

COMMUNITY-BASED ADULT EDUCATION

Access for Aboriginal Residents in the Inner-City of Saskatoon

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, adult education has become an important issue for Aboriginal adults in Canada (Rodriquez, 2001). This may be especially true in many urban areas that are experiencing population growth amongst Aboriginal Canadians (Hanson, 2005). The development of effective adult education programs may be an important step toward positive social change for Aboriginal adults who lack appropriate education and/or job training (Spencer, 1995). In presenting a discourse on community-based adult education, some discussion regarding the concept of adult education in the inner-city context is required.

ADULT EDUCATION

Researchers have suggested that the acquisition of education by adults should not be viewed as synonymous with the process of education for children. (Draper, 1998). Generally speaking, adult education differs from that of children because it is not standardized, but is often designed to fit the realities of adulthood

(Cervero & Wilson, 1999). Adult education has been characterized as a process of learning that is put together by the learner, occasionally with “expert” input, with a particular goal (St. Clair, 2004). In attempting to define adult education in the United States, Knowles (1962, p. vi) stated that it:

Brings together into a definable social system all the individuals, institutions, and associations concerned with the education of adults and portrays them as working toward such common goals as the improvement of the methods and materials of adult learning, the extension of opportunities for adults to learn, and the advancement of the general level of our culture.

It should be noted that, according to Knowles, the function that adult education serves in the United States is not as clearly defined as it has been in other countries. As opposed to areas of Europe where adult education is intended for the development of national culture, or in parts of Africa where adult education is a means for

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dealing with illiteracy, adult education in the United States serves numerous individual needs, institutional goals, and societal pressures (p. 5). Hanson (2005) provided a historical background of adult education in Saskatoon that suggested literacy enhancement, development of employment skills, and preparation for post-secondary education were the principle functions of previous adult education programs. Another issue put forth by Hanson was the issue of location: for economically challenged adults, and particularly parents, travelling a long distance in order to attend adult education classes at established institutions such as universities and vocational colleges can be problematic.

Hansman (2001, p. 47) asserted that adult learning “involves development in personal, interpersonal, and community processes.” This sentiment is echoed by Nowlen (1980) who recognized four interpersonal settings in which adult education takes place: (1) the individual setting, (2) the temporary setting, (3) the organizational setting, and (4) the community setting. Essential to Nowlen’s conception of the community setting was the mandates related to dealing with specific problems that are prevalent in specific communities:

The educational program focuses on problems and assembles participants who relate to two or more organizations or segments of a neighborhood or community. One of the program purposes, usually designated as most important, is community development ... program ideas tend to evolve from major problems and opportunities related to community functioning. Some ideas arise from events themselves: a court desegregation decision, a sharp rise in unemployment, and the like. Other ideas are selectively chosen as “issues” because a programming agency chooses to treat them as such—for example, infant mortality and morbidity in the ghetto or the impact on private charities of closing federal tax loopholes. (pp. 16–17)

Inner-city adult education programs, programs that are housed in such places as neighbourhood schools and community centres, can be in a better position to cater to economically challenged individuals. Rooney (2004) stated that inner-city adult education centres typically focus on those who are “marginalized and disadvan-

taged” (p. 151). Rooney also pointed out that such programs would require the provision of specific services: “this work includes a range of services including information and referral, advocacy, support and various types of services” (pp. 151–152).

The delivery of accompanying services that are provided in an inner-city adult education program may be especially important for women. In areas where marginalized and disadvantaged groups reside, women are often mothers and are unmarried. Darab (2004) focused on women who attempt further education as adults and pointed out that one of the more frequently recurring concerns of participants in her study was the provision of affordable child care:

Child-minding services are required both for library clients and to accommodate lecture and tutorial attendance. In view of the size of the female population ... and their continued acceptance of the bulk of unpaid family work, an increase in child care facilities is long overdue. (p. 348)

Hanson (2005) suggested other services essential to adult education in addition to child care. Counselling, legal advice, and government-funded allowances were suggested as essential services for success in inner-city adult education programs.

