

INDIGENOUS LITERACY ASSESSMENT

UNIVERSITY



Trigger Warning:

Contents of this report may contain triggering or sensitive material such as discussions of abuse, Indian Residential Schools and other challenges experienced by Indigenous peoples.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Prayer	3
About USAY	3

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Catalyst	4
Overview	5
Defining Terms	5
Scope	6
Impact of COVID-19	6
Tools	7
The Context	8
The Weaponization of Education	9

INTRODUCTION

Demographics	12
Health and Wellness	13
School Experience	14
Natural Supports	16
Employment	18
Digital Literacy	19
Colonization	20
Community Supports and Partnership	23
Literacy	24

OUR LEARNINGS

Conclusion	27
------------	----

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

USAY is situated on the traditional territory of the Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, Iyârhe Nakoda and the Tsuu t'ina Nations as well as the Métis Nation of Region 3.

FUNDER ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Indigenous Literacy Assessment was funded by Calgary Learns. To learn more the work they do to improve adult literacy in the City of Calgary, check out their website at calgarylearns.com.

Author: LeeAnne Ireland

Acknowledgements: Berniece Gowan, Levi First Charger, Jennifer Fournier, Chaz Prairie Chicken, Gemini Iron Shirt, Selah Rayne, Jay Kequahtoway, Terra-Lee Behiel, Jessica Hawryluk, Jared Nelson, and Zarek Wright-Winnipeg.

Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth (USAY)
211, 811 Manning Rd. NE
Calgary, AB T2E 7L4
Phone: 403-233-8225
Email: info@usay.ca



PRAYER

Aayo ihstipatapiyooop, nohk'ksikaakskohsaakinaann ahohk ksisstsikoyik.
O Creator, be near us today

Kimmaatookinaan, anak kaanomyanistsitapi nit'hpipoy.
Take pity on us, all peoples included

Oky niit'h piipoy, annak kawaapoomahka, payootah,
sooyitapii.
Also, I pray for all creation who roam the Earth,
all birds, and all sea creatures

Maakoohkomaanist asookapis kshakoom.
Everything on Earth to remain the way it should be

Anak maatsoopookhkootima maakohksi
piik'khotsimass.
All unfortunate people to acquire their needs

Noomhpiipoy anak kanaitapi makoohsookapis
opatapiisowiy
For all people to have a good life, good health

Oky ninoohkitoot'hsisk miisaamipaatapiysin,
Miistawaatsimaan, kaamotaani, kootsimaan.
Also, I ask for a long life, to raise my children to adulthood,
to escape harm, and to have all my necessities taken care of.



- Elder Saakokoto
- Artwork by Kaylee Leibham

ABOUT USAY

USAY is an Indigenous-led and governed organization that serves urban Indigenous youth ages 12 to 29 years. The agency was formed after a council was created by Mayor Al Duerr to address the rising rates of Indigenous youth suicides in the city. After several conferences, it was decided that an organization that focuses exclusively on the needs of Indigenous youth was necessary and USAY was formed.

Today, USAY focuses on three major strategic objectives:

- Successful transition to adulthood
- Social Inclusion
- Healing

With these overarching goals, USAY operates more than 30 programs annually. The programs offered are highly diverse and can be seen on our [website](#). We encourage you to watch the various videos to understand the incredible work we do. It is important to remember that USAY upholds the traditional role of 'helper', which means we support Indigenous youth in uncovering their pathway to success.



ABOUT THE PROJECT

THE CATALYST

USAY has been in operation for more than 20 years, and literacy has always been a concern and barrier when planning and implementing programs. In the past 15 years of service delivery, USAY has actively identified literacy as a major barrier for the people we serve, and we have creatively and intuitively developed clever 'workarounds' to ensure participation. However, we acknowledge and understand that literacy is a major challenge, one which we were unsure how to address. Drawn entirely on the experiences of our staff who have worked with a large cross-section of Indigenous people living in Calgary, USAY aimed through this project to understand the challenges we see with literacy within our organization.

In our programs, we see three types of literacy challenges, impacting almost 100 percent of our participants, they include:

- Virtually no ability to read, write or comprehension skills, for example signing their name with an 'x'
- Simple reading, writing and comprehension skills that would be on par with elementary school level reading levels (based on our observations), but not enough to move forward with employment, post-secondary and/or training programs that require a robust level of literacy
- Ability to sign their name, can read forms and have basic reading skills to functionally get through daily experiences

Prior to our beginning the literacy assessment, we had not identified any participants to our best estimations that could read, write or comprehend written English language at their associated standard grade/age level. Essentially, all the Indigenous participants in our programs are experiencing some sort of barrier that can be attributed to their literacy gaps.

Overall, the overwhelming observations by USAY staff working with so many urban Indigenous people and experiencing the intensity and severity of literacy challenges among our participants was worth exploring.

Overwhelming observations by USAY staff working with urban Indigenous people and experiencing the intensity and severity of literacy challenges among our participants was worth exploring.

OVERVIEW

From May 2020 to June 2021, USAY conducted an information gathering project among 152 Indigenous adults within the City of Calgary focused on literacy. The findings from that process are found within this document and aim to further the understanding of literacy challenges and provide recommendations for better service provision. The goal of this document is to deepen understanding so that future projects can make informed decisions that improve literacy skills among Indigenous adults by better understanding their unique needs and the environments of learning that they exist in.

This project benefited from an initiative grant through Calgary Learns.

