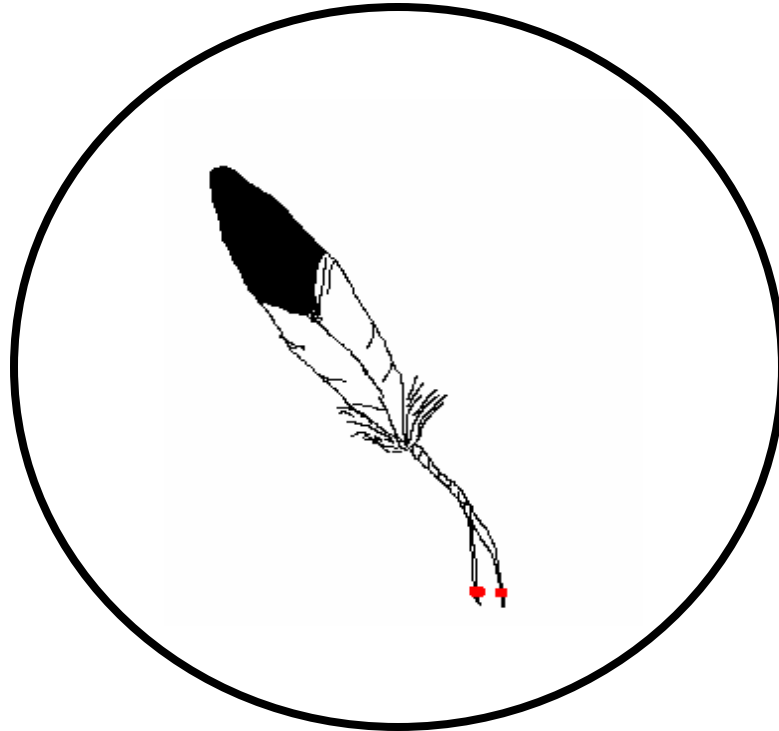


**Literacy and Learning: Acknowledging Aboriginal Holistic
Approaches to Learning in Relation to 'Best Practices'
Literacy Training Programs**

Final Report



Prepared for The Ministry of Training, Colleges and University (MTCU)

And

The National Literacy Secretariat (NLS)

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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT)

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The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto,

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The logo is composed of an Eagle feather, symbolic of honour, respect and strength. The circle is symbolic of equality, unity courage and positive relationships. The Eagle flies high above the world and has the closest connection to the Creator, possessing a broad perspective of all life. The Eagle feather therefore represents a person's thoughts rising as high as the Eagle. The Eagle feather is honoured in Aboriginal communities across North America, as is the circle. This circle represents the equality of all people involved in the life-long process of Aboriginal literacy and learning.

Dedications and Acknowledgements

This research is dedicated to the practitioners and co-ordinators involved in Aboriginal literacy in Ontario. Their commitment and dedication to this challenging area is exemplified by their tireless and selfless work that continues to provide empowerment to Aboriginal literacy learners in the province of Ontario.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Executive Summary	6
Terms of Reference	9
Introduction.....	10
Background and Context	11
Objectives.....	15
Meeting Objectives: Results	16
Literacy and Language Resource People	16
General Networking with Stakeholders	19
Public Awareness and Promotion of Native Heritage, Culture, Language and Literacy	19
Summary of Findings.....	20
What is Aboriginal Literacy?	22
Identifying the Barriers, Responding with Supports.....	23
Personal Barriers.....	23
Perception.....	24
The Stigma of Literacy	24
Barriers to Motivation.....	24
Health and well-being and Physical/Mental Barriers	25
Language, Voice and Literacy	25
Social and Cultural Barriers	28
Material Barriers	29
For Learners	29
For Practitioners	32
Personnel Resources and Professional Isolation.....	32
Training and Professional Development.....	33
Lack of Teaching Tools	34
Cultural Arts and Literacy Learning.....	35
Further Challenges, Problems and Limitations.....	37
Publications	39

Factors that Influenced the Project.....	39
Impact of the Project.....	40
Highlights and Achievements	40
Recommendations and Indicated Actions.....	42
Conclusions and Recommendations Based on the literature review	44
Concluding Remarks.....	47
References	48

Executive Summary

With the support of the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) and the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU), this research project was developed to engage literacy stakeholders in a research initiative relevant to Aboriginal people. The intent is to facilitate a process that will ensure that Native literacy in Ontario is perceived, acknowledged and recognized wholistically as distinct to Aboriginal peoples, in relation to mainstream literacy.

The major objective was to gather, document and understand information related to the experiences of program personnel and learners in respect to acknowledging Aboriginal wholistic approaches to learning and ‘best practices’ in literacy training programs. A second objective was to identify and document the ‘barriers’ and supports experienced by Aboriginal learners in literacy training programs.

Aboriginal Literacy constitutes a reexpression of those knowledges in contemporary terms. Over time, Native Literacy has evolved to directly include Native cultural components and language retention (Williams, 1989). However, from Aboriginal perspectives, literacy is equivalent to learning in the broadest sense as an endeavour that spans a lifetime.

Being literate in terms of Aboriginal Literacy is more than reading, numeracy and writing towards gaining access to mainstream employment. Traditional Ecological Knowledge Systems (TEKS) practitioners are, in fact, Aboriginal Literacy practitioners in the context of an Aboriginal Literacy culture. The understanding is that Aboriginal languages reflect and hold the key to maintaining Aboriginal culture and identity in Canadian cultural context. Aboriginal literacy facilitates the development of self-determination, affirmation, achievement and sense of purpose. In Aboriginal ways, literacy begins with orality and the traditional values found in stories. As the Aboriginal Peoples recognized Aboriginal literacy as an approach to empowerment, a concerted effort was made to explore and build connections between Aboriginal literacy, healing, community development and self-determination (Gaikhezhyongai, 2000:6). Aboriginal practitioners who are revitalizing Aboriginal Literacy are effecting personal

transformation from subjugation to self-empowerment and also supporting the achievement of harmonious, reciprocal relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and cultures.

The researchers invited practitioners in the four separate MTCU streams - namely English, French, Native and Deaf/Blind - to self-identify and to become participating researchers in describing Aboriginal Literacy. As a result, Aboriginal Literacy spans and includes Aboriginal peoples in English, French, Métis, Native/Deaf and Deaf-Blind literacies, the oral tradition (oracy), and also areas of knowledge specific to Aboriginal peoples' way of life and faith tradition in the cultural context of each community and Tribal Nation. Aboriginal Literacy, practitioners noted, "is part of everyday life."

It is important that the Aboriginal people know that Aboriginal literacy programs enhance literacy skills in a positive self-fulfilling way. Self-knowledge reflects Aboriginal literacy in cultural context. It reflects a distinct Aboriginal 'literacy culture' that serves to motivate the learner to self-expression, self-affirmation, self-determination and participation in local self-governance and community development through self-improvement.

Although addressing the gap between Aboriginal languages and literacy is currently a challenge, the profound connection between language and culture in Aboriginal worldviews or *Ohutsyakwekuha* (environments) may once again eventually come to be reflected in Aboriginal Adult Literacy in particular and in Aboriginal Literacy in general, through cultural learning in the family over time. It is the hope and desire of practitioners that MTCU will come to understand this and consequently include Aboriginal language learning within the literacy portfolio.

The Aboriginal person lives between the spiritual and the material world, between Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian worlds, and between the Aboriginal Old World, the Euro-Western Old World and the Euro-Western New World. That is to say, early Aboriginal learning was measured against a type of literacy that involved 'colonized thinking.' Aboriginal practitioners and

learners, recognizing this, have been measuring the meaning of literacy according to how it permits them to function with reference to TEKS. This is Aboriginal Literacy. When Aboriginal cultural arts are included in a literacy practitioner's kit of teaching tools and a learner's portfolio of accomplishments, the learner and the practitioner are further enabled towards self-affirmation by participation in the fabric of education in Canadian society.

The project served to connect Aboriginal practitioners and resource people with Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal faculty and the academy in general. It demystified the academic and research processes and helped practitioners to overcome preconceptions they had concerning the loss of their Aboriginal perspective on literacy and their identity as individual Aboriginal practitioners in distinct programs, with distinct languages, concerns and needs. The research enabled us to conduct research for practitioners and researchers to collaborate and to conduct a research project with Aboriginal Peoples that begins to define distinctly Aboriginal approaches to research ethics in general and to research in Aboriginal Literacy in particular. Initiated to acknowledge Aboriginal Literacy and Learning, the project allowed literacy instructors and field-workers in Aboriginal Literacy to determine their own relationship to the academy and to have confidence to do so in their own voices.

To better understand 'Best Practices' in respect to literacy training programs we must first understand the meaning of Aboriginal literacy in its broadest sense. Meaningful Aboriginal literacy will develop and find expression in everything that is done. Consequently literacy training programs must reflect a broad approach that recognizes the unique ways that Aboriginal people represent their experience and knowledge. Literacy programs must reflect a cultural perspective that allows Aboriginal People to develop their literacy skills broadly as in developing skills related to narrative skills, artistic skills and to hold to traditional values as they go about doing these things.

Aboriginal peoples have an unquenchable hope in the promise of education: they believe that it will instruct them in ways to live long and well on Mother Earth and that it will instil in them the wisdom and the capacity to carry their responsibilities in the circle of all life.

(Brant Castellano, Davis, and Lahache 2000.)

