

ABORIGINAL ADULT  
READING LITERACY  
BENCHMARKS  
CONSULTATION

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between February and April 2011, twenty-five consultations were conducted with community-based Aboriginal literacy programs in both urban and rural areas of Alberta to learn what curriculum materials and “best practices” practitioners are using and to get feedback about what would be helpful to them in implementing the Alberta Reading Benchmarks.

The consultation found that *wise practices* are a better approach than “best practices” because they are context based and not necessarily transferable. They involve:

- hiring Aboriginal instructors
- using local tutors, facilitators, or mentors
- elder involvement
- including essential skills, employability skills, life skills/enhancement, financial literacy, and computer literacy
- holistic approaches that look at the entire person including needs such as child care and transportation
- incentives or living allowances while studying
- flexible-intake, self-paced programs that offer extra time to complete if needed
- building confidence by including Native studies content
- learning by doing
- thorough orientations to full-time studies
- meeting people in individualized and locally appropriate ways.

The following recommendations were made concerning the implementation of the benchmarks:

- Context should be considered in the benchmarks.
- Publishers and creators of curriculum should be well-informed about the reading benchmarks so that they can rate their material to the benchmarks.
- The Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board should be approached regarding the reading benchmarks to determine how they integrate with apprenticeship entrance requirements.
- An assessment tool on the reading benchmarks should be developed with the following considerations:
  - It must begin with an oral and interactive component to engage learners at the lowest level and increase confidence.
  - It must include a choice so that people can pick the contexts with which they feel most comfortable.
- Training should begin with talking about the underlying philosophy of benchmarking.
- Training opportunities should include funding for travel and accommodation.

- Once relationships have been established among people learning together, further training can use technological solutions (such as web-conferencing, teleconferencing, e-newsletters, etc.) to reinforce and continue developing the tools to the context.
- When people working in Aboriginal literacy get together for training, they should be given the opportunity to develop a community of practice to share wise practices, results from pilot programs, and research knowledge.

This document provides a brief overview of the community consultation about benchmarks in Aboriginal literacy in Alberta. Beginning with programming, it looks for things that are working well in Aboriginal literacy. It then looks at the implications of the Aboriginal world view on literacy as participants articulated it. Finally, it turns to resource issues such as curriculum/materials, assessments, human resources including training needs, and funding. Other wisdom finds its way into a concluding section called “Other Considerations.”

This report acknowledges the people who shared their information and experience in the adult Aboriginal literacy — the document compiles their voices. Their contributions are identified in parentheses.

## BACKGROUND

The consultation aimed to:

1. present the proposed draft reading benchmarks to the participants;
2. get information about what the consulted groups’ programs are currently using as curriculum materials, resources, “best practices,” etc; and
3. get feedback from them about what would be helpful in implementing the reading benchmarks (e.g., training, curriculum, resources, best practices, etc.).

The consultation’s goal was to talk with:

- Aboriginal literacy researchers (minimum 3)
- Aboriginal and public colleges — that is, private (band-affiliated) and public colleges that serve a high population of Aboriginal learners (minimum 6)
- Aboriginal-literacy-serving community organizations (minimum 15 to 20).

In order to determine who might be contacted in this consultation, each of the Alberta adult literacy benchmarks advisory committee members or their representatives were contacted (see appendix 1). In the case of the community adult-literacy councils, I made a list of communities where I knew there was a large Aboriginal demographic, based on their websites. This was confirmed by the Community Learning Network to be a good approach to involving the councils. In a snowball effect, the list grew to 128 because people who were contacted suggested other people. However, many of these contacts (81 in all) ended up as dead ends.

When I contacted people I mostly used the name of the person who had referred me to them to create relationship connection and legitimize the consultation. A total of twenty-five consultations took place. They included: three researchers, five college representatives, four colleges/communities, and thirteen communities.

