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FAST FACTS



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Adult Learning Centres Deserve Top Marks for Aboriginal Education

This week students from Manitoba's Adult Learning Centres (ALCs) are graduating and celebrating their achievements. ALCs, which began to emerge in an unplanned way seven years ago, have become a powerful and effective new approach to education in Manitoba. In particular, they have proved to be very effective when it comes to Aboriginal adult learners.

The growth of ALCs has been steady: by the 2002/03 program year, there were 47 ALCs in Manitoba.

While ALCs have many things in common, each one is different from the others in at least some ways. Most are relatively small, located in inconspicuous and rather modest surroundings, and do not look at all like traditional schools. They are generally 'store-front' operations, physically located in premises not originally designed to be used as schools.

The teaching styles vary from ALC to ALC — in some cases classes are run very much as they would be in a regular high school, in some cases there are no regularly-structured classes at all and there is complete flexibility in terms of what courses are taken and when.

The development of the ALC program will be, in a way, formalized by the province next week, when all Adult Learning Centres will be governed by the Adult Learning Centres Act.

In a good many cases, remarkable personal transformations are occurring

Aboriginal Learners

Approximately one-third of learners at ALCs are Aboriginal. This is more than double Aboriginal people's share of the total population of Manitoba.

We recently completed a study of Aboriginal adult learners in five Adult Learning Centres, three in Winnipeg, one in Portage, and one on the Long Plain First Nation. Our report is based largely on interviews with Aboriginal Adult Learners

and staff members, and the objective was to determine what keeps Aboriginal adult learners attending ALCs, and what contributes to their successes in ALCs.

The research was designed and conducted in a collaborative and participatory fashion. All interviews with Aboriginal adult learners were conducted by trained Aboriginal interviewers.

Most of the Aboriginal adult learners that we interviewed feel comfortable in the Adult Learning Centre that



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they are attending, and many of them are experiencing considerable success. In a good many cases, remarkable personal transformations are occurring.

Why are ALCs so effective in supporting Aboriginal students?

We believe that the main factors contributing to their success include the holistic and learner-centred approach to instruction adopted by the ALCs that we investigated; the strong social, emotional and practical supports provided to learners; the warm, highly personalized and non-hierarchical atmosphere that prevails in the ALCs; the dedication, even passion, of teaching and other staff; and the friendly, non-judgmental and respectful manner in which adult Aboriginal learners are treated by staff. The importance of these factors was emphasized repeatedly in the interviews. Many adult Aboriginal learners told us that they feel much more comfortable in the ALC that they are attending than they did in their previous school experiences, and many described negative experiences in schools previously attended.

By “holistic” approach, we mean that ALCs do not see their students merely as students, but as learners with lives and experiences far beyond and outside the ALC.

Job Training Extra Motivation

Many of the adult learners whom we interviewed told us that those who succeed at ALCs are those who are motivated to do so. The issue of motivation is linked in part to the kinds of jobs that are available to graduates: too often they are not sufficiently well-paying to support a family. While there are many important but “intangible” benefits for adult learners, such as increased confidence and self-esteem, if completion of the mature grade 12 diploma resulted in a job that paid well enough to pull a family out of poverty, then there would be a much greater incentive to enroll and attend regularly.

One of the ALCs covered in our report offers 10-month, job-specific training courses, designed to meet particular labour-market demands and opportunities. More such programs are needed.

We found that where Aboriginal cultural practices are part of the educational strategy at an ALC, they are much appreciated by Aboriginal learners, and where such practices are not present they are desired by many Aboriginal learners. The incorporation of Aboriginal cultural practices into the

adult learning experience and the creation of more opportunities for both learners and staff to learn about Aboriginal culture are strong themes arising from our interviews.

A focus on Aboriginal adult learners is mandated in part by the demographic realities. The Aboriginal share of Manitoba’s population is growing at a pace that far outstrips that of the non-Aboriginal population, and, as this is especially true for young people, it is certain that this trend will continue.

Yet Aboriginal people are disproportionately excluded from the educational system. Therefore, tools that allow Aboriginal people to take advantage of educational opportunities are essential if Manitoba is to have a just and prosperous future. Adult Learning Centres have proven themselves to be one such tool; they show what is necessary and what is possible.

—*Jim Silver, Darlene Klyne, and Freeman Simard*

This FastFacts is based on the report Aboriginal Learners in Selected Adult Learning Centres in Manitoba, by Jim Silver with Darlene Klyne and Freeman Simard, published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba and available online at www.policyalternatives.ca.

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