs in 1994 to fill a gap in the area of computer communications. Since that time the Computer Services department has developed and maintained K-Net, a computer bulletin board and e-mail service with 500 active users among Sioux Lookout District First Nations. One of the many supports this service provides is developing and delivering a wide range of training and capacity building programs aimed at strengthening computer and telecommunications expertise at the community level. They have an excellent youth site < <http://youth.knet.ca/> > that contains a children's corner, Native Studies, Technology, Science, Sports, Music, as well as a chat area.

The Keewatinook Internet High School is also included in this site and has been created for Aboriginal youth who live in small isolated First Nation communities in Ontario. The school would be a great resource for any program that is considering setting up a distance education program on line or even just for further assistance on youth programming < <http://kihs.knet.ca/> >.

*Ningwakwe Learning Press, Literacy Resources.* NLP's main objective is publishing Aboriginal literacy materials and therefore all of their materials are useful to adult and youth literacy students. Here are a few samples from their collection.

*The Truth About Nibbles, by Lenore Keeshig-Tobias and David McLaren.* This unique *Families-Read-Together* format encourages parents to read together with younger children. There are two separate reading levels — LBS level 5 for the parent to read and an LBS level 2 or grade three reading level for the child to read. Parents contribute to the growth of their child's literacy experience while incorporating a much-needed bonding opportunity. The story involves a contemporary Aboriginal family in their day-to-day setting with traditional teachings in a humorous and insightful story line.

*Drum Making: A Guide for the Anishnaabe Hand Drum.* This guidebook outlines the Ojibwe method of constructing a hand-drum and is filled with full colour photos, step-by-step instructions and teachings.

General Reading resources for learners include:

- *Potato Soup* by Ferguson Plain
- *FryBread* by Ferguson Plain
- *Story Keepers: Conversations with Aboriginal Writers* by Jennifer David
- *Honouring Our Peacekeepers* by Bud Whiteye
- *Quill Basket Making* by Letitia Root
- *Quilting* by Letitia Root
- *Cooking* by Letitia Root

Samples of Ningwakwe Learning Press Literacy Workbooks:

- *Empowering the Learner 2*
- *10 Legends Workbook*
- *An Anishnaabe Look at Exploring Measurement*
- *Feathers of Freedom*

Some Ningwakwe Learning Press Educator Resource titles:

- *The Aboriginal Literacy Curriculum Toolbox: Cultural Philosophy, Curriculum Design and Strategies for Self-Directed Learning* by Janice Brant
- *Creations from the Heart: Native Crafts and Learning Activities* by Jameson Brant

# 5 A Statistical Profile of Native Literacy in Canada

*Four in ten Canadians do not have the literacy skills they need to meet the “ever increasing demands of modern life; where skills are the key to success in our knowledge based economy and society.”*



Until now, there has been very little reliable data available regarding the literacy skills levels of Native people in Canada. Quantitative research by academics into Native adult literacy is still almost non-existent. There is a growing body of qualitative research but until now very few statistics have been available.

In 2005, the results from the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) were released by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Statistics Canada. These findings add to the knowledge found in the previous three IALSS reports released in 1995, 1997, and 2000. The survey is a large-scale comparative study profiling the skills of adults in 6 OECD countries and provides national snapshots. The survey rated people’s ability to “deal with everyday literacy demands” (MCL, 2005). As mentioned above, for the purposes of this survey, literacy is defined as using printed and written information to function in society as well as achieving one’s goals and developing knowledge and potential.(OECD, 2005).

Participants’ literacy skills were gauged on a continuous scale from 0–500 with 0 being a complete lack of skills and 500 being the theoretical maximum of proficiency. Participants’ skills were measured in prose literacy — understanding text such as flyers and newspaper articles, document literacy — understanding text such as maps and charts, numeracy, and problem solving.

