

**FIRST NATIONS ADULT BASIC EDUCATION:  
TRANSFORMING PERSPECTIVES AND PROGRAMS  
THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ACTION**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ADULT  
EDUCATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**This thesis sought the voice of First Nations adult learners in the overall evaluation of an adult education program. First Nations learners and existing literature come together to evaluate a model of First Nations Adult Basic Education that takes into account factors such as learner attendance, retention, course completion, and literacy levels of learners in an adult basic education program within a First Nations context.**

**This thesis also attempts to challenge current approaches to adult basic education programs. The findings of my research illustrate the benefits of having a structured, linear, step-by-step approach to adult basic education and a goal-orientated ABE program for First Nations adults that focuses on career exploration and includes financial incentives as a means of enhancing attendance and retention.**

**In my Native culture and tradition, it is important to “tell a story” about who you are, what you believe, and what you have been taught in order for the listener to understand why you do what you do. In this study, as background to the voices of adult learners and staff, I also tell my story as a First Nations woman who left the education system when I was fourteen years old and returned to adult basic education 14 years after having dropped-out of school. I believe my story is indicative of many aboriginals who return to school in adulthood, and gives me insight into the experience of other First Nations adult learners.**

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that the majority of First Nations students leave mainstream education too early. In fact, in Canada, as many as 78% of First Nations students drop out of high school according to a 1991 study (Larose, 1991). Only a few return to the educational system to upgrade and continue on to higher education. Neither have First Nations people typically had positive educational, social, and economic experiences; however, with the new millennium before us, many see the need for our people to be better educated and involved in organizations in order to reach our ultimate goal of self-governance, self-reliance, and to re-capture our pride and self-esteem. Moreover, as the literature makes clear, as more First Nation's-controlled adult education programs develop, so too does the number of First Nations adult students who return to school. In the *National Report of First Nations Post Secondary Education Review* (2000), it is stated that, "More and more, education is being recognized as an increasingly important tool in the development of healthy First Nations communities" (p. 2).

Over the past eight years, I have been directly involved in the administration and development of adult education programs in two First Nations-controlled adult education centres in British Columbia. Because of my involvement in the administration of these centres and because of my personal experience of having returned to school in my adulthood, it has been especially important for me to learn more about the factors that lead to program completion. In this light, it has been my primary goal to learn about and research existing First Nations program models that could ultimately enhance the adult

basic education programs at the adult education centre where I currently work. In reviewing the research and literature on program planning and development, I have extracted components from the various models to design an adult education program to meet the needs of aboriginal adult learners in a better and more meaningful way. I have also taken into account the expressed needs of literacy learners at our centre because it was the literacy level learners that were the least served at our centre. It was also this learner group that became the central focus of my study.

A unique adult basic academic program, called the Basic Academic and Job Development (BAJD) program had been offered at the centre where I currently work. It focused on basic academics, life skills, and job readiness. Meanwhile, a second but much more traditional adult basic education (ABE) program at our centre served adult learners at a grade 8 level and above. It concentrated on the higher levels and academics only. The problem, as will be discussed, is that students completing the BAJD program tended to be at a grade seven level and lower and for many reasons were rarely prepared to bridge into the traditional ABE program. Instead, they typically dropped out once enrolling in the ABE program or they spent many years (sometimes 3 to 7 years) without progressing to further studies, especially college, or they were not accepted into the ABE program due to their low literacy level (under grade 8).

To address this lack of bridging I developed the STEP Program, as will be discussed, by integrating components of other program models that I believed would be conducive to First Nations adult education program delivery, and to investigate this question, I conducted a study that compared the impact of the new ABE program that I designed, called the STEP Program, to the past history of the regular adult basic



education programs (ABE and BAJD) that were offered at our adult education centre. I compared the impact before, during, and after the STEP Program's implementation to the previous ABE and BAJD programs. In brief, my project's primary focus was to compare student enrollment, attendance, retention, and program completion before and after the implementation of the STEP Program to past outcomes of traditional ABE programs at our centre. The project's secondary focus was to pinpoint overall improvements in the centre's climate during this period.

I hope that this can contribute to the overall understanding and enhancement of First Nations adult education through this new model. The evaluations I did on the STEP Program suggest it was highly successful and that a better approach in the basic levels of ABE may be achievable within First Nations settings.

### **Historical Overview and Background to the Problem**

One cannot fully comprehend the education and economic disparities of First Nations without first examining the historic European policies of the past--policies that were intended to assimilate aboriginal people into the dominant culture. Since European contact, the journey for North America's First Nations people has been one of death, disease, and loss in every sense of the word. In Canada, such losses include language, culture, life style, land resources, and, in too many cases, personal self-esteem. The losses have had far reaching effects. First Nations people were removed from their ancestral lands. Children were separated from their parents and placed in residential schools. First Nations people were prohibited from practicing their cultural ceremonies, and during the process of colonization and assimilation, they were taught to reject their own people and

their own past. In fact today, the suicide rate for First Nations people is disproportionately higher than that of non-aboriginal people (Haig-Brown, 1995).

Tobias (1976), in his research on the history of Indian policy, speaks to the “Government’s determination to make Indians into imitation Europeans and to eradicate the old Indian values through education and religion” (p. 18). Alfred (1999), the Director of the Indigenous Governance Program at the University of Victoria adds another perspective: “The truth is that Canada and the United States were established only because indigenous peoples were overwhelmed by imported European diseases and were unable to prevent the massive immigration of European populations” (p. 59). Alfred also identifies many current problems as a result of the conflict between traditional ways and European ways: “The problems faced by social workers, political scientists, physicians, [educators] and teachers can all be traced to this power relationship, to the control of Native lives by a foreign power” (p. 47). For my part, I have often wondered if anything can be done because from my experience as a First Nations person returning to the adult basic education system, and as an educator, social worker, and administrator, I have seen how the policies and oppressions of the past have resulted in the creation of significant barriers to success for aboriginal learners in their educational experience, their self-concept, and their economic stability. Typically, there is a sense of hopelessness for my people when they return to an education setting to upgrade their skills because of a lack of self-esteem and the belief that they cannot accomplish their goals.

A century of displacement has threatened the very existence of the First Nations people’s culture and has threatened the foundation and existence of aboriginal peoples in North America. As I see it, the lack of success among First Nations students in the

education system, from elementary to college, has been a major factor in the creation of this condition. A recent study prepared by the British Columbia Ministry of Education (1998) showed that 64% of Aboriginal students did not graduate within the regular six-year time frame from grade eight to grade twelve. The Federal Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs (1990) reports that 45% of status Indians living on reserves who are fifteen years and older have less than grade 9 education. As a result of such studies as these, and others such as, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), it has also been shown that a significant number of aboriginal youth lack the necessary academic skills required for employment and self-sufficiency. However, attrition and lack of academic success are not only evident at the high school level. Scott (1986) reports that virtually all of the literature on First Nations adult learners in institutions of higher education tell the same story: "Indians who go to college are less likely to complete degree programs than are white students" (p. 381).

Haig-Brown (1995) adds another dimension and presents a paradox when she notes that Canada is highly esteemed worldwide because it is believed to have one of the finest education systems in the world. In fact, as she points out, the history of education for First Nations people in Canada has been dismal and, at times, unspeakable. The lingering impact of the residential school experience is still evident today. As Haig-Brown discusses, it is only recently that the federal government and religious organizations have come forward to try to heal the misery of the past and compensate First Nations people for the harm that was inflicted upon them.

In reading the literature, I draw many parallels with my own experience. I was one of these statistics of the new school system. My parents, too, were direct survivors of

the residential school experience. They viewed formal “white” education with contempt. They never encouraged me to continue or follow through with my education and, in fact, they did not attend any of my school activities, nor did they ever choose to participate in a single parent-teacher interview at my school. My announcement that I was dropping-out of school at age fourteen elicited no reaction from my parents. My story is far from unique--it is actually commonplace among First Nations people of my age in Canada.

The disparities are evident today as we attempt to meet the needs of adults returning to school at our centre. Many of them enter the doors with minimal education and very little self-esteem. There are some who return having gone through the residential school experience, and there are many others who return to school having experienced the public school system with little success.

The overall purpose of this thesis was to examine the characteristics of a First Nations adult learning program that was successful in reducing the high incidence of dropout that had been a regular occurrence in a previous program. I tabulated the available records to show that attendance and retention had improved, and talked with staff and participants to learn from them about why this had occurred. A second purpose was to evaluate the effects of other changes that occurred in the centre during the second period, such as the effects of improving the appearance and climate of the centre. Throughout, I sought to allow First Nations adult learners to tell their story. The telling of one’s story is significant in that it is the traditional “native way” to provide a voice. I used the research method of action research to conduct my project. By the end of the project, the information I had collected spoke to the value of program planning and development, the importance of knowing and validating First Nations peoples’ history as

a means of moving forward, the promise of Indian control of Indian education, the need for community-based education, and the vital importance of the instructor-student relationship in a supportive school environment for First Nations adults. As I have concluded, these are factors not only important in this thesis, but to the continuing evolution of the STEP Program at our adult education centre to today, and First Nations education across Canadian society.

### **Focus of Inquiry**

The central issue for this study was to examine First Nations' student attendance, retention, and course and program completion in an adult education program within a First Nations adult learning centre. In this, the question was how to evaluate the characteristics of a First Nations adult education program that more effectively addressed retention and attrition than the one that we had which was typical of a traditional academic ABE program. I see this question as being arguably the single most important question for my people. It is my view that if we do not provide adult education programs that retain and prepare First Nations adult learners for higher post-secondary education, they will remain in the past living at subsistence poverty levels. It is imperative, then, that we find solutions through education--both for the young and for the adults. On both levels, the high number of aboriginal dropouts in this country need to be re-directed if First Nations people are to ever be self-sufficient and prepared for longer range aboriginal community development plans, such as self-governance. Without being successful in ABE, adults returning to school will not successfully access higher education or training, and will not be prepared to play a part in the quest for First Nations self-governance.

Additionally, adults who have a successful experience in returning to school may be more likely to foster more positive attitudes towards education in their children, which may also help to change the patterns of dropout and limited educational success of the past.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to assess and understand the impact of a promising, systematic step-by-step approach to ABE; hence, its name, "STEP." This is an ABE program that has a long range approach to bringing adult learners from the grade eight level and lower, to the college preparation level within a 3 to 4-year time frame. What makes the STEP Program different from most ABE programs being delivered on most Canadian reserves is that it is a highly demanding and structured program that has a strong focus on education and career planning. Many of the other ABE programs that I am familiar with, including the one that had been at our centre for 10 years, have a self-paced and open-learning format. That may suit a non-aboriginal learner in a non-aboriginal context, but this study sought to show that a more structured approach was more effective for aboriginal learners in my centre.

In sum, the primary purpose of this study was to determine whether a program model like STEP can be utilized and can lead to increased attendance, retention, and course completion, and thus, if such a program can prepare adult learners for college preparation and, ultimately, for post secondary education. It needs to be noted that the STEP Program sought to achieve such a goal within 4 years. It is a case study, which involves an institutional evaluation. I sought to explore the impact of STEP and the

significance of this program both for First Nation's adult education and our quest for self-governance.

### **The Context of the Study**

I knew before I began this study that our adult education centre records indicated that student enrollment and completion had increased since the implementation of the STEP Program. I knew already that it was a successful program, but my task was to discover why. Essentially, my approach was to develop a questionnaire for staff and students that might elicit measurable results in order to find out their views on why the STEP Program was leading to increased student attendance, retention, and course completion, while also drawing from the staff and students' anecdotal feedback to find out what they perceived to be the overall improvements in the centre. Two questionnaires were developed--one for staff and one for adult learners--though they basically asked the same questions.

My adult centre is located on a reserve on Vancouver Island and serves the geographical area traditionally known to belong to the Saanich Nation peoples, which are also referred to as the Straits Salish--a subdivision of the Coast Salish tribe's reserve lands. Their combined population is approximately 2000, not all of whom live on the four reserves. The adult centre has been in operation for 12 years and is governed by four Native Bands. They appoint their elected chiefs and councilors to form the School Board that oversees the delivery of education for students from pre-school to adult education.

The adult education centre is a two-story building consisting of a daycare which provides services for children from birth to four years, administration offices, a small library, a staff and student lounge, a boardroom, faculty offices and seven classrooms. At

the time of study, transportation was not provided to students and adult learners came by city transit, cars, and many walked. The centre sits on a site that also has a tribal school, a small high school, a gymnasium, a cultural building, and a heritage house on it. My centre was built and used as the first day school for the local First Nations people in the area. Before 1940, government-appointed teachers taught at the day school. In 1970, in response to the Federal mandate to close Indian Schools, our current School Board structure was formed. By 1986, a survey of the four communities resulted in a strong mandate for the total takeover of local control by the School Board from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. In 1988, the elementary tribal school opened. As part of this take-over of control of education, the old school building was renovated to accommodate the fledging adult education centre. In September, 1988, the present adult education centre was purchased and, at that time it began to deliver the BAJD program and the ABE program in partnership with a local college.

### **Scope and Limitations**

In its 12 years of existence, approximately 370 students have attended the adult centre. Many have participated in the ABE program, the BAJD program, and (more recently) the STEP Program. At the time of study, the BAJD program was no longer being delivered because it had been replaced by the STEP Program. The number of staff at the centre at the time of study was 8. The student population at the time was approximately 95 students in the ABE and STEP Program combined, with an additional 25 students in an un-related First Nations Family Support Worker program (who were not included in the study because their program is a first year college level program). The



approximate ratio of male to female students in ABE and STEP was 2 to 8, respectively. Their ages ranged from 19 to 68. Seventy-five evaluations were distributed to students and 10 evaluations were given to staff (2 staff who had been previously employed at the centre). However, only 32 adult students and 8 staff responded to the questionnaire.

Before I began this study, I had administered an initial questionnaire on a mail-out to 150 past and present students but, at that time, my project did not have a clear focus. I was seeking to evaluate the adult education centre, its staff, its curriculum, and the respondents' views on what constitutes First Nations control of First Nations education. What transpired, however, was that 11 months lapsed and 34 pages of research results were set aside because the initial questionnaire included students who had attended the centre over a 10 year time-frame—a time period that was too lengthy for the scope of my study. Hence, the responses of those who responded (51 respondents in total) to this initial survey were based on numerous variables. The results could not be analyzed in any meaningful way. For example, over a time span of 10 years, the student body, the staff, the administration, and the school board had changed. It was nearly impossible to chart the respondents' answers based on when they attended because, in the questionnaire, I had not asked the participants to identify the year(s) they attended. As well, at that time, my study did not focus on comparing the STEP Program with past adult basic education programs. Nevertheless, I could see that the general sense of our centre was that the STEP Program was a very positive new step. The first stage had its disappointments but it did help put me on the road to this study. It was only after I entered the thesis stage of my study that I began to redefine the questionnaire and specifically compare student attendance, retention, and course completion before and after the implementation of the

STEP Program. Therefore, for this study, the scope included the ABE, BAJD, and the STEP Program students who had attended the adult centre on average between two to four years and had generally participated in at least two of the three adult basic education programs in the study.

This second stage of the study is where I specifically studied the impact of the STEP Program. There were approximately four females for every male who responded to the survey, and the education levels of all the participants ranged from grade six to grade eleven. The median age of the respondents was 25. Many of the students who participated had gone through the public school system for this formative education and had been placed at grade ten to grade twelve within the public system. In reality, at our centre they were academically assessed much lower in our system. This is important because it demonstrates how our students are moved through the public school system to grade twelve but often leave school with only a high school completion certificate and not an actual Dogwood certificate, basically placing them at grade levels between grade two to grade ten. A school completion certificate essentially means the student has put in their 6 years of high school but may not have an actual high school grade level, whereas, a Dogwood certificate indicates that the student has actually completed the courses required to enter college level or college-preparation programs, which include courses such as math 11 and English 12. What we found was students entering our centre had a false picture of where they were at academically. Those who graduated thought they were functioning at grade twelve but more often than not, were below a grade nine level.

### **My Story: What I Bring to this Study**

It is important in my tradition to “tell a story” about who you are, what you believe, and what you have been taught, in order for the listener to understand why I do what I do, or say what I say. Hence, I tell my story to encapsulate my beliefs and my teachings and also to bring a first hand view to this study. I believe my experience lends credence to the literature because it also speaks to displacement and how First Nations people too often reject their own Indian culture.

My culture is important to me because it defines who I am and provides my self-identity. I grew up speaking my native language, which is quite unusual for my generation. I credit my language fluency to having been raised in an isolated Indian village and having had an upbringing in an isolated village, as well as having received direction from my grandparents and extended family and community. Through my youngest years, I had limited contact with the “outside” dominant culture. However, in my teenage years, when I entered high school, and after my entire village was relocated, I went through a phase in my life where I did not want to be an “Indian.” I wanted to be white. I turned away from my cultural teachings.

I am an early school leaver, having dropped-out of school in 1974 when I was fourteen years old and in grade nine. I was out of the education system for 14 years before I returned to school and adult basic education in a mainstream college off reserve. At that time, I had no idea what lay ahead. I really did not have a concrete plan. Formal white education was never important for me. Yet, I attribute my success in obtaining a degree in social work to a very special instructor that I had. The instructor, whom I will

call Michael, set very high expectations for me and helped me think about my future and how my learning needed to link to my future.

It is also imperative that I locate the starting point of my learning. The beginning of my educational journey was in my isolated Indian village where life was often physically challenging with little in the way of the amenities, such as running water, electricity, and even the basics of food. We relied on the seasons. My community allowed the seasons to guide our journeys when we went out in search of food. The fruits of the seasons were found in berries, deer, and salmon. We moved from village setting to village setting in search of fish, clams, and berries. In that part of my life, in and around Quatsino Sound, which is on the west coast of Vancouver Island, my teachings evolved on the edge of the ocean, surrounded by picturesque mountains that were enveloped in mist and mystery.

