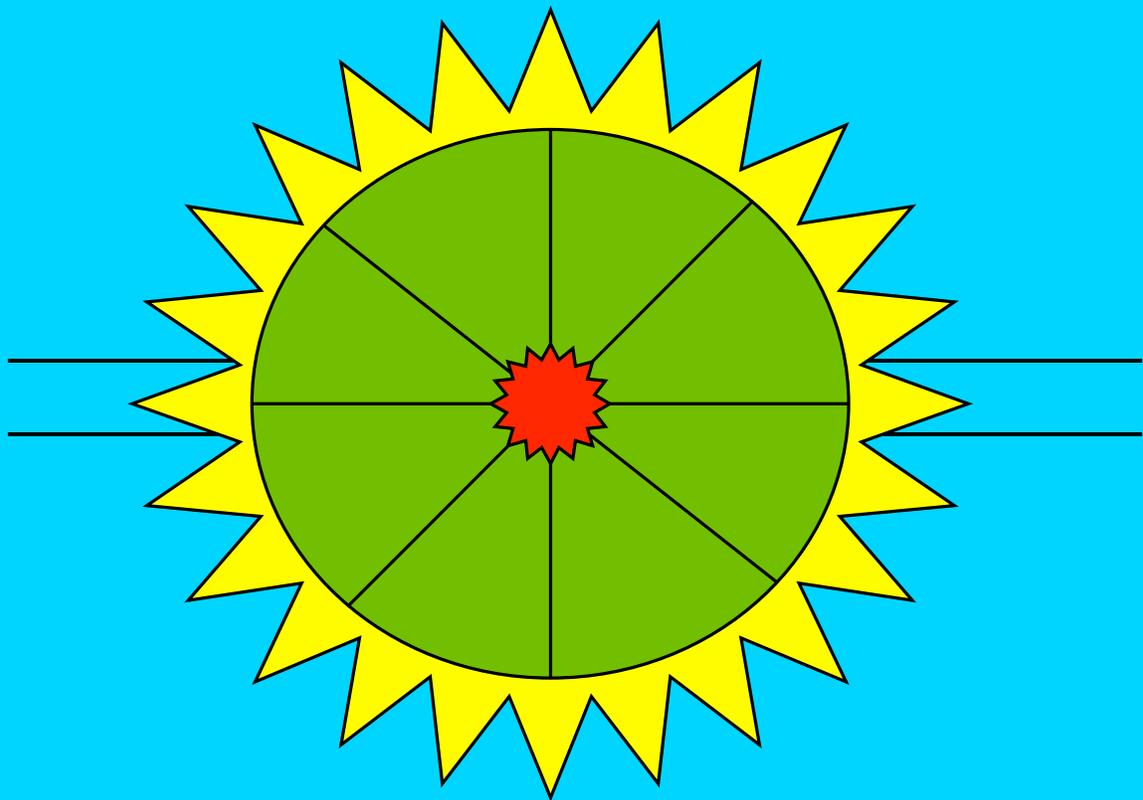


CIRCLING THE DRUM

*A NATIONAL ABORIGINAL
FAMILY LITERACY STRATEGY*



It is not important to preserve our traditions, it is important to allow our traditions to preserve us.

~ Gael High Pine, "The Great Spirit in the Modern World,"
Akwasasne Notes, 1973

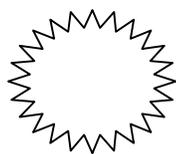
Inscribed within the circular nature of the oral tradition, the discrete bits of knowledge held regarding Aboriginal territories and forming part of the traditional heritage merge into an inseparable and interrelated corpus, linking the people who carry such knowledge in them with the territory where it took root. A simple enumeration of these types of knowledge would be a sterile process that could only isolate them from their context.

~ La Transmission intergénérationnelle des saviors dans la communauté
Innué de Mashteuiatsh, Natalie Boucher, 2005
(Translation from p. 33, Quebec Regional Report).

Learning and wisdom have often been divided; perhaps the clearest result of modern literacy has been to maintain and enlarge the gulf.... As for reading and writing, I shall only say that the association of these with 'productive mechanics' is significant, since these arts are only of paramount importance in a quantitative culture, where one must be able to read both warnings and advertisements if one is to earn money safely and 'raise one's standard of living': that if reading and writing are to enable the Indian... to read what the Western proletariat reads, they will remain better off, from any cultural point of view, with their own more classical literature of which all have oral knowledge.... It is only when measured in terms of dignity and not merely in terms of comfort that a 'standard of living' can properly be called 'high.'

~ Ananda Coomaraswamy, the Bugbear of Literacy, 1943

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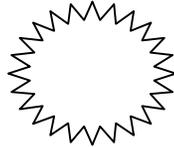
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This strategy tries to approach the development of Aboriginal family literacy in Friendship Centres from a holistic Aboriginal cultural perspective, considering cross-cultural contexts and long-term implications for the generations to come. As a result of its broad focus, the document is lengthy, moving around the issues in an effort to understand them from various angles. At the same time, the essence of the strategy can be simply represented through the symbol on the cover page:

The red star in the middle of the circle represents a drum or heart beating, which symbolizes the spiritual source of Aboriginal cultural authority lying at the centre of all family and community activity.

The green circle divided into eight parts represents all the generations of the community circling around the drum on the Earth, and moving through time from Infancy to Old Age.

The yellow rays emanating from the outside of the circle represent the relationship of families and communities with the world around them, as they move around the drum seeking a state of internally directed balance.

The strategy is divided into four key sections:

- Vision, which provides background awareness of where the strategy comes from and where it needs to take us.
- Understanding, which presents the information provided through various reports leading up to and supporting the development of this strategy.

Circling the Drum – National Association of Friendship Centres

- Reasoning, which reflects on the information presented in the previous section and analyses it according to key thematic areas.
- Movement, which provides recommendations for action in developing Aboriginal family literacy services.

VISION

Circling the Drum was commissioned through the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC, at www.nafc.ca), a national agency representing 117 Aboriginal Friendship Centres across Canada. The document is intended for a wide variety of stakeholders in the development of Aboriginal families, cultures and learning, and is based on previous activities in the Friendship Centre movement exploring family literacy, including 8 regional reports developed in provinces and territories across the country in 2007. *Circling the Drum* lays the foundation for an Aboriginal family literacy strategy that is national and holistic in scope and based in Aboriginal cultural perspectives, while supporting cross-cultural capacity. The strategy supports a definition of family literacy that reflects Aboriginal values in learning, including:

- Internally driven and holistic learner motivation;
- Community orientation;
- Culturally and Spiritually centred foundations of learning;

These values are often difficult to reconcile with priorities of broader Canadian government and learning institutions, but there is no mistaking their primary place in attempts to define and develop learning processes from Aboriginal cultural perspectives.

UNDERSTANDING

Common Trends

The regional Friendship Centre literacy reports and other supporting documents (listed in the bibliography) all agree on a range of common trends in relation to family literacy in Friendship Centres, including:

Circling the Drum – National Association of Friendship Centres

- A general desire for, and attempts to develop, family literacy programs in Friendship Centres, along with a lack of resources to do so (resulting in a minimal amount of activity specifically devoted to family literacy).
- A good deal of activity related to *families* and *literacy* in the broadest sense of these terms, including programs for infants and toddlers, children, youth, adults, parents, grandparents and Elders, and whole families.
- A diverse range of funding supporting various activities related to literacy and families (or at least, all age groups) from all levels of government, including: Health Canada, Canadian Heritage, and Human Resources and Social Development Canada (at the federal level); provincial ministries responsible for families and children, health, education, training, literacy, social assistance, and Aboriginal Affairs; and, some schools and agencies like the United Way at the local level.
- Various partners *external* to Friendship Centres are also involved or potentially involved in programs related to family literacy, including: adult literacy and family literacy agencies, schools and school boards, libraries, daycare and family resource centres, Child and Family Service agencies, First Nations education authorities, local Boys and Girls Clubs, urban Aboriginal planning groups and youth councils, Aboriginal Human Resource Development agencies, justice and housing programs, ESL/ FSL programs, and healing programs.
- Common priorities related to family literacy include: a desire to ground programs in Aboriginal languages, cultures and holistic approaches; a focus on pre-schoolers, school aged children and youth, and their respective relationships with parents, families and elders; programs providing health and healing, employment and training, and housing and justice services; and, a need to address staffing, training, materials and resources development, and outreach and awareness-raising.
- Challenges and gaps in developing Aboriginal family literacy services are: low levels of funding support; lack of recognition for Aboriginal languages; transitory and project-based funding; excessive and constantly changing reporting requirements; narrow program eligibility parameters and bureaucratic (vs. holistic) client definition; lack of flexibility and relevance in curriculum frameworks; narrow definitions of literacy; lack of Aboriginal control over programming; learners' personal barriers; family breakdown; community crisis and disunity; low levels of parental involvement; and, stigma, lack of motivation and low overall awareness related to literacy.

- A need for evaluation tools that are: based on non-intrusive and ethical Aboriginal cultural protocols; built on or adapted to evaluation frameworks already in use in the communities; and, inclusive of community based testimony emphasizing qualitative success. Overall, evaluation processes need to be kept as simple as possible, given the scarcity of resources for program delivery.

Unique Regional Trends

Some unique regional trends were noted in relation to the development of Aboriginal family literacy:

- British Columbia Friendship Centres are developing a significant province-wide Aboriginal Family Literacy Initiative, with family literacy projects underway across the province. The initiative is being led by the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres, in partnership with stakeholders from all levels of government.
- Significant support for family literacy in general appears to be strong in the province of Alberta, which supports a leading family literacy agency with a national profile, the Centre for Family Literacy, as well as an ongoing family literacy delivery program, with some significant Aboriginal adaptations of family literacy models. Saskatchewan also had a significant number of Aboriginal-specific family literacy projects (15) at the time of this report. However, most of the Aboriginal specific family literacy initiatives in these provinces were not delivered directly through Friendship Centres, and many were delivered through First Nations or Métis territories.
- Regions with a higher visible proportion of Aboriginal people, such as the northern territories, Saskatchewan and Manitoba appear to have some unique opportunities to address Aboriginal family literacy as a result of their higher profile relative to the rest of the population (Aboriginal languages are official languages in the Territories, for example). Regions where Aboriginal people are less visible (but which still have large Aboriginal populations), such as Quebec and Ontario, have a larger resource base in general, but may experience greater marginalization of Aboriginal issues. However, this tendency has many exceptions, and every region has its own diverse realities. Ontario and Saskatchewan have their own Aboriginal-specific literacy networks.

REASONING

Based on the information shared through the regional reports and in the research, several themes are explored.

The Need for Cultural Foundations

Aboriginal cultures, languages and traditional knowledge are increasingly seen as the foundation for Aboriginal programs and services. Based on the findings of the regional reports, it is obvious that an Aboriginal family literacy strategy implies much more than an extension or adaptation of mainstream family literacy approaches. The inferior status of whole family approaches in broader Canadian society should not be reflected in Aboriginal programming. Holistic family programs grounded in cultural principles should ideally be seen as a central priority in Aboriginal learning rather than as an element of preparation for school and employment.

This implies a significant “paradigm shift” in the ways in which Aboriginal community development is usually supported by Canadian governments and institutions, which usually consider Aboriginal cultural elements as tangential aspects of development leading to common ends, often emphasizing economic indicators and raised “standards of living.” Essentially, Aboriginal culture based learning shifts the locus of authority to a level of spiritual principles and values rather than material ones (although these are still considered), and makes these values the defining quality in the learning process, in a way that unifies and re-integrates Aboriginal families and communities according to locally defined cultural principles. In effect, the whole process moves toward “de-institutionalization”, in the sense of allowing people to approach learning experiences in more holistic and natural ways. This movement allows Aboriginal communities to continue along the path of revitalizing cultural and linguistic models, including all forms of knowledge contained in Creation stories and legends, medicines, calendars, symbols and other forms of knowledge. The presentation of these forms of knowledge in family contexts becomes the basis for greater success in improved economic and systemic educational outcomes. This approach also avoids the trap of defining Aboriginal communities according to crisis and trauma, by placing the emphasis on cultural strengths and natural individual inclinations.

The recovery of cultural foundations can be built into existing learning programs in Friendship Centres by focusing broadly on several key areas of relationship:

Infants, Pre-schoolers and Parents

Program models for pre-schoolers and parents, as well as pre-natal and neo-natal programs, exploring traditional parenting, learning and literacy skills, and helping children and families prepare for school using Aboriginal cultural approaches and perspectives.

Youth and Elders

Program models connecting youth with elders in the restoration, maintenance and wider application of Aboriginal knowledge, relating these forms of knowledge to modern contexts and media in culturally appropriate ways.

Whole Family Activities

Program integration encouraging various intergenerational and whole family approaches to learning and literacy from Aboriginal cultural perspectives.

Broader Implications

The revitalization of Aboriginal families and culturally based learning processes is not just about making Aboriginal communities healthier and more self-sufficient; it can also be a gift to wider communities across Canada and internationally. Models developed from Aboriginal cultural perspectives are uniquely qualified to address issues that the modern age is struggling with. Aboriginal approaches can and should inform not only the broader family literacy movement, but also education systems in general, as well as areas as diverse as governance, economic sustainability, the environment, and just about every facet of modern life.

The idea of Aboriginal roles and responsibilities in relation to the rest of the world is not new; many Aboriginal Elders have been making this point for a very long time, and the concept has actually been built directly into various traditional indigenous belief systems since time immemorial. Practical ways of learning about and implementing important indigenous principles that relate to general modern crises are already being tested in Aboriginal family-based learning programs across the country, and some examples are shared in this report. However, much more needs to be done to support development in this direction.

National Context

The success of an Aboriginal family literacy strategy will need to consider, reach out to and possibly engage with a wide variety of stakeholders across the country, including:

- Key national literacy agencies;
- Other regional and local community agencies and grassroots activists with an interest in literacy;
- Various national Aboriginal agencies;
- Federal government initiatives, including the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills and other key departments;
- National public education forums, including agencies such as the Council of Ministers of Education Canada, and possibly Curriculum Services Canada, or Canadian school board and principals' associations.

The NAFC can play a key role, and possibly even lead, in facilitating and focusing research, policy discussion, and national partnerships supporting the strategy.

MOVEMENT

The final section identifies 10 broad areas of recommendation, with the final two recommendations (9 and 10) broken down into more detailed recommendations. The recommendations are presented as follows:

Preparing the Drum

1. Assemble a Family Literacy Advisory Group
2. Discuss and Frame Family Learning Policy in the Friendship Centre Movement

Sounding the Drum

3. Broaden Aboriginal Discussion on Family Literacy
4. Develop an Aboriginal Family Literacy Campaign

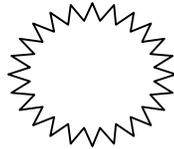
Gathering the Community

5. Affirm Strategic Aboriginal Family Learning Partnerships
6. Link and Contribute to Aboriginal Family Literacy Networks
7. Develop a National Funding Strategy

Circling the Drum

8. Develop and Share Aboriginal Family Literacy Program Models
 - 8.1. Develop A Flexible Delivery and Evaluation Framework
 - 8.2. Support Best Practice Demonstration Projects
 - 8.3. Work with Aboriginal Family Literacy Research Partners
9. Support Community-based Teaching Capacities
 - 9.1. Enhance the Engagement of Traditional Teachers
 - 9.2. Contribute to Increased Availability of Aboriginal Language Instruction
 - 9.3. Hire Aboriginal Family Literacy Coordinators
 - 9.4. Increase Aboriginal-controlled engagement of Teaching Professionals
 - 9.5. Deliver Aboriginal Family Literacy Training for Teachers and Community Workers
10. Develop and Share Learning Materials and Resources
 - 10.1. Support the Development of Aboriginal Language Materials
 - 10.2. Develop Cultural Learning Materials and Resources for Families
 - 10.3. Network the Development of Learning Materials
 - 10.4. Support Family Oriented Learning Resource Centres

VISION



This section provides awareness on the underlying vision or spirit of *Circling the Drum*: knowing where the strategy is coming from as well as its broad intentions. The Vision section includes the following:

- Brief background information on the NAFC, the agency responsible for producing the strategy;
- A definition of the intended audiences for this document;
- Background on how the strategy came to be developed;
- A description of the broad purposes of this strategy; and,
- A basic working definition of Aboriginal Family Literacy.

About the NAFC

The National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) works to improve the quality of life for Aboriginal peoples in Canadian urban environments. The NAFC supports self-determined activities that encourage equal access to, and participation in, Canadian society, and which respect and strengthen Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness.

Friendship Centres address the needs of the growing Aboriginal population in urban areas across Canada. These agencies offer a wide range of services, including information, referrals, counselling and programming related to employment, housing, education, health and more.

The NAFC was established in 1972 to represent the growing number of Friendship Centres at the national level. Today NAFC membership includes 117 Friendship Centres and 7 Provincial Territorial Associations. The primary objectives of the NAFC are:

- To act as a central unifying body for the Friendship Centre Movement;
- To promote and advocate the concerns of Aboriginal Peoples: and,
- To represent the needs of local Friendship Centres across the country to the federal government and to the public in general.

For more information on Friendship Centres and the NAFC, see the NAFC web site (www.nafc.ca).

Audience

Circling the Drum has been written for diverse audiences, including:

- Leaders in the Friendship Centre movement (NAFC Board of Directors and Youth Council, Management and Directors of Provincial and Territorial Friendship Centre Associations, other decision makers in the development of Friendship Centre policies and strategy);
- Front line workers in Friendship Centres and other Aboriginal agencies with an interest in Family Literacy;
- Agencies providing support or potentially providing support for Aboriginal family literacy, including National, Provincial and local government agencies and foundations, especially individuals acting within these agencies who have understanding of and sympathy for Aboriginal culture based initiatives.
- Other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal partners and potential partners in developing Aboriginal family literacy services, including education systems, national and international academic bodies, NGO's and government agencies.

Background

Friendship Centres deliver various programs and services related to families and literacy, and have often expressed an interest in more comprehensive family literacy development. The NAFC and many Friendship Centres have taken an active interest in family literacy models and approaches as they might be applied in Friendship Centre environments. In 2006, the NAFC published an exploratory paper¹ and held a national gathering focused on family literacy in Aboriginal Friendship Centre communities. These activities triggered significant

¹ Nurturing the Good Mind – A Discussion Paper on Aboriginal Family Literacy and the Friendship Centre Movement, National Association of Friendship Centres, March 2006.

interest in and discussion around family literacy development in the Friendship Centre movement, as well as some significant new activity in parts of the country. In 2007, the NAFC commissioned reports on Family Literacy in Friendship Centres from eight regions of Canada:

- The Atlantic region (Labrador/ Newfoundland, PEI, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick);
- Quebec;
- Ontario;
- Manitoba;
- Saskatchewan;
- Alberta;
- British Columbia; and,
- The Northern Territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut).

The information was gathered for these regional reports through telephone interviews, personal visits with Friendship Centre staff, survey questionnaires and online research. Most regions researched relevant resources and agencies external to the Friendship Centres as well as the Friendship Centres themselves. These regional reports are listed in the bibliography to this document, along with contact information for the regional agencies.

Strategic Purpose

Circling the Drum provides a national lens on issues addressed in the eight regional reports, includes an examination of the national context, and considers broader implications of family literacy from a holistic Aboriginal perspective. For this reason, *Circling the Drum* also considers other research and developments in Aboriginal education and community development (sources are listed in the bibliography).

Circling the Drum lays the foundation for a comprehensive national Aboriginal Family Literacy Strategy focused through Friendship Centres. The need for such a strategy arises from the desire of Friendship Centres to address the effects of urban life on Aboriginal cultural cohesiveness and family life, which are inseparable, and which are seen as foundations for addressing various community priorities, including issues related to education, health, justice, and economic well-being.

Circling the Drum – National Association of Friendship Centres

In keeping with the NAFC philosophy regarding Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness, and with the general drift of the regional reports, *Circling the Drum* indicates an urgent need for movement toward an Aboriginal culturally based approach to family literacy, one that also marks a significant departure from many prevailing institutional presumptions. For example, the emphasis usually placed on employment and economic development by Canadian institutions and government agencies, often in isolation from broader concerns related to the lives of future generations, and the Earth herself, is extremely difficult to accommodate from traditional indigenous cultural perspectives. This in turn profoundly affects the way in which areas like education and family programs are framed. Taking this approach is also in keeping with much indigenous discussion and literature concerning education and community development.

At the same time, *Circling the Drum* is based on the practical need to relate to broader institutional frameworks and realities currently surrounding Aboriginal and other communities, and on the need to provide a strategy that translates well across various governments and communities. While the culture based approach taken here explicitly challenges many assumptions made by Canadian institutions, this strategy also provides practical recommendations for the organization and delivery of Aboriginal community-based family learning programs in ways that are helpful for stakeholders from any cultural framework.

The purposes of this document can be summarized as providing an Aboriginal Family Literacy Strategy that is:

National in Scope

Applicable to the development of activities on a national scale, while being flexible enough to support diverse regional and local priorities.

Holistic

Addressing a wide variety of social, economic and other Aboriginal community priorities through family literacy.

Culture Based

Grounded firmly in key common cultural principles found in Aboriginal communities across the country.

Cross-Cultural

Adaptable to - and considerate of - diverse Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural and social realities.

Aboriginal Family Literacy

Many of the regional reports devote significant space to defining what literacy means to them. The Alberta report, for example, explores different ways of looking at literacy, and devotes several pages to its evolving definitions, from both Aboriginal and other perspectives.² Other regional reports also look at literacy from various angles. This section tries to crystallize the common principles arising from these efforts.

The importance and potential of family literacy services in Friendship Centres have already been broadly described in the NAFC report, *Nurturing the Good Mind*, which was published in March 2006 and is available on the NAFC web site.³ As a starting point, *Nurturing the Good Mind* shares the definition of “family literacy” that was developed through the Centre for Family Literacy in Alberta:

*“Family Literacy is an approach to literacy development that builds on family strengths and connections within the context of the communities and the culture in which families live and learn. Family Literacy programs provide models for positive interactions in the family and larger community. In doing so, Family Literacy programs provide assistance to whole families in developing skills to participate more fully in their communities.”*⁴

This definition is a good place to begin. It corresponds in subtle ways with Aboriginal community concepts of how learning should proceed, where the focus is more on holistically considering *internally* driven realities such as what people *bring* to learning (strengths; relationships and the emotions and complexity that come with them; culturally framed ways of thinking; background traumas, and so on). Such a focus contrasts with the usual emphasis placed by most mainstream educational institutions and government agencies on *external outcomes* that are often built around real or perceived deficiencies (skill sets achieved and checked off, employment, income, grades and other statistical measures). These quantitatively driven measures, usually framed in isolation from a holistic understanding of the learner, often result in alienation from learning processes and environments (for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners).

² An Analysis of Regional Literacy Programming in Alberta’s Communities Serviced by Native Friendship Centres, Alberta Native Friendship Centres Association, 2007, pp. 7-9.

³ <http://www.nafc-aboriginal.com/policy.htm>

⁴ Foundation Training in Family Literacy, Centre for Family Literacy, 2002, pg. 1.1.3.

Beginning with internally driven realities leads to a much more broadly defined set of outcomes, hinted at in the Centre for Family Literacy definition: *participation in community life* within the context of culture and community relationships. If we take the traditional Aboriginal definition of community as including all visible and invisible life forms in the world (as in the traditional prayer of recognition that acknowledges “All my Relations”), the Aboriginal definition of learning and literacy begins to have profound implications that actually turn the mainstream perspective *upside down*. Ultimately, the inversion is one that places a spiritual centre or *heart* in the midst of material concerns, *rather than being framed by them*. An appropriate symbol of this principle is found in the way a drum is often placed in the centre of a community powwow, with dancers moving around interpreting the world each according to their ability, sometimes in groups defined by age or role or gender, sometimes all together. The centre is sacred; food and other material concerns, including positive and negative, are on the outside, revolving around.

Of course, it is an oversimplification to assign “spirit” to Aboriginal peoples and “materialism” to Canadian society in general; however, at their core, and in relation to defining principles, there is no mistaking the general direction or drift of Aboriginal cultural and community desire versus that of contemporary mainstream Canadian society, at least when it comes to attempts to frame the learning process. In Aboriginal community definitions of literacy, the *primary focus* is often described in terms of the restoration and transmission of internally driven Aboriginal cultures and *values*, which should lead to various outcomes, including, but by no means limited to employment and economic indicators. This is a very significant distinction; while employment and a higher “standard of living” (usually described as escaping from poverty) are important, they are not at the core of meaningful Aboriginal literacy development process, nor are they even seen as the most important outcome of literacy. Rather, outcomes are based on inwardly directed learning and growth, deriving in turn from cultural and spiritual values. This is a remarkable trend for a population so deeply affected by outward poverty and trauma.

Of course, material outcomes are important, and no one is suggesting people can always learn well on an empty stomach; nevertheless, just about every regional report, supported by various studies and research reports across the country, indicate that improved economic and employment prospects at all levels (from the individual to the nation) rely in many ways on taking care of first things first: grounding ourselves in a holistic consideration of underlying principles and inner realities that can not be quantified – sometimes defined with labels such as “self-esteem”

and “self-determination”⁵ (although these terms are not always adequate, and are really only the tip of the iceberg).

Aboriginal definitions of literacy in the regional reports and elsewhere consistently emphasize holistic, culturally grounded learning processes as an essential factor in all Aboriginal educational programming. In general, the eight regional reports were in agreement on the need for a broad and holistic definition of literacy and family literacy that is grounded in Aboriginal cultures, as a way of moving toward a variety of external outcomes. For example, the Atlantic regional report defines literacy as including “...an understanding of traditional and contemporary Native issues” and “an understanding of... Native language... along with an opportunity to take part in traditional activities and events.”⁶ The Manitoba regional report describes literacy as “a complex set of abilities needed to understand and effectively use the dominant symbol systems of a culture – alphabets, numbers, visual icons – for personal and community development.”⁷ Many Aboriginal definitions (and applications) of literacy refer to the basic need to understand “visual icons” or symbols inherent in dress, dance, crafts, specific traditional teachings, and ultimately all of nature. Understanding these things means understanding their meaning as much as how they are used; otherwise we live in a world without meaning.

After devoting several pages to exploring definitions of literacy, the Alberta report leaves us with a startling example of how unique Aboriginal perspectives on literacy are, sharing responses given “When members of the urban Aboriginal community were asked what literacy was....”

- Literacy preserves our “mother language”;
- Literacy helps us share our stories, preserve our oral traditions;
- Literacy celebrates our language;
- Literacy preserves our culture;
- Literacy brings families/ generations together;
- Literacy opens doors for my children and myself;
- Literacy provides opportunities to *give to the community*;⁸
- Literacy provides confidence and self-esteem in our youth;
- Literacy helps define a person’s purpose;

⁵ A statistical example of this argument is cited in “Focus on Literacy – A Review and Discussion on Literacy in Aboriginal Manitoba”, Manitoba Association of Friendship Centres, pp. 13-15.