Some of the key findings of the survey have implications for all Canadians. Four in ten Canadians do not have the literacy skills they need to meet the “ever increasing demands of modern life; where skills are the key to success in our knowledge based economy and society” (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2005). Also, that Canadians with low literacy skills tend to remain in lower paid, low skilled jobs that offer little chance of improving their quality of life, and finally, that among the unemployed, those with the most “serious literacy barriers only had a 50% chance of finding a job.”

The most recent IALSS provides, for the first time, a survey of Native literacy statistics in Canada. While the survey did not measure the literacy skills of Native people all over Canada there was a targeting of people living in urban areas in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and of people living in selected communities in the territories, as well as Inuit in Nunavut. This was accomplished through the purchase of an over sampling of data.

For the purposes of this discussion paper, the data found in the large urban centres in Manitoba and Saskatchewan will go a long way to create a picture of the state of Native literacy in Canada and specifically, in Ontario. Issues facing Native people with low literacy skills are similar throughout Canada. It is hoped that in the future more Native participation in the IALSS survey will take place in order to capture more thoroughly the main literacy statistics for Native people in Canada.

Taking into account varying levels of education and use of a mother tongue other than English or French, the prose literacy of those Native people surveyed is lower than the rest of the Canadian population. Over 60% of the urban Native population in both Manitoba and Saskatchewan score below a Level 3 on the prose literacy scale. In comparison, 27.3% of the rest of Canadians scored at a Level 2.

Level 3 is considered:

the minimum skills level suitable for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society. It denotes roughly the skill level required for successful secondary school completion and college entry. Like higher levels, it requires the ability to integrate several sources of information and solve more complex problems. (ABC, 2005)

What was found was that average prose levels for urban Native participants was at a level 2, which is defined as being:

able to deal with material that is simple, clearly laid out, and in which the tasks involved are not too complex. It denotes a weak level of skill, but

more hidden than Level 1. It identifies people who can read but test poorly. They may have developed coping skills to manage everyday literacy demands but their low level of proficiency makes it difficult for them to face novel demands, such as learning new job skills. (ABC, 2005)



Native participants scored lower in the document literacy, numeracy, and problem solving than the rest of Canadians. For more information, please see the full report on the Statistics Canada website (Statistics Canada, 2005).

Is it all bad news? Is there hope? The answer is no and yes. Youth are staying in school longer than in the past according to the Aboriginal Peoples Survey by Statistics Canada, therefore the link between literacy proficiency and educational attainment is a strong one sure to help with these statistical scores in the future. And Native people are more likely to finish school at an older age, so completion is happening, only later rather than sooner (Statistics Canada, 2001).

With regard to younger children, the Aboriginal Peoples Survey found that children living in non-reserve areas were increasingly attending preschool programs designed specifically for them. As well the link was made between better educational achievement and participation in extra-curricular activities, of which more and more Aboriginal children are participating in (Statistics Canada, 2001). Also linked to involvement with extra-curricular activities is an increase in the child's self esteem, and an ability to enjoy better social interactions with peers.

It has been found that engaged parents create engaged kids, so increasing the literacy levels of parents and adults in a child's life will actually work to increase their own proficiency levels. By creating home environments that are "conducive to learning", and "influencing children's positive attitudes to education," parents and adults can go a long way to ensuring that our children grow up never needing to attend an adult literacy program (Kavanagh, 2002). Evidence shows that "parental trust and involvement in school is critical to success. It leads to increased attendance, positive attitudes, higher grades, and increased participation in post-secondary education" (Minister's National Working Group on Education, 2002).

The good news for literacy programs, service agencies serving Aboriginal populations, and national organizations like NILA is that now they have the hard evidence needed to advocate for increased funding and support for Native literacy programming across Canada. This evidence will also encourage other organizations to further develop their approaches to literacy skills development and help them to see how fundamental literacy skills are for survival in today's society.

