

The Transformative Nature of Culture-based Literacy Provision in Native Literacy Programs

by

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**Abstract**

This thesis examines the transformative nature of culture-based literacy provision in Native literacy programs in Ontario through a qualitative study employing both Indigenous research methodologies and a phenomenological analysis of participant interviews. Through open-ended interviews with Native literacy practitioners I explore what happens when culture and cultural teachings become a starting point for learning and skills building in the literacy program and how this kind of learning approach/environment may be transformative not only for Native adult learners but also for the Native literacy practitioner. Findings include: the importance of community, how self-awareness is a pre-cursor to self-determination, the value of being both a teacher and a learner, and the part Indigenous knowledge plays in the learning and healing journey of the literacy learner. This thesis offers examples of successful approaches to culture-based literacy provision that help Native adult learners to reclaim their cultural identity and reach their educational goals.

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# Chapter I

## Introduction

### Research Question

The major objective of this research study is to gather information from four Native literacy practitioners throughout Ontario to see how and why they may perceive culture-based approaches to literacy as being transformative for Native adult learners in their programs.

Why does this culture-based approach work where so many others have failed? For many Native adults in Native literacy programs it is often the first time we are learning the truths about who we are and where we come from. For many it is the first time our histories and culture have been taught in a favourable light and we can be proud of who we are instead of being made to feel ashamed. For others it is the first time in our lives we are provided with a safe, supportive learning environment that isn't shaming and punitive. Given these realities, how then does a culture based approach that provides a safe and non-shaming learning environment become transformative for the learners?

What happens to the learner when they learn about positive aspects of their culture all the while building important mainstream literacy skills? How are they transformed when given the opportunity, respect, and space to reveal their own knowledge of what it means to be a Native person in the context of skills building? This may take the form of knowing about certain medicines, songs, or stories and how they relate to the topic at hand, using mathematical and/or writing systems.

It may also take the form of being able to share knowledge of other family members in a way that is valued, supported and listened to. How are mainstream literacy skills and cultural learning working together to create this transformative space? How do they complement each other? Are they at odds with each other?

Native learners come into Native literacy programs for various reasons: to work on their high school equivalency, to learn to read to their children and grandchildren, or to better their employment chances. They may be interested by innovative programming such as beading, language classes and medicine walks. They may be reaching out to increase their social networks; supporting their friends' learning journeys; learning about computers and/or wanting to work on their resumes. Whatever the reason, they find themselves in an environment that values them and encourages knowledge acquisition in a space that is safe, challenging, and culturally relevant all at the same time.

Why people learn better in certain environments than in others has always interested me. Hanohano speaks of a concerted effort on the part of mainstream educational systems in the U.S. to assimilate: "Education has worked as an agent of colonial subjugation with the long-term objective of weakening Indian nations by causing the children to lose sight of their identities, history, and spiritual knowledge." (Hanohano, 1999, p.210)

Unfortunately, this is very true in the Canadian context as well. Many years later these children find themselves in adult literacy programs, needing to learn important basic skills and wanting to find out who they are as Native people. This issue is a very serious one considering that the latest statistical findings show that Native adults test far below

the rest of Canadians in terms of literacy skills (International Adult Literacy Survey, 2005, Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2005). One of the reasons that this research is significant is that by studying the approaches of the practitioners as they implement their culture-based curriculum and programming, a strong justification for increased funding and cross-cultural awareness may arise. What works for Native learners needs to be documented.

What are valid learning practices for Native adult learners also need be researched, analyzed, and discussed. Such research may help practitioners as they attempt to find a “common” language when it comes to talking about what it is they do in their programming. Finding out what it is about the culture-based approach to literacy that helps learners to transform their learning experiences from ones of remembered shame to empowering, self-actualizing ones that help them to become stronger in mind, body, spirit, and emotions is an exciting and timely prospect.

I want to look at these approaches as holistic endeavours enabling learners to learn about their histories as well as the current issues that Native Peoples face, in order to become citizens of change not only at an individual level but at familial, community and societal levels.

By exploring such approaches I want to discuss the importance of these literacy programs for Native adults who have returned to a specific skills building learning



environment despite traumatic histories of schooling and other learning experiences that did not reflect their realities.

So many of us as Native people can remember being taught that Native Peoples were uncivilized and had in no way contributed to the development of Canadian society. This shaming has had long lasting effects. Elder Jan Longboat talks about our whole bodies being “Indigenous literacy”. (Longboat, p. 67) This Indigenous philosophy is important to consider when talking about what kind of education most of us had as younger people. I especially like her words, “our whole body is Indigenous literacy”. This is such an empowering statement in the face of all the messages we have received about *what we are not* in mainstream education. School is where we learn about where we belong in the world. We learn about our place in society. Our identities and personalities are shaped in large part, at school. We learn about our options in life at school (Schissel & Wotherspoon, p.31).

What did Native learners learn the first time around during their experiences in school? To state it simply, many learned that they, their families, their culture, and their communities, were a problem that needed to be eradicated, as in the “Indian Problem”. They did not learn that they had many options in life. Literacy educators working with Native people are now faced with the challenge of attempting to make the learning experience a non-traumatic, celebratory and participatory one for learners. This is very difficult when one considers the amount of shame that most learners are dealing with both at an individual and at a community/societal level.

Unhealthy or toxic shame means the individual or community believe that they are fundamentally flawed, that there is something wrong with them. I believe that many adult Native learners have a “double whammy” of shame that they are dealing with and working through that educators need to be aware of. Not only do many adult Native learners have the common experience of growing up in unhealthy environments, but they also feel the imposed shame of being Native in a world that values whiteness.

I want to examine the processes that learners go through as they become stronger, prouder and better empowered to get at the essence of culture-based approaches to learning, and why these are so valuable both to and for Native Peoples. By speaking to Native literacy practitioners from a variety of backgrounds who instruct Native learners from differing cultural backgrounds in a number of ways, I hope to gain insight into the “magic” or “learning spirit” of Native literacy. Then we can more fully appreciate how culture-based approaches to literacy skills building provide for a solid contextual educational experience that enables learners to participate more actively in their community of choice.

## **Researcher**

My name is Nancy Cooper. My spirit name is enibwitang debwewin kwe, which translates from Ojibway: “she who stands up for the truth”. I am from the Chippewas of Mnjikaning First Nation in south-central Ontario. I am Bear Clan. This introduction is important because it places me firmly into my past/present/future in a context that speaks

to who I am as an Ojibway woman in family, in community, and in nation. It is also important because it speaks to my fifteen year commitment to literacy work in my community. The name I received from Ningwakwe, an Ojibway elder and leader in the Native literacy movement in Canada, has to do with her interpretation of my devotion to my life's work and how I can only speak the truth and stand up for what is true when doing my work.

This section provides an overview of my background as a literacy worker and how I came to be interested in the transformative nature of culture-based education. It also highlights areas in my journey of coming to awareness of self that are both relevant to and in some ways parallel to the journey many adult learners find themselves on in those literacy programs that celebrate who they are as Native people.

I always knew that I wanted to work in my community. Growing up I watched my mother work in the Native community in various ways, no matter where we lived throughout northern Ontario.

On completion of my undergraduate degree I felt ready to begin and almost immediately started working as a literacy practitioner in a downtown Toronto literacy program for Native women. For the past 15 years I've worked in literacy in a variety of ways, from teaching literacy classes, to administering a Toronto city-wide Native literacy program, to supporting Native literacy practitioners throughout Ontario. Unpaid, volunteer work has overwhelmingly involved me in Native literacy pursuits. These include serving on several

boards for Toronto, provincial and national literacy organizations that are committed to increasing society's awareness of the educational issues facing the Native community. Because of this work and my life long experiences as a student and an educator in various learning environments, I've found a shortfall of research and research in practice in the field of Native literacy. I've also found that there needs to be greater awareness on the part of non-Native funding agencies and institutions about the specific cultural needs of learners in the pursuit of literacy skills building, and how important that mix of culture and learning really is.

A woman of mixed heritage, I grew up in a social, spiritual, and educational environment that did not reflect my Ojibway cultural heritage. Instead, the education I received was very much reflective of Euro-western culture and ideologies. As a result, I began at an early age struggling to find out who I am as a mixed race person. Our family cultural background was never really discussed. In later years I came to a very important realization about my mother and her decisions to not teach her children our language or culture. In a country where she had been punished and made to feel inferior to other people because of who she is, she most definitely did not want her children experiencing the same detrimental situations.

Consequently, she made the conscious decision not to teach us our language or aspects of our heritage. In her experience, she had been made to believe that the "whiter" we were, the better off we would be in the world. I understand, as an adult, the effects of racism and colonization on a person and can see my mother's decisions as very logical reactions

to the culture she found herself living in at the time. But as a teenager and as a young adult I was very confused, isolated, and at times, very angry. I was almost always the only Native person in the classroom, neighbourhood or social setting. This is very interesting in hindsight considering that I grew up in Timmins, which is one of the northern Ontario cities where hundreds of Native students from remote communities are sent to attend high school every year. How could I have been the only Native student in those classrooms?

It wasn't until I went to university that I was able to start making connections with other Native people in classroom contexts. I was also learning about who I was as a Native person for the first time in my life. This sense of place and identity later helped to stir me to a lifetime commitment of working in my community, which I have done ever since in the capacity of educator. Through my work I've come to see that so many people in/of my community grew up feeling and believing many of the same things I did.

I was fortunate to be able to finish school despite many difficulties and fortunate to be able to find work in the adult literacy field. After university I went to work in the downtown urban Native community in Toronto as a literacy practitioner. It was there when I was developing programs relevant to that particular community that I was able to watch as people transformed their lives becoming empowered, engaged, proud citizens through their acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. Overwhelmingly, it was much more than the literacy skills they were acquiring. I noticed that there was an eagerness to learn even the smallest detail about cultural practice, language, arts, or other forms of traditional knowledge.

I realized that many of us were hungry to have any small pieces about ourselves reflected back at us in the form of cultural knowledge. There I was able to make the links between learning basic literacy skills and learning cultural skills. I began to attempt to embed Native culture into whatever was being taught in the literacy classroom. I also tried to ensure that certain cultural traditions such as smudging and sharing circles became part of daily program practice.

I was fortunate to be part of a larger group of Native literacy practitioners throughout Ontario who were talking and thinking about many of the same things in regard to culture-based learning. I learned a lot from these literacy experts and continue to marvel at what they can accomplish with so little funding. I am amazed at how they continue to be inspirational and motivational for the many learners who walk through their doors. I learned as I went along. I became transformed into someone who makes a difference. I learned how to be a strong, proud Anishnawbe woman. I was privileged to share my journey with other learners as they found their own paths as strong, educated Native people.

In many successful Native literacy programs, culture is very often at the centre of all learning and teaching. Considering my experience of not having access to my culture in educational settings, it has always been fascinating to me as a practitioner to watch adult learners grow and thrive in a safe, culturally relevant environment i.e. the literacy classroom. There are many parallels between my coming to awareness and

transformation and the journeys of adult literacy learners as they come to awareness and are transformed in Native literacy programs. Documenting, discussing and exploring my own personal transformation has helped inform my exploration of why and how this approach to learning and teaching is so important for and to the spiritual, emotional, and educational growth of adult learners in Native literacy programs today.