Terms of Reference

In this report, the term “Aboriginal” refers to First Nations, Inuit and Métis persons and collectivities. The terms “Indian,” “Native,” or “Indigenous” may also be used, depending on the context and the usage current in the regions, or work environments. Where experience in a particular territory is under discussion, the Nation name (e.g., Odawa, or Oneida) is usually preferred. “Practitioners” is used with reference to Aboriginal Elders, Traditional Teachers, literacy teachers, librarians, storytellers, tutors, culture-educators, administrators and resource personnel. “Aboriginal Literacy” describes Aboriginal Peoples’ distinct perspective on literacy and includes culture and language in the context of Native education as a whole. “Traditional” refers to protocols in keeping with Aboriginal Traditional Ecological Knowledge Systems (TEKS), that is, with ancestral Aboriginal culture and value systems.

“Wholistic” describes the Aboriginal philosophy in which “everything is related” by virtue of shared origins and in which, by extension, the human being is considered an entire whole; that is, mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally as an individual, with one’s family and extended family, one’s people, and with the cosmos in sacred relationships. This is distinct from a “holistic” philosophy in which the term ‘related’ is taken as meaning ‘all things are interconnected’ by virtue of sharing an environment in which action leads to a type of ‘domino effect’ in a secular world.

Introduction

In February 1998, the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) of Human Resources Development Canada delivered a new research framework, *Enhancing Literacy Research in Canada*. This document states that the National Literacy Secretariat has supported research as one of the important elements in its work to advance literacy in Canada. The focus of this framework is intended to enhance the cooperation between the NLS and its partners to support research itself and to promote the dissemination and application of research results to literacy policy and practice.

In August 2000, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) produced a document entitled *Setting the Agenda: The Ontario Research Strategy*. This document states that although the Ontario government has supported various literacy research activities, there has been no particular research agenda to guide Ontario literacy in the area of adult literacy research that is aimed at improving literacy practice. As part of its reform, MTCU, through its Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Section, has placed an emphasis on its support for adult literacy research to promote and inform literacy practice and policy in Ontario. The findings of the project described herein, indicate that both these government agencies acknowledge the need to promote and inform research practices within the Aboriginal stream of literacy. With the support of NLS and MTCU, this research project was developed to engage literacy stakeholders in a research initiative relevant to Aboriginal people.

Between September, 2001, and December, 2002, a research team led by Dr. Eileen Antone and Dr. Peter Gamlin of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, gathered information and conducted information sharing sessions and interviews on Aboriginal Adult Literacy in Ontario. This report is the result of that enquiry into how to acknowledge and describe what are the barriers and supports, and what, if any, 'best practices' exist in the community of Aboriginal Adult Literacy practitioners and learners. The various research-facilitator assistants worked on three major phases of this project simultaneously.

The first phase consisted of a literature review addressing broad issues, which situated Aboriginal literacy in the context of Native education as a whole. The objective of this literature review is to illuminate some of the potential directions that Aboriginal literacy in Ontario might take in the context of academic “dialogue” that is currently occurring in Native Education. An annotated bibliography, which includes a list of Native language resources and websites, was developed in conjunction with the literature review. In articulating a distinct philosophy for and approach to Aboriginal Literacy and Learning, we have drawn on literature in related fields such as education, cross-cultural communication, psychology, health and language law towards understanding, describing and defining “what is Native Literacy” in conjunction with the interviews that followed. The intent is to facilitate a process that will ensure that Native literacy in Ontario is perceived, acknowledged and recognized wholistically as distinct to Aboriginal peoples, in relation to mainstream literacy.

The second phase included information sharing, data gathering via one-on-one interviews and focus groups. The major objective was to gather, document and understand information related to the experiences of program personnel and learners in respect to acknowledging Aboriginal holistic approaches to learning and ‘best practices’ in literacy training programs. A second objective was to identify and document the ‘barriers’ and supports experienced by Aboriginal learners in literacy training programs.

The third phase involved a two-day symposium where nearly eighty practitioners came together for the first ‘Native Literacy and Learning - Aboriginal Perspectives’ Symposium at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto (OISE/UT), on May 3 and 4, 2002. A follow-up working session on October 18, 2003, with about twenty participants for evaluation, needs assessment and next steps/planning, helped to dimensionalize the interviews and symposium.

Background and Context

Historically, the education of the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada has been based on the governmental policy of assimilation. The assimilation process was implemented in both

residential and community day-school systems (Antone 1997). Similar processes and policies were implemented across the America's, including offshore territories, by the different colonial governments. These systems were established to inculcate Aboriginal students in Euro-Western doctrines. The result was that Aboriginal people were not prepared with the skills necessary to enter the mainstream workforce, nor were they prepared with the skills necessary for life in the traditional Aboriginal community (Barman 1986:112).

Ball (1996) quotes the 1992 National Anti-Poverty Organization:

... Residential schools are gone now, but the legacy lives on among many Native people in the form of self-hatred, substance abuse and child abuse. The damage cannot be overstated. People lost their pride, their hope, and the chance to learn from the Elders. An entire generation of adults experienced the pain of losing their children to residential schools. Those who grew up in the schools often have frightful memories which may prevent them from getting involved today in their own [and their] children's schooling.

In recent years, in resistance to such history, Aboriginal adult literacy programs have been concerned with such goals as securing and revitalizing Aboriginal languages and cultures and, in particular, with telling the alternate history that reframes the past in terms of revisioning and reconceptualizing Aboriginal identities and roles in society through literacy and learning.

The pattern of education of Aboriginal people still seems to be to inundate them with the values of the mainstream system. The result continues to be assimilation, this time under the auspices of integration through multiculturalism, a goal designed to commodify Aboriginal Peoples and to eliminate their systems of learning and values, which are perceived as inconsistent with those of the mainstream. Now, however, this goal is to find the types of approaches and instruction that work best for Aboriginal people and in what context or environment (MTCU 2000).

According to Imel (2001), Aboriginal Adult Education programs in the 1950's were designed to improve English proficiency and provide vocational training. Indirectly, this legacy set the stage for the revitalization of Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge Systems. Aboriginal Literacy constitutes a reexpression of those knowledges in contemporary terms. Initially, literacy was focused on allowing Native people to improve their reading and writing skills in the dominant

Euro-Western languages. Over time, Native Literacy has evolved to directly include Native cultural components and language retention (Williams, 1989). However, from Aboriginal perspectives, literacy is equivalent to learning in the broadest sense as an endeavour that spans a lifetime.

Being literate in terms of Aboriginal Literacy is more than reading, numeracy and writing towards gaining access to mainstream employment. It is the beginning of the life-long process of affirming the worldview, and thus empowering the spirit of, Aboriginal Peoples. It is an approach to learning and languaging that begins the process of reflective and reflexive 'critical' thinking, thinking that sees problems in terms of their potential solutions, and the necessity of reclaiming one's original language. TEKS practitioners are, in fact, Aboriginal Literacy practitioners in the context of an Aboriginal Literacy culture. The understanding is that Aboriginal languages reflect and hold the key to maintaining Aboriginal culture and identity in Canadian cultural context. Aboriginal literacy facilitates the development of self-determination, affirmation, achievement and sense of purpose. It gives Aboriginal Peoples, whomever and wherever they may be, the skills to effectively participate in and to contribute effectively and "in a good way" to society as whole.

The Elders tell us that creativity is an intrinsic aspect of survival. Creativity leads to new thinking and new behaviour. New thinking, new behaviour and survival all follow from listening to traditional values and then finding ways to practice them. In Aboriginal ways, literacy begins with orality and the traditional values found in stories. When we follow these values, we are practicing Aboriginal ways in literacy and, more generally, in every aspect of our lives (Couture 1987). Couture points out that: "Indian identity is redefined in terms of 20th-century conditions. And with this, fundamental traditional elements are re-expressed and presented as fresh inspiration for a renewed action" (p.5).

As the Aboriginal Peoples recognized Aboriginal literacy as an approach to empowerment, a concerted effort was made to explore and build connections between Aboriginal literacy, healing, community development and self-determination (Gaikezheyongai, 2000:6). Aboriginal

organizations have also been developing ways of incorporating the Aboriginal knowledges and methodologies into the learning situations of Aboriginal learners.

Some examples follow. First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) established in 1985, an Aboriginal-owned and operated education and training facility, located on the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory near Deseronto, Ontario, developed a Medicine Wheel Model of learning based on four stages: Awareness, Struggle, Building and Preservation (Hill, 1999). This wholistic approach to learning centers on spiritual, emotional, mental and physical aspects of the individual. Another model of Aboriginal literacy is the Rainbow Approach constructed on the literacies of various colours. In this model, red represents the literacy of Aboriginal languages, orange of oral tradition, yellow of communication, green of multicultural/multilingual society, blue of technology, indigo of “spiritual seeing” or intuition, and violet of the holistic base of Aboriginal literacy (spirit, heart, mind and body) (George, 2000). Based on the concept that creativity is an intrinsic aspect of survival, it seems that some Aboriginal Peoples are developing their own models to re-express the traditional elements as fresh inspiration for renewed action.

Aboriginal practitioners who are revitalizing Aboriginal Literacy are effecting personal transformation from subjugation to self-empowerment and also supporting the achievement of harmonious, reciprocal relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and cultures. Culture, tradition, language and ways of knowing are all interconnected; in Aboriginal Literacy, where these are described according to the Medicine Wheel, or other cultural symbols, practitioners and learners are able to balance these aspects of their lives when there is harmony.