Consultations designated as colleges/communities refer to programs that are run by a college at a community's invitation — they are clearly community based in their design and activity. Of the seven colleges, three were public provincial colleges (comprehensive community institutions) and four were Indigenous colleges.

Although I am not an Aboriginal person, I was raised in rural Northern Alberta near Aboriginal people and communities. I currently live my life integrated into the Aboriginal community through relatives (I was married to an Aboriginal man and have Aboriginal children) and my social interactions. I have worked at Northern Lakes College in institutional research for over ten years. I am conscious of the cultural lens that tends to view Aboriginal people as deficient related to some inexplicable norm. I also recognize the complex and varied contexts of Aboriginal communities.

## THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

Most consultations took place over the telephone. Four took place in person. The consultations took place between February and April 2011. The project was initially scheduled to be complete by 30 April but the work was extended into May.<sup>1</sup>

Each consultation involved sharing information about the benchmarks through a Powerpoint presentation and the draft benchmarks. In most cases I sent these to participants ahead of time via e-mail. I went through the presentation verbally to allow for discussion and questions. Within the presentation's design there was time for participants to tell me about their programs. I focused on learning about their curriculum/resources including assessment tools, best practices, and training needs related to the benchmarks.

## FINDINGS

### *Programming (Wise Practices)*

In this consultation I talked with people from rural, urban, and reserve/settlement communities and examined full-time and part-time programs, including a few family literacy and corrections programs. People have taken strongly context-based approaches for success in this variety of programs.

The notion of best practices has been critiqued in Aboriginal community research because of its implication that what works in one context should work in others. By contrast, the notion of "wise practices" suggests a more culturally appropriate and contextualized understanding. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux and Brian Calliou's paper called "Best Practices in Aboriginal Community Development: A Literature Review and Wise Practices Approach" is a good explanation of this concept.<sup>2</sup>

Some full-time programs are designed with a goal in mind. For example, one full-time literacy program focuses on helping participants achieve the academic ability to complete their apprenticeship entrance exam (Houle-Steinhauer). Practical goals such as getting a driver's license and filling out forms were also mentioned (Goddard). Others find that their funder requires them to have students state career goals (Crone). Still others recognize that career exploration is part of the program (Lindberg, Woyiwada). Because seeing the personal benefits of part-time programs is important for students, such benefits are shared through word-of-mouth advertising and referrals (anonymous). One part-time program mentioned that the best follow-through from participants occurred when their participation was mandated by child services (Schram).

<sup>1</sup> The changed schedule also meant that several potentially good contacts were never consulted toward the end of the project.

<sup>2</sup> It is available at [http://www.banffcentre.ca/indigenous-leadership/library/pdf/best\\_practices\\_in\\_aboriginal\\_community\\_development.pdf](http://www.banffcentre.ca/indigenous-leadership/library/pdf/best_practices_in_aboriginal_community_development.pdf)

One of the wise practices that several people mentioned is the hiring of Aboriginal instructors or, when they are unavailable, local Aboriginal mentors and tutors (O'Rourke, Weaslefat). Having local people involved, even as facilitators/mentors, was important to support programs (Cairns, Eek, Flett, O'Rourke). One interviewee described how she made sure that there were Aboriginal instructors and guests at the beginning of the program though she shifted to a broader group over time to expose students to a variety of people. She noted that when people are beginning to receive feedback on their writing ability, having someone from the same cultural group deliver that feedback often makes it easier to receive (Lindberg). Whoever provides instruction and feedback needs to be encouraging and build upon success to improve students' self-esteem (Lindberg).

A related program practice was the regular involvement of elders in programs. This was particularly valuable for urban-based programs (though community-based program also invited elders into their classroom). Full-time programs were more likely to invite elders although one community-based family literacy program also included elder stories with the children and parents (Dore, Lacombe, Lindberg, McPhee, O'Rourke, Weaslefat).

