

ENHANCING EQUITY FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLES: ADULT BASIC EDUCATION ON-RESERVE

© Vivian HAJNAL, © Michelle PRYTULA, © Michael COTTRELL
(University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada)

vivian.hajnal@usask.ca
michelle.prytula@usask.ca
michael.cottrell@usask.ca

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The provision of Adult Basic Education (ABE) On-reserve in Saskatchewan began in 2007-08 with funding from the provincial government. This is a unique program in Canada, as education on-reserve is the responsibility of the federal government. The ABE On-reserve programs were provided by seven Regional Colleges and the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies. The programs were responding to several needs, most of which focus on achieving equity for Aboriginal peoples. The authors engaged in a comprehensive review of the ABE On-reserve programs. Their mixed methods research study employed secondary data, surveys, focus groups and interviews. This paper reports on the information gleaned from the secondary sources and the data collected from the surveys. The results indicate that from 2007-08 to 2010-11, 2700 adult learners were provided with the opportunity to work at Levels 1-4 of the ABE program. Over the four-year history, 45% of adult learners participated at Level 1, Level 2, or assorted preparatory courses. Sixty percent of learners were women. Ninety-one percent of respondents suggested their program was great or good. Each of the programs involved negotiations between a College and a First Nation community, and occasionally included industry partners. These cross-sector collaborations supported the goal of enhancing learner growth and success and did contribute to enhancing equity for First Nation peoples.

Keywords: Aboriginal education, Adult Basic Education, On-reserve, multi method study, cross-sector collaboration

Adult Basic Education (ABE) is the provision of opportunities to learn for adults who are not eligible to attend the provincial K-12 school systems. In Saskatchewan, ABE is offered through the auspices of the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (4 cities), the Regional Colleges (7 regions) and Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies. Adults are allowed to take up a second-chance opportunity to attain their grade 12 equivalency or to advance their skills. While ABE in towns and cities has had a place in the educational opportunities for adults for over 40 years, the provision of on-reserve ABE programs is recent, starting in 2007-

08. This paper describes the need for on-reserve ABE, the current programs delivered from 2007-08 to 2010-11, and the learners' perceptions of their program.

In Canada, K-12 education is a responsibility of the provincial governments. However, the federal government has responsibility for First Nation on-reserve education. Consequently this on-reserve ABE programming, sponsored by the provincial government, is unique in Canada and is responding to a perceived need.

The research reported in this paper focused on secondary data available from Statistics Canada and the Ministry of Advanced Education, Employment and Immigration (AEEI) of Saskatchewan. Demographic and program information was available from four sources provided by AEEI: the ABE On-reserve summary reports, the 2011 AEEI Learner Survey, other census summary data, and information found on the Ministry website. The data sharing with the research team was part of a comprehensive review which the researchers conducted for AEEI. The secondary data was augmented by site visits, surveys and focus groups. The surveys were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

The Location

Saskatchewan is a province in the mid-west of Canada, has a population of 1M people, and is 600,000 sq. km. in size. The average population density is 1.8 persons per sq. km. As most of the population is located in the lower half of the province, there are large areas of very low population. The First Nation reserves are located throughout the province, often in areas which are not agriculturally productive and removed from centres of population with potential employment.

The Need

The need for these programs can be explained by several factors, most of which focus on achieving equity for Aboriginal peoples. These factors include a growing Aboriginal population, an Aboriginal education gap, static on-reserve high school completion rates, life-time earnings, and non-pecuniary gains such as positive effects on health. An additional factor which was an impetus for these programs is the need for skilled workers in a booming Saskatchewan economy. Saskatchewan experienced a 6.7% increase in population between 2006 and 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2012). To prosper as a province, a more skilled workforce is required and it was hoped that our Aboriginal population and new immigrants would contribute their skills to fulfilling this need.

Aboriginal peoples are the fastest growing population group in Canada. The First Nations population will grow faster on-reserves than off-reserves, rising to 100,000 in 2030 from 60,000 in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2011; Warick, 2011). The province's current proportion of Aboriginal population is 16%, and is expected to grow to 21-24% by 2030 (Statistics Canada, 2011; Warick, 2011). This is a large demographic shift, partially a result of the difference in median age between Aboriginal peoples (26.5 years) and non-Aboriginal peoples (39.5 years) and a lower birth rate for non-Aboriginal peoples (Sharpe & Arseneault, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2011). As well, Saskatchewan with a booming economy, is facing a major skills shortage.

