

# A Selected Literature Review for Adult Learner Success Aboriginal Upgrading Program



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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

As faculty and staff of Bow Valley College (BVC) in Calgary, Alberta, who are experienced in working with Aboriginal learners, we were curious to learn about best practices or at least promising practices for learner success in the Aboriginal Upgrading Program. We looked at literature by Aboriginal scholars together with government reports that we felt would be relevant to our Aboriginal Upgrading Program. Our aim was to implement promising practices that were suggested in the literature into the program. This brief review of relevant literature is the result of our enquiry.

Two of the project's members represent the Academic Foundations Department. One is Cree and has been with the Aboriginal Upgrading Program for eight years; the other is non-Aboriginal with extensive experience working with Aboriginal peoples in northern Canada and two years with the program. Another member of the project group represents the Counselling and Client Support Department and is the primary Aboriginal counselor for BVC. Occasionally, a member of the BVC Aboriginal Centre monitored the review process. As practitioners, each of us brought to the table a unique understanding of the issues that Aboriginal learners face and a profound appreciation of Aboriginal ways of knowing.

We used a group discussion approach to the review, in part to honour the importance of community and the oral

nature of Aboriginal culture. Talking about the literature in relation to our aim to identify promising practices for learner success in the Aboriginal Upgrading Program contributed to the practitioners' knowledge in these areas of the college that work closely with Aboriginal learners.

According to the *Urban Aboriginals Peoples Study*, "pursuing higher education is the leading life aspiration of urban Aboriginal peoples today" (Enviro-nics Institute 2010, 3). However, most Aboriginal people face many barriers that affect their academic and educational success. The *Aboriginal Student Success Strategy* asserts that "these barriers can be characterized as: historical, social, cultural, lack of academic preparation and prerequisites, financial, geographical, and individual and personal" (SIAST 2009, 34). Learners will benefit from practitioners who are cognizant of these barriers in any Aboriginal program delivery.

Anecdotal information and observations by faculty and staff at Bow Valley College Aboriginal campus suggest that there are some learners who, in the last semester of their upgrading program, require increased support and interventions in order to complete the program. This trend was the impetus for the literature review project.

Among the reasons that learners cite for their need for increased support, the following two can be overwhelming for the learner:

1. *Fear and apprehension of success.* For many of the learners in

the program, success is something they have not experienced in their lives. For some of these students, there is a perceived added responsibility and therefore pressure that comes with success. Moving onto other postsecondary programs after this program (which has been supportive and guiding) can cause anxiety and may affect the learner's confidence.

2. *Withdrawal of family support.* Some learners moving toward success experience their family's support withdrawn or lessened. For some, they are the first in their family to successfully complete an upgrading program. In these cases, the family members fear losing the learner to the non-Aboriginal world. For others, family members experience jealousy of the learner's successes and may consciously or unconsciously withdraw support.