I wanted to explore in depth my own process of learning about myself as an Ojibway woman while I learned more about my cultural heritage and traditions, and in relation to the discussion of the transformative nature of culture-based approaches to learning. In this way my research project became a coming back to self in a very profound, self-determining way.

### **Setting the Stage**

When education is based on and experienced in one's culture, it has the potential to be a transformative event. It becomes "a living process to be absorbed and understood."

(Battiste, 2002, p.15) In many Native adult literacy programs in Ontario, much of the curricula and program development is based on this premise. The idea of putting culture at the centre of the learning process ensures that a learner can truly know her or himself as an Indigenous person, with a deep and wide history, with a relevant and rich present and with a promising future.

Native Literacy in Ontario: There are currently 26 Native literacy programs in the province of Ontario that are funded by the provincial government through the Ministry of

Training, Colleges and Universities (Ontario Native Literacy Coalition, 2005). These include 10 on reserve programs, 12 programs that are based within an Indian Friendship Centre in urban or semi-urban settings, and 4 programs that are considered stand alone, i.e. they are their own organizations, with a board of directors and not under the direction of another larger organization such as a friendship centre or band office. Many of these literacy programs provide services in what is commonly referred to as a culture-based approach to learning. This means that cultural teachings or cultural awareness are at the centre of the skills building of the program. Learners take part in group work, work with tutors, attend classes, participate in computer based learning, or work on their own learning plans in conjunction with the practitioner or volunteer teacher.

Each of the programs participating in this research project is vastly different with regard to geography, community size, and cultural makeup of their constituencies.

The program in Toronto serves mainly socially isolated and homeless Native families and individuals in the downtown core of the city. This program is part of a larger community centre that houses a food bank, family services, and other social supports. In Thunder Bay the program is based within a Friendship Centre in the downtown area. The program in Hamilton, one of the longest running Native literacy programs in the province, is based in a Friendship Centre. Each of these literacy programs provides a variety of services and programming for learners and their families.

**Literacy Definitions:** 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 further development of self-determination for individuals and communities. Literacy constitutes the wide range of skills necessary for improving one’s quality of life. Native literacy practitioners in Ontario agreed that Aboriginal literacy included “areas of knowledge specific to Aboriginal peoples’ way of life and faith tradition in the cultural context of each community and tribal nation.” (Antone, 2003, p.22)

To describe this holistic approach more fully, it is important to understand the concept of balance. In other words, The Mental, Physical, Spiritual, and Emotional growth and learning a person does in each of these quadrants is equally important. 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 in George, 2005, p. 43).

Through this approach, the broader definition of learning can include such concepts as the learning being linked to the learner’s purpose in life and that all knowledge is valuable. As a result of this approach to learning and skills development, literacy, for many in Native 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 move forward, to take advantage of other educational challenges, and/or it 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. For instance, George's The Holistic/Rainbow Approach to

Aboriginal Literacy, states:

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, p.16)

The body that represents the interests of Native literacy programs in Ontario is the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC), based in Owen Sound. It defines Native literacy:

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. (George, 1997)

This definition makes perfect sense when discussing a culture-based approach to literacy.

The confusion begins when this definition is placed in direct opposition to the outcomes

based approach with stringent funding guidelines for literacy provision in Ontario.

Practitioners find themselves at odds with funding guidelines and struggle with adequately capturing very important outcomes of culture-based approaches.

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 and communities. Literacy issues often do not show up on the radar of policy analysts and decision makers at 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, economies, and societies, to educate and inform others about the importance of continuous 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 often said in the Native community we must know where we come from in order to know where we are going. The education system has failed Native Peoples when it comes to teaching Native histories, culture, and our contributions to society as a whole (Battiste, 2002, p.5). Therefore, many Native adults find themselves searching for a sense of identity at the same time as they are searching to upgrade their skills in a literacy

program. The mix of cultural teaching and awareness along with literacy and basic skills development in a Native literacy program can be a magical life changing process for some Native adults who have been disenfranchised by the mainstream educational system. Not only are learners able to develop the skills needed to “succeed” with further education and employment, they also learn about their identities. They may also be able to uncover, acknowledge, and implement important knowledge, also known as Indigenous knowledge, that they have carried their whole lives. Many people, who are in need of healing, be it spiritually or physically, find that cultural awareness is often a key component in the healing process.

Field of Academic Scholarship: The academic scholarship of Native literacy research is still in it's infancy with only a few academics across Canada focussed on the issue (Antone, 2003, Johnny, 2004, Silver, 2006). The concept of research in the Native literacy field is still a relatively new one as well; therefore, the findings from this research project are anticipated by many practitioners in the field, not only in Ontario but throughout Canada. In the past, much of literacy research in the Native community has had to do mainly with children's literacy and/or language literacy. Thus, the field of Native adult literacy research is ripe for development, exploration and discussion.

## **Thesis Overview**

The idea and plan for this research study sprang from many years of my work within the Native literacy community. Over the years other practitioners and I would come together to talk about our practice, celebrate successes and problem solve. Despite our differences in culture and geography, this culture-based approach was the most common approach that practitioners had found worked best for learners. As a result, programming to reflect this belief was developed. For practitioners and learners it works. As a researcher myself, I worked to find out how and why it works.

The format of this research study includes an in-depth literature review that covers topics pertaining to culture-based education and Indigenous knowledges, and Indigenous Research Methods, culture-based approaches to learning and Native culture-based literacy. Each of these areas helps to both inform and to identify areas for further exploration.

Indigenous research methodologies and a phenomenological approach to analysis were the lenses through which I viewed not only my own journey of coming to awareness of self, but also how I viewed the information gathered from interviews with practitioners. The procedure and protocol followed in receiving this information will be documented and discussed. The findings and subsequent analysis of the findings then follow.

Emergent themes and similarities and differences are deeply explored. Using a decolonizing analysis means that I as the researcher must have inserted myself into the research and have truly been part of the whole process and not just an objective observer.

Finally, the implications of the findings are discussed as well as recommendations for practitioners and funders that may help with supporting the continuation of the important work being done in the Native literacy field in Ontario, concluding the research study.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

When writing about Native literacy and culture-based approaches to learning in Native literacy programs, certain subject areas need to be taken into account so that a full and complete picture be taken of the many pieces that make up the concept of Native literacy, culture-based education, and Indigenous knowledges. These concepts cannot be taken into account without considering other aspects of them that make up the overarching concepts of culture, and education.

In the Native literacy field, the body of academic literature is quite small compared to the more mainstream approaches to adult literacy learning. This can be shown by the relatively small sections found covering Native literacy and Native adult in education in Quigley's State of the Field Report on Adult Literacy (Quigley et al, 2006, p.50) and in Battiste's State of First Nations Learning (Battiste, 2005, p.109), as well as in Battiste's literature review regarding Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy in First Nations Education (Battiste, 2002, p.60).

Fortunately for those literacy educators and researchers in Canada, much of what has been written that is specific to Native literacy has originated in Canada, with a bulk of the resources coming from Ontario. One of the explanations for this could be the result of the Ontario government having taken a "stream" based approach to funding. The Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities funds community based literacy in the

Anglophone, Francophone, Deaf, and Native streams – communities. Stream based funding came about in the Native literacy field because literacy funding was separated into streams many years before Native literacy needs were acknowledged as specific issues in other provinces. Therefore, the Native literacy field throughout Canada was able to organize, gathering strength and expertise from this funding approach many years before provinces other than Ontario were able to organize in the same ways.

I have provided an overview of the existing literature that has at its core a culture-based learning approach in Ontario and throughout Canada. Culture-based approaches to learning in Indigenous communities are as varied and expansive as the communities themselves. There has been quite a lot written about these approaches, especially in the field of Indigenous knowledge or Indigenous education. Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics in Canada, the United States and elsewhere in the world have contributed to the body of knowledge that is available to researchers (Battiste, 2002).

Within the overall theme of culture-based approaches to learning there are what I refer to as sub-themes, which include but are not limited to, culture-based education, and Indigenous knowledges. Each of these themes will be explored with specific regard to the research I have undertaken. Other relevant literature that is not specifically Indigenous but covers the subject of adult education and looks at culture and its role in the learning process will also be included in order to forefront some of the similarities and differences among community approaches to learning and empowerment of learners.



The theme of Indigenous Research Methodologies is also related to this task and important to my research approach. Many Indigenous academics are writing and talking about how Indigenous research methodologies must be implemented if we are going to conduct ethical and “true” research in our communities. As a result of this school of thought, and the fact that I wish to ground my research with Indigenous research methodologies in mind, I provide a review of relevant literature with regard to Indigenous research methods and approaches from throughout the world.

This literature review has been undertaken by searching various sources. An internet search was completed using two main houses of literacy resources in Canada: the AlphaPlus Centre and the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD). Other online sources include, for example, the Government of Canada Canadian Heritage site. A University of Toronto library search for journals, articles and resources was also completed. Search engines and online databases were further utilized in order to find much of the material that could prove relevant to this thesis.

### **Native Culture-Based Literacy**

The Native literacy community in Ontario has been funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities since 1986 (Johnny, 2004, p.1). Programs are found both on and off reserve, in urban and rural communities. Each of these communities has specific needs and individual approaches to learning that make them unique. Practitioners and other educators in the literacy field have worked hard to ensure that the needs of the practitioners and learners are met in appropriate ways (Paterson, 2005).

The Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC), in existence since 1988, is the provincial network that advocates for and trains practitioners in the field. The vision of the ONLC is “to foster culturally appropriate learning environments for learners in Ontario.”

(ONLC, 2006) A large piece of the written body of work dealing with Native culture-based literacy has been developed by the ONLC as the organization responded to the needs of the field (Hill, 2001, ONLC, 2003, Wemigwans, 2001). Topics covered include how practitioners share methodologies and resources; a framework of how to develop a culture-based curriculum in Native literacy programs; and field development. Other relevant resources originating from the ONLC include practitioner standards development, and the development of a common assessment strategy for the field (Thompson, 2002, ONLC, 2000).

Cooper (2004) also writes personally and candidly about the challenges facing both practitioners and learners in the learning/empowerment process. Nationally there have been efforts to capture the issues and needs of the field, and to further the cause of Native literacy in the Canadian literacy arena. Beverly Ann Sabourin and Associates (BASA) and the National Aboriginal Design Committee (NADC)/National Indigenous Literacy Association (NILA) have both developed resources that are helpful for those requiring a more national focus (NADC/NILA, 2002, Sabourin, 2002). NILA aims “to provide a forum on Aboriginal literacy, to be the voice of Aboriginal literacy, and to facilitate literacy development initiatives.” (Anderson, 2003, p.9)

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive overviews of the state of Native literacy is the *Holistic/Rainbow Approach to Aboriginal Literacy* by George (George, 2000). Filled with important statistical information and survey findings, it helps to paint a clearer picture of the literacy issues of Native learners and the needs of practitioners in Ontario.

