First Nations, Inuit and Métis Essential Skills Inventory Project (FIMESIP)

Case Study:

The Childcare Worker Preparation for Certification (Initial Project) and Early Childhood Orientation Supported Program, (Subsequent Project), Prince Albert Literacy Network

Prince Albert, Saskatchewan
About the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Essential Skills Inventory Project (FIMESIP)

The Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) in partnership with Employment and Social Development Canada’s Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, the Assembly of First Nations, the Métis National Council and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami developed a comprehensive inventory of Essential Skills initiatives aimed at First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. The First Nations, Inuit and Métis ES Inventory Project’s (FIMESIP) goal is to better understand the state of practice with respect to Essential Skills initiatives tailored to First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth and adults living in diverse communities throughout Canada and to share these insights and lessons learned with a larger community of practice. Through FIMESIP, we have identified factors (“markers” of promising practice) that contribute to the initiatives’ success.

CCDF gratefully acknowledges the support of the Steering Committee and Working Group of FIMESIP:

The markers, inventory, case studies and evaluation toolkit are available at: www.fimesip.ca.

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**Steering Committee**
- David Boisvert, Métis National Council
- Maria Wilson, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami
- Lu Ann Hill-McDonald, Assembly of First Nations
- Bryan Hendry, Assembly of First Nations
- Shareef Korah, Employment and Social Development Canada

**Working Group**
- Kim Fraser-Saddleback, Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies
- Wayne Zimmer, Seven Generations Education Institute
- Lizzie Aliqatuqtuq, Nunavut Arctic College
- Cindy Cowan, Nunavut Arctic College
- Guido Contreras, Rupertsland Institute
- Sonya Howard, National Association of Friendship Centres

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About the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF)

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The Canadian Career Development Foundation
119 Ross Ave Suite 202, Ottawa, Ontario K1Y 0N6 Canada

Toll-Free: 1-877-729-6164
Tel: (613) 729-6164 Fax: (613) 729-3515

www.ccdf.ca
Overview

In 2010, the Prince Albert Literacy Network (PALN) participated in the Prince Albert Community Literacy Plan (PACLP), mandated to identify gaps in literacy services in the community. One of the gaps identified was labour market opportunities in the community of Prince Albert for Level 1 and 2 learners (as assessed by the Canadian Test of Basic Skills, CTBS). There was also a great need for training in the area of workplace literacy and Essential Skills (ES) to meet the needs of adults in the area. One area of high need that PACLP identified was for childcare workers. As part of their research and consultation process, PACLP identified a number of candidates who had potential to fill these positions if they had literacy and ES upgrading that would allow them to complete the certification requirements of the occupation.

All childcare workers in Saskatchewan must complete, at minimum, a foundational course in childcare to work full-time in a childcare facility. This course is available at post-secondary institutions in the province (e.g. the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, SIAST) and online. While PALN recognized that the online version made the course accessible to members of the community, the literacy levels of potential candidates needed to be enhanced in order for them to be successful in completing this online program.

With funding from the Saskatchewan Ministry of Advanced Education, Employment and Immigration, PALN decided to develop a pilot project with the intent of helping people prepare to take the online course. Criteria for the funding stated that participants were to come from a cohort of adult learners who were unemployed, First Nations and Métis, and Level 1 or 2 learners. PALN developed a preparation course that they hoped would position participants to take the online course independently. Of the 20 participants that took the preparation program, 11 successfully completed the preparation program, but only five successfully completed the online certificate course. The preparation course was effective in providing participants with work and life skills and raising levels of literacy needed for the program; however, PALN found that participants needed ongoing support as they progressed through the online program.

As a result of this finding from the pilot evaluation, the program was redesigned from a preparatory course to a fully-supported classroom delivery. In this modified model, the certified course would be taught in a classroom in the community by an Early Childhood Educator. The course would integrate portfolio development, cultural learning and workplace readiness. Participants would be able to complete project-based assessments rather than written tests and classroom instruction time would be lengthened from 12 to 16 weeks. Participants would receive ongoing support and guidance from staff members and participants would be given 11 days of work placement time in the community.

These changes to the approach had significant impacts. Ninety percent of participants (18 out of 20) earned the Early Childhood Education Orientation Certificate. Sixty-one percent gained employment, 22% were looking for employment, 11% were furthering their education (either in the field or in a related field) and approximately 5% moved away from the area (Nilson, 2013).