My grandfather was, and will always be, my greatest and most inspirational teacher. Through his quiet and gentle approach, he molded my character, much the same way as he created beautiful carvings out of wood. He handled the wood carefully, lovingly, and with spiritual clarity. He opened my eyes to many things by letting me learn by trial and error. He showed me how to touch and feel while learning life's lessons. He was a teacher in experiential education before the concept was realized. To this day, his "way" forms the foundation of how I learn. I have come to see that I learn through experience, by trying new ideas, and by carefully observing and feeling people's emotions and seeing their reactions. I carry this "way of knowing" today, and believe this is why I chose action research as the method to use in my project.

When I reflect on my learning, I recognize that a great deal of how and why I think the way I do is deeply interwoven into the fabric of my childhood. So much of it comes out of the tapestry of my grandfather's teachings. He would say in our language: "Jsinau you are smart, you will speak for our people; one day you will be a helper." I hold his words in my hand, close to my heart, and will never forget those words or forget him. He played a key role in developing my self-esteem and helping me to see that I could play a role in the lives of our people.

In retrospect, I see that my early years played a significant role in directing my present career and educational aspirations. In this, my grandfather demonstrated the importance of helping others to envision their potential and what they have to offer. Thus, today, because of my personal experience and my chosen educational path, I see my work as both social and educational in nature. To me they are one and the same. To this end, I also saw a Master of Adult Education as a medium to assist me to explore adult learning in a comprehensive way. By my mid-thirties, I knew that my strengths were in working with adults rather than children, probably because I had been in a similar place or situation in my life as many of the adults who register in our adult basic education programs.

Like many of the female learners, I was a mother at 15 and had experienced family and community breakdown (after our native village was re-located when I was 12). After the government relocated my village, life changed drastically. I was exposed to alcohol, violence, and abuse--things that had never been part of my life in the old village. The relocation forced my people away from the ocean and placed us on the side of a highway. Very few people possessed vehicles or had obtained drivers licenses,

which complicated life even more because the closest grocery store was several miles away. Two years after the relocation, I dropped out of school. I could not adapt to the change. I realize now that my passion to create a successful adult education program stems from having lived the experience and having gone through the struggles of returning to adult basic education as an adult and parent.

Eventually I saw that within the constructs of education, social work and program development, I could make a difference; I could be a “helper” for our people. As time lapsed, I saw that adult education theory and practice would strengthen and complement my natural skills in dealing with and understanding people. With this thought in mind, I set off on my journey of learning and applied to Saint Francis Xavier University. In pursuing a Master of Adult Education, I sought to increase my skills and knowledge on program planning and implementation, most specifically, on how to design and implement adult education programs for First Nations people. It was my intention to expand my learning on program development models so that I could utilize appropriate components from the various models and adapt them to build effective First Nations education programs. I saw the Master of Adult Education program as being a unique educational program because it allowed for self-directed learning. I saw the program as real and “experiential” because I could choose my area of interest, build on my knowledge and skills in specific topic areas that had meaning for me, but also for my community and my culture. As well, I could conduct a project that would not only benefit me, but my workplace. Finally, the program allowed me to draw on my social work background and allowed me to integrate both social and educational theory into everyday practice. In short, I believe my experiences, combined with my learning and the literature

I read, can bring this study to life in a real and meaningful way for aboriginal instructors, administrators, and learners across Canada and beyond.

### **Assumptions**

In pursuing a Master of Adult Education and in conducting a study, I sought to increase my skills and knowledge of program planning and implementation. However, based on my experience, I assumed that adult education programs at the band level where I worked had not been effective because the programs did not emphasize clear goal setting, lacked structure, lacked attention to literacy level learners and also lacked bridging students into higher education. I assumed the programs had been piece-meal unsystematic products that were tailored from public school models--products developed over time by mainstream college institutions. This view was also expressed by many respondents in my project, which I will discuss in later chapters. Moreover, I had watched as many adults from my own community returned to school to enter ABE programs, meeting with little progress or success. Thus, I assumed that a systematic, linear, goal-orientated adult education program would serve the needs of our learners in a better way. It was this assumption that I was to test in our centre.

I also assumed the STEP Program that I developed would start to address some of the issues around attendance, retention, and course completion because it took a different approach to what I had been introduced to in my own journey of re-entering the education system. I also assumed that it would improve the overall climate and student satisfaction at the centre.

A possible limitation was the fact that I was both the centre director and sole researcher for this study. However, to the best of my knowledge, I did not bias the participants in this study and I have included details here on what I heard them say to this effect. I have also assumed that my own openness to advice and the rapport I had developed with faculty and students helped to overcome undue bias. Finally, I have assumed that my own study and research training have made me capable of valid assessments and interpretations of events and collected data.

### **Definitions of Terms**

In this paper, the terms First Nation, Aboriginal, Native, First Nations people, and Indian are used inter-changeably. They all refer to First Nations students both as found in the literature and those who participated in this research project.

Common acronyms that are used to describe the adult basic education programs at my centre include: ABE referring to the adult basic education program that has been delivered at my adult centre, and has been administered and staffed by a local mainstream college in our area. The ABE program has been in operation for twelve years and, generally, provides education to students at the grade eight level and higher. The ABE program continues to deliver programs at the time of this writing.

BAJD refers to the Basic Academic and Job Development program that was delivered at our adult education centre for 10 years prior to the implementation of the STEP Program, and was also administered and staffed by a local mainstream college in our area. The BAJD program focused on students in a broad range of academic levels, from grade two to grade ten generally. BAJD included life skills, and academic and job



preparation. The Basic Academic and Job Development program no longer exists and has been replaced by the STEP Program.

Adult Education Centre, Adult Centre and Centre are used to describe the adult education centre under study, where I am currently employed, and where I conducted the research project.

Life skills, in the context of the Basic Academic and Job Development program in this study, is used to describe a component of the program that focused on assisting students through workshops, journal writing, reflection, and individual and group exercises. These were intended to improve learners' parenting skills, increase their self-esteem, and better prepare them to function in society by providing them with tools to budget their finances, deal with stress, and prepare for employment opportunities.

### **Plan of Presentation**

Following this introductory chapter, I focus on program planning and development in the literature review and highlight specific areas that I have found to be important considerations for program planners developing ABE programs for First Nations adult learners. The primary areas of focus include the importance of validating First Nations' history in a program's overall design, Indian control of Indian education, meaning--community-based education, instructor-student relationships, the need to consider literacy level learners, and the importance of school environment for adult learner success.

In chapter three, I report on the findings of my study. This evaluation highlights the lack of bridging between programs in my centre, the lack of structure, and the historical lack of attention to literacy level learners where I work.

In chapter four, I synthesize my project with the literature and I draw conclusions concerning the benefits of considering a structured ABE program approach when developing a First Nations adult basic education program. I provide recommendations that can be used to guide practice, and I suggest areas for further research. I end chapter four with my reflections on what I have learned and where my new knowledge is taking me.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE**

In this chapter, I provide a review of the literature with respect to program planning and development, validating First Nations' history, issues of Indian control of Indian education, community-based education, the degree of literacy in Aboriginal communities, fostering enhanced instructor-student relationships, and the importance of school environment to student success. All of these areas proved relevant to my research project as well as the day-to-day delivery of the adult basic education program at our education centre.

#### **Program Planning and Program Development**

Much of the literature on program planning and program development suggests that getting the program development process started tends to require a systematic approach to assessing the situation. Bard, et al (1987), in the *Trainer's Development Handbook*, for example, provide a description of program planning that is helpful in assessing the needs, creating a plan, and implementing and monitoring such a plan. Although their writing has human resource development settings in mind, their work provides a practical and systematic approach to program planning and underscores the need to be open to change in developing programs. Bard et al also emphasize the need to consider the realities of the workplace and the professional development needs of staff if program planning is to be successful. As with the case of our adult education centre where we moved from our traditional adult basic education program to the STEP Program, the authors of this book maintain that the needs of organizations are in constant

change. Hence, program planners must be prepared for change and ready to respond to their organization's evolving needs.

Program planners must also have a clear direction on where they want to go. Bard et al say that whether one is new to the field and trying to grasp the basics of program development, or has been in program development for years, there are always areas for program improvement. In light of my research and project, this is a good starting point because, when we started to implement the STEP Program, the staff--while well experienced--was nevertheless open to new ideas and change.

Caffarella (1994), on the other hand, starts the planning process earlier than Bard et al recommend. Rather than first determining need, they suggest that program developers first establish a basis for the planning process. Caffarella goes on to say that the developer then needs to prioritize needs, develop program objectives, formulate evaluation plans, and monitor educational outcomes. She also discusses why program-planning models are useful. For example, she touches on how resources can be used more effectively and how daily work can be made easier by planning. That is, she says program models are not routinely used because of time pressures and lack of knowledge on available models. Hence, she encourages program developers to consider the objectives behind program development. In her view:

**Educational programs for adults are conducted for five primary purposes: to encourage ongoing growth and development of individuals, to assist people in responding to practical problems and issues of adult life, to prepare people for current and future work opportunities, to assist organizations in achieving desired results and adapting to change, and to provide opportunities to examine community and societal issues. (p. 12)**

Although much of the literature suggests that the program planning process is systematic, Caffarella further points out that this notion can be deceptive. The program planning process may appear to be systematic and logical, in reality the program planning process is more a mass of decisions, details, and deadlines than precise, logical steps. Colgan (1993) adds to this by questioning whether program development models actually represent true world experiences. Colgan reviews ten models, including: design, planning, positioning, learning, entrepreneurial, cognitive, political, cultural, environmental, and configuration. Colgan advocates that practitioners should take an eclectic approach to program development. She says, the “variety and opportunities depicted by the models suggest that continuing educators should have a passion for eclecticism!” (p. 30). Therefore, it seems that effective planning needs to include an eclectic approach to planning.

There are also those who articulate the need to involve the community from the very beginning in program planning and development. Vella (1994), for example, discusses the importance of community input into the program development process. She provides a practical approach to program and community development. Of major interest for Vella is the incorporation of community input and honest dialogue with community members. In her writing, she recounts her personal experiences with community development in developing countries. Praxis in action and the illustration of the effective application of her 12 principles, despite cultural differences, are detailed in her work. Her 12 principles include: needs assessment; the need for safety; sound relationships; sequence of reinforcement; praxis; respect for learners ideas; feelings and actions; immediacy; clear roles; teamwork; engagement; and accountability. Rees, et al (1997)

also examine power issues in the development process and suggest that verbal interaction is central to the program development process.

Similarly, Knox (1986) provides a practical guide for program planners with the main focus being program development. Knox introduces guidelines that are helpful for program planners who are in the beginning phases of program planning. He draws from a wide range of sources but, most importantly, he offers encouragement for program planners. He maintains that program development and program enhancement are achievable and the planner need not be overwhelmed. From this one can assume that although there are many models to draw from, a program planner should be aware of the needs of the learner, but also be flexible and open to change based on community input and the overall evolution of the organization.

In summary, the authors seen here offer insights that suggest that, in getting started, program planners must first define the needs and their purpose in concert with the community through open and honest dialogue. In essence, program planners must establish a valid basis for the planning process. From there, they can create a plan and decide how and who will implement, monitor, and evaluate the plan. One of the basic tenets, however, is that although the task may seem great, program planners need not be overwhelmed because there are many models that can be tailored to a variety of situations and needs.

### **Ethical Considerations**

An area not always considered in program planning but very important throughout all phases of program development, is ethics. Ethical considerations have direct application to program planning and delivery. There is a growing body of literature

dedicated to ethics in adult education that suggests that significant emphasis should be placed on ethical considerations. Brockett (1988), for example, offers a broad examination of ethical issues and draws attention to raising the awareness of adult educators to the ethical dilemmas in practice. He notes that adult educators do not have a formal code of ethics and draws attention to the many ways that adult educators' ethics are challenged, not only at the program development stage but also on a daily basis. Foremost, Brockett challenges adult educators to consider the why and what of their actions and their assumptions. He suggests that program planners must ask why they are developing a program and for whom they are developing the program. By doing so, adult educators are forced to consider the ethical dimensions of the decisions and actions they take.

In this light, Sork has a chapter in Brockett's book that begins by stating: "Many of the necessary decisions involve making choices among mutually exclusive ends and means, each of which is associated with a value position" (p. 34). Sork further explains that even program planners who generally develop programs with the learners' best interests in mind still tend to be influenced by funding expectations, the sanction of their organizations, and their personal value systems. He suggests that ethics should be considered when program planning includes, but is not limited to, responding to the "felt needs" of adult learners. He argues that ethical concerns will often arise when the planning process is based on the learning deficiencies of adults, when claims are made that specific capabilities will be developed by learners who participate in a program, when programs have compulsory participation, and wherever maintaining confidentiality of information is involved in programs. Further to this, he cautions that, "unlike the fields

of medicine and nursing, where the consequences of unethical actions can be fatal, in adult education the consequences are less dramatic, but may nevertheless be quite serious" (p. 46). Thus, program planners must be acutely aware of their starting point and their motivation in developing an adult education program.

Singarella and Sork (1983) have also conducted considerable exploration by asking who should be served by adult education. Should adult educators meet the needs of clients or the institution? Should adult educators respond to client felt needs? Client felt needs "may seem quite safe since the providers are effectively disavowing responsibility for selection of goals; that responsibility is left in the hands of the learner" (p. 248); however, Singarella and Sork advocate a middle road where both the learner and the organization are considered.

On the topic of need, James (1956) has laid some groundwork that is important to this discussion. His work pays specific attention to the term "needs" in relation to educational goals. He presents three definitions of needs and suggests that educators that allow needs to dictate educational goals, as opposed to values, morals, and leadership, are ultimately disregarding their own responsibilities. He is of the opinion that it is an educator's responsibility to set clear goals based on morals and ethics. He believes that goals can be accepted if they are presented within a well-planned argument. In essence, James challenges educators to take risks and take the lead in decision-making.

On a similar note, Singarella and Caffarella (1991) present an interesting view on program planning in relation to ethical concerns. They discuss needs assessment, program objectives, forming an instructional and administrative plan, and developing an effective program evaluation. In this, they raise questions pertaining to process. For



example, they question the process of setting objectives because, in their view, when objective setting is done, the planner is ultimately attempting to identify the outcome before the program even begins. They raise questions about assessments and stating need beforehand. In so doing, the planner implies one must find solutions. This often leads to subjective perceptions and judgments on the part of the planner in determining what is needed.

Singarella and Caffarella's principal assertion is that there is still an unresolved issue in program planning. Specifically, there is a chasm that exists between theory and practice. They say that current literature on program and curriculum development focuses on how planning *should* occur, rather than on how it *actually* occurs.

In all, the authors seen here draw attention to the necessity of considering assumptions, motives, and personal values prior to beginning the program development process.

### **Issues of Power in Program Planning**

Underlying much of this discussion is the reality of power in the program development process. Cervero and Wilson (1994) propose a theory of program planning and practice that goes beyond the traditional, mechanistic program planning models that describe program planning as simply goal setting, defining objectives, and evaluation. Cervero and Wilson raise issues of power, program planner interests, negotiation and, responsibility in program planning. Central to their discussion is the influence of power relations on the program planning process. Of greater importance, however, is that they

highlight how a program planner's personal interests are actually the motivating factors behind the planning process.

In considering responsibility in the planning process, Cervero and Wilson raise the question of ethics but also raise the question seen earlier with Singarella and Sork, to whom is the program planner responsible? Is it the adult participant, or the organizing institution? They illustrate how the realities of power relations and politics are intertwined with program planning, as well as the idea that power is always being negotiated and is not static. They maintain that "whenever people act in an organizational context, they do so within sets of power relations" (p. 249). Moreover, they say that "all those involved in planning a program exercise their power in accordance with their own concrete interests" (p. 255).

Rees, Cervero, Moshi and Wilson (1997), as well as Vella (1994), all take power into account. All of them add a perspective that illustrates the power of dialogue in the program development process. They emphasize that much of the literature suggests that successful program outcomes will be met if program planners abide by step-by-step procedures. In fact, as they argue, it is the negotiation of power and interests that occurs during the dialogue that makes the most significant difference. Each of these authors goes on to suggest that program planners need to be cognizant of the role "talk" plays in program planning—meaning the communication that transpires between the program planner and the funding source. They also stress that program planners need to be skillful in the use of language. They maintain that power and interests negotiated through talk is as important a consideration as the more traditional step-by-step procedures we are accustomed to in current program development models.

Although not specific to issues of power, Copet (1992) provides another perspective on the issues of education in the program planning process in aboriginal communities. He maintains that, before program development can occur, the leaders and community members have to be educated and informed on the program's history and the program's objectives. His approach is called the Concept of Parallel Philosophies. Key to his theory is that education needs to be in the form of community planning. Taking power into account, he stresses the need for cultural education for aboriginals and non-aboriginals alike, and he also calls for mutual planning between interested parties. Power issues now take the discussion to the topic of radical approaches to programming.

### **Radical Approaches to Program Development**

The literature suggests that there are radical, more culturally appropriate approaches to program development for adult educators than those seen here. These approaches advocate for ways to work with groups that have been traditionally oppressed. A prominent leader in this was Paulo Freire--one who approached program development in a radical new way. Freire (1973) describes his experiences working with adults in Brazil while he was in the field of adult literacy. His primary premise is that learner consciousness needs to be raised since illiteracy can keep people in a position of being oppressed, second-class citizens. Of particular note is, Freire's utilization of culture circles, dialogue, and the replacement of mechanical literacy methods with teaching methods that foster critical consciousness. In each of these, the central transforming power is dialogue and communication. Adult learners come to see their commonalities to understand their past and even their future better. In his view, educators need to strive to

change the attitudes of not only the learner but also themselves through dialogue. Based on Freire's tenets, if education's objective is communication rather than the extension of the educator's ideology, the result will be gradual liberation of the oppressed. Freire challenges adult educators to seriously consider their assumptions when working with groups that have been historically oppressed. Moreover, he raises ethical considerations and explicitly connects politics and education, ultimately challenging adult educators to consider political realities in adult education and program development.