Another resource that attempts to provide an overview of the state of the literacy field in Ontario is Cooper's (2006) literature review and discussion paper, *Literacy as a Barrier to Employment*. The concept of culture-based literacy has been used by the field for quite some time to explain the approaches practitioners use in the skills building approach to learning in programs. There have been several different explanations of what exactly culture-based literacy is. There has not been a collective definition adopted by the field as of yet.

The works of Antone, (Antone, 2002, 2003, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2002) have helped to gather the words and thoughts of practitioners from around the country in order to further the case of culture-based approaches to literacy in Native communities. Their work is groundbreaking in its scale and has helped to develop the field's approach to culture-based learning. This work also explores the problematic concept of a common definition of what culture-based literacy is, considering the varying cultures, communities, and realities that make up the Native community in Canada.

The development of relevant culture-based resources for Native adult learners in Ontario is evident through the publishing efforts of Ningwakwe Learning Press (Ningwakwe

Learning Press, 2006) based in Owen Sound. 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. Their dedication to developing appropriate and respectful resources for Native adult learners has resulted in many manuals and books that are used not only in Native literacy programs, but in other educational institutions, both Native and non-Native all over Canada and the United States. One of the recent releases from Ningwakwe Learning Press deserves individual mention in this review because of its relevance to the topic and that is Brant's (2006) "toolbox" on culture-based literacy, philosophy and curriculum is a thought provoking, useful resource for practitioners wishing to deepen their practice.

The meanings attached to the concept of literacy are explored in Hare's (1995) unpublished Masters Thesis as she speaks both with people who went to residential school and those who did not to find out what literacy means to them considering their differing educational experiences.

For the Native literacy field there are no certification programs for practitioners to learn how to teach literacy. Instead many practitioners "fall" into the work because of an interest in community development or teaching. As a result, Native literacy practitioners are the real experts in the field and many of the research findings and project reports state this quite explicitly. Reports that are local in scope as well as those that deal with

national (and international) Native literacy issues all reflect this thinking (Gaikezheyongai, 2000, George, 1997).

The Canadian Public Health Association's 2<sup>nd</sup> national conference on Literacy and Health had a large Native representation. Smylie et al have succinctly conveyed the key messages about the importance of culture-based literacy and health issues in Native communities throughout Canada (Smylie et al, 2006).

The bringing together of technology and culture-based approaches to literacy is relatively new in Ontario and in Canada. AlphaRoute (AlphaPlus, 2006), an online literacy curriculum for learners throughout Canada, is perhaps the most visibly "Native" with teachings based on the Medicine Wheel as well as other elder's teachings.

The importance of literacy and adult education for Native adults became one of the major findings of Silver et al (2003). They speak of adult education being a 'second chance' for learners and the success of this second chance education is based on the fact that learners are taught about issues such as colonization in order to make sense of their lived realities. In another Silver (2006) document, Native learners interviewed speak of the strong cultural presence in the learning program and how that is a big motivator to continue learning.

In the document, *Canadian Indigenous People: Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills*, one of the top key factors that ensure successful implementation of workplace literacy programs is the use and integration of culturally relevant materials (NILA, 2005, p.25).

### **Culture-based Approaches to Learning**

Throughout the past two decades there has been a groundswell of work by Native academics writing about Native control of education and culture-based approaches to learning. Battiste (2002) has developed perhaps the most comprehensive listing of writings about culture-based approaches to learning in recent history. Informative, yet very critical of the educational system, this literature review has been very helpful in my search for understanding of Indigenous knowledges and culture-based approaches to learning in First Nations education. In her recent, *State of First Nations Learning*, commissioned by the Canadian Council on Learning, the importance of communities providing literacy learning opportunities for Native adults is stated several times (Battiste, 2005).

I am differentiating between culture-based approaches to learning and literacy because of the more general appeal that culture-based approaches to learning have over culture-based approaches to literacy. Writing and research about culture-based approaches to learning most often deal with university learning or elementary and secondary school learning and very rarely includes adult literacy learning. Why this happens is a mystery but I imagine it may be because Native adult literacy and education is only now showing up on the radar of educators in a larger way.

The findings of the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (Statistics Canada, 2005) might be able to speak to this newfound interest in Native adult literacy and education considering that Native adults in urban centres in Western Canada placed well below the literacy level required to comfortably manage in today's society.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Indian and Northern Affairs, 1996) mentions literacy a mere two times in the forty-three detailed recommendations on education. Other organizations that do not have literacy as a primary focus are beginning to take notice. The Chiefs of Ontario recently released their Education Manifesto for First Nations Education in Ontario (Chiefs of Ontario, 2005, George, 2005, McGregor, 2005) and listed some of the reasons why literacy may not be a priority for Native communities in Ontario. Community leaders may place a higher degree of priority to issues such as self-determination and economic development. According to George, "There seems to be a failure to fully appreciate that literacy is a foundation to more effectively address those issues", such as self-determination and wellness. (George, 2005, p.14)

The Ontario First Nation Public Library Association has as a strategic goal to "support effective literacy programs in First Nations communities." (Ontario First Nation Public Library Strategic Plan Liaison Committee, 2004, p.18)

An excellent resource that addresses Aboriginal literacy and languages in an academic way is the 2003 volume of the Canadian Journal of Native Education (Advancing

Aboriginal Languages and Literacy, 2003). This journal is one of the first to specifically address the literacy issues in Aboriginal communities. It represents the first time Aboriginal literacy has been viewed through an academic lens in such a large way.

Utilizing traditional practice in the classroom is understood as being transformative not only for the Native students but also for non-Native students who are being introduced, many for the first time, to the realities of Native culture. Teaching then becomes very much about role-modelling respectful behaviours (Hart, 1996).

Perhaps one of the best examples of this utilization of traditional practice in the classroom is Graveline's writings about using the concept of circle in her university classrooms for students other than Native students. It transforms many students' ideas about racism, Native histories, learning and de-colonization (Graveline, 1998; 2000). The use of the circle in literacy classrooms has also proven to be transformative. As a practitioner I found that using the circle to bring people together at the beginning of a day helped to focus learners and to help us all to remember that we are community. This circle learning can make for very profound learning environments. Fitznor incorporates talking circles "reflective of Aboriginal methods of learning for healing, teaching, and decision-making." (Fitznor, 2005, p.17)

Traditional practice such as circle learning also emphasizes the strong possibility that Native learners learn in various ways that need to be taken into consideration when designing curriculum. Building on the previous work of Diane Hill, Michael Johnny



(2002) explores Native Learning Styles and provides options for teaching and learning that have proven helpful in literacy programs.

When looking outside for help understanding different approaches to teaching and learning, we can't help but look to the "grandfather" of transformative education, Paulo Friere, for his important pedagogical works, including *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of the City* (Friere, 1970, 1993). In *Pedagogy of the City*, Friere encourages transforming schools and learning institutions into ones where the experiences of the learners provide the core of curricula and that teachers work in relation to students. There are many similarities between his understanding of the transformative nature of education and Native approaches that we would do well to take notice of. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he encourages curriculum development that reflects the realities of the learners. This approach has been found to be the most effective, according to many Native literacy practitioners in Ontario (Antone, 2003).

Relying on one another and learning from each other are themes/lessons that factor strongly in the written literature about culture-based approaches to learning. Gregory Cajete (1994) writes about Native education in a way that emphasizes our reliance upon one another as individuals and as communities.

Critically and respectfully de-emphasizing differences in order for the decolonizing process to be accomplished, Chamberlain writes about the dangers of the development of

an “us and them” dichotomy, and instead urges us to listen to one another and learn about not just our differences but our similarities as well (Chamberlain, 2003).

This suggestion of learning about others and the similarities we share echoes many of the teachings I have received throughout the years that have urged me to not judge others and instead get to know people as individuals instead of relying upon assumptions that had been influenced by the media and society. I would be remiss if I were to not include writings and poetry by Native artists such as myself (Cooper, 2004) that speak about learning and teaching in a culture-based fashion.

Poetry and fiction are all too often overlooked as an excellent research resource when it comes to critically looking at different approaches to learning and teaching. Two examples of works that emphasize these approaches are Harjo and Bird’s (1997) anthology of women’s writings and Hogan’s (2001) breathtaking memoir that speaks to learning from the spirits, from the old people, from each other, from animals, and from the land.

### **Culture-Based Education/Indigenous Knowledges**

Ethical space and Native Epistemologies are terms that one comes across when searching for resources about culture-based education and Indigenous knowledges (Ermine, 2005, Honohano, 1999). They are very provocative terms that pique the interest of the reader because they speak of the possibilities that come when we shift thinking about how things “should” be done, or how they have “always” been done, and look to the past and to the

elders to provide us with another viewpoint from which to learn and expand knowledge about Native literacy and education. One of the things that I strive to accomplish is to provoke thinking about the transformative nature of literacy when culture is the main underpinning of the learning. I like to be able to look deeply at literacy practice and see how it moves the learner and the practitioner to a place where anything is possible.

The experiences of many Native people in the school system have not been good ones. The legacy of residential schools still effects many people, families and communities. As researchers we need to take these experiences into account when looking at and searching out different approaches to learning. Because education can equal trauma for many, the approaches needed in order to engage many learners require understanding of both the history and relevant needs of the individual.

Horsman (2000) writes of this in her book Too Scared to Learn as well, cautioning educators to bear in mind past trauma that adult learners may be dealing with in the classroom. Native education needs to be redefined and reshaped to the needs of the people instead of taking the shape of the agenda of the powers that be (Battiste, 2002, Schissel, 2003, Hampton, 1995, Brant-Castellano, 2000).

When looking at the transformative nature of a culture-based approach to literacy, I have to take into account the strength and importance of the role Indigenous knowledges take in the process. To read about, talk about, and research Indigenous knowledges is very heady and exciting work that enables the individual to come to terms with the vast

knowledge system that is Indigenous knowledge. A system that, unfortunately, has been downgraded, downplayed, and dismissed, with attempts made to extinguish it altogether through the residential school system, the church, and forced assimilation of Native individuals into mainstream communities.

From a mainstream perspective, however, these kinds of knowings have been perceived as folk-lore, stories, and myths, and not given the proper respect they deserve, nor given their proper place in academic discourse about Native learning. The good news is that much is being written to counter these assumptions (Cole, 2000, Fixico, 2003, Battiste, 2000, Warren, 2000). More and more Native students are learning about their histories and remembering their past, picking up again those things they thought they had lost along the way.

Battiste (2002) writes about how important it is to not fall into the trap of thinking of Indigenous knowledge as something mystical and sacred. Yes it can be those things, but Indigenous knowledge is also the knowledge about fishing, repairing boats, raising children, gardening, as well as a myriad of other “run of the mill” activities that make up the daily life of a family and a community. So when referring to Indigenous knowledges in the literacy classroom I talk about the knowing that each learner brings with them that they may have “put away” over the years. Learners may have also found that sharing what they knew wasn’t safe either. However, that early knowledge stays with us and makes up who we are and, given the right opportunity, we can share it and learn from one another. Imagine what we can be capable of when we are clear in the knowledge that

what we know is valid; that what we bring to the table is listened to and respected by others?