⁶ A Report on Native Youth Literacy Programming in the Atlantic Regional Friendship Centres, Mi’kmaq Native Friendship Centre, 2007.

⁷ Focus on Literacy – A Review and Discussion on Literacy in Aboriginal Manitoba, Manitoba Association of Friendship Centres, 2007, (p. 5).

⁸ Emphasis added; note the contrast with the typical Canadian government emphasis on what kinds of benefits can accrue to the individual learner and his or her immediate family.

- Literacy protects our Aboriginal and treaty rights;
- Literacy helps me protect the health of my family;
- Literacy helps me communicate my family needs to those who can assist;
- Literacy strengthens our community's ability to be successful in the "western culture" of economics;
- Literacy provides us the skills to be competitive in today's economy; and,
- Literacy is respect.

Clearly, Aboriginal definitions of literacy consistently return to the necessity of cultivating a "Good Mind" or living a "Good Life" in the broadest and most holistic sense of these terms.⁹ It is also clear that the force granting and strengthening our Good Mind or Good Life is not emphasized through the material world, but rather through the centre, or heart, or spirit, or *drum*, which animates us all, and around which we all revolve regardless of age or station in life.

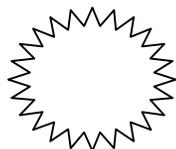
The regional reports demonstrate the implications of this worldview by consistently urging a movement away from learning processes that are defined institutionally and statistically, according to purely materialistic economic principles - learning processes that separate families and communities and disconnect us from our larger responsibilities and meaning on the Earth. Without exception, the regional reports and other sources are directing us toward qualitative models that increase overall levels of respect, responsibility, social cohesiveness and self-definition in a holistic relationship with our surroundings. The need for this movement could not be more urgent.

"Findings further indicate that the extensive impacts of historic external and then contemporary internal change has allowed the Oji-Cree people to lose touch with their children and to discontinue the daily teaching experiences that would connect their children to the land. The children, in desperation, have unconsciously found that the aftermath of suicide creates the link to traditional activities that they have otherwise been denied."¹⁰

⁹ A brief explanation of references to these Haudenosaunee and Anishinabe concepts is provided in [Nurturing the Good Mind – A Discussion Paper on Aboriginal Family Literacy and the Friendship Centre Movement](#), National Association of Friendship Centres, March 2006.

¹⁰ Raven Saw: Tradition, Transition, and Transformation in a Northern Aboriginal Community, Wesley-Esquimaux, 2004.

UNDERSTANDING



This section reviews what has been shared about Aboriginal family literacy across Canada, based on the eight regional family literacy reports, as well as interviews with national agencies. The regional reports were done through regional Friendship Centre associations to determine what activities are currently taking place, what best practices may exist, and recommendations for moving forward.

In general, the regional reports covered most if not all of the Friendship Centres in their region, and involved interviews and surveys with a variety of people, including Executive Directors, program managers and front line community workers in various programs. Programs surveyed varied depending on regional priorities, but all the reports focused on programs for youth, children and/ or families, and some included a comprehensive review of all programs delivered in their province or region.

Many of the themes that arose in these reports were shared across the eight regions, while some themes and trends were unique to a given area. This summary of the regional reports begins by looking at common trends shared across the regions, and then moves on to explore some unique regional trends.

Common Trends

The common trends listed here do not necessarily all apply to every Friendship Centre or even every region; however, they were all evident in many Friendship Centres and most regions. These trends are organized below into the following broad categories:

- Activities
- Resources
- Priorities & Best Practices
- Challenges and Barriers
- Success and Evaluation

It is not possible to include all the information shared through the regional reports here. However, various factors in the reports were considered and organized according to the above themes. Some areas, especially “Priorities and Best Practices”, should be useful in future development activities, and are referenced in the recommendations found in the final “Movement” section of this report.

Various cultural activities and perspectives were almost always built into all initiatives regardless of region, to the extent possible.

Activities

Specific Family Literacy Initiatives

The regional reports generally describe programs related to *families* and *literacy*, but *organized and ongoing activities* specifically devoted to family literacy in Friendship Centres were limited. There were about a dozen or so small family literacy projects or programs in each of several regions, and most of these appeared to be in agencies other than Friendship Centres. The only province with a significant Aboriginal family literacy strategy underway in Friendship Centres was British Columbia, where project-based development was underway that seemed to hold promise for regular family literacy programming in the future.¹¹ However, for the most part, the family literacy activity that was reported tended to be very small in both scope and funding. Much of this appeared to be provided through Friendship Centre staff whose many other duties only permit them to focus occasionally on family literacy, or through non-

¹¹ See “Unique Regional Trends” later in this section of the document regarding the activities in BC.

Aboriginal agencies that rely to a large extent on voluntarism. Funding for family literacy was usually either non-existent, or where it did exist, it tended to be in the form of small, short-term grants from very limited funding pools (again, with the possible exception of BC). Most specific family literacy initiatives were described as sporadic, *although the activities themselves are a very high priority*, since they often relate to helping parents with small children. As noted on page 41-42 in the Alberta regional report, "It appears that where family literacy approaches are implemented, they are popular and likely to be used."

Common examples of family literacy activities held in Friendship Centres across the country include:

- Occasional reading circles for parents and children;
- Parenting classes related to either pre-literacy or preparing children for school, as well as cultural approaches to encourage learning in children;
- Accessing family literacy training and resources (e.g., books, tutors) from regional family literacy agencies (often through local libraries or other non-Aboriginal community based organizations);
- Various one-time family literacy events, often in relation to family literacy day (book sales and other awareness raising events);
- Making links between literacy/ upgrading and Aboriginal family support programs (e.g., literacy staff speaking with parents' groups);
- Integration of Aboriginal cultural elements into all of the activities above.

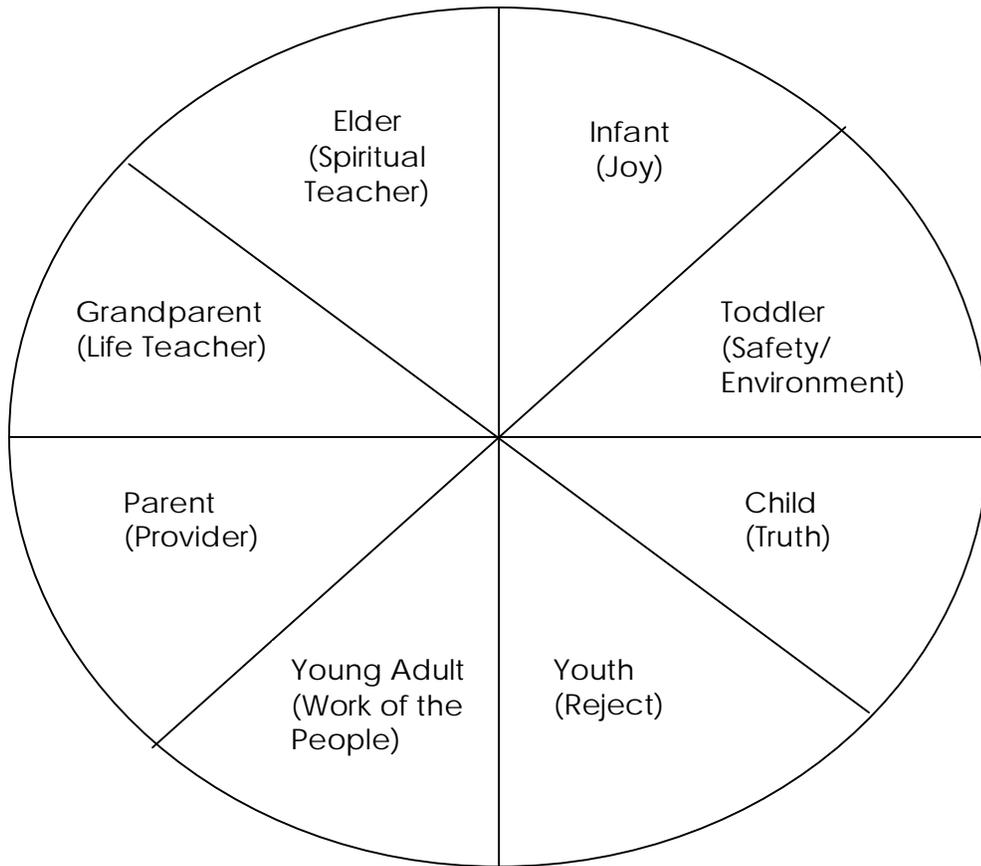
Activities Related to Family Literacy

While most regions had very little family literacy activity in and of itself, most also had much activity that *relates closely to literacy and family learning*, such as parenting programs, alternative schools, head start programs, homework clubs, adult upgrading and employment training, Aboriginal language courses, and so on.

Furthermore, several regions pointed out that these various programs are closely connected, and generally work together in as holistic a manner as possible. "For example, health workers will often give teachings about diabetes in other programs, and various programs serving children and families often have clients in Aboriginal housing...."

“In general the resource people brought in for one program are made available to other Friendship Centre programs. This means that all programs could have some relation to any quality family literacy initiative.”¹²

The various common areas of programming shared across the country are explored below. Activities are broadly defined according to client age, and may not be shared in every Friendship Centre or region (not all regional reports reported on every age group). It is also important to keep in mind that programs not only vary across the regions, but also between Friendship Centres in each region, depending on local needs and priorities. The breakdown of literacy-related activities according to age is based roughly on the following diagram:¹³



¹² Family Literacy in Ontario Friendship Centres, Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, 2007.

¹³ Borrowed from the Ontario Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Strategy Life Cycle Teachings on line (<http://www.ahwsontario.ca/programs/ahbhc/LifeStyleTeachings.html>) and from “Seven Fires Teachings”, © 2004, ONLC, both based in turn on an interpretation of traditional Anishnabe Teachings.

INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Friendship Centre programs for pre-school aged children relate to family literacy in many ways, and from the descriptions shared in the regional reports, they are often the areas where activities that fall under the usual definition of “family literacy” are most likely to be found.

Many Friendship Centres have programs for children from the pre-natal stage up to when they start elementary school (up to around 4 or 6 years old, depending on the program). While some of these activities focus mostly on the children (as with daycare activities), many are family oriented, at least to some degree, usually by engaging with parents. Prenatal, neo-natal and pre-school programs are a good place to reach new parents and inspire a commitment to literacy learning from the earliest stages of their baby’s life. Programs for infants and young children include a holistic spectrum of activities, including (in no particular order):

- Day Care programs;
- Early preparation for school readiness (e.g., early infant stimulation strategies, toddler socialization, number and letter recognition, etc.);
- Parental skills training (especially for youth) – for example, learning about child development and care, including activities that focus on how babies and children bond and learn, as well as physical concerns such as pre-natal/ neonatal nutrition;
- Literacy activities such as reading circles, tutoring and book sharing;
- Various cultural programs, including Aboriginal language training, traditional parenting teachings, and Aboriginal storytelling, as well as Aboriginal adaptations of non-Aboriginal family literacy models and other curricula for pre-schoolers;
- Parental support through links with healing and preventative services;
- Links with Children’s Aid and Child and Family Services agencies;
- Links with Corrections and Justice programs (often for parents seeking custody of their children).

The mix of these activities varies between Friendship Centres, but most appear to be attempting out of necessity to provide a wide range of services rather than a simple day care service. For example, one pre-school program in Val-D’Or, Quebec involves parents with their children in a variety of activities, including social and sports activities, Aboriginal language teaching and various support services for the parents.¹⁴

¹⁴ Portrait of Literacy within the Quebec Native Friendship Centres Movement, p. 18-19.

CHILDREN

Children's programs also have strong links and potential links with family literacy. Many Friendship Centres were described in the regional reports as hosting literacy-related children's programs, generally providing services to children between the ages of 5 or 7 up to 12 or 13, depending on the program. As with services designed for infants and toddlers, the children's programs often involve parents, but are not always successful at doing this. Literacy-related services to children tend to serve two broad categories of need:

- Social/ recreational programs
- Programs supporting educational achievement

These areas of need are closely linked, and usually involve Aboriginal cultural perspectives and ways of doing things. The Mahiganech (Little Wolves) Club in one Quebec Friendship Centre, for example, includes Aboriginal language and cultural teachings as well as reading, writing and math skills. The Akwe:go program in Ontario, which has 25 Friendship Centre sites, also combines cultural teachings and awareness with literacy tutoring and holistic approaches to children's wellbeing.

One very strong concern shared across the regions is the need for support for urban Aboriginal children in coping with public school systems. For this reason, numerous Friendship Centres have some form of after-school homework assistance or tutoring programs. Much of the homework assistance programming is designed to appeal to children who may be having significant difficulties in their school, which in turn may often be reflecting difficulties in family life.

For some regions, Friendship Centre educational services to this age group can be a gap. This may be related to a presumption by provincial governments that off-reserve Aboriginal children are served through provincial school systems.

Several Friendship Centres cited the discomfort Aboriginal parents often feel in relating to school systems, especially when they had low literacy skills and their own history of difficulty in school. The importance of addressing parents' literacy and learning experiences in relation to that of their children was also noted in the reports.

YOUTH

Youth programming is a key feature of the Friendship Centre movement, and just about every centre has some kind of youth program. The emphasis on youth is reflected at the national level as well; the NAFC has its own Youth Council, and supports a strong youth focus at the grassroots level through the Urban Multi-purpose Aboriginal Youth Centre (UMAYC) program.

Friendship Centre programs working with youth are diverse, and include the following broad areas, all of which can, and often do, relate to literacy:

Social and recreational activities

Aside from giving youth a safe place to just hang out and engage in positive activities, this area also provides learning-related opportunities – for example, through “on-the-land” learning trips, or cultural programs and projects linking youth with Elders and traditional teachers.

Youth Employment projects and training initiatives

Either through summer job programs for youth still in school or through longer-term initiatives in partnership with Aboriginal Human Resource Development agencies (through placements, training and other employment programs).

Upgrading initiatives

Either through alternative high schools for school aged youth, or through upgrading and tutoring services for youth who are in their late teens and twenties, and are going back after dropping out.

All of these areas can also be related to *intergenerational* literacy activities, and sometimes are. For example, it is not uncommon for youth in upgrading programs to bring their small children to the learning centres, and youth engagement with Elders is a frequent practice used in Youth programs across the country.

ADULTS AND PARENTS

All regions of the country mentioned various kinds of literacy-related services for adults, although not all Friendship Centres were hosting such programs, and indeed many saw this area as a gap, with the exception of employment programs, which are relatively well funded through Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreements (AHRDAs).¹⁵ Literacy-related services for adults generally fell into the following categories:

- Adult literacy and upgrading programs – often restricted to adults over a certain age and out of the school system, with literacy services usually aimed at those with a literacy level falling below roughly a grade 9 level;
- Employment Programs – Friendship Centres often have Employment counseling services, or may arrange or host work placements through a training agreement, as well as providing other employment-related services. These are often programs where literacy issues related to employment arise, especially as literacy requirements rise in many workplaces.
- Life Skills – This broad area covers a range of literacy related activities commonly found in Friendship Centres, many of which can be very family oriented, including: cooking and budgeting classes, parenting skills, cultural awareness, addictions and various other aspects of personal development and counselling.
- Justice Programs – Many Friendship Centres also facilitate programs related to justice, often through Court Workers placed in the Friendship Centre.
- Health and health literacy – adults may need help with medication, understanding medical conditions and preventative health care and nutrition, especially as these relate to common health issues found in Aboriginal communities.

¹⁵ AHRDAs are not generally delivered through Friendship Centres, although some regions have negotiated agreements for Friendship Centre delivery of employment training. The NAFC has made strong arguments for more consistent management and delivery of employment training through Friendship Centres (See NAFC Employment and Training Policy Forum Report, 2005, available on the NAFC web site.)

GRANDPARENTS AND ELDERS

There are two broad trends in Elders and Seniors' programs that relate very clearly to literacy and learning:

- Programs for Elders and Seniors to share their knowledge; and,
- Programs to help Elders and Seniors learn necessary skills related to their lives.

Elders and Seniors as a group may (or may not) include people with traditional cultural knowledge and teachings, or with the ability to speak and share their Aboriginal language with younger generations. Many elderly Aboriginal peoples have limited formal education, and may also be in need of literacy help with issues like understanding health care issues, medication instructions, various other kinds of forms, instruction in English (or French) as a Second Language, or learning how to use a computer.

WHOLE FAMILY ACTIVITIES

Friendship Centres generally provide various activities that bring whole extended families and communities together, including:

- Conferences on specific themes (Cultural teachings open to the whole community, or health education on topics like diabetes or AIDS awareness, for example);
- Social events, such as Christmas parties, powwows, feasts, and so on;
- Various outings which are often educational, such as summer camps and opportunities for land-based learning excursions and ceremonies;
- Numerous other ways in which diverse local programs work together.

Resources

This section provides a birds-eye view of common existing and potential sources of support for Aboriginal family literacy development and delivery, broken into two categories: *Funding Sources* and *Community Partners*. Tables outlining these two categories are organized roughly according to the age groups identified in the previous “Activities” section. Some resources fall into more than one of the age categories. Because so few resources have been designated specifically for family literacy, the lists include a range of key *literacy and family-related* resources used by Friendship Centres, as expressed through the regional reports.

A complete breakdown of all the diverse existing and potential supports for Aboriginal family literacy would be too long to include here. Furthermore, such a listing of programs would be of limited value locally, since all levels of government are prone to constant restructuring and re-naming of programs, often at a pace that communities are unable to keep track of. Some of the regional reports, for example, referred to government and community programs or agencies that had recently come to be known under another name, had been restructured beyond recognition, or had even been cancelled. These references in the regional reports were based on relatively recent information (documents from within the previous several years). Even a look at the education section of the federal government’s Aboriginal Canada Portal¹⁶ reveals significant omissions and out-of-date information.

To complicate matters more, the same federal program may be described under different names at the local level, while different programs from different provinces may sometimes have similar names.

For these reasons, the tables below are intended to be useful mainly for framing high-level strategic approaches to coordinating supports for Aboriginal family literacy, rather than as a reliable guide for accessing resources at the local level. As the Friendship Centre movement pursues family literacy as a priority, the resources broadly identified here should be included in a framework for networking and strategizing across various levels of government and jurisdiction.

¹⁶ www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca

FUNDING SOURCES

The Funding Sources in the table below are arranged according to federal, provincial and local levels of access. Federal ministries are specific, since they are shared in common, while the provincial/ territorial column refers more broadly to types of ministries. The list only outlines some of the more commonly referenced agencies in the regional reports; there are other sources that are not mentioned here which could also be related to family literacy. Brief descriptions of the programs are provided in the endnotes to the table.

	Federal	Provincial/ Territorial	Local/ Municipal
Infants/ Toddlers	Health Canada (especially Aboriginal Head Start and CAPC)	Ministries for Families/ Children/ Community Health	
Children		Ministries for Families/ Children/ Community Health	Recreation Departments
Youth	Canadian Heritage (especially UMAC and Young Canada Works)		Recreation Grants
		Ministries of Education	School Boards
Adults	Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRDSC)	Ministries funding adult literacy and basic education	Local Aboriginal Training agencies (AHRDA holders)
		Ministries providing Social Assistance	
Elders	HRSDC		
Whole Family	Canadian Heritage - Friendship Centre Program	Aboriginal Affairs Ministries/ Secretariats	United Way
		Ministries responsible for health and healing.	Various grants programs related to recreation and the arts (mainly in larger urban centres with bigger budgets)

Health Canada

Health Canada supports two very significant programs related to family literacy and pre-schoolers: Aboriginal Head Start and the CAPC program.

- Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) has a funding program dedicated to off-reserve (urban and northern) communities. The program focuses on early childhood development through locally controlled and designed early intervention strategies, with the goals of providing Aboriginal children with a positive sense of themselves, a desire for learning, and opportunities to develop fully as successful young people. AHS provides programming in six core areas: education and school readiness; Aboriginal culture and language; parental involvement, health promotion; nutrition; and social support.
- CAPC (Community Action Program for Children) provides long term funding to deliver programs addressing the health and development of children (0-6 years) living in conditions of risk. CAPC recognizes that communities have the ability to identify and respond to the needs of children and places a strong emphasis on partnerships and community capacity building.

There are other significant programs commonly found in Friendship Centres and funded through Health Canada that could be related to family literacy as well, such as NNADAP (National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program), but the two mentioned here are more commonly associated in direct ways with family literacy activities.

Canadian Heritage

Canadian Heritage is the most significant source of funding for Friendship Centre activity, through the Aboriginal Friendship Centre Program, UMAC and Young Canada Works (YCW), which are all managed through the NAFC. All programs often engage youth with elders and other community members, and involve/ partner with various kinds of learning activities.

- The Aboriginal Friendship Centre Program program is broadly applied to support staffing and operations “to improve the quality of life for Aboriginal Peoples in an urban environment by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access to, and participation in Canadian society; and which respect and strengthen the increasing emphasis on Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness.”

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- The primary goal of the UMAC (Urban Multi-Purpose Aboriginal Youth Centre) program is to create a network of urban Aboriginal youth centres to support and assist urban Aboriginal youth in enhancing their economic, social and personal prospects.
- Young Canada Works offers students and recent graduates summer jobs and internships.

Ministries responsible for families, children and community Health

These kinds of ministries have mandates (and names) that vary from region to region, but there is a general tendency for the provinces to become involved in children and families in social and health areas, sometimes including all ages. For example, Quebec has a Ministry of families, seniors and women, which supports some daycare activity in Friendship Centres; Manitoba and Ontario both support Aboriginal Healthy Baby Programs and Parent/ Child Centres. Some Friendship Centres were noted in the regional reports as having daycare services with provincially licensed curricula through ministries responsible for children.

Ministries of Health

Provincial supports for Aboriginal health, healing and wellness can be sources of support for various Friendship Centre activities that relate to family literacy, including programs focused on health education related to various common physical health issues found in Aboriginal communities (such as diabetes) as well as emotional healing (family violence networks, for example, can be funded through some provincial ministries of health, and these definitely have a strong community educational element).

Ministries of Education/ School Boards

Provincial education ministries all have some kind of relationship with Aboriginal communities through local school boards. Unfortunately, much energy remains within the ministries (via the boards) at the policy level rather than going to Aboriginal-controlled program delivery. Significant exceptions include accredited Aboriginal Alternative Schools in some provinces, especially Alberta and Ontario.

Ministries funding Adult Literacy and Basic Education

Various provincial ministries fund literacy programming, usually with a focus on adults, sometimes through Friendship Centres, as well as First Nations and non-Aboriginal agencies. Examples of this kind of ministry

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include the Ministry of Advanced Education and Literacy in Manitoba, the Alberta Advanced Education and Technology Ministry, and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities in Ontario. Literacy is generally an obscure and relatively small part of these ministries.

Ministries providing Social Assistance

Some provinces have programs for people on social assistance (welfare) to help them in areas related to literacy.

Provincial Aboriginal Affairs Ministries/ Secretariats

Many of the regions have entire Ministries devoted to Aboriginal Affairs, and all have government offices that deal directly with Aboriginal Affairs. Some provinces have Aboriginal affairs folded into broader portfolio areas. These agencies are more focused on policy and the framing of program activity than the provision of direct funding; however, they are significant for this very reason, since new resources for community based literacy and whole family approaches to learning can be implemented through the influence of Aboriginal Affairs offices on other ministries that may not be receptive to alternative Aboriginal approaches.

United Way

The United Way seems to be one of the few non-governmental funding agencies that consistently supports family literacy-related activities in the Friendship Centres. This is probably a result of the sheer scope and high profile of the United Way, along with its commitment to supporting various communities and client groups that are in some degree of crisis or distress. These funds are accessed through local United Way proposals.

HRSDC

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada is another significant source of grants and programs addressing or touching on Aboriginal family literacy. For example, "New Horizons for Seniors" grants encourage the active engagement of Elders in meaningful learning and cultural activities, and Housing and Homelessness outreach initiatives are also funded through this ministry.

Other

Various other agencies not included here also have a potential role to play in Aboriginal family literacy (or may already be doing so), such as provincial ministries of culture, the federal Urban Aboriginal Strategy, regional foundations, and others.

PARTNERS

“Partners” are defined here as agencies external to Friendship Centres who support (or demonstrate potential to support) or relate to family literacy in the Centres, but who are not likely to be making a direct funding contribution. It was noted in several of the regional reports that while external partners are highly valued, they are often unable to provide the cultural sensitivity (in the case of non-Aboriginal partners) and/ or overall level of support desired by the community. In other words, many of the partners listed below are generally regarded as sympathetic and generous allies with limitations of their own, rather than reliable sources of ongoing programming that meets community need. In other cases, the groups mentioned below are not so much partners as agencies using the expertise of various Friendship Centre staff to augment their own services (primary examples would be public schools and Children’s Aid Societies). However, this latter group is included because Aboriginal communities would not be well served by a family literacy strategy that was not moving toward more equitable partnerships with mainstream institutions focused on children.

As with the Funding Sources list, the Partners list is not comprehensive or prescriptive; however, the list does provide a snapshot of what can be the basis for networks supporting Aboriginal family literacy development in Friendship Centres.

Some of the other relationships that can be loosely defined as partnerships focus on interagency referrals, program collaboration, and other areas of mutual support (shared meeting space, community-wide gatherings, etc.).