In an area that has been culturally deeply affected by a long history of contact, the participants spoke about the loss of culture. They found that students are inspired by their own leaders who are role models of living cultural pride (Eek). By contrast, in a region with more limited cultural contact, Aboriginal guests who tell their woeful stories of recovery are not demonstrating the cultural value of humility and are often not well received (Woyiwada).

Several full-time program representatives talked about the importance of including essential skills, employability skills, and life skills/enhancement in their programming (Crone, Lindberg, O'Rourke, Houle-Steinhauer, Woyiwada). Part-time community-based programs were more likely to look at financial literacy, computer literacy, and life skills (Tyler-Moon). People from a couple of programs with a focus on combining literacy with employment talked about how difficult it was to get industry partners to recognize the program's value (Houle-Steinhauer, Lindberg).

The need for a holistic approach that looks at the entire person was echoed by several participants from a variety of programs (Weaslefat). This translated into helping to address social needs like daycare and transportation before people are able to attend to their literacy learning (Weaslefat). It also leads to some flexible attendance programs such as four days a week being considered full-time attendance (Woyiwada). Even for part-time programs, the need for concentrated time for literacy learning could include child care if that was required by some participants, based on their individual situations.

The use of incentives for part-time and voluntary programs ranged from grocery and gas vouchers (Lacombe) to getting a computer once the student attains four levels (including computer literacy) or receiving a library card (Tyler-Moons).

A family literacy advocate talked about how children are very important in Aboriginal communities. Although people will do anything for their children (Flett), sometimes parents are self-conscious about their own reading ability and don't participate in family literacy for that reason (Flett). Engaging in literacy for their children committed or motivated parents in ways that weren't available to parents of older children (that is, the children's older ages disqualified parents who weren't eligible to participate) (Lacombe).

Both full-time and part-time programs are often self-paced (Dore). Students who come from a very regimented and "dictated" learning regime have to learn a self-paced method but they appreciate that style once it's adopted (Crone). Often programs provide flexible intake times (Woyiwada) and extra time to complete the programs. One instructor had some students participate in a more rigorously scheduled course through the Internet and, though they found it challenging, they were able to keep up. She wondered if people were taking

the extra time to complete because they could or whether it was really needed (Woyiwada). Another talked about the importance of individualized learning plans (McPhee).

There is a common recognition that students with literacy issues lack self-confidence, particularly in new situations. Sometimes self-confidence arises directly (Tyler-Moon) and sometimes it's encouraged when students have a private space to ask the instructor questions (Dore). Confidence is also fostered when courses include information about Aboriginal history and contemporary reality through an integration of Native studies into the programming (Houle-Steinhauer, Lindberg). Having more advanced students helping those who are not as far along further serves as a confidence builder (Petrie). Some literacy workers also mentioned being aware of a community-development approach to empower students (McPhee, Tyler-Moon). This involves using material that has currency in participants' lives. One program tries to draw on local stories though the local mentors and reserve life in general. Another focuses on common experiences with addiction and learning disabilities (McPhee).

Some people learn better by doing which can be accommodated in a number of ways. One program talked about having students move around, cutting up pieces of sentences and putting them together again and acting out concepts (Dore). Others talked about interactive field trips to stores (to use shopping coupons), to the bank, and to the library (Tyler-Moon). One relatively isolated reserve community takes field trips to a not-too-distant city to read menus and use the transit system (Woyiwada) as part of their experience of the urban environment. In another case, learning by doing involves working in partnerships with a bank and toastmasters (Radley). One aspect of these activities is to expose students to a broader and less-familiar world (McPhee). It is also about working with community partners.

For students returning to full-time studies, orientations are important and can include learning how to be a student again, study skills, managing time, computer uses and abuses, organizing a binder, what to do at lunch, etc. (Dore).

There was a mixed response in terms of where to meet people to encourage their participation in part-time literacy programs. One respondent suggested that neutral territory or even meeting at home is helpful (Schram). However, another suggested that because of the loss of culture some people are very protective and private so visiting their homes would not be appropriate (Flett). One part-time program uses a very flexible approach involving home visits, texts, tests, and phone calls by local facilitators to follow up with participants.