DEFINING TERMS

Calgary Learns, a Community Adult Learning grant funding organization, believes that 'literacy' is not just about reading and writing. While reading and writing provide the necessary foundation for learning, literacy is fundamentally about an individual's capacity to put their skills and knowledge to work in shaping the course of their own life. Literacy involves 'reading the word and the world' in a variety of contexts. Individuals need literacy skills to obtain and use information effectively, to act as informed players and to manage interactions in a variety of contexts (ex. making decisions about health care, parenting, managing household finances, engaging in the political process or working).

This document also uses the terms 'foundational learner' and 'foundational learning', these are defined by the Community Adult Learning Program Guidelines as:

"A foundational learner is an adult who chooses to engage in foundational learning opportunities such as literacy, numeracy, skills for learning, basic digital skills, and/or English language learning to address knowledge and skills gaps. Foundational learners often experience economic, social, and/or other challenges or barriers that may interfere with their learning - challenges that cannot be separated from the learning journey itself."

Foundational learning denotes learning opportunities that support the development of adult literacy, numeracy, skills for learning, basic digital skills, and/or proficiency in the English language. Foundational learning opportunities help individuals to pursue further learning, have satisfying and meaningful employment, and fully participate in society. While the Community Adult Learning Program Guidelines do not identify or mandate a specific 'cut-off level' for foundational learning, in general terms, it can be thought of as up to and including approximately Grade 9 levels in the formal kindergarten to grade 12 system, or, "in the case of adult literacy and numeracy, up to and including Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) level 2." (Community Adult Learning Program | Guidelines 2020, P.12).

Literacy is not just about reading and writing, it is also about an individual's capacity to put skills and knowledge to work.

SCOPE

The Indigenous Literacy Assessment project had two main outcomes, they included:

- Assessment of 152 Indigenous adult's level of literacy
- Recommendations for Indigenous literacy programming, resources and support

The final deliverable of these outcomes is this document that can be utilized by agencies and others in the community to understand the level of literacy among Indigenous adults, and the recommendations for programming to specifically meet their needs.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

During the assessment phase of the information gathering process, the COVID-19 pandemic caused strict public health measures, which impacted USAY staff from 'sitting with' those taking part in the assessment. Instead, participants were asked to take part in the assessment in a drive-thru fashion to allow for adherence to health restrictions prescribed by the Government of Alberta. Participants were also receiving COVID relief support from the USAY office in the form of food gift cards. It is important to note that the findings of this information gathering process may have been impacted by the pandemic in ways that we are unsure of.



TOOLS

USAY wanted assessment and information gathering tools that were reflective of our organization and community. Therefore, we sought out various literacy assessment tools that could be utilized. With the support of Calgary Learns, USAY decided on the ReadForward adult literacy reading assessment tool. Readfoward is calibrated to the Alberta Reading Benchmarks (ARB). ReadForward and ARB allowed USAY to understand the provincial standard for adult literacy assessment and reading comprehension in a measurable and communicable manner.

The ReadForward adult literacy reading assessment tool was combined with a survey that USAY developed to surface the various factors, including systemic and environmental, that can influence and impact the individual that was taking part in the literacy assessment. These include:

- Demographic information
- School experience
- Home experience
- Employment experience
- Health
- Access to technology
- Culture
- Spirituality
- Self-Esteem

The participants were also asked about their recommendations to improve literacy among Indigenous adults in the community, and the types of programs they would be likely to partake in. Thus allowing for a sense of self-determination among participants about the types of services that reflect their needs in the community, in the hopes that future programming would be reflective of their voice.

It is important to note that each of the participants were provided with a \$30 honorarium for their participation and knowledge sharing in alignment with Indigenous protocol. It is believed that when sharing your knowledge and guidance, you are compensated or gifted an item within that exchange.

Find out more about the Alberta Reading Benchmarks by checking out their [website](#).



THE CONTEXT

This document was written in June 2021, shortly after the remains of 215 children were uncovered at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in a mass, unmarked grave. At the time of writing this document, more mass graves were being discovered throughout the country, including Brandon, Manitoba, who were actively exploring 104 children's burial sites. The reporting of these children in the mainstream media brought to light the 'truth' or 'evidence' of the abuses experienced within the Indian Residential School System that had been described by Survivors.

The uncovering of these mass graves sparked renewed and intense grief for the Indigenous community across Canada and the world. The grief, anger and fear was profound for the USAY staff and community, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The inability to reconcile personal feelings of loss, trauma and pain as separate from the findings of this report are transparent and a clear bias. It was impossible, as information gatherers, community members and changemakers in the community to be objective about the acute pain that these children's burial had on our organization, work and commitment ongoing.

For those reasons, it is important to understand that USAY will be honouring our children by sharing the voices of Indigenous adults in the way that they gave their expertise, knowledge and thoughts. A profound, deliberate and calculated decision has been made to not compare the statistics of Indigenous adult readers against those of non-Indigenous people in any context. It is apparent that Indigenous people should not be compared to non-Indigenous people in any way; literacy is no exception. To quote the Alberta Reading Benchmarks, "Eurocentric standards do not correlate with Indigenous standards of literacy" (ARB, 3).

The intentionality of this decision is to let the truth of their voices and information stand alone, and then make recommendations and decisions based on



In 2021, amid report after report of presumed grave sites being found on the former grounds of residential schools, non-Indigenous Canadians undeniably experienced an awakening.