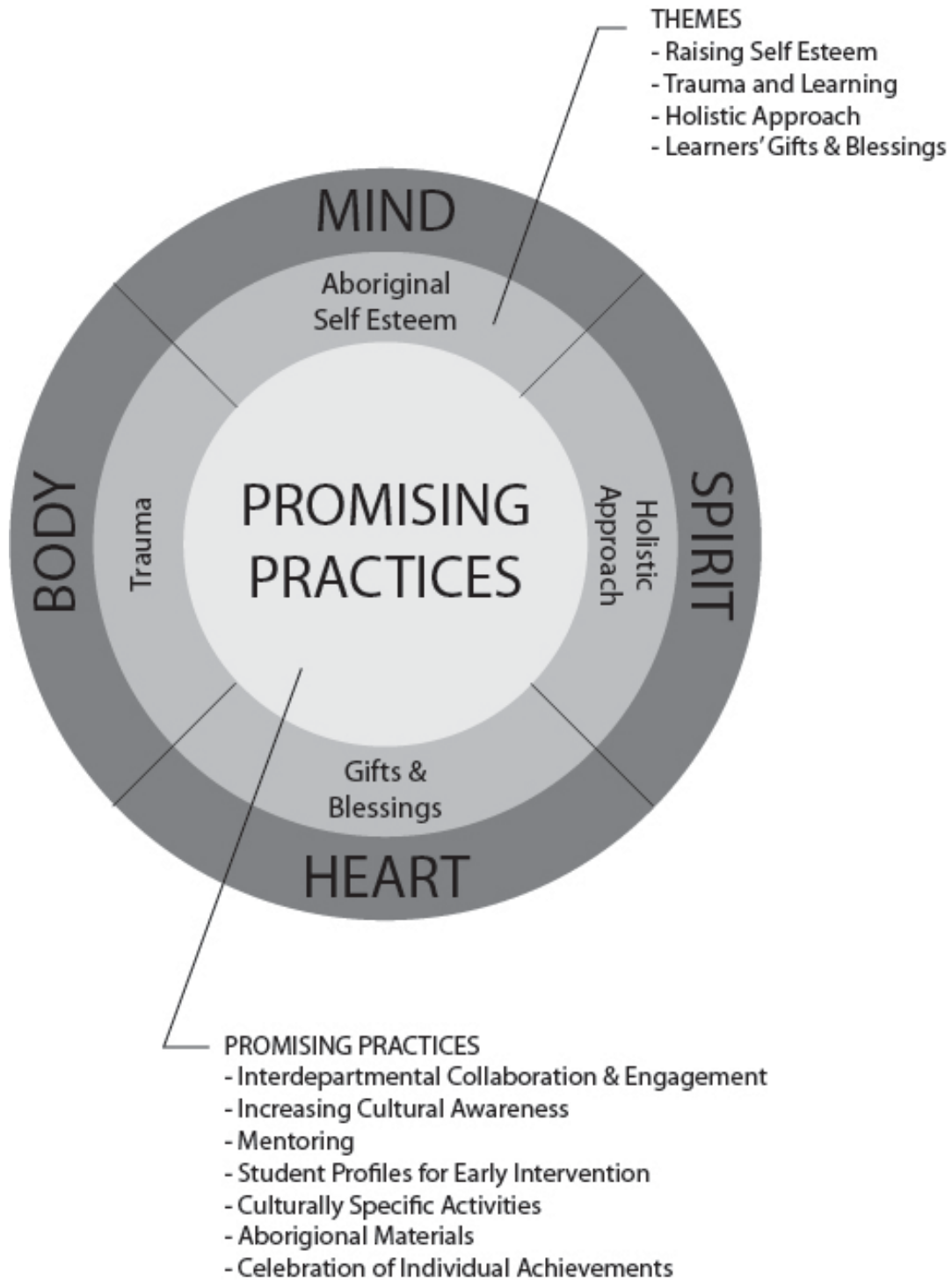
This selected literature review is two-fold in nature. First, we describe emergent themes from the literature, particularly as they relate to learners at the Bow Valley College Aboriginal campus. Second, we extrapolate promising practices. Then we consider the application of these promising practices for the Aboriginal Upgrading Program.

The themes and promising practices discussed here are not mutually exclusive. Each one of the themes can be identified in one or more of the promising practices and

many of the individual promising practices are interwoven with others. As we continue to evaluate and implement changes in the BVC Aboriginal Program, we will embrace the holistic Aboriginal perspective—from the whole to the part. While this review discusses individual ideas and practices, we acknowledge that each contributes to the environment and success of the program. Each theme and practice is embedded in the others and all are part of the holistic framework of mind, body, spirit, and heart.

Figure 1 (overleaf) illustrates the relationships that exist between the practitioner and learner, together with the interconnectedness of the holistic approach, the identified themes, and promising practices. Even though the importance of relationship was not identified as a specific theme, there is a tacit understanding that it is embedded in all themes and promising practices.

## 1.1 RELATIONSHIP & INTERCONNECTEDNES



## 2.0 THEMES: KEYS TO SUCCESS

The ten pieces of literature we found relevant were mostly reports from national research organizations, universities, and governments. In identifying the themes we were guided by their frequency in the literature but the review group also determined that the themes had to be directly related to the learners at Bow Valley College Aboriginal campus. The themes we identified are

- Raising self-esteem;
- Trauma as it relates to learning;
- A holistic approach acknowledging mind, body, spirit, and heart; and
- Engaging this holistic approach to help the learner begin to understand his/her gifts and blessings.