Several people talked about attendance as an issue in full-time programs. Having someone local follow up with people helps with their attendance, which is critical to success (McPhee). Someone described two models being used in different scenarios. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) and Service Canada generally tie a training allowance to attendance whereas the Alberta Employment and Immigration model gives a monthly living allowance at the beginning of the month, much like social assistance. The first model is valued more by participants (Lindberg) and is practised with local adaptations in other places (Woyiwada).

People noted other "wise practices" that were important such as how the space set-up can suggest openness and invitation when round tables are used (Dore). One talked about consistency in the learning environment and in the people who teach (McPhee). Another mentioned the importance of repetition to keep reinforcing the learning (Woyiwada). This group of students often takes more than one exposure to learn something new which requires patience with repetition. One found that students enjoyed making up questions that would "stump" other students to add some fun to the class (Petrie).

I spoke briefly with several people doing literacy programming in communities where there is a high population of Aboriginal people in the towns and regions that they serve. Many spoke about how there was an abundance of immigrants studying in their programs but Aboriginal people rarely sought their services and, when they did, they often did not follow through. This low turnout and follow-through was despite programmers' outreach efforts in places like friendship centres or the college's strategic location near Native counselling services offices.

### *World View*

This consultation was also meant to address differences in the approach to literacy in Aboriginal communities based on world view or cultural differences. One researcher spoke about the importance of viewing literacy broadly. It is about making meaning in the broadest sense and includes more than text-based literacy. She defined literacy as "a meaningful configuration of symbols, signs, and representations of who we are based on our language, culture, values, and behaviours and how we transmit this to others" (Laderoute). This is somewhat recognized in programming that involves elders, storytelling, acting out concepts, and visual representations of meaning. Meaning is made through numerous visual clues such as the colour of price signs that indicate sales in grocery stores. Some people practising in the field seem to be taking this more holistic approach to literacy as meaning making in its broadest sense (Snip).

Context (Goddard, Laderoute) and relevance (Petrie) are also crucial to literacy learning. An example is how teaching about geometry using teepees also includes revisiting the stories related to teepees and their cultural significance. In other words, it's teaching a concept within a story of its significance (Petrie). Beyond the text and the task levels, context has to be recognized (Laderoute).<sup>3</sup>

➔ *Recommendation: Context should be considered in the benchmarks.*

Most Aboriginal languages in Alberta are not written and none are text-based. Although respected elders are sometimes not literate in the narrow definition of text-based literacy, they are respected in their communities as being wise people who create and share meaning. This can make it quite socially acceptable and comfortable to be a non-text-based person in an Aboriginal community (Schram). Some reserve communities are relatively insular and it is only in interaction with a broader world that literacy becomes important (Goddard). Demonstrating the value of text-based literacy is a long-term effort on the part of people in the community who have come to recognize its importance. Sometimes the practical applications like getting a driver's license (Goddard) are motivations for text-based learning and sometimes it's about wanting more opportunities for children (Flett, Lacombe).

It is important to really listen to what individuals and communities need and want out of literacy learning (Goddard). For example, some people work in camps for oil companies but have found that they have limited promotional opportunities without their GED so that certification is their goal. Others are seniors whose families have moved away and they want to stay in touch using the Internet. Sometimes these seniors just want to know how to send and receive e-mail and pictures. It's important to listen to what someone really needs or wants and to be respectful and not judge them (Lacombe). Some communities are working to reduce the rate of dependency on social assistance by taking responsibility for their future.