Everyone from random citizens doing TV street interviews to the Prime Minister himself voiced horror and dismay, as if blindsided by the fact that the assimilationist project this country ran for the better part of a century had claimed the lives of children. Many, many children.

We were not blindsided, of course. The deaths of young Indigenous kids at places like Tk'emlúps, Cowessess and Williams Lake, B.C. were shared widely in the accounts of former students, who passed the knowledge to their children and grandchildren. They were meticulously reported by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015.

We've a long way to go to fulfill the essential goals of that commission. But the massive shift in public attitudes that followed the grave discoveries is undeniable. Before making this choice, Maclean's consulted privately with Indigenous, Métis and Inuit leaders, who unanimously approved of, and in some cases applauded, the idea. The grave finds, they agreed, changed the tone and substance of debate over Indigenous rights. Whether that change yields action, they're waiting to see"

- Maclean's Power List

those voices in the space it was shared. It is important to not present non-Indigenous statistics as the standard in which Indigenous people have to be measured against. The tool of colonization and the Doctrine of Discovery are based on the premise that Indigenous ways of knowing, being and living are not equal to that of non-Indigenous ways and should therefore be suppressed, oppressed and eliminated, with damaging and lasting impacts. It is for that reason, and others, this document will take a decolonized approach in not drawing comparisons between information that should not be compared.

This document also does not aim to explain the history of Indigenous people in Canada. It is the expectation that the reader will take on the responsibility of becoming knowledgeable about the history of colonization in Canada. In cases where specific historical information is relevant to discuss to provide context, those pieces will be included. However, it is encouraged that readers have a foundational knowledge of Indigenous peoples in Canada, both pre and post contact.

In many cases the information is presented as it was shared, and the reader can draw conclusions about what that information can mean in the context of their own work. USAY has taken the findings of this information gathering process and made recommendations and conclusions that are based on our work with Indigenous peoples and the community, as well as our own lived experiences.



THE WEAPONIZATION OF EDUCATION

It is essential to understand the Indian Residential School system when discussing Indigenous education in Canada. This extensive school system was developed by the Canadian government and administered by churches as a tool for genocide. The objective was nominally focussed on educating Indigenous children who were forcibly removed from their homes, however the primary function was to 'kill the Indian in the child' to force assimilation and indoctrination into the Euro-Christian belief systems.

This system of genocide was in operation from the 1880s until 1996, when the last school closed in Saskatchewan. During their time at the schools, Indigenous children were tortured, and some were murdered and buried in mass, unmarked graves all across Canada. The Indian Residential School system was a systemic, calculated and widespread practice that contributed to loss of language, culture and life. By the mid-century, the government was beginning to acknowledge the detrimental health outcomes of this practice and made amendments to the Indian Act.

The Indian Residential School system evolved in the 1950s into what has been coined the Sixties Scoop. This ongoing practice of disrupting Indigenous families by the government continued when ten of thousands of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes without consent from parents or authorities. The government hired advertising companies to market Indigenous children in newspapers and television for adoption into non-Indigenous homes across the globe. Many of those adopted or fostered during this time have shared stories of abuse, and the long hours spent providing manual labour.

Presently, Indigenous children and youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system. Many Indigenous people have stated that this system is repeating the horrors of the past in the modern day evolution of the Indian Residential School system. The apprehension of Indigenous children into the child welfare system since the early 1980s is now being thought of as the 'Millennium Scoop', and survivors are calling for investigations and reform.

The impact from this genocide has caused Intergenerational Trauma, which has longstanding and ongoing repercussions within Indigenous community. The impacts of Intergenerational Trauma include higher involvement with the sorrow systems including justice, reduced health outcomes and poor educational attainment.

When aiming to understand topics such as literacy, it is paramount to understand that education was weaponized against Indigenous people for more than 100 years, and that many of those practices have evolved, not disappeared. The ongoing systemic challenges facing Indigenous people in Canada needs to be recognized, discussed and considered when evaluating data, understanding findings and viewing the information provided within this document.



THE FINDINGS



If research doesn't change you as a person, then you haven't done it right."

- Shawn Wilson,
Research as Ceremony

The findings found in this document are reflective of the information provided by 152 Indigenous adults living in the City of Calgary. The participants of the assessment self-selected to participate and may have been from the same household as others who are being reported on. USAY has aggregated the data to ensure the protection of all participant's identities and any quotes shared have been kept anonymous. The analysis of the findings could be used in other ways and create additional learnings, however, the information reflected here was most pertinent and of interest to the goals and objectives of USAY. Aggregated data could be shared with others interested in learning more.

For the purposes of this report, it was important to show a distinction between those participants that achieved a grade nine or less formal education, and those that completed grade 10 or above. Adults who have completed grade nine or less are considered 'foundational learners'.

The data was separated based on those that had completed grade nine or less of which there were 11 participants that met that criteria. Although this is a small number compared to that of those that completed the assessment overall, it is important to look at the differences between the two groups and create programs based on their feedback. The sample size of foundational learners may be small because they may have had difficulties completing the assessment without help and were least likely to engage with the assessment in the first place.

Throughout this document, the data is compared between those 'foundational learners' and those that had attended high school, and show compelling differences that provide insight into the types of recommendations that would increase literacy rates amongst Indigenous adult learners. As relevant, we will be representing the statistical findings from foundational learners to those above grade 10, which will be shown in a comparison for example "n% compared to y%".

Each section of the findings will be broken into themes to provide related recommendations. In some cases, USAY will be providing recommendations from other literature, and some of the interpretations are based on what USAY thinks is being said or needed based on being an Indigenous-led organization.