There is an Aboriginal education gap in Canada, including Saskatchewan as the representation of Aboriginal peoples in educational attainment lags

behind those of non-Aboriginals. The K-12 dropout rate in the 20-24 age group for Aboriginal peoples (North American Indian, Métis, and Inuit) living off-reserve is 22.6% compared to 8.5% for non-Aboriginal people. The dropout rate is higher among First Nations living off-reserve (25.8%) than for Metis (18.9%). The proportion of Aboriginal peoples aged 25-64 in Canada without a high school credential is 34%, while for non-Aboriginals the proportion is 15%. In Saskatchewan, 43% of Aboriginal peoples do not have a high school credential. From 2006 census data, *Statistics Canada* (2008) reported that 23% of non-Aboriginals had completed a university degree, and 8% of Aboriginal peoples had such a credential. At every level of education, Aboriginal attainment and participation results are lower.

Additionally, Mendelson (2008) reported that the on-reserve high school completion rate remained static at about 40% over the last three censuses. He talked about the completion rates for 20-24 year olds.

A decade ago, the 1996 Census found that approximately 60 percent of First Nations on-reserve residents aged 20 to 24 had not completed high school or obtained an alternative diploma or certificate. In the 2001 Census, once again approximately 60 percent of First Nations on-reserve residents aged 20 to 24 reported not completing high school. The 2006 Census figures for First Nations on-reserve have recently been released. The results are unchanged: approximately 60 percent of First Nations on-reserve residents aged 20 to 24 still have not completed high school or obtained an alternative diploma or certificate. p. 4

This lack of change points to the need for more attention to be paid to K-12 education, both on and off-reserve, but this is a topic to be considered in another paper.

Unfortunately, Aboriginal peoples consistently rank lower in income than the non-Aboriginal population. As dropouts earn less than those with a high school diploma, there is a financial impetus to attain the school-leaving credential. For example, the lifetime earnings for a female North American Indian without a high school equivalency is \$202,279, with a high school diploma is \$479,788 and with a Bachelor's degree is \$1,382,858 (Howe, 2011). Women have a slightly higher return for education than do the men. Without an education, Aboriginal people earn far less than non-Aboriginal people. With an education, the Aboriginal earnings gap is almost ameliorated (Howe, 2011).

The ABE On-reserve program was designed to help achieve equity and both pecuniary and non-pecuniary goals for Aboriginal peoples. The non-pecuniary results for education include enhancing self-concept, job and life satisfaction, increasing positive effects on health, marriage, parenting, and decreasing risky behaviours. The development of knowledge-based skills, including critical thinking and social skills, as well as household management skills and the contribution of the learners to the on-reserve community are other possible non-pecuniary benefits from these programs.

While the majority of ABE learners complete their programs, many leave before completing their credential. Reports from B.C. suggest that 30% do not complete their credentials (Adult Basic Education Fact Sheet). In Saskatchewan from AEEI data, we found completion rates varying from 51% to 74%.

The Program

The ABE On-reserve program is a cross-sector collaboration between the provincial government, the First Nation communities, the Regional Colleges and Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT), the Aboriginal learners, and occasionally industry partners. The ABE On-reserve programs were introduced in 2007-08 and began with 1.9M in funding, supporting 199 learners in the initial year. During the following three years the annual number of learners served was approximately 850, supported by 2.9 M in funding. Consequently during the first four years of the program approximately 2700 adult learners were provided with an opportunity for on-reserve programming. In 2011-12, the budget was increased to 3.8 M.

In the province we have seven Regional Colleges and one additional College which does not have any boundaries for its activities – SIIT. Each of the Colleges collaborated with anywhere from 1 – 15 First Nation communities to provide the on-reserve ABE programs. They began collaborations at different times during the last four years. Each program is negotiated separately. The average program length is less than 100 days.

Although the AEEI supplied the funds to the Colleges for the management and operation of the program (instructors, coordinators, councillors, course-related supplies and materials, educational and teaching aides), First Nations also had financial requirements. They provided the facility that houses the program, including the furniture. They can provide income support for adult learners, day care, lunch programs and transportation. The actual decisions about who provides what for the program was a negotiated arrangement between the Colleges and the First Nations.

Program Description

There are four levels of ABE in Saskatchewan and descriptions of these can be found on the Ministry website. Levels One and Two help increase literacy and numeracy as well as provide for development of general skills, abilities and attitudes required for living in a complex world. Attention is paid to development of workplace skills, including such items as driver education. Level Three provides credit courses in Communication, Social Sciences, Mathematics, Science and Life/Work Studies. Upon completion an Adult 10 certificate is obtained. Level Four provides the opportunity to attain a Grade 12 certificate by completing seven courses through Adult Secondary Completion or by testing, through General Educational Development (GED^R) which provides a Grade 12 equivalency. .