Someone aptly described a difference in philosophy regarding the funding of full-time literacy students in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Alberta Employment and Immigration funding focuses on getting people ready for the workforce as quickly as possible. People entering literacy programs funded through this provincial

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Laderoute, "Nihiyaw Awasak—Validation of Cree Literacies: An Ethnographic Study of Children at Home, at School, and in the Community," PhD dissertation, University of Alberta, 2005.

program are required to state their career goals. However, career goals are often not people's motivation for improving their literacy. Instead it can be something as simple as wanting to read to their grandchildren or help youth with their homework. These reasons for pursuing literacy are more valued in the Saskatchewan model that seems to be founded on the philosophical belief that everyone deserves an education. It's the difference between education and training (Crone). A similar philosophy is also articulated in the Alberta government's *Living Literacy* report which expresses a vision that "Albertans have the literacy competencies to participate fully and successfully in living, learning and work."<sup>4</sup> Although work is part of its vision, the report recognizes that literacy is also needed for other aspects of living. My observation is that Aboriginal communities seem to value the idea of literacy for life rather than only for work.

Judgement that there is something missing or a lack of some sort in Aboriginal communities because of lower literacy levels is unproductive. As one participant said, "we've spent enough time looking at barriers — that's not helpful. We need to take responsibility for moving forward." One program doesn't do assessments. They simply start everyone at the beginning and make sure that material at the start includes some unique cultural content that will be of interest and possibly even new to everyone.

Many Aboriginal people have had negative initial educational experiences (Dore, Schram, Tyler-Moon). Some literacy program representatives wondered about the view students develop of learning when they have been unsuccessful in school. Without going into detail about the effects of residential schools here, their legacy has had a significant effect on the value attributed to book learning in some communities. Program content that instills cultural pride is therefore essential in literacy work (Weaselfat). Building on strengths and being culturally sensitive is also imperative (Cairns). It also needs to be recognized that English is a second language for many Aboriginal learners. Their fluency of expression in this second language is often limited (Goddard, O'Rourke, Woyiwada).

Two individuals expressed concern that benchmarking imposed from an outside agency might not be well received in a community (Cairns, Goddard). One suggested that benchmarking is a foreign concept and the rationale behind it would need to be explained before others might find it acceptable (Cairns).

Another respondent described the mainstream education system as encouraging forging forward before complete mastery or learning from one's mistakes prior to trying again. An example of this might be how many people fail their learner's and driver's license exams every year. She observed that in Aboriginal communities there is a stronger desire to be exposed to some new learning and then withdraw to practise it until mastery is achieved. This takes time. When someone is ready, s/he can and will return to demonstrate mastery (Snip).

I also observed that Aboriginal students at higher levels who are expected by provincial curriculum to dissect or present arguments often find the process difficult because there is no cultural value in argumentation (Snip). The unique attributes of the Aboriginal world view are evident in literacy education.

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<sup>4</sup> Living Literacy: A Literacy Framework for Alberta's Next Generation Economy. <http://aet.alberta.ca/post-secondary/policy/livingliteracy.aspx>, p. 6.