DEMOGRAPHICS

To understand those that participated in the information gathering process, USAY asked questions about their age, gender and household composition. We understand that examining this information through a gender lens, for example, may impact how the findings could be utilized and the recommendations made. When applicable, and relevant, USAY drew correlations and possible areas of intersectionality that may improve literacy based programming for Indigenous learners. In some cases, there will be clear gaps in the recommendations because of a lack in knowledge, diversity of participants and other factors.

The average age of participants was 34 years with no notable difference between the groups. USAY is a youth serving organization, however, this data is representative of those in their family unit that were receiving food support during the COVID-19 pandemic relief program. In this case it was primarily mothers, as the majority of those that participated in this assessment identified as women (91% for foundational learners, and 76% for Grade 10+). We also know that there was an average of three children in each household (3.5 children for those foundational learners, and 2.8 for those that had grade 10+). Most of the Indigenous learners were located throughout the city, but mostly highly concentrated in the northeast and southeast quadrants of the city.

With the exception of one person who did not identify their identity, all of the participants identified as Indigenous, with some variation on their status (Bill C31, Non-Status, etc.). Interestingly, more foundational learners (+12%) could speak an Indigenous language compared to those that had completed above grade 10, this may be an indication that English may be a second language.

Recommendations

Based on the fact that the majority of the participants were women who had the role of primary caregiver of children, the ideal literacy project would be designed for the family unit, allowing for children and parents to have activities designed for their increased literacy. Families would also have a broad definition, allowing for multi-generational family members to be included, such as grandparents, aunties, etc. Also, a small group of people were non-binary or transpeople, it would be important to ensure that the project is inclusive of all people and family structures, and people with diverse identities.

When supporting foundational learners it would be important to ensure they have childcare if programming is not offered to their children simultaneously. USAY is envisioning that literacy programs could have adults and children separated into activities to learn literacy based on their literacy levels and then come together for co-learning as a unit to improve their skills.

Many of the participants lived in the northeast and southeast quadrants of the city. With 54 people saying they would like the program to take place in the northeast, and 44 selecting the southeast. About half of the respondents said that they would go anywhere for programming as long as it was close to transit and/or had access to parking.

It might be wise to build literacy skills through Indigenous and English language 'co-learning' practices. Building literacy skills around Indigenous language learning may allow for foundational learners to connect more to concepts and ideas that feel connected to their Indigenous identities.

Systems Change

Universal child care would allow women to participate in the workforce and increase their family's stability. As the majority of the participants were women, the lack of childcare is evident in their ability to access systems.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Participants were asked if they had any learning disabilities, physical disabilities or mental health concerns, to understand what factors might have impacted their literacy level. The intention was to have a clearer picture of the types of barriers that might be present in future literacy programming and build in the necessary supports.

USAY found that there were no notable differences between the two groups of learners, and overall 13% had a diagnosed learning disability. Of those that did have a learning disability, 67% received support, 24% did not and 9% were unsure. Learning disabilities included:

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
- Deafness
- Memory Loss
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder

Again, there were no notable differences between the two groups in terms of health conditions. Overall the findings revealed that 26% had a physical condition of which the following were listed:

- Asthma
- Arthritis
- Muscular conditions
- Diabetes
- Seizures
- Cleft Palate
- Heart Disease

It was also found that 25% had a mental health condition, which included:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Schizophrenia
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Postpartum Depression
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Bipolar

Recommendations

As many of the participants have a learning disability, mental health and/or physical conditions, it would be important to ensure the program is accessible and responsive to their needs. It would also be beneficial, especially in a family learning setting, to increase awareness about learning disabilities and differences to ensure that any challenges are assessed and supported within school before it becomes a 'personal' burden that means the person exits school early.

Before launching any activities, utilizing a network of services to ensure there are available assessments, supports and referrals would be necessary. Utilizing Treaty benefits and Jordan's Principle may help offset associated costs.

Systems Change

Mental health is a growing concern as communities transitioned out of the recent pandemic restrictions, as well as the recent recovery of Indigenous children in unmarked and mass graves, combined with low availability and access to support. Therefore, ensuring that mental health is seen as health and integrated into our communities is important to the success of all community members. Reducing barriers to access, increasing navigation supports, reducing wait times and generally reducing the stigma to pursuing mental health support are ways in which the system could invest in Indigenous community members. Future investment in Indigenous models of mental health is worth exploration from a systems level approach.

Increase awareness of learning disability and difference before it creates a 'personal' burden and forces the person to exit school early

SCHOOL EXPERIENCE



Education is the
new buffalo"

- Blair Sinclair

Literacy and education are intrinsically linked. In our society, school is often the first place that children are introduced to the concepts of reading, writing and math skills. For that reason, it was important for this work to understand what it was about education that could be improved as a 'first line of defense' to increasing adult literacy in the future. Understanding how to improve systems to ensure more Indigenous children and youth leave with a higher level of

literacy before entering adulthood may increase literacy rates ongoing.

For all of the participants, 91% made it to high school (10+), with 55% completing grade 12. It is important to note that 7% of participants had completed junior high school, with one person who had completed to grade 6 (2% were unknown).

Of all the participants, 71% felt the most connected in high school, with 16% in junior high, 1% in elementary, and 10% unsure when they felt connected to school, with some saying they never felt connected to school. Foundational learners had felt most connected to school in grade 8, and those who had attended high school felt most connected in their high school years. Comments from those that attended high school said their connection was strongest when they had friendships and support of teachers which increased as they attended high school.