## **Indigenous Research Methods**

In order to more fully understand the phenomenon of culture-based approaches to literacy learning, I feel it is important that I engage in research methods that are respectful and relevant not only to the communities I am working with, but also to my own experience as an Indigenous woman. Therefore I have taken a scan of the available and relevant literature that has to do with Indigenous research methods. Knowing what has been written by academics about these specific methods helps me to frame the work I'm doing in a cultural and respectful way as I make my way into communities that have too often been harmed by research. The common refrain heard is that communities feel they have been researched to death, and that nothing relevant comes from it. Instead, researchers leave with the information they have gathered and do not follow up with the community or individuals studied. What Native researchers strive to do is to conduct research that is needed and wanted by the specific community they are involved with (McDougall, 2006). This ethical collaborative approach is documented by several Native academics who write about the struggle and the successes of placing themselves within the research process and not above it (Day et al, 1998; Hudson & Taylor-Henry, 2001).

Whose question is it? That's an important thing to consider when embarking upon a research project. Where did my thesis question come from? It came from many conversations with Native literacy practitioners, learners and elders. Te Hennepe

encourages the researcher to think about this important question when doing research. She also gets the researcher thinking about who the audience is and where the authority really lies (Te Hennepe, 1997).

All researchers should, and an Indigenous researcher must take these common refrains seriously when approaching communities. Many Indigenous communities throughout the world have been developing relevant, culturally appropriate research methods. In New Zealand, for example, “Kaupapa Maori” research is developed by the Maori, for the Maori (Smith, 1999). Pro Diversitas maintains the principle of active community participation in any research project and abides by the principle of full disclosure. These are just two of many relevant principles of conduct when working in and with Indigenous communities (Pro Diversitas, 2006).

In Canada, guidelines for research within Indigenous communities have been developed and are stringently followed by academics conducting research in Native communities (RCAP, 1993).

The concept of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession, or OCAP, has been developed with regard to health research in Canada, which has many similarities to educational research in that many communities feel that they have not been listened to, instead they have been picked and prodded with no real outcomes benefiting the community as a whole. OCAP ensures that the community owns information, has control

over who to share information with, has access to all research information, and possesses that information as a whole community (Schnarch, 2004, p.81).

There are also some very important resources that serve as guidelines for researchers who may not be Indigenous but who will be working in communities that I found very helpful. These include Mihesuah (1998) and Smith (1999). They examine the pitfalls that occur when assumptions are made and colonial practices are continued.

Decolonizing the research practice is a large part of what Indigenous research methods are attempting to do. As a researcher I need to be acutely aware of how I am doing the research and question my assumptions and approaches at every turn. I need to be listening and learning and attempting to understand those I speak and interact with. I need to remember that they are the experts and I am there to learn from them, not the other way around. I need to be aware of the immense responsibility I carry as a researcher to be true and respectful to the knowledge I gather. I also need to be responsible when it comes to taking the information and knowledge I've gleaned from the community back to the community in order for others to utilize the research as they see fit.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methods**

#### **Overview**

In this chapter, I explain how I used an Indigenous research methodological approach along with a phenomenological analytical approach to gather and analyze data for my research project. I will explain why and how these approaches seem appropriate for the kind of study I was focused on as well as being consistent with my personal ideals as a Native woman and as a literacy practitioner.

#### **Procedure**

I discuss the process that I undertook to guide my research question from idea into action; I explain the process of the research design, participants, data collection and analysis. Another section explores my journey of becoming aware of self as data.

#### **Indigenous Research Methodology**

Indigenous research methodologies can encompass strategies that are community-based, participatory, action-oriented, therefore, can address the specific needs of individual Indigenous communities. These methods are respectful of Indigenous worldviews and are developed by, for, and within Indigenous communities. Indigenous research methodologies are responsive to community needs and most often collaborative in nature (Smith, 1999).



Such needs based approaches to research are relevant to the Native literacy field and are respectful to the issues and needs within the field and within the communities where literacy programs are found. There is a need is to continue to have relevant, respectful, adequately funded literacy programs available for Native adults. Many community literacy programs struggle to find program funding on a yearly basis.

Often funding is based on a one time project basis so continuity of programming that might be innovative and/or successful is hard to maintain.

Utilizing Indigenous research methodologies helped create a “coming back to self” for the researcher in a very profound and self-determining way. This positioning became a very political act while it continued to be a highly personal one.

As Native researchers, we have many responsibilities, but one of the most important is to know ourselves. This speaks to healing and introspection and taking time with ourselves to let ourselves “become”. We must ask ourselves many questions while we are learning to know ourselves in different ways. Perhaps two of the most critical questions for us as researchers are the questions, “am I being colonial in my thinking, practice, or writing?” And, “how can I decolonize my practice?”

We bring all of who we are into whatever we do, and research is no different. There is no such thing as being objective and I think this is where and how research has hurt many Native communities in the past. As researchers we cannot help but bring our worldview into the process and with these worldviews come judgments about differences however

well meaning the researcher may be. I need to remember who I am, keep an open mind, use the skills I've learned for the betterment of my community, and remember that the role of the researcher is to learn from the experts (Atkinson, 2002, p. 20).

It's an emotional and an intuitive connection that needs to be found in order for research to be successful and valid. Cleary and Peacock talk about this emotional connection in their article "Disseminating American Indian Educational Research through Stories: A Case against Academic Discourse". They speak of not masking the intense emotional connections they have to their topic (Cleary and Peacock, 1997, p.12). I think this is a very important point to make when talking about Indigenous Research and Indigenous researchers. If done appropriately, we come to the process and practice of research with our whole bodies, our whole minds, our whole spirits, and our whole emotions. In other words, we are wholly present. Research becomes of the person and of the community in a holistic way that is bound to have lasting healthful effects upon not only the community but also the researcher.

## **Phenomenology**

After the interviews were completed I applied a phenomenological analysis approach. This approach strives to capture the researchers' description of people, places or things, and how their existence belongs in the world. I look at how the field of Native literacy and Native culture-based approaches to learning are in effect, their own phenomena, and how this is interpreted and understood by practitioners from a first person perspective in order to extract the essential features of their experiences.

Crabtree and Miller describe phenomenology as “using the self as an experiencing interpreter.” (Crabtree and Miller, 1999, p.28) Phenomenological analysis fits perfectly with the above discussion of Indigenous research methodology because it challenges the researcher to both enter into the world of the data and the situation with the question, “what is it like to have a certain experience?” We are urged to get at the nature of the event, to really know it. It can be likened to taking snapshots of the situations and describing them as they are, not by their interpretation, but by descriptions of them.

Indigenous research methods urge us to place ourselves within the research and to not interpret as an outside entity. Where and how culture-based Native literacy is transformative is thus described and discussed.

Study Background: There are currently 26 Native literacy programs in the province of Ontario that are funded by the provincial government (ONLC, 2005, website). These include 10 on reserve programs, 12 programs that are based within an Indian Friendship Centre in urban or semi-urban settings, and 4 programs that are considered stand alone, that is, they are their own organizations, with a board of directors and not under the direction of another larger organization such as a friendship centre or band office. Many of these literacy programs provide literacy services in what is commonly referred to as a culture-based approach to learning. This means that cultural teachings or cultural awareness are at the centre of the skills building and learning at the program. Learners take part in group work, work with tutors, attend classes, participate in computer based

learning, or work on their own learning plans in conjunction with a practitioner and/or volunteer teacher.

In my proposal I wanted to conduct open ended interviews with four Native literacy practitioners in four separate programs throughout Ontario. I determined that an open ended interview would provide opportunities for practitioners to explore and express their own ideas about culture-based literacy and its transformative nature more deeply than other interview types. Moreover, I felt that both of us, interviewee and interviewer, would have the freedom and choice to explore other ideas as they emerged. There were six guiding questions as noted in Appendix I.

The practitioners were interviewed by phone because of distance constraints. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. Each was recorded and then transcribed. Because I have been involved with the Native literacy community in Ontario for the past fifteen years, I had a general idea of who among the practitioners would be willing and enthusiastic about being interviewed regarding the transformative nature of culture-based literacy. Each of these potential interview participants had been working in the literacy field for a number of years, thus I was guaranteed to gain knowledge and understanding from talking to them about their practice.

I wrote letters of invitation to four Native literacy program coordinators in Thunder Bay, Hamilton, Toronto, and on the Saugeen First Nation. Three coordinators agreed to be interviewed. One did not, feeling that she did not coordinate what would be considered a

culture-based program. She did, however, wish me luck with my research. After this I immediately sent out the informed consent forms for the participants to sign and return to me prior to the interviews taking place.

Each of the literacy programs is vastly different from the others with regard to demographics - geography, population, and cultural makeup of their constituencies. The program in Toronto serves mainly socially isolated and homeless Native families and individuals in the downtown core of the city. This program is part of a larger friendship centre that houses a food bank, family services, and other social supports such as street work. The program in Hamilton is based in a friendship centre and is one of the longest running Native literacy programs in the province. In Thunder Bay the literacy program is housed within a busy friendship centre serving the city and the surrounding First Nations communities. All literacy programs provide a variety of services and programming for learners and their families such as Medicine Picking Walks and Teachings, Community Kitchens where participants learn to budget and cook healthy meals for their family, first language classes, in addition to literacy and numeracy skills building.

Design of the Study: My idea for this research study arose from being a literacy practitioner in the Native community for many years. Over and over again I watched as Native adult learners come into the literacy programs where I worked not only searching for skills building but looking for something else. This something else, I soon came to believe, was the search for a greater sense of self as a Native person.

Over the years my fellow practitioners and I would talk about this phenomenon within the literacy programs and how we as a field in Ontario practiced culture-based literacy in various ways. These experiences led me to the research question that I developed about how Native culture-based literacy provision can be transformative.

Using the knowledge and skills that I have gained as a student researcher and as an educator I hoped that I would be able to examine the idea/concept of culture-based approaches to learning and how these approaches can be transformative for Native learners engaged in the process of skills building. I wanted to find out what is special or unique to these approaches that make the learning process a magical and lasting one for so many learners. I wanted to find out how these skills help learners as they continue on their learning journeys; to continue on with school or employment or with other lifetime endeavours. In the process, I hoped to learn more about myself as an individual but also to learn more about my family and my community.

My idea for placing my journey into the study as data arose from many of the graduate courses I took that covered topics such as Aboriginal Education, Aboriginal Women's Voices, and Indigenous Research Methodologies. It was during these classes and others that I learned about how important it is for the researcher to place her/himself into the research. As a result I analyze my journey of transformation and coming to awareness of self in the same way I analyze the interview data.

**Interviews and Data Gathering:** Interview questions were given to participants prior to their interview so that they had time to reflect on the questions and think about their response. It was intended that the open ended interview questions would help practitioners discuss how they saw Native adult learners in their literacy program being transformed as a result of participating in a culture-based literacy program. Practitioners were also encouraged to think about how they themselves were transformed as a result of designing and working within a culture-based literacy program. All three interviews were taped and transcribed. Taping them allowed me to be fully present with the participant in question so that I wouldn't have to concern myself with writing anything down until after the interview was finished.