## RESOURCES

### *Resource and Curriculum Material*

Participants provided an extensive list of the resources and curriculum material that they use, which include:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Alberta school curriculum (Crone, Dore) which incorporates the study of novels that have some Aboriginal themes. For example, <i>Z is for Zachariah</i> by Robert O'Brien (New York: Simon Pulse, 1974) is science fiction about survivors of a nuclear holocaust and <i>The Lady at Batoche</i> by David Richards (Saskatoon: Thistledown Press, 1999) deals with the battle of Batoche from different perspectives (Crone).</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Vocabulary Boosters</i> workbook series by Susan Rogers (Edmonton: Grass Roots Press); <i>The Spelling Tool Box</i> (Edmonton: Grass Roots Press); <i>Oxford Picture Dictionary</i> (by Jayme Adelson-Goldstein and Norma Shapiro, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); <i>Amazing Alberta: 100 Word Puzzles about Our Province</i> (2005 Marion Hoffmann); and <i>English Express</i> (a subscription service for adult learners by Alberta Advanced Education and Technology at <a href="http://eae.alberta.ca/englishexpress">http://eae.alberta.ca/englishexpress</a>. It is no longer offered.) (Tyler-Moon)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Store coupons (Tyler-Moon)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arrow Might — an at-home adult-learning literacy program. Available at <a href="http://arrowmight.ca/">http://arrowmight.ca/</a></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Further Education Society of Alberta has developed their own material that is available on a cost-recovery basis (Cairns)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Science Research Associates (SRA) kits available at <a href="http://www.mcgraw-hill.co.uk/sra/reading_for_understanding.htm">http://www.mcgraw-hill.co.uk/sra/reading_for_understanding.htm</a> (Hornick)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Skill Plan resources out of BC for the construction industry. Available at <a href="http://www.skillplan.ca">http://www.skillplan.ca</a> (Petrie)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rhymes that Bind program (Family Literacy resource at <a href="http://www.famlit.ca/programs_and_projects/programs/rhymes.shtml">http://www.famlit.ca/programs_and_projects/programs/rhymes.shtml</a>)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Read On" program of the Lethbridge public library available at <a href="http://www.lethlib.ca/adult/literacy">http://www.lethlib.ca/adult/literacy</a> (Weaselfat)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grassroots Press (Lacombe, Woyiwada)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resources for NWT (O'Rourke)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A variety of reading material including researching on the computer, and reading comic books (Lindberg)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using material with Aboriginal content — novels, magazines, newspapers, etc. (Dore)</li> </ul>

Respondents made many comments about the material. Some found it difficult to find appropriate material with Aboriginal content versus immigrant content (Eek, Radley). Although material that reflects Aboriginal ways of knowing would be useful (Eek), there is always the danger of overstating “Aboriginalness” (Schram). Material that reflects rural realities (hunting, fishing, the land) would be appreciated, particularly at the lower level (Schram, Laderoute). Sometimes material that could be shared with children would also be appreciated (Eek). Finding good contemporary material is a challenge (Dore, Radley). It would be helpful if resources were rated so that financially limited literacy programs could get the best “bang for their buck” (Radley). This includes both quality and reading level and leads to the following recommendation.

→ *Recommendation: Publishers and creators of curriculum should be informed of the reading benchmarks so that they can rate their material to them.*

This next recommendation comes from an individual literacy program that dealt specifically with literacy training for apprentices (Houle-Steinhauer).

→ *Recommendation: The Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board should be approached regarding the reading benchmarks to determine how they integrate with apprenticeship entrance requirements.*

### Assessments

A variety of assessment tools were being used in different programs, namely:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Canadian Adult Reading Assessment — it was piloted on the first cohort by Marilyn Luft who was a project manager with Alberta workforce essentials (Houle-Steinhauer).</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TOEWS and the Service Canada Essential Skills (Lindberg)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CAT (Cognitive Abilities Test) now that TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education) is less readily available (O'Rourke)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CAAT (Canadian Adult Achievement Test) (Petrie, Woyiwada)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) assessment from the Southern Alberta Language Assessment Service (SALAS), who is certified to do these assessments. An invaluable resource for both tutors and students is the CLB's “Can Do Checklists” (Radley).</li> </ul>

Several people spoke of a desire for an assessment tool related to the reading benchmarks. There was some concern about using simple multiple-choice tests (Laderoute). The need for choice in doing an assessment is also important (Goddard, Laderoute). Someone described an assessment tool that involved reading word lists and picking one with which the participant felt most comfortable and doing an assessment based on the stated level of comfort with the word list (Houle-Steinhauer). One person described an assessment approach that she uses starting with a verbal assessment that focuses on building confidence in simple things like alphabet recognition with upper and lower cases, reading individual words, and then lines of text, etc. (Woyiwada).

Related to the assessment question is the interpretation and marking of assessments and how the assessor can colour or affect the process (Laderoute). One researcher talked about a study in a remote Aboriginal

community where several people who had ostensibly completed high school were functioning at a grade-four level (Goddard). It begs the question of what happens when people don't meet standards.