Hope and Timmell (1984), on the other hand, emphasize cross-cultural sensitivity. They draw heavily on the works of Freire and deal with areas such as tools of analysis, new forms of management and supervision, and planning workshops. Hope and Timmel espouse education as social transformation. In their view, adult educators and program developers need only facilitate the program development process; it is the community members who should ultimately design their own programs based on their needs and goals.

Alfred, in *Peace, Power and Righteousness* (1999) says that colonization has impacted the aboriginal way of thinking. In his view: "People have been turned into tools of their own oppression" (p. 77). Alfred goes on to say that, in large part, the oppression of the state lies in its *power* to determine fundamentals, such as the right of aboriginal people to determine their own identity. Alfred advocates a radical approach to changing the constructs and the system. He suggests that:

Despite all the wisdom available within indigenous traditions, most Native lives continue to be lived in a world of ideas imposed on them by others. The same set of factors that creates internalized oppression, blinding people to the true source of their pain and hostility, also allows them to accept, and even to defend, the continuation of an unjust power relationship. (p. 70)

Holt (1992), also an indigenous educator, speaks to this point saying, "In such a ritualized process pertaining to education, as we know it, often we fail to interrogate our own oppression" (p. 19). He goes on to say that without "radical change and without that aforementioned interrogation of our own oppression, justice and democracy will continue to be merely warm and fuzzy motherhood statements and words" (p. 21).

It seems clear that those advocating radical approaches to adult education actually are conscious of both power issues and the complexities of ethical issues that are inherent to program planning.

### **Validating History as a Means of Moving Forward**

My experience over 10 years in adult education has shown me that, in order for First Nations learners to understand their current situation, it is important for adult educators to integrate curriculum and dialogue that encourages the validation of First Nations' history. This observation is reinforced in the literature. For example, Holt (1992) makes the following points concerning indigenous people in Australia: "Indeed, most Australians are not very familiar with the historical legacies of their own history; how it has affected them as well as Aborigines" (p. 20). Until recently, mainstream education typically ignored the realities of Canada's oppressive past. It has been suggested that First Nations have done poorly because, in the past--and even to a degree today--the educational system has been one of the major battlegrounds between First Nations and non-First Nations (Haig-Brown, 1995). If indeed this is the case, First Nations people need education that is different. Education must reach far into the past in

order to validate the present for them. It must also reflect the rich cultures and histories of the First Nations people of Canada.

Dialogue and reflection are crucial for understanding and dealing with the past. Faunce (1984) believes that a student's awareness of their place in the hierarchy of society is linked to their personal view of themselves--past and present. Maslow (1968) says, "we speak of a self, a kind of intrinsic nature which is very subtle, which is not necessarily conscious, which has to be sought for and which has to be uncovered and then built upon, actualized, taught, educated" (p. 688). In a similar vein, Brady (1990) stresses, "human learning is that of dialogue with crucial questions by life in order to achieve understanding" (p. 46). The essence of these authors work is that people *can* change their personal situations only after they become aware of why they are in a particular situation. According to Inkster and Sanderson (1992): "knowledge is power and people who have been powerless must see the knowledge of their history and reinforce the notion that suffering matters" (p.20). Mezirow (1997) speaks to this idea as well when he says, "Often learners are unaware of being oppressed; they internalize the values of the oppressors" (p. 62).

By being aware of their history--including the legacy of residential schools--First Nations learners can understand why they and the generations before them have experienced only limited educational success. In fact, between the 1930s and 1980s, very few First Nations advanced in the educational system because the same opportunities available to the majority culture were not afforded to them (Hill, 1995; Jensen & Brooks, 1991). For example, legislative changes to the Indian Act had educational impacts when First Nations people had to enfranchise and give up their rights and identity--their legacy

of Indian status--in order to become professionals, doctors, or lawyers (Hill, 1995). The impact of mainstream education has been such that, "for the vast majority of Indian students, far from being an opportunity, education is a critical filter, filtering out hope and self-esteem" (Hampton, 1995, p. 7).

It is very clear from the literature that adult educators need to allow First Nations people to remember and reflect on the realities of their colonial history by developing programs that include relevant curricula through discussion and debriefing circles. As Brady (1990) puts it: "The focused unification provided by remembering is requisite to sense and order. Through it human life is given shape that extends back into the past and forward into the future" (p. 46). Michael Apple also speaks about First Nations people as having a collective memory (Haig-Brown, 1995). He argues it is the First Nations peoples' sense of a collective memory that adult educators need to tap into as their starting point for education if they are to support their students' personal growth and learning. This view is also at the heart of Freire's (1973) work, as well as that of Hope and Timmell (1984).

In effect, the literature suggests that the inclusion of First Nations history is vital to bring change for First Nations people in any educational program that is to bring change for First Nations people. Tremblay and Taylor (1998), in reference to successful adult education programs they studied, articulate the positive outcomes of "focusing on the needs, experiences and background of the learners" (p. 33). This view is also confirmed in the federal government's *Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education & Training Policy Framework Document* (1995), when it states: "The unique history, culture, values and traditions of Aboriginal peoples and their learning needs must be reflected in

strategies which allow the adult learner to incorporate individual experiences into the process of learning” (p. 8).

### **Indian Control of Community-Based Indian Education**

The concept of Indian control of Indian education was first coined in the early 1970s. *Indian Control of Indian Education* (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972) is the title of a policy paper that was presented to the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada in 1972 by the National Indian Brotherhood in response to the federal government's 1969 *White Paper Policy*. The *White Paper Policy* recommended that federal responsibility for First Nations education should be a provincial responsibility. The response outlined the National Indian Brotherhood's opposition to the government's position. The Brotherhood argued that if the federal government transferred control of First Nations' education to the provinces, then the federal government might go as far as to renege on their fiduciary responsibility to First Nations people. Moreover, the Brotherhood's paper emphasized that educational philosophy, goals, principles, and future directions for First Nations education needed to be within their control. It discussed the need for local control of Indian education and the need for inclusive nursery to post-secondary programs. It also provided an overview of the concerns and issues of First Nations people beyond education. As Foley and Flowers (1992) say:

**Aboriginal peoples around the world are taking control of their destiny. Following centuries of domination and the attempted imposition of alien values and lifestyles, Native people are reaffirming the validity of their own cultures; they are redefining political, economic, and social priorities within the context of the late twentieth century. Control over education lies at the heart of the process. (p. 61)**



### **Rationale for Community-Based and Community-Controlled Programs**

The importance of First Nations control of education for the First Nations learner cannot be overemphasized. Through the development of culturally appropriate programs and culturally sensitive instructors, education programs can reflect the identified needs of the adult learner. Spencer (1998) speaks to this in *The Purposes of Adult Education*, when he says: "A basic tenet of adult education is that since adult students come to the classroom with considerable life experiences, adult education should build upon that experience" (p. 11). Rowland (1995) shifts this to indigenous people, saying: "Indian higher education [was] one major measure of Indian self-determination" (p. 273). Foley and Flowers (1992) say that when education is under non-Aboriginal control, there is generally room for an "elitist and diffusionist approach [which can lead] to programs that are ineffective...causing community resistance (p. 69).

Holt (1992) has made the compelling point that, as an aboriginal, he is forced to live in two worlds--his world and the white world--whereas, non-Aboriginals do not have to live in the aboriginal community. This is an intriguing point for adult educators. If they were to view the situation from the learner's perspective, they would find that, from the on-set, the instructor holds a position of power because of the colonial and paternalistic history that is generally involved with First Nations adults. Ultimately, the First Nation student enters the relationship with a feeling of inequality and intimidation. The world they are entering is not their own, but they often need to go there if they are to advance in Canadian society.

It is clear that effective adult education programs for First Nations people need to come from the heart of the community (Haig-Brown, 1995). First Nations education

programs that are successful typically ensure the community is intimately involved—not just as observers but also as valued educators. A prime example is adult education programs that routinely involve elder participation. In First Nations controlled programs, elders typically play an active role by providing direction and the spiritual dimension to life and learning, and the connectedness of the two (Brillinger & Cantrell, 1993; Haig-Brown, 1995; Rowland, 1995). For example, after completing his interviews with nineteen tribal elders, Rowland said, “In the view of the Cheyenne, knowledge and spirituality are inseparable” (p. 273). He went on to say, “the tribal college on the reservation can play an essential role in using the voice of the elders to empower the community” (p. 279).

With respect to involving the community, Boone (1985) discusses organizations, community needs, politics and, cultural realities. He asserts that adult education organizations and adult learners are systems. He maintains, if adult educators are to effect change in a system they “must focus on individual members’ beliefs, attitudes, and objectives, as well as those of the system” (p. 4). This holds true as well when the larger “system” is the First Nations community.

Holt (1992) also speaks to cultural education. He says education, as we commonly know it in the dominant culture, does not reflect a major aspect of our being. He says education “does not take care of the spirit and thus does not speak to our condition.... [The] universal aspects of ourselves are often neglected through the emphasis solely on intellect and knowledge” (p. 19), see also McQueen (1993). Thus, it is important to create a cultural environment where there is validation and inclusion of First Nations’

history and tradition. In learning their history, First Nations people often discover their present reality in a new and real way.

The value of community-based, community-controlled programs is clear in Vella's (1994) work. Writing about her personal experiences in Ethiopia, she illustrates that the incorporation of community input in program planning needs to be the primary focus of program development. Byrnes (1993) espouses a similar view in the North American context, recognizing that historically program development for First Nations education has not been carried out in consultation with First Nations people. According to Byrnes, First Nations' values and cultural beliefs have not been integrated into the developmental process. Byrnes reports: "the knowledge required to operate in an Aboriginal society is spiritual knowledge together with an interlinked understanding of the social structure and its complex obligations" (p. 159).

In summary, the literature suggests that a program planner will be much more successful when community involvement, awareness, and community-control are at the forefront of the process.

### **Community Controlled Education and Self-Determination**

Inkster and Sanderson (1992) propose that relevant education for First Nations people must have self-determination as its objective. Self-determination is set in motion when community members identify their own needs as well as the solutions to meeting the identified needs. Central to this process is dialogue and community involvement where everyone contributes to the solution. Inkster and Sanderson draw parallels to Freire's teaching, which suggests that conscientization of the people leads to ownership

of issues. When speaking on conscientization, Freire (1973) says: "The important thing is to help men [and women] help themselves, to place them in consciously critical confrontation with their problems, to make them agents of their own recuperation" (p. 16).

One can assume that, similarly, when First Nations people view their present situation in relation to history and oppression, they should also own their own experience and be led to action and ultimate change. In *Learning for Self-Determination: Community-Based Options for Native Training and Research* (1982), Jackson, McCaskill and Hall say: "It is at the local level, on reserves, that Native peoples in Canada have been developing new and more appropriate ways of advancing their collective interests" (p. 2).

It should be noted, however, that Scott's (1986) research is in contrast with many of the views already proposed. Scott conducted a study at the University of Oklahoma and his findings suggest that the First Nations students who were most academically successful were those who integrated with white students in the academic setting and had little attachment or commitment to their culture. While this may meet some goals, for most researchers concerned with the long-term future of First Nations people in Canada, it puts possibility of self-determination in doubt. A significantly larger segment of the literature points to aboriginal education programs being successful when they are locally developed, controlled, and relevant to the past, present, and future of aboriginal people. First Nations communities have made attempts to develop educational institutions and programs that reflect their long-range community development needs—needs being defined as a movement, on a local and national level, towards self-government. Barman et al's (1987) work is but one that calls for the development of adult education programs that are truly in aboriginal control. As most of the writing indicates, community directed

and controlled education, with a foundation of self-determination, appears to foster a sense of self and pride, not only in adult education but also in the education of First Nations children.

In summary, through the development of community-based education, culturally appropriate programs, and culturally sensitive instructors, a program can reflect the identified needs of adult learners. They can also reflect the identified needs of the larger community and re-build communities. Bad Wound (1991) talks about directing attention away from regular notions of the role of tribal college curricula and says educators should establish a line of thinking about curricula and education programming “as a means of empowering students to assume an active role in the struggle for tribal self-determination” (p. 15). It seems clear that community involvement links to self-determination and self-determination generates an avenue in which First Nations people can address their identified issues on their own terms.

### **First Nations Learning Centres and Colleges**

First Nations learning centres and colleges are seen as an impetus for First Nations self-governed education because they can incorporate holistic, community-based, culturally sensitive elements into education programming. According to Byrnes (1993), “for many years programs have been instituted in Aboriginal communities, primarily by non-Aboriginal people, but have not worked as intended” (p. 157). Copet (1992) adds to this by suggesting program development was limited due to the “strong emphasis given to the use of consultants... which often entailed insensitivity to cultural qualities of the communities” (p. 39).

Tribally Controlled Community Colleges (TCCC's) were first established in Arizona in the United States in the 1960s. Boyer (1989) reports that financial difficulties were paramount in sustaining Tribally Controlled Colleges in the early years but the Tribally-controlled Community College Act of 1978, which allowed for funding based on full-time student enrollment, has helped to alleviate the problem. According to George (1994), as of 1990 there are twenty-six tribally controlled colleges in the US.

Stein (1986) describes Tribally Controlled Community Colleges as having a philosophy of service to the community. From his research, he reports that TCCCs lend themselves to community spirit, reflect grassroots community educational needs, and maintain strong local governance structures. Bad Wound (1991), a director of a US Tribally Controlled College, conducted an analysis of TCCCs' mission statements and found that the institutes have dual missions: "To sustain tribal identity and to provide knowledge about mainstream society" (p. 16). Tribally Controlled Community Colleges were crucial in dealing with the disastrous educational outcomes for First Nations people in the US through the late 1960s and 1970s, according to Stein (1992). He reports that the Indian leaders who led the way for the development of these colleges emphasized the need for tribally controlled education as a means of regaining control of their destiny. Stein says a number of American Indians "have taken on some of the distorted view of themselves.... Thus, many doubt their own or any Indian's intelligence or capacity to succeed in higher education" (p. 95). This only underscores the need for locally controlled aboriginal centres of learning, as Stein makes clear. Further, Stein points to how tribal colleges have developed remedial programs as a way to meet the challenges threatening to destroy the aboriginal way of life. He reports that "85 percent of tribal

college graduates who stayed on the reservation were employed--a significant fact, [since US reservations] have from 45 to 80 percent unemployment rates" (p. 93). Moreover, Conti and Fellenz (1991) say that "tribal colleges educate students who may be returning to school after repeated failures elsewhere" (p. 18). Tremblay and Taylor (1998) also emphasize the link between successful programs and community controlled programs.

*The Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education and Training Policy Framework* (1995) reports: "Strategies must also provide the community-based development and delivery systems which enable the post-secondary system to respond to the Aboriginal people as distinct societies capable of identifying their unique learning needs" (p. 8).

Another key point relevant to community-based control of education is reflected in Barman, Herbert, and McCaskill's (1987) assertion that whoever has control of education ultimately has control of the culture that is being transmitted and, accordingly, as the number of First Nations communities who control their education increases, so too does the number of aboriginal adults who return to school. In the past, however, mainstream education programs had limited success with First Nations students because "they were based on the values of non-Aboriginal culture rather than the values of Aboriginal culture" (Byrnes, 1993, p.157).

Those programs were often not relevant and typically were not applicable or sensitive to First Nations' realities and needs. In part, the movement of adults turning to locally controlled First Nations centres has to do with the provision of community-based culturally sensitive and relevant programs. Stein (1986) believes Tribally Controlled Community Colleges are working well because they bridge into the community and offer meaningful Indian studies courses, both formal and informal. Tribally Controlled

Community Colleges recognize that students require more than academic or vocational tools to operate in our competitive society. In fact, the literature strongly suggests (Bad Wound, 1981; Brillinger & Cantrell, 1993; Haig-Brown, 1995) that First Nations people are not only interested in academics but also in the inclusion of culture, history, language and oral tradition as being essential components of their education. Stein (1986) says, "Students will need to know who they are as an Indian person, what their tribe's culture is and how language helps to preserve all of these values" (p. 4).

Conti and Fellenz (1991) propose that there are basic principles in tribal college program delivery that affect student learning and success--principles that speak to the need for culture and validation of history and the aboriginal experience. They sum this argument up well when they say: "A curriculum that does not build upon a knowledge of these principles deprives students of their dignity and limits their ability to participate in their own education" (p. 19).

### **Educational and Learning in the First Nations Setting**

Considerable research points to the importance of adult educators establishing warm relationships with their First Nations adult learners if the programs are going to be successful. The school environment also plays a key role, as will be discussed. In fact, Danzinger (1996) reports that the number of graduates in Canada has increased dramatically as a result of colleges and universities providing support and learning environments--supports that make it possible for First Nations students to feel at home and comfortable. For this to happen, this literature suggests that the importance of the



role of the adult educator cannot be overlooked (Brillinger & Cantrell, 1993; Byrnes, 1993).

### **Cultural Awareness**

When working with and developing adult education programs for First Nations adults, the literature suggests that a non-First Nations adult educator must, foremost, be culturally astute (Hill, 1995). Hill expresses the following view: “to truly understand aboriginal learning and teaching, one has to understand the cultural teachings of the people” (p. 29). Foley and Flowers (1992) also underscore the need for educators to be aware of the indigenous knowledge of the communities they are working with before embarking on teaching.

Not only does the literature advocate that non-First Nations adult educators need to be culturally aware, there are also those who take the view one step farther to recommend that, wherever possible, it is most advantageous to utilize First Nations instructors (Byrnes, 1993; Hampton, 1995). On balance, however, there is considerable data to suggest that there can be very positive results when non-aboriginal instructors are intimately linked to the community and knowledgeable of First Nations culture and world-view.

Freire (1973) proposes that effective adult educators are those who seriously consider their assumptions before and while working with those groups that have historically been oppressed. The literature on cultural awareness makes it evident that understanding the First Nations community’s worldview helps the adult educator be more sensitive and effective because it encourages the educator to truly start where the

learner is—academically, spiritually and culturally.