Aboriginal Literacy, wholistic perspectives in practice, is not divided. It is inclusive of English, French and Deaf streams. In addition, what the Ministry defines as the ‘Deaf’ stream is in fact further inclusive of Deaf, Blind and Deaf-Blind Aboriginal learners as acknowledged in this study. Moreover, this includes Aboriginal language speakers although literacy in Aboriginal languages is difficult to evaluate on account of the language and culture differences and the scarcity of Aboriginal language/English and Aboriginal language/French speakers and writers. Within this broad spectrum, their differences notwithstanding, Aboriginal Literacy in its focus on

‘learning through listening’ is distinct from and yet equal with Non-Aboriginal literacy. The unifying factor between the distinct modes - Anglophone, Francophone, Deaf, Blind and Deaf-Blind, and Aboriginal language - is the ‘Aboriginality’ of the learners and practitioners. It involves ‘learned’ styles that depend on the relationship between variables in one’s environment in concert with one’s own genetic capabilities rather than ‘learning styles.’ The latter suggests that Aboriginal ways of thinking, knowing and learning are inherent or bounded by genetics. Aboriginal Literacy and Learning – a relational style for learning - in its focus on ‘learning through listening’ is distinct from, yet equal with, Non-Aboriginal literacy.

This is demonstrated by the Medicine Wheel in which, for example, four distinct colours and separate parts reflect the informal relationship between the four families of humankind, as well as many other relationships. By comparison, Non-Aboriginal literacy involves binary relationships and formal teaching. Instead, when teachings are passed from Elders to the younger generations, as a distinct way of relating and learning, Aboriginal Literacy (orality) takes on the traditional form so that literacy and learning constitute life itself, being lived out in contemporary society. Aboriginal Literacy is part of the everyday lives of Native Peoples – reconnecting intergenerational ties, it is being infused into life-long learning that is learning for life.

Objectives

The objectives of this Aboriginal literacy project were:

1. To identify Native literacy resource people (practitioners) who are engaged in Native language teaching but who may not be associated with the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition.
2. To do general networking with a number of stakeholders in Native language literacy.
3. To develop more information and resources for programming that will continue to enhance and empower Native Learners to acquire skills for their life journey.

4. To promote greater understanding of Native Heritage, Culture and Language.
5. To Increase Public Awareness of Native Literacy.

Meeting Objectives: Results Literacy and Language Resource People

By networking with various First Nations organizations in Toronto and via First Nations Band Council Offices in the province of Ontario, we identified Native Literacy language resource people and stakeholders. Some of these people presented at the symposium and contributed to the Canadian Journal of Native Education. Outside the province we also networked in Saskatoon and, via telephone interviews, in Vancouver.

We measured our success in two ways: first, in terms of practitioners' welcoming responses to information-sharing and their acceptance of our invitations to participate in the interview process, symposium and follow-up meeting; and, secondly, by the overwhelming response of practitioners to the information sharing, interviews and symposium. This was far more than we could accommodate due to timing and budgetary constraints.

Similarly, although we invited *Taamkaádinâkijik*, the Elders and Traditional Teachers Council at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto to participate as a whole, the project lead-times and their tight itinerary did not permit them to do so. As well, while we sought to encourage Aboriginal literacy learners to be involved, there was very little response. Finally, in a central Ontario location, a small group of Aboriginal deaf learners who wished to be interviewed could not be included on account of the lead-times and costs required to book a video conferencing and to locate and engage an interpreter. Some of the possible reasons for this were discussed in the symposium and are described in the findings under the heading of 'barriers.' This learning will enable us to more effectively address these areas, drawing on the Contact List we have compiled that includes practitioners and programs in Ontario as well as those from the ONLC.

The symposium provided a well-needed opportunity for a gathering of Aboriginal literacy practitioners. Practitioners welcomed the opportunity to share supports and to seek solutions to the barriers that they and their learners experience. They are happy that distinctly Aboriginal perspectives on literacy are being acknowledged and they look forward to ways in which these things may be addressed and resolved as a result of this research.

Elders Lillian McGregor and Grafton Antone provided the opening and closing for each day, respectively. Similarly, Ningwakwe Priscilla George and Sally Gaikezheyongai, both Aboriginal practitioners and researchers, gave keynote presentations. Fourteen practitioners presented on a broad range of topics related to barriers and supports in literacy, ranging from “Healing the Spirit” to “Deaf Literacy.” “What is Native Literacy” was the subject of the research team’s presentation, which reflected and brought their own areas of literacy-related interests and knowledge to bear on the events of the two days. Lillian McGregor, Jacqui LaValley, Grafton Antone, Jan Longboat and Joe Paquette provided grounding in the traditional teachings via Elders’ and Teachers’ Roundtable Teachings

In terms of streaming, the practitioners did not recognize Aboriginal Literacy as divided into streams. Distinct language components in terms of mainstream English and French were acknowledged but these were not considered separate categories any more than Aboriginal Language learning in each Aboriginal language. Although one of the practitioners and other literacy contacts from two of the conferences were French-speaking, we were not able to make contact with any Aboriginal French literacy practitioners. Finding a French-speaking Aboriginal literacy practitioner was also a long and challenging task. In recognition of the comments from these practitioners in relation to literacy and health, we have produced a condensed version of the symposium results in French.

With reference to the Deaf/Blind stream, one of the presenters, who spoke as a practitioner of ASL in deaf culture and who had low vision, was himself a learner in an Aboriginal literacy program. In addition, home-educating Aboriginal parents self-identified as being active in Aboriginal Literacy. Outside Toronto, we made contact with Aboriginal librarians, Education

Authorities and Councils, grade school teachers who led parent-child programs, and program leaders at post-secondary institutions.

Significantly, these gatherings created forums for Aboriginal Literacy practitioners to come together and discuss issues that would enhance literacy for the Aboriginal learners who access Aboriginal Literacy programs. This was also a way to encourage, enhance, recognize and validate Practitioners' accomplishments in terms of developing teaching methods, practices, and administrative processes and their findings in the literacy teaching process.

Both in Toronto and elsewhere, we found that traditional Elders and Teachers were regarded as the foremost source of Aboriginal Literacy and that cultural artists, spoken-word artists, workshop providers and other resource personnel were also delivering literacy-related services. Wherever the programs were located, there was a definite sense that there is a need for the learner 'to see herself/himself in the practitioner':

Learners are more comfortable learning from someone who is just like themselves. After learners are aware that I am of Native origin, that learner/teacher barrier is removed and they are more comfortable and more interested in learning. This difference in their attitude indicates the continued resistance to Western influences (Swanson, 2002).

In addition,

People prefer an Aboriginal [literacy] service because they are understood by Aboriginal people. There is something that is needed for communicating, perhaps a comfort level, or a simpler understanding, or . . . sign language, or behaviourisms. There's something going on there that would be interesting to explore (Manyguns, 2002).

As a result of the networking process, it became evident that practitioners themselves constitute a vast motivational body of ideas that can serve as an effectual resource both for other practitioners, in the research and curriculum development process, and for learners in terms of enhancing and empowering Native learners to acquire skills for their life journey.

The Contact List of practitioners that was compiled as a result of information sharing and interviews reflects a variety of fields. These include a small amount of personnel in literacy administration in Ontario and practitioners from British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Alberta.

We anticipate that this list will improve responses in future research, while reducing or serving to eliminate time and resource constraints.

General Networking with Stakeholders

This included making contact with Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal faculty at Colleges and Universities in Ontario and across Canada. As well as the member organizations of the ONLC, we were able to connect with the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, the Native Canadian Centre, Spirit of the People, Anishnawbe Health Centre of Toronto, Native Women in the Arts and with organizations for the Deaf and the Blind. Priscilla George, one of the keynote speakers at the symposium, represented the National Aboriginal Design Committee. In rural and semi-rural Ontario we also connected with some Directors of Education from various bands and with resource administrators.

Public Awareness and Promotion of Native Heritage, Culture, Language and Literacy

In general, from its inception, through the ethics protocol process and in the implementation of its goals, the project as a whole created awareness of Native Heritage, Culture and Language and their pivotal role in Aboriginal Literacy. Conducting the research in traditional ways with the offering of tobacco, we were successful in having conversations for information sharing and in gaining interviews one-on-one and in-groups, by email, fax and telephone. In keeping with traditional Aboriginal protocols, we conducted qualitative research in one-on-one and group interviews using open-ended questions to initiate discussion and dialogue. Throughout this process we shared our own knowledge and awareness with the participating research group, the ONLC, as the scope of Native Literacy grew. This was particularly significant in terms of those ONLC practitioners who participated in interviews, some of whom also participated in the symposium and follow-up session.

In terms of dissemination of our work, throughout the process we participated in a number of scholarly and professional events. We cosponsored an Aboriginal Speakers Series event with the Indigenous Education Network, OISE/UT in April 2002. In May 2002, we presented at the Saskatchewan Provincial Aboriginal Literacy Gathering in Saskatoon. We also participated in

the 2002 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Congress at the University of Toronto at the Canadian Association for Studies in Adult Education and at the Canadian Indigenous/Native Studies Association. As guest speakers, we presented in partnership with ONLC, at the Ontario Literacy Coalition's AGM in October and at Goal: Ontario Literacy for Deaf People's AGM in November 2002.

In addition, we presented at the Health and Literacy Research Conference for the Institute for Population and Public Health and the Canadian Institute for Health Research in cooperation with the Institute of Aboriginal Peoples Health in Ottawa, in October 2002. As a result, we are now included in the network on literacy and public health. We also were able to network at the Native Mental Health Association of Canada's Annual Conference in London, Ontario and the "Walking in Beauty" Conference presented by the Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies and which was sponsored by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation.