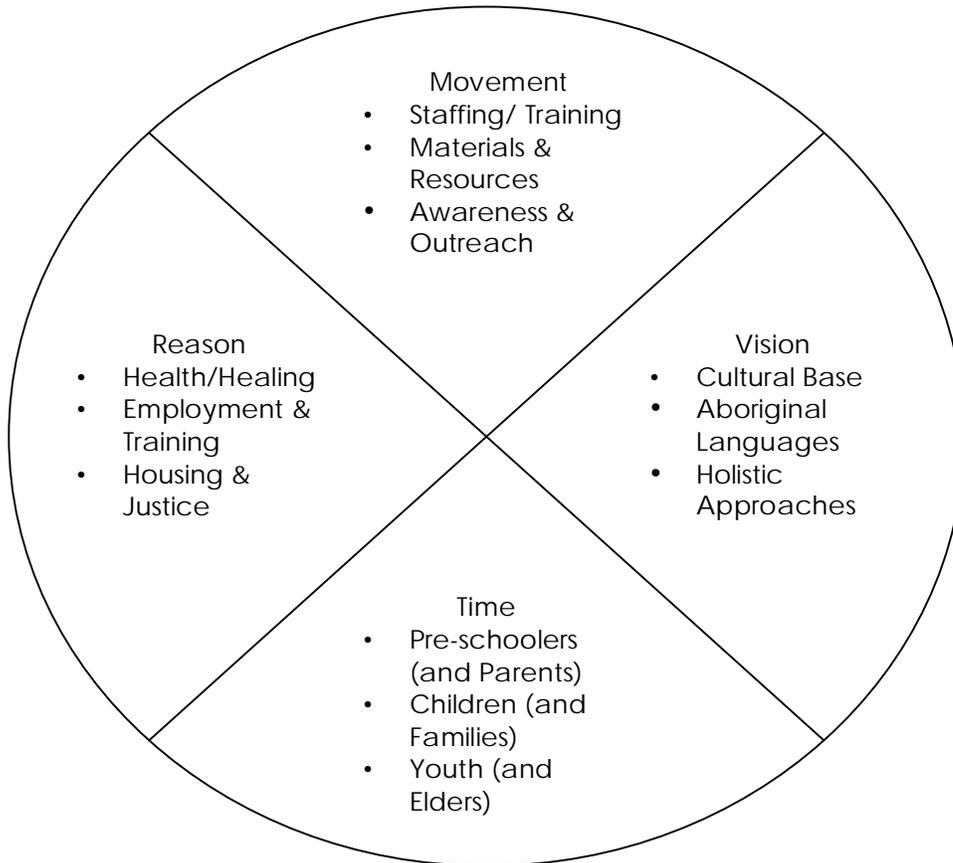
	Partners
Infants and Toddlers	Local Family literacy agencies and regional family literacy networks. Activities delivered through these types of agencies, while limited in scope, are significant, and appear to be generally more culturally sensitive than other non-Aboriginal literacy and education initiatives.
	Local Schools and School Boards
	Local Libraries
	Local daycare services, and pre-natal parenting classes (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, including Métis and First Nations family resource centres and Head Start programs, where these are not hosted in the Friendship Centre).
	CAS and Native Child and Family Service agencies. Various children’s program staff members work with (mainly non-Aboriginal) Children’s Aid groups, or network with CAS, meeting with

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	caseworkers and foster families to ensure understanding of cultural values and beliefs.
Children	Local school systems - Some Friendship Centres work with local schools, to assist with various initiatives addressing the needs of Aboriginal students, including Aboriginal language and cultural programs, competencies in various subjects (aboriginal music, history, art, etc.), and ways to work with kids having difficulty in the school system. Some agencies network with schools to address Child and Youth Mental Health, school suspension support, and assisting with literacy. Depending on the region, principals and teachers may be open to working closely with Friendship Centres on the development of Aboriginal cultural curriculum components.
	Regional First Nations Education authorities
	CAS and Native Child and Family Service agencies
	Local Boys and Girls Clubs
Youth	Local Schools and school boards
	Urban Aboriginal planning groups and Youth councils
	First Nations Education and Training agencies
	Justice programs, Aboriginal housing developments and shelters, which all have high numbers of clients in need of literacy services (and who are experiencing high rates of family breakdown).
Adults	Various external local literacy programs and networks (Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal). While not all Friendship Centres had their own Literacy program, many are near other adult literacy programs, some of them Aboriginal. There were consistent concerns expressed about the limited cultural relevance of some of the non-Aboriginal services – usually offered through community organizations, school boards, and sometimes through colleges.
	Local ESL/ FSL programs
	AHRDAs – for example, training initiatives with literacy components related to specific work place requirements.
	Regional Literacy Networking Agencies (which support development, not ongoing delivery). Various regional agencies exist to support the development of literacy and family literacy initiatives across the country, and Saskatchewan and Ontario have Aboriginal specific Literacy Networks (Saskatchewan Aboriginal Literacy Network and Ontario Native Literacy Coalition). These agencies link programs and support Aboriginal literacy field development by providing information and training, and improving community capacity to address literacy issues.
	Justice programs, Aboriginal housing developments and shelters.
Elders	Local literacy programs Local ESL/ FSL programs
Whole Family	Housing programs Healing Lodges (e.g, accessing community learning opportunities on children’s mental health, parenting skills, family healing, etc.)

Priorities and Best Practices

A number of common priorities emerged through the regional reports. These priorities relate to a wide variety of best practices, which were sometimes explicitly expressed in the reports, sometimes only implied. Because of the overall lack of funding for whole family literacy, many of the priorities and best practices relate to learning for various age groups and community sectors, without referring specifically to whole family literacy approaches. However, as it was pointed out in the reports, these priorities and best practices form the basis of an overarching Aboriginal approach to whole family literacy. The common priorities are organized below, not by order of importance (they are *all* important) but by an attempt to respect how they *relate* to each other. The priorities are divided into four categories, which relate to gifts common to all human beings: Vision, Time, Reason, and Movement.¹⁷



¹⁷ Adapted from "First Nations School of Toronto - A Culture Based Perspective on the Development of a Curriculum Framework, Douglas, Thrasher, Rickett, 1995.

In this model, *Movement* is related to the ability to act in selected ways, and is balanced by *Time*, which allows us to explore the environment and develop relationships through the line of our life, from infancy to old age. *Vision* represents our ability to see (internally and externally), and is balanced by *Reason*, which is taken here to mean how we interpret/break down the world around us.

The priorities are arranged according to these four areas and described in relation to family literacy, along with some of the best practices that were suggested in relation to each priority. Realizing all of these areas may not be realistic in every community, for various reasons (mainly lack of resources). However, the priorities and best practices are offered here in their own right, without considering financial or other limitations (which are considered under “Gaps and Barriers” further on).

VISION

The priorities relating to “vision” include: building from a cultural base; revitalizing Aboriginal languages; and, weaving holistic approaches. These broad priorities all relate to *seeing* both our internal and external existence from an Aboriginal perspective.

BUILDING A CULTURAL BASE

As it is put in the introduction to the Quebec report, “The promotion and transmission of culture... is a key issue for Aboriginal people who live in urban centres, either permanently or for shorter periods.” All regions consistently emphasize the need to ground all learning processes for all ages in Aboriginal cultures, which were cited over and over as crucial to every priority area. The benefits of addressing this priority are numerous, and include:

- A holistic curriculum source for any subject, from cooking and parenting to history and metaphysics;
- An improved sense of pride, purpose, meaning, self-esteem and self-confidence for learners; and,
- The provision of powerful (and even “remedial”, in the sense of healing) alternatives to dominant worldviews that have led to such disastrous results for Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) families and their environments.

Recovering and building on Aboriginal cultural foundations is a difficult but rewarding process, and does not necessarily conflict with the need to adapt to dominant cultural realities, although it may challenge them critically. In fact, comments in the regional reports agree with previous reports (most notably the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples) that Aboriginal cultural foundations are important for survival (if not success) in relating to the dominant cultural framework.

Some of the Best Practices associated with the priority of building a strong cultural base that were shared in the reports:

Establish Aboriginal Venue

Learning environments defined (and ideally controlled) by Aboriginal communities, including accredited alternatives to mainstream education systems, are a much needed and proven practice. Where Aboriginal control and ownership is not possible, Aboriginal definition of the venue is recommended (for example, having Elders, traditional teachings, medicines, ceremonies and various traditional activities available as options were all frequently mentioned as important aspects of Aboriginal venues). This approach raises success rates, and improves the cultural relevance of the learning experience, including a feeling of safety and openness to Aboriginal concepts of family and community. In some parts of the country, it may also serve the sorry purpose of evading negative attitudes toward Aboriginal peoples in broader society and institutions. It also gives community members a sense of responsibility and engagement that does not exist for many Aboriginal people in mainstream educational agencies. As one Friendship Centre worker was quoted in referring to a community-centred alternative school: "the kids, they own the school."

Respect Aboriginal Learning and Communication Styles

Aboriginal families need learning processes that reflect the ways they learn and relate. How things are taught should consider learning styles more common in Aboriginal cultures. Characteristic Aboriginal learning styles are beginning to be well documented, such as experiential learning, visual-spatial learning, and so on (these are both raised in the regional reports). It was also mentioned in the reports that the learning process should be grounded in awareness of Aboriginal communication styles, including tendencies related to body language, eye contact, laughter, etc. (without assuming that all Aboriginal peoples have the same tendencies). One of the reports mentions how much laughter there is in

Aboriginal settings, “whereas in the urban school system, if people laugh at you, it’s like an insult.” Learning about Aboriginal learning and communication styles in a cross-cultural context is also an important best practice that bridges between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies.

Explore Aboriginal thought processes

Distinct Aboriginal cultural ways of thinking about the world need to be respected, understood, explored and applied in learning contexts. Based on the many activities described in the regional reports, it is imperative that ways be found for community members of all ages to gain exposure to these thought processes. The most frequent reference in the reports is to the Medicine Wheel as a model for holistically framing our vision and understanding of any topic, but this tool is only one of many (and is not indigenous to every Aboriginal culture); other Aboriginal ways of framing intellectual perspective include Creation (and other) Stories, songs and various other stores of knowledge that draw on many interconnected layers of meaning, both symbolic and practical – and which exercise the mind in challenging ways. In Aboriginal cultural intellect, everything has symbolic value, and the ability to “read” includes highly symbolic thinking processes, which was referenced in various ways in the regions - for example, by referring to different kinds of literacy, including “intuitive literacy.” It is important to understand that in traditional Aboriginal cultures, such ways of reading and understanding the world are not “pie-in-the-sky”, but are very real and tangible, and can be learned by (or enhanced in) young people who are inclined through exposure to older ones who are able. It was also acknowledged in various ways in the reports that these intellectual resources need to be kept alive in *people*, not just on paper. It is *through families* and *across generations* that this is most effectively achieved.

Provide Experiential Learning

The regional reports frequently point out the importance of including approaches that involve experiential, hands-on learning, by going out on the land, for example. Such experiences were described in several reports as being in some way *fascinating* for learners at a level that is rarely achieved in modern educational institutions. Deep observation with one’s whole being (to the extent possible) and nonverbal communication were mentioned as being important aspects of experiential learning. As it was pointed out in one report, “Imitation of others’ behaviour is considered one of the primary processes in

communication and is essential for people whose origins stem from the oral tradition.”¹⁸ Experiential learning can be helped through various activities involving the whole being. Examples that were raised included drumming circles for youth (“where Aboriginal language can be used, taught and sung”),¹⁹ or through the creation of arts and crafts. Such activities reach learners on many levels; while they can include written materials, they are also challenging in a way that triggers deeper learning processes and engages people at many levels, rather than merely presenting information. These processes are intimately linked with the symbolic thinking referred to above; when learners understand the *meaning* of the fire, or the drum, or a carved piece of wood, at more than one level, or on many levels, each according to their inclination, their minds, memories and emotions are being stimulated in ways that will allow for a much broader integration of knowledge in different contexts.

Provide Cultural Content

Many references are made to the need for content in Aboriginal learning environments that respectfully presents Aboriginal perspectives and values on land, history, treaty agreements and rights, and many other topics. Such content is often described as empowering for learners.

Use Traditional Cultural Teachers

It is important to consistently bring in traditional teachers and elders for a variety of purposes, including: teachings on medicines, beliefs and values, everyday living (parenting is one important theme), regional land-based knowledge, drumming, arts and crafts, etc.

Apply Cultural Perspectives to Modern Contexts

The application of Aboriginal cultural views to modern and urban contexts was also mentioned as a best practice, since many urban Aboriginal clients have been disconnected from their original territories, cultural contexts and extended families. Friendship Centres by definition provide activities that “encourage equal access to, and participation in, Canadian Society, and which respect and strengthen Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness.” This role does not mean “watering down” essential traditional principles or using “token Indian” content, but rather *grounding* learning and effective strategies for modern life in the deepest possible understanding of Aboriginal cultural ways and forms of knowledge, in

¹⁸ Pp. 31-33, Quebec Regional Report

¹⁹ Ibid.

respectful consultation with locally recognized elders and traditional teachers. Relating traditions to modern issues helps learners connect with the content more meaningfully. For example, it is useful to place the learning of “survival skills” related to educational institutions and employment within a curriculum that respects and explores how these institutions relate to Aboriginal cultural ways. Rather than forcing a decision between “two solitudes”, an understanding of where we stand in relation to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal views helps learners identify strategies for integrating both in their own lives. The alternative has too often been to live with anger and helplessness in relation to dominant institutions, combined with low self-esteem and trauma related to the loss of core cultural identity and inner sources of strength.

REVITALIZING ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES

Every region mentioned the importance of Aboriginal languages in relation to family literacy, and Aboriginal languages are commonly mentioned as integral to how Aboriginal people see and interpret the world. Hearing, speaking, reading and writing in Aboriginal languages was being built into all program areas as much as possible, in spite of the almost complete neglect from all levels of Canadian government of the original languages of the country. Concern for the losses incurred to Aboriginal languages is a strong emotional issue, and one of the highest recurring priorities in Aboriginal communities when it comes to education. Whole family approaches are crucial to Aboriginal language revitalization, since it is only in family homes and communities where the languages can be kept alive. Aboriginal language programs, whether through immersive or bilingual approaches, help improve the overall academic success of Aboriginal students at all levels.²⁰ Potential best practices linking Family Literacy and Aboriginal language revitalization suggested in the reports included:

Bringing Language out of the classroom

Friendship Centres can and do support language survival through the incorporation of language instruction and use into various areas of programming, especially those activities that promote the use of the languages in everyday contexts, such as community cooking classes or storytelling with children. Other best practices using Aboriginal languages

²⁰ National Friendship Centre Aboriginal Language Survey, March 2007; Aboriginal Language Literacy Strategy, Ontario Ministry Training, Colleges and Universities, March 2007.

in family life included using elders and speakers to teach various skills, arts and crafts while incorporating the languages into the learning process. In BC, some projects built Aboriginal language learning into traditional economies (language was being integrated into activities related to fisheries and canning, for example).

Using Languages for Inherent Knowledge

Language classes (for any language) too often feel institutionalized, expecting students to pick up languages by rote learning of parts of speech and various objects (“dog”, “hat”, etc.). While such terms are necessary, it is also vital to use the languages to impart *concepts specific to the culture* as much as possible. Such concepts are an essential part of what makes us distinct as Aboriginal people, and inform *how* we think and process the world. As one Aboriginal mother has said of the mainstream school system, “...all instruction occurs not only in the English language but is structured in such a way as to reflect English cognitive strategies to the exclusion of all others.”²¹

It is a best practice to engage all levels of the community in the retention and survival of Aboriginal “cognitive strategies” by explicitly working to help learners understand *how* Aboriginal languages process the world around us, and *the value this has*. This may happen quite naturally in environments where people speak the languages to some degree. For example, one Friendship Centre shared the importance of sometimes using Cree “to explain more abstract concepts to the students...”. In other cases, it may be useful to build explicit linguistic teaching strategies into various theme areas, such as justice: “Aboriginal peoples have been here for thousands of years and their beliefs and knowledge are held in the languages. For example there is no Cree word for guilt or guilty. It is a western word that is based on shame and retribution.”²² Exploring the meaning and implications of linguistic tendencies in relation to family relationships and roles, ideas about responsibility, and so on, while using Aboriginal language to describe specific areas in richer ways, can be a strong method of engaging learners on many levels.

Language Immersion/ Exposure

Immersion usually involves the exclusive or near-exclusive use of a language for the length of a particular program. Immersion in Aboriginal

²¹ From Appendix A, “Aboriginal Literacy and Academic Achievement,” Suzy Kies, Native Mothers’ Initiative for Academic Success.

²² Colleen Crozier, Centre for Family Literacy, Edmonton, at the 2006 NAFC Literacy Gathering

languages is an obvious best practice for revitalizing languages, but it has also been raised as a way of improving children's performance in school,²³ and could be effective in the engagement of whole families. While Aboriginal languages are almost completely neglected by Canadian governments, some popular existing Friendship Centre practices can be (and are) creatively used to at least partially create immersive experiences for families. Summer camps and on-the-land excursions, common practices usually involving youth and children, can be extended to involve whole families and at least a partial focus on immersion, even with relatively limited enhancements to existing resources. In more than one region it was mentioned that parents want to create a Saturday family school with the objective of transmitting Aboriginal knowledge, language and culture. Where immersion is not possible, the above examples, along with other regular programs, can be used to create bi-lingual environments to the extent possible.

HOLISTIC APPROACHES

The regional Friendship Centre literacy reports consistently reiterate the need to take a holistic approach in any learning process, since we need to see ourselves and our environments as fully as possible in order to make the most of our learning experiences, and our lives. This generally means helping people address the needs of their whole being – spirit, emotions, body and mind - within the constantly shifting contexts of their families and communities. It also means working to integrate programs as much as possible, and de-emphasizing institutional approaches driven by bureaucracies (which often *divide* families into categories based on age, role, activity, etc). Defining Aboriginal "holistic" approaches in practice is not easy in relation to bureaucratic policy and programming concepts, since a holistic approach requires adaptability to the infinite possibilities in any person or moment or situation, based on deep observation rather than tidy categories and pre-ordained curriculum frameworks. Aboriginal holistic thinking and practice is by definition always changing and ultimately unquantifiable (or where it is quantified, the statistics have little value). Rather than leading to an evasion of accountability, a holistic approach to programming is seen by many Aboriginal community workers and members as the best way of *being accountable*. In fact, government accountability frameworks are often seen at the community

²³ National Friendship Centre Aboriginal Language Survey, March 2007; Aboriginal Language Literacy Strategy, Ministry Training, Colleges and Universities, March 2007; The work being done through Native Mothers' Initiative for Academic Success (see the "National Context" section of this strategy) also strongly supports the assertion of the importance of Aboriginal language learning to overall academic success for Aboriginal children.

level as *reducing accountability* to communities by inhibiting the ability to respond flexibly to individual and community realities.

Aboriginal definitions of whole family include extended family members (aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc.), and move outward from there to reach the wider community, nation, all nations, all of the natural world around us, and ultimately all of Creation. Many of these families at the human level, and increasingly in nature, are severely and increasingly disrupted and *unbalanced* - but this is exactly why holistic thinking and approaches are seen as such a high priority.

There are too many holistic best practices to include here, but some helpful examples that arose in the regional reports are listed below, according to very broad principles of holistic best practice.

Intergenerational Learning

Various activities indicating best practices for working with whole families, including extended family members and close family friends, are already applied in Friendship Centres across the country, and these can be built on, rather than re-inventing the wheel. These include:

- Involving Elders with various age groups and programs on areas as diverse as story telling, parenting, language instruction and arts and crafts;
- Special events like feasts and socials that involve all community members, and where cultural activities, teachings and language are emphasized;
- Increased overall emphasis on whole family literacy learning through locally driven awareness campaigns.

Program Integration

Intergenerational approaches naturally give rise to a tendency to want to integrate, or at least coordinate, the work of different programs in the Friendship Centre. This may also mean breaking down barriers related to program “eligibility” (age limitations or other eligibility requirements in specific programs). Many Friendship Centres are already working creatively to integrate various programs with different aims. For example:

- Ongoing outreach and awareness raising *across programs*;

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- Sharing activities across various programs. The possibilities are endless and are already being practiced (for example, participants in life skills, cultural awareness, youth, upgrading, health and other programs may all be invited to hear the same teaching on a certain topic; seniors' and youth or children's programs may share a nutrition program that integrates language learning; literacy and upgrading programs can involve children of learners directly in the classroom; excursions on the land may be shared, and so on);
- Sharing resources across various programs and age groups (computers, libraries, craft supplies, breakfast clubs and other food programs, and so on).

Building on everyday activities

One recurring best practice that can involve various age groups in learning is the involvement of learners in activities that are used in their lives on a daily basis. Some of the examples that were mentioned include:

- Various activities related to food (a top priority, very frequently mentioned), from shopping (or hunting) to preparation, sharing and clean up (often linked with various Aboriginal cultural activities, language learning, literacy and numeracy acquisition, nutrition and health awareness, and other areas);
- Playing games using linguistic, math or other literacy skills;
- Sports and recreational/ kinetic activities as part of holistic learning environments, important for any balanced learning process, and essential for people with learning disabilities like ADHD or FASD/E. These activities are usually very informal, but can also be linked with very specific strategies for addressing learning capacity through exercises related to balance, right/ left brain stimulation, and so on.²⁴

Holistic Assessment and Referral

Holistic, in-depth assessment and referral processes are a best practice which is strived for in Friendship Centres, and which lends itself well to family literacy. Holistic assessment includes means establishing trust and considering the learner as a whole person when helping them set learning goals, including things like their home and family environment as well as

²⁴ [Sharing Methodologies and Resources](#), Ontario Native Literacy Coalition, 2001.

job skills. Awareness of linguistic/ cultural background, issues like violence or addictive behaviours in the home, and so on, all have an intimate relationship to learning. Holistic assessment takes time and needs to occur naturally within a community context, in a non-threatening manner. This is especially valuable considering the stigma that is often associated with literacy issues.

Friendship Centres are often ideal places to holistically identify the needs of community members and their families, since many Centres already address diverse priorities. If certain programs aren't found in the Friendship Centre, there are usually ties with those services through trusted workers in the Centre. For example, some Friendship Centres have close ties with local Aboriginal housing initiatives, in ways that mainstream social agencies do not. Friendship Centre staff members also often develop long-term relationships and trust within the community, and awareness of sensitive issues may arise more naturally.

One report describes holistic assessment and referral as a "socializing" approach, which includes "identification of literacy issues based on day-to-day activities that arise in programs for families, rather than through formal testing: 'A lot of clients in various programs have literacy needs related to things like grocery shopping, signing contracts and health. People don't like to just come out and admit they have a literacy problem. A good way to approach it is through other services like CAPC.'" This way, potential learners see literacy as a personal priority (by meeting their family responsibilities, for example) rather than as an institutional priority.

Referrals also need to consider the person from many directions, including wider family and community contexts. The "socializing" approach to referral also works well because the people being referred will feel less institutionalized. The idea of "friendship" is truly important to this approach, since it implies being introduced to literacy and family resources in a sociable and natural way. Ideally, various Friendship Centre staff should be equipped to identify literacy issues in community members and their families as they go about providing their programs, even framing the beginning of a non-threatening literacy assessment process and opening doors to new experiences by relating them to what is going on in the person's life. Many Friendship Centre staff already make a practice of friendly referral; for example, referring workers may accompany clients to new learning environments at first, to make the experience less threatening and ensure the relevance of the program to the client's life.

TIME (AND RELATIONSHIPS)

The priorities related to passing through Time include: Infants and Toddlers; School Aged Children; and Youth. Having these age groups as family literacy priorities does not mean that *literacy* is not a priority for adults and elders; in fact, adults are a very high priority for workplace literacy and literacy related to healing and the recovery of cultural knowledge, while elders are a priority age group for literacy services related to health, and sometimes ESL. However, in relation to *family literacy priorities*, the earlier age groups predominate. Adults and elders have a strong role to play in their *relationships* to the younger groups – relationships that have been severely disturbed through the relatively recent institutionalization of learning and work. This extensive institutionalization has had an especially harsh impact on Aboriginal people, through residential schools, through the lack of Aboriginal cultural perspectives in mainstream institutions, and through the widespread destruction of traditional territories and economies.

The younger age groups as family literacy priorities all relate to how we move through time and what we need to acquire in the process, especially through the *relationships* we form along the way. While some of the best practices and relationships shared here are related to specific age groups (storytelling in relation to developing bonds between pre-schoolers and young parents, for example), they are only the area where the practice is more commonly applied; in reality, many of the best practices shared below can be best practices in learning and literacy across various age groups.

INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Infants, toddlers and children not yet in school seem to be the highest priority age group in developing family literacy activities, since the early years are so vital in forming the foundations of learning. While working with children is a way of engaging with all age groups, it is most intimately connected with *parenting relationships* (which may involve biological parents and other relatives or primary caregivers). Children are more likely to have difficulty with literacy issues if their parents have lower literacy skills, and parents who engage in the learning process will help inspire their children to learn.

One of the biggest tragedies resulting from residential schools and other Canadian systemic forms of racism has been the cross-generational destruction of traditional Aboriginal family structures, and with them parenting skills (and the general lack of culturally appropriate parenting models to replace them). The fallout from this disaster is enormous, and is related to more than just trauma and poverty; for example, traditionally, Aboriginal societies were structured to observe children deeply as they grow, and in this way to identify natural leaders, teachers, healers, and so on, at an early age, and support their development. To a large extent, external institutions have replaced this most essential of community functions. Many Friendship Centres are working with broken families and single parents, often either currently in crisis or suffering some degree of trauma from their past. Aboriginal youth are having children very young compared with broader Canadian society, which results in gaps in their own formal learning paths, and higher levels of literacy and other poverty related issues. One alternative school teacher shared that seven out of the nine female students in their program were pregnant.

Some of the best family literacy practices associated with this priority area:

Story Telling

A common best practice in different parts of the country is the incorporation of story telling involving smaller children and their parents or primary caregivers, using both oral traditions and written materials. While high quality stories using books and materials from any culture are good for all children, it is an Aboriginal-specific best practice to use *Aboriginal* stories to help “ground parents in their history and belief systems so they can pass this on to their children.”²⁵ Aboriginal story telling traditions can be enjoyed by people of all ages, since well-rendered traditional stories contain many layers of meaning.

Some Friendship Centres identified the best practice of ensuring respectful renditions of Aboriginal mythology by involving elders and traditional teachers in the story telling process. This is not to encourage the “policing” of how stories are told, but rather to allow the positive *opportunity* for the stories to be heard according to oral traditions, which have purposes that are both complex and ancient (“traditional Aboriginal stories and mythology have informed all levels of social structure and

²⁵ Notes from NAFC Family Literacy Gathering, 2006

thought for thousands of years...").²⁶ Engaging Elders also allows the opportunity for building in Aboriginal language revitalization activities with parents and children together, providing an opportunity to learn elements of the language together and possibly practice it in the family home later in a way that also promotes bonding in a fun way. Involving Elders should also be an important part of the writing and re-telling of traditional stories, since the essence of Aboriginal mythologies can be “watered down” or even missed in the translation and publication process.

When Elders and Faith Keepers who personally hold the stories according to oral tradition are unavailable, an alternative is story telling and reading clubs for kids and parents using culturally sensitive materials. These kinds of activities are mentioned quite frequently in the regional reports, and are reported to be very popular with both small children and their parents.

Other forms of artistic expression

Closely related to the area of storytelling are various other art forms, including songs, drama, and the creation and use of masks and various other crafts. These kinds of artistic activities are essential to the development of Aboriginal specific family literacy development. Strong links have been established between these kinds of stimulation and a child’s learning success later on. Ideally, Aboriginal cultural content, languages and worldviews can be reflected in various artistic activities and media, especially those involving interpretations of Aboriginal stories.

Games and Play

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal games are being successfully brought into some Friendship Centre learning environments, and more could be done to support the exploration and sharing of how these games relate to Aboriginal cultural perspectives. One of the sad results of residential schools is that several generations of parents may not have been played with themselves as children, and making the links between playing and learning can be a revelation that helps open some parents to new learning experiences for themselves as well as their children (play is essential to later language and literacy development). Culturally sensitive one-on-one and group play were both mentioned as important to help prepare small children to become more sociable and work in cross-cultural groups.