The following are quotes from participants indicating why they felt connected to school, creating a better understanding of the in-school supports that may increase literacy among Indigenous students:

- "[Grade 12 because] by then there was more culture being introduced into the school system."
- "I was more part of school activities and classroom learning"
- "A good relationship with one of my teachers"
- "I felt close to the end and figuring out what I wanted to after high school"
- "I played sports and had a lot of friends and also met my girlfriend in that grade"
- "I feel it really depends on my teacher and their way of teaching. I struggled academically throughout grade school due to lack of in-class support and racism/discrimination, and stereotyping. Once I was removed from regular class and put into a smaller group with more academic support I started to excel later in life (secondary school). I was diagnosed with a learning disability and the university was very supportive with assisting in an alternate learning plan which resulted in me graduating with a social work diploma."
- "It wasn't until I returned to school as a mature student that I felt purpose in school."

Participants were asked a series of questions which they could rate on a Likert scale regarding their connection to school and their general school experience. The findings of that question found that foundational learners are:

- Less likely to enjoy school (55% compared to 65%)
- Equitably felt supported by school in learning to read (73% compared to 75%)
- Less likely to feel that school helped them in learning to write (73% compared to 83%)
- Less likely to feel school provided math skills (55% compared to 77%)
- Less likely to feel equipped to achieve their goals (55% compared to 62%)
- Far less likely to embrace support when it was offered by the school (45% compared to 72%)
- Less likely to feel that school valued their identity (45% compared to 55%)

The participants were asked how historical and current day colonial practices impacted their ability to access school; exploring how their family's history of Residential Schools, Day Schools, Sixties Scoop and Child Welfare impacted their desire to engage in the education system. It is important to remember that these colonial tools utilized schools and the education systems in ways that often separated children from their families, more obviously is Residential Schools, but schools are sources in which some children are reported to child welfare. Therefore USAY wanted to explore how these factors might impact participants' desire to access school, the results for all Indigenous learners found that:

- Almost 50% (47%) of all participants were fearful, challenged and tense when accessing systems such as school (this increased to 55% for foundational learners)
- 59% of all participants felt that the history of Indigenous people and their families had created tensions for them within education

Recommendations

Creating ways for Indigenous students to build connections within their school may reduce those leaving early. Programs that are in the school may be effective in increasing literacy if they focus on teacher and peer connections to ensure students feel safe prior to providing instruction. Those intentional efforts to increase relationships within the school should begin prior to high school to ensure Indigenous students attend beyond foundational learning. Although not the role of charitable organizations to build connections to school, it may be an intentional component when work is already underway in those spaces.

47% of all Indigenous adults were fearful of accessing systems such as school. 59% felt that the history of schools caused tension for them within education.

Systems Change

Based on the reasons students felt connected to school and the barriers they experienced while attending, it is recommended that the following strategies would improve school connectedness from a systems approach among Indigenous students:

- Recognize and address the historical context of schools/education for Indigenous people
- Be actively anti-racist
- Provide cultural supports
- Recognize of the importance of Indigenous families
- Create a sense of belonging and community
- Provide extracurricular activities that are meaningful
- Build spaces for friendships, connection and relationship building
- Create non-traditional school settings that allow for unique learning environments (for example land based learning)
- Provide experiential and fun learning opportunities (for example field trips)
- Have supportive school staff and ways to connect on a personal level
- Create more holistic connections between education and future paths
- Become trauma-informed and intentional about creating safe spaces

Please note that participants offered many quotes illustrating the importance of these integrative and holistic approaches within the educational system. Further details can be provided to those that are interested in learning more about their comments related to these above recommendations.

NATURAL SUPPORTS

Participants were asked about their experiences outside of school and what their natural supports were like during their time in school to understand how this might have impacted their adult literacy level.

Questions focused on whether or not they felt supported in learning, if others in their life valued education and if they had access to learning materials. The results of this series of questions found that foundational learners were less supported in their homes around learning and education. Indigenous adults who are foundational learners were:

- Less likely to feel that their education was valued outside of school (27% compared to 54%)
- Less likely to feel that the people in their lives wanted them to do well in school (64% compared to 78%)
- Less likely to have people around them that prioritized reading and writing (45% compared to 62%)
- Both groups felt equitably that they had access to support with learning outside of school (55% compared to 59%)
- Far less likely to have access to reading material outside of school (only 18% of foundational learners had access to reading material compared to 73% of those that completed beyond grade 10)

Participants were also asked if they felt they were celebrated for their successes and if they could reach out to friends and family in times of need. The results found that 56% of all participants felt as though they were celebrated and acknowledged for their successes, and 78% felt they had friends and family they could reach out to.

Recommendations

The fact that foundational learners had less supportive environments outside of school reiterates the importance of programs that focus on the family structure. Literacy programs that increase literacy and numeracy among the family is essential. Increasing the value, and priority of reading and writing skills through building connection and support to the whole family is a logical way to create more supportive environments for learning both in and out of school.

The findings found that foundational learners were far less likely to have access to reading material outside of school. Alberta Reading Benchmarks found that, “there is limited selection of level 1a-1b reading material with adult Indigenous content”



The findings found that foundational learners were far less likely to have access to reading material outside of school. Alberta Reading Benchmarks found that, “there is limited selection of level 1a-1b reading material with adult Indigenous content” (ARB, 5). Therefore, organizations or community groups, in partnership with Indigenous adult foundational learners, could co-create content that would improve literacy skills among this group and provide resources beyond their own programs.