Establishing and maintaining an inner-city adult education program that offers appropriate academic and support services to disadvantaged individuals may require more than just course instructors to deliver such a program. Staffing was cited by Blatchford, Brazier, and McQuade (2004) as an essential issue for adult education programs, because the typical student in an adult education program can find such programs to be “alien and potentially hostile to them” (p. 413). Blatchford et al. asserted that the role of administrative support staff is important to the academic success of adults who often have immediate, non-academic obstacles to overcome in order to acquire an education:

Preparatory programs attract a wide diversity of students with a wide range of individual needs. Amidst this diversity it is difficult to identify a ‘typical’ student profile or to generalize across the group in terms of a set of common needs. However, there are general characteristics,

which are commonly seen amongst preparatory students that can serve as a starting point for discussion ... in an alien and unfamiliar environment students who might in other contexts be competent and confident can find themselves hesitant and lacking in confidence. A background of disadvantage may result in students presenting with some form of baggage, often in the form of previous negative experiences with education, which can create anxiety and further uncertainty. (pp. 415–416)

Blatchford et al. suggested that the obstacles faced by disadvantaged adults are diverse and often require sensitivity on the part of adult education support workers. The workload associated with support services such as counselling and child-care suggests that this sort of work cannot be expected of the course instructors who already have the responsibility of providing academic programming.

Scholarly literature related to the provision of adult education in inner-city areas frequently places significant emphasis on peripheral services for students as they do on academic programming. If adult education is a means for addressing employability as well as the broader issue of social change, such programs may have to be more accessible and academically relevant to inner-city adults. In this study, the researcher investigated accessibility and programming in inner-city adult education programs for Aboriginal Canadians.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a focus group and interview methodology for data acquisition, a process that used the principles of appreciative inquiry. In particular, the researcher employed such principles by negotiating “an initial intentional empathy” (Elliot, 1999, p. 12) with the participants, and strived to maintain a climate of individual and social affirmation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). The two different forms of data collection that were used, individual open-ended interviews and community focus groups, both made use of a framework of questions related to the importance of community-based adult education that addressed the general research question: what are the benefits of accessible adult education for

the area it serves? The framework used in designing the research instruments consisted of five elements:

1. Importance: Why is community-based adult education important?
2. Programming: What type of academic program(s) or courses should be offered?
3. Benefits: How would such a program benefit you/your family/your community?
4. Location: Where should such a program be located?
5. Services: What non-academic services should such a program provide?

Five focus group sessions were conducted in the inner-city of Saskatoon. Community members who were self-described as being Aboriginal and potential adult education students as well as those who were currently in existing adult education programs were in attendance. Upon commencement of the discussions, participants were placed into groups of at least 6 individuals with one being a member of the research committee who served as facilitator and recorded the discussion. The format for the focus groups made use of Wagner and Arnold’s (1965) method for informal discussion. Their discussion method was ideal because of the participant’s perceived tendencies to be less talkative in group situations. The informal discussion method was also appropriate because of the approximate one hour time limit for the discussions. As suggested by Jackson (1999), the focus groups were intended to acquire relevant information and insights from the participants, with direction provided by the group’s facilitator.

Following the completion of the five focus group sessions, former instructors and administrators of local adult education programs were interviewed. Although the framework of questions for these interviews was similar to that of the group forums, the principle researcher amended the interview format in order to acquire insight into the development and delivery of adult education in Saskatoon. Twenty of these interviews were conducted.

Following the focus-groups and interviews, data was coded to identify themes. The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used for both the interview data and the group forum data.

FINDINGS

The focus groups were comprised of adult individuals from the inner-city of Saskatoon. Among all the participants, 88% declared themselves as being Aboriginal, a term that is defined in this study as being either status Indian, non-status Indian, or Métis; 73% of the participants were women. The age range of the participants was from 20 years to 63 years, with an average age of 36.8; 95.5% of participants were parents, and 85.1% of the study's participants had not completed their secondary education. Most of the focus group participants were economically challenged and experienced problems related to their low socio-economic status. Most experience difficulties associated with inadequate housing, transience, unemployment, single-parent situations, abusive relationships, substance abuse, and direct, spousal or family involvement in criminal activity.

