

2009

The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada:

A Holistic Approach To Measuring Success

Executive Summary



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About the cover

The cover of this report features a section of *Leadership*, a 1994 serigraph by Ojibway artist Roy Thomas (1949-2004). Born in Longlac, Ontario, Thomas was a founding member of the Woodland School of painting who drew his inspiration from ancient pictographs, Midewiwin scrolls, the works of Norval Morrisseau and legends his grandparents told him as a child.

Of *Leadership*, Thomas wrote "This print shows a young person taking the place of leadership after finding enough faith in himself through watching those before him. All the figures in this print are leaders in the same boat, having a common goal (the circle) which they are heading for."

"Leadership begins with taking control of your own life. Leaders are people who win for themselves so that others can benefit. They earn their place by learning from others and serving the people; they take risks without fear of failing."

Serigraph from the collection of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (ARCHIVES No. 407199)

Leadership © Louise Thomas, www.ahnisabae-art.com,
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Executive Summary

UNDERSTANDING ABORIGINAL LEARNING

Aboriginal people in Canada have long understood the role that learning plays in building healthy, thriving communities. Despite significant cultural and historical differences, Canada's First Nations, Inuit and Métis people share a vision of learning as a holistic, lifelong process.

Increasingly, governments, Aboriginal organizations and communities are making decisions and developing policies that reflect a better understanding and awareness of an Aboriginal perspective on learning. However, the effectiveness of these decisions still typically rely on conventional measurement approaches that offer a limited—and indeed incomplete—view of the state of Aboriginal learning in Canada.

Current measurement approaches typically focus on the discrepancies in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth (in particular, high-school completion rates) and often overlook the many aspects of learning that are integral to an Aboriginal perspective on learning. As a result, conventional measurement approaches rarely reflect the specific needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people.

This situation is not unique to Canada. In a recent report, the United Nations stated “it is of utmost importance that Governments, indigenous peoples, donors and civil society organizations work together to ensure that special [measurement] approaches are devised to coincide with the aspirations of indigenous peoples¹.”

Without a comprehensive understanding of Aboriginal people's perspective on learning and a culturally appropriate framework for measuring it, the diverse aspirations and needs of First Nations, Inuit and Métis across Canada will continue to be misinterpreted and misunderstood.

BUILDING A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR MEASURING ABORIGINAL LEARNING

Until now, a comprehensive framework for measuring Aboriginal learning has not been available in Canada, or in fact most of the world. *The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada: A Holistic Approach to Measuring Success* represents the first application of such a framework and marks an innovative approach to measuring Aboriginal learning in Canada.

The Holistic Lifelong Learning Measurement Framework is based on the underlying structure of the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Models that were first published in 2007 by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL).² These learning models were developed by Aboriginal learning experts across Canada, marking an essential first step toward the development of the present framework.

The new framework incorporates the elements common to all three learning models, while acknowledging and integrating elements that are unique to the learning perspectives of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. It also provides a shared tool for monitoring progress in Aboriginal communities for future years.

The three main components of the Holistic Lifelong Learning Measurement Framework are: **Sources and Domains of Knowledge, The Lifelong Learning Journey and Community Well-being.**

Each component of the framework includes a set of indicators that contribute to a more complete assessment of Aboriginal learning. Taken together, these indicators illustrate the full range of learning opportunities that occur across the life cycle (from infancy through to the senior years) and in a variety of settings (school, home, community, workplace and the land).

This new expanded approach will, for the first time, provide Aboriginal communities across Canada with a comprehensive picture of both their learning strengths and challenges. Furthermore, the measurement framework identifies what we do not know, highlighting the critical areas where current indicators do not exist.

One of the goals of the Holistic Lifelong Learning Models was to convey the strong connection that exists between learning and well-being for Aboriginal people. This warrants the need to measure social and economic conditions (such as income, employment opportunities, incidence of diabetes) that contribute to (or impede) learning success.

As a result, the Holistic Lifelong Learning Measurement Framework includes various Community Well-being indicators to reinforce their relevance when analyzing and interpreting learning outcomes for Aboriginal people. Descriptions of these well-being indicators are featured in special feature boxes that appear throughout chapters 2 and 3.