Over the four-year history of ABE On-reserve programs, 25% of learners participated in Level Four and GED^R, 30% at Level Three, and 45% at Level One, Two and assorted preparatory courses. A closer look at the large proportion of learners in Level 1 and Level 2 (45%) highlights the long-term needs of learners in these programs. The road to a grade 12 equivalency can be long.

The Learners – Demographics

In this section we provide a demographic picture of the adult learners. A more complete description can be found in our report to the Ministry (Cottrell et al., 2012). Over the four years under consideration, we saw that 60% of the learners were women and 40% were men. These statistics are very similar to those in other jurisdictions with more women participating than men. As expected, the learners were young. Seventy percent of learners were under 30-28% less than 22 years of age, and 42% between 22 and 29. Thirty percent were older than 30 including the less than 10 % that were 45 or older.

Childcare was a pressing need for these learners with 26% of them reporting concerns. Only 15% of learners had no children under 18 living at home, while 85% reported living with children. Thirty-one percent of adult learners responded that they had 1 child at home, 16% had 2 children, 21% had 3 children and 17% had 4 or more children under the age of 18 living at home (Cottrell et al., 2012). With 38% of respondents having 3 or more children, it is not surprising many respondents reported childcare was one of the issues with which they had to deal.

Approximately 60% of adult learners were single, 30% had a partner and 10% were separated or widowed. With 70% of the respondents living alone, we can readily see why childcare is important. The AEEI survey provided insights into the characteristics of the learners. English was the first language for 76% of respondents, Cree for 20%. The remaining 4% were divided between Dene and other.

When asked about a learning disability, only 6% of learners self-reported. This is widely discrepant with general statistics in ABE programs where 29% of learners self-reported that they had a learning disability (Patterson & Mellard, 2007) to 80% that was postulated by the National Literacy and Learning Disability Center (as cited in White & Polson, 1999). As these current ABE learners were not successful in completing their original K-12 education, it is highly likely that they would require specialized assistance to overcome cognitive and learning barriers (Noyes Spear, 2011).

The program was full-time, operating five days a week. During the period of this study, learners arrived at their educational locations by driving their own vehicles (31%), walking (26%), getting a ride they arranged (20%), getting a ride the program arranged (16%), or by some other method (7%). Remembering the size of Saskatchewan, its northern climate, and the often dispersed residential patterns on reserve, adult learners may need to travel many miles and often in very cold weather.

Before signing up for the current ABE program, 50% of respondents were a stay-at-home parent, 39% were unemployed, 7% were employed, and 4% were students. Deducing from these statistics, over 90% of these learners were supported by social assistance.

In survey data, the adult learners identified several reasons why they enrolled in the program. The most prevalent were: 60% wanted to go on to further education, 56% wanted to finish high school, 23% wanted to get a job, 19% needed skills for a new job. Learners believed that what they were learning would help them if they went on to other programs (98%), would help them get a job (94%), would prepare them for skills training (98%) and would help them in their personal lives (91%). For these learners, the focus on learning was to have the opportunity to get a good job with a commensurate salary, and only somewhat on self-fulfillment.

As the adult learners progressed in their programs, they dealt with many issues. The most frequently identified issues included personal issues (33%),

childcare (29%), lack of funds (23%), housing (18%), and transportation (14%).

The workload for learners was demanding. Fourteen percent were worried about their ability to keep up with the class and 8% thought the attendance policy in place was too tough (Cottrell et al., 2012). In some instances, attendance was tied to the allowance they receive. When learners needed help, they turned to their instructors (78%), other learners (37%), and tutors (14%). As one of the learners reported, "The program is really great. I love the work and the people I'm going to school with. My instructor helps a lot too. If I do not get a question, he/she explains it in a way I can understand."

The Learners – Satisfaction

The learners were very happy with their programs, as 91% of respondents suggested their program was good or great, while 8% thought it was okay. Learners agreed they were treated like adults (95%) and their culture was respected (94%). Some learners felt the support from counsellors and others was poor (9%) and 25% felt the support for their special needs was lacking.

As researchers, we were always concerned about the place of culture in the program. Oftentimes, the instructors were not Aboriginal. Consequently, we were pleased to see that 94% of learners thought their culture was respected. No learner found racism to be an issue.