The following section is an analysis of data collected from the community forums and an analysis of interviews with adult education instructors. This segment will be separated into two principle sections. The first section, individual and community betterment, will include analysis of the elements of importance and benefits related to community-based adult education. The second section, program characteristics, is an analysis of how participants felt about academic composition, location, and services of an effective adult education program.

Individual and Community Betterment

In terms of importance and benefits of a community-based adult education program, the researcher found numerous concerns were prevalent among the study's participants. Most participants reported issues of child and family development as a primarily important benefit related to involvement in an adult education program. In particular, most participants stated that they felt that the prospect of being a more positive role model for their children was important. One parent expressed her feelings about being a role model in terms of academic modelling:

We would be a benefit to our kids because we can model what we do at school ... seeing us at school would help increase attendance and keep them moti-

vated ... their marks would get better and their literacy skills would also improve.

Many participants reported concerns related to their employability. Most participants reported the belief that an appropriate education would help improve their employability. One of the most frequent points made, especially among male participants, was that most desirable jobs required at least a high school education or a suitable equivalent:

Finishing an ABE (Adult Basic Education) certificate has provided me with employment and the conditions so that I can consider furthering my career.

Numerous participants were more in favour of the establishment of an ABE program as opposed to a General Educational Development (GED) program because many employers do not consider the GED as a suitable form of education. These participants reported that many employers felt that a grade 12 equivalency such as the ABE 12 as a suitable level of education.

Community development was a frequent concern among participants. The researcher did observe a measure of familiarity and camaraderie amongst participants in the community forums as they spoke about shared issues and concerns. The participants spoke about their particular community's state with reference to such things as crime/gang activity, unemployment, poor housing, and appropriate role models to solidify their point that the inner-city area of Saskatoon would stand to benefit from a more educated populace. As one participant noted:

People would make better choices about going to school and getting a job. Children would be proud of their parents and would look at them with admiration ... it would be a better lifestyle for everyone ... it would help build relationships with school and community.

Another participant expanded on this point:

It makes you feel better about your community ... like you're helping the community by being a good role model ... it shows others that there are opportunities for them.

In regard to community development, the participants were very vocal in stating their beliefs that educated adults in the community would lead to a stronger community through positive role modelling, reduction of crime through increased employment levels, and better life choices by individuals.

A number of the participants commented on issues related to self-esteem. A frequent sentiment that was observed throughout the community forums was a feeling of inadequacy due to their lack of education and the resultant socio-economic problems they were experiencing. The researcher found that participant feelings of inadequacy were more related to how their children would perceive them, as opposed to how anyone else would perceive them. The participants frequently stated their value for the relationship that they have with their children and, in some cases, grandchildren. Many participants stated a desire to be able to assist their children in academic activities such as homework from school. As one participant said:

I firmly believe in life-long learning ... whatever educational level we are at, our minds still slowly suffocates if we cannot find viable outlets for learning. If we can help our children do well at their school work, we would not only be helping our kids, but we would feel better about ourselves as parents.

A few participants reported a hope that completing their education would improve their personal self-esteem through improved employment:

When I am done my ABE, I will try to get into the TA (teacher assistant) course ... I also hope to become a teacher in the future. Doing all this will help me and my family and it will feel good to be a role model and to provide for them.

The comfort that is associated with a community-based adult education program has been found to be important for the participants. Many participants reported feelings of apprehension when considering enrolment into large out-of-community institutions like universities. As one participant reported:

I have not applied to any other institutions because I would feel uncomfortable and intimidated to attend one of those

places and it would just set me up for failure.

Program Characteristics

Participants voiced a variety of concerns related to what an appropriate community-based adult education program would consist of. As noted earlier, there are three elements that would constitute program characteristics: academic programming, location, and services. Programming refers to issues related to course work and/or requirements that must be fulfilled in order to acquire certification of completion for the program. Location refers to the physical location where a community-based adult education program could be situated. Services refers to non-academic services that are not necessary for the attainment of certification of completion, but may be needed by the students in order to alleviate any personal/circumstantial factors that would otherwise not be addressed, thus making it difficult or impossible for the students to attend or complete the program.