These themes direct us to consider the whole learner—mind, body, spirit, and heart—and challenge common notions of success being quantitatively measured. “In Aboriginal thought, success is about finding one’s place in society, what that place may be, and to realize that he/she has a unique role to fulfill” (George 2008, 38). In acknowledging these themes and their impact upon our learners, we can develop and implement promising practices. In this way, we can guide the learner to achieve individual success as s/he perceives it.

## 2.1 RAISING SELF-ESTEEM

Aboriginal self-esteem is often described as a balanced and positive interconnection between the physical, emotional/mental, intellectual, and spiritual realms (Toulouse 2007, 2). For many learners, at least one of these realms is out of balance. In fact, “learners often come to literacy programming with several layers of issues that need to be resolved before cognitive academic learning can take place; that is, they must be addressed before the Learning Spirit can be fully activated” (George 2008, 22).

Low self-esteem presents barriers to learners. Often, particularly in an educational setting, learners have not experienced any measure of success. “It is crucial that the Aboriginal student feel that they have a meaningful place in our schools. This can be achieved by ensuring that our own belief in the abilities of the student is great ... It is also key that these students know that their teachers care about them and have the highest regard for their learning” (Toulouse 2007, 3). Practitioners’ efforts to change learner attitudes toward education involve supporting learners to change their attitudes toward themselves. Supporting adults to re-create their self-identity, particularly as a “capable student and adult learner,” requires practitioners to attend to *their* relationship with learners. Relationships between practitioner and learner, and between learner and learner, are critical to a safe learning environment.



## 2.2 TRAUMA AND LEARNING

Many Aboriginal learners have experienced trauma of some kind in their lives. Substance abuse, family violence, suicide, and sexual abuse are forms of trauma many learners experience. Intergenerational residential-school trauma is often an underlying cause of many of these traumas. “It is believed that these factors create blocks to learning – that they may affect a learner’s ability to be ‘present’ in the learning process, physically or otherwise” (George 2008, 21). These blocks manifest themselves in the form of depression, absenteeism, anger, aggression, and withdrawal and they impede learning. As educators, it is part of our role to help change the learners’ view of themselves and the world around them and thus aid in healing the fractured Learning Spirit. According to Ningwakwe George in *Aboriginal Adult Literacy: Nourishing Their Learning Spirit*, the Learning Spirit has two distinct uses.

*The first understanding of “learning Spirit” ... uses “learning” as an adjective and “Spirit” as a noun. The Spirit is learning; it is a “learning Spirit ... The second understanding of “Learning Spirit” ... refers to the State of Being that facilitates the seeking of knowledge that will help the Spirit fulfill its purposes for being in this Life, the “Spirit of Learning” or “Learning Spirit” inherent in every opportunity in life ... In essence, the Learning Spirit is a way of knowing and a way of being. As the Spirit is made of energy, it can be postulated that positive energy attracts positive energy*

*while negative energy attracts negative energy. When practitioners assist learners in recognizing their negative thoughts and changing them into positive ones, it shifts the aggregate energy formed about individuals, thereby enabling their energy field to attract more positive energy forms into that person’s life in the way of experiences and people. (George 2008, 11 and 24)*

This assistance, external to the learner, begins when practitioners understand the hope and courage that it takes on the learner’s part to enter a program. “Aboriginal literacy practitioners believe that the learners who walk through their doors have some semblance of hope; otherwise, they would not be taking that important step of enrolling in a literacy program ... [They] consider it an act of immense courage on the part of the learners to seek yet another opportunity to improve the literacy/education skills, in spite of past setbacks” (George 2008, 20).

## 2.3 HOLISTIC APPROACH— MIND, BODY, SPIRIT, HEART

“From an Aboriginal perspective, education is more than the accumulation of cognitive knowledge about the physical world. It is about receiving wisdom from, about and for the universe ... Knowledge is not secular ... The Aboriginal concept of accountability in education is much broader than simply meeting the needs of the adult learner, institution and society. It includes learning to be responsible for the impact that our human activity has on earth and beyond”

(ibid., 16). A holistic approach asks all participants (learners, practitioners, and administrators) to connect themselves to each other and the learning context with a view that, as lifelong learners, practitioners give consideration to how we act, think, feel, and think in respect to our world.