Each of the participants chose not to be anonymous and as a result can be identified by their first and last initial within the body of the transcript and later analysis. Each of them was informed of the fact they could withdraw from the study at any time and that they were under no obligation to participate. They were also informed that they could refuse to answer any of the questions posed. Each of the participants will be sent an executive summary of the research results according to the agreement stated in the initial letter of invitation requesting their participation. Copies of the research study will also be made available to participants.

**Data Analysis:** Data analysis involved three levels: description of the interviews, analysis within the individual interview and analysis across the interviews to find common themes and emerging differing themes.

First Level – Description: This level involved studying the data and writing a detailed description of the responses interviewees made in the transcribed interviews. The descriptions for each participant begin with an introduction to that person. Responses were grouped according to four broad based themes directly related to the interview questions. They include: description of practice, learner transformation as they are introduced to a culture-based approach to literacy; learner's use of cultural knowledge in the pursuit of mainstream skills building, and finally, discussion of personal and learner transformation.

Second Level – Analysis within the individual interview: Each interview was then analyzed to find key themes and recurring statements. This involved several re-readings of the transcripts and descriptions. These key themes were then identified and discussed.

Third Level – Analysis across interviews: Interviews were then analyzed as a group to find common themes. It is here that emerging differing themes are also discussed.

### **Parallel Journey: My Journey as Data**

Why is my journey valid as data? As an Indigenous researcher I understand the importance of placing myself within the process of the research and fully experiencing what there is to see, feel, hear, and know. Cleary and Peacock speak of this as coming to the process and practice of research with our whole bodies, our minds, our spirits, and our emotions. Research becomes of the person and of the community in a holistic way that is



bound to have lasting healthy effects upon not only the community but also the researcher (Cleary and Peacock, 1997).

With this in mind, I deeply explore my own process of learning about myself as an Ojibway woman at the same time as I learned more about my cultural heritage and traditions, in relation to the discussion of the transformative nature of culture-based approaches to learning.

My spirit name is enbiwitang debwewin kwe or she who stands up for the truth. I received it almost 5 years ago from a respected elder, Ningwakwe, who is known as one of the champions of Native literacy in Canada. Asking for, receiving and claiming a spirit name has been a very empowering process for me because it not only names me in conjunction with the Creator, but it links me to a knowledge base that is ageless, one that understands the fine balance between the individual and the spirit world and our responsibilities as humans.

As an educator working in the Native community, I believe it is my duty to continually create an environment whereby learners learn about the richness of their culture and about the many contributions to mainstream society our societies have provided, both willingly and against our collective will. My sadness and anger go hand in hand when I think of the way that I was educated to believe that Native people were a simple people, conquered, and needed to accept being assimilated for any good to happen for them. Native people had simple traditions, folklore, and a belief in the great mystery or Creator, but they didn't have science and technology and "advanced" knowledge.

As educators, we have a lot of un-learning to do for ourselves in order that others can unlearn as well. De-colonizing the education we received is a long and arduous yet rewarding journey. For at the end of that journey we return to a knowing that sustains us in the face of those who would tell us we are less than, quaint and primitive, a vanishing part of Canadiana. (Canadiana is a term referring to things related to the country of Canada)

Native people can reclaim this knowledge and in some part reclaim that which was stolen and/or suppressed through forced relocation to residential schools, adoptions, and by simply being part of the mainstream education system. Hogan writes so eloquently and sadly about this being taken away in her book Woman Who Watches Over the World.

When speaking about young ones who returned from residential schools, she writes:

And when the children returned, their families often did not recognize or know them. They looked, dressed, and spoke like the ones who had stolen them. The children thought in smaller ways, too, having lost the great tracts of knowledge and ways of being contained in their own languages, the words that came from living on and with a land. (Hogan, 2001, p. 87)

This was a great theft, the theft of knowledge. It is up to us to pick these ways of knowing up again and use them, not only for ourselves but for the people who are in our literacy classes, having come there after a lifetime of being made to believe they were less than others around them.

While reading Bradshaw's Healing the Shame That Binds You, I was struck by a quote from Gershen Kaufman:

Shame is the affect which is the source of many complex and disturbing inner states: depression, alienation, self-doubt, isolating loneliness, paranoid and schizoid phenomena, compulsive disorders, splitting of the self, perfectionism, a deep sense of inferiority, inadequacy or failure, the so-called borderline conditions and disorders of narcissism.(Kaufman, in Bradshaw, p.viii)

I've seen too many learners in such described states described who have come to the literacy programs I have administered over the years. I just never realized what it was the learner was dealing with until I started addressing my own shame issues. Growing up in such a racist and misogynist environment, I learned to believe at an early age that because of who I was there was something wrong with me. And only by changing who I was could I be redeemed in my parent's/society's eyes. This, in addition to being part of the mainstream education system, which reinforced the "facts" that Native people were less than others, damaged my idea of who I was and I lost that person along the way and became, instead, a false face.

The word "expert" has, unfortunately, due to my colonized experience, meant only those who have gone to school and researched topics in order to become expert in something such as gaining a degree or notoriety about their expertise within a small circle of academics. "Education" had taught me that my people were: simple people, incapable of complex thoughts, disorganized and incapable of taking care of themselves. They lived at a subsistence level, starving, warring, and godless. They didn't harness the bounties of nature in the proper way. They were illiterate with no writing systems in place. They did not know how to govern themselves. I could go on and on and on listing the deficiencies I've learned from my education and from the racist assumptions of other people who felt they knew about Indigenous people.

Linda Hogan, in her essay “First People” talks about this early education and how it judges Native Peoples ways of knowing. “Even though I was a halfhearted student at best, this education taught that what my own, Indigenous people once knew were the stories of superstitious and primitive people, not to be believed, not to be taken in a serious light.” (Hogan, 1998, p.9)

I grew up believing these things about my own people, and, as a result have had to deal with self-hatred, shame, and internalized racism in my life. A large part of my life was spent turning my back on who I am and identifying with being only white and middle class. I wasn’t “like” those people, those Native people I experienced only in the periphery of my life.

After working in my community for so long I’ve learned many things about the damage this kind of thinking has wrought. I realize I’d been lied to and the truth had been kept from me in a various ways. I’ve learned that there are different ways of looking at the same situation and that the word expert encompasses a much larger concept of “knowledgeable” than I previously thought. Not trusting my family and/or community knowledge, my Indigenous-ness, is so ingrained. This colonized thinking and acting is what I must work against. I must continue to deconstruct the word expert. I have to learn to trust my own knowledge, the knowledge of my people and continue to incorporate different ways of knowing into the work I do. I must trust the knowing.

## Untitled

Ok  
So I'm not Princess Pocahontas  
and I didn't even want to be  
Indian  
Native  
Wagonburner  
First Nation  
Aboriginal  
Squaw  
For 18 years.

Where does this leave me?  
And who is carrying around the  
"Indianness" ruler,  
Measurement of tradition  
¾ cup of Anishnawbe kwe?

But  
I can say hello  
Aneen  
and I love my mother  
and the other one  
Mother of us all.

I burn sage and my  
Soul opens further each day  
To let in the years  
Years  
Years  
Years  
I lost.

I've stood on the mountains  
Throwing all the 'whys'  
To the tides.

They came back.  
I can wait for the full moon  
I can wait,  
For answers that have been with me forever  
Just forgotten  
Just hidden.

(Cooper, 1993)

Trusting the knowing has led me from a place of ignorance and shame, through to awareness of self and nation, on to understanding and pride, and finally to a place of growth, empowerment and forward motion. What a journey it has been. What a journey it continues to be.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

#### **Overview**

This chapter begins with a profile and introduction of each participant presented in the order in which the interviews took place. Each interview deals with the following questions: personal motivation for being a literacy practitioner; description of practice and learner transformation as they are introduced to a culture-based approach to literacy; learner's use of cultural knowledge in the pursuit of mainstream skills building, and finally, discussion of personal and learner transformation. I then identify and discuss themes within the interviews, common themes across the interviews and differing themes that emerged.

**Interview Participants:** Participants interviewed included 2 women and 1 man. All are of Native heritage. All had been involved with Native literacy for at least 4 years when interviewed. All interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour and 10 minutes. The following section presents each participant's responses throughout their interview.

#### **Interview 1 RB:**

RB is the literacy coordinator at a Friendship Centre in Thunder Bay, Ontario. She has been the literacy program coordinator for four years. Prior to taking the position as coordinator, RB was a learner in the program. She is Anishnawbe from northern Ontario. She is a mother. Her work in literacy has garnered her both provincial and national

attention. She is a recent recipient of the Council of the Federation's Literacy Award as well as being a past recipient of the Canada Post Award for Literacy. She volunteers as a board member for the National Indigenous Literacy Association.

Personal Motivation: Because RB was a learner in the program first and then moved into the coordinator position, we talked first about her motivation to begin attending the literacy program in the first place. Change was a big factor for her. She needed change and action in her life.

“Change, I needed change in my life. I needed to do something different because I was on disability sitting at home every day doing nothing. I needed to fill some time after my last child started school”. She started volunteering at the Friendship Centre and noticed the literacy program. This is when her life changed in a big way. “And then I noticed the literacy program in here. I don't know it was just like a calling.” Another big factor in her motivation to start in the literacy program was the search for knowledge of her culture. She felt that she needed to find “roots” in her life to begin bettering herself. She found that being in the program “gave me a real sense of belonging somewhere”, and “I learned just about being Aboriginal in general. You know, learning the medicines and finding out there was a creator. And actually learning how to smudge and the feeling it brings over you. So it was really neat to learn all that stuff and feel a kind of connection when I learned about it.”

After finishing in the literacy program RB went to college and received a diploma in social services. Before too long she became the program assistant and then the



coordinator. Perhaps because of her unique start in literacy, RB is more very passionate about helping learners to succeed and thrive. One of the students in the program might be joining a provincial literacy board of directors and RB discussed her pride in the student. At the end of her interview, when asked if there was anything else she wanted to add, RB stated. “Not really, you know I love literacy still. It’s part of my life now. Being able to see myself go through it and looking and hoping for some students is almost the same thing. The one that’s gone into his culture, he may be sitting on the board of the \*\*\* next year. I see him as I was when I started and it’s just so neat to see. And he’s quite articulate and he can speak so well. When he told me they asked him to be on the board and get his resume I was really déjà viewing. I was so happy for him too.”

Despite some very clear frustrations when she started in the position, “I was frustrated because there was no one around to show me or show me how things worked”, RB continues to “love” literacy.

Description of Practice: RB coordinates a very busy literacy program with upwards of “5 to 6 intakes a day.” Culture-based approaches to learning form the core of the work that takes place within the program. She discussed several ways the learners were able to learn about and immerse themselves in their cultures, some for the very first time. Medicine walks were one of the ways that learners were able to access cultural teachings.