KEY FINDINGS

By broadening the conventional scope of inquiry to a more holistic one, this framework provides a more complete picture of Aboriginal learning. Indeed, a new narrative emerges that supersedes the all-too familiar and distressing storyline that centers on learning deficits and academic shortcomings among Aboriginal youth.

Through this new approach we can gain a more complete understanding of Aboriginal learning in such key areas as early childhood education and youth participation in the community to learning about Aboriginal languages, traditions and culture.

The key findings of the 2009 report are presented below and are organized by the underlying components of the framework.

Sources and Domains of Knowledge

The Holistic Lifelong Learning Models highlight the fact that learning from—and about—culture, language and tradition is critical to the well-being of Aboriginal people. Indeed, the report finds that such activities play an important role in the daily lives of many Aboriginal learners and are commonplace in Aboriginal communities across Canada.

New information shows that more than one-quarter (28%) of all off-reserve Aboriginal children and 55% of Inuit children participated in, or attended, a cultural gathering, ceremony or activity, such as fiddling or drum-dancing.³

When it came to traditional activities (such as hunting, fishing or trapping) the report's findings show that half (50%) of off-reserve Aboriginal adults took part in at least one of these activities in 2006. The participation rates were even higher (68%) for Aboriginal people living in rural off-reserve communities and Inuit living in northern communities (86%).⁴

As the Holistic Lifelong Learning Models depict, Aboriginal learning is a highly social process that serves to nurture relationships in the family and throughout the community. These social relationships are a cornerstone for learning about ancestral language, culture and history; a fact that is emphasized in this report's findings.

New information shows that an overwhelming majority (nearly 98%) of Aboriginal adults regularly received some form of support (personal or emotional) from individuals in their community in 2006. At the same time, more than two-thirds (68%) of Inuit adults reported strong or very strong familial ties.⁵

Aboriginal children and youth reported that family provided the greatest support when it came to learning their ancestral language, as more than 41% of off-reserve Aboriginal children and 77% of Inuit children reported having someone in the community to help them understand their culture and history.⁶

The Holistic Lifelong Learning Models also depict the central role that Elders play in the promotion of lifelong learning for Aboriginal people. Elders teach about the importance of responsibility and relationships within the family and the community; all of which reinforces inter-generational connections and identities.

New information shows that in 2006 approximately four in 10 off-reserve Aboriginal youth interacted with Elders at least once a week (outside of school). Inuit youth reported the highest interaction with Elders (45%) followed by First Nations youth living off-reserve (40%) and Métis youth at 38%.⁷

The Lifelong Learning Journey

Recent research has shown that effective early childhood education programs can not only play an important role in preparing Aboriginal children for school, but can provide a solid foundation for their development throughout their lifespan.⁸

New information indicates that half (50%) of Aboriginal children living off-reserve in 2006,⁹ and 44% of First Nations children living on-reserve,¹⁰ were receiving some kind of regular child care—compared with an estimated 51% of Canadian children.¹¹

Among those off-reserve Aboriginal children receiving child care in 2006, over half (52%) attended a day-care centre or a preschool program while the remaining were at a home setting. Inuit children were the most likely to be cared for in a day-care centre or preschool program (62%),¹² while First Nations children living on-reserve were the most likely to be cared for in a home setting (65%).¹³

Among off-reserve Aboriginal children receiving child care in 2006, 18% were in a setting that promoted First Nations, Inuit and Métis traditional and cultural values and customs. Inuit children (62%) were most likely to participate in Aboriginal-specific programs, followed by First Nations children living off-reserve (26%) and Métis children (15%).¹⁴

The familiar and concerning statistics of low high-school completion rates remain an important part of the picture of Aboriginal learning. In 2006, 40% of Aboriginal people aged 20 to 24 did not have a high-school diploma, compared to 13% among non-Aboriginal Canadians. The rate was even higher for First Nations living on reserve (61%) and for Inuit living in remote communities (68%).¹⁵ These numbers are distressing given the importance of a high-school diploma in the pursuit of further education, training and employment.