The classroom-based model, the Early Childhood Education Orientation Supported Program (ECEOS), continues to operate with provincial funding through the Ministry of the Economy, and a partnership between PALN and SIAST. This model has been recognized locally, provincially and nationally with accolades and awards for its innovation, excellence, and community-based approach. Most recently, this learning model is being adapted to security guard training at SIAST, with a pilot scheduled to begin in 2014.

Essential Skill Focus

The ECEOS works across all of the nine ES so that participants can take the Certificate while developing the ES needed to complete it. The intent was to build the course objectives for participants at a literacy level of 1 and 2 and help them build the competencies needed to be certified by the province through the completion of the course. To do this, the developers infused ES training into the learning objectives of the curriculum. They used the ES Occupational Profile of Childcare Worker and the SIAST curriculum to build content and experiential activities to help participants build the ES needed for the job. The ES were integrated into simulated workplace tasks expected of a childcare worker as a way for participants in the program to build these skills through experiential learning.

ES development was also integrated into the other courses, such as workplace and life skills training. For example, after a discussion on appropriate dress, participants were then given an assignment to develop a budget (Numeracy), source complete outfits (Finding Information) and journal their learning experience (Writing).
The development of ES was further supported and documented through the use of a learning development portfolio during the course. The portfolio, while a place to document learning in other courses, also had ES development worksheets that supported the learning objectives of the curriculum. In it, learners reflected on which ES they used for a particular activity. The concept of the portfolio was also shared with all instructors, support staff and workplace supervisors so that they could be mindful of infusing ES and the portfolio into their activities.

Objectives

The objectives of the program evolved from the Project Team’s experience with the initial pilot project. The current program has four goals:

1. Provide the necessary supports to increase the confidence of participants wanting to complete their ECEOC.
2. Prepare participants to complete their ECEOC by providing them with opportunities to build their literacy skills and knowledge of childcare.
3. Provide hands-on work placements for participants so they can gain valuable experience needed to pass their project-based assessment and ultimately gain work in a childcare centre.
4. Raise awareness of protocols, procedures and additional training that are necessary to enter the workplace as a childcare worker—facilitating access to the necessary training where possible.

Markers of Promising Practice (Keys to Success)

Methodology/Approach

The approach to this program was to design curriculum and training that would both meet the employer-specific needs of the childcare industry in Prince Alberta and enable learners at literacy levels 1 and 2 to be successful in completing it. To do this, the program emphasized being both learner-centered and workplace skill-focused.

Evaluation of the program was built into the methodology from the start. Local evaluator, Dr. Chad Nilson, was contracted to be part of the Project Team develop evaluation tools, provide guidance and produce a final report/recommendations for the project. Using a logic model to demonstrate the relationship between the inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes, Dr. Nilson used a number of methods and assessment tools to measure different components of the model. These included the use of interviews, program surveys, a focus group and a collection of assessments, tests and program data (Nilson, 2012). For both the pilot and subsequent ECEOS program, evaluation reports were published at the completion of each program period.

Structure of the Program

The program’s structure was based on funding industry and provincial certification requirements, input from formal and informal partners, learners and employers, and the program’s evaluation reports. These elements defined intake criteria, curriculum, pedagogical approach, amount of time spent in the classroom and in the workplace and participant support. For example, employers participating in the program felt that it was vitally important for participants to have an extensive work practicum built into the training. This would provide participants with first-hand knowledge of what it means to work in the industry, stress the importance of communication skills in a team setting and offer opportunities to demonstrate responsibility by being on-time for shift and being present for all the children under their care.

Because the program wanted to reach participants who live in Prince Albert, it was marketed to local employment agencies, employers and learning centres that were best positioned to refer potential candidates. The Community Network Coalition of Prince Albert (a community-based initiative that shares information across agencies) broadcasted information about the program. This informal network was vital in directing potential participants and referral agencies to the Project Coordinator.

