



# LESSONS IN LEARNING

Improving literacy levels among  
Aboriginal Canadians

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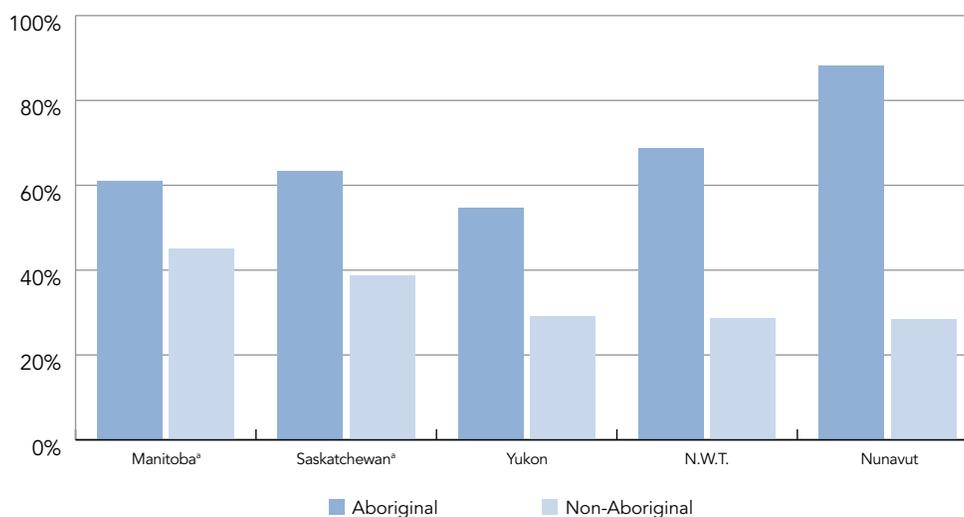
Data suggesting that large numbers of working-age Canadians have inadequate literacy skills have prompted calls for improving literacy practices among children, youth and adults. For Aboriginal people, the need for improvement is especially urgent.

## The literacy gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adults in Canada

In 2003, Canadians participated in the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS). Results from IALSS were scored on a five-level scale with Level 3 considered to be the level required “for coping with the increasing skill demands of the emerging knowledge and information economy.”<sup>1</sup> Competence at or above Level 3 is associated with a number of positive outcomes, including better health, economic success, civic participation and opportunities for lifelong learning.

Among Canadians aged 16 to 65, 42% failed to meet this standard; among Aboriginal peoples, this number was even higher. In urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan, as well as in the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, the proportion of Aboriginal adults whose literacy skills fall below Level 3 is at least 16 percentage points higher than for their non-Aboriginal counterparts (see [Figure 1]).\*

**Figure 1:**  
Proportion of Canadians aged 16 and over whose prose literacy skills are below Level 3



<sup>a</sup> Only urban Aboriginal people were sampled in Manitoba and Saskatchewan

Source: Statistics Canada, IALSS 2003

\* It should be noted, however, that the IALSS is conducted only in English and French and was not available in any Aboriginal language. This is especially critical for Inuit living in Nunavut, for example, where 65% of Inuit adults over the age of 15 primarily speak Inuktitut at home.

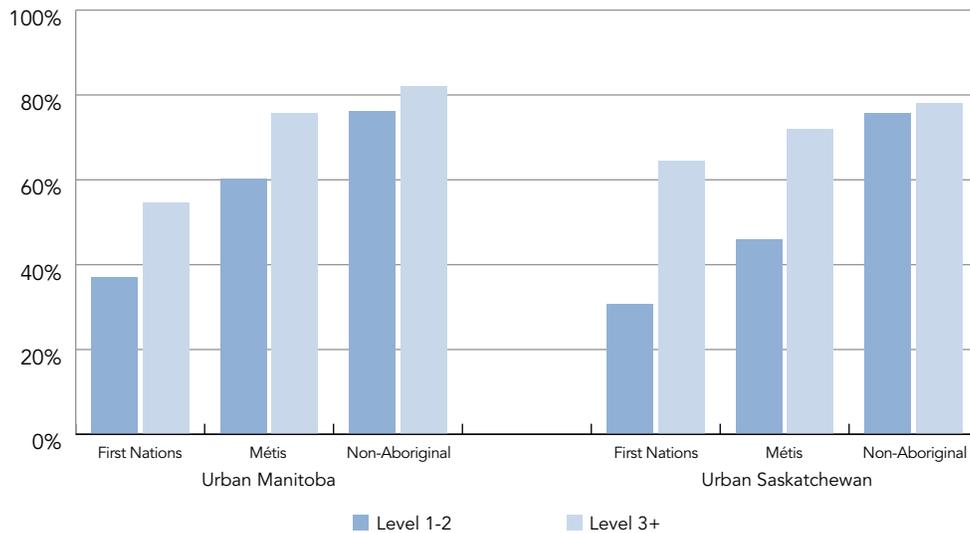
### The price of low literacy

For all Canadians, weak literacy skills are associated with poorer labour-force outcomes. For example, while 77% of working-age Canadians with literacy skills at or above Level 3 are employed, only 66% of those with literacy skills below Level 3 are employed. For Aboriginal adults, the employment gap between those with strong and those with weaker literacy skills is even greater. For example, among First Nations in urban Saskatchewan, 65% of those at or above Level 3 are employed versus only 31% for those below Level 3 (see Figure 2).