These numbers and this evidence help us to understand the needs of First Nations people with lower literacy skills. We have looked at some of the barriers faced by Aboriginal people with low literacy skills and at some of the more relevant current reasons that is a reality faced by many. The following section discusses specifically the areas that are most affected by a person's literacy level: education, families, youth, poverty, health, socio-cultural issues/ community wellness, and most importantly, for this report, employment.

To begin this section, the author looks at an invaluable resource, the O-GI Labour Market Analysis and makes the link between the need for literacy skills development and the findings from the analysis.

# 6 What We Know:

## Working with O-GI Labour Market Analysis

*While the report itself dealt with employment and training issues, many other interesting facts were available for interpretation while looking through a literacy lens.*

The O-GI Labour Market Analysis was designed:

to identify Ontario wide economic opportunities from an employer perspective and to establish a database of economic demographics on Aboriginal clients or potential clients living in urban communities in Ontario. (Nawagesic and Domansky, 2000)

The findings from this report are quite helpful when looking at literacy skills development issues. While the report itself dealt with employment and training issues, many other interesting facts were available for interpretation while looking through a literacy lens. The statistics within the report are helpful in creating a picture of who the clients of Friendship Centres are and what their needs are over and above finding employment.

If we read between the lines of the findings, we find that there are many reasons why people are having a hard time finding employment or training, keeping employment, and/or furthering their education. For example, just over 81% of O-GI clients with less than a high school diploma indicated that they had not accessed any employment services.

Why is that? There could be several reasons including fear and shame around not being able to read documents or the possibility that there might be testing involved. And up to 60% of clients requested some form of skills training, which could include additional support over and above the offering of high school completion programs.

In the table outlining *Training Needs by Educational Level*, over 36% of clients who did not complete high school did not identify any training needs. From a literacy perspective, this can speak volumes about the lack of self-esteem and trepidation that a person may feel when they have low literacy skills.



We can also make the links between lower educational attainment and lower income levels as 51% of clients with household incomes of under \$10,000 only have partial high school.

It is very important to highlight and second one of the comments from the report, that being, “investments in furthering clients’ education levels will result in future savings in terms of government assistance programs” (Nawagesic and Domansky, 2000). It was also found that those clients with less than a high school diploma experience barriers to getting and keeping a job in larger numbers than those with higher educational attainment. 86% of clients with less than high school have at least one barrier as compared to 65% of clients with a higher educational attainment. Of the barriers listed, lack of education/skills, personal problems, and “other barriers to work” are, to a literacy educator, red flags that may indicate literacy issues for the client.

With many youth leaving the school system without the necessary skills for employment, there is a strong need to take literacy skills development into account when youth enter employment programs looking for assistance.

Indeed, one of the recommendations of the report is for the O-GI to develop a basic education strategy for upgrading and high school completion. In many communities, the mainstream educational system is not appropriately addressing the needs of youth and graduation rates lag behind the rest of Canadians. Bearing in mind that it has been mentioned above that completion is happening, just at an older age, it is still important to address that fact that school is not working for youth.

What is being done to address these issues? This final quote best sums up what is needed to address the literacy inequities in First Nations communities.

A major effort is required now to assist Aboriginal people, including those who are the focus of this study, in terms of acquiring the necessary education and skill training to not only compete in, but to thrive in today’s flourishing economy. (Nawagesic and Domansky, 2000)

The following sections continue to speak to the interconnectedness between individuals with low literacy skills and other issues.

# 7 Making the Links: Addressing the Complexities of What Having Low Literacy Skills Really Means

*Many Native literacy programs address the learning needs of the learner in a holistic way. In order to achieve success, the whole person is taken into consideration.*



Many Native literacy programs address the learning needs of the learner in a holistic way. This means that in order to achieve success, the whole person needs to be taken into consideration.

What's happening at home? What past educational experiences were like and what imprint have they left? Does the learner have enough transportation available to get to the literacy program? Does the learner have enough food to eat? Is the housing situation for the learner adequate? Does the learner have family or primary relationship support for their learning journey? Is the learner dealing with health issues that aren't being properly addressed? These are all questions and issues that often need to be addressed in addition to the actual literacy skills building that takes place in the program.