Summary of Findings

Four clear and consistent findings emerged from the information sharing, interviews, symposium, follow-up meeting, and learning from conferences. First, there was complete agreement, from practitioners' perspectives that: (a) Aboriginal Literacy comprises a distinct, culturally-appropriate and wholistic perspective on literacy; and that, (b) a proactive response needs to be taken in respect to this.

What the stakeholders in literacy define as literacy can itself be a barrier to the literacy of others. According to Hunsberger, Bailey and Hayden (1998), "Literacy is typically placed somewhere along a continuum ranging from viewing literacy as a set of skills to viewing it as a basis for rational and ethical action (p.2); "literacy can be repressive or liberating (Bailey et al, quoting Hoyles 1977 p.29). Information literacy, scientific literacy, family literacy, and several other "specialized literacies" and literacy frameworks were specific to the various environments in which literacy is to be practiced and demonstrated. Literacy in this context involved "levels of competence as shown by ability to function in fragmented practical tasks." Literacy is the source

of “injustice” since “those who hold the power can write the definitions and requirements so as to exclude any person or group deemed undesirable and to consolidate their own positions and power. Injustice in any field is caused “when a narrow view of literacy is perpetuated by a powerful group in a specialized area or in a broad field of literacy itself.” In other words, with reference to this study, Aboriginal Literacy consists in what Freire (1970) called the “conscientization” of Indigenous peoples, and in the present context, with regard to the way in which Aboriginal Literacy practitioners add their voices to the role of literacy, in the shaping and reclaiming of Aboriginality; that is, Aboriginal literacy involves the certainty, awareness and knowledge that originates from ‘knowing for oneself.’

Secondly, practitioners agreed that there is no single type of Aboriginal literacy program or ‘best practice.’ Effective and successful programs and practices were those that learners perceive to be directly relevant to their own environments and cultural traditions and, consequently, those in which they are motivated to participate. Practitioners stated that recognition of this practice and its flexibility and effectiveness, by virtue of reframing Aboriginal perspectives in a positive light, was not achievable as long as funding arrangements were predicated on governmental criteria-based outcome objectives that did not take Aboriginal cultural perspectives into account.

Third, and with reference to the previous point, practitioners observed that there was very little understanding of, or support for, Aboriginal Literacy programs that reflect the culture-appropriate values of Aboriginal Peoples.

Fourth and finally, practitioners described Aboriginal Literacy in its wholistic aspect as distinct from mainstream literacy in that it reflects Aboriginal worldviews in two particular ways. These are: (a) the intergenerational/multigenerational expression of Aboriginal Literacy that includes how it extends to all areas of life; and, (b) the process in which teachers become learners and learners become teachers. As Cajete (1994) describes it, this learning “unfolded through mutual, reciprocal relationships between one’s social group and the natural world . . . involved all dimensions of one’s being, while providing both personal development and technical skills through participation in community life.” This conception of Aboriginal Literacy is necessary for

practitioners, learners and their families to achieve their place as respected, participating and contributing members of distinct Aboriginal Tribal Nations and of Canadian society.

What is Aboriginal Literacy?

The researchers invited practitioners in the four separate MTCU streams - namely English, French, Native and Deaf/Blind - to self-identify and to become participating researchers in describing Aboriginal Literacy. As the practitioners responded, it became apparent that they perceive literacy more inclusively and wholistically than it is defined by the Ministry. That is, Aboriginal Peoples approach literacy through their shared 'Aboriginality,' and within that commonality, in relation to each person's distinct area of knowledge and expertise in their individual environments. As a result, Aboriginal Literacy spans and includes Aboriginal peoples in English, French, Métis, Native/Deaf and Deaf-Blind literacies, the oral tradition (oracy), and also areas of knowledge specific to Aboriginal peoples' way of life and faith tradition in the cultural context of each community and Tribal Nation.

Aboriginal Literacy, practitioners noted, "is part of everyday life." It is reflected in the ability to communicate and, while it includes reading, writing and numeracy, "spiritual and emotional literacy" are integral. Broadly speaking, it is "a journey" in which learning enables the person to be free to achieve and to maximize her self-development potential for the good of society as a whole. Aboriginal literacy reflects a type of "symbolic literacy" (Longboat quoting Battiste, 2000); in it "sign language is Aboriginal literacy" (Manyguns, 2002). It involves relationships between self, community, nation and creation with a focus on words, language, listening and comprehension. With reference to TEKS, being literate is about sustaining a particular worldview and about the survival of a distinct and vital culture. Being literate is about resymbolizing and reinterpreting past experience, while at the same time honoring traditional values. Being literate is about *living* these values in contemporary times. Being literate is about *visioning* a future in which an Aboriginal *way of being* will continue to thrive. In this way, meaningful Aboriginal Literacy as a living process will develop and find expression in everything that is done. As Grandmother Lillian McGregor (2002) puts it, Aboriginal Literacy reflects "a way of life."

Identifying the Barriers, Responding with Supports

In keeping with the importance of the environment, *Ohutsyakweku* in Oneida, we learned that the ‘barriers’ to Aboriginal Literacy as “something that obstructs passage or retards progress” (Lickers, 2000), can be categorized in terms of four distinct environments, *Ohutsyakwesuha*. Metaphorically, these can be blocked by barriers in the directions of a learner’s life: first, personal; secondly, social; third, cultural; and fourth, material. Wherever the practitioners identified a social, cultural or material barrier, they pointed out that the learners with whom they were acquainted tended to proactively seek support and action; personal barriers, however were more difficult to overcome

Personal Barriers

Personal barriers that were identified are: perception; the ‘stigma’ of literacy; motivation; health, well-being and physical/mental ability; and, language and voice. In fact, the Western education system has not been conducive to the learning of many people across Canada. According to Statistics Canada's literacy rating scale, levels 1 to 4, with 1 being the lowest, 17% or 2.9 million adult Canadians are at level 1 and 2 and do not have the skills to deal with the majority of printed material that they encounter in everyday life (OLC, n.d.). It is important that the Aboriginal people know that Aboriginal literacy programs enhance literacy skills in a positive self-fulfilling way. It is also important that the communities in which these programs are located be supportive in mainstream literacy (the learning of reading, writing and arithmetic), as well as in the local traditional cultural literacy practices (TEKS).

Practitioners were acquainted with learners’ needs first-hand in terms of the need for culture-appropriate traditional literacy approaches. In view of practitioners’ front-line experience and the fact that learners themselves were still looking for the Aboriginal cultural component and relevance, understanding and support from the larger funding community needs to prevail with respect to the practitioners and learners. Learners judged a program to be effective first in terms of how the program met their emotional and spiritual needs and then by how that in turn helped them to focus on developing reading, writing and numeracy skills (Lickers, 2002).

Perception

Perception in this case refers to misperception. An example of a practitioner's misperception of a learner's behaviour follows. The practitioner spoke of working with a man whom she perceived as 'lackadaisical.' When an occasion required the workers to complete forms, the man asked for her help. She told him to start and she would help him as soon as she finished her own. When she went to help him and looked at his form, it was blank. Her response to the blank form was, "Gee, you're lazy. I told you to start and I would help you finish." Only then, in the privacy of their one-on-one conversation, did the man admit that he could not read and write.

The Stigma of Literacy

The stigma of literacy is a major barrier in terms of attracting learners to the programs. Some learners perceive literacy programs as a place to go for those who are "not-smart." There is no thought given to the fact that the dominant western school system failed the Aboriginal people and, that, as a consequence, literacy programs were created to enable Native adult learners to access the literacy skills necessary for everyday communications.

From the perspective of learning psychology, literacy can be understood as a projection and transference onto the other of one's own ignorance of the other's life experience. That is, the stigma arises when a learner internalizes the negative perceptions and reactions of others who do not understand the learner's own needs. In terms of overcoming this stigma, Aboriginal learners were asking practitioners for more culture-appropriate, learner-centred programming. In effect, they wished to approach literacy through culture-appropriate materials that give the learner the advantage of affirming one's specific knowledge of culture and history in relation to one's *Ohutsyakweku*. This self-knowledge reflects Aboriginal literacy in cultural context. It reflects a distinct Aboriginal 'literacy culture' that serves to motivate the learner to self-expression, self-affirmation, self-determination and participation in local self-governance and community development through self-improvement.

Barriers to Motivation

In terms of motivation, the entire concept of the family *Ohutsyakweku* is high on an Aboriginal learner's list of priorities. Swanson (2000) notes: "Learners put the needs of their families first and so, sometimes, it seems that learners are not motivated. A person may feel that it is more

important to take care of his/her particular ailment than to attend work or school. This attitude extends to [the health and well-being of] family members. The immediate welfare of a learner's child has priority over attendance or completion of an assignment. There needs to be a way to help students work around that." Barriers to motivation are closely linked to material barriers (our page 29).

Health and well-being and Physical/Mental Barriers

Lickers (2000) notes that MTCU does not recognize the greatest barriers of all: "mental, emotional and spiritual dysfunction . . . the greatest hindrance to Native Students." The effect of these barriers is common knowledge: Native people have "the highest school drop-out rate, alcoholism rate, drug addiction rate, suicide rate and the highest percentage of people in jails". Furthermore, "A lack of self-esteem, self-confidence and a confused cultural identity impede our students as no physical barriers can. We can teach people to read and write, but without the self-esteem and self-confidence to utilize these skills, they are no better off than they were before." In addition, Jones (2000) notes, "success must be measured in terms of building the whole person – mind, body, spirit and emotions." Cultural teachings and Life-Skills training address these barriers.

