

Sekoli Swa kwe kon, Onkwehonwe ni:l Onyota'a:ka Tsi twa ka tuh ti. London Ontario Akta Tyot su nit ne Hotinnoshoni ne yukats, kale Kaliwisuks ne yukats Eileen Antone ne ah slo ni kik ne yukats. Ano:wal ni wa ki ta lo t^



Participants at the Symposium

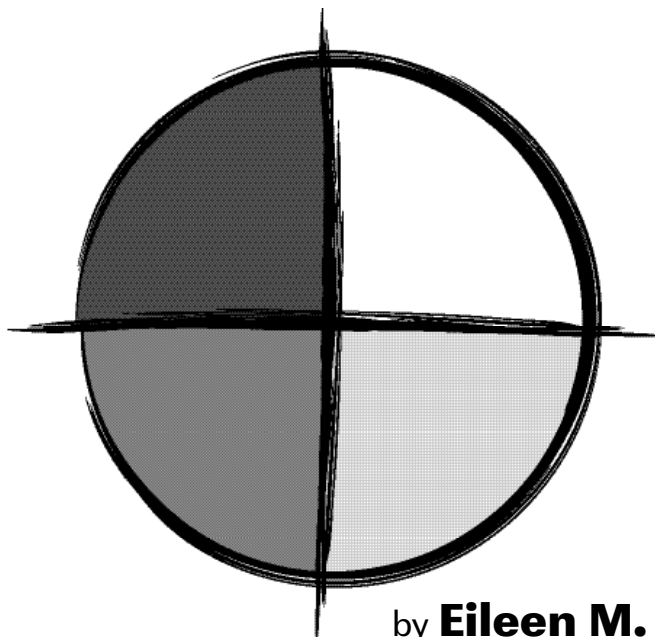
(Left to right) Elder Grafton Antone, Eileen Antone and Peter Gamlin (principal investigators), and Research Assistants Rhonda Paulsen, Lois Provost Turchetti, Julian Robbins, and Moneca Sinclair.

Introduction

Sekoli is a formal greeting in my language. *Swa kwe kon* includes everyone that is here. I am one of the Original People of North America also known to Aboriginal peoples as Turtle Island. I come from Onyota'a:ka, known as Oneida First Nation of the Thames, near London, Ontario. My name in the Longhouse is *Tsyot s'nit*. *Ka li wi suks* is my research name. *Ka li wi suks* means "she who gathers information." An elder who was a participant in my original thesis research gave this name to me. I am from the Turtle Clan. Eileen Antone is my English name.

In working with Aboriginal literacy, it is important that I introduce myself in the Oneida language, as language is an integral part of the literacy of Aboriginal people. Identity is also an integral part of Aboriginal literacy, so it is important that I identify myself to you as a member of the Onyota'a:ka First Nation and a member of the Oneida Turtle clan.

Aboriginal Peoples: Literacy and Learning



by **Eileen M. Antone**

Historical Background

Aboriginal education became the focus of my work when I realized that, though I am an Aboriginal person, I was unaware of my heritage and history. I wanted to know why I did not have the traditional knowledge that is the basis of Onyota'a:ka life.

My original research was a sociological study of education for Aboriginal people in Canada. Through in-depth inquiry into the education of Aboriginal people in Canada, I found that the goal of the Euro-Canadian education system was to educate Aboriginal students to an individualistic worldview, based on the knowledge that came from Europe (Antone 1997). Education was a process of assimilation whereby Aboriginal People were to be absorbed into the Euro-centric society (Wilson 1986).

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The main strategy which the Government of Canada used to accomplish assimilation was the Residential School system, in continued existence from the late 1800s to the late 1900s in different parts of Canada. This system removed the children from their home communities and the influence of their parents and extended families (Knockwood 1992). The impact of these schools was that many Aboriginal people lacked the skills they needed for a high quality of life in either Aboriginal or European society (Barman 1986:112).

Aboriginal practitioners began to explore and build connections between Aboriginal literacy, healing, community development and self-determination.

Early literacy programs in Canada continued the aims of assimilation. They tried to teach learners to read and write in the English language so that they could find work in the dominant society (Barman 1986:112). These literacy programs did not seem to help, as Aboriginal people continued to have high unemployment rates (McCallum 1997).