As is well documented elsewhere, it is commonly understood that Native people do lag behind the rest of Canadians when it comes to income levels, adequate housing, educational levels, and health standards. So if we were to try to address all of these issues, where would we start? As literacy experts, practitioners would say that often literacy is at the centre of many of these issues.

These needs and issues are also strongly connected to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Without these needs being met, the person cannot fully achieve self-actualization (Griffin, 1991).

So we can see how many of a person's basic needs might not be met if they are dealing with low literacy skills. For example, going to the doctor and receiving confusing instructions about a new medication would be overwhelming for a learner who is working at a less than a grade 6 level of competency. Medications or important procedures are not applied and the person starts to live with chronic pain, illness, or worse. In fact, Health Canada has identified literacy as a determinant of health and literacy skills are "critical to understanding health prevention information, the use of medications, and compre-

hension of the elements of a healthy diet.” (Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills, 2005, Rootman and Ronson, 2005)

If we look at the O-GI Labour Market Analysis and see that over 68% of clients have less than a high school diploma, and we then look at the 2001 Aboriginal People’s Survey that found that 60% reported living with at least one chronic condition, and then we look back at the Adult Literacy and Life Skill Survey to see that over 60% of the participants in urban centres in Manitoba and Saskatchewan were working at less than a level 3 in prose literacy, which is the “minimum skill level suitable for coping with the demands of everyday life”, we can see how literacy skills development can play such a huge part in the eventual eradication of many of the problematic issues facing Native people in Canada today.

Poverty and unemployment issues are also very important to consider when addressing literacy issues. According to Stats Canada findings in *Tenuous Connections — Urban Aboriginal Youth Sexual Health and Pregnancy*, “39% of Aboriginal single mothers earn less than \$12,000 a year” (Anderson, 2002).

Poverty, housing stress and/or homelessness, as well as under employment can all be connected to

those with lower literacy skills. For the homeless or those who are in imminent danger of becoming homeless, a lack of literacy and essential skills pose a “significant barrier” (Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills, 2005).

Making these links between literacy and other issues such as poverty and health are important, not only for literacy educators but also for all people concerned with the well-being of others in society.

In *Towards a Fully Literate Canada*, the authors encourage the government of Canada to adopt a vision statement that captures the vital importance literacy plays for all Canadians and how all Canadians deserve equal opportunities in society. They say that “every person must have an equal opportunity to acquire, develop, maintain and enhance their literacy skills regardless of their circumstances” (Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills, 2005).

The following section discusses the literacy programming at Friendship Centres, based on the author’s knowledge of the Native literacy field in Ontario as well as on telephone interviews made with literacy and employment staff at two Friendship Centres. The discussion will also include findings from telephone conversations with OFIFC staff involved with training and policy.

# 8 The Heart of the Community:

## How Literacy Skills Development and Employment are linked in Ontario Friendship Centres

*Friendship Centres provide all the ingredients necessary to help a person deal with their needs in a constructive manner while helping them to build their personal capacity according to their individual goals.*



Friendship Centres are bustling, important places that work to address the many needs of the community. Programming at the Centres tend to focus on dealing with many of the needs addressed earlier in this discussion paper, namely programs dealing with food and housing issues, youth issues, family, after school programming, physical activities, employment and training issues, and education. Essentially the centres are providing all the ingredients necessary to help a person deal with their needs in a constructive manner while helping them to build their personal capacity according to their individual goals.

### Methodology

Key informant interviews took place over the telephone between the author and several Literacy Practitioners, Employment Counsellors, and Alternative School Coordinators from various Friendship Centres throughout the province. Five Literacy Practitioners, three Employment Counsellors, and two Alternative School Coordinators were interviewed. The interviews were informal in nature and included questions about how literacy learners were supported to move up and through literacy, upgrading and employment preparation programs as well as how staff within the Friendship Centre were made aware of literacy issues and how to deal specifically with their programming using a literacy friendly approach. Employment Counsellors were asked how they worked with Literacy Coordinators to ensure that client's goals were being realized. Alternative School Coordinators were asked the same question as the Employment Counsellors.