The participant intake process was carefully considered. As the funding criteria stipulated that participants had to be at a literacy level 1 or 2, the intake process is done in stages to ensure that participants want to be in the program and experience success. Preliminary referrals and applications are reviewed in an initial intake interview. This first interview determines whether candidates meet the criteria for the program. This is followed by an assessment of their literacy levels and finally, potential

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1 Logic models are used to evaluate the effectiveness of a program. Logic models are usually a graphical representation of the logical relationship between the input (resources), activities, outputs and outcomes of the program.
candidates are interviewed a second time. The second interview focuses on the supports that candidates will likely need to succeed in the program. These supports are put in place upon acceptance into the program. This preliminary process helps to develop a short-list of candidates. Once a short-list is developed, candidates complete a mandatory police check and social services child abuse check (that are both required to work in the industry). The ECEOS program is now considering having these checks done earlier in the intake process as failure to pass these checks automatically disqualify candidates.

A key component of the ECEOS program is evaluation. Both intakes have been rigorously evaluated. This, the Project Coordinator believes, has led to fund sustainability. The funders, through the evaluation reports, see how the program is being developed and revised as a result of its evaluation process. Accordingly, they have confidence that funding dollars are being well spent. Another way ECEOS is building towards sustainability is through its partnerships with local community businesses, agencies, and organizations. This keeps the project visible and connected to the community at large. Maintaining these partnerships has results in, for example, agencies referring candidates, employers and other professionals donating their time to be guest speakers, and discounted bus passes provided by the city of Prince Albert. The partnership with SIAST, a recognized institution in the province, also supports the continuation of the program because the partnership provides formal recognition for the participants.

“This particular model [has] really opened doors for people, but it had to have the cooperation of an institution that has the capacity to provide a certification that is recognized across the province.”

Delphine Melchert, Project Coordinator

Content of the Program

The curriculum of the program is based on the skills needed to work as a child care worker. All discussions and activities are chosen based on tasks learners are expected to be do in the workplace. All curriculum components directly relate to the required task of a childcare worker in the community of Prince Albert.

The program incorporated the teachings and background history of various First Nation and Métis cultures represented by the students. This component of the curriculum was taught by an Elder from the community. Her teachings reflected the traditional role of child rearing among First Nations and Métis culture and she discussed with the students the responsibility these learners were taking on by working as childcare workers in the community. This element of the program helped participants feel more connected to their culture, feel supported and encouraged to share their learning with their families and take part in the broader community’s Aboriginal activities.

Delivery of the Resource

The program maintains its learner-centred focus by keeping the class size to a manageable group of 20 participants. This allows instructors to get to know each learner and work with them to build on their unique strengths. The focus on learning application and demonstration helps students see immediate skill development and progress. Upon completion of their work placement days, time is built in for reflection on the learning that took place. Instructors also actively build in time for learner reflection into exercises and portfolio assignments, helping learners move forward on their own individual learning path. The portfolio developed throughout the program becomes a document that reflects their philosophy as a childcare worker.

The program is delivered by a team of experienced facilitators and support staff. The instructors are from the local community, experienced in delivering adult education and working with adult Aboriginal learners. There is one instructor for each topic area: workplace skills, portfolio development, the childcare curriculum, cultural teachings and life skills. The instructors are scheduled to deliver their portions in separate blocks of time, but on occasion co-facilitate. As the budget and time to run the classes are tight, many times the instructors volunteer their time to prepare lessons in order to ensure that the goals of the program are met.

Support roles are filled by an education assistant, administration support person at SIAST, and a literacy assessment specialist. The Program Coordinator plays an integral role, managing all aspects of the project, including assisting with the intake process, liaising with the partners, managing class time and resources needed by instructors, sourcing placement partnerships among employers, trouble shooting, and overall governance and accountability of the project.
Outcomes of the Program

Overall, the program met its goal of certifying students to be childcare workers. Eighteen of 20 completed the revised program and most found employment or pursued further education in the industry. One student received an offer for employment before the program was even completed. Participants’ families have also been positively impacted. Those with children are more aware of safety issues, how to play and learn with their young children, help with homework, and relate to the activities (hobbies or cultural events) that their children are taking part in at school.

Overall, the participants have a stronger sense of self-reliance and positive self-esteem. They can better advocate for their own needs, and those of their families, and source out services due to increased abilities to read, comprehend, and communicate their points of view.

For employers, the outcomes have included increased availability of potential staff and growth as a business to service the local needs. Donna Strauss (Executive Director, Family Futures) commented that “… having a local program like this, with its innovative approach, also shows the province they can be creative to find local solutions.” Employers in Prince Albert see the benefits of building a program from the bottom-up (i.e. putting needs of the learner first) as an approach that really works. They see the potential for staff to continue on with additional training. The benefits of the program are also being demonstrated in the workplace.