Programming

The researcher found concerns regarding academic programming to be related to how prepared the participants were to be involved in an adult education program. For many of the study's participants, the subject matter associated with an ABE 10 or ABE 12 program was said to be too esoteric. These participants felt that preparatory programs that would allow students to develop appropriate skills prior to involvement in an ABE program would be desirable.

One former instructor stated:

Some of the students encountered a lot of problems because they had quit school early on ... sometimes they were still in junior high when they quit, so they don't necessarily have the ability to work well in an ABE or GED program. Some students could have used some preparation work before entering.

It is understandable that many of the participants felt that adult education would be a means for acquiring gainful and meaningful employment. Many participants stated the need for academic or vocational programming that could lead directly to a desirable job. Trade skills

were mentioned frequently as a form of programming that would be useful. One participant mentioned the importance of programming that may not lead directly to employment, but would provide initial steps toward a state of improved employability:

Getting my ABE is important because I would like to get into nursing and social work. I didn't get far enough in school when I was a kid, but I know I can now and that's a big step in order to get into a nursing program or something like that.

It was a point of interest for the researcher that there was very little mention by the participants regarding particular portions of a GED or ABE curriculum. Subject matter such as mathematics or the sciences were only mentioned by participants with reference to the ability to assist their children with school work. Literacy was a topic of partial discussion, but no in-depth discussion regarding its inclusion in an adult education program took place. Through informal discussion with participants that took place after the community forums, the researcher found that the participants viewed the curricular composition of an adult education program as a "given" component, and thus did not deserve much discussion.

What was discussed at great length regarding the composition of an adult education program was what can be regarded as the peripheral programming: those skills that assist students' completion of an adult education program by enhancing areas of academic activity (i.e., using educational technology) or out-of-school situations that may impact their participation in adult education (i.e., time management). Many participants stated that they would appreciate the inclusion of programming such as computer usage, personal/family budgeting, parenting, and other issues that were sometimes referred to as "life skills." One participant used the word "practical" when she referred to this type of programming:

There are practical things that we need to consider if we're going to get through school and be successful as a student and a parent. Some people may want to be better parents, but they don't know how. Some also need to be better spouses, and more responsible with money.

Two particular points of discussion were of interest to the researcher. The first was related to issues of cultural sensitivity. Numerous participants mentioned a desire for at least some of the subject matter to be dealt with in a Canadian Indigenous language such as Cree:

I want to get an education so I can get a job, but I also want to learn about myself and my own culture ... I wish I knew my language better so I could pass it on to my kids. I have cousins who know Cree, but I don't really know it.

Numerous participants voiced concern that some of the subject matter not only be conducted in a Canadian Indigenous language, but that the subject matter itself deals with Canadian Indigenous issues in the areas of literature and the sciences (e.g., Indigenous healing).

Secondly, the researcher noted that numerous participants voiced concern regarding adult students who have undiagnosed disabilities. A number of the participants who had previously attempted to take part in an adult education program either experienced difficulties themselves or knew of someone who had experienced difficulties due to a learning disability that was later diagnosed.

Location

In one of the more straightforward portions of this inquiry, most participants shared similar feelings regarding the type of location of a community-based adult education program, with all five community forums making reference to locations in close proximity to that particular forum:

I live just down the street from St. Gorretti, so this would be a good place to come to school ... it needs to be a place close to home, especially if you have kids.

Virtually all of the locations cited by participants as desirable locations were community schools. In addition, most participants stated that these types of schools had the advantage of being close to home and were "secure" and "comfortable" because of its closeness to the community.

One of the most important issues for participants regarding the issue of location was how accessible the adult education program is to bus routes. A number of participants noted that the time it takes to go about activities such as drop-

ping of young children at daycare and getting to and from work can impact on their ability to attend an adult education program:

If you don't live in walking distance, you have to take the bus and the walking that you have to do to get to the bus can be a problem. If you have kids, than you have to think about stopping at school or daycare. If you work part-time, you have to make an extra trip for that. It can be really hectic.