Language, Voice and Literacy

Practitioners noted that lack of an Aboriginal language in a program reflects two factors. First, MTCU provides funding to maintain literacy in an Aboriginal language, however, language acquisition is not supported; and, secondly, there may be learners of different original languages in a program. The latter case, however, did not seem to be a problem. In one program where there was only one Aboriginal language available, learners nonetheless opted to learn that language since it is understood, with reference to TEKS, that some language patterns are shared cross-linguistically. The lack of an Aboriginal language has a direct relationship to the corresponding low levels of health and well-being. This language lack represents lack of voice, which in turn reflects lack of self-acknowledgement, a strong cultural identity, and self-esteem.

There are two language families in Ontario, categorized into a total of thirteen distinct languages. With regard to the learning of Aboriginal languages, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996) notes that “action must originate at the community level and be directed to those who can assure intergenerational transmission.” Eight aspects of this process are identified. The first four are relevant to language as the vehicle for culture:

- language reconstruction
- mobilization of older speakers in the community (that is, the oldest surviving fluent speakers)
- promotion of family, neighbourhood and community reinforcement to restore the normal pattern of intergenerational transmission
- formal linguistic socialization, usually ... through literacy and schooling but without displacing formal education in the majority language.

The need for a minimum basic program in functional ‘literacy’ as it pertains to preparing to become a contributing member of society focuses on the ‘majority’ languages, cultures and worldviews. Formal language reconstruction through language acquisition is occurring in conversational language classes led by some older speakers in the community and via the creation of dictionaries and Aboriginal culture-appropriate publications. However, revitalization is time-consuming, costly and impossible without the support and involvement of Elders in inter-nation efforts that value the distinct languages and peoples, each individually and as a diverse group. Problematically, formal learning of the languages does not permit true “intergenerational transmission” in a traditional “family” context; the context is a “neighbourhood and community” setting. As a result, this type of language literacy is artificial and contrived. Not only does it resemble second language learning rather than first language learning; it also occurs in the context of the mainstream relational patterns. Ultimately, although the words themselves may be transmitted, the concepts that develop behind them in this context reflect Euro-Canadian patterns rather than Aboriginal ones. The challenge remaining, then is how to generate Native language literacy in as natural a context as possible and how to do so with MTCU support. It is important to bear in mind that this process would constitute indirect linguistic socialization that differs from the learning of a spoken language in the family *Ohutsyakweku*.

The second four areas in Native language learning are intended “to extend the language into broader communicative and symbolic uses”:

- endangered languages will replace the dominant languages in schooling through immersion and other forms of bilingual education
- use in the work environment
- services to citizens will be provided in Aboriginal languages
- recognition and implementation of cultural autonomy and Aboriginal languages in the upper reaches of education, media and government.

Immersion and other forms of bilingual education which aim to put the languages on a par with the two ‘majority’ mainstream languages and with the ‘international/heritage’ languages of other cultures are available only in the public school system. This contrived approach to literacy learning may decrease illiteracy by ‘majority’ standards yet will not create a corresponding increase in Aboriginal literacy which remains – at the present time – largely unacknowledged. In addition, Aboriginal languages that are learned through formal, written means can become fixed and lose their ability to carry the cultural concepts that would be learned through intergenerational transmission in the family.

This thinking is reflected in practitioners’ suggestions that Aboriginal literacy and language learning go hand-in-hand. Lack of the Aboriginal language seemed to be related to a lack of literacy in English. To address this problem, bilingual materials that meet this language need are being used and are in high demand wherever they may be found. Shirley Williams and Isadore Toulouse have been creating Ojibwe materials; Grafton Antone has been creating Oneida materials. Ken Hill has done some materials in Cree. However, since Aboriginal languages are spoken rather than written ways of communicating; there remains the challenge of the distinct local and regional language differences, the large number of Aboriginal languages and dialects, and the challenge of a non-standard orthography, which, in itself is necessary from an Aboriginal perspective.

As a consequence of the close ties between languages and worldviews, the provincial literacy situation somewhat reflects the concurrent national Aboriginal language dilemma: while there is

a push for one language to be adopted as a 'standard' or 'official' language, practitioners and learners resist this. Effectively, if a language is ultimately lost, so too would be the cultural philosophy, cultural knowledge and cultural identity of that people. On a local level, this language issue also reflects the need for approaches and language materials that are culture-specific to urban and to rural Aboriginal literacy learners. One practitioner summed it up as, the sense of danger from impending cultural and philosophical annihilation in this way: "Aboriginal people are now defined by their languages [not only in the census but according to our way of life] . . . if there are no more Aboriginal languages, will there still be Aboriginal people?" Although addressing the gap between Aboriginal languages and literacy is currently a challenge, the profound connection between language and culture in Aboriginal worldviews or *Ohutsyakwekuha* may once again eventually come to be reflected in Aboriginal Adult Literacy in particular and in Aboriginal Literacy in general, through cultural learning in the family over time. It is the hope and desire of practitioners that MTCU will come to understand this and consequently include Aboriginal language learning within the literacy portfolio.

Social and Cultural Barriers

Many social and cultural barriers relate directly to the some of the gaps identified by practitioners and which began many years ago in the colonizing experience. These gaps can be bridged only when knowledge relationships between the Aboriginal culture and mainstream culture are bridged such that the two cultures are on an equal footing. There are actually, then, two aspects of Aboriginal literacy. These are: first, Aboriginal Literacy as it is addressed directly in this research project with regard to the language and learning of Aboriginal peoples; and, secondly, Aboriginal Literacy as it is addressed here only indirectly and as it pertains to Non-Aboriginal peoples literacy of Aboriginal Peoples' Heritage, Languages, Cultures and Literacy, that is TEKS. This problem reflects a broader angle on the perception barriers identified above. It spans all levels of literacy, including the institutional level and so falls within the highest levels of Aboriginal literacy in terms of its mutuality and reciprocity.

Once again, with the historical denial of Aboriginal people's TEK as literacy enters the picture. Social and cultural barriers can be overcome through the continued sharing of Aboriginal heritage, language and culture through projects like this one. Furthermore, this sharing must be addressed by both individual and collective action by Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginals individually and in collaboration. In other words, in terms of Aboriginal knowledge, expectations and protocols, 'what is Aboriginal literacy' must be acknowledged and respected by the academy itself and by the MTCU and NLS.

Material Barriers

Material barriers fall into two categories: those encountered by learners and those encountered by practitioners and learners.

For Learners

Material barriers for learners include financial restrictions, lack of child care, transportation, housing, career skills, life-skills, knowledge of the law, of health and of the various opportunities for learning, and literacy in terms of self-growth.

One of the major barriers to literacy for Aboriginal parents is difficult to perceive since it is referred to as child poverty. As one practitioner explains, in rural areas, this barrier is related to language access: "Aboriginal people who live in the North, and who speak Ojibway, Cree, Dene or whatever other language are disadvantaged when they are being assessed by English-only speakers." In urban areas, lack of literacy skills exacerbate mothers' inability and frustration in seeking the resources required to take care of their children and support their families. Rather than enabling these mothers to participate in literacy programs, the greater emphasis is administrative and related to proof of poverty. In this case, lack of literacy is two-edged. Although "part of the work to overcome child poverty involves making culturally-sensitive and culturally-appropriate services available through the mainstream," the mothers may not have the literacy skills to access the services. And since mainstream agencies are not knowledgeable in Aboriginal culture, paradoxically, Aboriginal practitioners may spend time "doing literacy in terms of teaching mainstream people." The mothers remained demotivated by the sheer amount

of barriers to accessing employment and, consequently, literacy remains inaccessible under the current systems. Instead, another practitioner points out, “while the 1989 All Party Resolution of the Federal Government pledged to eradicate child poverty by the year 2000, by 2000 not only was child poverty not eradicated, but it increased from 1 in 6 to between 1 in 4 and 1 in five, about 49%. Aboriginal children represent a disproportionate number of these. As a result, Campaign 2000 was made to be a watchdog on child poverty related issues, however, this information seems not to have been considered in planning Aboriginal literacy programs.

The way in which one practitioner described the childcare barrier in terms of its direct relevance to Aboriginal women was particularly poignant. One learner, the practitioner explained, had two small children but no childcare. The young mother wanted to do the program so that she could better the circumstances of her children, her family and herself. When the young mother went to begin the literacy program, she was told that she would have to leave her children at home. As she was nursing and on a limited income, the young mother could not attend the literacy program until her children were grown and in school. Ironically, that is the very time at which the children would need to begin drawing on the young mother’s own literacy skills for support in their own learning and literacy. In Aboriginal value systems, children represent a blessing and the future of Aboriginal life as a people. They are always welcomed and accommodated. From Aboriginal perspectives, Aboriginal Family Literacy is again distinct from Family Literacy, as it would be understood in the Euro-Canadian population. It includes Aboriginal spirituality as it would be taught by the young mother to her children and, in the process, it constitutes a renewed depth to Aboriginal Adult Literacy that constitutes learning about oneself through a commitment to the family through literacy learning. MTCU guidelines, however, have forced the exclusion of this particular tenet of Aboriginal cultural ways of life. As a result, young mothers like this one and their children are labouring under the additional barrier of deprivation of literacy services and programs on account of mainstream criteria and guidelines. Similarly and in addition, the other barriers to literacy that are outlined above can be overcome only in the process of achieving Aboriginal literacy. New criteria that are determined by Aboriginal peoples themselves must form the standards by which to measure the success of Aboriginal literacy programs.