With this approach, practitioners consider the whole person in programming and education. George quotes Hall's description of a holistic approach's significance: "A whole person denotes a human being who is capable of balancing his/her mental, emotional and spiritual human capabilities both internally within oneself and externally in societal interaction with all life forms present throughout Creation" (ibid., 9). An imbalance of these human capabilities disrupts the lifelong learning journey of the learner. Efforts by practitioners help learners achieve balance. As lifelong learners, practitioners try to achieve this balance within ourselves. "Given that various philosophies and religions believe that human beings are composed of Spirit, Heart, Mind and Body, it makes sense that educational policies, principles and practices recognize all four parts of our Being. That is, reflective and affective education has every bit a legitimate part in education, and even more so, as the cognitive or rational" (ibid., 15).

According to Ningwakwe George, "The First Nations Technical Institute has created a model for Aboriginal learner that addresses the holistic approach to learning—spirit, heart, mind and body.

1. Spirit—an attitude or insight

(what the intuition says)

2. Heart—a feeling about self or others
3. Mind—knowledge
4. Body—skills." (ibid., 22)

This model offers insight into incorporating holistic practices in other adult education programs for Aboriginals.

## 2.4 LEARNER GIFTS & BLESSINGS

The notion of gifts—that each person possesses gifts as part of their being and that these gifts are part of our purpose in life—is an important concept in Aboriginal culture. The pursuit of the knowledge about these gifts can be emphasized as part of the journey of lifelong learning. Supporting learners to recognize and accept their gifts can contribute to maintaining balance in one's life in particular and in the universe in general. "We all have a purpose for being here, and ... we have been given 'gifts' by the Creator to fulfill that purpose" (George 2008, 12). If practitioners can acknowledge the notion of gifts to be true, then it is an obligation to help learners come to recognize their own gifts and purposes.

For many learners, the ability to even be open to gifts has been damaged through trauma. However Betty Bastien argues that it is the acknowledgement of gifts and blessings that will enable the learners to become engaged in their lifelong journey of learning. She says,

*It is in the nature of the universe to give in the form of gifts, blessings and lessons – all meant to be used in a good way. Many of the gifts given to us are not immediately understood nor do we see their value; at times we never do. Many of them will only be understood after a long period of time as life unfolds. Sometimes it can take nearly a lifetime before we understand the meaning and purpose of the gift. They are personal and shape an individual’s purpose in life. This is how each person contributes to the overall balance of life. (Bastien 2004, 103)*

## 3.0 PROMISING PRACTICES

The *Aboriginal Student Success Strategy: The Final Report of the Committee* claims that “effective educational settings are those that are perceived as safe, inclusive and support and challenge students to learn and grow” (SIAS 2009, 33). Practitioners can set the bar high for ourselves as educators in order to ensure that learners in our programs are not afraid to reach beyond their comfort zones. We can work toward making our program recognize the challenges and barriers faced by our learners. Although accommodating such social barriers is challenging for programs, the literature highlights the importance of addressing barriers in a holistic way. “Best practices are crucial to the well being of the Aboriginal learner. Sharing these practices in formal and informal settings is key to our own growth as educators” (Toulouse 2007,

5). Enacting promising practices is one way that practitioners provide opportunities for reflection and adaptability. Promising practices are fluid so there is flexibility in the program for changes to occur as circumstances warrant or as the learners’ needs arise. The promising practices suggested here will be continually reconsidered, amended, and reflected upon to be sure they remain promising.

Like Ningwakwe George who describes learners’ courage and hope, Pamela Toulouse also describes the importance of hope when she says that “by recognizing this hope inherent in our Aboriginal learners, we aspire to create an educational environment that honours the culture, language and worldview of the Aboriginal learner” (2007, 2). A primary purpose of developing and implementing promising practices at Bow Valley College Aboriginal campus is to create a unique environment that recognizes the barriers and challenges that Aboriginal students face and at the same time fully supports learners’ hopes for a positive educational experience.