A number of participants stated that the value of an adult education program that is located in their community is, in part, strengthened by the camaraderie that is experienced by studying alongside people from one's own neighbourhood. A recurring sentiment throughout the community forums was the importance of studying in a program with individuals of similar experiences, values, and needs. The camaraderie that was spoken of during the forums was important to the participants because it was thought that such an environment of familiarity and shared values would alleviate personal anxiety and apprehension.

Services

The issue of non-academic services that could accompany a community-based adult education program represented one of the key issues amongst the study's participants. Because of the financial and domestic difficulties that are frequently encountered by Aboriginal adults, a number of non-academic services are required in order to attend and complete an adult education program.

Participants frequently voiced concerns associated with the availability of counselling services related to academic issues in the program. The academic counselling that the participants felt was important is related to such issues as appropriate courses based on previous schooling, provision of academic resources, and access to tutors. For some participants, previous experiences such as being ignorant of a resource or of specific academic requirements illuminated the need for appropriate counselling:

When I tried to get a GED, all I knew is that I wanted to get an education, but I didn't know if I should do something else

that would be better for getting work. I also needed help with things that I didn't understand from class. The teacher was helpful, but some other "helpers" would have been great.

For other participants, taking part in any formal education program is virtually a new experience considering that these individuals had been out of school for a long period of time. They had not been given the direction that is usually provided for younger people by their parents.

Related to matters of counselling is the issue of career counselling, a service that appeared to be very important because, as noted earlier, many of the participants felt that adult education was a means to improving their employability. Many participants felt that although they understood that acquiring education is inherently a positive activity, they don't necessarily know how to go about their education in a manner that optimized their chances of obtaining a desirable job. One participant spoke at length on the subject of employability, which was echoed by many of his peers:

Most of us want to get a job, but some don't know how to go about it. I know that finishing school isn't all there is to it ... the students need someone they could trust who can tell them what their options are. If I want a certain job, how do I know I'm not wasting my time trying to do classes that are not going to help.

For many participants, career counselling is an important first step in the process of completing an adult education program because they were unsure of what sort of employment they wished to become involved in. These participants saw the career counsellor as an individual with a near-exhaustive knowledge of the local job market who could assist them in selecting an appropriate course of study and also guide eligible graduates into appropriate employment situations. The researcher also found that former students placed a formidable amount of trust with the individual that helped them in the area of job/career counselling.

Another form of counselling that was discussed by many participants was that which relates to issues of addictions and criminal activity. Many of the participants stated that they were either themselves previously involved in

the criminal justice system or had a family member who had been in trouble with the law. There were numerous discussions in all of the community forums regarding the barriers that substance abuse and unlawful behaviour can have on family and community development. Both issues, substance abuse and criminal activity, were frequently discussed with reference to how adult behaviour can influence child/adolescent behaviour in a negative way.

Many participants stated that addictions, more so than criminal activity, had prevented them from attending or completing an adult education program in the past. The participants' desire for counselling services to help deal with problems related to drugs and crime suggested that some had such problems in the past, while others were dealing with such problems at the present time. Participants had mixed feelings regarding a counsellor's role: most felt a counsellor should assume focus of helping those with drug and/or criminal problems to overcome the problem itself, while a small number felt that the counsellors' role should be to help students succeed in school in spite of these problems with drugs and crime.

For all of the services that were related to some form of counselling, nearly all participants noted that these services should be located in close proximity to the adult education program, if not in the same building. A small number of participants and many of the instructors/administrators put forth the possibility that the duties of a counsellor, whether in the area of academics, employment, or addictions/crime, can be taken on by one of the course instructors, and some even cited instances where this was the case in the past.

One service that most participants felt is necessary for their enrolment into an adult education program is child care. As mentioned earlier, 95.5% of the participants have at least one child, most of whom were not yet of age to attend school. In families that were characterized by having only one parent or by a two-parent household where at least one of the parents was working in a low-paying job, the possibility of paying for their child(ren) to be placed in appropriate childcare is problematic at best. As one participant stated:

Unless childcare is provided, I don't think I could think that I could cope with the cost of having to pay for it and not working. Keeping a full-time job is just enough to make ends meet, but if you have to give up that job to go to school, it makes it almost impossible.