Skill building is infused into the process: “We’ll start with the medicine teachings, which I take six or seven students out a year. We take them out in the bush for the whole day and we teach them, like, sage, cedar, sweetgrass, tobacco, things like that. Before we even go out, they’re given handouts of what some of the medicines mean and what they look like so that they can go off on their own and find them. They are then taught the smudging ceremony, just for the feeling that gives you. You know like when you smudge you get this feeling of peace within yourself? It’s hard to describe that, but for me that feeling is what kept me going and wanting to learn more about the tradition. I was really quite curious after I smudged probably for the first time. So we teach them to pick it and we bring it back to the centre and dry it. Then it’s broken up and given to the people that picked it. When we teach it to them here, then they bring it home and they teach it to their families. And then later it gets passed down.”

There is also a ceremony taking care of the sacred bundles that belong to learners and to the centre that takes place four times a year with the change of the season. This ceremony teaches students the importance of proper maintenance of their bundles. Bundles include the traditional medicines and other artifacts that are meaningful to the individual.

Another community development activity that has literacy and numeracy built into the process is the community kitchen that takes place twice a month during times when money is tight for social assistance recipients, just before child tax cheques are released and just before social assistance cheques are released. Learners work together to plan,

budget, shop, and cook nutritious meals that are then frozen and taken home for their families. As RB explains, there are a lot of teaching and learning moments during this process. “We’ll take a simple recipe, to turn it into literacy, of if we have 35 students in the classroom, we know we have to times it by 35 that recipe unless it’s for 4 people, and then you would just break it up. You do the math for that and figure out what needs to go in there. And then there’s the actual going out to a grocery store and compare pricing. In some cases we always go for the cheapest because we only have a budget of 50 dollars. We go for the cheapest and again they will estimate how much they think it’ll cost. Then, the skills, they are all kitchen skills, teaching of cleaning and disinfecting, making sure their hair is up and their gloves are on. It can be turned into literacy, its called survival.”

Learner Transformation: The next question in the interview had to do with what the practitioner notices when learners are introduced to a culture-based approach to literacy. RB talked about learners feeling cared for while in the program and what happens to them when they feel like part of something larger than themselves. “Unfortunately many of them have been through the grinder, you know, and ah, have lived on the streets, or are in dysfunctional families. Coming into this program gives them, kind of gives them a grounding. I’m going somewhere today, I actually have somewhere to go today...It makes a person’s self-esteem grow quite a bit, and from that I found that I was able to grow. And we have a couple of students that have all of a sudden taken a really strong cultural path. And its amazing from when they’ve come in, you know, they were the big fighters and the partiers. All of a sudden some things happened and they’re doing sweat

lodges and sun dances. You know they're mentoring each other. It's really something to see here."

Students mentoring one another comes up again later in the interview when RB talks about embedding smudging into the everyday lives of the learners. "We even keep a smudge dish in the class here and a big basket of sage and anybody that wants to can come in go ahead and light themselves a smudge and smudge themselves. So that kind of brings awareness to the students that don't know what it is also. This is also where that mentoring comes in because these people will turn to them and explain what it is and why. We don't, so we don't just teach it to them, they teach themselves."

Seeing and understanding how learners change when they are introduced to cultural activities makes RB proud of what she does. She also notices how issues of self-esteem and self-awareness become critical components of transformation.

"Once they grasp some of that culture they're more at ease with themselves." She notices that as learners become more comfortable with their surroundings, they open up and share with others, eventually getting to a place of taking care of one another. "They may sit here three or four weeks and just sit here, just do their work but eventually I can look out and I can see them starting to talk to each other a little bit you know, and then they're joking and then they go out and have a coffee, that sort of thing, across the street. It's really something to see. It's nice. So they kind of take care of each other in here."

In addition to the cultural activities and curriculum that are provided for learners in the literacy program, there are also plenty of opportunities for learners to attend workshops and career fairs, to take part in other programming at the Friendship Centre, work on their resumes and cover letters, and practice their interview skills through the use of a multi-purpose computer program.

Learner Use of Cultural Knowledge in the Pursuit of Mainstream Skills Building:

RB provided one excellent example of how a learner uses his cultural knowledge as he pursues mainstream skills building. This learner who “follows his culture quite well right now” is a writer whose stories originate from his dreams and imagination. He works hard to learn correct spelling and grammar. RB knows that in order for him to get his story submitted to a newsletter or an anthology, he “has to have computer skills, knowledge of grammar, punctuation and sentence structure and all that. So in order to get that story submitted, he has a bit of work ahead of him.”

RB highlights the important part cultural knowledge plays for this learner when she says “just the fact that he’s using his cultural learnings in making these stories.”

Other learners also utilize their cultural awareness through writing. RB notices that many of the stories that learners will submit for literacy newsletters have to do with the teachings they received in the program. For example, “a lot of them write about the activities we do. About the berry picking, about the sage picking. About what they learned and the fun they had and the community they felt.” She also mentions how proud

learners are when they are published, “Oh they get really proud eh?” and “My god, it just makes them glow.”

The final question in the interview had to do with how practitioners felt that they and the learners were transformed as a result of participating in a culture-based literacy program. Because RB had been a former learner, it was easy for her to look back into the not too distant past to remember how she felt as she was learning about who she was as a Native woman. She spoke about growth, peace, and being blessed in this quote:

“Oh you can grow from anywhere once you learn about it (culture). It was amazing to me how at peace I had felt as a learner and how I was more able to open up my mind to learn once I had found out. Well to me it was kind of like doing the AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) thing and this power thing. And then somebody told me, well it doesn’t have to be Jesus you know. But that encouraged me to go out and look for something different, something that I could look up to that would be strong for me. And this is also where the interest coming into the culture was for me. And now I just tell people I’m doubly blessed because I have two gods. ‘Cause you don’t have to leave one to become part of the other one.”

RB notices learners taking a healing and wellness approach to their lives after they have participated in the literacy program. Others might call it self-development or life skills. These things along with the cultural base to all the learning helps learners succeed in many aspects of their lives. She states that “with the kitchens, teaching them how to

budget, bringing them to the grocery store and comparison (shopping). This is always going to help them in their life.” This transformation both for herself and for learners is about coming into awareness of self, “Becoming whole is almost what it sounds like. A person.”

**Interview 2 BM:**

BM is the literacy coordinator at a downtown Toronto cultural centre whose main client base is homeless or socially isolated Native people. BM has been the literacy coordinator there for 4 years. She is a Coast Salish woman and mother.

Personal Motivation: Commitment to community is one of the reasons BM works in literacy. She feels that she really is making a contribution to her community. She states that if she weren't “making some kind of contribution, I wouldn't be motivated to be here.” Helping others to make changes in their lives is a big motivator for her. “I know it's a bit nutty, but as I said I'm motivated to be here because it's my community. And if I help even in my time that I'm here, if I can help a handful of people each year, a handful of Native people move beyond their current position or just help them reach the idea of that they have the potential to do that right, then I think I will feel that I have done a good service.”

Another motivator for BM to stay in the work is that she finds her colleagues very interesting and like minded. She likes knowing that there are literacy coordinators all

over the province that she can rely upon who are “having the same kinds of experiences, same kinds of barriers, you know, those sort of commonalities.”

Description of Practice: BM approaches her instruction practice holistically. She feels that in the Native community there is a world view that appreciates a holistic approach to learning. “Whereas I see the Native people, I think most Native people, it’s partly the way they are to look at the world and where they are, to see it from not just from an individualistic view but to see and view things as part of their community, their clan, their family, or their nation. So they’re looking, it seems that Native people have the ability, to have a perception just beyond the individualistic view. So having that personal feeling about Native people, that’s the way I communicate, I don’t just say this is what I think.”

Worldview is very important to BM. Learning about others helps people to learn about themselves if they have open minds. She wants to approach teaching as “looking at it beyond my own ideas, I always want, maybe it’s a way of kind of reinforcing my philosophies about our existence, about learning. I want to reinforce them by bringing out the qualities of other civilizations and their strengths and their weaknesses even.”

BM talks about the importance of this approach when providing an appropriate learning environment for Native adult learners. Learning about who they are as Native people and where they come from provides learners with information that was not provided in mainstream school environments. And part of learning about who they are includes



learning about other Indigenous Peoples lives and struggles. BM links this lack of awareness of self and personal and community history to Native people's feelings of failure in their lives.

“Failure in their lives, but that doesn't mean the method (family knowledge) failed. It means that they don't understand the connection between their failures, their personal history, their family history, the history of their nation. They didn't draw that line, because how could they? They haven't learned their own history. Some people haven't even been to their own nation. How could they know the economic history of their nation, and to believe that what happened in their grandfather's life, or their great-grandfather's life, or their great great-grandfather's life. How could they understand how that has effected who they are in their life today? They don't know their history.”

Learner Transformation: When asked what she noticed about learners when they are introduced to this culture-based approach to learning and teaching, BM talked about how learners open up and start to ask questions, becoming critical consumers of the knowledge that is provided to them.

“They ask questions. If I kind of see that they are humming and kind of hawing, and the want to ask but they don't even know really what they want to ask. They want to ask, well what does this have to do with me? They want to say that and I can see the question is forming but the words aren't coming. They don't even have to say the words, I know, (they wonder)”what the hell does this have to do with me?”

An appreciation for the knowledge that they carry and that their families carry is another kind of change that BM notices in learners after they have been involved with the program for a time. Because BM talks about her family and what they teach her, learners can start appreciating what it is their families can teach and have taught them. The knowledge that family carries might not be the kind of knowledge that is considered meaningful in mainstream society, but put into the context of familial knowledge and passing information down through the generations, it takes on a new and renewed importance for people.

“If people within the program know that their uncle can teach them something, maybe their uncle doesn’t know about computers, maybe he doesn’t know how to take the streetcar to the west end of the city. He doesn’t have those kinds of skills, but he has skills because he has survived in his community and he has made some kind of a living, maybe he has had a family. So he has different kinds of skills. Those are not necessarily less valuable than the skills that you have because you live in the city. I think there is so much value placed on material things. And skills that involve living in a materialistic place, in a capitalist centre, an economic centre...But the kinds of skills that people like my dad and my brother and maybe their uncles and aunts and people that live outside of the city, those skills are valuable too, those things teach you too.”

BM believes that it is important for people to “see the value in experiences outside of what they live.”

Learner Use of Cultural Knowledge in the Pursuit of Mainstream Skills Building:

BM watches many learners use cultural knowledge and a newfound self knowledge to successfully achieve their goals. From learning how to read, to asking questions, to being on a healing journey, one learner stands out for BM.

“I have one person in my program that always says ‘why’. I love it because it makes me think too. Even if it’s something positive, he likes to read self help books, he’s buying books! Two years ago he hadn’t ever read a book in his whole life... That to me is just amazing, I love that.”