²⁶ Ibid.

Sharing Parenting Skills

Daycares may do much to stimulate children's learning, but the first and most important teachers are a child's parents (or primary caregivers, where the parents are absent). Helping new and younger parents to develop good parenting skills is a best practice, especially when it is linked with awareness and improvement of their own literacy skills through culturally based models. Aboriginal peoples have their own distinct ways of approaching parenting, and these need to be respected locally and integrated into parenting classes wherever possible. In addition to specific traditional Aboriginal parenting teachings, exploring play, arts and story telling with children can support the learning of culturally grounded and bi-lingual language and literacy skills related to parenting.

Parental Engagement

Parents need to be drawn into involvement with their children's learning process in sensitive ways that meet their needs as parents and as people. The process should be holistic, providing various levels of support based on the parent and child's needs, and should be enjoyable. Some needs that typically need to be addressed include: daycare; nutrition awareness; making links with employment; the provision of food and transportation; and of course, learning parenting skills as described above. Safety and a non-judgmental atmosphere are crucial to engaging parents in their child's education, as well as their own. Ways of establishing safety include humor and other forms of emotional engagement. Building in awareness of one's own literacy issues should happen naturally as parents become familiar with the people and environment, rather than through a one-time formal assessment. Family literacy practitioners often note that parents come to a realization of their own literacy needs through working on instilling them in their children. Working on vocabulary should ideally go hand-in-hand with work on self-esteem as a parent, which helps them to look at their own literacy development.

Another appeal for parents is the sense of friendship offered through programs working with other parent and kids; this sense of friendship is vital in helping many parents overcome feelings of isolation, especially in urban environments.

Adapting existing Family Literacy Models

A large proportion of existing family literacy delivery models focus on the relationship of new parents to young children, in communities that are considered to be “at risk”, whether through poverty or some other form of community distress. While concerns are expressed in different regions about the cultural relevance of non-Aboriginal *adult* literacy programs, this does not seem to be the case so much with non-Aboriginal *family* literacy programs. Family literacy programs seem by their nature to be less institutionally driven and more inclined to holistic approaches than programs with a strict focus on adults. Of course, much more could be done to develop Aboriginal-specific family literacy approaches, but starting from scratch isn’t always necessary. Some family literacy programs have reached out in meaningful ways to Aboriginal communities and adapted to Aboriginal cultures and environments, and the models developed may prove for many agencies to be a solid foundation on which to build stronger family literacy approaches in Aboriginal communities.

For example, the Literacy and Parenting Skills (LAPS) program was adapted for Aboriginal community settings in the late 1990’s, based on understanding developed with Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal LAPS (ALAPS) focuses on parenting and parents’ self-esteem, and uses tools like mother goose (nursery rhymes) and sing-along activities, but has also developed sessions on traditions and values, and tends to involve extended family members more (grandparents, for example). About a dozen Aboriginal ALAPS trainers were in place in Alberta in 2006.

SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

The institutionalization of children in school systems has contributed a great deal over the past century to drastic changes in how children relate to their families. The residential school system continues to have a profound effect on how many Aboriginal people relate to education systems across the country. Aboriginal communities generally want much greater control over the education of their children (along with equitable resource bases from which to exercise such control). However, the reality is that most urban Aboriginal children (and youth) are necessarily exposed to public education systems over which Aboriginal communities have little to no control, and with which they often experience great alienation. Even where some degree of control is granted (as is the case with urban Aboriginal alternative schools and First Nations), Aboriginal initiatives are often not funded equitably with provincial school systems, or are still

subject to frameworks that fall short of meeting Aboriginal community priorities.

Having said this, public school systems in general have been and are taking steps to improve their levels of service to Aboriginal students. Helping Aboriginal children to succeed (and youth to stay in and finish school) is a high priority for any community. From an Aboriginal perspective, this priority area is not just about augmenting or supporting public school systems (which many Aboriginal communities feel are failing to meet the learning needs of their children); rather, it is concerned with equipping children with the tools they need, first to survive, then to succeed in the school system, by bringing more Aboriginal perspective and meaning into their learning process and, in some communities, bringing much greater and more significant Aboriginal influence to bear in local public school systems. Some broad areas of best practice for school-aged children include:

Supporting Children Academically

Friendship Centres across the country are striving to help improve the performance of their kids in public school systems, especially to support the kids who are not getting the help they need at home or in the education system. Homework clubs and tutoring for kids after school were mentioned as a common practice in some of the regional reports. These activities also provide children with Aboriginal specific perspectives and supports.

Building Relationships between Schools and Families

Friendship Centres appear in some regions to be driven by a desire to improve relationships between schools and families, and some are advocating on a regular basis with teachers and principals, and involving parents and guardians in the process. Some communities are using family literacy models (such as the Aboriginal Literacy and Parenting program) to explore how to deal with the school, including models for addressing conflict resolution related to schools. It is crucial to help whole families prepare together for engagement with school systems, ideally through *cross-cultural* strategies addressing various systemic and curricular requirements, policies addressing behavioural issues, services for special needs and “at risk” students, and other areas. Learning about the institutions is the first step to reducing feelings of intimidation many Aboriginal people feel about them, and can also be a step towards

improving one's own literacy level. Advocacy by community workers for children and families in relation to schools is best when parents or guardians can be educated about advocating for themselves in the process.

Extra Curricular Programs and resources

Most Friendship Centres express a desire to hold a wide variety of after school activities, including: camps, weekend programs, Aboriginal language and cultural activities, sports and recreation, access to computers and on line resources that may not exist in the home, and so on.

Addressing Child and Family Healing

Various best practices related to healing are important, many of them related to "at risk" children (mostly experiencing various forms of family crisis and breakdown, and possibly in a relationship with Children's Aid Societies). Activities related to this area are highly sensitive, and need to be coordinated with professional and culturally sensitive Aboriginal healing services that engage whole families wherever possible.

YOUTH LEARNING PRIORITIES

Young people (usually referring to teens and young adults up to 24 or 29, depending the program) are clearly a priority in every regional literacy report. Aboriginal youth drop out and suicide rates are a major concern for Friendship Centres and their communities across the country, as well as the general need to improve overall exposure of urban Aboriginal youth to positive social, recreational and health services. High teen pregnancy rates were mentioned in relation to low literacy levels, since young parents were missing out on their education and having difficulty providing for their families (which can result in an increased likelihood of low literacy levels in the next generation). Involving youth in wider family activities, especially in relation to their own parents, can be a challenge, since youth naturally gravitate towards independence and are inclined to *challenge* parental authority. For this reason, Aboriginal communities often emphasize the *relationship between youth and respected Aboriginal Elders* who live in a good way and carry important cultural teachings.

Literacy-themed best practices engaging youth included:

Providing Traditional Cultural Opportunities

Friendship Centres seem to be in general agreement on the primary importance of providing youth with cultural and spiritual guidance through various Aboriginal cultural practices, including drumming and dancing, visits and teachings from Elders, on the land excursions, teachings on local history, and opportunities to take part in ceremonies and rites of passage.

Aboriginal Alternative Schools

Some regions have already made a priority of developing Aboriginal-controlled schools with strong Aboriginal curriculum components. Many Aboriginal youth become extremely alienated from mainstream school systems and drop out, and success rates in Aboriginal alternative schools are proven to improve the rate of credits achieved while addressing social issues and providing cultural activities.

Youth Leadership Training

In keeping with the value of considering future generations, Aboriginal communities see the fostering of leadership skills in youth as an urgent area of need. One common best practice in Friendship Centres is the development Youth Councils across the country, encouraged through the national UMAC program. These councils provide opportunities for youth to strategize and prioritize community wide priorities, and to discover their natural abilities in supportive environments where they are actively engaged (rather than as receptacles in a classroom).

Activities using computers and online resources

Youth are often especially eager to use computer resources, which are increasingly available in Friendship Centre settings. Many families may not have computers at home, and opportunities to access various resources (including educational and cultural materials as well as career and employment-related information) are increasingly available on line, often in interactive formats that are more engaging than print materials.

Access to computers and the use of online resources and learning are a best practice. Some reports mentioned computer literacy as an area where all ages can learn together, and where youth may provide leadership in the community.

Other Media

Another area of literacy that seems to be a priority for many youth programs is the expression of youth perspectives through various media, including magazines, radio, blogs, vlogs, music and dance (especially hip-hop), mini-documentaries, and any of numerous avenues that have been opened up recently through rapid escalations in cross-cultural fertilization and the development and availability of new media technologies. Youth can play an important role in supporting the restoration of indigenous perspectives and applying them to modern contexts, and in communicating essential indigenous messages to the broader community. Of course, the involvement and advice of trusted Aboriginal Elders in such a process is essential. One comment in the Quebec report suggested the potential regarding youth usage of online radio resources in Montreal:

“It is extremely interesting to observe these young people innovate with new technologies to promote cultures and build mutual understanding among different peoples, and at the same time improve their literacy skills.” (pp. 32-33, Quebec report)

REASON

Reason is taken here to include the organization and planning of the various priorities of community life according to thematic programming areas. Literacy needs to be addressed in close coordination with other priorities like those listed below. Not all areas could be included here, but some key areas that relate to family literacy are given as examples. The way these programs relate to literacy and families are often similar in other programming areas not mentioned here.

HEALTH AND HEALING

Holistic health, healing and wellness are an important priority for Friendship Centres. Literacy learning can be intimately connected with all areas of health and healing, either through the identification of (and education on) health and personal issues through the learning process, or by the identification of literacy issues and ways of addressing them in health and healing programs. Best practices including the following areas:

- Linking literacy with activities related to nutrition and food preparation. This has long been an area of best practice in grassroots literacy programs, and is especially useful in Aboriginal communities, where feasting is such an important element of any community celebration. Literacy activities supporting children in school systems can also be built into nutrition programs involving families. (One report points out that “ADHD, a source of concern for many urban Aboriginal children (and parents) has been linked with processed foods, and... poor families need extra help in getting access to whole foods.”)
- Using health and healing programs in holistic ways that include the use of Aboriginal medicines, languages and other cultural knowledge.
- Building literacy awareness and learning into helping community members and families develop strategies for illness
- Awareness of various common health issues from diabetes to HIV;
- Linking literacy to recovery from trauma and addictions.
- Linking literacy with learning about medications, reading prescriptions, advocacy and access to medical systems, and understanding diagnoses.
- Gently identifying literacy issues and plans for addressing them through healing and addictions programs, where high levels of trust need to be built. For example, the process of building self-esteem and the acquisition of Literacy skills are very closely connected. Healing programs also help people to believe in their own possibilities.
- Linking literacy with ongoing life skills programs exploring personal strengths, barriers and areas of potential.

EMPLOYMENT AND EMPLOYMENT PREPARATION

Literacy is most often linked with this area, especially literacy for adults, since various levels of government place a high priority on improving employment prospects for Aboriginal people, most notably through Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreements (AHRDAS). Friendship Centres may or may not be the focal point for Aboriginal Human Resource Development in their communities, but many will have

various opportunities related to employment training and literacy. Some best practices associated with this priority:

- Training and placement opportunities for community members in Friendship Centres at all levels, and the coordination of these activities with holistic development opportunities available in or through the Friendship Centre, including literacy training, daycare and other areas.
- Cultural teachings and Aboriginal language and literacy training for Friendship Centre staff, along with staff from other Aboriginal agencies in the community, to help Aboriginal community workers better serve their communities;
- Integration of literacy awareness, assessment and referral into employment counseling practices available through Friendship Centres, along with holistic counseling and referral to various family support programs.

HOUSING

As it was noted in one report, there is “a lot of moving around in urban areas.” Aboriginal housing is a major priority for urban Aboriginal communities, and many Friendship Centres have close ties and referral relationships with various housing programs. Friendship Centres are also known as the first agency many Aboriginal newcomers to a city or town will visit, even before they may have established permanent housing. Best family literacy practices related to this priority include:

- Consistent outreach to and shared programming with Aboriginal housing programs;
- Home visits through book sharing and parent outreach programs;
- Shared literacy activities and events involving whole families in Aboriginal housing projects, such as family literacy day.

JUSTICE

Literacy and Justice issues are inseparable; as the Alberta regional report notes, “Over 1/3 of offenders have not completed grade 9, and 65% of people entering prisons or jails for the first time have less than a grade 7 education.” (p. 12) Many people in trouble with the law will not understand their rights or be treated fairly in justice systems as a result of low literacy levels, given the complexity of the system, and its reliance on highly specialized and dehumanizing legal terminology. For example,

Aboriginal people have the highest rates of failure to comply with release conditions, court appearances and so on.

Many Friendship Centres have a history of providing court worker programs and other supports related to justice issues. Some best practices related to literacy and justice issues:

- Building awareness of personal legal rights in relation to navigating through the justice system into literacy curriculum, and relating this awareness to the ability of the accused/ offender to assume or resume healthy family and community relationships (there can be no higher motivation);
- Linking with family literacy as a way of helping parents with legal issues affecting their custodial rights to re-build and develop healthy relationships with their children, where this is an issue;
- Broadening educational frameworks focused on justice issues to include all community members, rather than just focusing on “offenders”; for example, an understanding of the justice system needs to include assistance with information and awareness on Treaty and Aboriginal rights and relationships with police forces. Parents knowing about these themes should feel better about helping round out their children’s learning experiences in public school systems (since such topics are not well-covered from Aboriginal perspectives).

MOVEMENT

Movement refers to addressing the *realization* of priorities through time, in this case the priorities and practices that are most commonly raised in relation to the actual *building* Aboriginal family literacy programs in Friendship Centres.

STAFFING AND TRAINING

The regional reports raise the need for staffing and training to support family literacy in Friendship Centres as a top priority. While developing materials is important, nothing is more essential than building community capacity to deliver learning experiences through appropriate *methodologies and processes* that respect the many priorities already

detailed above. Important practices related to staffing and training include:

- Ongoing research and development projects related to building Aboriginal approaches to family literacy, to support and train relevant staff in Friendship Centres, linking with centrally available and readily accessible centres;
- Hiring and training specific Aboriginal family literacy coordinators;
- Making family literacy training available for existing staff in relevant programs where it is desired (this will vary depending on the centre, and might include staff members in head start, parenting, upgrading, employment, housing, justice or healing programs, to cite some examples).

LEARNING MATERIALS AND CONTENT

The reports also prioritize various resources with appropriate content for Aboriginal family literacy activities. Best practices in this area mentioned in the reports include:

- Development of more books, on line resources and other media with appropriate content and themes concerning Aboriginal communities;
- Developing and publishing grassroots materials through programs themselves which engage learners and challenge them to present their own perspectives (these might be shared across Friendship Centres through an online resource);
- Provision of supplies supporting various arts, crafts, tools and community based skills, especially for those areas which are important elements in some Aboriginal economies or areas of traditional teaching (supplies related to fisheries or other traditional land-based economies, quillwork, drum making, and so forth);
- Provision of more computers and software supporting learning;
- Providing resource centres within Friendship Centres that are a hub for accessing all of the above, or enhancing such resource centres where they already exist.

RAISING AWARENESS

Many of the regions mention the need for greater public awareness among families and communities about literacy. Best practices listed in the reports include:

- Community events (career fairs, powwows, etc.) with friendly messages inviting people into specific program areas based on themes of broad interest, and without labeling anyone;
- Positive messages reducing the stigma of “illiteracy.” “To this end, consulting and circulating in the community at a grassroots level was seen as important (versus making grand speeches or announcements about the plague of illiteracy, for example).”
- Broader community engagement - Active engagement of other key agencies in or near the community to improve awareness and cooperation, such as other urban agencies, or Tribal Councils in the region.
- Reiterating the possibilities related to improving one’s literacy level in all messaging, emphasizing strengths and possibilities inherent in people, families and communities, rather than just problems. Constant encouragement is necessary.

Challenges and Gaps

The challenges and gaps identified here indicate broad neglect on the part of Canadian government systems with regard to Aboriginal community-based programming, especially in urban areas. However, it should be noted that on a smaller scale, there are many exceptions to these broad tendencies, and that various federal, provincial and local partners have worked with communities to support innovative models that give hope for significant further development.

Low levels of funding support

As stated in one report, existing support for literacy activities is “neither stable nor recurring.” All regions consistently mentioned the lack of adequate funding in general, for both family literacy as well as Aboriginal culturally driven activities, which often require the engagement of a variety of partners. One typical comment from a Friendship Centre noted the hurdles related to attaining support for a top community priority, the

intergenerational transmission of Cree culture and knowledge: “funding opportunities are limited at present and several partnerships will have to be developed to meet this objective.” (p. 23, Quebec report) The necessity of various “partnerships” often implies a process of begging for relatively small, short-term grant amounts and in-kind contributions from other agencies that are often also struggling for survival.

Another typical comment regarding funding levels: “Friendship Centres’ funding and resources are already stretched thin, to the point that many of their community reference or resource materials are out-dated. Centres’ computers are not reflective of today’s needs, and programs have been either shortened or abandoned outright.” (p. 35, Manitoba report)

Many gaps were mentioned relating to the lack of sufficient funding and resources for family literacy, including shortages in the following areas:

- Cultural educational materials suitable for families, including books and various other suitable media reflecting Aboriginal social and cultural perspectives.
- Teachers (preferably Aboriginal) trained in literacy and family literacy and grounded in Aboriginal languages and cultures.
- Other resource people and support workers who can help address family literacy, including family literacy specialists working across various programs.
- Training for existing program staff that can and should be an essential part of community-wide family events learning and cultural recovery efforts.
- Computer and internet facilities and training, and resources to monitor them.
- Transportation costs related to travel within urban areas, as well as opportunities to travel to traditional territories for land-based cultural experiences - often an issue for all sorts of programs, but magnified in family literacy approaches, since the costs of transportation (where they are covered) are often based on programs defined according to age. As a result, many clients, especially those with large families, cannot afford transportation costs for family literacy programs even where they do exist.

- Access to Cultural Resources - Scarcity of elders and Aboriginal language speakers, and/ or lack of adequate funding for using their services (travel, accommodation, honoraria), often related to a widespread lack of recognition of Aboriginal cultural knowledge at institutional levels.

Lack of Recognition for Aboriginal Languages

Aboriginal languages are identified as an essential element in Aboriginal family literacy programs and services. Significant data exists supporting immersion and bilingual approaches with Aboriginal languages as a best practice for Aboriginal academic success.²⁷ Unfortunately, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governments alike are hamstrung by the lack of official status for Aboriginal languages. The 2007 National Friendship Centre Aboriginal Language Survey published by the NAFC documents this national tragedy from the unique perspective of the Friendship Centre movement, pointing out that most Aboriginal language activities in Friendship Centres and urban environments are doing nothing to stem the loss of languages containing vast stores of knowledge unique to Canadian lands and ways of living on them respectfully. All levels of Canadian government continue to neglect these precious national resources, leaving much Aboriginal language activity to be supported by community bingos and volunteer activity. This situation can only be described as a national disgrace.

Transitory and Project based funding

Exasperation regarding the transitory nature of Aboriginal and family-based initiatives is often expressed across the country. Time and again, excellent grassroots family literacy activities are delivered with short-term funding, and are then cancelled. One-time project grants often raise false hopes of further service development. Some typical comments that would probably apply to Aboriginal literacy initiatives in many Friendship Centres across the country:

- “The MNFC (Mi’kmaq Native Friendship Centre) has seen programs come and go...” (pp. 6-7, Atlantic Regional report)

²⁷ National Friendship Centre Aboriginal Language Survey, March 2007; The work being done from various directions in the education field supports the importance of Aboriginal language learning to overall academic success for Aboriginal children.

- “This seems to be a trend: you get funding, then funding drops and the gap still exists.” (Northern Regional report).

Excessive and constantly changing reporting requirements

Many Aboriginal program staff at the community level experience considerable frustration with excessive reporting requirements for relatively small amounts of funding that are often patched together through diverse sources. As one Friendship Centre in the Atlantic report said (p. 7): “It is almost a requirement that those responsible for research and development in this area continually educate themselves around the primary funding streams available to support continued development and innovation.... What clearly isn’t working... is often related to funding policies. With larger government departments fractured into siloed divisions and agencies, each with their own policies, standards and expected outcomes, it can be very challenging to bring to bear a holistic approach to something that is as broadly defined by those very departments as literacy.” An example follows in the Atlantic regional report of two mutually uncoordinated High School equivalencies offered through the same Department of Education. To make matters worse, the various funding sources periodically re-arrange their own reporting frameworks based on political or systemic departmental priorities of the day rather than on any clear sense of community accountability, so that the sands of essential community activities are constantly shifting.

Friendship Centres are not alone in dealing with overwhelming government accountability measures all out of proportion to the funding received; a national Blue Ribbon Panel on Accountability refers to broader non-profit sector criticism and recommendations across the country intended to address this urgent problem.²⁸

Client eligibility and client definition

“Institutional thinking” that is far removed from Aboriginal community realities and defined exclusively by mainstream society often leads to program definitions that discourage holistic intergenerational programming where it is most needed. Community members are often excluded from specific learning programs based on age limitations or other eligibility requirements. Examples were shared in several regional

²⁸ Submission to the Legislative Committee on Bill C-2: The Federal Accountability Act, Imagine Canada, May 25, 2006.

reports of adult literacy funding agencies prohibiting family literacy activity, continuing the effective separation, “compartmentalization” and institutionalization of Aboriginal families and communities through external agencies. A typical comment found in regions where literacy systems are in place: “Centres that are funded for adult literacy cannot include families learning together.” (p. 35, Manitoba regional report)

In other cases, the whole mainstream definition of *who the client base essentially is* completely contradicts the grassroots realities of Aboriginal contexts, and ensures the exclusion of important segments of the community. For example, in Senneterre, Aboriginal seniors are excluded from literacy programs because they only speak English and Aboriginal languages rather than French. (Of course, support levels for Aboriginal language and cultural learning continue to be insignificant or non-existent when compared to those for English and French).

Lack of flexibility and relevance in curriculum frameworks

School boards, provincial and federal ministries, and other large bureaucracies rarely prove to be flexible enough to accommodate Aboriginal learning and community development needs from the basis of Aboriginal cultural perspectives and values, or even of simple practical community realities.

“...one person stated that students in the alternative schools need to catch up on compulsory credits such as English and Math, and that there was not a lot of room to offer a course on parenting. This worker believed English classes could be customized to build in parenting as a theme, but that this would involve a lot of work, and that the teachers “might have to ‘hide it’ for a while until it’s a success and then show it to the school board.”

Narrow Definitions of literacy

While broad and holistic definitions of literacy exist at a theoretical and academic level, and as defined through national and international literacy agencies, practical definitions of what qualifies as literacy according to government policies are often much more narrow, often preferring to focus on employment and economic initiatives and outcomes. As a result, the general desire for an emphasis on cultural processes and whole family learning is often reduced to a tangential aspect of programs that are driven by material, statistical and economic

priorities. One report suggested the provincial government's literacy agenda seemed to be aimed at getting people off welfare at all costs in short timeframes, without regard for other implications. In Ontario, literacy has been placed in the employment training section of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, which has resulted in an approach that increasingly ties literacy learning to "Essential Skills" defined through employment programs. This trend makes it far less likely that literacy activities might support parenting or parents working more closely with their children's schools, to cite just one example.

Such narrow definitions of literacy not only inhibit the likelihood of whole family learning as a vital component of adult literacy programs; they may also serve to reduce internally-driven learner motivation for self-improvement and the acquisition of literacy skills.

Lack of Aboriginal Control

Most of the reports referred to the need to centre family literacy programs in Aboriginal agencies and to ensure the definition of programs at the local level through the communities, who understand the issues that need to be addressed. Education and literacy are areas where Aboriginal control is especially lacking. Aboriginal community based alternative schools and literacy programs were cited repeatedly as a gap across the country. Numerous references are also made to the lack of cultural sensitivity in non-Aboriginal education and literacy systems.

The report from the NAFC family literacy gathering in 2006 also strongly reflects the need for Aboriginal community control over program design and delivery: "Family literacy is working together and the payoff is huge. We are pleased to see it, the community development approach. We are tired of people telling us this is what you need to do. The first thing I tell a community is 'I don't work for the government.' All the answers are sitting right here."

Learners' personal barriers

Every regional report indicated various common personal barriers for individual learners of all ages, including:

- "Previously acquired negative attitudes toward learning" stemming from a variety of historical and personal factors;
- "Learning disabilities" such as ADHD, FASD, dyslexia, etc.;

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- Lack of a positive support group, either through family or friends;
- The simple fact of having come from families in which no one has ever attended college or university, or even finished high school;
- Linguistic barriers for speakers of English as a second language, as well as the children/ grandchildren of these speakers, who have various issues related to a lack of advantages in learning both their Aboriginal language as well as English or French;
- Family and community breakdown: by far the most commonly cited personal barriers (which in fact are all related to those listed above) are broadly related to family and community breakdown, which are described in more detail below.

Family Breakdown

“Many Aboriginal families have broken down as a result of generations of assimilative Canadian policies aimed at the destruction of Aboriginal cultures. These policies are well documented, and include residential schools, the criminalization of traditional practices, the breaking of treaties, institutionalized racism, and other factors. This high level of family breakdown means there is a huge gap in the ability to address whole families together and to access cultural resources. For example, CAS often places Aboriginal children with non-Aboriginal families, and the loss of cultural parenting skills over generations can make the reclamation of those skills an uphill battle.” (From the Ontario regional report)

Communities in crisis and disunity

Widespread poverty and crisis in urban Aboriginal communities give rise to numerous barriers to developing family literacy programs. It was noted in the reports that many clients in poverty may see community programs as “a form of respite (taking care of various members of their family, or themselves, while they cope with matters more urgent than literacy). This means that literacy and learning are the last thing on the minds of people who may need it the most....” Poor health, addictions, housing difficulties and homelessness, ongoing trauma and violence and other issues plaguing urban Aboriginal communities can make literacy a low priority for individuals and families. “All the kids coming to our gym night are in some difficulty, referred from group homes and so on.”

Urban environments by their very nature can contribute to a simple *lack of community*. As noted in one report, “Many children (and parents) in

urban centres don't openly identify in public school systems or other mainstream institutions as Aboriginal.... Cities are difficult for Aboriginal people in the sense of accessing traditional community and family supports ('We don't have aunts, or extended families...')." (All quotes from the Ontario regional report)

Low levels of parental involvement

One of the casualties of family and community breakdown is the relationship between parents and their children. Parents in distressed communities generally aren't very involved in their children's learning process. Encouraging parental involvement in children's programs was listed as difficult by agencies in several provinces. Several reports mentioned challenges related to getting parents more involved in regular activities with children's programs, including:

- Single parents struggling with poverty, low self-esteem and poor health;
- Having large families with "kids of different ages and interests";
- Parents being intimidated by school systems and school officials, and having low literacy levels themselves;
- The emotional difficulty experienced by parents in talking about their children's learning and behavioural issues;
- Trust issues related to any discussions related to the family, possibly related to fear of apprehension by Children's Aid through reporting requirements for front-line workers.