### 3.1 CURRENT PROMISING PRACTICES

#### 3.1.1 INTERDEPARTMENTAL COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT

The Bow Valley College Aboriginal Program is one of a few programs with dedicated staff from three learner services departments that provide on-site support for learners in the Aboriginal Upgrading Program. These include: client services,

advisory services, and assistive technology. Students meet with a student advisor during admission to determine career goals and funding needs. The advisor is also available on-site on a weekly basis should learners have issues that affect their funding. A counsellor is in attendance two days a week to meet with learners who are dealing with a wide range of issues including family, financial, and emotional and mental-health issues. Learners either self-identify as having issues or are recommended by faculty. In addition, learners who have been identified as having learning disabilities, or who are in need of learning strategies, have access to a learning strategist. The strategist's dedicated delivery area includes computers that have assistive technology software to help support and enhance learner experience and skills. The strategist also works with learners on strategies for studying, organization, time management, and other issues that may be affecting learner success.

Trust is sometimes an issue for learners. By seeing a consistent counsellor, advisor, and learning strategist, learners are able to establish relationships with practitioners based on respect, honesty, and trust. "The [learners] are provided with on-site academic and career planning, academic skill development, and other areas that may affect learning and retention" (Black 2011). In fact, the learners at BVC Aboriginal campus ranked support for learners significantly higher than did learners in other BVC programs and those attending other Canadian Colleges of similar size (Black 2011).

Midterm marks are reviewed with individual students and all program practitioners—successes are acknowledged and interventions regarding challenges are discussed. This approach to the review of marks allows the learners to see both literally and figuratively that all practitioners involved in the program are engaged in supporting their success. It also enables all faculty and staff to be aware of particular challenges and barriers the individual learner may be facing.

### ***3.1.2 INCREASING CULTURAL AWARENESS OF NON-ABORIGINAL FACULTY AND STAFF***

"It is imperative to recognize and honour Aboriginal ways of knowing, expressing and being in programming" (George 2008, 9). In order to honour Aboriginal ways of knowing, faculty and staff need to be informed. Currently, instructional staff at the BVC Aboriginal program are non-Aboriginal. To this end, promising practices will include increasing the cultural awareness of the non-Aboriginal faculty and staff, particularly with regard to the use of holistic approaches in classroom practices. Instructors will need to be vigilant in their classroom practices in order to address Aboriginal learning styles. "The learning styles of the Aboriginal student are unique and their school success is dependent upon educators teaching differently" (Toulouse 2007, 4). The Aboriginal learner is generally holistic in his/her style. Oral traditions support auditory learning. Traditional teachings are visual, experiential, and reflective. "These unique aspects of the Aboriginal student and their

preferences for learning need to be present in their day to day activities. This is ‘how’ Aboriginal student success can be achieved” (ibid.).

By increasing cultural awareness, faculty will be able to engage learners in cultural discussions and help learners further embrace their cultures. “In order to move to an overall positive cultural identity ... individuals will go through a process of unlearning what they have unconsciously internalized (George 2008, 22). The more culturally aware faculty and staff become about Aboriginal ways of knowing and issues facing learners, the more culturally relevant and successful the programs can become. Increasing cultural awareness of non-Aboriginal faculty and staff opens up opportunities for open and honest discussions regarding stereotypes and racism and helps our learners define their place in today’s multicultural world. Cultural awareness goes beyond celebrations and public events and historical stereotyping in order to effectively address the psycho-social issues of identity and racism in relation to learning.

### **3.1.3 MENTORING**

Currently, there is an elder program in the Aboriginal Upgrading program. The elder attends the campus twice a month holding talking circles in the mornings and then meeting with individual students in the afternoon. For many, this program represents the first time they experience talking circles and meeting an elder. The elder shares her cultural knowledge with the learners and listens to their issues. It is one

way the program creates a sense of community. The discussions that take place with the elder in the circle provide learners with the opportunity to express concerns and receive feedback from those within the circle. This feedback builds the learners’ problem-solving skills regarding how to handle similar issues that may arise. It is a safe and supportive environment.