When he questions himself or his learning journey she is there to support him. She is “trying to help him understand. You’re getting better, you’re healing. You’ve been on your healing journey for two years and now you’re getting to the point where now you can hear other points of view; you’re listening to other voices, we’re listening to other voices; other theories; other opinions; that’s why you can read a book now, because you’ve developed your own sense of ideas; your own sense of philosophy; your own sense of values. If you have those things, then you can tolerate listening to somebody else’s point of view.”

Learning how to communicate and being confident that your voice counts is perhaps the most important concept that BM feels comes with the acquisition of cultural knowledge. When asked how learners incorporate cultural knowledge into the other mainstream skills building work they do in the literacy program, she is quick to answer.

“That’s an easy one. I think it’s all about communication. It’s all about communicating. It’s all about just exactly what I said about feeling like your experience, your understanding is important enough to share with somebody else and if you believe that and that’s in your heart, and if you feel, you can speak up and say something and make a contribution.”

Other things that BM notices are self-expression, learners making a contribution to their community, and the building of strong self-esteem. She says that she feels she is an effective teacher when “they teach those things, those kinds of things to their children. To me, I don’t think there’s another way to reinforce, I don’t think there’s a more effective way to teach those things.”

Personal and Learner Transformation: BM hopes that learners can see and feel the value of participating in a culture-based literacy program. “I’ve seen it happen enough to know that, you know what, this is working. I’ve seen people that have come from being completely homeless to being in supportive housing. I’ve seen people go from being in supportive housing to having their own apartments.” She knows that “being an independent person makes a huge change in your world.”

Because she and learners work hard to build the program in a good way, they have a “little community, we have a little nucleus here within the centre. And its held together with the idea that we have to be strong people, we have to have a voice, we have to make

a contribution, we have to help one another, we have to listen, we have to share, and the sharing is that whole idea that I'm learning as much as anybody in the program is learning." They're changing their lives. They're learning that they can make a contribution. It's important for her to know that she is helping to "build a community that realizes the value of each and every member of that community."

She also talks about the transformation she observes with tutors who work with learners in the program. They see that the program is based on the above quote and they see that the work that they do with learners is about much more than just teaching a skill. "But if he comes here and he sees that part of what he does is helping somebody else because they're spending time doing something constructive or they're learning how to change fractions to decimals or because they're learning how to write a letter or they're learning that they have a voice that matters and they can write a letter to the editor of the Timmins newspaper or whatever. If they are learning some of those things and he can help make that happen, well that's changed his life. Right? And it's totally changed my life too.

**Interview 3 AS:**

AS is the literacy coordinator for a Native literacy program in downtown Hamilton. This literacy program is the longest running Native literacy program in the province. AS is Anishnawbe from northern Ontario. He was a teacher for over 20 years before getting into the adult literacy field. He has been involved with the literacy field for 5 or 6 years.

Personal Motivation: AS talks about being dissatisfied with an educational system that had people falling through the cracks as the main motivator for getting into the literacy field.

“I’m talking about younger people and older people that wanted to get an education they just didn’t fit into the regular school system. And didn’t understand what was going on in the curriculum for the regular school system regardless of subject.”

Description of Practice: AS speaks of the use of Native spirituality as the base of his practice. Native spirituality “rings a bell” for everyone, even those who may not have a complete understanding of their culture. “So for me what I’ve done is, what I’ve managed to do is use the spiritual aspect of Native culture, if you will, in curriculum and those are simply things like universal truths. We have a round world. We have a two world concept. We have a bridging mechanism. We have a reason for us being here. So building understanding between these types of things and academics and all its components seems to work for me with my students.”

Learner Transformation: When learners feel good about themselves, they “tend to want to ask more questions.” AS feels that providing a culture-based approach for learners results in broadening their minds. “It opens up parts of their being that were...left untouched prior to.”

When faced with a reality of racism and prejudice AS finds that “a lot of Native people, it seems to me, have low self-esteem. And rightly so, I don’t mean that in a negative way, but I do because a lot of them were born into a system that we just don’t understand. We just don’t fit into.” So, “introducing our culture into literacy” works, because “once our students, the students that we serve, get an understanding of what it is that is being taught, they just tend to take off.”

AS is very clear with students about what Native people have to face in society if they want to succeed. “And with the students that I work with I’m not afraid to tell them these kinds of things or talk about these kinds of issues because they are well aware of it and it takes a little bit of coaxing at times to get them to want to speak exactly how they feel.”

To AS, literacy is more than just an educational technique or school of thought. Instead literacy is a “whole life system.” It’s about “putting pieces together that weren’t there, that weren’t understood, that aren’t part of me. Its about having to face the real situation in terms of what happens if I don’t do this or what could happen if I do this here.”

When a culture-based approach to learning and teaching works, there is trust “where there was never trust with anybody else.” Students learn that it is ok to open up, be vulnerable and talk about their problems. They are then transformed and become stronger human beings. Transformation also occurs as a result of AS teaching critical thinking skills. “I teach them to think. I want them to think. I want them to know why we do what we do. I want there to be a reason for that. And if you do that even with

people who have special needs problems, and you approach it from that point of view, you're going to be successful.”

Learner Use of Cultural Knowledge in the Pursuit of Mainstream Skills Building:

AS thinks that learners use their cultural knowledge in a variety of ways because cultural knowledge that is based on the Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers (honesty, kindness, strength, wisdom, sharing, love, and humility) encompasses so much of daily living.

“If we have that foundation and we get the foundation in our programs, we give the foundation and we teach the foundation to our students they're able to grasp some meaning for their own life, they're able to say hey, I'm ok it's not really me that's messed up here.”

AS feels that this type of teaching provides students with the tools for success. “So what we're doing by introducing culture into an academic component and life skills into your academic component, we're able to generate in that student that desire and that drive to succeed.” True success can come only after an awareness of self has been achieved.

“And literacy is that, we are these things, these standards that are saying listen there's meaning in your life and this is how you get them. First you have to understand this, you have to understand these teachings; you have to understand where we're from; who we are; and why we're still here.” This then “generates in the student that necessary ingredient to say, ‘you know, I can do this shit, I can succeed, and I am succeeding.’”



Personal and Learner Transformation: AS feels that transformation comes to him and the learners when they share their gifts with one another. He strongly believes that everyone has gifts, but the most important gift that we have to give is that we are all teachers and all learners. Unfortunately “the educational system that we’re involved with, it’s a focused system and it’s a system that’s directly opposite to the Native belief system and the Native way of life, figuratively speaking. Not only that, it’s true.”

Transformation also comes when cultural teachings are used in the explanation of systems that might be foreign or oppressive to the students. “You know getting our students to accept the hogwash and the bullshit because there’s a place for it somewhere along the line where it’ll fit. And when you can show that through culture or through one of the teachings or through several of the teachings it just makes sense to them, and they buy into it.”

These cultural teachings also form the basis for the development of secure relationships, not only in the program but also in family. “I always tell them that we’re reflective of our feelings; we’re reflective of our knowledge; we’re reflective of each other. And we have to maintain and we have to show and we have to sustain and we really have to care for each other unconditionally; and care for the program; and care for our families; and care for something, because if we lose that we’re done.”

## **Themes Identified within Individual Interviews**

Cultural Awareness Providing a Sense of Belonging: Interview 1, RB. As a former learner as well as being the program coordinator, RB felt strongly about the feeling that a sense of belonging that cultural awareness provides. She talked about her own process of coming to an awareness of her culture, a culture that her mother did not or could not share with her children. RB knew intuitively that she needed to “find roots in my life to begin bettering myself.” This is perhaps why she is hyper aware of that need/want to become culturally aware in others as they enter into the literacy program. She talks about watching learner’s self-esteem and social skills grow as they become more comfortable with themselves. “Once they grasp some of that culture they’re more at ease with themselves. Being around the same kind of people in the program, they don’t feel so bad anymore after awhile.” The trips to pick berries or sage, the smudging, the blessing of sacred bundles, all of these activities help to ensure that there is a safe, culturally relevant place that Native learners can find out about who they are as Native people and engage in literacy skills building.

Community Development: A large part of the programming at the literacy program has to do with community development and helping learners become advocates for themselves and their families. There is also a strong focus on ensuring that learners become self-sufficient and knowledgeable about the resources that are available to them in the city of Thunder Bay.

RB spends a lot of time sending learners to workshops and career fairs in order that they learn about existing opportunities. The social aspect of the community development is evident in the many activities that are planned and implemented for learners. There is the community kitchen, berry picking, medicine picking, learning about where to get used furniture and clothing in the city, learning how to get government identification issued for yourself or a family member, help with filling out forms and learning about becoming a better health advocate.

RB also makes sure that learners know where there are food banks in the city as well as where to find emergency supplies of food that can be accessed when the food banks aren't available. She is fiercely protective of the learners in the program, stating "of course we'll always advocate for them." The many activities listed are just a few of the activities and opportunities that are provided above and beyond the classic skills building curriculum of a literacy program.

Importance of Indigenous Knowledges: Interview 2, BM. The importance of knowing about who you are and where you come from comes up again and again in the interview with BM. The knowledge her family carries is very important, not only to her, but to her son as well, and she is determined not to lose that knowledge. "I have to go and listen to the stories. I have to go and listen to my grandmother talk and talk and talk. And take little bits of information here and there. And then I have to listen to my dad tell his stories about why is my grandmother's land not attached to the rest of the reserve. Why is that? In forty years nobody is going to know the answer to that unless I tell the story.

And the story about my great grandfather being a rancher and owning horses. Nobody will know the economic history of my nation unless I share that. My children won't understand.”

She also believes that some of our knowledge and skills are hereditary. “When you look at some of the reasons why you are where you are, why you have some of the skills you have, why you have some of the strengths, why you have some of those things. Those didn't originate with the body you are in.” This belief in the relevance of Indigenous knowledge helps Native learners to make connections with the past and helps them to understand who they are as Native people.

Knowledge that is Applicable to People's Lives: Some of the learners that come into the literacy program that BM coordinates live a hard existence. “They can't think outside their own existence, because they are just barely existing, they are barely surviving. You know they can't even lift their eyes higher than their day to day existence because they might falter or they might fail in their own existence.” As a result the learning that takes place in the program must be applicable to learner' lives, it must “apply to their existence.”

Providing a frame of reference, be it reading a poem, listening to an author, studying a chapter in a book, is of the utmost importance for learners in the program because “if its not right there, if its not visible for them, in the first glance at it, you can't hold their

attention..” The learning then becomes about “showing how it might be applicable in their own lives, that information, whatever it might be.”

Dealing with Prejudice and Oppression: Interview 3, AS. AS is very clear when he talks about how Native people are perceived by many of those in non-Native society. And he is clear with the learners in the literacy program that they are going to have to deal with prejudice and oppression everywhere they go, so they better be prepared to succeed.

“There’s an old cliché that nobody like a smart Indian. And with students that I work with I’m not afraid to tell them these kinds of things or talk about these kinds of issues ‘cause they’re well aware of it.” AS talks with the students about the barriers they have faced while looking for work or while in the educational system. He talks about the reality of racism but he also talks about how we all have to live in this world despite the fact that “there are people on the other side of these windows who want us to screw up - simply because that’s been the norm. We’re never going to succeed according to some people.” So it’s up to the students to “really care for each other unconditionally and care for the program and care for our families and care for something” to ensure not only their success but community success.