In this context, 'family' includes more than either the Euro-Western nuclear family or the stereotypical extended family. By extension, it involves inclusive family attitudes and relationships towards one's own community, extended-community and the cosmos (our page 9). In some homes, Family Literacy occurs in terms of "home-based education" or home schooling. Wilson, a midwife who teaches expectant and nursing mothers childbirth-related literacy is also a home-educating parent. She pointed out, "having children prompted our search for cultural understanding, our own adult interests and learning" and the struggle of promoting learning for the sake of interest and cultural awareness, as opposed to personal career advancement and financial gain." Put another way, within Adult Literacy, culture-appropriate Native literacy comes into play when adult learners are motivated to return to the ancestral culture after becoming parents themselves (Wilson, 2002).

In reflection on stories similar to the above, Practitioners identified a high need to "redefine 'literacy' so that it is generationally inclusive. The closest area of literacy related to this is Family Literacy. LePine (n.d.) notes that "Family literacy is based on involvement and role-modeling by parents for the direct benefit of their children. Educating parents allows them to have more options and, therefore, to make healthier life choices for themselves and their children."

In this research, Family Literacy reflects a key dimension of TEKS. If a learner cannot take her children to the program, she is demotivated and tends to not attend. "Learners put the needs of their families first and so sometimes it may seem that learners are not motivated. A person may feel it is more important to take care of her/his particular ailment than to attend work or school. This attitude extends to family members. The immediate welfare of a learner's child has priority over attendance or completion of an assignment" (Swanson, 2002). When the learner attends with children or youth in tow, however, Aboriginal Literacy is modelled by example.

For Practitioners

The material barriers experienced by practitioners are as follows: first, the need for personnel resources in terms of additional staffing in the literacy programs; secondly, the need for stress management through recognition and inclusion of the physical, spiritual and emotional aspects of literacy with reference to their own work and personal development as literacy professionals; third, the need for training in terms of meeting the MTCU requirements for program administration and management; and fourth, the need for teaching tools. This latter barrier was addressed in part in the language, voice and literacy (our page 25).

In addition, materials that meet the cultural needs and maturity level of Aboriginal adults were lacking. This problem was particularly noticeable with regard to Aboriginal men and with regard to practical learning for day-to-day living for both men and women. As a result, practitioners often find themselves, like Williams (2002) and Toulouse (2002), who have done a significant amount of work in revitalizing language and culture, designing and writing their own learning materials for specific purposes. When this material is not available, practitioners sometimes draw on their personal knowledge and expertise to create those materials themselves. This reflects the direct connection between the 'invention' of one's own voice, language, culture and self in Aboriginal cosmologies. The cultural relevance of this position was clearly explained by the late Rodney Bobiwash in his definition of Indigenous peoples as those who historically have their own language and a connection with a particular place (personal email, Bobiwash, 2001).

Personnel Resources and Professional Isolation

The need for additional staffing in the Aboriginal Adult Literacy programs is high. Within the individual smaller programs in distant communities, in almost all cases, coordinators were the only paid staff member in their programs. As a result, they found themselves serving the learners as teacher/instructor, instructional advisor/counsellor and administrator, and serving volunteer tutors as mentors and supervisors. This did not lessen and may even, in retrospect, increase the workload of the coordinator-teacher practitioner. As well, the use of tutors added an indeterminate variable to the literacy process as we did not collect any data on the number of

tutors available in any program, the length of time a tutor spent with a program or a learner, the training required to be a tutor, the number hours required, and so on. The high demand on practitioners' time required them to put in many unpaid hours and this in turn led to a high incidence of stress and the tendency to burnout. The 'career-life' of a literacy practitioner tended to be between 3 and 12 months, with very few serving in the field for 10 or even 5 years.

Practitioners found that the ONLC Regional Gatherings do offer the potential for networking and the opportunity to share their own learning within the immediate community. These gatherings – on account of the cross-fertilization of ideas - hold the promise of stimulating the development of materials that may be relevant both within and outside the ONLC across Ontario. In urban programs, practitioners had greater access to and more frequent contact with their supervisors and other colleagues as a support network, personally, professionally and in terms of resource materials. Whether urban or rural, practitioners from all programs were willing and ready to support each other and all stressed the importance of recognizing their relationship in terms of getting from where they are currently located in their personal lives and careers to where they would like to be in terms of goals and aspirations. Paradoxically, the increasing need to participate in professional development and any benefits of that was accompanied by the stress of having to catch up with a backlog of work on practitioners' return to work. Beyond this, practitioners welcomed the Symposium and the research in general, as a way of self- and professional development through networking with a community of like-minded professionals and gaining new knowledge on to draw on their own experience a source for new materials.

Training and Professional Development

Practitioners identified the need to do their own research for material relevant to literacy and, therefore, for related training as one of the ways to partially address the overwhelming demands on their time. At the same time, they made a distinction between the need for training in the 'how' of Aboriginal Literacy and the 'what works' of literacy teaching versus training designed to meet administrative requirements. With regard to the Ministry suggestion that accreditation should be required, they felt that once a practitioner possessed the education requirements that qualify her for her field, accreditation, if needed at all, should be a personal decision. In this regard, their assessment is correct: a demand for accreditation would add a further expectation

and additional commitment of personal time and finances. The greatest barrier identified by practitioners was that of managing the stress caused by the increased MTCU requirements and the lack of useful teaching resources. Practitioners said that this barrier could be overcome by the inclusion of physical, spiritual and emotional aspects of literacy to complement the mental aspect, the only one recognized in Euro-Canadian literacy.

In responding to this situation with supportive solutions, practitioners sought out other Aboriginal practitioners, volunteers, and looked into solutions from similar situations in other programs. Practitioners outside the ONLC community found some support from the Ontario Literacy Coalition (OLC) while those in ONLC found support from within their network through Regional Gatherings and a Practitioner Development initiative, which was begun in 2002. These gatherings were greeted with mixed feelings. The events seemed to be positioned primarily from the standpoint of compliance with Ministry criteria and only secondarily from the position of determining and utilizing practitioners' and learners' own knowledge and concerns. Some practitioners at the Regional Gathering attended by the researchers, seemed hesitant and uncertain of the use to which the information collected would be put (in terms of Practitioner Development Needs Assessment). This hesitation is understandable; some practitioners feel that this may be yet another case of the use of Aboriginal people's own Traditional Ecological Knowledge Systems (TEKS) to further the Ministry's own ends and to reduce the number of programs available to Aboriginal people through misinterpretation of data with reference to the misapplication of government-criteria related outcomes. The sense of being accountable to an agency that does not understand one's values caused practitioners to experience additional stress. Instead, they felt that a program that is judged to have failed the imposed MTCU criteria should be evaluated in such a way that the problem is reframed in the Aboriginal cultural context of that specific group. This should lead to the development of supports towards overcoming the barrier to success, rather than having the assessment and evaluation carried on from outside the group and in such a way that the coordinators and practitioners could be unreasonably kept in the dark.

Lack of Teaching Tools

In terms of relevant curriculum materials, practitioners were more accepting of resources from their own cultural tradition and resistant to those from other traditions. This seems to be the

reason behind practitioners' frequent comments on the lack of available resources. Although there were over three thousand resource materials catalogued in the AlphaPlus Centre, practitioners seemed to be either unaware of this resource, or did not recognize it. They were also unaware of the small network of Aboriginal Librarians in each Tribal Nation as a resource and of the culture-appropriate materials available through other sources such as the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.

The practitioners' apparent resistance to using unfamiliar materials or materials from other Aboriginal cultures reflects two things: first, an acknowledgement and recognition of the cultural other; and, secondly, the Aboriginal sense of oneness with one's own environment. A former literacy co-ordinator gave an example that illustrates this well and clarifies the point. The coordinator recalled the case of an older Ojibwe student who had a Non-Aboriginal tutor. Even though there were a few Ojibwe materials that would have been relevant for the student, the tutor selected Non-Aboriginal materials and provided these instead. It seems not to be the case that the Non-Aboriginal tutor had a low regard for Aboriginal materials but rather that literacy practitioners, like other teachers, tend to select, as a first priority, material that they themselves find meaningful. Paradoxically, this has direct relevance to the current focus on learner-centred Aboriginal literacy programs. Since learners will apply similar criteria of meaningfulness in their approach to learning, this supports the need for Aboriginal learners to be taught by Aboriginal practitioners from a cultural origin that is related as closely as possible to their own.

Cultural Arts and Literacy Learning

Practitioners noted that Aboriginal cultural arts are integral to literacy learning and that lack of the arts was a barrier to learning. Although some practitioners experienced denials from MTCU in terms of funding approval to include these resources, they continue to attempt to include these whenever possible. Lack of the cultural arts is related to the barrier of perception (our page 24) and the idea of 'living in two worlds.' The perception barrier is one of relationships and communications between the 'two worlds.' St. Clair (2003), writing on cross-cultural communication in general, describes this division as a cultural one that originates in "the differences between societies and cultures, languages and dialects, standard and non-standard speech communities, cultures and subcultures, sacred and profane." In order to overcome this

division, a learner must go through what St. Clair (2003) calls a “reanalysis of language” and which “leads to a reinvestigation of culture.” We would, however, add to this a ‘reinvestment in culture.’ This describes, in academic terms, what Aboriginal practitioners and learners are doing in terms of revitalizing heritage, languages and cultures within the field of Aboriginal Literacy.