#### 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey's data on Aboriginal learning

Data on adult literacy skills among Aboriginal populations are scarce; however, the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey collected data from large enough samples of Aboriginal people living in urban areas in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, as well as Aboriginal people living in selected communities in the territories, to answer key questions about the literacy proficiency of these populations.

**Figure 2:** Proportion of Aboriginal people aged 16 to 65 who are employed, by prose proficiency

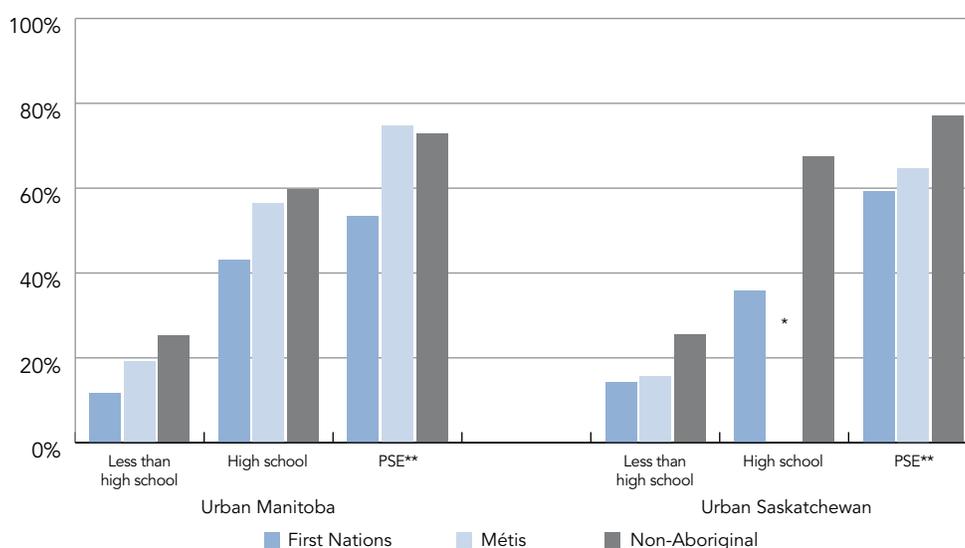


Source: Statistics Canada, IALSS 2003, (from Literacy profile of off-reserve First Nations and Métis people living in urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan)

## The role of education

Education contributes to stronger literacy skills among both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples: among both groups, those with higher levels of education generally have stronger literacy skills. As Figure 3 illustrates, education reduces the literacy gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations and, in the case of Métis living in urban Manitoba, eliminates the gap entirely.

**Figure 3:** Proportion of First Nations, Métis, and non-Aboriginal adults in urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan with scores at or above Level 3 on the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS)



\* Data unavailable due to unreliably small sample size

Source: Statistics Canada, IALSS 2003, (from Literacy profile of off-reserve First Nations and Métis people living in urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan)

Negative educational experiences and poor educational outcomes contribute to the literacy gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. For example, in 2006 while 15% of the non-Aboriginal adults (aged 25 to 64) in Canada had not completed high school, more than one in three (34%) Aboriginal adults do not have a high-school diploma or degree.<sup>2</sup> There are a number of reasons for poor educational outcomes among Aboriginal populations in Canada. Among the barriers to success articulated by Aboriginal students and educators are discrimination and institutional insensitivity toward Aboriginal cultures<sup>3</sup> and lack of awareness of Aboriginal approaches to learning.<sup>4</sup> Other factors have been identified as barriers to learning for all struggling students, regardless of ancestry. These include a lack of school readiness,<sup>5</sup> absenteeism and mobility.<sup>6</sup>

## Lessons in Learning: Fostering stronger literacy skills among Aboriginal populations

Addressing the educational challenges faced by many Aboriginal students is a critical component of improving literacy skills among Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Several different approaches show promise of addressing the challenges.

1. Aboriginal parents' engagement in schools works to dispel harmful stereotypes, breeds confidence in parents and brings children closer to their teachers—all of which have a positive impact on learning.<sup>7</sup>

One of the outcomes of the historical use of education as an assimilationist tool is the reluctance of contemporary Aboriginal parents to become involved in their children's schooling. There is strong evidence that students are more successful in school when their parents are involved in their education.<sup>8</sup>

Parents are most likely to become involved in their children's education when schools actively encourage their involvement.<sup>9</sup> Schools can encourage parental involvement by offering meaningful roles in school governance:<sup>10</sup> this is true for all parents, but this approach can be particularly effective among Aboriginal parents.<sup>11</sup> Schools can enhance parental involvement by keeping parents informed.<sup>12</sup> Once children leave elementary school, it often becomes difficult for parents to determine which teachers or school staff can provide information about their children's academic progress. Schools can alleviate this problem by assigning an advisor to each student. The advisor serves as a contact person for both students and parents, and can provide general school information as well as details about particular students to their parents.