### **Interpersonal Connections Between Faculty and Learners**

Wilson's (1994) research is but one clear example that speaks to the need for dialogue, creativity, a flexible school environment, and strong teacher-learner relationships in a school environment. Wilson, a non-aboriginal educator, worked with a large aboriginal population in a university in Alaska. She instructed an introductory psychology course. Early in the course, she found that she had to adapt the course because her Aboriginal students were not achieving success and many were facing possible failure. Subsequently, she modified the course to have a stronger social focus. She did this by organizing interpersonal communication exercises and encouraging small group sessions. Within this framework, she arranged for informal make-up classes that included coffee and snacks and she encouraged dialogue among the students with a focus on their personal lives. The small group sessions were strictly social with no discussion of course content. Wilson determined that "there was a more desperate need for fellowship and affiliation than there was for course remediation" (p. 306). She found that "not only were students interested in getting to know [her] personally, but they wanted [her] to know them in the same way" (p. 306). The students' academic improvements were dramatic as a result. For example, they started to feel comfortable and began to ask questions in class, they began to extend their working time, and were soon seen working in the library and studying in the student lounge. Most notable, however: "not only did all Alaska Native and Canadian Indian students in the study meet the course requirements but all received grades of A" (p. 307).

Wilson's study illustrates the need for sensitivity and awareness on the part of adult educators as well as the importance of positive relationships between instructor and student. Primarily, however, the results of her study lend authority to the importance of considering native students' interpersonal needs as an integral component to student success.

The literature suggests that there is agreement that the relationship between First Nations adult learners and their instructors is central to educational success (Barman et al, 1987; Haig-Brown, 1995; Hill, 1995; Kleinfield, 1975; Wilson, 1994). It has been seen that the inclusion of culture in this setting is also part of such success but Brillinger and Cantrell (1993) also advocate for personalized interactions and a strong commitment on the part of instructors. Wilson (1994) says her findings "clearly indicated the significance of the quality of the interaction that students have with their professors" (p. 310). Moreover, Freire (1973) imparts the need for the facilitator of learning to engage students in authentic dialogue, while Aitken and Falk (1983) underscore the importance of positive faculty interactions as contributing to learner success. Stein (1992) also credits the high retention rate in tribal colleges to instructor-student relationships. He maintains that administrators and teachers at tribal colleges put the needs of their students at the forefront.

Part of this equation of successful relationships is the need for the instructors to leave their biases at the door. If an instructor is to be successful in a First Nations adult education classroom, it is imperative that he or she should get to know the students and allow their students to get to know them, in a real and warm manner, according to Stein (1992). Stein talks about instructors who also provide front-line daily contact outside of

regular instruction hours, and advise and mentor their students on a consistent basis. He believes that it is that support and human contact that foster a student's success. He stresses that, "besides providing instructions to students, the teachers must often touch their students in a personal way" (p. 93). He reports on a case in a Tribal College where an instructor transported a student to and from school to ensure the student received the science tutoring and support he needed to qualify for a biomedical research program. In short, it is through the actions of the instructor and the way in which he or she role models genuine caring and support that helps to encourage students.

Wilson's (1994) ethnographic research also reveals that a lack of relationship between an instructor and student can be interpreted in the First Nations community as the instructor not caring about the student. Wilson shares these words by a student in her research: "What I know of the professor is what I see in front of the room... what you hear is their lectures, you don't know anything about the person. It's so impersonal. But then I guess that's because they don't care" (p. 311). Danzinger (1996) too, confirms these assertions in his discussion about his personal experiences and maintains that the counselor, educator, or advocate whom First Nations "students could trust and with whom students could bond" (p. 237) is a vital link to success. Aitken and Falk's (1983) study also identifies positive faculty responsiveness and support as one of the main factors contributing to college completion. And, in a study conducted by Kleinfield (1975), it was found that an instructor who is approachable tends to be more effective.

As each of these references illustrate, the human element appears to be at the core of a First Nations student's sense of belonging and accomplishment (Inkster &

Sanderson, 1992; Kleinfield, 1975; Wilson, 1994). However, the environment also plays a part, as seen next.

### **School Environment Contributes to Learner Success**

Lin, Lacounte and Eder (1988) researched the effects of a First Nations school environment on student academic performance. Of particular interest was their finding that “among Indian students the factors of overall attitude toward college education and the feeling of isolation account for more than 17% of the variance in academic performance as measured by GPA.... In contrast, among white students, attitudes toward professors, attitudes toward college education, and the feeling of isolation, account for only a little of 9% of the variance of GPA” (p. 8). Their research imparts the importance for First Nations adult learners to have a sense of belonging, community, and personal relationship for academic success. Barman, et al (1987) pick up the need for First Nations to have control over their own education institutions again in order to provide an environment that allows for cultural socialization, and say, “whom ever has control, controls what culture is being transmitted” (p. 4). Tremblay and Taylor (1998) have also examined the problem of under-education and unemployment of Canadian adults, including aboriginals, and report that their research findings suggest that, “the cultural environment emerged as the most influential factor contributing to a quality learning environment” (p. 30). Brillinger and Cantrell (1993) take this one step farther to propose that non-aboriginal educators who are unaware of the significance of culture within a learning environment “often inadvertently create a learning environment which is

characterized by paternalism, dependency and resistance, resulting in frustration and discouragement for both the learner and the educator” (p. 143).

### **Literacy Issues in First Nations Communities**

In a (1992) report by Canada’s *Secretariat of the Department of Industry, Science and Technology*, it was confirmed that adult literacy in Canada is a serious problem for adults. For example, the report reveals that many Canadians (though it doesn’t provide actual numbers) “do not have the advanced literacy skills to function fully in the context of an industrialized economic and social environment” (p. 10). The report goes on to suggest that adults need to have the opportunities for remedial adult basic education, life skills and an equivalent to high school completion in order to compete in Canada’s economic society.

However, the situation is much more acute for First Nations adults. Tremblay and Taylor (1998) report that natives 15 years of age and older with less than a grade nine education is 45%; it is only 17% for the non-native population. The *Secretariat of the Department of Industry, Science and Technology* report concludes, “there is a pressing need for researchers to focus on Native literacy” (p. 31).

Specific to literacy issues and First Nations adults, however, to date, the research surrounding the literacy levels of aboriginal adults is limited. Much of the data are specific to the parity between First Nations and non-First Nations children and young adults in the public school system. Although qualitative and quantitative research pertaining to First Nations literacy is limited, the literature that I reviewed points out that: “Nationally, two of three aboriginal adults haven’t completed grade twelve, suggesting

that Natives in Canada as a group have even more severe literacy problems than immigrants, who are better educated as a group” (Calamai, 1999). Most recently, the issue has been taken up as a human rights issue. A human rights inquiry has been recently launched into Native education in British Columbia (Vancouver Sun, 2001). In the news announcement it is said that the BC Human Rights Commission is launching a public inquiry as a result of the “horrifying” statistics from the BC Ministry of Education which reveals that only 38% of aboriginal students graduate from grade twelve, compared to 77% of non-aboriginals. The announcement also reported that, in some areas in British Columbia, only 5% of aboriginals graduate.

### **The Relationship Between Literacy and Lack of Employment**

In the *Report of the National Round Table on Economic Development and Resources* (1993), Jette says: “Government departments and agencies have issued thousands of pages of analysis, all concluding that a state of crisis exists across the nation” (p. 121). This crisis, with respect to aboriginal people, they argue, is due to a lack of strategic planning, a lack of education, and a lack of trust. The report says that many Canadian aboriginals lack the skills to enter higher education and they note that basic literacy and numeracy skills escalate this problem.

Calamai (1999) discusses an oil company based in Fort McMurray, Alberta, that tested potential First Nations employees only to find that nearly fifty percent of the applicants could not deal with the grade ten material being presented as an assessment base, although they had graduated from grade twelve. Calamai also points out that the three Canadian national surveys that have been conducted since 1987 have not included

the literacy levels of First Nations people living on reserves. Hence, he is suggesting that although educators working with First Nations people know there is a serious problem, the national quantitative data are still not available or are only available in piecemeal sections across the country. He nevertheless goes on to say, "the ideal of empowerment lives in the aboriginal-literacy movement" (p. 13).

Further to this, Wabano (1991) in *Issues and Options in Adult Literacy: A National Symposium* says, "We believe that the serious issue of Native literacy programming has either been ignored or approached through inappropriate and ineffective means" (p. 50). She goes on to suggest that aboriginal literacy programs need to be based in First Nations communities and the schedules need to be flexible enough to meet the adult learner's needs and circumstances. George (1994) takes this farther, saying: "literacy leads to the development and empowerment which will contribute to self determination" for First Nations people (p. 211). He further argues the need for community-based Indian control of Indian education. Anderson (1995), in his Ontario report on *Native Literacy in Ontario: Areas for Development*, refers to aboriginal learning centres as one option for dealing with the problem. He maintains that "Regional adult education centres need to be developed which focus on the provision of a holistic Native learning environment" (p. 11).

In The Royal Commission Report: *Nine Steps to Rebuild Aboriginal Economies* (1997), the authors point to a lack of education and training as being one of the main barriers to obtaining meaningful employment for First Nations people. They suggest that the available data reveal that there is a strong correlation between levels of education and levels of unemployment in aboriginal communities. In the report, they say: "Among those



studies commissioned in the area of economic development, the most directly relevant calls attention to the very positive and successful model provided by the tribal colleges in the United States” (p. 25). They suggest that it is imperative to establish better learning environments for aboriginal learners that assist them to make transitions into higher education.

In sum, in considering the literacy issues in First Nations communities in Canada and the United States, it is evident that true advancement for First Nations peoples--socially and economically--requires literacy development within aboriginal communities. George (1994) makes the following observations on this point:

For the Aboriginal people... literacy is a process involving not only the individuals, but also the whole community. Literacy leads to development and empowerment, which will contribute to self-determination. (p. 211)

### **Literature Review Summary**

The literature reviewed here suggests that several variables influence education success for First Nations learners. The essential elements of a successful First Nations adult education program generally extend beyond academic content to include restoration and reinforcement of cultural traditions. Moreover, an educational environment that fosters a sense of community, fellowship, and a sense of belonging is also said to be a key component to program and learner success. The role of the educator cannot be overstated because personalized interactions, instructor relationships with students, and cultural sensitivity are also central elements to learner success. In general, the literature makes the assertion that First Nations' education programs that take these variables into account

**and are tailored and delivered under thought-out and well-managed conditions, can lead to First Nations programs that are highly successful.**

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF MY PROJECT**

My study sought to understand the factors influencing student enrollment, attendance, retention and course completion through the evaluation of a new program called the STEP Program. To assess its degree of success, it was compared to the past adult basic education programs that had been delivered at my adult education centre, using attendance, retention, and course completion two years prior to the implementation of the STEP Program, and two years after, as a basis for comparison. Attendance, retention, and program completion rates were the primary issues for this study.

The initial aim of this study, and the questionnaire that I distributed in the fall of 1997, may be seen as a way to evaluate the adult education centre's services, programs, administration and staff, in terms of their satisfaction, sense of effectiveness, and levels of morale. Although I hoped it would be revealed by an assessment, it soon became clear that the early questions were too vague. It gave me a reasonable sense of the level of success of the program but the fundamental question that came to be asked, and the purpose behind the revised project seen here, was to determine whether the STEP Program contributed to improved adult learner enrollment, attendance, retention and course completion at the centre. If it did, why did it, and how did it achieve this?

Entering the research project, I knew that student enrollment and student inquiries had increased dramatically with the STEP Program. The adult centre's record keeping showed that there had been an approximate 70% increase in student inquiries in 1999 after the STEP Program was implemented in the 1997-1998 school year. This only occurred after the community saw that the STEP Program could in fact advance students

towards higher education. One success built on another, and another, and it all had a rippling effect.

My project turned towards a study of this STEP Program and the question evolved into how it addressed retention, attendance, and completion more effectively than the previous one, which was typical of traditional ABE programs in settings such as mine. On the survey, I asked: "With the implementation of the STEP Program, has there been an increase in student enrollment, attendance, retention and completion, as compared with the traditional adult basic education programs that our adult education centre offered and, if so, why has this taken place?" With this new question and direction, the focus of the study became much clearer and more manageable. Most important, however, a formal evaluation would allow student and staff voices to be heard in the continuing evolution of the adult centre's adult education programming.

In summary, the order of events in this study was first, in 1996-1997 I was the life skills instructor for the BAJD program, which was a program delivered and supervised by a local college in our area. After the School Board hired me as the Director of our centre in the spring of 1997 I began the process of conducting informal discussions with staff, students and community members to gain insight on their perceptions of the adult centre's services. In September 1997 I implemented the STEP Program, which would ultimately replace the BAJD program. Within this timeframe in the fall of 1997 I recognized that a more formal evaluation was required. I held a Staff Retreat to discuss the centre's services and their overall satisfaction and I gained the School Board's approval in November 1997 to conduct a formal evaluation. This was phase I of my

project. As will be discussed the initial findings of phase I led me to phase II which evolved into an evaluation of the overall impacts of the STEP Program.

### **Background to the Problem**

My adult education centre primarily serves the geographical area traditionally known to belong to the Saanich Nation peoples. The four reserve communities are situated on southern Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Their combined population is approximately 2000, not all of whom live on the reserves. Established in 1988, the adult education centre had added few new programs over the past nine years and had done little to develop its existing ones. The programs had traditionally been comprised of an Adult Basic Education (ABE) program, a First Nations Family Support Worker program and a Basic Academic and Job Development (BAJD) program. It was a School Board priority in 1997 to hire a Director to actively pursue the development of new and relevant adult education programs for the centre.

I was hired as the Director of the adult education centre in April 1997 and immediately set about the task of reviewing current programs and services by seeking input from students, staff, board members and community through informal discussions. I wanted to gain a better understanding of the adult centre's strengths and limitations. Having been employed at the adult education centre in the BAJD program as a life skills instructor in 1996-1997, I had already formed my own impressions of the adult education centre's strengths and limitations. Thus, it was important for me to determine how others felt about the adult education centre's programs and services and to be open to re-assessing my own views before I moved ahead to develop new programs.

However, early in the process, it became clear that informal discussions would be inadequate and a thorough, formal evaluation was needed. It was also evident that both the ABE and BAJD programs required attention. The enrollment in the ABE program was low considering the four Band's combined adult population. Furthermore, most believed the BAJD program had likely run its course with the pool of local participants because it had been in operation for 10 years. However, I was not convinced that the BAJD program was the best or the only program to address the community's long-range education and training needs. Based on my knowledge of aboriginal community needs, the self-government process, and my social work training in community development, I believed the BAJD program would have only limited impact in meeting those needs. In addition, I did not believe that the adult centre programs linked with each other in a meaningful way. Hence, I felt that I needed to investigate all of these questions in order to develop educational programs that were more intimately connected with the larger community's plans and goals. Within this time period I introduced STEP and set out to evaluate its impacts. This is because when I was instructing the life skills program for the BAJD program, I concluded that the ABE program needed rejuvenation and the BAJD program needed major adaptation if it was to actually move adult learners from basic academics to meaningful employment or higher education. Without these, there would be little student advancement to higher education or community progress over the long term. The primary problem, as I saw it, seemed to stem from the BAJD program being an entity on its own with limited links to the ABE program. The ABE program and the BAJD programs were physically next door to each other--right in the same building--but they operated in isolation from each other.

Clearly, the programs did not have a bridge between them to allow students to easily progress from one to the other. This was in part because students in the BAJD program were functioning at a low literacy level—grade two to grade seven, whereas students in the ABE program were at grade eight level or higher to be accepted into that program. Therefore, the programs provided weak bridging into each other and to other education programs in our centre. In fact, one of my first observations was that the staff had to be encouraged to communicate across programs and students had to be encouraged to communicate from one program to the other. As a life skills instructor, I had felt very isolated when I instructed life skills in the BAJD program and believed that the students felt much the same. I did not get a sense that there was a team effort or a joint vision for the staff or the adult centre as a whole. There was a pressing need to establish a sense of community in the adult centre. Community involvement and community awareness was minimal. Based on my reading, and my experience, I was convinced that it was through community awareness of the centre that we would increase student enrollment.

I had to ask what was wrong with the BAJD program? My work as a life skills instructor showed me that many of the participants left BAJD excited and motivated because of the social experience, their new life skills, and their sense of self-empowerment, but they still required considerable reinforcement and academic support beyond this program. Although they left with a new sense of self-confidence, they often realized their new educational journey would be a difficult and often a long one. They often needed more education but were inadequately prepared academically for ABE. Academically, BAJD was a literacy program which, in-turn, left a large gap between it and the ABE program because the ABE program began working with adult learners who

were at the grade eight level. They were not there yet--in many respects. Clearly, there was a piece missing between BAJD and the ABE program. Moreover, in BAJD, the participants were provided with a daily stipend, whereas the same financial support was not available through ABE. This was a result of BAJD being funded by Human Resource Development Canada, which allowed for stipends. Not having the same financial resources available from program to program only complicated issues.

For some, the reality of being at a low ABE literacy level was like not being able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. The dream of advancing to college-level programs seemed unattainable. Entering college or having a career just seemed too far away, especially without financial support. More often than not, students either gave up on their studies or floated in ABE for several years without actually advancing. This is not to say the participants did not receive good or adequate instruction from the BAJD program; rather, it is to point to the internal and external disconnectedness as it related to a larger picture of First Nations adult education in our area.

It should be noted that the objective of BAJD was employment readiness with a strong focus on life skills. Academic upgrading was only a secondary focus of the program. One should not expect that the adult learners would be ready to approach formal education and upgrading immediately after finishing this program. Only a small number of participants actually attained and maintained employment, according to the coordinator of the BAJD program who had been employed by the program for 10 years.

Through a review of BAJD files (which were not complete; several years of records were not available) and discussions with key employees who are familiar with the participants' current situations, my estimates suggested that approximately 13% (20



participants) of the 160 participants who attended BAJD over the 10-year time frame actually maintained employment for a 3-6 month period. A greater percentage of participants, approximately 70 participants (44%) attempted further education. Although a comprehensive review of the number of participants who actually completed grade twelve or moved into vocational or college level courses was beyond the scope of this study, several individuals familiar with the program suggested that fewer than 10% of those who went on to ABE from BAJD continued or completed higher education. Actual follow-up records on these students are not available. However, since the staff had been employed at the adult centre for many years and since the student body is small, I consider the estimates to be reasonably accurate.