In respect of Traditional Aboriginal Knowledge Systems, the arts are included, not merely as culture-appropriate but as developmentally- and pedagogically-appropriate for they constitute a cultural language that is available for use by and familiar to the literacy learner. Consequently, ‘living in two worlds’ in an Aboriginal context must be recognized as a simplified analogy. The Aboriginal person lives between the spiritual and the material world, between Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian worlds, and between the Aboriginal Old World, the Euro-Western Old World and the Euro-Western New World. This might appear to be a complex concept, yet in Aboriginal terms, it is simple: at any given moment, a person’s context involves at least two *Ohutsyakwesuha*: her/his own and the one with which she/he is trying to relate.

This is significant where practitioners described literacy as “decolonization” and noted “lots of people don’t know that they are still colonized.” That is to say, early Aboriginal learning was measured against a type of literacy that involved ‘colonized thinking.’ Aboriginal practitioners and learners, recognizing this, have been measuring the meaning of literacy according to how it permits them to function with reference to TEKS. This is Aboriginal Literacy. When Aboriginal cultural arts are included in a literacy practitioner’s kit of teaching tools and a learner’s portfolio of accomplishments, the learner and the practitioner are further enabled towards self-affirmation by participation in the fabric of education in Canadian society.

Indirectly related to the role of Aboriginal cultural arts was the Learning Through the Arts (LTTA) project at the Royal Conservatory of Music. Although the research was done with Grade 3 to 6 children, it seems reflective of the increasing movement at OISE/UT itself towards the inclusion of the arts a medium that facilitates learning. Examples are the Centre for Media Studies in Education and the Centre for Arts Informed Research. Practitioners gave many examples of the inclusion of the use of traditional cultural arts in facilitating and reinforcing

Aboriginal Literacy learning. We would like to suggest that the results of the three-year LTTA study, which will shortly be published, can be extrapolated and theoretically applied to specific areas of Aboriginal Literacy research. Rather than harking back to the notion of Aboriginal peoples as children, acknowledging the place of the cultural arts in Aboriginal literacy culture directly supports Aboriginal people's sense of self as an entire whole, in terms of their own ancestral TEKS practices as Tribal Nations.

In Aboriginal literacy, cultural arts and cultural realities serve as a crossroads between worlds and towards literacy learning and education. Support for this is found in the Multicultural Act (1995, 4th Amendment on-line) which "acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage," "to make use, as appropriate, of the language skills and cultural understanding of individuals of all origins;" and, to "facilitate the acquisition, retention and use of all languages that contribute to the multicultural heritage of Canada." The Arts Policy under the Multiculturalism portfolio further supports the use of cultural arts. In addition to moral considerations and Aboriginal rights in general, given that cultural arts and realities are integral to Aboriginal literacy and learning, support for this aspect of Aboriginal Literacy should be forthcoming from MTCU.

Further Challenges, Problems and Limitations

The subjectivity of Aboriginal worldviews is generally deemed to be problematic in Euro-Canadian thought. Yet this type of self-awareness reflects an other-focused way of learning (Gunn-Allen, 1986) that allows Aboriginal researchers to avoid the common problem encountered by researchers: that of forgetting one's own perspective and bias. The subjective view is rooted in the development of strong individuals and, therefore, by extension, the development of strong families and Tribal Nations. Although allowing for individual voices to be heard in dialogue might seem to render Aboriginal Literacy into a more lengthy process than contemporary Euro-Canadian literacy, Aboriginal Literacy creates a higher overall likelihood of arriving at equitable solutions. Thus storytelling as the narrative of individuals and Tribal

Nations (orality) continues to be the grounding for Aboriginal Literacy. It is heard in the Teaching Circles. It is seen in the keeping of journals and in carvings and paintings. It is lived through ceremonies, dance and song.

At the symposium and at the follow-up session, although the specialized spoken aspect of this literacy (orality) was represented by four Aboriginal storytellers, practitioners also acknowledged “all are teachers and learners”. Every time that Aboriginal practitioners or learners gather together to teach and to learn, this narrative approach provides the foundation for the celebrating the learning relationships that ensue and that ensure the continuance of Aboriginal cultural arts and realities. Significantly, however, the spoken aspect of Aboriginal literacy is yet to be recognized by MTCU as a specific area for literacy skill development.

As researchers, we ourselves are also conscious of the fact that we are Aboriginals within higher education. Consequently, we are wary of making assumptions for we realize that some practitioners and learners feel that we may be part of the ‘mythological monster of education.’ Eber Hampton (1995) explained an alternate perspective in which, with regard to his achieving his doctoral degree and having survived the institution, we are able to return to guide others through the path to Aboriginal Literacy and Learning. For the very same reason that some practitioners hesitated in participating - in their minds, the inclusion on our part of Non-Aboriginal researchers and participants cast a doubt on the veracity of this study – others were affirmed. That is, the research and symposium were conducted in keeping with traditional Aboriginal protocols and represented a conversational analysis of the challenges faced. This very conversational analysis, in that it represents the coming together of seemingly contradictory points of view, in conjunction with the increasing acknowledgement of Aboriginal legacies within mainstream literacy, is the strength of the research and should assure that it does not sit on the shelf: it reflects and includes Aboriginal practitioners’ own voices in their own words.

Publications

Towards this new vision we will be publishing a special 2003 Spring Edition of the Canadian Journal of Native Education. We have also prepared press releases that are being distributed to various media agencies. In terms of additional information and resources for programming we published the symposium proceedings in both English and French. Two additional publications, one on the interviews and symposium follow-up/feedback, and one on the literature review and annotated bibliography are also forthcoming. The former will also include a list of contacts in Aboriginal literacy. The latter will include a list of Native language dictionaries and on-line resources. Future research in this field will focus on resource development by practitioners so that they too will be able to initiate, collaborate on and adapt curriculum materials at the source.

Factors that Influenced the Project

Originally, the project was designed in keeping with academic protocols on anonymity. However, we found that a majority of participants wished their names to be used and, consequently, we revised the consent forms and obtained the necessary amendments to the Ethics Protocol from the University research office. Additionally, participants felt that research on Aboriginal Literacy could not be conducted without the inclusion of traditional Elders and Teachers. Although we extended the invitation, they were not able to participate as a result of the time constraint of the research project. As well, many of the practitioners who wished to participate, and whose participation would have further dimensionalized this study, were unable to as a result of budgetary constraints. One of the time factors in obtaining the French translation was the challenge of finding an Aboriginal first language French-speaker. We encountered further time constraints in obtaining ISBN and CIP numbers for our publications and in the journal publishing process.

All in all, the philosophical basis of Aboriginal Literacy was acknowledged in terms of following traditional protocols. Practitioners perceived this positively and appreciated the recognition of Native Heritage, Culture and Language that would be achieved in the information sharing process with literacy practitioners outside the Native community. We experienced a high level

of support from Aboriginal practitioners and organizations in the use of their facilities for interviews and information sharing meetings. The project as a whole served as a landmark for Aboriginal Literacy in the academic community.

Impact of the Project

The project served to connect Aboriginal practitioners and resource people with Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal faculty and the academy in general. It demystified the academic and research processes and helped practitioners to overcome preconceptions they had concerning the loss of their Aboriginal perspective on literacy and their identity as individual Aboriginal practitioners in distinct programs, with distinct languages, concerns and needs. It gave them an occasion to articulate and to write their thoughts and the confidence to be proactive in their own professional development. The focus groups, as a forum for information sharing, provided practitioners with the opportunity to hear how others were handling similar situations and issues and to adopt/ adapt those to their own circumstances. As a result of the whole networking process, we were also instrumental in connecting practitioners and organizations in the north with those in the south. We are at present encouraging practitioners of Aboriginal Literacy to participate in developing models of support for research in practice.

Highlights and Achievements

The research as a whole provided an unprecedented opportunity in Canada for collaboration between an Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal professor in the field of Aboriginal Literacy. In addition, Aboriginal student researchers used Traditional protocols to approach Aboriginal practitioners and the research process itself became an opportunity for and an occasion of mutual and reciprocal learning.

Along with this, the research enabled us to conduct research for practitioners and researchers to collaborate and to conduct a research project with Aboriginal Peoples that begins to define distinctly Aboriginal approaches to research ethics in general and to research in Aboriginal Literacy in particular. On account of its inclusive nature, we were able welcome and include

practitioners from a broad spectrum of areas – from literacy and Native language instructors to artists in education and academics in higher education. These gathered and worked together on Aboriginal Literacy issues toward the common goal of acknowledging and affirming Aboriginal Peoples’ supports in overcoming barriers to literacy and learning.

The Symposium was a major highlight for all participants. The noun “symposium” was the source of a challenge that reflected the challenge of this project. There is no word in any original language for “Symposium.” We had to clarify that the closest description would be an Aboriginal “Gathering” for the purpose of sharing information from their programs. That is, the sense of reciprocity, mutuality, respect and equality in pursuit of a common goal between those from the academy and those from the literacy field made the entire event of learning together analogous to the ‘magic assembling’ of unity in diversity, in keeping with ancestral TEKS. The various papers and reports that are being published will document and thereby provide this well-needed complementarity and balance. Initiated to acknowledge Aboriginal Literacy and Learning, the project allowed literacy instructors and field-workers in Aboriginal Literacy to determine their own relationship to the academy and to have confidence to do so in their own voices.

The approaches to literacy reflected herein are specific to Aboriginal Peoples in Ontario. The interview participants, presenters and writers are from Northern, Mid-Northern, Central, Southern and South Western Ontario. This includes urban, sub-urban and rural programs.