There are various reasons why the adult learners chose to attend ABE programs. For some learners, there was a minimal financial benefit. However, not all learners received an allowance, and sometimes the First Nations were not able to provide the allowances, even if they were promised. In the majority, the learners were interested in finishing their high school credential (53%) and going on to further education (61%). Jobs were a focus for 22% of the learners and the learners realized they needed skills for a new job (17%). The learners, although focused on academic needs, were happy to report a gain in confidence, and an increased feeling of satisfaction with themselves and their lives. They felt good about being role models for their children. As adult learners they hoped to determine the academic courses they pursued. They clearly wanted to realize their full human, social and economic potential.

Data about continuations and withdrawals from the programs were compiled from the AEEI data provided to us. Sixty percent of learners continued in the program until it was finished. This does not mean that they necessarily successfully completed the entire program they were in, but they certainly achieved some success. The adult learners who withdrew on their own or were asked to withdraw provided many different reasons. To clarify the data, their responses were grouped. Adult learners primarily discontinued the program for personal (19%) or program (16%) reasons. Two percent of learners discontinued for employment or other educational opportunities. Three percent of learners provided other responses.

Collaboration and Agreements with First Nations

Many provinces in Canada are examining labour market requirements and the underlying education and training systems that are in place. They are finding discrepancies. For example, Saskatchewan has a low unemployment rate, and needs additional people for the workforce. Trying to fill the void, it has recently encouraged immigration. Additionally it is also encouraging the

participation of more First Nations peoples in the workforce. The ABE On-reserve program is one of the ways to provide some opportunities for First Nations peoples to improve their educational background and to prepare for additional training.

The ABE On-reserve program was designed to work through cross-sector collaborations between First Nations and Institutions, supported by the AEEI Ministry. Bryson, Crosby and Stone (2006) defined cross-sector collaboration as “*the linking or sharing of information, resources activities and capabilities by organizations in two or more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately*” (Bryson et al., 2006:44). Such cross-sector collaboration is necessary for addressing complex problems where power sharing is essential. They continue by suggesting that “*forging initial agreements, building leadership, building legitimacy, building trust, managing conflict, and planning*” (Bryson et al., 2006:46) are parts of the process. Crosby and Bryson (2010) adapted their 2006 model of cross-sector collaboration to further explicate the many factors that were important in establishing collaborations. We saw evidence of many parts of the process in this ABE On-reserve cross-sector collaboration.

The forging of initial agreements was demanding and significant variation in agreements between the First Nations and Colleges could be found. Agreements with First Nations and Colleges were often informal in nature. Some Colleges had previously worked with First Nations in other programming, both on and off-reserve. Consequently they were able to build on their previous relationships. Leadership from the First Nations communities and Colleges was required for the agreements and programming. Trust was required for believing the educational experience would be good for the learners and the collaborators would attend to their commitments. Conflict arose occasionally and had to be dealt with. Planning for the next cycles was required and needed as early attention as possible.

The challenges of establishing a cross-sector collaboration and the necessary funding to address the needs for ABE On-reserve programs were many, but the goals of maximizing learner growth and success, as well as reducing gaps in educational attainment and incomes, were important enough to find support among the collaborators. Working through existing organizations, the mechanisms and structures for this cross-sector collaboration were put in place; sometimes in more informal ways than all collaborators would have wished. As researchers, we were privileged to interact with the learners through focus groups, to examine the programs and their outcomes, as to think about accountabilities and the management systems that were in place.

Conclusions

After four years, the On-reserve ABE experiment was still in its infancy, but it had already effected some very positive changes in the relationships between Colleges and First Nation communities. From the Colleges' perspective, delivering On-reserve ABE required a whole different level of engagement with First Nation Communities and leaders and consequently resulted in a much deeper understanding among College administrators of First Nations' cultures and circumstances. Through developing closer relations and an enhanced understanding of First Nation communities, better decisions were able to be made in partnership with First Nations to

maximize learner growth and success – the goal of these cross-sector collaborations.

As academics and researchers, we were all too familiar with the statistical evidence pointing to dramatic differences in life expectancies, educational achievement, workforce participation levels, infant and pre-mature mortality rates, access to healthy water and sewage facilities and adequate housing between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal citizens, and the high rates of social pathologies which plague many First Nation communities (Douglas & Gingrich, 2010). From the results of our research, we perceive that the ABE On-reserve programs can make a contribution to enhancing equity for Aboriginal peoples in Saskatchewan.

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