### Discussion

Of the twenty-nine friendship centres in Ontario, there are 10 that house literacy programs. The literacy programs are separate programs within the centres and are funded by the Ministry of

Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). Funding from MTCU is dependant upon the number of clients and contact hours the literacy program has. Programs are mandated to provide the following services: information and referral, literacy assessment, training plan development, training, and follow up. Of course, programming is always very dynamic and addresses the specific needs of the community. For example, in Thunder Bay, the literacy program hosts a community kitchen for learners. There learners develop a budget, learn to shop and compare prices, read recipes, estimate how much to cook for large numbers of people, and cook, leaving enough food for everyone in the program to take home a meal for their families. Skills development is evident but so also are the needs of the community being addressed in a small but significant way, i.e. a healthy cooked meal for the family to enjoy together.



Other cultural activities at literacy programs include craft classes, where participants learn about measurement, counting, estimating costs and staying within

a budget, marketing and re-investment of proceeds from sales of crafts. There are also monthly or weekly talking circles, moon ceremonies, berry picking and cultural teachings. Literacy practitioners have become experts at developing programming that addresses the cultural and learning needs of learners while at the same time ensuring that they are following the funding guidelines and learning outcomes of the MTCU.

Literacy programs also help people with information and referral, as well as resume, job interview preparation and other employment readiness activities. Literacy programs provide drop-in services to clients who may only require help with a resume or a quick job search on the Internet.

Literacy practitioners in Native literacy programs are dedicated and often times overworked but overall their satisfaction comes from helping people to realize their goals be they to learning to read, going to high school, learning to make moccasins, or helping their grandchildren with homework.

Practitioners are also recognized as educational experts, such as Rita Buffalo, coordinator of the literacy program at the Indian Youth Friendship Society Centre in Thunder Bay. Rita is the 2005 Council of the Federation Literacy Award recipient from the Government of Ontario as well as being the recipient of the Learner's award from the 2004 Canada Post Literacy Awards. Her inspiring story can be found at < [http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/training/literacy\\_award.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/training/literacy_award.html)>. Rita is also vice-President of the board of directors for the National Indigenous Literacy Association and plays an active role lobbying for increased literacy awareness.

The role that literacy programs play within Friendship Centres is varied. Often the literacy program is a vital link between other programs. For example, an expectant mother attending a pre-natal program may express an interest in getting her high school diploma, but the pre-natal program worker noticed in the intake process that the client was having trouble filling out forms and making numerous spelling mistakes. The program worker would then refer the client to the literacy program for an assessment and perhaps upgrading before she then heads over to the alternative school prepared to work on

her high school equivalency. Or a client will go to the employment program eager to begin a job search. The program worker will see that the client's resume needs work and will refer the client to the literacy program. This is the kind of cross-referral that is happening throughout the province at Friendship Centres that house Literacy Programs.

At the United Native Friendship Centre in Fort Frances, these kinds of referrals happen all of the time with clients moving seamlessly between programs. This happens as a result of the information provided by the literacy coordinator to the rest of the staff at the centre. Monthly mandatory staff meetings ensure that all staff is aware of what is happening in each program and that all staff is able to increase their awareness of the far reaching effects of literacy skills development.

In Fort Erie at the Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre, the literacy coordinator works closely with the Native Court Worker to ensure that the literacy needs of those in trouble with the justice system are addressed. The literacy coordinator at the centre talked about how important literacy is for those men and women who have been incarcerated and released. It is well documented that the literacy skills of inmates are low and that a large percentage of Native people populate the jails. The job to increase the literacy skills of those being released is a big one and one that literacy programs are faced with every day.