On the other hand, there were many who went through the BAJD program who found the life skills component valuable. Many of the participants whom I spoke to remembered the BAJD program as being a very powerful experience. They took control of their personal lives after the program and made tangible strides to improve their personal situations. There are many BAJD success stories at our adult centre. There were participants who advanced from BAJD to further academic studies or employment and, similarly, there have been adult learners who started out in ABE who are now attending college. In this regard, my conviction was reinforced that components of BAJD, such as life skills, should be maintained in any new program, such as the STEP Program.

Of equal importance, the Adult Basic Education program staff provided our centre with strong leadership skills, which led me to believe that the development process for ABE would not require substantial change. The ABE staff had gained the respect of the

students and the extended community. On the other hand, I believed the BAJD program needed to be re-shaped and adapted in a major way if it was to effectively bridge and prepare adult learners for higher education.

Those who attended the adult education centre typically apply to enter the programs offered after they are advertised in the four Band's community newsletters and the adult centre's newsletter. If they apply to enroll in ABE and are accepted into the program they do not receive financial sponsorship, though their tuition is paid. If they apply to the BAJD program (before STEP) they receive a stipend and financial support for childcare. However, with the introduction of STEP, to be discussed later, if they apply to enroll in the STEP Program and are accepted, their tuition is paid, they receive a bi-weekly stipend based on their attendance and progress, and they receive financial support for childcare. This is because the STEP Program is a Human Resource Development (federal government funded program), as was the BAJD program, whereas, the ABE program is not. Typically the students in the present ABE and STEP Program range in years from 19 to 68 and the majority of the students are women, and generally, all who apply are on social assistance.

### **Primary Research Sources**

One of the two references that I used extensively throughout the early conceptual stage of the project was Haig-Brown's (1995) resource: *Taking Control: Power and Contradiction in First Nations Adult Education*. Haig-Brown had conducted ethnographic research at the Native Education Centre in Vancouver, British Columbia. Her book proved to be an excellent resource because it provided insights from students,

staff and community members derived from her personal interviews and observations. Through the eyes of the community, she encapsulated the interpretations and philosophies of community-based education and aboriginal control of education. Additionally, she examined an array of relevant topics to this study, such as program development, student participation and retention, balancing academics with culturally relevant content, and student and staff issues. I was able to use this source in conceptualizing the structure of my study.

The second reference that was very helpful was Kirkpatrick's (1975) book, *Evaluating Training Programs*. It proved valuable because of the models and scenarios that were presented. He drew on theory and practice to provide evaluation strategies that were manageable. In his work, he says:

At best adult education institutions only provide the participants with an evaluation instrument, usually one that has not been tested for response objectivity, and calculate the average [mean] response to questions concerning the program and/or program leader. While this is a step in the right direction, little effort has been made to incorporate participant evaluation into future programs. (p. 42)

I found this comment intriguing. It was after reading his book that I decided to do a follow-up with staff and students concerning the overall changes to the centre, including the addition of the STEP Program, and it was at this point I began to narrow my study. In consultation with my St. Francis Xavier advisor, I used focus groups and personal interviews in addition to administering a questionnaire to incorporate a personal dimension of the students to the study by hearing their stories first hand in an expanded form from what the questionnaire results provided. Initially, I had intended only to conduct the written questionnaires. Kirkpatrick's work inspired me to take the results of the questionnaire to a higher level. I wanted to take the questionnaire results that I had

gathered during the main part of the research and, together with staff and students' in-put, use the data as a means of looking towards the future. I sought to have the staff and students work with me for the future of the adult education centre's programming. With a shared voice and vision, I believed we could build an adult basic education program that reflected all levels of learners' needs, and especially the needs of literacy-level learners.

### **The Adult Centre Described**

As mentioned, the adult education centre where I work falls under the authority of the School Board, which is comprised of the four Saanich Nations Bands' elected chiefs and councilors. There are 22 board members in all. In addition to the adult education centre, the School Board also operates and administers an elementary school and a high school. The tribal elementary and high schools receive core funding from the Department of Indian Affairs. The adult education centre, on the other-hand, does not receive core funding for its programs. Program delivery is strictly proposal driven. Proposals for annual funds and grants are submitted to the Department of Indian Affairs, Human Resource Development Canada, and other organizations such as the Industry Trades and Apprenticeship Commission, and the National Literacy Secretariat to establish new programs or to sustain on-going programs.

At the time of writing, the adult education centre offers: a Literacy program, the new STEP Program that I developed and implemented, an ABE program, and a First Nations Family Support Worker program. Most recently, the adult education centre also began offering evening Computer Classes, Small Business Development Seminars, a Youth Services Canada Project, a Youth Entrepreneur Action Program, a Horticulture

Training Program and a Trade Links Program. The adult centre also has basic library services and resources.

When I first started at adult education centre as the life skills instructor in 1996-1997, there were approximately 35 adult learners in full-time attendance at the ABE level, which included Basic Academic and Job Development. After I implemented the STEP Program in the 1997-1998 school year, the number increased to approximately 70 adult learners by 1999-2000 attending ABE and STEP on a regular basis. These figures do not include the First Nations Family Support Worker program or short-term courses, such as the evening computer class.

However, as touched on earlier, the physical set-up of the adult centre only served to increase the sense of isolation and establish barriers between programs. For example, the interior of the adult centre was bare and lacked character. A visitor walking down the hall of the adult education centre would find a stark corridor with closed doors. The visitor would not get a good sense of the atmosphere or the work that was taking place behind the closed doors to the various classrooms, nor would they get a sense of the people, the community, or the culture. Ironically, the exterior grounds, such as the lawns and garden, reflected a sense of pride found in the adult education centre but beyond this point the centre was not welcoming.

My initial views were confirmed shortly after starting my position as Director in 1997. I brought the Staff to a retreat at the Native Heritage Centre in a neighboring community. At that meeting, I asked the staff and the elder who had been invited to assist us to describe the environment of the adult education centre--both for its strengths and weaknesses. Specifically, they were asked to describe the adult education centre

based on the following aspects: Physical setting, student-to-student relationships, staff-to-student relationships, staff morale, quality of education and level of community involvement. The main points of feedback were that in addition to implementing the new STEP Program we needed to deal with the adult centre's physical setting. It was felt that we needed to change the wooden classroom doors to glass doors in order to give a more open feeling. It was also felt that we needed to incorporate native art to the classrooms and hallways to increase a sense of culture and community. We agreed we would participate in a staff work bee in order to remove old articles like old course material and other outdated material that had piled up over 10 years, to provide a sense of newness. The Library was also discussed. The staff suggested that we should relocate the Library upstairs where students could access resources better and where it would be more visible. We decided to put signs up to provide visitors with directions to classrooms and staff. In general, our goal was to brighten up the building by cleaning, painting, and making it more welcoming. Brillinger and Cantrell's (1993) findings support the views of the staff here in that they say: "equally important to the interpersonal relationship that is forged between educator and learner is the physical environment in which the learning experience unfolds" (p. 147). This preliminary staff dialogue was important because it helped to set in motion my research, specifically, the intent of conducting a thorough evaluation of the adult education centre.

In regards to the student-to-student relationships, the staff felt that we should implement a Student Orientation Day at the beginning of the year so that students could get to know each other on a social and personal level. It was suggested too that we should

have workshops, inter-mural games, and implement a hot-lunch program to bring students and staff together on a regular basis.

Staff-to-student relationships were also taken into consideration. It was felt that one of the adult centre's greatest strengths was its staff. We wanted to build on that strength by hosting more non-school activities, such as starting each month off with an elder visit to properly open the month in prayer. We wanted to hold more social and cultural events through the year.

Staff morale was the focus of much discussion. The main theme that emerged was that the staff was tired but they were ready for change. They had put in many hours and, for some, many years had gone into the adult education centre, but they felt they were at a standstill. Student numbers were not increasing and student progress, specifically in the area of moving on to higher education, was limited. It was decided that we needed to meet more often for staff meetings but, even more, it was decided we needed more social interaction to support each other. Looking at the students, staff felt that we needed to address the issues of retention, attendance, and course completion--and do this soon.

With respect to quality of education, our goal was to expand the courses and programs and raise the centre's community profile. We would distribute newsletters and visit the communities to let them know that the courses we deliver are the same quality as those delivered at the local colleges off the reserve.

The staff also wanted to increase the community involvement at the adult education centre and raise our profile by offering courses and programs that would be community-based and community-driven. They wanted to get out into the community to

raise awareness and they wanted to try to bring the community into the adult education centre for events such as open houses, spring teas, evening classes, career fairs and aboriginal fashion shows.

This initial discussion was very important, not only because it gave me a place to start to focus my research, it provided me with a very good sense of staff perspectives on their work environment above and beyond the need for a new ABE program like STEP. Since this staff retreat did not address the adult education centre's programs and courses per se, and did not examine the effectiveness of ABE and BAJD programs, here was my entry point for this research project. It was here, I believe, that my thesis study really took shape.

It was in this light that, at a School Board meeting held in November 1997, I proposed that a formal evaluation be conducted to determine student and staff perspectives on the level of services and quality of education at the adult education centre. I argued this evaluation could be a way to assist in a long-range educational development plan for the adult education centre. The School Board agreed to my proposal and authorized the research study that now follows.

### **Introduction of the STEP Program**

I had designed the STEP Program based on my own experiences and had done so, specifically to address the apparent gaps in the current adult centre programming, as introduced previously. As an adult learner who had returned to school in 1989, the structure and time-lines that worked best for me and helped to keep me focused were what I drew upon for the STEP Program. My own experience convinced me that a



learner has to have a goal in mind and has to believe the goal is attainable; otherwise, they may find that, when difficulties arise, it is easier to give up than go on.

### **The STEP Program Described**

The STEP Program I designed was introduced in the fall of 1997 to fill the gaps of previous ABE programs at our centre. Its objective was to provide a systematic, step-by-step, long range approach to bringing adult learners from the grade eight level (STEP 1) to college-prep level (STEP 5) within a four-year time frame. Its goal, then, was to mainstream adult learners through the system into college-level courses, while including career exploration. I soon found, however, that the low literacy skills of our potential students were the primary barrier. As a result, in the 1999-2000 school year we expanded the STEP Program to include STEP 1:A, which offered ABE programming to students under a grade eight level. This was accomplished with the financial support of the four bands' social development programs.

In the STEP Program, students had to make a commitment to the program for 1 to 4 years (depending on which grade level/step they began in), and the School Board also had to make a commitment to these adult learners by ensuring there was financial post-secondary support once the learners reached the highest, STEP 5, level. The STEP Program was and is funded by the aboriginal arm of Human Resource Development Canada and is solely administered and controlled by the School Board. The courses used in the program are Open Learning Agency courses--a post-secondary institution in Vancouver, British Columbia, that offers courses through a distance education format. Any given step would generally require the students to complete a Math, English, Native

language, and an Education & Career Planning course, as well as a computer class. The STEP Program provides participants with a goal and a means of getting off social assistance or employment insurance. As of September 2001, the program will expand to include First Nations social studies, biology, and geography at the step 4 and 5 levels.

Potential participants for STEP must undergo an academic assessment. The program is open to people aged 19 and over, and runs from September to the end of March. It ends in March because of funding restrictions. STEP 1-2 has an in-take of 23 students, and STEP 3 has an intake of 16, while STEP 4 has an intake of 12. The new STEP 5 consists of the number of students who successfully completed STEP 4 the previous year (as of September 2001 there are 16 STEP 5 students enrolled). The median age of adult learners in the STEP program is age 25 and the ratio of female to male participants is 5 to 1, respectively.

Students are required to complete and pass their courses in order to advance to the next step the following year. If a student does not complete the program and pass the courses, they have two options. They can apply to the regular ABE program or they can take a year off and reapply to the STEP Program the following year. If a student fails to meet the program requirements a second time, they are no longer eligible to apply to the STEP Program. This, in part, forms some of the structured requirements discussed earlier.

The concept behind STEP is that adult learners will be most successful when they work within a structured but supportive environment, meaning an environment having clear, stringent attendance requirements, assignment deadlines, and a requirement to pass and complete all of the program's components--a completion requirement that generally was not expected in their high school experience or the ABE and BAJD programs. The

participants in the STEP Program received a nominal stipend for their attendance; however, if assignments are not handed in on time, in consultation with their instructors, the stipend is withheld until the work is completed. The stipend is based on a combination of attendance and assignment completion. In the development of STEP, I dispersed the stipends (provided by HRDC) to allow for increased amounts as students progressed from one step to the next, which was different than was done in BAJD where students received one "larger" amount.

Basically, the STEP Program provides adult learners with a visual picture of their movement through the steps and, ultimately, they can see their educational progress from where they start to the possibility of college level.

Initially, the majority of participants had upgrading as their goal, while others had the goal to enter college or vocational training. The goal of entering college however, increased, as will be discussed later. Advancing through the steps seems to give the adult learners a sense of purpose and progress from one semester to the next. Moreover, with every new step completed, there is a sense of accomplishment and pride, and the learners see that they are getting closer to their goal.

### **The Basic Academic and Job Development Program Described**

The Basic Academic and Job Development (BAJD) program began in 1987 and ran until 1997. The School Board and a local college in the area had jointly administered the program. The local college administered the BAJD contract and hired a supervised staff on an annual basis. It received its funding from the aboriginal arm of Human Resource Development Canada, as is the current case with the STEP Program. The

program was open to participants 19 years and older. An academic assessment was not required for program entry. The main criterion was that, through an interview process, the participants would demonstrate their willingness and commitment to the 7-month program. Typically, 16 participants were selected for the 7-month program.

However, having no *academic* screening during the recruitment process presented problems because the participants' reading levels were often significantly dispersed. The academic levels of participants tended to range from grade 2 to grade 9. This made teaching and group dynamics challenging. Instructors had to be very sensitive to participant needs and were required to provide written material that was understandable to everybody. The instructors had to produce material that was not beyond the reading comprehension level of some, while not too remedial for others.

The BAJD program had three components: non-credited academics, life skills, and job readiness (which included short-term employment placements). Participants received a daily stipend as part of the grant that our centre received from Human Resource Development Canada, based on attendance, and they received financial support for childcare, as required. As mentioned above, the daily stipend was more than the STEP students receive today because the student numbers were less in BAJD. The life skills workshops included self-esteem building, financial management, conflict resolution, and problem solving, to name a few. The employment readiness component included certification in Food Safe, First Aid, Super Host, and Cashier Training. The academic upgrading included elementary reading, writing and math work sheets.

The profile of the participants that I derived from my experience as a life skills instructor in the program, and in my later discussions with the adult education centre

Staff, often revealed that students lacked education or had had negative educational experiences in either the public school system or in a residential school. Generally, the participants had limited self-esteem and were at a low-income level. They seemed to require consistent support, sensitivity, and encouragement.

Notwithstanding these problems, the BAJD staff accomplished some very good work considering their situation and the many barriers with which they had to contend. My personal assessment was that the main strength of the program was that the coordinator for the employment readiness component of the program was a local band member who played a key role in providing support. She remained in the position for the full 10 years of the program's delivery. Overall, she was the main bridge into the community. She provided program coordination and student support and was very knowledgeable about various participants, their families, and the extended-family connections and band politics. She also provided direction for cultural sensitivity and access to elders in the community. Her efforts spoke to the value of community links; nevertheless, it was this program that I believed needed to be replaced by the STEP Program. This was because the bridging from BAJD to ABE was not complete. As it turned out, many of the students were functioning at a low literacy level and not the grade eight-level that was required to move up to the ABE program.

### **The Adult Basic Education Program Described**

Finally, in regards to the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program, which was established in 1987, our adult centre records show that approximately 210 students had enrolled in the adult basic education program, for one or more courses. Typically,

interested students take an academic assessment to determine their appropriate grade placement before entry and acceptance. The assessments were usually administered at the adult education centre. Students do not receive stipends while attending ABE unless they are working at provincial level Math and English courses (grade 12). When students take six ABE courses at the provincial level, such as English 12 and Math 11, plus four additional courses, they generally qualify for band-sponsored post-secondary funding. Some students also meet the criteria to receive Adult Basic Education Student Assistance (ABESAP) funding, which assists in paying for their registration fees, tuition, books and supplies. Based on the records of the ABE program, the median age of the ABE student is 28 years and the predominant gender of the ABE student has been female.

Over the years, the ABE program has gained student and community support. This, in part, has to do with the leadership and support for the staff. As mentioned earlier, students and community have come to trust and care for the staff. One ABE staff member is non-native and the other is Metis. Both staff members have gained the trust of the community because of their demonstrated dedication and commitment to the community. They also play active roles in the teamwork and dynamics at the adult education centre. They participate in community celebrations, they attend funerals, and they include elder and language sessions in their classrooms. Moreover, they have established strong friendships with their students. In short, the adult centre staff and community consider the ABE staff members to be School Board employees, rather than employees from a local college in our area. This is significant at our centre because mainstream institutions and their employees are often seen as outsiders. In addition, it is significant because the ABE staff have been supportive of the changes and

implementation of the new STEP Program from the beginning, even though there was initial apprehension on their part because the STEP Program could decrease the student enrolment in the ABE program.

### **Outcomes of the Study**

In the second phase of this study, meaning the phase after the staff retreat and the initial questionnaire that I distributed, my more focused task was to create a questionnaire that would address issues of retention, attendance, and course completion. I chose the questionnaire to collect data from faculty and students and I thought the timing was right as it came right after our retreat. I saw the question as a way to build issues and themes for the personal interviews and staff and student focus groups to follow. The questionnaire would inform the interviews. I attempted to develop a questionnaire that allowed for measurable results but also included open-ended questions for additional respondent feedback. In the questionnaires and the interviews to follow, it was made clear that no names would be reported in this report in this thesis and all involved knew that participation in the study was voluntary. Two questionnaires were developed--one for staff and one for adult learners, though they basically contained the same questions. Overall, the questionnaires attempted to address the following: When did the staff or student attend the adult education centre, before or after STEP, or during both periods? Had the respondent seen increases in attendance, retention, and course completion since the STEP Program had been implemented and, if so, why? What was the respondent's description of the adult education centre before and after STEP? How would staff and students rate student satisfaction at the adult centre before and after the STEP Program

was implemented? There was also an area for additional respondent comments in the questionnaire.