The statistics are more positive in post-secondary education (PSE), where a growing proportion of Aboriginal people are completing their credentials. In 2006, 41% of Aboriginal people aged 25 to 64 had completed a post-secondary certificate, diploma or a degree. Although this rate was lower than that of non-Aboriginal people (56%), Aboriginal people were on more equal footing when it came to rates of attainment at the college level (19% vs. 20%) and the trades (14% vs. 12%). The wider discrepancy in PSE attainment is a direct result of differences in attainment at the university level, where only 8% of Aboriginal people had completed a degree compared to 23% of non-Aboriginal Canadians.¹⁶

Informal learning and experiential learning—including participation in social, cultural and recreational activities—helps foster a desire to learn among Aboriginal youth while helping with the acquisition of new skills. Yet until now, information on the state of Aboriginal people's informal learning has been limited.

New information reveals that in 2006, Aboriginal youth living off-reserve participated in extracurricular social activities at rates equal to or above Canadian youth. Almost one in three (31%) Aboriginal youth reported participating in social clubs or groups on a regular basis and 37% in art or music activities—compared to 21% and 27% of Canadian youth, respectively.^{17,18}

In 2006, a large majority of off-reserve Aboriginal youth (70%) actively participated in sports outside of school and at least once a week—similar to the finding of 71% of Canadian youth in a similar survey.^{19,20}

Although research suggests that most adult learning is work-related, studies also indicate that much of adult learning occurs informally at home and in the community. Community involvement, through such activities as volunteering, contributes to social cohesion and serves to foster a strong sense of attachment to neighbourhoods and communities.

In 2006, one-third (34%) of Aboriginal youth and more than half (56%) of Aboriginal adults living off-reserve volunteered in their community on a regular basis; while 70% of First Nations adults living on a reserve volunteered within the last year.

Increasingly, broadband internet services—including digital subscriber line (DSL), fixed wireless and cable—are becoming an essential part of the infrastructure that connects individuals, communities and organizations. It also plays a key role in cultivating lifelong learning by improving access to distance education and skills development. Access to these services and learning opportunities are particularly important for Aboriginal people, many of whom live in small, remote communities across Canada. However, many Aboriginal people have limited broadband access.

For example, First Nations people living on-reserve still rely primarily on slower dial-up internet service: according to Industry Canada only 17% of First Nations communities had access to broadband services in 2007 compared to 64% of other cities and small towns in Canada.²¹

However, many Aboriginal people are pursuing distance learning when and where possible. In 2006, 18% of off-reserve Aboriginal adults were enrolled in a post-secondary course through distance education. Among this group, those living in rural communities (20%) and smaller towns and cities (20%) were more likely to participate in distance learning than Aboriginal people living in larger cities (17%).²²

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHANGE

Aboriginal communities, governments and researchers recognize the need to forge a common, balanced understanding of what constitutes success in Aboriginal learning. Failure to do so can result in information that is irrelevant to Aboriginal communities and fails to inform effective social policy.

The consequences of this conceptual disconnect are potentially harmful and can lead to, for example, assessments of Aboriginal learning that focus exclusively on failure—when in reality, many successes may exist.

The Holistic Lifelong Learning Measurement Framework introduced in this report is grounded in an Aboriginal vision of learning and thus provides the basis for informed policy and program development; the very changes that are necessary to develop the full potential of First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

While the framework and its indicators present a more complete and balanced assessment of the state of Aboriginal learning in Canada—one that highlights many strengths—this does not necessarily mean that the learning conditions in all communities are acceptable. Rather these strengths represent the kind of critical building blocks that can contribute to future improvements.

As this report affirms, more needs to be done to improve the learning outcomes of Aboriginal people in Canada. CCL hopes that Aboriginal communities, governments and researchers will use this Holistic Lifelong Learning Measurement Framework to monitor and report on the learning of Aboriginal communities.

The framework has the potential to shift the current focus of policy and program development from one that reacts to learning deficits alone, to one that recognizes, builds upon and celebrates strengths. In this context, a shared appreciation for Aboriginal learning is possible, one that is holistic, lifelong, and of benefit to all.

Endnotes

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