Many participants noted that the provision of free childcare was not necessarily adequate for their situations. A number of participants, some speaking from experience, stated that they not only require affordable or free childcare, but such a service should be in close proximity to the adult education site. A number of participants who were previously enrolled in an adult education program had dropped out because the time required to take their child to a distant childcare facility was too lengthy.

The issue of childcare was closely related to a broader issue that was very important to many of the participants: funding. As alluded to earlier, many of the participants are financially challenged and are either involved in low-paying jobs or are receiving social assistance. One of the most widely discussed issues related to funding, particularly amongst those who have jobs, was the opportunity cost of attending an adult education program: should an adult pursue his/her education on a full time basis, such an activity would mean less time would be available for employment. This loss of income would be a significant issue for those who are already in a very strenuous financial situation. As one participant stated:

I'm a single mom and I have to do all I can to provide for my kids ... getting an education and making a better life for myself and my kids would be a dream come true, but I don't know what I would do for money.

Many participants, those who have jobs as well as those who are on social assistance, were also concerned about the costs that might be associated with attending an adult education program. For those with children, the cost of childcare is an important consideration. Some other issues that were discussed related to funding were the costs for such things as school supplies and transportation.

Waiting lists were also a frequently discussed issue amongst all the participants. In regard to

previous adult education programs in Saskatoon (there were as many as 18 in 2001/02), all of the instructors and administrators that were interviewed reported waiting lists at their respective sites. A number of program coordinators reported that they found it difficult to keep up with the number of times that adults from the surrounding community inquired about the possibility of enrolling into an adult education program. Although the length of these waiting lists varied from one site to another, very few participants reported that they, or someone they knew, had successfully enrolled after being on a waiting list for a significant amount of time. Many of the participants reported that they did not pursue enrolment because of the frustration that they experienced as a result of being on a long waiting list.

DISCUSSION

This study found evidence that supports a number of assertions in the introductory sections of this article regarding adult education. As some of the cited authors suggest, education for disadvantaged adults frequently requires support beyond the realm of academics. The context of this study, the inner-city of Saskatoon, is home to a significant number of Aboriginal people who are in need of the opportunity to acquire an education in order to make a better life for themselves, their family, and their community. Such improvements to life, family and community can come from the acquisition of employment as well as the enhancement of family and community relationships through the virtues of life-long learning. For adults in these communities who are too old for admittance to public school and have been away from any formal education setting for some time, the process of acquiring an appropriate education is more complicated than simply attending classes and completing course work. Many, if not all prospective adult education students, require particular forms of support and services in order to enroll and be successful in an adult education program.

Hanson (2005) and Hansman (2001) emphasized the importance of adult education programs that are community-based. Economically challenged residents from an inner-city area who are parents and rely on public transit must overcome the obstacle of distant cross-city travel

in order to attend existing adult education programs: such a commute frequently involves travel associated with dropping off and picking up children at school and/or daycare. In a Saskatoon program that has since been discontinued, adult education classes were housed in numerous inner city public schools to provide such programming. As urban-Aboriginal populations increase as a result of migration from First Nations communities to inner city areas, access to such programs is essential. Establishing such programs would require cooperative effort on the part of community and public school authorities.

A number of cited authors suggest the importance of programming that is relevant to the adults for whom it is administered for. An inner city adult education program that caters to economically disadvantaged Aboriginal people may have to consider two principle reasons why their program is required: to improve employability and to prepare for post-secondary education. The provision of programming that will lead to the acquisition of an ABE 12 certificate as well as the opportunity to be eligible for vocational training elsewhere are, regardless of the costs, essential to the economic and social development of the urban areas in question. The findings suggest that the specific structure of such programming should be developed in response to an area's particular requirements, as opposed to an imposed framework of programming.

Domestic realities for adults in the inner-city context provide obstacles to the acquisition of a suitable education that will lead to economic, personal and social benefit. Child-care, academic/career counselling, and access to social workers are some of the peripheral services that may help economically and socially disadvantaged inner-city residents become more successful at acquiring such an education. Although this study focused on inner-city residents for whom such a program can be provided, further research is required regarding issues of Aboriginal values, heritage and language and their role in adult learning.

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