The benchmarks were seen as particularly useful in assessing individuals and for people moving between programs (Poole). They were also seen as more of a tool for the instructors than for the learners (Cairns).

→ *Recommendation: An assessment tool on the reading benchmarks should be developed with the following considerations.*

→ *It must begin with an oral and interactive component to engage learners at the lowest level and increase confidence.*

→ *It must include a choice so that people can pick the contexts with which they feel most comfortable.*

### *Human Resources*

The pool of educated people in Aboriginal communities who have the ability to address literacy issues is still small. Those who do this work are dedicated and share their skills and abilities (Flett). Isolation and burnout are not uncommon (Lacombe).

One of the challenges facing northern communities is that those working in the field of Aboriginal education (and likely other managers) have a lot on their plates. A small number of individuals are responsible for providing programs and services in K-12 and postsecondary education, for example, head-start programs; engaging with the local schools; sometimes boarding out students for high school; bussing students; and other responsibilities in education, employment, and training. They are working with various levels of government, colleges, school boards, parents, and many others. Many are responsible for extensive accountability reporting. Although the topic of literacy is important in northern Alberta, there is very little room on people's desks for added responsibilities. This is a capacity issue (Edge).

Applying for short-term funding opportunities can be particularly challenging (Poole). Many funding opportunities seek collaboration but these relationships take a great deal of time and effort to establish (Eek). In rural communities, supportive agencies are often unable to supply more than a letter of support because they, too, are limited in their funding (Eek).

Often it is social development workers as much as educators who see the need for literacy work with adults in the community due to the high rates of social-assistance dependency.

### *Training Needs*

It was clear from some responses to benchmarking that there needs to be training on benchmarking but also on the philosophy of benchmarking (Cairns). Those working in Aboriginal literacy are like other learners — they can absorb only so much at one time and often need to learn with follow-up opportunities over time (Cairns).

Given the human resource limitations, respondents were very creative in how they would like to learn more about using benchmarks. Some suggested regional training (Eek, Tyler-Moon). Others suggested the use of technology such as Skype (Schram) or video-conferencing (Eek). The cost of travel for training is more than some agencies can afford because of the combination of travel distance and accommodation. Sometimes people are willing to take their personal time to travel or even to attend sessions but the time away from their communities can place a burden on others who have to accommodate their absence (Schram, Eek). Some spoke about how

effective it is to have people come into their region to work with large groups of interested individuals, including volunteers (Flett, Lacombe). Others talked about training staff who then pass their information on to volunteers through regular volunteer professional development sessions (Radley).

- *Recommendation: Training should begin with talking about the underlying philosophy of benchmarking.*
- *Recommendation: Training opportunities should include funding for travel and accommodation.*
- *Recommendation: Training should be followed up using technological solutions to bridge distance (i.e., web-conferencing, teleconferencing, e-newsletters, etc.) to reinforce and continue development of the tools in relation to contexts.*

Someone I spoke with called me back asking about the results of my consultations. She wanted to know what I had learned and was looking to learn from wise practices elsewhere (Petrie). It made me realize how many people were asking about what resources I might know about. One participant described hearing about a pilot project but not knowing how it turned out and being curious about what was learned. There was clearly interest in learning from one another and possibly developing a community of practice consistent with some of the values of supporting innovation and excellence in teaching and learning and sharing responsibility as it was described in the *Living Literacy* document.

- *Recommendation: When people working in Aboriginal literacy get together for training they should be given the opportunity to develop a community of practice to share wise practices, results from pilot programs, and research knowledge.*

### *Funding*

It would be unfair to present this information without any comment on funding issues. Several participants spoke about the human resources that are occupied with chasing funding dollars for literacy programming of any sort. Year-to-year funding with its reporting requirements drains limited human resources (Eek, Houle-Steinhauer, O'Rourke, Weaselfat). Given the discussion about limited human resources in Aboriginal literacy, it would behoove funders to consider this in their program development. In one case a pilot project was funded but secure funding for ongoing literacy work is more difficult to attain (Lindberg). Sometimes lessons learned from pilot projects can improve programming but funded time is needed to develop good or improved programming. Literacy programming is expensive compared to other training programs because of the need for lower student-instructor ratios (O'Rourke) — a need that isn't always recognized by funders. One person even suggested that one-on-one human interactions are the best form of learning literacy. Also, the funding to create appropriate material is difficult to attain (Lindberg).