In 1987, Aboriginal people in Toronto began a literacy movement to improve the quality of

education for their learners. Aboriginal practitioners began to explore and build connections between Aboriginal literacy, healing, community development and self-determination (Gaikezheyongai 2000). These visionaries saw another way, one not based on the constant negation of Aboriginal views and values (Battiste 1986). Their efforts to enhance literacy for Aboriginal people continue today.

Literacy and Learning Project

The Literacy and Learning project collected data from Aboriginal communities in the province of Ontario between 2000 and 2002. The research team consisted of Dr. Peter Gamlin and myself as principal investigators, both from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). We worked with five Aboriginal students: Moneca Sinclair, Ed.D. Candidate at OISE/UT; Lois Provost Turchetti, M.Ed. Candidate at OISE/UT; Julian Robbins, Ph.D. Candidate at Trent University; Rhonda L. Paulsen, Ph. D. Postgraduate student at OISE/UT; and Heather McRae, M.A. Candidate at OISE/UT. Heather joined us in the fall of 2002 to help bring this project to a close.

The research was a collaborative work, in partnership with the National Literacy Secretariat, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC) and OISE/UT. The ONLC currently serves a membership of twenty-six Native literacy programs throughout Ontario. Our research data came from urban and rural Aboriginal communities affiliated with ONLC, as well as independent or stand-alone programs not connected to ONLC.

Methodology

There were three phases to this research project. The first phase consisted of a literature review, which situated Aboriginal literacy in the context of Native education as a whole. The objective of the literature review was to illuminate some of the



Terms

In this paper “Aboriginal” is used as a generic term to include all Aboriginal people in North America, including Status and non-Status Indians, Métis and Inuit. “Native” is used interchangeably with Aboriginal. The collective name for the Original people of North America has gone through several modifications with the changing political climate. As an individual I have experienced these changes and I am quite comfortable using the word “Native” to talk about my work and all my relatives. I also use the term “First Nations” interchangeably with “Native” and “Aboriginal”. The term “Indian” is legal terminology used in legislation such as the Indian Act, which governs the First Nations People of Canada. Where experience in a particular territory is under discussion, the Nation name (e.g., Odawa, or Oneida) is usually preferred.

“Aboriginal Literacy” describes Aboriginal Peoples’ distinct perspective on literacy, in the context of Native education as a whole, and includes culture and language.

“Traditional” refers to protocols in keeping with Aboriginal Traditional Ecological Knowledge Systems.

“Practitioners” is used to refer to Aboriginal Elders, Traditional Teachers, literacy teachers, librarians, storytellers, tutors, culture-educators, administrators and resource personnel.

The term “Wholistic” describes the Aboriginal philosophical approach to learning, in which everything is related. By extension, the human being is considered an entire whole – mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally at one with the cosmos. This is distinct from a holistic approach in which the term related is taken as simply meaning interconnected. (Antone 2003).

potential directions that Aboriginal literacy in Ontario might take in the context of academic “dialogue” currently occurring in Native education. Our intent was to facilitate a process to ensure that Native literacy in Ontario is perceived wholistically. In conjunction with the literature review, we developed an annotated bibliography as well as a list of

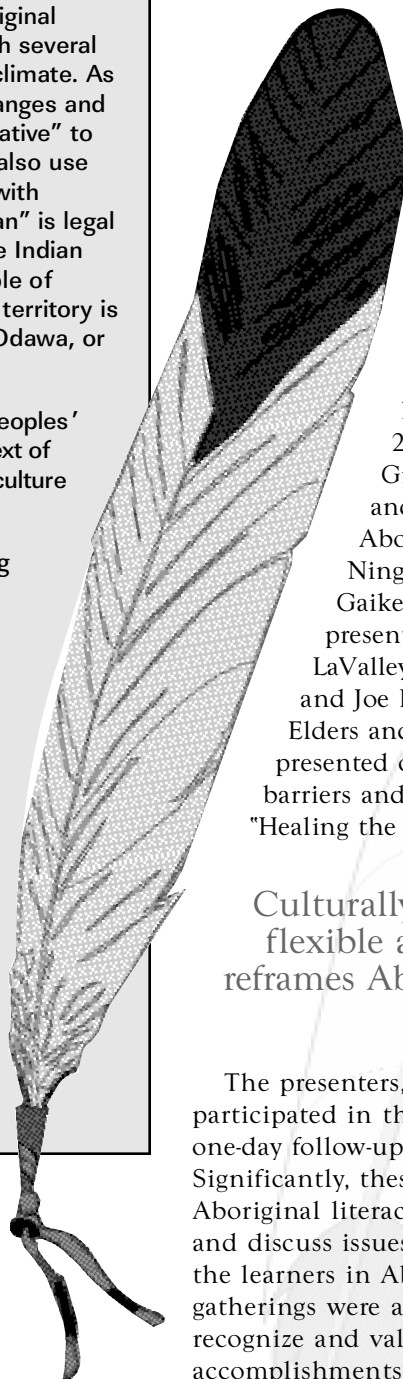
Native language resources and websites.