Stigma, lack of motivation and low overall awareness

Community awareness of (and participation in) literacy issues is generally seen as low, even though the level of need in Aboriginal communities is regarded as high. The Manitoba report points out that many of those who are most in need of literacy services are the least likely to access them (p. 33). The low participation level of people regarded as having literacy needs in Canada overall is also often cited in the literacy movement in general. This low level of awareness and involvement relative to perceived need may be partially a result of the various factors listed above. However, several other factors may be at play:

- The stigma often associated with having lower literacy skills, which is referred to in the regional reports; many people do not want to admit to literacy problems.

- Many people's lack of motivation to improve their literacy skills may simply be rooted in a resistance to the "need" to be able to process large amounts of often disposable information in a linear format. Of course, literacy is almost always necessary for most employment in the "information age"; however, some of the assumptions of the "information age" itself may be fundamentally flawed - for example: the often unspoken assumption that modern Western "culture" (including everything from political, economic and academic frameworks to entertainment) can include all cultural forms of knowledge, understanding and wisdom, when in fact it may stand in opposition to some of them and even be incapable of understanding them on their own terms. This area will be addressed in more detail in the cultural foundations section of this strategy.

Success and Evaluation

The most important principle in developing evaluation processes is that they should *not add* to the already cumbersome requirements imposed on the not-for-profit sector by government agencies (while still maintaining clear principles of good accounting). The recent recommendations made to the federal government on accountability through a national Blue Ribbon Panel engaging diverse Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal non-profit stakeholders (including the NAFC) is very clear in this regard: the very existence of many essential not-for-profit agencies is at risk as a result of deeply flawed and highly onerous government accountability frameworks.²⁹ The fact that family literacy activities relate to a wide variety of programs and age groups – which often receive minimal funding to begin with - adds to the importance of this key principle: *Keep it Simple*.

Overall, not much in the way of specific family literacy program evaluation was mentioned across the regions, since family and literacy activities in Friendship Centres are evaluated under a variety of frameworks, depending on diverse funding sources and regional and local definitions of programming. Family literacy activities are currently delivered with minimal funding (often for less than \$5,000 and/or on a volunteer basis), which leaves little room for detailed evaluation processes. However, some indication of possible further directions for evaluating success in Aboriginal family literacy arose in the regional reports, including:

²⁹ Submission to the Legislative Committee on Bill C-2: The Federal Accountability Act, Imagine Canada, May 25, 2006.

- Aboriginal cultural forms of evaluation;
- Building on existing institutional evaluation frameworks; and,
- Tracking qualitative successes through testimony.

Aboriginal Cultural Forms of Evaluation

A lack of culturally sensitive evaluation tools overall was specifically noted in the Quebec regional report (p. 48), and this lack is likely reflected in other regions. There are several factors contributing to the shortage of such tools:

- The overall low levels of support for initiatives that are firmly grounded in Aboriginal cultural perspectives and values.
- Developing cross-cultural evaluation frameworks meeting ethical Indigenous principles as well as the requirements of academia can be a doubly laborious process.
- The onerous level of reporting requirements in the non-profit sector.

Reporting requirements associated with a few government-supported non-profit initiatives have become more culturally sensitive and community driven in some instances over the years, especially in relation to Aboriginal healing initiatives - although even these are rarely likely to be as fully culturally based and holistic as Aboriginal communities desire at the grassroots level. At the same time, Aboriginal program evaluation and definitions of success are beginning to be defined by Aboriginal scholars in some academic environments, through methodologies that often challenge dominant “Western” evaluation frameworks at a fundamental level, from a cross-cultural perspective.

The most significant evaluation activity at the time of this report in relation to Aboriginal family literacy was being coordinated through the BC Aboriginal Family Literacy Initiative. The BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres was in the process of developing a culturally sensitive, ethical evaluation process for this initiative, in partnership with trusted scholars at the University of Victoria. While the BC evaluation framework has a distinct West Coast cultural flavour (teachings related to the rings of the Cedar tree provide the framework perspective), it seems likely that this model might be shared and adapted to various Aboriginal cultural environments across the country. Other Aboriginal evaluation processes being developed in various areas might also play a role, depending on regional/ local relationships with various scholars and models.

Developing and applying Aboriginal cultural evaluation will be a necessary but long-term process to any large-scale family literacy initiative. In the meantime, some clear areas were gleaned from the regional reports that can immediately be applied to developmental activities and smaller scale initiatives currently in place as the strategy evolves in the coming years.

Build on and relate to existing evaluation frameworks

Most Friendship Centres, along with their Provincial/ Territorial Associations, are experienced at working with various evaluation procedures that could be adapted to any large-scale family literacy initiative that might arise in relation to this strategy. Statistical tracking processes based on existing programs include:

- Tracking numbers for program/ project intake, attendance, retention, completion, and waiting lists;
- Keeping records of student progress through various literacy and school system levels;
- Tracking the achievement of other personal client goals through follow up (employment, community involvement, helping children with homework, etc.);
- Other program-specific indicators. For example, tracking parental involvement rates in pre-school programs (where this is a goal) is a significant indicator of success (see “parental engagement” in the “Gaps and Barriers” section above);

Any of these activities could be adapted with minimal changes to demonstrate family literacy program successes – although some of the measures are proving difficult to establish at the community level. Measuring adult literacy progress in one province has proven to be more involved and complex than grading children in public school systems, which have probably triple the level of funding per student, including higher pay rates for teachers. A key principle in the accountability process is to minimize the administrative workload for front line workers so that their time is focused on helping meet their clients’ needs, rather than being stressed about elaborate reporting procedures. If supports for larger-scale Aboriginal family literacy initiatives do begin to build, it will be important to allow for flexible and broad measures using the simplest possible reporting forms and tables.

Tracking Qualitative Successes through Testimony

Much of the feedback in the regions referred to qualitative rather than quantitative evaluation, which implies a *testimonial* aspect of evaluating (and celebrating) success. Traditional indigenous cultural conceptions of the very act of speaking inherently contain a solemn commitment to the concept of carefully attesting to the truth in a holistic manner, in ways that are impossible to analyze from statistics or grades. As one participant at the NAFC Literacy Gathering in April 2006 stated, “it is difficult to measure love and self-esteem.” (p. 15) Another agency worker was cited in one of the reports as “helping clients overcome past negative experiences and participate in everyday events that many take for granted – hard to measure, but perhaps one of the highest signs of success in traumatized populations.” Some reports mentioned factors that are wider measurements of family and community health and improved lifestyles, and these are important to include in asserting the broad links and impacts made through family literacy programs. Aboriginal communities are starving to be *heard* and to express and share their strengths and successes in ways that can never be reflected through statistics or “measured” in linear ways on paper. Behavioural changes related to things like improved self-esteem, or emotional and spiritual shifts in community life cannot be “proven” to relate to anything tangible. There is no measure for the incredible amount of energy and profound inner change that arrives when Aboriginal youth are publicly honoured for their learning in traditional cultural ways - not to mention the results throughout the lifetimes of each participant.

Anecdotal reporting of various observations of qualitative change in individuals, families and whole communities is necessary to consider when evaluating the real success of any initiative holistically. After all, it is entirely possible (and not that uncommon) to produce statistical data supporting grand achievements where nothing of great value has in fact occurred. Clearly perceived changes in *quality* of community life as impacted by family literacy can be reflected through testimonials regarding improvements in behaviour, self-esteem, and outlook on the part of learners and even whole communities (testimonials can come either from the learners themselves or from parents, teachers and community members).

Unique Regional Trends

The previous section identifies and reflects common themes that appear in a significant number of the regional reports. However, each region is different, and within each region covered, there are also diverse realities. The regions should be encouraged to continue to focus on their areas according to their capacity, and then to share their work with one another nationally.

This section highlights some key regional trends related to family literacy. These trends are not intended to be a comprehensive list of all family literacy developments unique to every region; indeed, anyone reading the eight regional reports might infer a wide variety of unique trends in the various regions. However, the areas outlined below give some indication of how diverse Aboriginal family literacy approaches and strategies might be across the country.

Developments in BC

At the time of this report, the most significant developments in Aboriginal family literacy in Friendship Centres was in British Columbia, where 22 family literacy projects were underway (20 projects supported through the province, and two from the federal government through the Office for Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES). Some other regions had significant Aboriginal family literacy project activity; for example, Alberta had Aboriginal-specific family literacy services in at least 9 communities (most of these appeared to be in First Nation/ Métis territories rather than Friendship Centres), funded through the “Family Literacy Initiative Fund,” and other provinces also had various Aboriginal family literacy initiatives (often “one-off” project-based activities). However, with all due respect for these other regional developments, various factors make the current experiment in BC especially significant for the development of Aboriginal family literacy:

- The BC projects are not isolated activities coordinated through non-Aboriginal government agencies; they are part of a province-wide, strategy (the Aboriginal Family Literacy Initiative) that is defined by Aboriginal communities through the Friendship Centre movement.
- The strategy is led by an Aboriginal agency, the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres (BCAAFC), with active engagement on the part of the BCAAFC Executive Director and the hiring of a staff person at the BCAAFC to oversee the strategy.

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- The activities are being designed to be culturally based and relevant, and to support the revitalization of Aboriginal languages where possible.
- The initiative is based on networking and partnerships across a diverse range of stakeholders, including: various provincial government ministries; the BC school trustees association; and, links with various Aboriginal groups, such as an Aboriginal low income housing association (which will distribute new, nation-specific books to the relevant communities), Aboriginal treatment centres, and so on.
- The initiative is striving to develop Aboriginal family literacy training modules, considering areas like Aboriginal assessment processes and including a consideration of certification for instructors.
- The strategy includes the development of an ethical Aboriginal evaluation framework developed through a third party, with 2 professors from the University of Victoria. The evaluation is designed to be non-intrusive, culturally based and culturally relevant.
- There definitely appears to be a lot of buy in already, from the province, communities and other stakeholders. The BCAAFC is optimistic that the strategy will continue to be supported over the coming months and years.

Family Literacy as a focus in Alberta

Alberta seems to be an overall leader in family literacy in some regards, with significant initiatives being supported through the provincial government, including Aboriginal-specific initiatives. Alberta's Parent-Child Literacy Strategy has an Aboriginal component, with nine Aboriginal specific sites, some of which incorporate Elders and Aboriginal themed books, including translation of stories into Cree (however, these were not necessarily related to Friendship Centres or even located in communities with Friendship centres).³⁰

Alberta is also home to the Centre for Family Literacy, which is often referenced by family literacy programs in other provinces as well. Significant opportunities appear to exist in Alberta for partnerships with the family literacy movement, although there is of course a broad desire on the part of Alberta Friendship Centres and Aboriginal communities for

³⁰ Alberta was not the only region with significant Aboriginal family literacy activity. Saskatchewan, for example, also seemed to have a fairly significant level of Aboriginal-specific family literacy projects, which were mentioned as taking place in 15 First Nations in the Saskatchewan report, and other regions also mentioned various Aboriginal family literacy initiatives.

Aboriginal control and leadership in partnership opportunities addressing Aboriginal family literacy (the Alberta report was not unique in expressing concern about the cultural relevance of non-Aboriginal programs).

Regions with a higher proportional Aboriginal presence

Saskatchewan, Manitoba and especially the northern territories have a high proportion and visible presence of Aboriginal peoples (although not necessarily the most Aboriginal people overall). Some cities in these regions (such as Winnipeg and Yellowknife) also fall into this category. Of course, there are exceptions to this broad trend; smaller cities and towns in Ontario's northwest, for example, have a very high and visible proportion of Aboriginal people. There are unique opportunities and challenges related to a high prevalence of Aboriginal people in relation to the broader population. Probably the most significant possibility is the improved likelihood of working with provincial government agencies to produce significant Aboriginal-specific and culturally relevant family literacy initiatives across the region, as has been done in BC.

Saskatchewan and Manitoba have an Aboriginal presence in the mainstream education system that looks to be much more influential than that of their counterparts in provinces like Ontario and Quebec. Saskatchewan's Aboriginal Education Provincial Advisory Committee to the Ministry of Education and First Nations and Métis Advisory Branch appear to have a very high profile, as do similar institutional groups in Manitoba's government education and training agencies.

In the Northern Territories, Aboriginal peoples form the highest percentage of the population (up to 90% in some areas). The relative predominance of the Aboriginal population in certain provinces and the territories may lead to better potential supports for comprehensive Aboriginal-specific literacy and family literacy strategies. One benefit of this is the official recognition of Aboriginal languages from territorial governments. The North West Territories has 11 official languages, including 9 Aboriginal languages. The territories also appear to have more flexible approaches to literacy, possibly a result of smaller bureaucracies (and budgets) as well as the need to adapt to Aboriginal cultural realities. For example, literacy models in general in the Territories appear to be more focused on families overall than in some of the more populated provinces.

Significantly, the Legislative Assembly of the North West Territories (NWT) passed a motion in 2000 calling for the development of a comprehensive

literacy strategy for the NWT. The range and scope of the strategy are extremely significant for Aboriginal family literacy, and include:

- Community-based adult literacy and basic education programs
- Family literacy programs
- Workplace literacy programs
- Integrated or comprehensive literacy programs
- Literacy integrated into other programs

Northern territorial literacy councils, such as the Nunavut Literacy Council, have a list of activities across the territory that seem to indicate that family literacy is a priority and is practiced to the extent possible (which is limited due to lack of funds). However, only 6 out of the 8 Friendship Centres in the north were providing any significant literacy programming (meaning services funded specifically for literacy – some were providing literacy activities as part of other program areas).

Provinces with a less visible Aboriginal presence

Some regions, such as many parts of Quebec, Ontario, and the Maritimes, have significant Aboriginal populations that are nonetheless a relatively small proportion of the overall population, and are therefore less visible. This is especially the case in large urban centres in these regions. Being in densely populated areas can mean a larger overall resource base; larger and wealthier provinces with the largest urban centres have access or exposure to more resources. However, being in these provinces can also mean a certain degree of marginalization of Aboriginal issues; this in turn can make Aboriginal-specific initiatives that are designed and controlled by Aboriginal peoples more difficult to achieve. For example:

- In Quebec, many Aboriginal people are faced with complicated linguistic challenges, since many of them have only English and an Aboriginal language, with little to no skills in French, and a provincial government that places great emphasis on the French language over all others.
- At the time of this report, there were significant steps being taken by the Ontario provincial government to address family literacy in urban environments (Parenting and Family Literacy Centres and other initiatives such as a program for pre-schoolers called Best Start). However, as one regional educational leader in the region said, these initiatives were being implemented through a “top-

down”, school board-oriented approach, with little regard for meaningful Aboriginal input, let alone control.

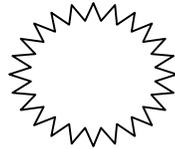
- While the Ontario Literacy and Basic Skills program has a longstanding practice of including a “Native Stream”, the program has also been consistently described by Aboriginal stakeholders as being defined by government rather than communities, and as inflexible with regard to Aboriginal cultural approaches.
- Systems driven by mainstream education and training priorities often play the dominant role in literacy and education initiatives, severely limiting the ability to focus on holistic and family literacy approaches; literacy appears to be driven to a great extent by the provincial department of education in Nova Scotia, by school boards in Quebec, and through an institutional focus on employment in Ontario’s Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (of course, grassroots agencies exist in these regions, but literacy appears to be more controlled through large bureaucracies than in areas like Saskatchewan or the Territories, where the literacy strategies appear to be more influenced by community-based literacy networks).

Regional Aboriginal Literacy Networks

It is worth noting that Ontario and Saskatchewan have Aboriginal Literacy Networks, namely the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition, and the Saskatchewan Aboriginal Literacy Network.³¹

³¹ www.onlc.ca; www.aboriginal.sk.literacy.ca

REASONING



This section reflects on the information shared through the regional reports in the previous section, and provides an analysis of the trends in relation to three critical thematic areas that need to be considered in developing an effective national family literacy strategy for Friendship Centres:

Cultural Foundations

The underlying reason for developing Aboriginal-specific approaches to family literacy is that Aboriginal peoples have distinct and long-standing cultures affecting all areas of life, and on which all program areas ideally need to be based, or at least relate back to in significant ways.

Broader Implications

Aboriginal communities do not exist in isolation from the rest of the world. Aboriginal family literacy relates on many levels to various Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities and priorities, in Canada and internationally.

National Context

Addressing family literacy in Friendship Centres across the country means considering some key national stakeholders and trends related to the priorities and needs identified in the regional reports.

Cultural Foundations

Shifting the Core Perspective

As suggested in exploring the definition of Aboriginal family literacy near the beginning of this document, Aboriginal perspectives on literacy and learning generally differ in profound ways from those of Canadian governments and institutions. This difference refers to traditional Aboriginal *cultural* perspectives; there are of course many programs, activities and individual and institutional perspectives on learning in Aboriginal communities that reflect Canadian institutional priorities in one way or another, either out of necessity for funding eligibility, or as a result of eroded cultural knowledge. However, very few official Aboriginal statements of educational *policy* can be found which do not somehow assert distinct Aboriginal ways, a trend which has increased as widespread community trauma and fear related to residential schools and other assimilative policies gradually fades.

The regional Friendship Centre literacy reports, along with many other documents driven by Aboriginal perspectives, including the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP),³² consistently emphasize the primary importance of Aboriginal cultures as a necessary foundation for Aboriginal learning processes. The intent behind this assertion is not merely related to externally tangible aspects of culture (different languages “practiced,” stories recounted, traditional crafts and regalia made, etc.), although these are important elements in Aboriginal education. The most important and essential cultural factors lie *behind* or *inside* these manifestations, and relate to value systems and ways of visualizing the world that depart radically from the way education, learning and literacy are generally thought of and organized in the dominant society. The inner values are reflected and reinforced outwardly through Aboriginal languages, stories, arts and other areas of life.

It is not easy to summarize common cultural principles of Aboriginal education, since there are diverse Aboriginal cultures; however, several broad trends seem to consistently arise regardless of Aboriginal status or geographical location. Underneath the broad emphasis on Aboriginal

³² See - Volume 3 - Gathering Strength, Chapter 5 – Education, 2. The Framework: Lifelong, Holistic Education

languages and cultures, Aboriginal people often refer to the following areas as priorities in education and learning:³³

- Spirituality and Spiritual concerns;
- Distinctive Aboriginal “styles of thought”;
- Whole family and community focus (“strong group bonds and great individual freedom”; “Parental and community participation”);
- Service orientation and “giving to the community”;
- “Deep respect for the natural world”;
- Holistic well being in preparation for “total living”;
- Using traditional qualities and values as a basis (e.g., “respect for Elders and cultural tradition, modesty, leadership, generosity, resourcefulness, integrity, wisdom, courage, compassion for others and living in harmony with the environment”);
- “Principles of wholeness, order, balance and respect for the spiritual and natural world.”

When employment and economic outcomes are raised, they are often in the context of a “cross-cultural” approach that reflects the alienation experienced in relation to dominant cultural frameworks and the need for accommodating Aboriginal cultural perspectives in the process of learning modern survival skills.

- “Literacy strengthens our community’s ability to be successful in the “western culture” of economics;”
- “For most Indians, education has the dual purpose of promoting Indian cultures as well as providing skills and information relevant to the non-Indian society.”

The areas listed above are clearly not tangential aspects of curriculum; rather, they form the core of broad Aboriginal cultural attitudes toward the ultimate purposes of learning.

The core values and perspectives inherent in various Aboriginal statements related to principles of learning are startling when considered in relation to prevailing trends of thought in recent history. Compare the recurring themes in Aboriginal discussions of learning listed above with the preoccupation of mainstream education systems on topics such as

³³ Adapted from various sources, including “Steps Toward a Theory of Indian Education, Dr. Eber Hampton, Chickasaw, Canadian Journal of Native Education, Volume 20, 1993, no. 2”, and from characteristics identified regarding a “general philosophy of First Nations education” in the AFN report on “Traditions and Education,” as well as from RCAP and the regional Friendship Centre reports supporting this document.

“Gender differences in student performance” and “Labour force participation by level of educational attainment.”³⁴ Of course, this is not to say that values in education are never considered in mainstream Canada; reducing all mainstream education systems to the level of statistical obsession is a vast oversimplification. Diverse attempts at innovation by excellent and inspiring non-Aboriginal educators are underway in many places. However, Canadian government and school systems are undoubtedly more broadly focused on material and economic outcomes of education systems than on values. In fact, the *starting point* and even the *core* of many policy discussions and frameworks for modern education systems are often built around just the kinds of *quantitative* considerations mentioned above. Furthermore, many Canadian politicians and educational officials are often distinctly uncomfortable when confronted with questions of spirituality in education and learning. Values seem to enter into formal mainstream discussions on education mainly in sporadic *reactions* to disturbing issues such as bullying/ violence, or as tangential topics (such as “media literacy”), rather than as core foundations.

The challenge then, in developing effective Aboriginal literacy education, and especially family literacy approaches, is not merely one of limited resources; it lies more in finding ways to *completely shift the core perspective* which frames all ensuing action related to developing literacy learning in Aboriginal communities.

Recognizing a Spiritual Centre

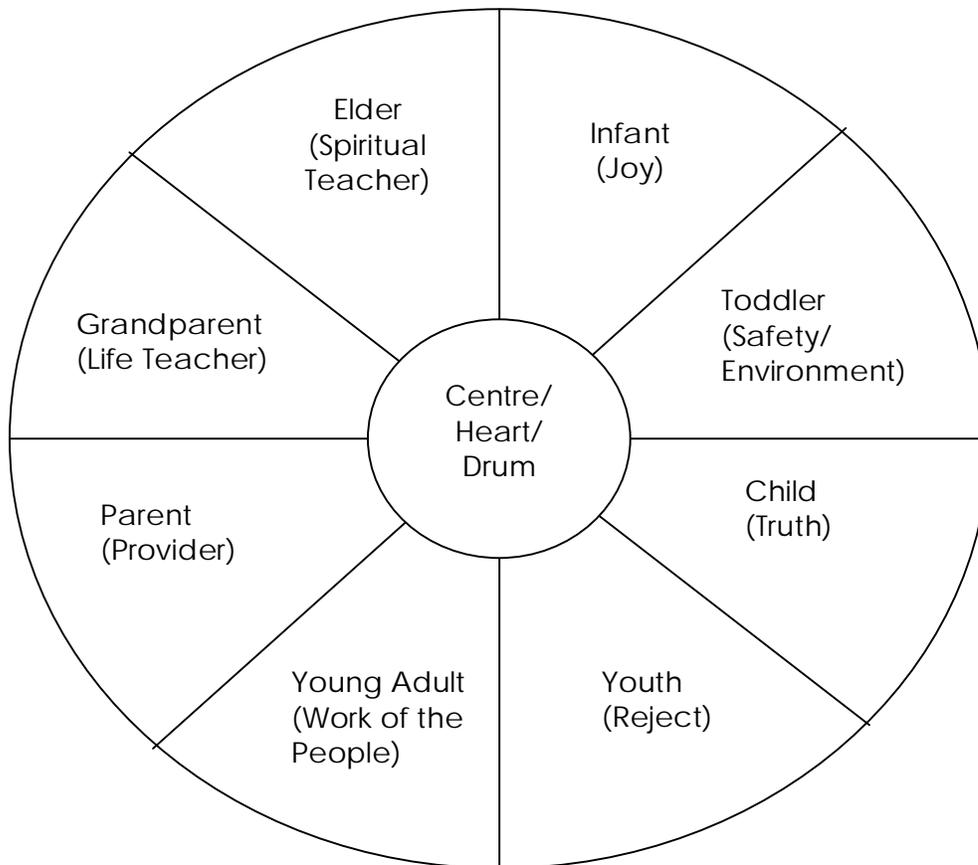
As suggested in the first part of this document, “the force granting and strengthening our Good Mind or Good Life is not emphasized through the material world, but rather through the centre, or heart, or spirit, or *drum*, which animates us all, and around which we all revolve regardless of age or station in life.” Recognizing a spiritual basis does not mean imposing it, or granting humans the right to dictate its forms on each other; however, an Aboriginal family learning strategy will be more *authentic* and *effective* to the extent that it can be grounded in forms of authority that transcend merely human levels of interpretation. A small example: when a traditional shawl is simply taken at the level of a woman’s dancing costume, it has lost its higher symbolic meanings, since it may well have multiple layers of meaning, many of them related to spiritual principles.

³⁴ Country Profile for Canada, Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2003-2007.

Circling the Drum – National Association of Friendship Centres

The drum at the centre of a circle is used in this document to symbolize the spiritual authority from which authentic and essential Aboriginal community cultural activity is derived, and the basis on which “effectiveness” in the learning process is defined. This is not to say that all Aboriginal cultures or communities should build programs based on this specific symbol, since it is not so much a “pan-Aboriginal” *model* as a convenient tool for expressing common indigenous principles and how they might support Aboriginal family literacy (and other learning) frameworks. Various nations might well find other equivalent culturally specific symbols on which to build their particular processes. However, these other symbols would also be likely in some way to recognize a living, breathing authority that is derived from a power that transcends (and should in fact define) human political and material concerns (rather than the other way around).

The diagram used earlier to frame family and literacy activities in Friendship Centres is re-introduced below, with the addition of a central core.



In this circle, *relationships* are emphasized between age groups on the opposite sides of the circle: infants to adults, toddlers to parents, children to grand parents, and youth to elders. These relationships have often

been emphasized in traditional indigenous societies around the world, although the manner in which this manifests has varied in complex ways (considering gender roles, for example), and relationships and transitions between groups on either side of one's own age in the circle are also strong factors for consideration. The underlying principle of balance and shared responsibility for one another in the social structure throughout the cycle of life is a recurring theme in Aboriginal cultures.

The unifying element - the *heart* of the community circle - is symbolized here by a drum. The drum has a symbolic spiritual quality because, like the sun itself, it is much more than its mere visible physical embodiment; its rays reach out and permeate every being surrounding it and fill their hearts and bodies, animating them invisibly with energy and movement each in their own way. The link between the drum and relationships between the generations is made explicit in one teaching given by a Cree elder, which emphasizes that the traditional way to tie a drum is to connect the child in the East with the adult in the West, and the Elder in the North with the youth in the South.³⁵ These symbols (as well as related symbols found in other Aboriginal cultures) are remarkable in the way they contain and express *all at once* the many principles and values reiterated in various Aboriginals statements on education. (Of course, there are many, many additional principles and layers of meaning not mentioned here that are inherent in the circle, drum and related symbols).