One suggestion might be to create programming in local libraries and encourage participants to have books in their living environments to ensure children and adults have access to reading material to support their literacy. If the program itself takes place in spaces that have reading all around, it could be impactful for participants.

Nearly half of the participants did not feel that they were acknowledged or celebrated for successes in their life. It would be important to invite family, friends and peers to celebrate milestones in literacy skill development. Having opportunities to further connect with peers and celebrate the successes of participants would increase confidence and provide motivation and encouragement for continued learning. It would be important, in USAY’s experience, to have these celebrations align with Indigenous ways of gathering, such as a Round Dance, giveaway or feasting.

Systems Change

Although not specific to any particular system, an overall recommendation to increase literacy success among Indigenous people, is to build natural supports in the form of:

- Valuing education and learning through internal motivation and feelings of safety
- Obtaining supports to learning outside of school
- Accessing books and tools to encourage literacy
- Acknowledging and celebrating school related success

This can only occur when Indigenous community members feel safe accessing services, begin to believe the systems are working with them, and the work of truth and healing has occurred.

EMPLOYMENT

Participants were asked about their current employment status, which was similar between foundational learners and those who had reached grade 10 or beyond. The results found that 21% of participants were employed, while 36% of participants were looking for employment. A large number of participants were caring for children and others in their life, while also completing household tasks. It is important to note that the high rates of those unemployed may be reflective of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown of the City of Calgary. Of those that were working, 78% were working one job, 24% were working two jobs, 3% three jobs and 6% five or more.

Of all the participants, 44% felt like they experienced barriers to their employment, the following lists those barriers from most reported to least:

- Childcare
- Lacking Job Training
- Lack of Experience
- Health Issues
- Life Skills
- Transportation
- Discrimination
- Lack of Language Skills

Some selected 'other' and cited reasons such as vaccinations, COVID-19, lacking identification, criminal record, lack of education and fear of discrimination.

Again, it is important to note that 77% of the participants were women and appear to be the primary care providers for children. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and childcare facilities were shut down which impacted the ability for parents to work.

Although the employment experiences were similar in both groups, the impact of literacy levels on employment showed marked differences. Foundational learners were:

- Far less likely to have the reading and math skills needed to find the type of employment they wanted (36% compared to 74%)
- Far less likely to feel that their reading and math skills matched what is required of them in their current employment (27% compared to 64%)
- Less likely to increase their reading to skills to obtain the job of their dreams (55% compared to 80%)
- Far less likely to feel like their workplace would offer training and resources to increase their skills (9% compared to 49%)

Recommendations

Alberta Reading Benchmarks states,

“[there] is an inherent assumption around literacy skill development is learners will be motivated to learn based on economic advancements (i.e. employment). Many literacy programs - by association, through funding requirements, and by using literacy tools and strategies - similarly function on an assumption that literacy learners are driven by external motivators, such as economic success, in pursuing their goals in reading literacy. These assumptions are incorrect for many learners, particularly learners outside of mainstream cultural influence” (ARB, 7).

This incorrect assumption may account for why Indigenous foundational learners were not motivated to increase their literacy skills to achieve employment, but as will be illustrated in subsequent findings more motivated to attend literacy programs overall. However, in contradiction, when asked what their desired outcome would be for completing a literacy program, the largest response was “better job opportunities” (n=22%).

Due to the complexity of these responses and literature around increasing literacy programming, it would be recommended that programs do not focus on career training, employment or economic prosperity as the primary ‘value’ of a literacy program for Indigenous foundational learners, in particular. More holistic and internal values are explored as recommendations in subsequent sections of this document.

DIGITAL LITERACY

To develop an understanding of the types of support required to increase literacy among Indigenous adults, it was important to evaluate their level of perceived comfort with technology. As the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to be a prevalent issue for the foreseeable future, as well as increased reliance on technology, it is imperative that we understand how to communicate effectively with Indigenous peoples through means that are meaningful and attainable to them.

It was evident that foundational learners had more difficulty communicating through digital means, than their counterparts. When asked a series of questions on a Likert scale regarding their level of comfort with technology, USAY found that foundational learners were:

- Less likely to feel they could effectively communicate through social media, email, chatting, etc. (64% compared to 91%)
- Less likely to access information through the internet and technology (64% compared to 94%)
- Less likely to have skills with technology that allowed them to be able to interact with the digital world in the way they would like (45% compared to 85%)
- Far less likely to feel confident on a computer and other technology (36% compared to 76%)

Recommendations

Use of oral means of communicating with Indigenous foundational learners. It would be best to use a hybrid approach in which a written communication method is sent, but is followed up with a phone call or video chat. USAY staff often use this approach, where we will send out waivers, forms or information that is usually required by funders, and then call the person and help them fill it out or talk about what it means, why we require it and how it might be beneficial to them. A 'pro tip' from the USAY staff, if you disguise this as an exercise for the benefit of your agency or team, they feel less nervous or stigmatized and are more likely to participate.

Of all of the participants, only 7% indicated that the ability to text or use apps would be a desired outcome of a literacy program. Therefore, making technology or digital literacy the central 'motivator' or focus of a program may not provide the recruitment and retention desired. However, with the growing reliance on technology building greater abilities to communicate through those means would increase the learners overall success.