Each semester, students are provided with the opportunity to take part in the Native Ambassador Postsecondary Initiative (NAPI) youth leadership training project. NAPI is designed to provide information on postsecondary education and positive role modelling to Aboriginal youth enrolled in junior and senior high school and other youth programs. This leadership project is adapted to respond to the adult learner needs of the Aboriginal Upgrading Program at BVC. NAPI offers learners the opportunity to complete leadership training in the areas of personal, team, and community leadership and it awards leadership training certificates in partnership with the University of Calgary Leadership Program. This project adds to the BVC program by providing an opportunity for learners to become leaders and role models in their own communities.

## 3.2 LOOKING FORWARD: PROMISING PRACTICES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

### 3.2.1 STUDENT PROFILES FOR EARLY INTERVENTION

*Aboriginal Success Strategy: The Final Report of the Committee* suggests that “as early as possible in the admission process, an institution needs to identify students who may need interventions to succeed” (SIAST 2009, 35). Currently, barriers and challenges that individual learners face are not always disclosed in the admission process but are revealed over time. With early intervention in mind, faculty and staff will develop an academic and personal assessment that can be administered at or shortly after the time of admission in order to determine what barriers the individual learner may face. In this way, an individual intervention plan may be considered and faculty and staff can monitor those learners deemed “at risk.” The assessment and resulting profile will be conducted by the BVC counsellor and a faculty member.

### 3.2.2 CULTURALLY SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES

According to Ningwakwe George, “practitioners feel that Aboriginal language and culture must be integrated in a meaningful and impactful way through literacy/educational programming” (2008, 35). Surprisingly, many of BVC Aboriginal program learners know little of their cultural identity. While they may be aware of negative stereotypes that are often prevalent

in our society, many students are without an understanding of their traditional history and culture or a sense of how this fits in today’s society. Some learners say that they don’t have a strong sense of belonging in either their traditional culture or the dominant Eurocentric culture. Cultivating and implementing culturally specific activities into the classroom means that “learners are acquiring more cultural teachings that they can put to use in their lives” (George 2008, 33).

Throughout each semester, delivery of personal and academic support sessions is planned. Each session is approximately one hour in length and may include life skills, study skills, time management, career planning, addictions counselling, grief management, and/or conflict management. In this way, the learners develop skills that enable them to deal with issues they may be facing. “Through the use of Talking Circles, learners find that they are not alone in their issues; members of the circle (including the practitioner) discuss how they may have approached a similar issue. This then gives the learners an alternative way of looking at their lives and a practical tool to consider should a similar issue arise again” (George 2008, 31).

It is our hope to also be able to offer traditional arts and crafts lessons facilitated by members of the Aboriginal community. Through beading, drum making, and other traditional arts, “the learners acquire important information about their culture which contributes to a positive cultural identity” (George 2008, 31). As Aboriginal students learn these traditional skills, they

will also come to know more of their history and come to appreciate the importance of their culture.

Field trips to culturally relevant places and outings on the land in the company of Aboriginal community members present opportunities for the learners to see the place of their history and traditions in the modern world. Such outings may include trips out on the land to pick traditional medicines, attend powwows, take part in smudging ceremonies, or visit places of ancestral importance.

### **3.2.3 ABORIGINAL MATERIALS—LEARNERS RECOGNIZE THEMSELVES IN THE CURRICULUM**

The Council of Ministers of Education’s *Best Practices in Increasing Aboriginal Postsecondary Enrolment Rates* states that “one of the key routes to improving enrolment and retention rates is the strengthening of Aboriginal content and control of curriculum. It has been argued that if students do not see their culture reflected in the curriculum or in the larger culture of the postsecondary institution, they are less likely to want to enroll” (CMEC 2002, 57). As non-Aboriginal instructional faculty become more culturally aware, they will begin to seek out Aboriginal resources that will encourage learner engagement. “Literature that reflects the realities and culture of Aboriginal students supports their sense of self” (Toulouse 2007, 7). By increasing Aboriginal-specific materials in the curriculum, the relevance and value of learners’ culture is conveyed with the intended impact of increased engagement

and potential for success: students become active learners with an expanding world view and a growing understanding of their place in that world.