In the symbol outlined above, Aboriginal cultural and holistic principles of learning identified in the regional reports ideally belong in the centre and radiate out through the community, bringing it closer together, rather than being placed as "cultural elements" of various programs and curricula filtered down through administrative government "silos." The cultural ways and principles are the foundation for the whole curriculum at all levels. These principles define and sanctify local learning spaces, link programs back to land-based knowledge systems and teachers, and help define housing, justice, healing and all other areas of programming in the community.

This symbol also respects communities as whole breathing organisms, unified and related in every direction, as we pass through time around the circle, as well as in our distinct relationships with the generations across from us in the circle, inclusively defining family from birth to death in an uninterrupted cycle. The significance of this circle as a framework for Aboriginal family literacy today lies in its symbolic reassembling of families

³⁵ Borrowed from a traditional Nehiyiwak (Plains Cree) teaching by Elder Mary Lee, as recorded in the online project www.fourdirectionsteachings.com.

and communities after years of neglect and trauma. As people move around the drum and are recognized for their individual roles and encouraged in their relationships, a deeper aspect of the significance of powwows becomes clear. Aboriginal family and literacy programs are empowered by community gatherings, feasts, dances and drumming in ways that are not possible to achieve through institutional frameworks. Learning is not imposed, but is made widely available as part of an ongoing rhythm of life, for everyone to gather according to his or her needs and nature - just as we get up and dance (or not) based on our abilities and inner inclinations.

While this framework may seem idealistic to some, its inherent principles are nonetheless already being practiced (or at least strived for) wherever possible at the community level. The BC Aboriginal Family Literacy Initiative is a good example of a family literacy framework that is moving toward whole family and community wide activities that constantly strive to ground themselves in or at least refer back to Aboriginal cultural principles and practices which bridge institutionally imposed gaps across the generations. Conscious efforts are being made through the BC initiative to support practices that intimately reflect the principles detailed above, including things like “Grandmothers teaching granddaughters”, “Youth teaching elders how to use computers”, and a strong focus on traditional foods and culture in ways that encourage cross generational training within Aboriginal communities.

Thus, youth activity, connected with the cultural wisdom of Elders, can become a meaningful *challenge* (which is the legitimate role of youth) to education systems to refocus traditional knowledge in relation to modern urban issues, rather than an invitation to militant activities rooted in anger, or worse (suicide, substance abuse, pointless crimes, etc.). The relationship with Elders is reciprocal, as in the example given above from BC (where youth also help elders with new technologies). Another example of a reciprocal relationship between youth and elders is given in the Quebec report, where teachings given to youth are translated into various media, and youth gain a powerful sense of meaning and responsibility. When youth are enthused about restoring and maintaining tradition, the true inherent role of Elders is restored in a world that too often warehouses them and reduces the approach of death from a spiritual community experience to a clinical secret.

Similarly, practices improving the connection between new parents and their babies and toddlers are already demonstrating the power of reciprocal balance implied when all community members around the circle are drawn together through the rays (or common heartbeat) of the

drum: as was noted in the Best Practice section titled “Infants and Toddlers”, many parents are deeply affected by discovering the importance of play in learning, especially when they realize that they themselves were not really played with as children. A better example of healing practice and deep life-changing learning and motivation could hardly be found - especially when we consider the gift of joy that is the role of infants to bring to their parents’ lives. Young parents can hardly be expected to carry out the “work of the people” in a good way without the gift of joy inside them.

Much more could be added, but obviously the principle of integrating traditional Aboriginal values in relation to whole family structures across every generation begins to emerge as more than just an “alternative methodology” for “the classroom,” or an “Aboriginal adaptation” of best practices in “family literacy.” Classrooms and family literacy models need to be built into the recovery of holistic Aboriginal family learning processes, rather than the other way around. Aboriginal cultural principles applied holistically are derived from highly emotional and spiritually inspired *vision* that has the potential to infuse our human procedures with *meaning* and new hope, in spite of all the confusion and imbalance that currently exists. And this meaning has so much power that it arrives like the sun coming into a dark room in the morning, or a drum sounding in a hall full of people drifting off in their thoughts or lost in casual conversation and gossip.

Loss of Balance

Aboriginal cultural principles are difficult to put into practice, especially given the pervasive influences that have been working for generations to eradicate traditional indigenous cultures in Canada and around the world. In modern societies everywhere, this circle has broken down in various ways, and the education of children and youth has become heavily institutionalized. It is no accident that for decades Canada stifled and even criminalized traditional drumming, dancing, Potlatches, Sun Dances and various other ceremonies that lay at the heart of Aboriginal communities, as a direct way of inhibiting the transmission of Aboriginal learning.

The traumatic results of assimilative Canadian practices on Aboriginal families and communities have resulted in high levels of crisis and trauma for many Friendship Centre clients. Aboriginal families often experience great instability, and many families have broken down completely. Justice, addictions, healing, and homelessness programs all face high

levels of client crisis, and all of these areas of concern tend to take priority over the acquisition of literacy skills. Furthermore, many elders and seniors have endured the destabilization and outright destruction of traditional structures themselves, and as a result, the process of exploring and restoring culture and healthy relationships for Aboriginal families in a modern urban environment is not easy.

The often tragic and traumatic social contexts in which urban Aboriginal communities and families so often live are listed again and again in a wide variety of sources, including in the regional Friendship Centre literacy reports. Responding to immediate crisis issues in communities is part of the ongoing reality of frontline community work. No one can learn effectively if their most pressing needs related to housing, food, shelter, justice, addictions and a host of other common problems that plague Aboriginal communities. However, addressing these concerns needs to be done based on solid cultural frameworks rather than the usual non-Aboriginal government approaches, which focus on glaring community problems; otherwise, services will only define clients based on the perception of “deficiencies.”

The Canadian Focus: Upside down

Unfortunately, the fallout of mass cultural disruption, often cited in statistical “laundry lists” of traumatic “indicators”, has too often framed Canadian attitudes relating to programs and services for Aboriginal peoples. Too often, government support for “Aboriginal programs” focuses on how to help Aboriginal peoples overcome *social deficits* in order to meet employment targets, lower levels of poverty, and raise “standards of living” (one might well ask, “Whose standards of living?”). While these are important priorities for Aboriginal communities, they are not always the predominating issues when we consider the needs of people and communities *holistically*. The widespread institutional misunderstanding of what Aboriginal people mean when talking about the importance of our cultures is reflected in low levels of support for Aboriginal cultural approaches to learning from various levels of Canadian government. The result is that supports for Aboriginal cultural and linguistic revitalization are usually relegated to tangential aspects of “Aboriginal” programs.

Canadian governments and institutions have held up *human-centred* systems as the new model to replace the heart and essence that has been beaten and torn out of most Aboriginal communities. Put bluntly, these linear institutional “solutions”, while well intended, simply do not

work. Nothing could be worse for learners or potential learners than to begin by institutionally defining them according to their weaknesses and trauma.

Culture before Trauma - Inverting the Deficit Model

In spite of almost overwhelming forces of community crisis and institutional pressures applied through Canada's governments and institutions, Friendship Centres and other Aboriginal agencies have been exploring cultural recovery for many years, and remain determined to continue.

"It is often pointed out that much of the content of Aboriginal cultures has been lost and that the dominant non-Aboriginal culture has been absorbed by Aboriginal people. This is true, but to exaggerate this point is to miss one of the central facts of Aboriginal existence: Inuit and the First Nations and Métis peoples of Canada are unique peoples, and they are determined to remain so. Traditional norms and values, though changed and constantly changing, retain much of their power. Often, the ideas and practices of the dominant culture — in health and social services and in all fields — simply fail to connect with Aboriginal feelings, Aboriginal experience and Aboriginal good sense. Better connections come from within."³⁶

Of course, Aboriginal family literacy programs need to address high levels of social distress and crisis, marked by poverty and various forms of trauma. However, cultural disruption and other factors have led to these tragic Aboriginal community contexts, and approaches that fail to relate firmly to Aboriginal cultural principles run the risk of being a "band-aid solution." It is not being suggested here that there should be no programs focused directly on poverty; as mentioned in the Manitoba regional report, "Attendance improves noticeably on 'Hot Breakfast' or 'Hot lunch' days." What is important is that Friendship Centres receive more support to develop programs grounding hot meals in the holistic presentation of Aboriginal cultural ways. It is an important principle that "hot lunch" be seen as an important holistic element of cultural and linguistic recovery and learning processes, rather than a way to improve attendance in literacy programs defined by government forces that are external to the community.

Building on Aboriginal cultural foundations promises solutions to the question raised in the previous section regarding lack of participation, or motivation to participate, in literacy programs. Literacy learning needs to

³⁶ RCAP, Volume 3, Chapter 3.

connect deeply and holistically with an appreciation of the whole picture of community trauma, and its roots in massive cultural disruption. For many learners, learning must relate to a level of *meaning* that is about more than “getting a job.” Inner motivation is related to how we feel in all levels of our being, at least as much as our outer material goals.

“Family literacy programs should be an important partner in reducing stigma and low self-esteem related to past experience, and should inspire and empower whole families and communities to embark on new learning experiences as an essential part of recovery from trauma.... Culture-based family literacy activities are a proven and essential element in addressing trauma and involving Aboriginal clients in learning, helping build self-esteem and reduce stigma associated with having low literacy levels. This would be achieved by... explicitly recognizing the role of cultural disruption in learning and the importance of understanding Aboriginal learning styles.³⁷

Broader Implications

The life and knowledge represented here by the symbol of the drum is not a mere bauble or decorative sideshow on the Canadian landscape - it belongs inherently to the land, and can enrich life in many directions. It may even belong *at the centre or heart of Canadian affairs*, rather than on the periphery. Aboriginal ways have been at the heart of these lands for thousands of years, and we neglect them at our peril. The potential impact of indigenous knowledge can have profound implications for, and applications to, every arena of life, including:

- Family literacy programs and public education systems reaching people of all cultural backgrounds;
- Wider contemporary issues related to family and community breakdown, and the need for different models of justice, governance, economy, and so on.

³⁷ From “Family Literacy in Ontario Friendship Centres”, October 2007.

Literacy and Education in General

Both the Ontario and Alberta regional literacy reports suggest that Aboriginal Friendship Centres have the potential to become leaders in the development and delivery of family literacy models for all communities (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal).

“If provided the appropriate resources, Friendship Centres are in an ideal position to facilitate literacy initiatives to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal clients in Alberta. Their holistic approach to program development would allow for a better understanding and integration of literacy ideals into current programming.”
(Page 68, Alberta Report)

As stated in the Ontario report, “Aboriginal communities are uniquely qualified to establish whole family approaches to literacy and learning, and have the potential to make lasting contributions (in this area) to all communities.... this approach... moves away from predominant funding models that define Aboriginal funding according to population (as a sliver of the broader “pie”), and which generally only consider Aboriginal models as applicable to Aboriginal communities; rather, launching Aboriginal models from a position of leadership signifies the importance of such models to all peoples, and supports the establishment of Aboriginal communities as valid ‘teachers’ rather than ‘poor cousins.’ This approach is not as daunting as it might seem, for two reasons:

- Aboriginal communities are less remote than the dominant (English/ French) Canadian cultures from traditional cultural concepts and practices supporting holistic family learning, and many teachings have survived in indigenous memory which address the roles and responsibilities of various life stages, learning approaches, and other areas related to family literacy. These cultural approaches to family learning hold much promise for all cultures.
- Aboriginal peoples are more directly concerned than dominant (English/ French) culture groups with community and family breakdown, cultural loss, barriers to educational achievement, and so on. (This is not to say that the dominant communities do not have such concerns, but that they afflict Aboriginal communities to a much greater degree, to the point of crisis.)”³⁸

³⁸ Pp. 44-45, Family Literacy in Ontario Friendship Centres, October 2007.

Aboriginal family literacy models could also have implications for the delivery of services to other communities suffering from family stress and cultural breakdown, such as many immigrant or poverty stricken communities, for example, or indigenous peoples in other parts of the world.

The applicability of Aboriginal learning models in various other communities also has the potential to invigorate aspects of public education systems, especially in areas where those systems are not reaching certain populations. The mainstream education system has arguably failed well over a third of its general student population; the International Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (IALLS) shows that 42% of Canadians between 16 and 65 scored below a level 3 – the “threshold for coping with the increasing demands of a knowledge society.”

The restoration of Aboriginal cultural teachings has practical implications at all levels relating to current educational issues. Building educational solutions for the future involves thinking in ways that are different from those that have led us into our current social, environmental and economic blind alleys. Cutting-edge educators in public education systems are beginning to struggle with concepts that are inherent in Aboriginal thinking processes, such as the engagement of the mind and being through *multiple perspectives*: “The education community has not found it easy to shift readily from specific, discrete educational topics to a more integrated systems approach. Our vision of education for a sustainable future is focused on how to get beyond reduction and analysis – with which we are most comfortable – to the synthesis and integration of what we know and can know.... To engage successfully in sustainable development we must train ourselves to think holistically.”³⁹

Wider Aboriginal Roles and Responsibilities

In recent centuries, Aboriginal knowledge systems have generally been assaulted, neglected or trivialized by non-Aboriginal societies. This situation is slowly beginning to change; we can only hope it changes fast enough to make a difference in the wider world. Many traditional Aboriginal teachings, from nations as far apart as the Haida, Haudenosaunee and Hopi, emphasize the vital role of Aboriginal ways in maintaining balance in the world, with vision that extends far beyond the annual budgets, five-year (or even 50-year) plans, and short-sighted

³⁹ Education for a Sustainable Future: A Paradigm of Hope for the 21st Century, Wheeler and Bijur, (eds.), Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers

definitions of “progress” and “development” that still dominate and stifle modern western societies, and much of the world.

Culturally grounded Aboriginal learning ideally connects in various ways with concerns about the general distress being experienced by the Earth and all her life and peoples through the widespread desecration of nature. For example, Aboriginal community gardening projects are appearing in the middle of urban centres involving clients with housing issues and linking with concepts of sustainable living through the transmission of traditional cultural ways of living with respect for the Earth. Such programs can (and do) include the transmission of traditional cultivation, harvesting and preparation techniques, and teachings about Aboriginal legends and linguistic concepts that transcend our usual modern ways of thinking of the land as an inanimate thing. As a curriculum, this holistic approach seems ideally suited to whole family learning. The focus on local foods, and understanding how they relate to the sacredness and preservation of our environment as a living thing are no longer the domain of obscure utopians. Even young urban New Yorkers are moving out of Manhattan to set up local organic farms serving the city, *and are succeeding*; thirty years ago, business success in such an area was unlikely.⁴⁰

The reach of Aboriginal knowledge extends far beyond the stereotyped identification of the “Indian” with nature. Aboriginal perspectives provide profound insight into potential remedies for the accelerating desecration of every area of life around the world. In the realm of manufacturing and the arts, Aboriginal perspectives frame a unique *value in the manufacturing process* that has been lost to most of modernity. The UMAC program in Lanaudierre emphasizes the need to help learners understand “the sacred nature of certain techniques and objects” in the creation of arts and crafts: “Teaching cultural knowledge is the heart of this initiative.” (p. 38, Quebec report).

Culture-based, family-centred Aboriginal education processes can inform models that address enormous holes in the modern social fabric, by:

- Cultivating service to others over personal competitiveness and individualism;
- Supporting the identification of leaders, teachers and other social roles based on the careful observation of infants, children and youth by Elders as they grow and learn, based on natural inclination and rites of passage, rather than narrow institutional processes, or in

⁴⁰ Sunday New York Times, March 16, 2008.

the case of politicians, “popularity contests” (which often results in people doing work for which they are ill-suited);

Areas where Aboriginal peoples have long been dominated and dictated to, such as economics and governance, are showing clear signs of cracking around the edges in relation to some of their most fundamental assumptions – assumptions that have long been considered lacking from Aboriginal perspectives. As one writer in the “post-autistic economics” movement has written, “it (neoclassical economics) can’t deal with ecological constraints because it was built with infinite resources as a core assumption.”⁴¹ Visitors to Canadian houses of parliament are shocked at the disrespectful and appalling behaviours of the country’s leaders as they sit around symbols that were once literally held sacred, such as the Parliamentary Mace and Speaker’s Chair. Even today, the improved behaviour at Aboriginal community gatherings where sacred bundles and other objects are present is often tangible (although this is not always the case, of course, given the widespread breakdown of traditional cultural ways, not to mention weaknesses common to all humanity regardless of cultural background); nevertheless, Aboriginal cultural *principles* of governance and relationship have much to offer to all. The suggestion is often made that the American constitution and federation is a Haudenosaunee model with important pieces missing.

None of this is to suggest that some Aboriginal “utopia” is just around the corner, but only to emphasize the necessity of supporting the revitalization of Aboriginal cultural ways, not only as a route to Aboriginal learning and healing, but in relation to potential Aboriginal *contributions* and *responsibilities* to wider society.

Learning within families is the place to begin this work. What we are hearing consistently across all regions of the country in asking about Aboriginal literacy and family literacy is that cultural content will *attract, motivate and retain* Aboriginal learners for holistic ends, including employment and better economic security, but also (and often more importantly) for things like “self esteem”, “healing”, and an overall sense of balance in the self that might then be extended to one’s family, community and nation. From an Aboriginal culture-based perspective, all things are interconnected and related, so our responsibility for ourselves does not end with our employment, nor with our provision for our families or even with making significant contributions to or assuming leadership in our communities and nations; in fact our responsibilities extend to our whole World, which, from traditional Aboriginal cultural perspectives,

⁴¹ Post-Autistic Economics Review – Issue 14, “Towards a New Economics”, Frank Rotering.

includes all of nature, including levels of being which are not considered in the dominant modern mindset: How are we the keepers of the Earth? What values are missing in modern industrial and post-industrial societies in the information age that have led to our present state of imbalance, and how can Indigenous ways of knowing and teaching help address this lack?

Moving through a broad family literacy strategy toward developing the role of Aboriginal peoples as teachers is in keeping with the philosophies of most Friendship Centres, which serve the dual purpose of supporting Aboriginal peoples in urban environments *while also promoting the understanding of Aboriginal cultures amongst non-Aboriginal peoples in the surrounding environments*. In other words, it is the role of Aboriginal peoples in urban centres to bring Aboriginal cultural perspectives to the broader world around them, acting as a bridge of mutual understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples locally. This principle is often directly written into the mission statements of individual Friendship Centres.

Considering the many implications of Aboriginal perspectives and values to every aspect of the wider world also brings a sense of urgency and meaning to Aboriginal cultural learning processes. As our Elders have been telling us, it is the role and even responsibility of Aboriginal peoples to restore the essence of our traditions, first of all in our own communities, and then in relation to the world around us.

National Context

It is important to the success of this strategy to build support at the national level in Canada by reaching out and developing partnerships and funding agreements with a wide variety of stakeholders. This section describes some important agencies and issues to consider at the national level in the development of Aboriginal family literacy education in Canada. The agencies described below are not all specifically focused on family literacy, but they do relate intimately to family literacy in one way or another. All of the agencies below should receive copies of this strategy.

Key Literacy Agencies

Literacy is a topic that converges with the priorities of many different interest groups, including health, business/ labour, international development groups and others, and there are a variety of agencies with a national profile that have evolved over the years. Some of the key agencies are listed below, along with their web addresses, in no particular order:

- Movement for Canadian Literacy (www.literacy.ca)
- Frontier College (www.frontiercollege.ca)
- National Adult Literacy Database (www.nald.ca)
- National Indigenous Literacy Association (www.nila.ca)
- ABC Canada (www.abccanada.org)
- Canadian Council on Learning (www.ccl-cca.ca)
- Laubach Literacy of Canada (www.laubach.ca)
- Canadian Literacy Thesaurus Coalition (www.thesaurusalpha.org)
- Canadian Library Association Literacy Interest Group (www.cla.ca)
- World Literacy of Canada (www.worldlit.ca)
- Federation Canadienne pour l'Alphabetisation en Français (www.fcaf.net)
- Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (www.frp.ca)
- Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada (www.csse.ca/CACS/LLRC/)

A number of these agencies, such as Frontier College, have a history of working with Aboriginal populations. Many of the agencies have conducted key programs and projects that can inform family literacy approaches, even those agencies that are not specifically literacy organizations. The Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, for

example, has delivered several important projects related to the theme of “Weaving Literacy”, which refers to integrating literacy development into whole families and communities.⁴² Such projects are too numerous to list here, but most are either referenced with detailed descriptions, or even found in full PDF format on the web site of the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) (www.nald.ca). NALD also has links to other significant databases, including Aboriginal resources.

The National Indigenous Literacy Association (NILA) and the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) are probably the two most likely partners at the national level in developing an Aboriginal Family Literacy strategy. NILA is important because of its Aboriginal focus, and MCL because of its broad scope and strong links with all the other national literacy groups, as well as with the provincial and territorial literacy networks (all Provinces and Territories have literacy networks or coalitions).

Other Community Agencies

Several agencies are worth mentioning here in relation to the further development of Aboriginal family literacy services in Canada. This list is not comprehensive, but as starting points, the agencies below are connected with and aware of broader Aboriginal and family literacy development across the country.

Some regional networks are very specifically devoted to family literacy, such as the Centre for Family Literacy in Alberta and Action for Family Literacy Ontario. These agencies generally provide advocacy for family literacy, communications and networking, professional development in delivering family literacy models in communities, and research on family literacy issues.

Several agencies specialize in publishing Aboriginal themed literature that can be used in supporting Aboriginal learning processes. These include:

- Good Minds (www.goodminds.com)
- Kegedonce Press (www.kegedonce.com)
- Ningwakwe Learning Press (www.nlp.ca)
- Pemman Publications (www.pemman.mb.ca)
- Theytus Books (www.theytusbooks.ca)

⁴² Detailed reports on these activities are available on the FRP web site at http://frp.ca/g_Weavingliteracy.asp#

This list is not comprehensive, but can provide a starting point for those looking to access or publish Aboriginal learning materials and literature. There are also a variety of on line Aboriginal language and educational web sites beginning to flourish in different parts of the country that should eventually be linked with this strategy.

Grassroots Activities

One good example of a grassroots organization is the *Native Mothers' Initiative for Academic Success*, started by a mother in Barrie, Ontario. This local initiative has national implications for Aboriginal family literacy practices. The initiative develops programs for teachers and Aboriginal parents to work with Aboriginal children and cultures. The focus right now is on children in grades 7-9. Several qualities make this initiative unique and promising:

- It is grounded in an approach that focuses on children's strengths, rather than their weaknesses;
- It is based on learning styles and teaching approaches that are grounded in Aboriginal cultures, languages and world views;
- It takes a holistic approach to the human being. For example, it engages the involvement, and improves the self-esteem, of both parents and children;
- It is articulating these pedagogical approaches in relation to the work of leading academics in the field of learning styles and their relation to linguistic and cultural factors, demonstrating the effectiveness of these approaches in ways that will be acceptable to mainstream academic institutions and governments;
- The initiative is grounded in a high level of community-based commitment; as of 2007, the initiative had been driven entirely on a volunteer basis.

National Aboriginal Agencies

Numerous Aboriginal agencies exist at the national level, and any one of these could be involved in one or another area of holistic family literacy development. These national agencies include the three main Aboriginal representative bodies for First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples:

Circling the Drum – National Association of Friendship Centres

- The Assembly of First Nations (www.afn.ca)
- The Métis National Council (www.metisnation.ca)
- Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (www.itk.ca)

Some of the other national Aboriginal agencies with an interest in literacy include:

- National Association of Friendship Centres
- Native Women's Association of Canada
- National Aboriginal Health Organization
- National Indigenous Literacy Association
- Canadian Council on Learning - Aboriginal Knowledge Resource Centre
- Aboriginal Healing Foundation
- Aboriginal Human Resource Council
- Canadian Council For Aboriginal Business
- National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation
- First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada
- National Association of Indigenous Institutes of Higher Learning
- The Confederacy of Cultural Centres

This is only a partial list, and the possible links with family literacy are endless. For example:

- The Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre, part of the Canadian Council on Learning, as well as other national research bodies such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, have a vital interest in Aboriginal cultural approaches to learning, and could support the foundations of a national Aboriginal family learning research database;
- The National Aboriginal Health Organization has taken an interest in literacy as a tool for both improved health in Aboriginal families, as well as improved prospects for health careers among Aboriginal peoples;
- Many Aboriginal Post-Secondary Institutes are involved in training Aboriginal teachers as well as delivering holistic culturally relevant upgrading and literacy programs;

- The concerns of the Aboriginal Human Resource Council and the regional Aboriginal Human Resource Development agencies (AHRDAs) can hardly be considered in isolation from literacy issues.

This strategy cannot prescribe specific partnerships or links with particular national Aboriginal agencies, which need to evolve organically according to developments that are constantly changing. However, some of the links that might be made in relation to reserve-based populations should definitely be considered from the outset, since Friendship Centres focus mainly on off-reserve populations, and the common interests of both populations have too long been separated by bureaucratic rigidity in Canadian government systems. The need to seek out common strategies and coordinate on- and off-reserve Aboriginal development efforts has already been acknowledged through a Memorandum Of Understanding signed between the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and the National Association of Friendship Centres in 2006. (Of course, Friendship Centres also serve Inuit and Métis peoples, and the NAFC has been exploring ways for sharing national development strategies through Friendship Centres with agencies representing these groups as well). Examples of the logical links with First Nations programs and services are offered here in the spirit of suggesting similar potential links with Inuit and Métis groups at the national level (recognizing that these nations have their own distinct characteristics).

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and its regional affiliates have worked for years on various initiatives related to Aboriginal languages, cultures, families and literacy. Some regional First Nations bodies have sectors devoted to members in urban centres, as in Saskatchewan, while many individual First Nation communities have developed important family literacy models that provide educational leadership grounded in the Aboriginal cultures and languages of their regions (examples include parent/ child immersion programs in First Nation schools, and language nest models involving Elders and children). Because of initiatives like these, the Education and Language Sectors of the AFN and their regional and local affiliates are key potential allies in the development of Aboriginal culture based family literacy strategies at a national level.

Federal Government Initiatives

Federal government initiatives that could relate to Aboriginal family literacy are too numerous to mention here, and government agencies are in endless flux, depending on the seemingly whimsical priorities of constantly shuffling governments and ministers. However, some key

developments taking place at the time of this report are worth noting in relation to Aboriginal family literacy development. Several broad federal departments are alluded to in the “Resources” section of this strategy (Health Canada, Heritage, Human Resources and Social Development Canada, etc.), although the list is not comprehensive. These are listed in relation to the more common kinds of family and literacy-related program funding sources found in Friendship Centres at the time of this report. However, in terms of the sheer volume of Aboriginal-specific initiatives overall, mention should be made of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). INAC has historically focused mainly on reserve-based First Nations and Inuit populations. However, at the time this strategy was being written, significant movement was underway to shift various Aboriginal programs from other departments to INAC; for example, the Aboriginal School Net program and Aboriginal Business Canada were being relocated to INAC from Industry Canada, and Aboriginal Head Start from Health Canada. These movements were all being made in relation to an “Aboriginal Horizontal Framework”, which aims to “provide a government-wide view of Aboriginal-direct programming and spending offered by the Government of Canada.” This framework arranges 360 federal programs and services under seven thematic headings: Health; Lifelong Learning; Housing; Safe and Sustainable Communities; Economic Opportunities; Lands and Resources; and Governance and Relationship.