2. Creating a school climate in which Aboriginal students feel welcomed and valued can help overcome feelings of alienation toward schooling.

Although the existence of racism toward Aboriginal students is often ignored or denied,<sup>13</sup> recent research presents strong evidence of the widespread existence of such discrimination. For example, in a study of discrimination among Canadian teachers, 50 student teachers were asked to assess the records of 24 students and recommend their placement in remedial, conventional or advanced programs. Student teachers systematically devalued the performance of students whom they were led to believe were of Aboriginal ancestry in comparison to their non-Aboriginal counterparts with identical student records.<sup>14</sup>

The first step in eliminating the effects of racism in Aboriginal education is to acknowledge that it does exist and that specific efforts will be required to address it.<sup>15</sup> In order to address racism in education, schools must have anti-racist policies and strategies to resolve problems when they arise.<sup>16</sup> Such strategies include cultural and anti-racist education of staff and students. Other strategies include efforts to include Aboriginal content and approaches to learning within mainstream curricula.

3. Developing an understanding of Aboriginal approaches to learning increases Aboriginal students' chances of success.<sup>17</sup>

A number of studies have demonstrated that, in different cultures, different aspects of learning are emphasized and valued.<sup>18,19</sup> For example, researchers have observed that many Aboriginal students prefer co-operative rather than competitive learning,<sup>20</sup> and that many learn through imitation, observation, and trial and error rather than direct instruction.<sup>21</sup> Given that learning-style factors can contribute to the alienation of Aboriginal students within classrooms, attending to these factors should contribute to more successful outcomes among Aboriginal students.<sup>22</sup>

In some jurisdictions across Canada, efforts are already underway to ensure that schools are more culturally inclusive of Aboriginal students and Aboriginal approaches to learning. For example, Manitoba's Aboriginal Education Action Plan (2004) stresses family involvement in Aboriginal student success and proposes a framework for family involvement. The plan also highlights the need for more Aboriginal teachers and teacher education programs as well as Cultural Competency and Diversity Education. These initiatives are considered a vital component for success in Aboriginal education.<sup>23</sup> Saskatchewan Learning's Policy Framework for Partnerships between Education System and First Nations Authorities and Communities (2003) demonstrates a commitment to sharing the management of the education system with the Aboriginal community and setting up learning programs where Aboriginal history and culture are reflected in all subject areas.<sup>24</sup> Saskatchewan seeks to abide by a number of policy principles which affirm the shared management of its education system with Aboriginal people and acknowledge that Aboriginal cultural differences need to be reflected in the curriculum, programs and teaching methods in schools attended by Aboriginal students.<sup>25</sup>

4. Identifying students who are inadequately prepared to learn upon entry to school allows for their literacy needs to be met immediately.

The majority of teachers know how to identify speech and language challenges, low vocabulary, poor phonetic and phonemic awareness and other obstacles to the development of literacy in the young. If these obstacles are addressed when children first start school, the pain and difficulty of remediation later will be reduced.<sup>26</sup> Systematic instruction in literacy has proven successful in improving the literacy levels of students whose initial performance was poor.<sup>27,28</sup>

5. Diminishing the impact of student absenteeism and mobility also contributes to Aboriginal student success.

Absenteeism and student mobility are significant obstacles to school success for students.<sup>29</sup> Aboriginal students are among those who are more often absent and more likely to change schools.<sup>30</sup> Greater attention to parental

engagement should help to address the problem of absenteeism by building support among parents. An earlier Lessons in Learning—“Students on the move: Ways to address the impact of mobility among Aboriginal students”—contains a number of suggestions for addressing the needs of students who change schools; developing strategies for successful enrolment, transition and induction, transferring student information, and building flexibility to meet learning needs.

## Conclusion

As education systems across Canada struggle to meet the needs of Aboriginal students, many Aboriginal groups have expressed their desire to create their own measures of progress and success in learning and education, rather than being held to standards to which they do not necessarily ascribe. “One size does not fit all; there are many kinds of learners, many kinds of learning, and many ways of demonstrating our accomplishments. Without better research and data, we won’t know where we are, where we want to go, and if we’re getting there.”<sup>31</sup>

In collaboration with the Canadian Council on Learning, members of First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities have developed three lifelong learning models to be used as frameworks for measuring the lifelong learning progress of Aboriginal peoples.<sup>32</sup> Ongoing work will focus on identifying appropriate indicators with which to apply these models.

Low literacy is one of many challenges facing Aboriginal communities across Canada. Addressing the underlying causes of low literacy can contribute to overcoming many of these challenges: “When we use traditional methods of teaching and learning by and for Aboriginal people, literacy nurtures a positive identity, and connects us to the land, to our families, to our communities, to our languages and to our ancestors.”<sup>33</sup>

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