In fact, there are a very high percentage of people with low literacy skills who are or have been in trouble with the law. Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto (ALST) provides as one of its principles the importance of alternatives which can "break the cycles of recidivism and dependency which is all too prevalent. These alternatives are more effective when they are community controlled and are based on the traditional cultural norms and values of the Aboriginal community" (ALST, 2005). Literacy skills development can most definitely be included in the list of alternatives.

Literacy learners are referred to the O-GI program as are O-GI clients referred to the Literacy Program. Often youth who are attending classes at an Alternative School will work with the Literacy



Practitioner to assess their level if they are thought to be at a level lower than a Grade 9. In Thunder Bay, the Adult Literacy Credit Unit works closely with clients in the Friendship Centre to help them to finish credit courses. Other programs at the Thunder Bay Centre such as the Urban Aboriginal Strategies Program work with clients to develop their life skills and knowledge about healthy eating and nutrition. Literacy learners make up several of the participants in this program.

Over and over again, the concept of strong partnerships was conveyed by staff of the Alternative Schools, the Literacy Programs and the O-GI Programs. This net of helpful service provision can be held up as a model for other communities searching to address needs in a relevant way.

As shown above, literacy programs play a vital part in the life of the friendship centre. There are however, many centres without literacy programs on-site. There are 10 literacy programs in friendship centres. In communities that have a Friendship Centre, there are six Native literacy programs that could provide services in collaboration with the Centre. The Ontario Native Literacy Coalition has as one of its priorities the development of strategies "that will respond to gaps in the delivery of Native

literacy services (i.e. broaden field)” (ONLC, 2005). This means that the ONLC is committed to problem solving around gaps in service and to educate and inform those who are interested in furthering literacy program development in the province. The ONLC would be an excellent resource for Friendship Centres interested in developing literacy programming on-site.

In communities that have Friendship Centres but no Native literacy programs, there are Anglophone or “mainstream” literacy programs that may be of some assistance to clients in the Friendship Centre. The Ontario Literacy Coalition (OLC) is a good resource if this connection were to be explored.

While the perfect scenario would be to have an on-site literacy program at each Friendship Centre, the next best thing is to have an educated staff able to assess where clients are in need of extra help and support with regard to literacy skills development. The Ontario Native Literacy Coalition provides semi-annual training for practitioners. These sessions provide practitioners the chance to network and hone their own skills as educators. If it was at all

possible, relevant staff from Friendship Centres that currently do not have literacy programs may benefit from these training sessions and be able to take back invaluable information to their colleagues.

Another option would be to use the experts that already exist within the Friendship Centres and use them to facilitate literacy awareness training or to discuss the processes they used to ensure literacy was at the core of many of the programs at the Centre. An example of this would be the literacy, employment, and alternative school staff at the United Native Friendship Centre. They work to ensure that all clients, no matter the program they are involved in, are assessed for literacy skills and can move seamlessly through the Centre.

Other options might include setting up an information session with a representative from the National Indigenous Literacy Association or with the Native Field Consultant from the AlphaPlus Centre. Either of these individuals could provide Friendship Centre staff with important information regarding the Native literacy field and steps to address the needs of literacy clients in the Centres.

# 9 Youth Literacy Issues

*Despite the availability of stay-in-school programs, youth work experience programs, and community youth forums, to name a few, youth are still dropping out of school in large numbers.*



Aboriginal youth make up a large part of the population of the community. Currently there are many different types of programming available for students at Friendship Centres, as well as at a number of other service organizations. There are stay-in-school programs, youth work experience programs, and community youth forums to name a few.

Unfortunately, youth are still dropping out of school in large numbers. The 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Study found that fewer than 50% of Aboriginal students finish high school. The 2005 Ontario Learns study states that 29% of Aboriginal people in Ontario do not have a high school diploma. (MTCU, 2005) There are no quantifiable numbers available to provide us with reliable statistics regarding youth literacy rates.