In addition to the programs already mentioned above (such as Aboriginal Head Start and School Net), some INAC-based initiatives are worth mentioning in relation to off-reserve culture and literacy:

The INAC-funded Cultural/ Education Centres program supports significant language and cultural education centres in 87 locations across the country, and some of these can be found in towns and cities like Timmins (Ojibwe Cree Cultural Centre) or Saskatoon (Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre). Cultural Centres based on reserves are also important sources of cultural and linguistic resources for many neighbouring urban communities, and many cultural centres are in the process of developing significant regional on-line databases. At the time of this report, INAC was looking at increasing the funding for these important agencies. The Cultural Centres also have a national representative body, the Confederacy of Cultural Centres,⁴³ whose mandate is to lead “in the preservation and maintenance of our languages, cultures and traditions.” The Confederacy holds that “Our languages have returned to first languages status among all generations. Our respect for and connection to the land and Creation is celebrated....

⁴³ www.fnccec.com

The Leadership and structures of our nations and communities are based upon the traditions and values of our peoples. All of our people take responsibility to actively participate in the affairs of our nations.” The Confederacy and its various members would clearly be important potential allies in any Aboriginal family literacy strategy.

INAC is also the home of the Office of the Federal Interlocutor (OFI). OFI has the role of helping “further the efforts of Métis, Non-Status Indians and urban Aboriginal people in order to help them realize their full potential economically, socially and politically in Canadian society. The Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians works closely with provinces, national Aboriginal organizations, federal departments and organizations towards achieving an overall coherence in the services available to off-reserve Aboriginal Canadians.” In addition, OFI is the lead federal agency responsible for the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS), which has funded Aboriginal learning and cultural initiatives across the country in urban environments.

While Aboriginal peoples have had, and continue to have, a somewhat negative relationship with this large government department, a solid relationship with INAC appears to be an indispensable factor in any Aboriginal strategy at the national level.

Office of Literacy and Essential Skills

The Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) was created in April 2007.⁴⁴ OLES has replaced the longstanding National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) in supporting the broad continuum of literacy and essential skills at the national level.

The Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) is the Government of Canada's centre of expertise for Literacy and Essential Skills. Through its partner-based approach, OLES focuses on three areas: increasing Canada's knowledge-base on literacy and essential skills, developing effective training tools, and ensuring knowledge and tools are shared among stakeholders, partners, and the Canadian public. Federal support for literacy has always emphasized adding value to existing provincial delivery models, and does not support ongoing program activity.

⁴⁴ http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/workplaceskills/oles/olesindex_en.shtml

In 2007, OLES issued a call for proposals for two streams of projects: Literacy and Essential Skills for Work; and Family and Community Literacy. Family Literacy has been a priority for NLS/ OLES for many years, and for this reason, federal initiatives delivered through these agencies have been an essential part of developing family literacy models across the country over the years.

National Public Education Forums

Public school systems play such a huge role in the learning process that any family literacy strategy needs to find ways to relate to them, as is being done in the BC Family Literacy Initiative. There are huge knowledge gaps for teachers teaching Aboriginal children and communication gaps in relating to their families, and it is (or should be) the responsibility of public school systems to address these issues. Addressing these kinds of gaps through teacher resources and education programs is just one area where a national effort may provide more pay-off than if each local community is left to struggle for itself with local trustee and school board associations. While public education is the responsibility of the provinces and territories, various agencies exist at the national level that help make the links across provincial and territorial boundaries, including:

Curriculum Services Canada (CSC)

CSC can play a role in reviewing resources and programs and awards its "Seal of Quality" where its standards are met, which can help ensure the widespread use of quality resources across the country. CSC has already played a role in the review and recommendation of Aboriginal culturally sensitive resources, and might be an important factor in building greater overall responsiveness to an Aboriginal Family literacy strategy.

The Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC)

CMEC is an intergovernmental body of ministers of education from all 13 provinces and territories. CMEC serves as: a forum to discuss policy issues; a mechanism through which to undertake activities, projects, and initiatives in areas of mutual interest; a means by which to consult and cooperate with national education organizations and the federal government; and, an instrument to represent the education interests of the provinces and territories internationally. CMEC has been exploring some areas that definitely link with family literacy; for example, they recently published a paper that explores questions posed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on

“Non-Formal and Informal Learning” at a national level.⁴⁵ Ministries of Education are already generally aware and supportive of the need for early parent-child literacy training to improve success rates for children in school, and also generally have some kind of framework for improving Aboriginal success in public school systems, although these kinds of initiatives are developed from non-Aboriginal perspectives.

Other Canadian Associations

The Canadian School Boards Association and Canadian Association of Principals both might also be important allies in the furtherance of improved, more flexible and culturally aware and sensitive relationships with Aboriginal Families and holistic learning strategies and best practices. Strategies with these bodies could also be applied with their Catholic counterparts.

Where does the NAFC come in?

Friendship Centres, with 1.3 million client services and over 1200 diverse programs, are in a position to make a major contribution to, and even lead in, the development of urban Aboriginal family literacy services across the country. The regional Provincial/ Territorial Associations (PTA's) for Friendship Centres are well placed to facilitate the regional delivery of programs and oversee quality. At the National level, the NAFC can take a strong role in networking with the stakeholders described above and raising the profile and potential for increased supports for urban Aboriginal family literacy. The NAFC focus on national research, policy, and the coordination of communications is essential to the success of a nationwide movement for Aboriginal family literacy. If even a few of the national agencies noted here were to become genuinely engaged in supporting a national strategy, much could be achieved in a relatively short period of time.

The NAFC has a history of strong and productive relationships and open partnerships with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agencies, and could work with coalitions that have strong family literacy components, such as the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, or could access and develop a relationship with the federal representative to the Council of Ministers of Education (among many possibilities). Some key

⁴⁵ OECD Activity: Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (RNFIL) – Report on Provincial/ Territorial Activities and Pan-Canadian Overview.

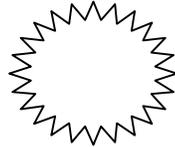
developments at the NAFC that should relate closely to the strategic development of Aboriginal family literacy development in Friendship Centres:

- The NAFC is leading the development of an Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network addressing the need for scholarly and policy attention to the needs of off-reserve and urban Aboriginal populations, in ways that ensure collaboration with Aboriginal communities. This project was started with a consortium of stakeholders in 2007, and seeks to create an international policy-research network focusing on Aboriginal concerns in urban settings. In Canada, this network will take the form of interconnected think tanks that bring together academics, Aboriginal and local community leaders, government representatives and public and private stakeholders. Together they will develop a socially relevant and academically rigorous research program focusing on urban Aboriginal policy and best practice issues. The overarching goal of the network is to achieve a better life for Aboriginal people living in cities and towns.⁴⁶
- NAFC is developing a comprehensive database for 224 urban, rural and off-reserve Aboriginal communities across the country. The mobilization of this vast store of knowledge would be vital in supporting the development of local strategic priorities for Aboriginal family literacy.
- The NAFC already hosts a tri-annual Aboriginal Policy Research Conference, which includes First Nations, Metis and Inuit groups. This activity could be a place to introduce the urban family literacy agenda and explore how developments in that area relate to activities located in First Nations, Métis and Inuit territories.
- Links could also be made with the Friendship Centre Language Survey and strategic report conducted by the NAFC in 2007, which has generated interest at Canadian Heritage, since Aboriginal languages are such an important element of Aboriginal family literacy.

These are just a few examples of ways in which the NAFC, with the participation of its affiliated Provincial/ Territorial Associations and member Friendship Centres, can very quickly create a great deal of momentum and inspirational energy in the development of a national Aboriginal Family Literacy Strategy.

⁴⁶ For more information on line, go to <http://www.nafc.ca/uakn/index.html>.

MOVEMENT



This section provides recommendations for action supporting urban Aboriginal family literacy development through Friendship Centres. The recommendations encourage a process based on common cultural principles detailed in previous sections. There is also recognition of the need for flexibility for various reasons, including:

- Diverse Aboriginal cultural perspectives;
- Wide ranges of programming and levels of service evolution;
- Unique individual client and staff priorities;
- Different local economies, resources and partners.

Because of the diversity of community contexts, programs and priorities across the country, a “family literacy program” that is highly centrally defined makes no sense. Friendship Centres need flexibility in designing family literacy programs, to address diverse local realities. Very few parameters should be set and overseen centrally at a level of program definition and monitoring, and opportunities to share local successes should form the basis for defining a broader Aboriginal family literacy movement.

This approach is supported by the first recommendation of the Blue Ribbon Task Force regarding grants and contributions, which recommends that the Government of Canada: “Re-calibrate the burdensome impact on the community nonprofit sector of the ‘web of rules’ embedded in federal Grants and Contributions practices and re-focus on outcomes that are consistent with the sector’s mandate to its donors, volunteers,

and the communities that depend on them. In particular, execute the recommendations in Part 6 of the Auditor General's Report on Grants and Contributions of May 2006 and empower the Blue Ribbon Task Force and the Task Force on Community Investments to address the burdensome impact on the community nonprofit sector of the 'web of rules' embedded in Grants and Contributions processes....⁴⁷

As one participant from the north shared in describing the successful outcomes they have had in the northern territories with family literacy activities: "the message is community driven; it's not prescriptive. Let it happen." This sentiment is reflected everywhere across the country in the Friendship Centre movement. For example, representatives from BC at the NAFC family literacy meetings in 2006 stated that, "We want to use general guidelines, principles and parameters and leave details to local centres."

The recommendations therefore support a holistic national framework that is adaptable to shifting conditions at all levels of Canadian government as well as in Aboriginal communities, through a cross-cultural approach that considers Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal contexts. However, the emphasis is on Aboriginal cultural and community based foundations, to which non-Aboriginal partners and funding agencies are invited as partners and supporters in an Aboriginal-led process. Effective Aboriginal programs and services cannot be developed as marginalized elements of Canadian government planning processes.

All the recommendations are ongoing responsibilities, all are important, and all can be addressed simultaneously (to a limited extent they already are, at least in some parts of the country); however, they are arranged here according to how they relate to and support one another. Ideally each area of recommendations will become more closely connected with the others as the strategy is developed and integrated in various ways. Each area of recommendations ideally connects with the others in an ongoing cycle, and as various areas are addressed in different ways across the country, the links can be made stronger, holistically strengthening learning programs and the cohesiveness of Aboriginal families and cultures.

⁴⁷ Submission to the Legislative Committee on Bill C-2: The Federal Accountability Act, May 25, 2006.

Preparing the Drum

At the centre, or heart of the strategy, symbolized by the drum, is the *validation* of a common holistic vision for Aboriginal family learning - a broad and unifying awareness and understanding that is processed *internally* in the Friendship Centre movement that can relate and reach out to diverse cultures and contexts. The work of validating such a vision cannot be done in writing; papers such as this one may serve certain communicational and strategic ends, but they cannot invest any process with power or energy, which can only be done through the engagement of people invested with *authority from an Aboriginal perspective*. It will not be enough to take the information and analysis gathered through the eight regional reports and this national strategy, and pass it on to non-Aboriginal government agencies as a project and program checklist; care should be taken to consider internally and culturally driven Aboriginal roles, responsibilities and leadership involved in embarking on the implementation of this strategy, in as holistic a manner as possible. This stage should also include a consideration of the extent of the work to be done and the roles, traditional protocol and responsibilities to be taken on with regard to the many implications of the strategy. Areas to be considered include:

- Ways of defining and maintaining Aboriginal control in the development process, ensuring the strategy is meaningfully led by Aboriginal agencies and fidelity to cultural principles - for example, ensuring definitions of “family” and “literacy” are based on Aboriginal cultural contexts and principles rather than those of Canadian governments and institutions, or asserting the inclusion of Aboriginal languages and cultural ways;
- Ways of defining Aboriginal responsibility and *contributions* to holistic learning processes, and how we present these gifts to others;
- Potential issues related to various areas of policy in both the Friendship Centre movement and with other agencies;
- How the Friendship Centre movement can relate to other stakeholders in building the strategy, and to what extent the Friendship Centre movement can take a leadership role at the national level in family literacy development, versus coordinating and sharing work and resources with other agencies.

A strong and committed group is needed to ensure the integrity of the strategy and the overall appeal and ongoing power of the underlying messages as well as adherence to Aboriginal cultural principles; this process of investing the strategy with authority and motion is a sacred trust that can be compared with the preparation of a drum or other sacred object that will be used to bring the community together. At this stage of development, the process should be qualitative rather than quantitative. The process needs to begin and build by developing common inner understanding among a small group of people consecrating a strong sense of unified vision and essence regarding the work to be done, rather than considering issues of political representation or the division of resources that may become available as a result of the strategy. Ceremony may well play a key role at this stage, although it is not the place of this paper to define such things.

1. ASSEMBLE A FAMILY LITERACY ADVISORY GROUP

Ground the strategy in the energy of people who can invest it with authority and take it to the next stage, through a working advisory group on Aboriginal family learning that considers and validates themes in this strategy. Members could include Elders, NAFC/ PTA staff, youth representatives, and interested individuals. The Advisory Group can share its work with NAFC members at an AGM or other gatherings, generating broader involvement over time, and as it coincides with other agendas.

2. DISCUSS AND FRAME FAMILY LEARNING POLICY IN THE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE MOVEMENT

Based on the work of the Advisory Group, build whole family learning into national Friendship Centre policy discussions, considering how family literacy supports other priorities and programs. The NAFC, with affiliated PTAs and interested centres, can build a framework for action grounded in holistic culture-based learning and supporting program integration across all ages and program areas, while understanding administrative program distinctions. Development will need to be gradual and respectful of existing frameworks, consider external stakeholders, and be flexible enough to change without sacrificing essential principles.

Sounding the Drum

Once a strong internal foundation has been laid, it needs to be communicated to all stakeholders and potential partners. Based on a core foundation defined and centred in Aboriginal cultural perspectives and values, Friendship Centres can implement a communications and networking strategy to develop understanding of the vision and principles, and to attract key partners who are in agreement with the approach being taken. The messages conveyed should be offered in friendship, while asserting Aboriginal control.

3. BROADEN ABORIGINAL DISCUSSION ON FAMILY LITERACY

Use existing networks to present the family literacy strategy to other Aboriginal stakeholders, through forums such as:

- The Aboriginal Urban Knowledge Network, which can consider how family learning relates to other urban Aboriginal programs.
- The Aboriginal Policy conference hosted tri-annually by the NAFC, to introduce the urban family literacy agenda and explore how it relates to First Nations, Métis and Inuit activities.
- Other Aboriginal Stakeholders, as determined in the ongoing work of the Family Literacy Advisory group.

4. DEVELOP AN ABORIGINAL “FAMILY LITERACY CAMPAIGN”

Develop and implement a broad awareness campaign to build support and participation from agencies and influential leaders (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) for Aboriginal whole family literacy. Audiences will include Aboriginal stakeholders, Canadian government and political agencies, and other groups listed in the “Resources” and “National Context” sections of this document, as well as additional stakeholders identified through processes described in the recommendations above.

An effective Aboriginal “family literacy campaign” will have very different messages than mainstream family literacy awareness initiatives. “Family literacy days” and related media campaigns such as “Raise a Reader”

are good initiatives, but tend to focus on messaging and literacy skills as defined through non-Aboriginal society. An Aboriginal family literacy message will address its audiences differently, and relate literacy skills to holistic Aboriginal cultural contexts. Much work remains to be done in this area; as it was put in the Quebec regional report, ““Few... organizations have been sufficiently informed about the need for and benefits gained from teaching Aboriginal languages and cultures. We must therefore build stronger awareness of the importance of preserving Aboriginal languages and cultures. Doing so comes squarely within the mission of the Native Friendship Centres.” (p. 49)

Communication to Canadian governments and institutions will need to consistently challenge government assumptions; these agencies generally continue to greatly underestimate and even ignore the vast potential inherent in Aboriginal cultures, relegating Aboriginal “cultural relevance” to tangential program elements supporting program frameworks defined by non-Aboriginal perspectives. However, the messages also need to be inviting, not attacking, critical but not condemning, based on cross-cultural understanding of Aboriginal and Canadian contexts and perspectives, rather than antagonism. Key messages can be based on themes from this strategy, such as:

- Aboriginal control of Aboriginal Learning;
- Holistic and culturally based values and approaches;
- Aboriginal Leadership in Whole Family Literacy Development;
- The need for, and benefits gained from, teaching Aboriginal languages and cultures in whole family environments, to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies.

Since this is a long-term strategy, it will be important to engage existing youth councils at the national and regional levels and begin building youth leadership with the guidance of Elders, using existing Friendship Centre resources, such as the Youth Councils. The youth will carry the messages forward into the future. This stage of development should also involve key networks in literacy and education, such as the National Indigenous Literacy Association, the Movement for Canadian Literacy, and other networks identified through the internal visioning process.

Gathering the Community

The widespread sharing of key messages based on a strong internal vision and principles will be the basis for an intensified development of partnerships and the attraction of funding resources.

Partnerships are significant links and shared resources and activities with programs external to the Friendship Centre movement. NAFC is in a strong position to lead the development of Aboriginal family literacy in urban settings, establishing relationships with leaders and policy makers in relevant agencies at the national level. These broad types of partnerships should not be considered as prescriptive at the local level. Different local partners will be suitable for different local and regional areas. However, the effective engagement of influential national partners should support better opportunities and models for partnerships at local and regional levels.

Partners will be affirmed based on mutual agreement, and a demonstrated willingness to participate in and support family literacy initiatives defined and led by Aboriginal communities and cultural principles. Longer-term relationships and resources supporting the strategy will be negotiated on this basis. The response to communications efforts detailed under recommendations 3 and 4 above should help identify and affirm agencies that clearly perceive and understand Aboriginal cultural protocols related to holistic family learning processes. As one participant noted in the 2006 NAFC Family literacy conference:

“We understand the need for partnerships but we don’t just want to put non-Aboriginal programs in Friendship Centres; we want to create our own programs to serve our unique needs. We want to see resources for whole community family literacy programming. We want to build on local or existing expertise.”

Furthermore, partnerships should be based on agreement on principles rather than issues of representation. This does not mean that political agencies should not be involved as partners - only that issues of representation should not dictate the strategy’s evolution. For this reason, key partnerships could include a wide range of agencies, with the key principle being a common interest in, and ability to contribute to and mutually benefit from, the development of unique Aboriginal models addressing holistic learning.

To state an example: the involvement of school systems or other large non-Aboriginal institutions such as CMEC or various education ministries as partners would mean these agencies would need to support the strategy on terms that move toward more equitable relationships. Such partnerships would need to support the movement of school systems toward respecting, supporting and applying Aboriginal community based and controlled programs and cultural approaches to learning in ways that empower whole families and communities and acknowledge and use Aboriginal expertise - rather than focusing only on how Aboriginal family literacy projects improve the general performance of Aboriginal students in education systems (which is also important). The BC association of Friendship Centres has already begun making links with school systems, and may be able to suggest models for engaging with these kinds of agencies. However, this is only one example among many possible areas of partnership. Holistic Aboriginal family learning partnerships may be more likely to arise with Aboriginal Cultural Centres, to cite just one other possible example.

5. AFFIRM STRATEGIC ABORIGINAL FAMILY LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

Develop and build key cross-cultural partnerships addressing holistic family learning from Aboriginal cultural perspectives, framed through clearly defined relationship agreements.

The sharing of resources of all kinds supporting the strategy will become increasingly important, to link developments in urban Aboriginal family literacy. A network and series of conferences (including on line networks where regular conferences are not possible) should be developed to promote the sharing of unique partnership models. However this area is addressed, it should add value to the horizontal linkage of existing resources as a way of providing new resources at local levels. Any network of resources supporting Aboriginal family literacy development will also need to connect new developments with existing resources. The National Indigenous Literacy Association should be able to play a key role in helping build this network, since this is their role. All networking should help Friendship Centre communities to work across various programs and coordinate integrated whole family approaches across diverse demographic groups. The sharing of various resources supporting Aboriginal family literacy can include agencies as diverse as the Centre for Family Literacy and the First Nations language services sector.

6. LINK AND CONTRIBUTE TO ABORIGINAL FAMILY LITERACY NETWORKS

Work with new and existing initiatives supporting Aboriginal family literacy learning to network and facilitate the sharing of common resources, approaches, partnerships and training.

The messages and networking developed through the recommendations above should generate good will and momentum toward the development of holistic and community based Aboriginal family learning programs. However, an Aboriginal family literacy strategy also needs significant new sources of funding. Family literacy initiatives in general are very poorly supported, but there is reason to expect some success through an Aboriginal-specific fundraising strategy, if messages identifying Aboriginal cultural and family based learning are delivered effectively at higher levels of government. The work being done in BC at the time of this report to develop a province-wide strategic 5-year plan for funding, led by the BC Friendship Centre association, had already developed significant levels of support from various relevant provincial ministries, as well as the federal government (albeit mostly project-based at the time). Commitment at the community level to address a gap in service delivery was having results, and communications with key provincial ministers and the Premier of the province played a major part in the early success of the initiative.

A national lobbying effort should be mounted with all levels of government, approaching high-level government officials representing ministries in the “Resources” and “National Context” sections of this strategy. Federal ministries such as INAC, Heritage and Health Canada, as well as links with relevant provincial ministries responsible for education, literacy and Aboriginal Affairs, are all important in strategies for Aboriginal cultural and family revival and learning. Of course, the reality is that some of these ministries and regions will be more responsive than others, and these will be where success can be demonstrated and built on.

Based on the findings of the regional reports, it is obvious that an Aboriginal family literacy strategy implies much more than an extension or adaptation of mainstream family literacy approaches. As already noted, the inferior status of whole family approaches in broader Canadian society should not be reflected in Aboriginal family literacy resources. Holistic family programs grounded in cultural principles should ideally be

seen as a central priority in Aboriginal learning rather than a tangential element of school and work preparation systems. Most Aboriginal communities have a very strong common interest in the development of resources related to the kinds of culturally based services suggested in this report. Fundraising for an *Aboriginal* family literacy strategy will add value to existing Aboriginal community development priorities, and the attraction of funding resources and agreements should be based on this reality.

The funding strategy supporting Aboriginal family literacy will therefore be about more than lobbying, fundraising and proposal writing; it will need to address the need for better-coordinated services supporting holistic Aboriginal community-based programs, and show how addressing Aboriginal family literacy improves linkages across various levels of government. It is currently the responsibility of individual Friendship Centres to ensure accountability to various diverse funding sources for relatively miniscule funding amounts. While accountability at this local level is necessary, it should be incumbent on the various government funding agencies to improve their ability to be more and more flexible and “horizontally coordinated” in their relationships with each other as well as in their reporting requirements. This is already a theoretical priority for Canadian governments, and the Aboriginal literacy strategy should demonstrate unique ways to address this area.

“There is ample evidence to demonstrate where literacy, however you might define it, intersects with the policies and outcomes purportedly desired by the departments of Justice, Community Services – and the broad determinants of health supported through Health Canada. A collaborative approach to community funding would certainly be more cost effective, and more in line with the contemporary research that defines community need and seeks to provide new paradigms for service delivery that are reflective of that need. We live in hope that a spirit of collaboration will grip those responsible for the design of funding policies at both the provincial and the federal level.”

(p. 7, Atlantic Regional Report)

7. DEVELOP A NATIONAL FUNDING STRATEGY

Develop a national funding strategy for new activities supporting Aboriginal family literacy, communicating at the highest levels of government wherever possible. The strategy should make a strong case for the importance of, and value added through, Aboriginal family learning approaches, in relation to a wide variety of other Aboriginal and government priorities, and should improve the coordination of government funding for holistic Aboriginal initiatives.

Part of this national funding strategy could include foundations and fundraising efforts in the private sector; however, it is recognized here that working with foundations is a whole strategic and specialized area unto itself. Furthermore, a National Aboriginal Literacy Foundation (NALF, at www.nalf.ca), closely related to the development of the National Indigenous Literacy Association, was being developed at the time of this report. NALF was initiated as a way to coordinate and access private sector and foundation funding supporting Aboriginal literacy. The development of the Aboriginal family literacy strategy will need to be linked with any future success of NALF. At any rate, it is recommended that the emphasis at this time be on fiduciary responsibilities of Canadian governments to Aboriginal peoples, including the growing urban Aboriginal population, since these responsibilities are very far from being met at this time.

Circling the Drum

With partners in place and in agreement with the authority represented by the core vision and principles, all agencies involved can “dance to the same drum” and organize themselves according to their abilities to address various aspects of the whole circle. This section breaks down broad recommendations for the actual development and delivery of Aboriginal family literacy activities.

Covering the whole circle includes addressing the following broad areas:

- Develop and Share Aboriginal Family Literacy Program Models
- Support Community Based Teaching Capacities
- Develop and Share Learning Materials and Resources

These areas are all interrelated, and all relate to the priorities defined in this document; for example, training for family literacy facilitators can be developed through project activity developing models, but is also related to capacity building in communities, and might also become part of an ongoing accredited Aboriginal teacher training program in a post-secondary institution. The extent of development depends on how far the strategy is carried, either nationally, or in any of the regions.

Ultimately, the activities recommended through the strategy will ideally be supported on an ongoing basis with stable funding, allowing for continuity, networking, evaluation and evolution of effective approaches. The recommendations below are therefore dependent on success in meeting the recommendations made above.

8. DEVELOP AND SHARE ABORIGINAL FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM MODELS

8.1 DEVELOP A FLEXIBLE DELIVERY AND EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Develop a framework for the *ongoing delivery* of culture based Aboriginal family and community literacy and learning. The framework will need to be flexible and straightforward, and designed to add value to existing community program and service priorities.

More than any other, this recommendation is dependent on fundraising successes, since it represents a move away from short-term project based activities depending on voluntarism for sustainability. The development of Aboriginal family based literacy and learning strategies in communities across the country needs to move strongly toward the creation of ongoing community centred and culture based learning programs, including an infrastructure that supports and defines the straightforward (and flexible) allocation of resources (such as eligibility for transportation and childcare support for example), as well as evaluation processes. Any ongoing program framework should be very flexible; eligible activities should be defined and evaluated locally in relation to broad parameters and in keeping with *basic* principles of good accounting. The framework should also link with and add value to overall capacity and strategic development in Friendship Centres, and build on existing community expertise and infrastructure (rather than building a new and separate family literacy “program silo.”)