As distinct from literacy and numeracy amongst Aboriginal peoples from the perspective of the mainstream educators, Aboriginal literacy remains distinctly Traditional. As the distinct province of Aboriginal Peoples, Aboriginal literacy includes cultural arts, cultural realities and an approach to learning through interaction with the environment. This is in keeping with ancestral ways of life.

Recommendations and Indicated Actions

Participation in a community is of high importance to Aboriginal practitioners; the majority responded, “Hearing from Native workers is the BEST thing the symposium did for Aboriginal literacy.” In discussing further needs, practitioners shared their knowledge of materials and publishing houses. All expressed the need for more time with presenters so that a longer discussion period could follow the presentations. One anonymous practitioner expressed his/her appreciation for participation from non-Natives and expressed the importance of hearing these things in Aboriginal peoples’ own voices and the “need to publish our learnings.”

This indication of success leads us to make the following recommendations and indicated actions, which are not prioritized:

1. To establish annual symposiums of this nature in Ontario for the purpose of practitioner networking. These should be focused on a number of themes, including personal/professional and resource material development.
2. To continue and broaden this research with the goal of establishing national and international conferences of a similar nature Canada-wide on a regular basis.
3. To strongly encourage MTCU to provide funding and training for support staff whose primary role will be to meet the administrative needs of the teacher practitioners and tutors.
4. To strongly encourage MTCU to provide funds to support practitioner professional development. Practitioner development should include funding for staff to apply for and participate in personal and professional development workshops outside ONLC if the ONLC is not able to provide those opportunities. Concurrently, a fair and equitable system for providing equal access to this training for all practitioners should be implemented.

5. To provide regular training to MTCU via the establishment of teaching circles along the lines of the *Dodem Kanuhsa* in Toronto and the *Kumik* in Montreal such that every MTCU employee, and particularly those who will be working with Aboriginal literacy practitioners and learners, will be encouraged to participate on a regular basis.
6. As an aspect of these teaching circles, to provide one occasion for annual training to MTCU by practitioners themselves as workers in the field. This may be included in the annual symposia or conferences.
7. To provide funding from MTCU and NLS for a future research project focused on training practitioners in self-awareness of the research and learning process, that is in conscientization, so that they will be able to research and to write their own materials, including a newsletter and/or website with links to Canada-wide Aboriginal literacy providers. The work that has already been done in this field should be acknowledged and recognized, and new work supported in terms of time, funding and material resources.
8. To overcome the ‘stigma of literacy,’ as several practitioners anonymously suggested, we recommend redescribing and redefining Native literacy using the following descriptors: “a way of life rather than . . . as a deficit,” “changing the term from literacy to learning,” and redefining Native literacy as “encyclopaedic,” acknowledging the “intergenerational aspect” and “re-integrating meaning through the family”, “defining ‘native literacy,’ not ‘adult native literacy’ so that there is no separation of young from old,” and, including “language programs . . . to give us a foundation from which to work”.
9. To recognize and acknowledge ‘what is Aboriginal Literacy’ by addressing a number of needs. Highest amongst these is the need for language and literacy materials for Aboriginal adults and the inclusion of language instruction and spoken literacy. MTCU should set aside specific funds for practitioners needs in terms of developing learning resources. This role, with the accompanying recognition of ancestral and emerging

protocols around Aboriginal intellectual property rights, should be reflected in the definition of practitioners' responsibilities.

10. Most importantly, to require that cultural literacy with regard to Aboriginal Peoples' value systems be mandated for MTCU and NLS staff who will be working in the area of Aboriginal Literacy. This training should be considered a required 'tool' for MTCU and NLS staff who are engaged in any decision-making aspect of Aboriginal Literacy. Additionally, an annual training seminar provided by Aboriginal Practitioners from different nations should be mandated. Finally, and in conclusion, as one practitioner put it, "It is important, as was stated very clearly by the participants, that this Research Team take this opportunity to do something different . . . what is needed is to provide history, current stories and a vision for the future."

As part of the fifth objective of this project to increase public awareness of Native literacy we also undertook to complete a review of Aboriginal literacy in Ontario from an academic research perspective. This can be found in the **Literacy and Learning Literature Review** document. We include the 'Conclusions and Recommendations' of the review here to give the reader a more comprehensive understanding of the full range of new initiatives that we feel should be undertaken in Aboriginal literacy in Ontario.

Conclusions and Recommendations Based on the literature review

Based on the literature reviewed regarding Aboriginal literacy in Ontario in the context of contemporary academic issues in Native Education as a whole, the following recommendations are made.

1. A continued focus on the theme of empowerment. Empowerment acknowledges the physical, mental and emotional components of literacy. It also acknowledges the intellectual resources given the legacy of residential schools. As well, empowerment in the context of literacy can entail a holistic way of learning (Akiwenzie-Damm, & Halonen, 1997; Smith, 1999).

2. An expansion of the definition of text. With the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge perspectives in literacy programs, room has to be made for other forms of text. In Native Studies, Elders and information from Elders are seen as “text”(Akiwenzie-Damm, & Halonen,1997; Antone 1997). The presence of Indigenous Knowledge in Aboriginal literacy programs in Ontario entails that the presence of Elders be properly facilitated and documented.
3. Focus groups or pilot projects should be set up which further incorporate the use of Aboriginal languages in Ontario literacy programs. Aboriginal languages are essential to forming a truly “literate” Aboriginal person (Battiste 1986; 1995). Language and culture are inseparable. The inclusion of Aboriginal languages can be used to more correctly balance Euro-centric perspectives with Aboriginal ones. If Aboriginal languages disappear, there are no places for Aboriginal people to emigrate to relearn them and they are, therefore, lost for ever.
4. Efforts should be made to further develop the evaluation with particular sensitivity to Aboriginal epistemology. Even if First Nations knowledge is included in the curriculum of Ontario’s Aboriginal literacy programs (which they are), if the evaluation system is not concerned with Aboriginal knowledge perspectives it does not do much good. Developing new means of evaluations means that Aboriginal literacy in Ontario will have to be affected on theoretical and epistemological levels. On a positive note, Ontario already has its own Native Literacy Coalition. Therefore, the Coalition can work with the province on identifying potentially more balanced evaluation methods. For instance, the self directed learner module which is one page of a 141 page Working with Learning Outcomes evaluation matrix of the government of Ontario could be expanded for Native literacy into a wholistic evaluation model. For example Linda Smith (1999) mentions Ngahuru Te Aweko-tulu, a Maori person that has prescribed ethical protocols which were designed for Indigenous (particularly Maori) researchers in cultural terms. Seven principles that Smith lists here are:
 1. A respect for people

2. Present yourself to people face to face
3. Look, listen speak
4. Share and host people, be generous
5. Be cautious
6. Do not trample over the manna (life) of the people
7. Do not flaunt your knowledge

These values and articulation of values are primarily key for Indigenous researchers who desire to remain true to traditional values. At the same time they partially illustrate a way for any researcher to approach an Indigenous community with respect. How can values congruent to these values of the Indigenous researcher be incorporated to some degree into Native literacy programmes (Steinhauer 2002)?

5. The existence of Indigenous Knowledge should not be questioned as valid and should not always be compared to Euro-centric knowledge with regard to its relevance (Steinhauer 2002).
6. Increased funding to provide assistance (a support worker) to Aboriginal literacy practitioners in Ontario. Given the legacy of residential schools and, thus, additional work (other than teaching reading, writing and mathematics) that the practitioners must currently endure.
7. A conference, which connects and further explores and links concerns of the Ontario Aboriginal Literacy practitioners with the needs and concerns of Aboriginal literacy practitioners in the rest of Canada.

Concluding Remarks

To better understand 'Best Practices' in respect to literacy training programs we must first understand the meaning of Aboriginal literacy in its broadest sense. In its broadest sense being literate is about sustaining a particular worldview and about the survival of a distinct and vital culture. Being literate is about resymbolizing and reinterpreting past experience, while at the same time honouring traditional values. Being literate is about *living* these values in contemporary times. Being literate is about *visioning* a future in which an Aboriginal *way of being* will continue to thrive. Meaningful Aboriginal literacy will develop and find expression in everything that is done. Consequently literacy training programs must reflect a broad approach that recognizes the unique ways that Aboriginal people represent their experience and knowledge. Literacy programs must reflect a cultural perspective that allows Aboriginal People to develop their literacy skills broadly as in developing skills related to narrative skills, artistic skills and to hold to traditional values as they go about doing these things.

In the course of this project, the ability to conduct this research amongst and between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal peoples, it was necessary to arrive at a sense of mutual and reciprocal trust and respect. This most important 'ingredient' cannot be budgeted for. Spontaneity, the unexpected, the unknown and compassion for Aboriginal Peoples are at the heart of this work.

The documentation of the project required dedication and commitment to many more hours than the allocated funding permitted. That is to say, while financial resources are required for the successful completion of this project, no amount of financial resources alone could have accomplished the willing and enthusiastic participation of practitioners. The ultimate success of this project is due to the recognition by researchers and practitioners person-to-person of our shared autochthonous origins across all *Ohutsyakwesuha*, and of the fact that Aboriginal Peoples are all related and share a common ancestor in the Creator. For this we give thanks. *Meegwetch, Kita'tamihin, Yaw?, Welalin, Pilamaya.*

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The Multiculturalism Act is available either at...
http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/multi/policy/act_e.cfm
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