### *Other Considerations*

There is a big gap for people who attempt to enter full-time Adult Basic Education programs and comprehensive community institutions but do not score high enough to meet entrance requirements. Often these individuals are ready, willing, and able to attend full-time studies. Unfortunately, they are often referred back to part-time community programs that do not fully meet their needs (Collinge, Eek). An example someone shared was of a young woman who left her remote reserve to attend college in the nearest community because she wanted to train to be a nurse. Unfortunately, she didn't have the required literacy to begin upgrading in a full-time program and had no way of supporting herself in the community where she had moved to pursue her training. The *Living Literacy* document talks about the need to "introduce new approaches to increase the numbers of adults participating in foundation literacy programs including ... access to tuition, books, supplies

and income support" (7). Filling this gap would certainly be a start. For rural communities it is difficult to get enough people together for literacy classes and yet it is equally difficult to get volunteers to give individual tutoring.

Another entry point for literacy training is supporting school-aged children with homework (O'Rourke). Aboriginal parents often have the desire to help their children but they are less likely to ask for assistance in the school when they are unable to help their children with their homework (Petrie). One community had a program for parents helping with homework which led to recognizing the need for further literacy work in the community (O'Rourke). This is an invitation to work together with the schools.

Two ongoing initiatives are relevant to this work. The first is the community learning participatory research through Athabasca University that is consulting with Aboriginal communities in Northern Alberta about their learning needs (Edge). The second is Aboriginal elder consultation work by Calgary Learns (Poole).

## APPENDIX 1: LIST OF PEOPLE CONSULTED

There were four people I consulted who asked not to be identified by name.

<b>Organization</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>Last Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Location</b>
Athabasca University	Lois	Edge	Academic Coordinator, Indigeneous Studies	Athabasca
Blue Quills First Nations College	Bernadine	Houle-Steinhauer	Director, Special Projects	St. Paul
Blue Quills First Nations College	Linda	Petrie	Trades	St. Paul
Bow Valley College	Danielle	Dore	Instructor, Marlborough Aboriginal Upgrading Program	Calgary
Bow Valley College	Diny	Woyiwada	Eden Valley Reserve Program	Eden Valley
Calgary Learns	Krista	Poole	Executive Director	Calgary
Fishing Lake	Rubye	Lacombe	Aboriginal Adult Literacy Project	Sputinow
Further Education Society of Alberta	Elaine	Cairns		Calgary
Lakeland College	Joy	Collinge	Chair, Upgrading and UT and Business	Lloydminster
Lakeland College	Sandra	Crone		Lloydminster
Lethbridge Public Library	Lil	Radley		Lethbridge
Manning and District Further Education Council	Kelly	Schram	Coordinator	Manning
Norquest College	Elaine	McPhee	Doing work at Enoch	Edmonton
Northeast Community Adult Learning Council	Marilyn	Eek	Coordinator	Fort Vermilion
Northeast Community Adult Learning Council	Odelle	Flett		Fort Vermilion
Red Crow College	Roy	Weaselfat	VP Academic	Cardston
Researcher	Sally	Goddard		Charlottetown PE
Researcher	Barb	Laderoute		Gift Lake
Riel Institute for Education and Learning	Wendy	Lindberg		Calgary
St. Paul Community Learning Association	Diana	Tyler-Moon	Executive Director	St. Paul
Yellowhead Tribal College	Seaneen	O'Rourke	Dean of Programs	Edmonton





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