The *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study* discusses the link between education and a closer connection to Aboriginal identity. “Those who plan to pursue post-secondary education say that career goals are their main reason for doing so. But interestingly, those who have already completed college or university say the greatest impact of higher education has been to help them feel more empowered—in part by expanding their knowledge of their Aboriginal heritage and identity. Higher education emerges as a passport towards learning more about one’s Aboriginal identity” (Environics Institute 2010, 3). By being reflected in the curriculum, the learner is provided with a greater positive understanding of his/her own cultural identity.

### **3.2.4 CELEBRATION OF INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENTS**

Types of achievements that the institution deems to be important don’t always align with learners’ descriptions about what *they* have achieved in the program. For some, regular attendance is a success. For others, contributing to a discussion is an accomplishment. It is incumbent upon the faculty and staff of the program to provide regular positive acknowledgement of the work learners are doing. “Positive messaging throughout the learning centre in the way of Aboriginal posters and pictures, [and] displays of learners’ work ... indicates to the learners

that what they've produced is valued, and encourages them to continue to learn" (George 2008, 32). Care is taken with the display of student work to honour that work. Because Aboriginal learners are generally apprehensive about being the centre of attention, displaying their work is one way to acknowledge their effort and achievement.

Bow Valley College provides opportunities for public acknowledgement by offering student awards and through formal graduation ceremonies. These public acknowledgments mark achievement that is important to both the institution and the individual. But it is also important for the program to understand and celebrate achievement that is important to the student only—those individual accomplishments that may not be marked in these formal ways.

It is equally important that the Aboriginal program looks for informal ways to acknowledge learners. The program needs faculty who are aware, accepting, and appreciative of students and their life experience, gifts, and challenges—especially when students' modesty can be a roadblock to self-praise for some learners. When staff are connected and know their students well, they are able to recognize achievement that is important to the individual as well as the institution. They are able to see growth in the student. Acknowledgement can be as simple as subtle and heartfelt words of recognition. According to CMEC's *Best Practices in Increasing Aboriginal Postsecondary Enrolment Rates*, "student support has been

seen to have a positive effect on student retention. Often, this support can take the form of something as seemingly small as having a staff member speak individually to new students during orientation, to ensure that students have access to a familiar person if they have questions or concerns" (CMEC 2002, 45).

As learners consider their achievements, the practice of reflection can be modelled by practitioners to build learners' vocabulary of success, so they can answer questions such as: what have they done well? What have they done that was difficult to do? What have they learned about themselves? about the subject? These reflections can be shared with practitioners and other learners and revisited on a regular basis by students and practitioners together. Although learning to accept their successes can make students feel vulnerable if they have not felt success in earlier school experiences, they can develop the skills to accurately reflect on their achievement.

As the program honours student work through display, reflection, verbal recognition, or ceremonies, practitioners with learners can together create the safety to celebrate success. Students are modelling for each other the behaviours needed to achieve success. They have the opportunity to celebrate the success of others. This can encourage increasing self-esteem in the individual learner, as well as increasing appreciation of others. Informal and formal recognition provides opportunities for students to acknowledge and encourage one another. As practitioners our role is to demonstrate that successes small and large



do matter.

## 4.0 SUMMARY

For Aboriginal learners, educational engagement works best and leads to success when it's approached from a holistic standpoint. Barriers and challenges need to be addressed and the Learning Spirit needs to be engaged. Guidance, support, encouragement, and acknowledgement enable the Aboriginal learner to open him/herself to the world and to define his/her place in it.

By developing and implementing promising practices, practitioners are better able to meet the needs of the Aboriginal learner. Cultural awareness, early interventions, guidance to gifts, and purpose are all part of a holistic approach and contribute greatly to the learning experience.

By changing negative views to positive views, acknowledging hope and courage, and providing guidance and support, the Aboriginal learner becomes a lifelong learner—a learner with confidence in his/her abilities who is sure in his/her cultural identity.

One final interesting point is that, as a result of participation in this selected literature review, the participants find themselves often referring to the literature and are excited about the potential of the Bow Valley College Aboriginal Adult Upgrading Program to better serve and support our learners as they move toward becoming their authentic selves.

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