Systems Change

Again, with heavy reliance on technology, making internet access and technology more affordable and accessible to Indigenous people would be considered a 'basic right'. With students accessing education, employees working from home and even healthcare providers offering video conferencing appointments, it is more important than ever to equip citizens with appropriate access to the internet and the 'right' technology (at least one computer with adequate graphics, speakers, webcam and microphone). Many public officials have indicated that reliance on these methods are not going to end when public health restrictions lessen, and therefore equipping people accordingly is a necessity.

Pro-Tip: Use a hybrid approach for filling out forms using oral and written skills. If you disguise it as a benefit to the agency and your team than participants are more likely to participate.

COLONIZATION

Of all the participants 84% had been involved with a colonial system, such as Residential Schools, Day School, Sixties Scoop and Child Welfare. The following quotes from participants showcase the level various impacts of being part of these colonial systems:

- "It was hard to show love in our family. Lots of substance abuse growing up, physical abuse, family in foster care, etc."
- "My mother was in foster care and because of that us kids never knew about the native tradition until I was 10"
- "I went to residential school and the day school, it affected my parents and families for us, I still can't talk about what I remembered"
- "My mom was a residential school survivor and we suffered from loss of language, culture and abuse. My great granny was a residential school survivor she raised my mom thus carried onto my mom, her abusive teachings my granny was exposed to; also my mom was involved in the 60s scoop as well"
- "My grandma went to residential school and it affected my mother and how she was treated that was passed down to me of how she treated me"

Of all the participants 34% had been involved in the child welfare system (all but one removed from their home) and 1% were unsure. However, based on the comments associated with this question, the definition of 'child welfare' and family disruption is complex. The following quotes from participants who stated they were not part of the child welfare system but illustrate the complexities of family disruption:

- "Although no one has ever said, I do have a reason to believe CFS many have been involved at some time in my early years I know I lived with my grandparents for a short time"
- "I left home at 15 years old, stayed with my friend's family for 3 years, it wasn't part of child welfare, they just did it out of the goodness of their hearts"
- "My mom did have an addiction and she gave me to my auntie when I was 4 years old"
- "My dad died at age 2 so I grew up with other family"
- "I think what impacted my learning journey was the separation of my mother and my step dad, because it was a difficult time in my life. I went on living alone with a friend for 2 years. It impacted my learning and studying in a bad way"

There was one notable difference between foundational learners and those that had completed beyond grade 10, which was they were less likely to be part of the child welfare system (9% compared to 35%). To be clear, USAY does not believe that involvement in child welfare increases literacy or school success among Indigenous peoples, it is more likely an indication of the small sample size within this project.

Participants were asked if they understand the history of Indigenous people in Canada, from contact to colonization, current social justice issues, and if they understood how that history and ongoing legacy impacts their lives. Foundational learners were:

- Less likely to have an understanding of the history of Indigenous people in the world (64% compared to 75%)
- Far less likely to understand how they might be affected by the impacts of colonization (36% compared to 73%)

"Colonization is the disease. What is colonization and how do we ensure that we are not contagious — that we do not colonize those we strive to assist, by accident?"

- Darien Thira

Research indicates that connection to and reclamation of Indigenous culture can provide a whole host of protective factors. In the words of Darien Thira, “Culture serves to hold our spiritual experiences on a community level — together they offer us Meaning”.

It is important to pursue literacy efforts in ways that are culturally and spiritually safe. For that reason, it is necessary to understand the current level of access to culture and spirituality the participants have. Participants were asked a series of questions regarding their understanding or involvement in reclamation activities. Overall, the results were equitable for foundational learners and found for all participants that:

- 84% agreed that oral traditional practices were important to them
- 78% felt that oral traditional and education align
- 57% were able to access culturally appropriate and knowledgeable resources (Elders, knowledge keepers, etc.)
- 57% felt included in the Indigenous community
- 65% had extensive or moderate involvement in traditional social events (smudging, powwow, ceremony, etc.)
- 62% had extensive or moderate understanding of their own personal traditional teachings

The biggest difference between foundational learners and those that had completed beyond grade 10 was their understanding of traditional protocols and how to use them (36% compared to 69%).

Recommendations

Participants strongly indicated that they would want programs that focus on building cultural knowledge. Based on the findings, it would be important to provide a ‘deconstructed’ literacy program, as many Indigenous teachings adhere to oral traditions. This could look like inviting an Elder to provide prayer, smudging and ceremony, and asking participants to journal and reflect on their experiences afterwards. It may also mean that they take part in teachings and they provide a written recount of their learnings in a way that they could integrate those teachings into their everyday lives.

There is strong evidence that shows land-based activities improve identity and wellness among Indigenous people, therefore land-based activities could include following instructions that are both written and oral. Recipes for preparing food, list of items needed to be prepared, safety cards, and other items necessary for outdoor activities might provide a space to integrate literacy instruction.

In all cases, USAY would recommend utilizing Elders, knowledge keepers and Indigenous community members in providing Indigenous cultural components and elements. It is necessary that these teachings are specific to the diversity of cultures, teachings and peoples; pan-Indigenous approaches are not ideal.