8.2 SUPPORT BEST PRACTICE DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

Develop and coordinate family literacy projects demonstrating best practices, delivery models, and so on, using best practices and recommendations in this strategy as the basis for project themes. Demonstration projects should be community based but shared regionally and nationally.

A project strategy needs to support Aboriginal family literacy best practices, including models based on and demonstrating Aboriginal family and culture-based learning methods and principles. Such projects may be supported through the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLEs), described in the “National Context” section of this report, along with other sources identified through the development and implementation of the recommendations above. Project themes will be based on the best practices identified in this strategy, and through subsequent discussions. In general, all development of models should include a focus on Aboriginal cultural approaches in the following broad programming areas:

Infants, Pre-schoolers and Parents

Program models for pre-schoolers and parents, as well as pre-natal and neo-natal programs, exploring traditional parenting, learning and literacy skills, and helping children and families prepare for life (including school) using Aboriginal approaches.

Youth and Elders

Program models connecting youth with elders in the restoration and maintenance of oral traditions, including Aboriginal languages, Creation Stories, Legends, and various other Aboriginal cultural teachings, relating these forms of knowledge to modern media and current issues and contexts in culturally determined ways.

Other Intergenerational Learning Models

Program models that develop links for whole families or for more than one age group, such as the involvement of Aboriginal language teachers and literacy programs in working with both adults and their children to improve literacy levels and proficiency in Aboriginal languages.

The reason for emphasizing these areas of linkage is that they are the basis for whole family approaches supporting Aboriginal cultural and linguistic recovery through activities that have obvious links with literacy development.

8.3 WORK WITH ABORIGINAL FAMILY LITERACY RESEARCH PARTNERS

Develop partnerships with researchers in Aboriginal controlled, culturally framed research projects addressing holistic learning, indigenous knowledge and other areas related to Aboriginal family literacy.

There is limited funding available for programming, so any resources allocated to research projects should be community based and widely shared, and should ideally involve partnerships with (and contributions from) learning experts in universities and Aboriginal research institutions, such as the Canadian Council on Learning's Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre, or various Aboriginal teacher education programs. Aboriginal academics should be encouraged to develop Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council proposals in partnership with Friendship Centres, supporting community-based, action oriented research into the application of Aboriginal family literacy models. Emphasis on community-based projects encourages more immediate impact than strictly academic or statistical research.

9. SUPPORT COMMUNITY-BASED TEACHING CAPACITY

After the learner, the most important person in any learning program is the person who facilitates the learning process. A range of activities enhancing community based teaching resource capacity in Aboriginal communities is essential to an effective Aboriginal family literacy strategy. While volunteers are important and deserving of recognition and support, an Aboriginal culture-based family learning initiative cannot be based on voluntarism; in fact, funding models need to be based on equity with mainstream English and French Canadian education. Aboriginal cultural education is holistic and family/ community oriented by definition, so developments in this area are not a sideshow as they are for dominant education systems; they are rather what Aboriginal peoples see as the future of their own distinct education systems. Mainstream English and French Canadian education systems are not expected to run on voluntarism and fundraising, nor should Aboriginal agencies.

9.1 ENHANCE THE ENGAGEMENT OF TRADITIONAL TEACHERS

Develop a national program to enhance budgets for the engagement of Elders and traditional teachers in urban centres, in ways that support their availability for the development of family learning. Criteria for recognizing these resource people must be at the discretion of local communities and based on regional cultural criteria, including local priorities regarding various forms of indigenous knowledge that communities wish to include in their curricula. These budgets will include travel related costs and honoraria.

The way that funds for accessing traditional teachings are used will vary widely; for example, some Friendship Centres may want to focus on increasing land-based excursions and learning, while others may want to increase Elder involvement with school aged children through cross-cultural outreach partnerships with public education systems. The parameters of content presented by Elders should also be flexible in the sense of having no constraints based on institutional definitions of literacy or learning programs (unless this is agreed on locally in specific activities with Elders who are also professional teachers in the system, for example. Otherwise, defining cultural activities in relation to literacy and education

systems is covered under recommendation 8.4 below). For all these reasons, national criteria should be limited to things like sharing learning resources developed (as appropriate and in accordance with local cultural protocol), and reporting on activities in terms of participation rates and testimonials.

This recommendation supports an existing priority in Friendship Centres. Traditional teachers and knowledge are essential to any family literacy initiative, but they are also a much-needed element of all Aboriginal programming. Friendship Centres in general are short of funding to bring these resource people into their programs. Family literacy programs can play a role in working with other programs to build better availability of cultural teachers overall in ways that coordinate shared access.

9.2 CONTRIBUTE TO INCREASED AVAILABILITY OF ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Develop, deliver and share intergenerational learning models for revitalizing Aboriginal languages in Friendship Centres in ways that intensify the possibility of immersive language learning experiences for urban Aboriginal community members.

There is a desperate need to increase opportunities for Aboriginal language revitalization in Friendship Centre communities across the country. This priority cannot be separated from the provision of holistic Aboriginal family and community based literacy and learning programs. Youth and Elders working together, and parents with infants and young children are high priorities. Movement in this direction should relate to the National Friendship Centre Survey of Aboriginal Language Programs conducted through the NAFC in 2007,⁴⁸ and identify *new resources*, rather than tapping existing funds for Aboriginal languages, which are very poorly financed.

9.3 HIRE ABORIGINAL FAMILY LITERACY COORDINATORS

Hire family literacy coordinators whose role is to identify and focus various programs so that they can address family literacy in an integrated way while still maintaining accountability to their respective domains.

⁴⁸ Available on the NAFC web site, at <http://www.nafc.ca/policy.htm>

Some Friendship Centres will benefit from developing family literacy coordinator positions to facilitate the diverse priorities identified in this report (program areas, age groups etc.) at the local level. These positions should be part of a regular program, rather than project-based. However, since a broader realization of this recommendation requires significant funds, the viability of this approach could be demonstrated initially through pilot projects, as is being done in BC.

9.4 INCREASE ABORIGINAL-CONTROLLED ENGAGEMENT OF TEACHING PROFESSIONALS

Develop initiatives supporting the placement of culturally aware “mainstream” teaching professionals guided by and hosted within Friendship Centres, to work with children, youth and families in relation to school systems. These teachers will work to empower and involve Aboriginal families and communities with schools, improve student success rates, and advocate for and arrange specific programs and exchanges between Friendship Centres and school systems.

While some excellent Aboriginal-run alternative schools exist in urban settings, there is no escaping the fact that urban and off-reserve Aboriginal children, youth and families are generally exposed to public education systems from which they are often extremely alienated. Aboriginal community and family relationships with public school systems are in need of unique solutions that are difficult to address without intimate knowledge of, and access to, the system. It is important to sustain systemic Aboriginal professionals within community cultural settings in order to improve the cross-cultural capacity of any family literacy initiative. In other words, we need professional teachers “on our side” as well.

Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) teachers are increasingly receiving training and accreditation in cross-cultural teacher training programs through universities, in programs that are designed to support Aboriginal approaches to learning. While it is important to have Aboriginal teachers in mainstream school systems, pay scale too often draws trained Aboriginal teaching professionals away from community settings, where they are also desperately needed. Some Friendship Centres have alternative schools with professional teachers hired through the system,

and occasionally trained professionals are committed enough to devote themselves to community-based literacy programs, but these teachers sacrifice a great deal in terms of money and security. At any rate, these examples need to be built on. There should be opportunities to hire teachers, at scale, to work within and for the Friendship Centre and on behalf of the community, to assist with the development of cross-cultural programs that address the unique needs of Aboriginal children, youth and families in relation to school systems, *while working for the community and guided by Aboriginal community and cultural perspectives*. Professional teachers developing and delivering Aboriginal cultural learning programs are deserving of pay equity with teachers and curriculum specialists in mainstream school systems. This area ideally needs to be developed in cooperation with public school systems, wherever these institutions are receptive to Aboriginal culture-based initiatives, which in turn will need the engagement and support of ministries of education and school boards. Such a program need not sever a teacher's relationship with the public education system; for example, there may be ways to arrange a rotation or sabbatical system for teachers in partnership with local school boards. Initiatives addressing this recommendation might be piloted within a given region and shared nationally as a model, if successful.

9.5 DELIVER ABORIGINAL FAMILY LITERACY TRAINING FOR TEACHERS AND COMMUNITY WORKERS

Work with key partners to develop and deliver accredited training for anyone delivering or interested in delivering Aboriginal family literacy programming.

Unique, culture based and cross-cultural training needs to be made available to support those involved in the development and delivery of Aboriginal family literacy programs, including both teaching professionals and community based workers mentioned above. All training should be linked with existing training programs for educators, and accredited wherever possible (through links with agencies experienced in accredited Aboriginal programs, such as regional Aboriginal post-secondary Institutes⁴⁹ and universities with a record of delivering quality Aboriginal teacher training). Recognition of prior learning and flexible, long-term accreditation processes should be accommodated to allow for capacity development in Aboriginal communities.

⁴⁹ Some members of the National Association of Indigenous Institutes of Higher Learning (<http://www.naiihl.com/>) may be interested in developing this area.

Leaders and partners in the development of Aboriginal family literacy training for teachers may be located in several places, depending on regional interest levels, and priorities for courses developed may vary from one region to the other, including themes as diverse as:

- Building family literacy into Aboriginal ECE courses
- Adapting Language Nest models in urban environments
- Community based placements in Friendship Centres

These are only a few examples of possible courses. Themes for training will be defined locally and regionally based on need. However, a strategy for linking and sharing the development of training at a national level should also be encouraged, and could be related to the best practice areas and programming principles identified in this report. As training is developed, a network for Aboriginal educators could build a virtual board for posting Aboriginal family based learning courses that become part of a broader curriculum pool for teachers and literacy and family workers in Aboriginal communities.

10. DEVELOP AND SHARE LEARNING MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

An Aboriginal family literacy initiative can have a pivotal role in facilitating the availability and nourishment of indigenous cultural learning materials and resources in urban environments. These materials and resources should be developed in ways that respect the expertise of Aboriginal Elders and Traditional Teachers, and support Aboriginal linguistic and cultural revitalization and family and community reintegration.

10.1 DEVELOP CULTURAL LEARNING RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES

Develop culturally based/ culturally relevant learning materials and resources supporting integrated family literacy learning activities.

All materials and resources should reflect cultural content and methodologies that are defined locally and shared nationally. Elders and teachers holding authentic traditional knowledge are essential to the development of culturally based Aboriginal family literacy resources and

materials, since they hold knowledge about learning and *understanding* that are vital to the healthy revitalization of Aboriginal families and communities. Locally respected Aboriginal Elders will also maintain appropriate protocol regarding what is written and not written, (or what is filmed and not filmed, and so on) regarding Aboriginal traditional knowledge. It is also very important to build traditional indigenous perspectives into curriculum content and learning methods in ways that speak to various age groups and modern contexts.

Adaptation of existing materials, as well as new materials developed by teachers and other resource people should be considered, and a strategy for publishing and distribution of the materials should be included in proposals. Existing Aboriginal publishing agencies will be essential partners in the development, publishing and distribution of materials.

10.2 SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE MATERIALS

Support the development of Aboriginal language literature and teaching materials, in ways that support whole family language revitalization activities.

Aboriginal language revitalization can be linked in practical ways with intergenerational community priorities; for example, projects could be delivered training youth to utilize computers to help Elders catalogue languages; or, recipe books developed in Aboriginal languages could be linked with family nutrition/ cooking classes to support the ongoing usage of the languages in the home, while also encouraging bi-lingual literacy skills.

10.3 NETWORK THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING MATERIALS

Develop networks (or link with existing ones) to ensure the widespread availability of resources supporting Aboriginal family literacy programming.

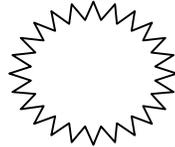
All Aboriginal family literacy materials developed through this strategy should be advertised and shared nationally and internationally, to ensure maximum availability, impact and usage, and inspire local adaptations of effective materials developed in different regions. Such a networking function could be linked with existing national agencies (possibly the National Indigenous Literacy Association) and made available online.

10.4 SUPPORT FAMILY ORIENTED LEARNING RESOURCE CENTRES

Develop family learning resource centres (or update existing resource centres) within Friendship Centres, with Aboriginal cultural resources, libraries, art and craft supplies, computers, internet access, and staff, open to all generation and programs.

Some Friendship Centres have resource centres and rooms with the above elements, but many are not fully equipped in ways that are necessary to support effective culture-based whole family literacy services, and many more resources are needed in this area. As recommendations for building community based teaching capacity are addressed, spaces will need to be developed that have locally determined cultural and linguistic resource materials, state-of-the-art technologies, and other supplies that support learning in ways that strengthen family cohesion and cultural and linguistic revitalization. Such resource centres also need to be supported by trained staff that can provide support in accessing resources and monitor the environments as needed. Aboriginal cultural resources should link closely with existing Elders and traditional teachers, since ultimately traditional cultural knowledge cannot be fully represented in literary formats. These kinds of resource rooms or centres are vital, since urban Aboriginal communities are in desperate need of spaces where learning is owned and defined by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people. Such resource centres have great potential to enhance the function of Friendship Centres as Aboriginal cultural “ambassadors” in urban environments.

CONCLUSION



FRAMING ABORIGINAL FAMILY LITERACY

Individuals and communities may hold distinct Aboriginal values and worldviews to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the level of assimilative force imposed on our background and cultural context, and on opportunities (or lack of them) to recover from these forces. Nonetheless, distinct Aboriginal worldviews and forms of knowledge have survived through extensive historical Canadian campaigns to criminalize and exterminate them, as well as current policies trivializing and marginalizing what has survived. In spite of all this, most Aboriginal leaders and communities hold these cultural ways as the force that should be guiding us into the future, although there are exceptions, as well as diverse interpretations of what this might mean. Looking at “family literacy” from distinct Aboriginal perspectives means considering several key needs:

The need to ground family literacy in distinct Aboriginal ways

Effective family literacy programming for Aboriginal communities needs to be based as much as possible on Aboriginal cultural principles, values and processes. This does not mean a wholesale return to *external* forms of Aboriginal family learning as they existed centuries or even decades ago; this could not be achieved for most Aboriginal people any more than modern multicultural Canadians can be assimilated to their own historical lifestyles - especially when we consider life in modern urban environments. However, it may be possible for the underlying *principles, values and processes* inherent in Aboriginal languages and cultures to be learned and applied to every facet of modern urban life, including approaches to

family literacy development. There are also distinct Aboriginal cultural characteristics and land-based forms of knowledge related to the traditional territories in what is now called Canada, and these are not found in any of the English, French or other recent immigrant groups in the country.

The need to consider distinct Aboriginal concepts of “family”

Aboriginal cultural conceptions and values imply a very broad sense of “family”, including a need to respect all stages of life in an interconnected and uninterrupted cycle; recently disrupted relationships between Aboriginal children and parents, and youth and elders, need to be restored in relation to the recovery and application of Aboriginal cultural ways in order to create balanced families and communities. Furthermore, we are responsible not only to our children, but also our children’s grandchildren, as well as our ancestors and relatives in the animal, plant and mineral worlds, and in worlds unseen. All these are our relations - our family - and we speak to them as our brothers and sisters, grandmothers and grandfathers. These are not merely abstract or fanciful plays-on-words; they reflect what is, or should be, clear, intimate and reciprocal *relationships*, in every direction.

The need to respect distinct Aboriginal values related to “literacy”

“Literacy”, however it is defined, often has a much different connotation in Aboriginal communities than it does in general.

Take literacy to mean simply the ability to read and write: from distinct Aboriginal cultural perspectives, this kind of literacy is often associated with assimilative tools based in very linear (and limited) forms of thought and knowledge which have more often done harm than good for Aboriginal communities. Even if we develop culturally sensitive materials, the actual *act* of writing or reading can definitely involve a *lowering* of meaning and understanding from the level of oral (and other traditional) forms of transmission, from certain Aboriginal points of view. These distinct Aboriginal perspectives on the role of written language contrast with the popular general representation of literacy as some kind of “right”, a “higher” form of learning, or cause worth fighting for in itself. The result has too often been a gulf between keepers of traditional wisdom and those who have committed themselves to modern institutionally driven learning processes, although this gulf seems to be gradually diminishing, at least within Aboriginal communities. Ultimately, the gulf can only be bridged when literate forms of knowledge assume an appropriate, *subservient* role

in relation to orally transmitted traditional indigenous knowledge deriving from authentic cultural sources.

Take “literacy” in a broader sense, in relation to developing “self-determination”, “analytical skills” and other inwardly “empowering” processes that add value and context to the mere act of reading and writing: there are still distinct Aboriginal cultural forms of understanding and relating to these terms; for example, proponents of “traditional knowledge” emphasize the source of true “empowerment” and authority as coming from a spiritual source (versus the mere development of “human cognition”, or “human rights”); “Aboriginal analysis” might favour more circular and holistic forms of perception over linear and logical ones; and the whole idea of “self-determination” will be distinctly coloured with strong inclinations toward community and service to community, over the mere survival and material success of determined individuals and their nuclear family units (although this is still important).

These perspectives on literacy need to be understood and respected in the design of literacy programs for Aboriginal people, through the development of unique approaches that contextualize literacy learning in relation to distinct Aboriginal cultural values. Otherwise, the risk is that literacy learning will continue to be regarded with great fear and stigma, and motivation will remain low in relation to learning new literacy skills, marked mainly by artificial external pressures rather than inner personal commitment.

The need to build cross-cultural capacity from a cultural base

Aboriginal communities do not want to exclude the provision of any kind of “literacy”, however it might be defined. Like everyone else, Aboriginal people need high reading and writing levels to survive in the “information age,” and the reality is that we may be struggling as lone individuals with a background of broken families and shattered communities in alienating modern institutions and urban settings (which can make “service to community” more of a challenge). The view of literacy as a mark of “progress” in a certain direction in coping with these realities cannot be denied. However, Aboriginal cultural foundations are increasingly being asserted as a solid basis for Aboriginal achievement in any context, including mainstream academic and economic fields. The underlying motivation and capacity for acquiring literacy skills are repeatedly emphasized as being inwardly based in strong cultural foundations and practices, which reach out to other cultural realities as needed, from a position of personal and communal strength.

MOVING TOWARD NEW MODELS OF LEARNING

An *Aboriginal* family literacy strategy, then, can hardly be considered in the way that “family literacy” is usually thought of – as an afterthought in public policy, a poorly funded sliver of programming for “at risk” communities, designed mainly to help them integrate into mainstream learning institutions. Nor can *Aboriginal* family literacy development be considered separately from a whole range of other *Aboriginal* community programming initiatives, especially those addressing the healing and reintegration of individuals, families and communities through cultural and linguistic revitalization. Considering the potential and needs related to developing *Aboriginal* family literacy education inevitably raises a wide range of challenging and urgent questions:

How can *Aboriginal* families once again become the conveyors of holistic indigenous cultural principles and forms of knowledge, and how does this process relate to various definitions of “success” in the modern world? How does a literacy learning process grounded in *Aboriginal* families relate to the process of nurturing the spirit, and concepts like the Good Mind, Orenda, or Bimaadziwin, and how can this process be supported organically according to cultural principles (rather than being defined or bogged down in bureaucratic frameworks)?

What are the implications of *Aboriginal* family-based approaches to learning, such as the deeper community observation of and engagement with children and youth, especially involving elders, and the improved discernment of natural leaders, teachers, healers, providers, and so on (rather than institutional “streaming” and bureaucratic definitions of “student achievement”)? How can environments supporting this kind of holistic assessment be developed? What *Aboriginal* cultural models might help identify and address the need for *different kinds of learning for different people*, according to their natural inclinations? How can holistic *Aboriginal* approaches to learning and child-rearing support the acquisition of literacy skills, not for its own sake, but for specific purposes, as needed in relation to each individual’s learning styles and natural inclinations? What *kinds* of literacy are needed for various *types* of students?⁵⁰

⁵⁰ These last questions are closely connected to another important *Aboriginal* principle of learning: that of allowing great personal freedom within a context of strong community and cultural cohesion. Individual learners may or may not be able to grasp higher levels of meaning related to various indigenous cultural frameworks (such as Creation stories or calendars, for example); but these frameworks are designed to be accessible at many levels, and can serve diverse learning purposes. Learning processes that are built on these cultural frameworks in authentic ways can have meaning in different ways for different learners, at different levels of understanding and application.

What does a “community service” orientation really mean? How do we help new generations of young people to find their own meaning and diverse natural purposes on the Earth, linking with, gaining strength from, and serving their families – including their ancestors and the generations yet to be born, and all of Creation? What is our responsibility as Aboriginal people in relation to other peoples and sacred places in the world?

How does the revitalization of Aboriginal languages, stories, and other cultural forms of expression inform Aboriginal learning and family healing processes, and how do they help us address the questions above? How can these activities be respectfully represented in literate forms while still maintaining the holistic integrity and vitality they have held for so many millennia? How can we reflect indigenous cultural symbols and concepts through different media and art forms, in a respectful manner that always refers back to the source as the authority (rather than reducing everything to the current emphasis on “educational achievement”, “economic development” at all costs, and “Western values” such as the rampant individual right to “self-expression” without any spiritual context)?

CHALLENGE AND HOPE

There are many challenges and barriers to addressing these themes and questions in practice. It may be difficult to gain widespread and meaningful understanding, support and partnerships for an Aboriginal family literacy strategy as presented in this report through Canadian institutions. This is to be expected, since understanding indigenous modes of thought today is not easy and our public and higher education systems still provided extremely limited opportunities in this direction, as a rule. However, determined individuals within non-Aboriginal governments and institutions have already begun to prove that it is possible to work around institutional barriers to provide services that are at least trying to be respectful of Aboriginal cultural perspectives.

At any rate, even if the flexibility, capacity and will to support a significant culturally based Aboriginal family learning strategy may not yet exist in Canadian (and even some Aboriginal) governments and institutions, the desire at a grassroots level to address all aspects of learning through families is very high, and will hopefully prove irresistible in the near future. Over and over, Aboriginal people keep returning to similar themes: the revitalization of languages and cultures, the healing of families, and the

need for cross-cultural education and community empowerment in the context of modern urban survival. While the term “family literacy” may be too narrow to fully address these priorities, an effective family literacy strategy cannot be separated from them, and is an essential part of being able to address them successfully.

The answers to the themes and questions raised here lie *within* Aboriginal cultures, communities and families. Ultimately, the grassroots learning needs of Aboriginal families and communities will bear fruit, whether they are addressed or not. We have already seen the fruits of not addressing them: high rates of poverty, suicide, gang membership, incarceration, and other forms of violence. Canadian education systems are still generally failing to address the learning needs of Aboriginal peoples in holistic ways that provide higher levels of hope and meaning. From an Aboriginal culture based perspective, “student achievement” in these systems is important, but not as an end in itself; rather, it should be a side-effect or benefit of a much broader focus: the provision of holistic, whole family, spiritually and culturally based learning systems that address all aspects of the human being and enable communities to build healthy and sustainable societies which are deeply informed by indigenous knowledge and principles.

Perhaps the greatest hope in addressing Aboriginal family literacy is the potential of Aboriginal approaches to inform family based learning for communities everywhere. The questions and issues listed above could apply to almost any family, community or cultural group around the world today. Aboriginal perspectives can help all peoples transcend the outdated economic and educational models that still largely govern our existence. A culture based indigenous family literacy initiative should not only inform the better integration of Aboriginal students into mainstream learning environments; it should also inform and inspire a re-visioning of the learning process and a significant shift in the outdated institutional perspectives currently framing our public education systems. The generation being born may be able to integrate this knowledge, if we give them the opportunity. We need to do more than merely help them adapt to educational institutions and materialistic economic values that are themselves profoundly out of balance and largely inadequate for meeting the rapidly changing global realities of the 21st century. Ideally the ways we represent our traditional worldviews will trigger learners at an essential level and inspire them to seek further culturally grounded knowledge at the same time they are expanding their horizons into a world that is moving incredibly fast, often in chaotic directions.

If we do our job right, at least some of our children today will carry our traditions into the future from a position of strength and deep inner understanding that empowers them to apply indigenous ways responsibly at an international level. If we do the job right, they will live these concepts from an inner place, and for some of them, their whole lives will be symbols. If we do the job right, Aboriginal children and youth today will not only be leaders among Aboriginal people tomorrow; they will become respected and beloved for their work and leadership in all arenas, bringing indigenous knowledge out of the shadows (when it is appropriate) and into a central position that reinvigorates learning processes everywhere, as well as how we think about art, science, justice, economics and governance. Holistic aboriginal ways of thinking and expression are potentially an essential factor in breathing new life into all aspects of our existence. This work cannot be achieved without the holistic education and reintegration of Aboriginal families.

Culturally defined literacy learning in family contexts will be an essential component in fulfilling our contribution as Aboriginal peoples to the world. It will be a vital way of informing how our traditions are translated into modern contexts, as long as the process is based on a relationship with true Spiritual and cultural authority, and maintained according to the traditions of our local nations, rather than through the false authority of distant bureaucracies. Like a heartbeat or a drum, Aboriginal traditions have the power to reconnect the bond between mother and child, Elder and youth, and provide effective cultural contexts for reintegrating communities and providing natural, family-based learning processes. These natural learning processes revolve in a circle like dancers around a drum, in respect for the source of Creation and constantly reminding us of the need to strive for holistic balance in everything, to the best of our abilities. It may still be possible to place literacy and learning for the world today in relation to heartbeat of our Mother. It may still be possible to ground our learning in a balanced relationship with the Earth and with the source of Creation, in the way a baby is bound to the heartbeat of his mother. Our children are demanding it.

*Life doesn't have to be this way – it can be good too
So whoever has a messed up life, this song's for you...
Listen to these words, 'cause these words are the truth:*

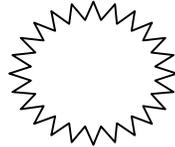
*Let's talk about all the problems and why -
Hold on, I gotta wipe my eye
Let's talk about the problems for a minute,
How all the youth are doing drugs, souls lost in it*

*Can't keep running away from the sadness it creates
It cuts your life short being turned away from the gates
Kids getting shot, bodies left on the block
Lost from the anger, stray bullet from a stranger
Families broken up, one child all alone
Sitting in his room, heart broken on his own
Heart's full of hurt, getting so low, so low
Screaming out for help, while you're there let me know
You been dealt a bad hand, had no choice but to take it
And through all the pain you survived, you didn't fake it
A true warrior at heart, knew it from the start
You're going to push through it all, then make your mark...*

Don't cry Momma, I'll be with you someday...

*~ From "Don't Cry Momma" by the Poetic Warriorz
(Aboriginal hip hop group based in London, Ontario)
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275 Maclaren Street
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 0L9
TELEPHONE: (613) 563-4844
FAX: (613) 594-3428
www.nafc.ca

Prepared by

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