The second phase of the research included interviews and focus groups. The major objective was to gather, document and understand the experiences of program personnel and learners, acknowledging Aboriginal wholistic approaches to learning and “best practices” in literacy training programs. A second objective was to identify the barriers and supports experienced by Aboriginal learners in literacy training programs.

The third phase of the research involved a two-day symposium. Nearly eighty practitioners came together for the Native Literacy and Learning – Aboriginal Perspectives Symposium held at OISE/UT on May 3 and 4, 2002. Elders Lillian McGregor and Grafton Antone provided opening and closing each day, respectively. Aboriginal literacy researchers Ningwakwe Priscilla George and Sally Gaikezheyongai gave keynote presentations. Lillian McGregor, Jacqui LaValley, Grafton Antone, Jan Longboat, and Joe Paquette provided a roundtable of Elders and teachers. Fourteen practitioners presented on a broad range of topics related to barriers and supports in literacy, ranging from “Healing the Spirit” to “Deaf Literacy”.

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The presenters, Elders and teachers who participated in the symposium were invited to a one-day follow-up workshop in mid-October 2002. Significantly, these gatherings created forums for Aboriginal literacy practitioners to come together and discuss issues that would enhance literacy for the learners in Aboriginal programs. These gatherings were also a way to encourage, enhance, recognize and validate practitioners’ accomplishments. Practitioners were able to develop teaching methods, practices and administrative processes and share their findings from the literacy teaching process.



Findings

Four clear and consistent findings came out of the interviews, symposium and follow-up meeting. First, there was complete agreement from practitioners that (a) Aboriginal literacy comprises a distinct, culturally-appropriate and wholistic perspective on literacy; and (b) a proactive response to this wholistic perspective needs to be taken.

Secondly, practitioners agreed that there is no single type of Aboriginal literacy program or "best practice". Effective and successful programs and practices are those that learners perceive to be directly relevant to their own environments and cultural traditions. Consequently, effective and successful programs are those in which learners are motivated to participate.

Practitioners stated that culturally appropriate practice is flexible and effective because it reframes Aboriginal perspectives in a positive light. As long as funding arrangements are predicated on governmental criteria-based outcome objectives that do not take Aboriginal cultural perspectives into account, culturally appropriate practice cannot be recognized and achieved.

Practitioners also observed that there was very little understanding of, or funding support for, Aboriginal adult literacy programs that include intergenerational literacy participation and practices (Antone 2003).

Finally, practitioners described Aboriginal literacy as distinct from mainstream literacy in that it reflects Aboriginal worldviews in two particular ways. The first is the intergenerational or multigenerational expression of Aboriginal literacy which includes how literacy extends to all areas of

life. The second is the particular learning process by which teachers become learners and learners become teachers. As Cajete (1994) describes it, this learning "unfolded through mutual, reciprocal relationships between one's social group and the natural world . . . involved all dimensions of one's being, while providing both personal development and technical skills through participation in community life." Practitioners, learners and their families need this approach to achieve their place as respected and contributing members of both Aboriginal and Canadian society.

We must continue the work of our earlier visionaries by exploring and building connections between Aboriginal literacy, healing, community development and self-determination. ■

For more information

on the Symposium, please see
"Best Practices for Aboriginal Literacy Work" at:

<http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~NLS>

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