I also used document analysis to research the centre's records. Doing this, I was able to compare the test data with the centre's documentation on the attendance rates, retention rates, and course completion rates over the past four years. Thus, I had statistics and impressions of trends. By asking students and faculty for their *impressions* on trends, I was able to gain insight into how the centre's faculty and students perceived changes that they considered to be significant.

Twelve students were interviewed in one-on-one interviews. In selecting those interviewed, I looked for six who had successfully completed a step the previous year, and six students who had not. The students who were interviewed had attended the adult education centre during the first year and second year of the STEP Program's delivery. The questions were developed to address why the student had or had not completed the STEP Program. I was attempting here to determine the factors leading to success and the barriers to their continuing in the program. An honorarium of \$15 was provided each participant following the interview.

Seven staff members were then invited to participate in a Staff Focus Group; 4 staff attended. The Staff Focus Group discussion looked at what they felt was still missing in our attempts to improve student attendance, retention and course completion. The 3-step process took 8 months to conduct. The questionnaires were administered between December and April 1998-99 and September and December 1999. The one-on-one student interviews, and faculty focus group interviews took two months during the



2000 school year. The results of the questionnaire, interviews, and focus group are summarized next.

### **A Summary of Staff Questionnaire Results**

Both students and faculty were handed questionnaires (75 to students and 10 to staff; 32 students and 8 staff returned the questionnaires). The staff members were asked: "In your view, do you think there has been an increase in student enrollment for adult basic education programming since STEP came into place? If you answer "yes," please give your interpretation of why there has been an increase." The majority of staff who completed the questionnaire (6 out of 8) identified themselves as being employed at the adult education both "before" and "after" the STEP Program had been implemented. All of those reported they believed that there had been an increase in student enrollment in adult basic education since the STEP Program was implemented. In fact, the centre's records for the past 2 years indicate that this is true. There had been a marked increase in student enrollment with numbers increasing by 50% from 35 students in ABE and BAJD to 70 students in ABE and STEP. And over three years the student enrollment in ABE and STEP increased to 82 students. The staff suggested that one of the reasons for increased enrollment was that there had been a carryover of BAJD participants to the STEP Program. They also identified the stipend as a strong factor providing student incentive. For example, literacy students started in STEP 1:A, then moved to STEP 3, and on to STEP 4, which completed all of their courses. As they successfully moved through each step, their daily stipend increased from 5 to 20 dollars per day, 5 dollars being at the lowest step, and 20 dollars being at the higher step. As mentioned earlier, by

STEP 5 students were eligible for post secondary financial sponsorship, which significantly increased their financial support based on their family unit. Therefore, the STEP Program gave a logical progression in financial support, not seen in the earlier BAJD program or ABE. It was further stated by one faculty member that, "STEP addressed the lack of continuity between BAJD and ABE." In relation to the programs that existed before STEP: "STEP provided a longer term, more consistent path" in adult basic education. One staff member put it this way:

There was an increase [in course completion] because the students that came into ABE from the STEP program were better prepared for school and because of the career and personal planning program they had a good idea of what they wanted in a college program.

The role of leadership was also emphasized in the responses. A staff member said the "leadership within the centre and out to the communities raised the profile of our programs." Others pointed to a "new sense of team-work and commitment towards student success," and said that the adult education centre was offering "more interesting courses and programs."

The staff members were also asked: "In your view, has there been an increase in the number of courses students who complete after STEP? If you answer 'yes,' please give your interpretation of why you think students are completing more courses." There was general consensus (5 out of 6 replies; 2 did not respond) that students were completing more courses than before the STEP Program was offered--both in the STEP Program and in the ABE program. In fact, the centre's records over the four-year period indicate that, indeed, more courses had been completed. With 35 students in ABE and BAJD two years prior to the implementation of the STEP Program (1996-98), records

show that 18 academic (Math and English) courses were completed. Two years later (1998-99), with the implementation of the STEP Program the number of academic courses (Math, English and Education & Career Planning) completed in ABE and STEP increased to 38, a percentage increase of 100%.

The following comments provide a general synopsis of staff responses. One said: "With Step there has been more of a sense of group identification and an expectation that academic achievement is part of being in the group." Others expressed a feeling that "intrinsic and extrinsic motivation has been stronger," and "deadlines and timelines have worked for most students." A number of staff also said there was "increased confidence" and a "clear direction" in increasing the numbers of course completions. With respect to more courses being completed one staff member said "linking the stipend to attendance and assignments being handed in has clearly increased course completion." Another said: "classroom instruction for the group in STEP works better."

Better preparation also tended to surface as an overall theme in the response to this question, not only better preparation in student academic course work but in students becoming better familiar with the adult education centre. One response said:

When students entered the ABE program from STEP they were better prepared. They had been students for a while at that point, therefore, they had overcome some of the barriers that students encounter returning to school. The students were sailing by the time they came to ABE and they were more familiar with the AEC so they knew their way around the computer room, lunch room, and other supports at the adult centre. In other words they knew where to go for help when issues came up.

Another question was: "In your view, has there been an increase in student daily attendance after STEP? Why or why not?" To this, there were mixed opinions whether or not there have been increases in student attendance. In general, however, the staff

agreed (6 out of 8) that attendance has improved since STEP has been introduced. Typically, staff attributed this to the program stipends. It should be reiterated that students also received stipends when they attended the BAJD program but the stipends were not linked to assignment and course completion as well as attendance; nonetheless, stipends were named as a motivating factor in STEP.

The adult centre daycare was also thought to play a role. The licensed daycare, which opened in the 1998, was seen as a way to meet student needs in a better way. However, one staff member said, “students realized by the time they entered ABE that there is definitely a connection between attending everyday and completion of courses.”

Other responses pointed to “group dynamics encouraging attendance, as well as sequenced lessons” that led to improvements. One staff member said that, “the course related deadlines helped group identification... students saw daily that their presence was meaningful, as a way to achieve their goals.” This staff member also noted that, “something in the STEP structure made those career-goals seem more concrete.”

The staff members were then asked: “How would you describe the adult education centre before and after STEP?” It was pointed out that, before and after STEP, there was always a group of very caring and dedicated staff that work(ed) very hard to support students. However, it was noted that, before STEP, staff were getting frustrated and were starting to burn out because they “would try to implement a few changes but always [it was] frustrating piecemeal,” as one put it.

Attendance was also highlighted as a major issue. One staff member described the adult education centre of the past as generating very “sporadic” attendance. Another went so far as to say the adult centre used to be “dead.” Now, they said, generally

attendance had improved. In fact, the centre records showed a 35% increase in student attendance two years after the implementation of the STEP Program. Staff attributed the improved attendance to having more family groups and elders in the centre. However, improving student attendance was said by all staff to be an area requiring continued development.

Still, another major issue had to do with the lack of communication before STEP. For example, communication at the adult education centre was described this way: “the left hand did not know what the right hand was doing and the classes very seldom interacted, which was a real shame.” The centre was also described as “a loose agglomerate [sic] of programs, some perennial.” Most revealing was the sentiment of a staff member, who said:

The instructors from the various programs did not even know each other's name. In fact... out in the “real world” I am sure they would have been surprised that they both worked in the same building, on the same floor or on the same site. There was no effective coordination of the centre and this had gone on for years.

Faculty also pointed to the lack of goal setting and limited course selection as being issues before the implementation of the STEP Program. One person said, “Students did not have a focus, nor did they have short or long term goals.” With respect to Basic Academic and Job Development, it was said, “there were only a few who carried on to work or attend up-grading.” In addition, the adult education centre was also said to have had “isolated classrooms,” a “serious lack of continuity from program to program, year to year,” and “the building itself was not very adult-focused, not very warm or welcoming—sort of frozen, low profile [with] no risk-taking.” There were also responses

that acknowledged the lack of community and elder participation in the past as well as the inadequacy of the computer lab's resources, computer-related courses and career-related activities.

The staff described the adult education centre after the STEP Program was implemented and there was a significant level of consistency in their responses. There were two re-occurring themes. One of the themes characterized the renewed adult education centre as being a "goal-orientated" environment. One person said the staff and students now have "more of a sense of purpose and team work." Another attributed this to an improved "inter-classroom flow of people and information...[and that] student rewards and responsibilities are [now] spelled out clearly." The second theme had to do with developing a sense of family and community within the centre. After STEP, one staff member described the adult education centre as "a unified purposeful community because there is now much more involvement on the part of elders participating and guest speakers to share the local history and culture." Increased communication within and without the centre was also noted. As one faculty member said:

After STEP, the AEC seemed to take a more active role in informing the outside community as to what was going on at the centre. Once the STEP program came on-board, we as a staff tried to bring the classes together as many times as possible...(and) we invited the surrounding communities to join us. This was a wonderful way for the students to be connected. They started to see the AEC as a community and they liked to be there.

Another piece of the picture after STEP had to do with the new influx of students who were enrolling at the adult centre at that time. A number of staff described how the same group of students typically tended to return year after year before the STEP Program was offered, but were now seeing new faces and new family groups coming to

the centre. There was much more participation from the community than ever “playing an active role in the centre’s education.”

The change in the physical decor at the adult centre was also said to have played a significant role. One person noted how the adult centre is now “much more colorful, comfortable and adult orientated as a result of student photos and native art being displayed.”

Another survey question asked was: “If you feel there have been increases and improvements in enrollment, course completion, attendance or retention since the STEP Program was implemented, please describe what it is that has happened?” To this, one staff member said:

Every year I was told students need more structure and I got tired of hearing it. Now, after looking at what STEP has done, I understand both my resistance and the truth in the statement. I see it as a case of Russian dolls--one inside another. My resistance came from not finding that more structure in the classroom had much impact at all. I believe the truth is that structure within the classroom needs effective structure in the centre--and beyond--for there to be a significant impact. I think the vision that transformed the centre affected everyone to try harder and expect more.

There were also suggestions that some of the increases and improvements were a result of the “support staff [that are] now in place.” This was a reference to the additions to the staff as a result of the new STEP Program, the new native language instructor, computer instructor, local elder guest speakers and part time education counselor that the local college provided.

Generally, however, there was agreement that the improvements were a direct result of the “overall improved cohesion at the AEC [and the] clearer goals for students,” as one succinctly put it. In addition to the increase in student participation, some of the

suggestions made for change were acted on at this time, such as hosting career fairs, hot lunches, and including elders in the centre's activities.

Staff members were also asked to reflect on and rate student satisfaction *before* and after STEP was implemented. When Staff rated student satisfaction at the adult centre "before" the STEP Program was implemented—with 1 signifying the lowest satisfaction rate—5 the highest, no one rated satisfaction as 1 out of the eight staff that responded to the questionnaire. Three staff rated student satisfaction as a 2, one rated student satisfaction as a 3, no one rated student satisfaction as a 4, and one rated student satisfaction as a 5 (highest). Three respondents did not answer the question, as seen below.

TABLE 1. Student Satisfaction *Before* STEP as Rated by Staff (N=8)

8						
7						
6						
5						
4						
3	X		X			
2	X		X			
1	X		X	X		X
Satisfaction Rating	N/R	1	2	3	4	5
		(lowest)				(highest)

\*N/R= No Response

This told me that staff believed student satisfaction was quite low before the implementation of the STEP Program, although one faculty believed student satisfaction to be very high at that time.

By comparison, rating student satisfaction at the adult education centre *after* the STEP Program was implemented, the staff rated student satisfaction in the following



way: No one rated student satisfaction as 1 (lowest), no one rated student satisfaction as a 2, no one rated student satisfaction as a 3, 3 staff rated student satisfaction as a 4, and three rated student satisfaction as 5 (highest). Two staff members did not answer the question.

TABLE 2. Student Satisfaction *After* STEP as Rated by Staff (N=8)

8						
7						
6						
5						
4						
3					X	X
2	X				X	X
1	X				X	X
Satisfaction Rating	N/R	1 (lowest)	2	3	4	5 (highest)

\*N/R= No Response

Staff was also asked to “provide any additional comments that you feel would be helpful in this research.” I was pleased with the breadth of the responses. This particular section elicited helpful direction for future program consideration. One of the staff members said, “STEP has just begun to tap into its potential to build a foundation for creative goals, which will be key in making the assertion of these goals a concrete and tangible journey.” Another said, “having goals makes the whole difference because I don’t think that we as a staff were very strong in the past in making this a reality.” In addition, one faculty member said, “there is something new with the STEP Program that seems to help the students to see beyond the present.” Generally, there was a feeling that STEP helps adult learners form personal goals and, with these goals the students were able to look ahead into the near and distant future.

Leadership was also raised in the comments section. The staff accredited the new leadership, meaning my efforts as Director at the adult education centre, with a change in the centre's purpose. For example, one staff member shared this thought: "research has shown that the principal of a school has more of an impact on the effectiveness of the school than any other factor." She went on to say, "I don't know all the details or even the veracity on this but it makes sense...before STEP we had worked hard to build supportive relationships, however, the relationship that was missing was a meaningful relationship with administration." The staff member then reflected on the time before STEP and said there really was "a huge lost opportunity" back then.

On reflection, my opinion is that the improvements are a result of my working with a dedicated staff that was willing to be challenged and open to change. Change is often threatening, but the staff rose to the occasion and, within a relatively short period of time, they worked as a team to move ahead with a shared vision for the students and adult centre. This was not evidenced more than when the long-time coordinator of the Basic Academic and Job Development program decided to play an active role by accepting the new direction of adult education centre programming. This meant the coordinator for Basic Academic and Job Development program sacrificed her old job to allow for change and development; she gave up her job as a program coordinator to allow for the new STEP Program. This had to be done because once the STEP Program was in place it was a requirement of the Open Learning Agency that instructors had to have a minimum of a college degree. She did not even though she did have ten years of experience working with her people. Her willingness to move aside had to have been very difficult, and this is why I acknowledge her in the opening comments of this thesis. I recall when I met her

for lunch in late 1997 to discuss the possible changes in programming at the adult education centre. I wanted to discuss the potential ramifications for her and the BAJD program—both negative and positive—before I brought the proposed program model to the School Board. In her typically graceful and professional manner, she said, “I’m willing to do whatever it takes if it’s the best thing for our people.” I will never forget her words and she will always be an example for me.

In regards to staff in-put, they also raised the issue of the STEP Program’s curriculum. Specifically, they questioned the need for inclusion of life skills in the program’s content because the students in STEP 1 were clearly opposed to taking part in the life skills workshops. Two staff members, in particular, questioned the benefit of the life skills component of the STEP Program because, from their experience, they found that the students in STEP 1 were clearly opposed to taking part in the life skills workshops because the majority of the students had been in the BAJD program. They had already participated in workshops that dealt with personal growth, goal setting, conflict resolution, financial management, and so on. At this point in their life they wanted a program that focused only on academics. The students at that time said they were at the adult centre to go to school and not to take workshops. They were the adult learners obviously skeptical about life skills and demonstrated their resistance not only by expressing their concerns but also by not attending the life skills classes. A class of 12 would normally be reduced to 2 or 3 when the content was life skills. Clearly, the students sent the staff a strong message.

In addition, many staff members pointed to the benefits of having elders and local resource people involved in the centre because their involvement provided a historical, spiritual and cultural dimension to our programs.

I appreciated their feedback because it was very helpful at that time. Hence, in the year 2000, we increased the number of local guest speakers and life skills was only included in the lower steps of the program, meaning the entry level steps of the program such as the STEP 1-2, and in a limited way in STEP 3. By step 3, staff decided to change the focus from life skills to study skills. In this, the focus was preparing for exams and improved study habits.

One staff member also highlighted the importance of integrating the students' voices into the overall molding and development of the adult centre as follows:

As we move forward in the development of the AEC, I think it is important to continue to involve the students in the every-day activities of the centre and encourage them to become responsible members of the centre. They have lots to offer and they will feel more in control of their education if they feel they are contributing and they have some control over what is happening at the AEC.

The students' involvement in the study and their responses to the questionnaire is discussed next.

### **A Summary of Adult Learner Questionnaire Results**

Unlike the initial phase of my research, in the second phase no questionnaires were *mailed* out. Questionnaires were handed out to students attending the adult education centre during the study, meaning, students who were attending classes at that time (1998) were personally given a copy of the questionnaire. In addition, past students

who happened into the centre for a variety of reasons, such as wanting to enroll in the new STEP Program, were asked if they would voluntarily participate in the study. Essentially the same questions were posed to the students in the questionnaire as had been posed to faculty.

The first question asked was: "In your view, do you think there has been an increase in student enrollment in adult basic education programming since STEP came into place? If you answer 'yes' please give your interpretation of why there has been an increase." In answer to this question, the majority of student questionnaire respondents (28 out of 32) answered that they attended the adult education centre both "before" and "after" the implementation of the STEP Program. Like the Staff, the adult learners believed that there had been an increase in student enrollment in ABE programs (30 out of 32). However, there was a variance in their description on increased enrollment, ranging from "a slight improvement" to "a big improvement." As was noted earlier, in the centre records there had actually been a significant increase over time from 1996 to 2000. The majority of adult learners suggested that several factors contributed to the increase in student enrollment. One factor was the benefit of the daily stipend because, now, students "do not have to worry about where their lunch is coming from." Another factor was that students had more choices on courses and career focused programs than they did before. One adult learner said, "There was an increase because there were more options for the community," while another said, "STEP helps you to know what field to go in to in the future." One student pointed to "a greater sense of professional behavior connected with the adult centre." It was also interesting to note that a student felt "a sense of pride and acknowledgment" because of the new decor in the centre, such as staff and

student art, and photographs of the students in the centre's corridors and classrooms. And another said: "having elders in here on a regular basis helps to make the centre whole." In summary, the majority of the respondents suggested that enrollment and course completion have improved overall.