There are many programs in place for youth who are dropping out of the mainstream system. The Alternative School Program with the OFIFC is successfully educating students who do not fit into the regular system. The Native Alternative School Program designed by the OFIFC and delivered by eight Friendship Centres (Fort Erie, London, Sudbury, Ottawa, Kenora, Fort Frances, Hamilton and Sault Ste. Marie) is successfully educating students who do not fit into the regular school system. Literacy programs within the Friendship Centres work to ensure that youth who test at levels lower than Grade 9 are given the support they require through assessments and one to one learning.

In 2004–2005 school year, 634 students, the majority of whom are Aboriginal youth, attended the Native Alternative Schools and earned 336.5 credits that year. There are waiting lists for enrollments, and requests for expansion to other urban Aboriginal communities serviced by Friendship Centres. The Program was evaluated in 2001 and found to be a very successful intervention for urban Aboriginal youth in the areas of addressing drop outs, behaviour, poverty, addictions, special needs, literacy and numeracy.

One Alternative School Program staff stated that the more engaged the parents were in the education of their child, the more likely that child would succeed in school. This has also been found to be true with elementary school children and their families. The IALSS study also found that higher educational attainment of parents meant higher educational attainment for children.

What does this mean for the Friendship Centres? Continuing to support families and youth with existing programming is crucial. However, helping staff to be aware of youth literacy issues and how to support youth is also an important factor to consider.

Empowered, engaged parents and extended family work, along with staff at Friendship Centres to ensure that that youth are empowered and engaged.

# 10 *Setting the Stage for Success: Recommendations for Increasing Literacy Awareness*

*In order to address literacy as a barrier to employment efforts must begin early and be sustained and available through the whole life cycle.*



## **Including literacy skills development in educational policy**

By specifically stressing the importance of literacy skills development in education policy, the OFIFC could bring attention to the interconnectedness of literacy and other social issues within the context of a life long learning plan. The OFIFC could also lobby for increased literacy funding in order to strengthen the base of literacy provision in all Friendship Centres.

## **Collaborate with existing literacy programs**

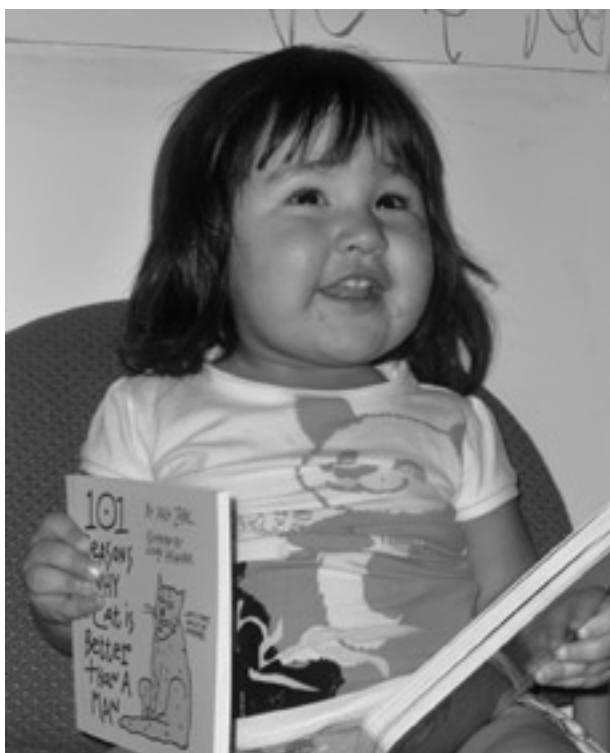
By collaborating with existing literacy programs, Friendship Centre staff can ensure that clients are being provided with all of the services they require. While it would be ideal to have a literacy program in each Friendship Centre, the reality of funding availability may make this idea impossible to realize at this time.