“Those that I’ve hired from the program seem to take the initiative to do the work versus having to be told what to do at every stage.”

Jeanette McKay, Director, West Flat Community Pre-School

The program informally continues to stay in touch with the participants, to keep up with progress they are making in their careers, and offer supports or referrals when possible.

Lessons Learned

The key lessons learned as a result of delivering this program include the following:

- **Take a team approach to program coordination:**
  The success of this project is built on the role that the Program Coordinator played in carrying out the vision of the program and supporting the team of instructors, the community partners, learners, employers and funders. A lesson learned in regards to this role is to break the role up into a few positions rather than one. There are many moving parts to this project and it operates on many different levels in the community. Accordingly, ideally there would be a Coordination Team, supported by a Team Leader. Key to success include: strong community networks, experience in developing programming, strategic thinking, relationship building, autonomy to coordinate program elements, and capacity to operationalize multiple components while remaining accessible to program participants.

- **Keep the focus of your project on the local community for the benefit of the learners and employers.**
  The Project Team considered expanding the delivery of the program because of its success, but in the end they decided to keep the focus on the participant and employer needs in the Prince Alberta community.

- **The portfolio is a critical learning tool for the participants and not just a “thick resume.”**
  It is important to have an experienced portfolio facilitator and preferably one that is familiar with the industry-focus of the program. Participants need adequate time in the class to complete the portfolio activities and have the facilitator model the lesson for learners. The program should build in time for learners to practice how they would share their portfolio with a prospective employer and have the portfolio completion
date be well before the end of the course so it is not up to
the learner to have to finish it on their own time.

- **Use consistent work placements for each participant
  and space placements throughout the program.**
A consistent work placement with one employer allows
students to build a relationship with the employer. The
Project Team found this approach was supportive in
assisting participants in finding future employment. The
Project Team also found that having the placements
dispersed throughout the program, rather than as one block
at the end of the course, supports learner engagement,
allows them to apply their learning, and discuss and address
challenges they experience in the work placement during
class time so they can make improvements for the next
placement opportunity.

- **Instructors tips include:**
  - Combine content with practical applications of tasks
    used in the job/industry;
  - Use a strengths-based approach to show participants
    the competencies that they can build upon for success
    in the program;
  - Use plain language and avoid technical ES language,
    terms and references;
  - When possible, use oral response-based assessments,
    especially at the beginning, to build participant
    confidence and ease fear of writing;
  - Be non-judgemental;
  - Use humour and be prepared to share your own story;
  - Create an environment where students respect the
    differences among themselves; and
  - Be available to participants outside of the classroom
    and have a space available to privately meet with
    students who need to address issues that they are
    unable to resolve in class.

**Benefits**

Nilson (2012 and 2013) and the instructors, participants, family
members and employers interviewed for this case study describe
numerous benefits of the program. Taken together, the core
benefits of the program include:

- There was a substantial increase in self-confidence reported
  by participants of the program (Nilson, June 2013);
- Increases in participant employability were demonstrated:
  over 60% of participants in the last intake were employed in
  the industry;
- General improvement in literacy test scores were seen;
- Participants and their families reported “pride” in personal/
  family member’s accomplishments and achievement in
  completing the Certificate Program;
- The culture of learning developed through the program was
  extended to the community and families of participants;
- Participants reported that they felt they had become better
  parents as a result of their learning in the program;
- Employers reported that they had access to a ready labour
  force and were able to grow their business;
- As a result of participating in the program, the education
  partner (SIAST) integrated a new learning model into its
  Early Childhood Education Department and reached a new
  group of students who would not typically attend PSE. This
  means that SIAST can extend the program methodology to
  other programs, grow their student body and contribute to
  the local labour market.

**Contact**

Delphine Melchert
Project Coordinator
Early Childhood Education Orientation Supported Program
Prince Albert Literacy Network
3398 Eagle Crescent, Prince Albert, SK
T: (306) 764-3389
E: wdmelchert@shaw.ca

**Resources**

ECE1001 Early Childhood Education. Course Overview n.d.
Albert Literacy Network.
Orientation Supported Program. Prince Albert, SK: Prince
Albert Literacy Network.
SK.
Performance Test 3 n.d. n.p.