Surviving and Thriving: By introducing culture and life skills into the academic content of the literacy program, AS believes he is setting the course for success with the learners. By doing this he believes that “we’re able to generate in the student the desire and that drive to succeed.” Helping one another and supporting one another ensures success for all involved. “I mean that’s why we’re here, to help each other, instead of like the crabs

in the can, or the lobsters trying to climb out and everybody pulling them back in. We're like standing on the rim trying to pull everybody up. And literacy is that, we are these things, these standards that are saying listen there's meaning in your life."

Encouragement, trust, and understanding are also paramount in the journey to success, according to AS. The learning journey continues both in and outside of the classroom as learners and instructor support and teach each other. "So it takes a lot of encouragement, it takes a lot of understanding. It takes a lot of sitting and crying on each other's shoulders at times."

### **Commonalities**

We are all Teachers and Learners: The importance of reciprocity in relationships was highlighted throughout each of the interviews. Both BM and AS talked about people being both learners and teachers at different times in their lives. AS believed that being a teacher is a gift. But that being a teacher means that we are also a learner. Learning and teaching never stops until the day we die. RB discussed the profound moments when learners teach one another cultural knowledge and begin a mentoring process that has nothing to do with someone being more qualified, such as being an instructor.

Self-Awareness Equals Self-Determination: Again and again, each practitioner speaks about how, when learners come to know themselves as Native people, both through learning their histories and cultural teachings, they begin to thrive and succeed. RB talks about learners who were known as "fighters and partiers" and how they changed to

follow a much more cultural path, once that knowledge was made available to them. RB also notices that people become “more at ease with themselves” after they grasp some aspect of cultural teachings. BM talks about a learner on a healing journey making great strides with integrating other opinions and ideas through his newfound love of reading. Using the teachings of the Seven Grandfathers as a base for all of the learning in the literacy program almost ensures student success in the Hamilton program.

Indigenous Knowledges: Learning from other Indigenous societies, learning from our families, learning from the elders, and learning from each other are all facets of Indigenous knowledge acquisition that the literacy practitioners talk about in their interviews. Often learners are learning about their histories for the first time. At the same time they may be learning that the knowledge that they or their family carries about a certain subject, fishing or hunting skills for example, has validity for a number of reasons. Reclaiming that knowledge is very empowering for learners.

Importance of Community: The importance of community was consistently discussed during all three interviews. Be it the community of the classroom or the community of family, community and its maintenance is considered one of the most important things in the literacy program. Learning about community is also a theme that was common throughout all three interviews. RB makes sure that learners know about resources that are available to them throughout the city. All three practitioners talked about the importance of community in the classroom for learners, tutors, and instructors. Taking care of each other was a theme that ran parallel to the concept of community.

## **Differences**

Each practitioner provided a thought provoking and in depth interview regarding their practice. RB's interview differed from the other two interviews chiefly because she was often speaking in the voice of a former literacy learner. This of course provided a much different discussion about how learners are transformed in the literacy program. RB also expressed the frustrations of a new literacy coordinator needing to start from scratch with administration and the need for some sort of how-to guide to get practitioners started if they find themselves in that particular situation.

For BM the importance of learning about other cultures in the pursuit of literacy skills was quite evident. She did not refer to any particular cultural practice in the ways that AS and RB did.

Both RB and BM talked about the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities as the main funder of the program but AS did not mention issues of funding.

For AS the issue of racism and how Native people are perceived by the non-Native community was a topic that he returned to a couple of times. He mentioned certain political issues such as the fight for recognition by the Mohawks at Caledonia and in the Red Valley. Native people's activism and stewardship of the land were also mentioned by AS but not by the other practitioners.



Perhaps because AS has a teaching background, he talked much more about getting learners ready for college and university, whereas RB and BM spoke in terms of skills building, or it could be that learners in his program are “higher” students i.e. closer to college level.

In the next and concluding chapter I will review the highlights of findings and discuss selected implications for both literacy practice and further research.

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusions**

#### **Summary**

The major objective of this research study was to explore the transformative nature of culture-based literacy approaches in the Native literacy field in Ontario using Indigenous research methodologies and applying a phenomenological analysis to the findings.

It has shown that culture-based approaches to Native literacy are indeed transformative, not only for learners but for tutors and practitioners as well. Over and over again practitioners spoke of the importance of creating a safe space for learners to access cultural knowledge and engage in cultural practice while building literacy skills. In that safe environment learners are provided with the skills for successfully achieving their learning and life goals. All three practitioners talked about the learning and healing journeys that are undertaken by learners in the programs. Learners move from being homeless to having a home, from being unable to read to purchasing their own books, from being hungry to learning how to shop within a budget and feed their families nutritious meals, and from being a school drop out to being a successful student at university. All of these changes happen as a result of the culture-based approaches to learning and teaching the Native literacy practitioners provide in their programs.

Why and how does this transformation happen for learners? I found four main themes in my data that respond to this question: reciprocity of the teaching/learning relationship in programs; how self-awareness leads to self-determination; the importance of drawing

upon Indigenous knowledge systems in the literacy program; and the part community plays in the success of students.

It is also important to add here the transformation that takes place for the practitioners and tutors in the literacy programs. Practitioners spoke of tutors coming to the realization that they are doing much more than teaching a skill, that they are participating in community building. In this way, helping one another is also a transformative event for people whose daily existence is fraught with struggle.

Below I will briefly review each of the four themes, along with some observations about implications for literacy practice and further research.

## **Themes and Implications for Literacy Practice and Research**

Four major themes emerged when the individual interviews were compared.

### **I. Reciprocity: We are all Teachers and Learners:**

In our lives we are teachers and we are learners. We never stop teaching and we never stop learning until the day we die. The three Native literacy practitioners believe that this is a gift because it teaches us about reciprocity in relationships and the importance of sharing what we know and being open minded to other ways of knowing.

Implications for Literacy Practice: Taking the time to develop relationships with one another and with learners is very important for literacy practitioners in the Native literacy field. Practitioners need to be open to learning from students while at the same time providing opportunities for learners to feel comfortable in

a teaching role. It is also very important for adult literacy learners to be provided the time and space to develop relationships with one another in order mentoring can take place. Literacy programs need to be able to have opportunities for sharing circles, ceremonies such as smudging, and cultural outings so that relationships are developed and nourished culturally.

Implications for Further Research: Because this cultural approach seems to be in direct conflict with a common understanding of the teaching and learning environment, further research could include an examination of relationship development in Native literacy programs. Research could also include looking at the concept of reciprocity in Native literacy programs.

## **II. Self-Awareness Equals Self-Determination:**

Knowledge of self is a profound knowing. Learning about Native cultural and traditional knowledge and the history of family and nation is a transformative event for many Native learners. When opportunities exist for students to learn about their histories, some perhaps for the first time, they begin to thrive and succeed. The path of coming to awareness provides learners with tools for success academically.

Implications for Literacy Practice: Providing different opportunities for learning about cultural teachings and knowledge is a priority for these Native literacy

coordinators. Native literacy programs need to continue to provide a safe space for learners to stay on their journeys towards self-determination.

Implications for Further Research: There is little research available that explores the effect cultural learning and awareness has on Native literacy learners. Making the links between adult student success and cultural competency would be an excellent research project. Other ideas for further research in this vein include the role of self-esteem in academic success, exploring the role of elders in literacy programs, and looking at the role of the sharing circle in literacy programs.

### **III. Indigenous Knowledges:**

Learning from Indigenous knowledge systems, be they from family, elder teachings, cultural activities, or from learning about other Indigenous peoples is a very important part of the Native literacy program. With the acquisition of this knowledge comes a greater awareness of self and pride in one's identity and history.

Implications for Literacy Practice: Having culture at the centre of the program ensures that learning about Indigenous Knowledges is taking place for learners. Native literacy practitioners have to be given the opportunity to include cultural teachings and activities into the curriculum in order for learners to benefit. This approach guarantees that knowledge will be passed from person to person and from parent to child thereby ensuring cultural growth.

Implications for Further Research: Looking at how culture is passed from person to person in the form of stories, ceremony, music, and teachings and is an excellent example of a research project that would benefit literacy programs struggling with the concept of evidence based outcomes.

#### **IV. Importance of Community:**

The importance of community development and the concept of taking care of one another was a theme that figured strongly throughout all practitioner interviews. Community in the classroom was a very important concept for the practitioners because sharing and caring is modeled through tutoring and mentoring.

Implications for Literacy Practice: Literacy practitioners in the Native literacy field understand the importance of community. This can include the community of a classroom or the community of a family group. It can also include learning to navigate oneself successfully in communities that aren't necessarily familiar, for instance, colleges and universities. Learning how to get along in community and to share space and time with others is a critical concept for learners to grasp while on their learning journey.

Implications for Further Research: Very little research exists that studies Native literacy approaches and their effects on student success. Creation of community forms part of the basis for transformative literacy learning in Native literacy

programs. Therefore studying how the creation of community can affect student's attitudes towards learning would be a good place to focus research attention.

## **Closing Reflections**

Part of this study had to do with exploring my journey of coming to awareness as a Native woman and looking for parallels in the journeys of Native adult literacy learners. I found that my journey of transformation did reflect many of the realities of Native learners in the areas of self-awareness and self-determination, the importance of community, and the use of Indigenous knowledges in the pursuit of self knowledge. Finding a supportive community that reflected my reality was also very important to me at different times along the way. The major differences between my journey and the journey of others had to do with the fact that I experienced class privilege and was able to attend university, and as a result, learned about myself as a Native woman.

As a researcher it was important for me to infuse my journey into the data so that I could see where my experiences mirrored and differed from others. Writing about the learning journeys of others without contemplating one's own learning journey would not constitute appropriate Indigenous research methods.

As a Native woman and a literacy educator I feel honoured to have been granted access into the lives and practices of so many wonderful and talented practitioners during the course of this study. I say meegwetch to them and wish them success in the very important work that they do everyday.

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## Appendix 1

*Open Ended Interview  
Guided Questions*

Date \_\_\_\_\_

First Name \_\_\_\_\_ Last Name \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Literacy Program you are employed at:  
\_\_\_\_\_

*The following are questions I will use with the practitioner to develop an overview and understanding of the kinds of culture-based approaches to literacy and learning that are utilized in the literacy program. These questions will also help to determine how learners learn best and how these culture-based approaches are transforming the learning experience for learners.*

*Questions:*

1. *How long have you been a literacy practitioner?*
2. *What brought you to this job?*
3. *You coordinate a literacy program that has elements of Native cultural teachings forming a basis for the learning. Could you describe your approach and why this is your preferred teaching/learning approach?*
4. *What do you notice about the learners in the program when they are introduced to this cultural approach to teaching/learning, some perhaps for the first time?*
5. *How do learners incorporate the cultural knowledge or teachings they receive into the other “mainstream” skills building work they do in the literacy program?*
6. *How do you see this approach to teaching and learning to be transformative for you and for the adult learners?*