## **Increase literacy awareness for all Friendship Centre staff**

By increasing the awareness of Centre staff about the issues of literacy, staff can be well prepared to address the needs of clients with low literacy skills and provide a relevant plan to achieve educational goals. This training could be in the form of information sessions provided by the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition or by inviting neighbouring Native literacy coordinators to inform staff of their practice. Program staff at the National Indigenous Literacy Association could also provide relevant information for dissemination to Friendship Centre staff.

## **Clear language and design awareness throughout the programs**

The findings from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey state that a majority of Aboriginal participants were at a prose literacy level 2, meaning that they best deal with material that is simple, clearly laid out, and in which the tasks involved are



not too complex. This has serious implications when looking at the amount of printed material people are faced with every day. One way to address this would be for Friendship Centre staff to participate in workshops about clear language and design in order for all program information to be available and understood by everyone. Several literacy programs and independent consultants can provide this type of workshop throughout the course of a few hours. The investment would go a long way to ensure that key messages are being disseminated in an appropriate manner.

#### Development of a Family-School Interlocutor Program

Many Literacy Practitioners talk about how they act as advocates for those learners who are parents. Many learner-parents are not confident with speaking to teachers or librarians and may not attend parent

teacher meetings or follow up with requests from school. They may also not be confident to act alone as advocates for their children. On the other hand, there is also the need for teachers, teaching assistants and school administrators to become better educated in understanding of the realities of many Native families. The development of a Family-School Interlocutor Program may go a long way to address these gaps.

#### Increased Support for Family Literacy Programming

Developing the literacy of the whole family through reading programs, parenting/literacy programs, sing-a-longs, and fostering a love of reading would help Friendship Centres to continue to ensure that families are being supported to become as healthy as they can be.

#### Literacy Training for Youth Workers

Friendship Centres excel at meeting the needs of youth through various programs and projects. Ensuring that Youth Workers are aware of youth literacy issues and how to deal with them would be beneficial for everyone involved. Learning how to assess literacy skills and develop appropriate programming would guarantee greater success for those youth who struggle with reading and writing.

#### Expansion of Native Alternative School Programs

While Friendship Centres have excelled at increasing literacy rates, educational attainment through the Native Alternative School Program and the schools need to be expanded and increased in the number of communities where they are available. This would ensure that the literacy support for community members is continued, encouraged and enhanced. This type of success will lead to further employment skills and economic self reliance.

# 11 Conclusions

*In the past 15 years, there has been steady growth in the Native literacy field with regard to support organizations, resource development, training and professional development opportunities.*



Links between issues facing many Aboriginal people and the need for literacy skills development have been clearly defined in this report. Issues such as poverty, living conditions, high secondary school drop out rates, high unemployment and reliance upon social assistance, and over representation in lower paying jobs can all be linked to the need for a comprehensive approach to literacy skills development. For the purpose of background and baseline information, literacy statistics were outlined. This included gleaning information from the International Adult Literacy Skills Survey, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, pertinent information from surveys conducted by the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, as well as a comprehensive literature and resource review. Other sources of information that aided in the formation of a picture of literacy for Aboriginal communities were personal interviews conducted with Friendship Centre staff from throughout the province. From these sources as well as others it became evident that there is a large need for literacy programming at many levels in Aboriginal communities (ie. youth, adult and family). There are numerous current initiatives, organizations, and champions working hard to continue meeting the literacy needs of members of the Aboriginal community as well as continuing to advocate and lobby on behalf of learners and literacy practitioners at the local, provincial and national level.

The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres continues to be a leader in the field of skills development, employment readiness and education for youth, adults and families. The OFIFC needs to continue helping communities and other organizations to understand and develop approaches to literacy skills development. Eight concrete recommendations have been tabled for the OFIFC that, if followed, would set the course for individual, family, and community excellence and success in the area of youth, adult, and family literacy skills development thus providing greater opportunities for people to enter the workforce and excel in their chosen career path.

## 12 References

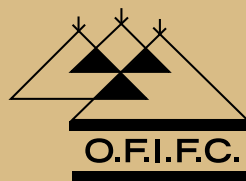
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