The students were also asked, "In your view, has there been an increase in the number of courses students complete after STEP? If you answer 'yes' please give your interpretation of why you think students are completing more courses." To this, 21 of the 32 respondents answered "yes" but many also indicated that they did not know if there were actual increases in course completion. There was some uncertainty. They also suggest that "students still slack off," whether it was before or after the implementation of the STEP Program. One of the students attributed any improvements to the newly implemented daycare and the additional course selections in the adult centre.

Students were further asked: "In your view, has there been an increase in students' daily attendance after STEP? Why or why not?" Twenty-three out of 32 respondents believed that there has been an increase. They said attendance has increased because the adult learners "want to move on to the next level of their goals" and "STEP students take pride in their attendance." As mentioned previously, the centre's records showed that attendance had increased by 35%. One respondent cited role modeling as playing an important part in the process of increasing daily attendance saying: "I have seen my friends and family who have completed the STEP Program and have moved on to a higher level of education." That student attributed role modeling to her personal desire to continue and her increased self-esteem and belief in herself. Another student

said, "I don't know exactly [if there is an increase in daily attendance]. However, I have been at the centre for two years and there are more here now than when I first started."

The students were also asked: "How would you describe the adult education centre before and after STEP?" It was agreed that before STEP there was less activity and fewer students attending the adult centre. One respondent said, in the past, there "were not many programs to suit the needs of students" and "there was really no one here." Several respondents mentioned the Basic Academic and Job Development program in their description of the centre before STEP. The following general view was presented: "I think that BAJD was a good course but all it did was to take students in and get rid of them whether they got a job or not. That was about it, and it didn't give the people a full chance to pursue their education." Adding to this, another wrote:

I attended the BAJD program and I was really uncertain about coming back to school. I didn't think I had what it takes to begin working towards my educational goals. Now being in STEP 3, I am surprised at myself for making it this far and even planning my career goals. It has also uplifted my self-esteem and has given me the courage and strength to continue on.

In contrast, most of the respondents commenting on the centre after the STEP Program had been implemented stated that there were now more adult learners and elders at the centre because there were more program choices. There was also an increased focus on career and education opportunities. One said, "I have noticed more students than before and they are from all age groups." This was accurate. In fact, the students enrolled in ABE programs ranged in age from 19 to 68 after STEP. Before STEP, generally the oldest students were in their late forties. One student also identified that, from its pilot year, there have been needed modifications made to the STEP Program. He

said, "Being in the STEP Program gives the people a chance to get their education...I was in the program the first year in STEP 1 but I wish I was in the second year because it is getting more organized now moving from STEP 1 to STEP 3."

Students were also asked, "If you feel there have been increases and improvements in enrollment, course completion, attendance or retention since the STEP Program was implemented, please describe what it is that has happened." The respondents said the stipends, and more courses and program options, were the primary contributing factors to increased student enrollment and attendance. One person said, "There has been an increase in enrollment because of funding. When I started in STEP 3, I received a supplement to my welfare and the money helped me with lunch expenses." Another person suggested that stipends "encourage younger people to come back to get their education." Another said improved course options lead to increased enrollment. That respondent added: "I did not know what field to go into but now I know that I have a different field to go in to." Another said, "This year three elders attended the STEP Program and that made me very proud to be here with them." Reflecting on this comment, I believe there is now greater elder participation because we invite them to attend and because we advertise a literacy level program. Moreover, we invite elders to participate as educators in all levels of programming and support. I have been told that in the past elders did not attend the adult centre to upgrade their education.

In addition, students were asked to rate student satisfaction before and after STEP. When the adult learners rated student satisfaction at the adult education centre "before" the STEP Program was implemented, they rated it the following way: Four students rated satisfaction as 1 (lowest), thirteen students rated student satisfaction as 2, nine rated



student satisfaction as 3, four rated it as 4, and no students rated student satisfaction as 5 (highest). Two students did not answer the question.

TABLE 3. Satisfaction Rating *Before* STEP as Rated by Students (N=13)

13			X			
12			X			
11			X			
10			X			
9			X	X		
8			X	X		
7			X	X		
6			X	X		
5			X	X		
4		X	X	X	X	
3		X	X	X	X	
2	X	X	X	X	X	
1	X	X	X	X	X	
Satisfaction Rating	N/R	1	2	3	4	5
		(lowest)				(highest)

\*N/R= No Response

When the adult learners rated student satisfaction at the adult education centre after the STEP Program was implemented, they rated it the following way: No students rated student satisfaction as 1 (lowest), no students rated student satisfaction as 2, four students rated student satisfaction as 3, twelve students rated student satisfaction as 4, and fifteen students rated it as 5 (highest). One person did not answer the question. Overall, therefore, the students indicated that there was greater satisfaction with the centre's adult basic education program than in the past as seen below:

TABLE 4. Satisfaction Rating *After* STEP as Rated by Students (N=15)

15						X
14						X
13						X
12					X	X
11					X	X
10					X	X
9					X	X
8					X	X
7					X	X
6					X	X
5					X	X
4			X		X	X
3			X		X	X
2			X		X	X
1	X		X		X	X
Satisfaction Rating	N/R	1	2	3	4	5
		(lowest)				(highest)

\*N/R= No Response

With respect to the comments section, the students were asked to “provide any additional comments that you feel would be helpful in this research.” There were a variety of responses but general themes emerged in the student responses. For example, the majority of students highlighted the need for more native language classes, students in each STEP should be closer in academic grade ranges, career planning should remain a core component of the STEP Program and, most cited, the stipend available to them was a strong motivating factor to attend and complete the program. There was also a stated need to have more tutors, especially local native tutors and extra help on a consistent basis and a need to continue to provide stipends and completion bonuses.

In particular, one respondent suggested that if the students were closer in academic levels--meaning having similar academic strengths in both English and

Math--then there would be fewer problems. The student was absolutely right. In the first year of the STEP Program we were quite lenient and not prepared for the consequences. For example, in the first year of the STEP program's implementation, a student who academically assessed at grade eight Math and grade ten English was placed at the higher step: grade ten. This was because we believed a student's English skill level was the best identifying factor for the grade level they should be placed at. Now, however, a student is placed in the step that reflects his or her lowest academic assessment, which has resulted in greater success because the student tends to then complete the year and pass all of the required courses. Interestingly, the student who drew our attention to this issue said, "If students were closer in their grades it would save some from getting too far behind and being embarrassed by having trouble with the work."

There were also a number of comments that related to staff. One person said, "I feel really comfortable with the instructors...the instructors give us enough boundaries and equal freedom. Which is just enough to keep us here." There were also references that related to the recruitment of students. For example, one respondent suggested that we "shouldn't choose students that keep coming back and then dropping out half-way through the program." This helped to solidify our current practice where we ask a student who has not completed all of the required courses in that given year to take a year off before reapplying to the STEP Program, or we suggest that he/she apply to the Adult Basic Education program because the ABE program is self-paced. Overall, it was clear from these questionnaires that more course selection, stipends, daycare, and multi-generational students improved the programming and enrollment at the centre.

### **A Summary of Student Focus Group Interviews**

The student focus groups interviews were held between June and August 2000 in my office at the adult education centre at times that were convenient for me as well as the students. I chose students entirely at random through the class lists and asked them as I saw them in the centre if they would be willing to participate in the study. Once I had 12 students, six who had been successful in completing the particular step they had been in, and six who had not been successful, I stopped making student contacts. Of the 12 students who were selected to take part in the interview, 6 had successfully advanced from one step to the next, and 6 had not successfully advanced. Of the 12 who were invited, all participated. As noted in chapter 1, the study had some limitations in this area. First, there was a chance that holding these in my office could have intimidated some. However, as noted in the limitations section, I do not believe this occurred because of the rapport that I believed that I had built with the students. The student sample was small-- only 12 out of the possible 70 were interviewed. However, they were randomly selected for the purpose of having six who were successful in progressing and six who were not. The objective was to allow for an expanded discussion to take place beyond the questionnaire. I had the results of the questionnaire in mind and sought to gain more depth. What I was most interested in learning were their views on the main factors and barriers affecting their success. The individual interviews allowed for 11 open-ended questions; however, I am only highlighting the most relevant areas for the purpose of focusing on the comments that add to this study.

In regards to the adult learners who progressed from one step the next, there was general consensus that stipends played a significant part in their enrolling in the STEP

Program and in seeing them through to the next step. One, a single mother with 2 children said, "The incentive really helped...I might have dropped out by January to get a job if we weren't getting it [the stipend] but that little amount was steady and really helped out, especially around Christmas time.... I sure noticed the difference once the program was over."

In the focus group, the participants were asked to list three factors that helped to contribute to their success. The main factors that were most often cited included: Having the support of their classmates, having the daycare in the building, and having the encouragement of the administration and staff. One said: "what helped me most was knowing that you and the staff were behind me... if I didn't make it to school you would check to see what was happening and because you cared enough to ask made me feel like I had to see the program through to the end." Another said, "the daycare saved me, without having the daycare in the building, and without a car I couldn't have done it."

When they were asked what role the adult education centre's administration and staff played in their education, the following areas were most often raised: Staff helped us to look ahead to the future, especially college; staff helped us to look forward to going to school by making learning interesting and fun; and, it was helpful to know the administration and staff were always encouraging us because that made us want to try harder. One student said: "you guys always noticed when I was gone... that is a different experience from when I was in high school because no one even noticed if I was there." And another said: "You had my Grandpa in to talk about our bighouse culture and that made me feel proud."

With respect to how the adult education centre could improve attendance, retention, and course completion, the students suggested that we should continue to provide incentive and completion bonuses and focus more on “other” activities beyond academics because social events made it fun to be at the adult centre. It was noted that social extras could bring staff and students together, as well. Specific suggestions were: “keep the hot lunches going” and “the career fairs and fashion shows are what brought my family here.” And finally, “having elders take part as students and teachers was the best part for me.”

### **A Summary of Staff Focus Group**

The faculty focus group was held in the summer of 2000 in a private section of a local restaurant. It lasted for approximately two hours. The reason I chose to hold the focus group there was that I believed it was a neutral and informal setting. The 4 staff members who participated were asked to consider and discuss the following 3 questions: When thinking about the changes that we have implemented to address attendance, course completion, and retention at the adult education centre, what is still missing? What further challenges do we face? And where do we go from here?

A theme that became apparent dealt with the fact that we still needed to improve student attendance. One staff member spoke about a program model that is used at another aboriginal adult education centre. In that model, a council of students monitor attendance and ultimately have the authority to set the centre’s rules and guidelines for matters such as non-attendance, even to the degree that they have the authority to ask a student to withdraw if the student is not attending regularly.

Other measures for dealing with attendance were also mentioned by staff, such as having student contracts outlining attendance and consequences for not attending classes. However, some staff felt that, under those circumstances, someone was ultimately left with the responsibility of monitoring the students and then following through with the students when there was non-attendance. Having to play this role made some staff feel like they were “police rather than supporters.” This led another staff member to comment on the importance of having an “intrinsic” desire and purpose in being at the adult centre in the first place. When students intrinsically want to attend, she said, students attend on a regular basis because they genuinely want to be there.

Discussion on attendance led to the need to continue to strengthen our “vision” and to connect students to goals. It was acknowledged that students who had goals tended to produce more and participate more. How to foster those goals became central to the staff’s discussion. They all agreed that we had to strengthen our career and the education-planning component of the STEP Program and continue to involve local elders and resource people. Of significant importance was that it was the ABE staff (3 out of the 4 present) that said that they were less inclined to monitor attendance. In contrast, the STEP instructor advocated more stringent attendance policies. At that point, the conversation concentrated on the need for the AEC to focus more on student career preparation. On this topic it was suggested that we should bring in local role models to share their experiences with the students and continue to utilize elders in program delivery.

The need to address the issues and barriers for “non-academic” students was also raised. In this, they were addressing those students functioning at literacy levels and

who, perhaps, might be better served with employment and vocational training. It was also noted that the School Board's existing post secondary financial assistance policy served to further exacerbate the situation because their policy was rigid with respect to vocational and non-academic sponsorship. Students who were in the non-academic or literacy stream could not access post-secondary sponsorship. There have been recent adaptations, however, to the policy to address this need. The policy now allows for limited sponsorship for vocational and special needs requests but the point was valid at that time.

The focus group then turned to the potential benefits of recognizing students throughout the year, not only at the end of the term or school year. For example, it was felt that "honoring the students throughout the year" could play a role in retention, and even beyond, to provide support and affirmation for the students who also do not complete their courses and programs. Suggestions included celebrating participation and honoring those that took the step to re-enter the education system, whether they completed or not.

The staff focus group ended with a discussion on future challenges; specifically, that staff must work diligently as a team to ensure that the local native language and culture are integrated into all aspects of our courses and programs in even a greater way.

### **Outcomes and a Follow-Up Note to the Study**

To summarize, over the 10 months of stage two of this project, attendance increased by 35%, inquiries rose by 70% in the first year, enrollment rose from 35 to 70 students in the first year, and course completion increased by 100% between the 1996-98



school years and the 1998-99 school year. Moreover, as for college and further education, during the first three years of the STEP Program, 16 of the 36 (44.4%) STEP 4 students moved on to college-preparation programs. Of these, 7 of the 16 (43.8%) students who entered college preparation programs moved on to college or further education.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **DRAWING THE PIECES TOGETHER AND LOOKING AHEAD**

Although it is far from extensive, the literature indicates that improving First Nations adult learner success in adult basic education has been the subject of discussion for quite some time. The discussion recognizes the disparity between First Nations and the majority culture, not only educationally, but also at a social and economical level. It also makes it clear that there are still deep, adverse effects of colonization, which further advances the need to consider new and creative approaches to adult basic education in order to maximize adult learner retention, completion, and eventual learner success in higher education.

Even a cursory glance at First Nations adult education program literature demonstrates the need to include the aboriginal experience in mainstream Canadian history texts. More specifically, I draw from the literature that it is necessary to look at aboriginal perspectives, traditions, and their world-view in the program development process for adult basic education. By validating First Nations peoples' history, especially in relation to colonialism and oppression, aboriginal adult learners can be helped to move forward from the past to the future. Within this context of program planning one sees the fundamental value of offering programs that are under the auspices of Indian control. Here is one of the ways for First Nations people to regain control, reclaim their traditional aboriginal knowledge, and build on their past in order to progress towards educational, social, spiritual, and cultural freedom and recapture their traditional identity.

The primary purpose of this thesis, as stated in the opening chapter, was to determine whether a program model like STEP can be utilized and can lead to increased attendance, retention, and course completion; and, thus, if such a program can prepare adult learners for college preparation and, ultimately, for post secondary education. My study suggests that, at our adult education centre, two key factors that increased student retention and course completion were raised student, and raised staff expectations. For example, the staff responses in the questionnaire suggest that the new STEP Program and the expectations of students lead the staff to want to be more open to increased levels of structure. Both students and staff saw that structure plays a positive role in student retention and achievement. Moreover, the student responses point to the need for “staff caring about whether I succeed or not.” Staff displayed clear concern and worked with students for better student retention and program completion. The STEP Program provided a systematic, linear, visible progression through stages of upgrading.

The STEP program was deliberately designed to have higher goals, higher expectations, and to place higher demands on students as they progressed through each step. The aim at the lower step, STEP 1-2 (previously called STEP 1:A), for example, is now to help students feel comfortable with their new educational experience and celebrate their return to adult basic education. From there, we all set out to show them that they can complete one course, then two, then three, and then four courses, as each step becomes more demanding; all the while orientating them towards making educational and career choices through education and career planning exercises.

Further, we had community involvement. Barman and Herbert (1987) support this approach when they suggest educational changes happen in stages and key changes occur

occur when they arise at the community level. I believe this study's findings add to the literature in that the STEP Program has fostered community participation by setting clear stages leading to concrete progress, most clearly evidenced in increased enrollment, course completion and elder participation. However, STEP out of context would not be sufficient. Despite having structure, stipends, and an emphasis on career and goal setting; without community and elder support to foster a cultural and spiritual dimension in our centre, I would have serious doubts if STEP would have succeeded the way it did..

The heightened expectations and the new stringent attendance and assignment completion policy in our program helped students in several ways. For example, knowing what was expected, students began to encourage one another to attend more and they began to see the connections between regular attendance and program completion. As one staff member put it, the students came to see that "their presence mattered." They saw this link not only because their assignments were completed, but also because more attendance meant they received a higher stipend. As discussed earlier, more attendance meant a higher stipend. Further to this, the students in the study consistently referred to the benefits of having clear goals in the STEP Program because goals helped them to see beyond the immediate, to the future, and, often, towards college enrolment.

An example of this is that 9 of the 12 students who participated in the Student Focus Group Interviews indicated that when they started the STEP Program, college was not their main goal and they did not have a clear goal in mind. Nevertheless, these 9 said their initial goal when entering the STEP Program was to upgrade and they had not given serious consideration to a college education. However, at the time of the interviews all said their goal was now to enter college.

Basically, as a result of career planning and goal setting at our centre, we saw increased numbers of students bridging from STEP 4 into college preparation programs from the number that had bridged into college programs when they were in ABE or BAJD programs within the time-frame of the study. The number of students who entered college after STEP within the two-year timeframe was 7 out of 16 and at the time of writing, of the current 14 students in STEP 4 (2000), a significant number (8 students) will bridge into college preparation studies next year. This is the highest number to progress into college preparation since the implementation of ABE programs at our centre.

The third, and overreaching factor in the study, however, was the role that the financial incentive played in the STEP Program's success. It simply allowed students to be more focused on their studies because their economic problems were somewhat eased. The financial stipend made participation in school more manageable and, in a subtle way, students knew that each progressive step also meant an increased daily stipend. It gave them something to strive for, which in my opinion parallels the real work world.

At the adult education centre, our daily experience confirmed much of the literature's findings because we too found that instructor-student relationships are vital within the educational context. In fact, most often cited in the student interviews was the role that the staff played in their education. Students said it helped them to know that the administration and staff were always on their side, making them want to try even harder. Instructor-student relationships proved to play a significant role in increasing the likelihood that adult learners would be retained at the adult centre, and in the end, more completed their programs.

A third factor was our new environment. The overall positive aspects of our school environment were seen by students to play a part in their success. One student in her second year of the STEP Program, entering STEP 4 said: "I feel good coming to school...it's awesome to be learning with everybody, especially having my auntie and granny in the STEP Program.... I don't feel stupid if I ask questions like when I was in high school." Another said: "It's a new experience for me to do school work where I'm not always feeling like I'm the dumb Indian." Most often cited about our school environment was that students felt comfortable and felt positive being with their relatives and friends and seeing more community involvement at the centre.

Generally, the literature illustrates that traditional mainstream education has not been effective for First Nations adults and children. Didactic and sterile education environments have not led to success for them. In spite of this history, however, this study suggests that First Nations people can take great strides to regain control of an education system that works for them. In doing so, the literature shows that First Nations people are on their way to regaining control of their own destiny. In this light, the literature provides a sense of optimism for adult educators working with, and planning for, adult education programs for First Nations adult learners.

Moreover, my study's findings reveal that a systematic, structured program with financial stipends, like STEP, still requires cultural and spiritual dimensions to make a First Nations adult education program whole and meaningful for its First Nations learners.

### **Conclusion and What I Have Learned**

In my role as administrator at our First Nations adult education centre, and with my new sense of affirmation based on my initial assumptions and the input from students, faculty, and the findings of the literature, the pieces of the puzzle came together. I now see that issues such as politics, restrictive post-secondary policies, and program funding realities can obscure the real issues requiring attention, namely, what works for students. Although politics and funding realities permeate day-to-day administrative tasks, I feel that a program planner must truly start where the student is. The program planner should be willing and open to making changes based on the input from those most closely related to the situation. Although funding and policies drive an organization, these are flexible and generally workable components that are open to change and creativity. With this in mind, I have come to the conclusion that it takes people like those who comprise our School Board, the community and its elders, together with the staff and administration at the adult centre, to have common goals based on a community's needs and their longer-range community development plans.

Foley and Flowers (1992) call for the development of adult education programs that are truly within aboriginal control. They say such programs recognize that "Aboriginal people are the best people to plan and deliver education to their own people" (p. 62). I believe that this is the case at our adult centre and was a key component to the success of the STEP Program. The School Board and staff were open to a new approach and they supported the changes seen in this study.

There were many considerations to take into account in implementing and developing the STEP Program, most importantly, however, we knew that our plan had to

be long-term and encompass all of our adult learners. As mentioned in the problem statement, the traditional ABE and BAJD programs did not meet the needs of students for many reasons. The BAJD program was short term--only 7 months long--thus, it did not effectively create a bridge for literacy level learners to move into the adult basic education program. There was a gap for learners because the ABE program started at a grade eight level and many of our learners from the BAJD program were still at a lower academic level than grade eight. The expectation that learners could succeed and move on was not really part of the former program. Therefore, if we were to seriously address this, we needed to have a longer-range plan and we needed to start where the learner was. *The Report of the Provincial Advisory Committee on Post-Secondary for Native Learners* (1990) speaks to this:

The literacy needs of First Nations must be addressed. It was not until the late sixties that Native students were given the right to attend high school. Consequently, many Native adults have never had the opportunity to learn to read or write. (p. 24)

As this study shows, the STEP Program helped to address this issue. It begins at the literacy level (STEP 1-2) and offers short-term goals for long-term possibilities. College-preparation (STEP 5), post-secondary education, and a possible career are all within sight. Within this context, the STEP Program was also able to address the issues of retention and course completion because more students tended to enter the system, and continue with their education--regardless of their entry level--when compared to the number that had continued when enrolled in the earlier BAJD program.

In this light, I firmly believe that program planners need to consider the needs of entry-level learners when they plan aboriginal adult basic education programs. There are a number of First Nations people who are at this most basic level. Adult basic education



has to provide the whole, and not only “piecemeal” segments. As a student who responded to the questionnaire said, the “STEP Program offered me something more than a few months of education and training... it has helped me to see that I am good enough and smart enough to go to college.” In this regard, I find the words expressed by an adult educator in the works of Tremblay and Taylor (1998) very fitting: adult educators need to “acknowledge the courage of entry level learners in taking the initial steps to start a program” (p. 4).

The primary goal of the STEP Program was to increase adult learner attendance, retention, and course completion and, in having this goal, we constructed a longer-range approach to improving overall student success. It was seen that by having students start the steps with shorter-term goals we could increase the chance that they stayed in school longer, especially if they were at a low-grade level. The significance of this is that those students will no longer rely on social assistance or unemployment assistance but will be eligible for post-secondary funding. In the long-term, the consequences, I believe, will have a far reaching impact, not only economically but also because their communities will have the possibility of more educated people ready to take on roles at the community level.

However, although the study’s findings, in my opinion, are very positive, the study is not without limitations. As seen in chapter one, this study does not include literature that speaks directly to programs that are similar in design to the STEP Program--meaning programs that share similar characteristics in relation to structure, program demands, and program expectations. Either the material was not available, or I failed to find it despite all of my research efforts.

The primary criticism made about the STEP program, however, was that students were placed in steps that they were not ready to be in. Staff and students suggested that we have to be more vigilant to ensure that students are appropriately placed in the right step. This is now being done, as previously mentioned, whereby, students are placed in a lower step based on their academic assessment.

In sum, the STEP Program is a relatively new and unique program model. It is only in its third year of delivery. Although the study points to increased attendance, retention and course completion, these are only preliminary results. The next few years will reveal if our program model will see a consistent flow of students move from the literacy level steps to college preparation. I believe, however, that a program model like STEP deserves attention and requires further study and inquiry. The preliminary evaluation findings here should encourage adult educators to consider the benefits of delivering a highly structured ABE program that has, at its core, high expectations for attendance, retention, and course completion, while embracing community and elder involvement.

Most importantly, the study demonstrates that there has to be a vision. There has to be a vivid picture of what lies ahead. What lies ahead can form the goal that the adult learner sets for herself or himself, and it can also form the rationale for the adult learner to be in, and stay in, school. When a person has a purpose and a meaning for being in school, his or her educational experience is enhanced and these motivators help them to be goal orientated. The light at the end of the tunnel becomes visible. This, in fact, was also my experience. By making school relevant, and by creating a warm school environment we can help to increase the learners' intrinsic desire to succeed.

### **Recommendations**

It is important to start this last section by saying, in spite of formidable obstacles First Nations people have demonstrated that, by taking control of their own education, they are able to create educational programs that can lead to optimal learning environments for their people. This appears to be most successful with strong leadership and when leadership has traditional perspectives as its foundation. The optimal learning environment, according to the literature and this study's results, advocate a holistic adult basic education model that speaks to the spirit. In this sense, more knowledge of history provides a sense of belonging, validation, and acceptance, regardless of where the learners begin their educational journey. To accomplish this, I recommend that ABE program development take into account a structured, linear and systematic approach to ABE that includes financial incentives, an emphasis on career and education planning, literacy level learners, elder involvement, and a cultural and spiritual dimension.

As the literature also suggests, although great strides have been taken to date in First Nations education, program planners and adult educators need to consider the words of Malcolm Knowles (1980) where he cautions that it is not enough to design and implement programs, but it is more crucial to manage the program once it is established.

Specific to managing the STEP Program, then, the first issue that comes to mind is the necessity to access core funding. Regardless of the recent success of the STEP Program, at the time of writing we are uncertain if we will have funding to continue from one year to the next. In this regard, I recommend that the School Board lobby government to provide our centre with the crucial ongoing funding that is needed to sustain the

program. I also recommend to programs that may be similar to ours to continue with steady lobby for funding for programs that show real promise.

In attempts to move beyond what I referred to earlier as the politics and financial issues that can obscure the real issues requiring attention, I present the following recommendations. I believe that the other factors not named here which are fundamental to First Nations adult program success are already incorporated into this study and speak for themselves. Therefore, I offer these recommendations for practice and further study.

1. I have concluded that a financial stipend, however minimal, is central to First Nations' adult basic education program success. It provides both incentive and student stability when finances tend to be a primary concern for many First Nations adult learners returning to the education system. Therefore, I recommend that adult educators and program planners give serious consideration to the economic realities of First Nations adult learners who return to school. Economic poverty is a real issue and can be a barrier to attendance, retention, and student success. The very basics, such as how a student will get to school is a crucial consideration. All of the students re-entering the education system at our adult centre were on social assistance. Without financial assistance, an issue like transportation could have been a barrier to attendance. Stipends, however, should be linked to both attendance and assignment completion.

2. Creating a learning environment that is accepting and inviting has been touched on throughout this study, especially in the case of learners who are at low literacy levels where confidence and self-esteem issues often are a major issue. At our centre, we found this group of learners to be the most vulnerable. Thus, I

recommend that an adult basic education program for First Nations adults needs to provide a safe environment for all but especially for literacy-level learners as they begin to strive for higher education. However, program planners need to provide flexibility for literacy-level learners even within a structured context like STEP. Most important, local native tutors are needed to work with the students. From our experience, not only are students more comfortable working with their own people, trained local tutors, such as our native language instructor and classroom support worker in the STEP 1:A class, are often significant community role models.

3. Based on this study, it is apparent that short and long-term goals are fundamental in facilitating not only student retention but student program completion. I recommend that program planners set clear goals and expectations for themselves, but even more so, for the adult learners. Make the expectations high so as to give the students and the entire community something to strive for and be proud of. My recommendation is to be firm on these expectations.
4. In a First Nations adult education program, daycare needs can be a pressing issue. Whenever possible, daycare needs should be considered at the beginning of program planning.
5. Faculty team building is also crucial in the program development process. Staff must be on board and are a vital part of the building process. It is important that staff share a similar vision in order to have cohesion. Moreover, it is imperative for staff to be prepared and willing to change as a program evolves and develops.

6. A further recommendation is the need for the inclusion of career exploration because, as this study suggests, career planning needs to be interwoven into the whole of a First Nations adult education program. I also tentatively recommend that career and education planning should be included in the latter stages or steps of a First Nations adult education program. I caution that career planning should not occur in the entry level stages, such as low literacy because, in the early stages (or steps), career exploration might be too overwhelming and beyond the learner's vision and perceived grasp. I base this only on my experience and hope that this point may be picked-up for further study.

7. Instructor-student relationships cannot be overlooked when considering recommendations for program planners. As Stein (1986) reported, it is instructor support and human contact that ultimately leads to student success. It is essential, then, that administrators of a First Nations education program build a team of workers who genuinely care about student success, meaning, building a faculty of educators who are willing to establish rapport with their students above and beyond the typical expectations.

8. The final recommendation is that program planners must involve the students in the evolution of an adult basic program. It was not only empowering for me but for the staff as well to hear the student "voices" in the evolution of our program. By providing a place for the dialogue to take place, learner consciousness was raised for us all, as was advocated by Freire (1973).

### **Areas for Further Research**

Although this study provides insight on the development of a First Nations adult education program, program administrators and adult educators need to expand their view of First Nations adult education. On numerous occasions, the literature and the findings in my study highlighted the importance of leadership. Secondly, there is an issue in the significant number of aboriginal females returning to school compared to males. Both are important areas for consideration in program development and further research.

In regards to the number of aboriginal women returning to upgrade their education, for example, one can first look at the comparison at our adult education centre where females outnumber males 2 to 8. In the *1999 BC College and Institute Aboriginal Former Student Outcomes Surveys* (2000) from the B.C. Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology, the characteristics of former students show that “63 percent of Aboriginal former students were female, compared with 55 percent of non-Aboriginal former students” (p. 7). Similar statistics found in the works of Aitken (1983), Danzinger, (1996), Haig-Brown (1995) and Hill, et al (1992). Medicine (1988) underscore that although statistics show that many aboriginal women are returning to education, “there is virtually no research in this area and no research agenda for the future” (p. 86). We need to ask such fundamental questions as why this is occurring and how we are going to meet the learning needs of aboriginal women in the future.

With respect to leadership, I purposefully did not focus on this area because I did not want to suggest that my role as director played a significant part in the overall development and delivery of the STEP Program; however, the role of leadership was emphasized in the staff and student responses to the questionnaire. Comments included:

“leadership within the centre and out to the communities raised the profile of our programs,” and, additionally, one a student said, “without having Fran to provide direction and make us feel important the adult centre might still be at a standstill.” Alfred (1999) speaks to leadership at great length. He said:

Insofar as possible [the Indian leader] should be a figure of reconciliation and futuristic vision...making sure that everyone comes together.... A leader probably ought also to be someone who enables process to happen, who realizes that sometimes people are not ready to do things, and will take the time to gently educate them, to prepare them. Many of the tribal chairmen of the 1960s did that, and they were powerful leaders. (p. 68)

Leadership tended to show itself as being key in starting and seeing the program development process through. Leadership, then, is another important avenue of further study, especially as it relates to First Nations adult basic education and community development.

Finally, the research that I was able to access relating to First Nations ABE programs and the development of such programs was primarily conducted by non-Aboriginal educators. In my view, it is imperative that, as First Nations educators we consider new courses of action in program direction because we must be intimately involved in the research and lead the process of researching our own issues.

### **A Personal Reflection**

The past 5 years of study that it has taken me to complete this thesis reveals to me that we, as First Nations administrators and educators, are charged with the responsibility to consider new courses of action to ensure that aboriginal learners share the same educational success as in the dominant culture. I believe that we need to take a critical



look at what has worked in the past for us to incorporate those aspects of program design into present day adult basic education programming. The result, I believe, is that we will start to form an educational paradigm that allows for a more meaningful exploration of indigenous thought and philosophy. At least this has been my experience in conducting this research. Nevertheless, I find myself in a place of asking more questions and, within this context, wanting to delve even deeper. A fundamental question that emerges for me is, what is it in structure and goal orientation that leads First Nations adult learners to want to achieve more? While it is too broad for an actual recommendation, this question is important for me and constitutes another important avenue of inquiry for me. Is the answer somehow linked with our collective past?

I cannot also help but think about my own educational journey. How it started out in a one-room school in my Quatsino village in our cultural Bighouse and moved to my short-lived high school experience. I think of how the period of my teenage years that should have been the most exciting and challenging educational years of my life were abruptly ended. This is too often the experience of my people. And now, as I recall my airplane ride across the country from British Columbia to Nova Scotia where my Master of Adult Education program would begin, I had then, and have now, many questions. One of those being, "Am I smart enough being an Indian?" If I ask this, at this point in my thesis and my life, how terrifying a place it must be for the learners who re-enter the education system with little reading or numeracy skills. Surely ours is a common struggle, and adult educators should never separate themselves from those deemed to be "our" adult learners. We are one.

As the literature points out, many of us as First Nations have come to internalize the views that the dominant culture has placed on us. We start to believe that we are stupid. Yes, these were my thoughts on the flight to Nova Scotia. And, although I now know that this is not the case, it still remains that programs that have sensitive and informal aboriginal educators are the parts of the whole that support us through to the next educational level. It does not matter where a person starts in their educational journey, what matters is who and what is there to help you along the way.

I feel like I have traveled a great distance on this learning journey. Thinking back and in remembering my Grandfather and my early teachings, I am now comfortable with who I am and why I think and feel the way I do. I have come to be thankful for my past because I now understand it--the relocation of our village to the new Quatsino site and all that followed. I hope that other First Nations and non-First Nations who read this thesis catch a glimpse of aboriginal reality because education for us has not always been accessible and, more often than not, education represented a situation in which we did not feel that we belonged. With Indian control of Indian education, however, I am certain that our goal to control our own future will be realized and we will regain our sense of belonging. The challenge now is to continue to find new courses of action to address the contrary points of view between white and native ways of facilitating learning.

In the course of my learning I cannot overstate the value of having conducted an annotated bibliography and literature review. At that time, I did not realize the significance of the two to my learning. However, now, as I immerse myself in the development of First Nations adult education in my daily work, I feel much more confident in my knowledge and, in turn, in my daily practice. I was exposed to many

views, experiences, and data—empirical and “not-so-empirical”—both helpful and not so helpful. I have come to see that it was the weeding through the articles and the critiquing of the articles that was the important part of the process.

In addition, it has been interesting to find that the research validated my own experiences. Like many First Nations adult learners who return to school, I too left the school system before turning fifteen. I returned as a young parent with little self-esteem. At that time, I too could not see a light at the end of the tunnel. This is why I now firmly believe that the provisions of goals—goals that lead to a larger vision—are so very important for First Nations adults returning to what they often believe might be a mirror of their past educational experience.

At this point in time, however, I am alone with my words and reflections as I attempt to recapture what I have learned. I am alone as I synthesize it all and write from the abstract to the concrete. I can only say that I find myself in a place that generates more questions. But I see this as a positive impact on my overall learning. The concrete, then, is that I find that I can approach learning in a different way. I have reached beyond the paradox of my own situation and have learned that there is no one model that works. Instead, appropriate adult basic education program models have to be viewed as living bodies that evolve over time. The skill comes in learning to adapt the models, allowing them to be flexible and learner-centred.

Overall, this has been an incredible journey. Of greatest importance, however, is that I am encouraged to learn more. I will take the words of Rowland (1995) with me into the future. He said knowledge is measured by how well the tribe benefits from a person’s learning: “In the view of the Cheyenne, knowledge and spirituality are inseparable.

Knowledge is measured by how well it benefits the tribe, and good knowledge is sought after and passed down through the generations” (p. 275).

In conclusion, I cannot help but end my educational reflection on the shores of Quatsino Sound. And, as I hear the echo that only time allows for on the shores of my childhood, I can still hear the waves, smell the cedar, feel the pebbles at my feet and see my Grandfather’s working hands. I am still learning as he would have wished. In many ways, I see that my learning journey has just begun.

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