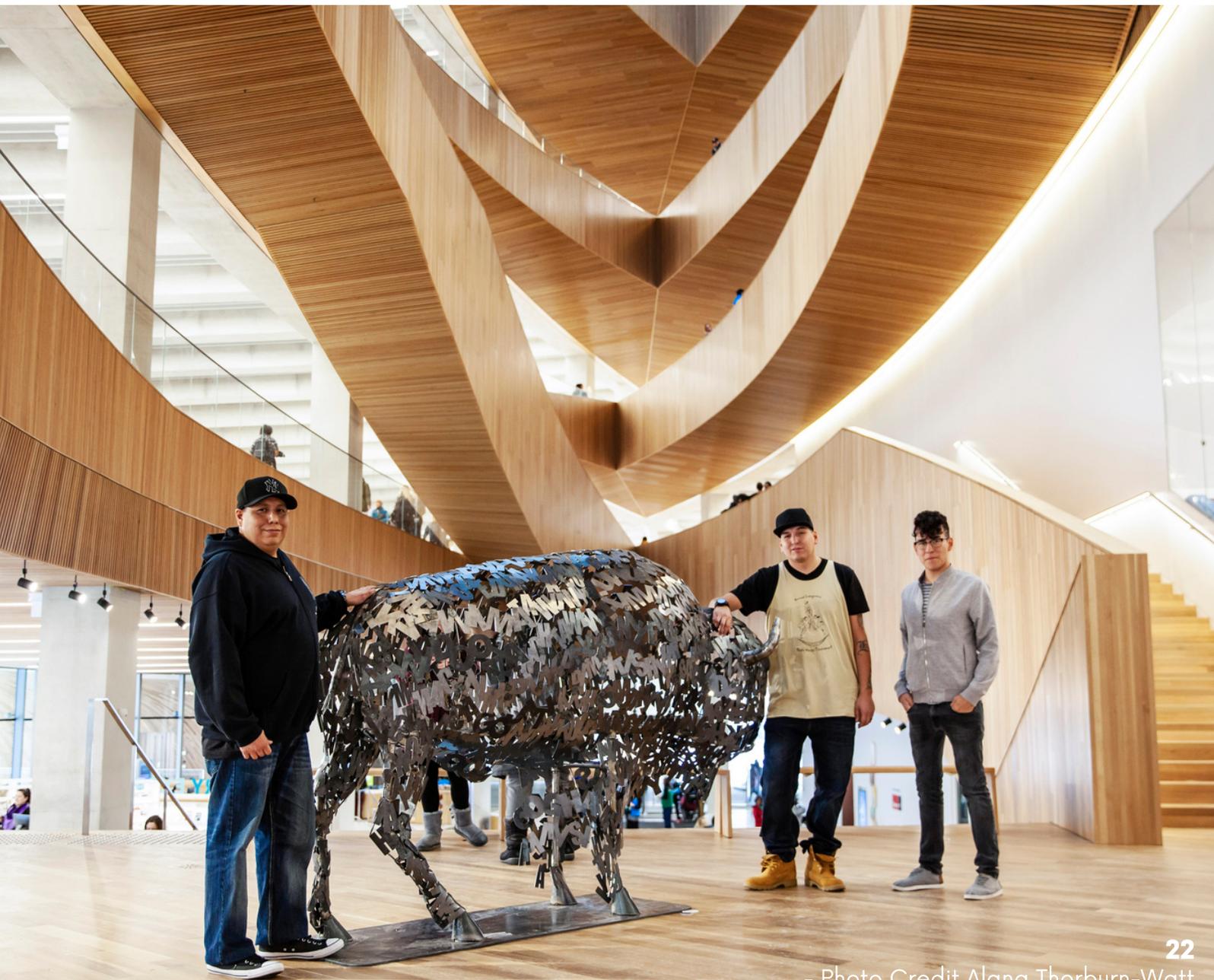


Systems Change

All systems from education and healthcare, to policing and justice, need to have a trauma-informed approach. Creating an understanding of coping skills, trauma-manifestation and, more broadly, what trauma is, could dramatically increase the positive ways in which systems respond to Indigenous community members.

This approach will also include understanding Canada's history with Indigenous peoples, including contact, biological warfare, Treaties, Indian Act, Residential Schools, and others. Through understanding these important and key topics of Indigenous history, service providers, systems and the community will be more responsive and understanding of the unique needs of Indigenous people. Through this work it is intended to reduce systemic barriers, violence and racism that Indigenous people face when accessing support from all systems.

Although not a specific recommendation about how this system should be improved it is important to highlight, as many of the participants were involved with child welfare, apprehended from their homes and expressed the impact this had on their learning. A general system change to a harm-reduction lens within the child welfare system could significantly increase outcomes for Indigenous children and their families, and overall reduce conflicts within program components such as the ones recommended through this document.



COMMUNITY SUPPORTS AND PARTNERSHIP

To understand the types of services and support accessed by Indigenous community members, a list was provided to them to select from. Findings found that 80% were accessing support, 14% were not and 7% did not indicate, this data may be skewed since all were accessing COVID Relief from the USAY office. The agencies included (in order of highest utilization to least):

- Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth (USAY)
- Calgary Food Bank
- Calgary Transit - Low Income Monthly Pass
- Awo Taan Healing Lodge Society
- Aboriginal Futures Career & Training Centre
- Aboriginal Friendship Centre Of Calgary
- Elbow River Healing Lodge
- Women's Centre of Calgary
- Calgary Housing Company
- CUPS
- Riel Institute of Education
- Alex Community Health Centre
- YMCA
- Alberta Health Services (Addiction/Mental)
- Metis Housing
- YWCA
- Native Counseling Services of Alberta
- Elizabeth Fry Society
- Trade Winds to Success
- Trellis
- Treaty 7 Urban Indian Housing
- Inn From the Cold
- Good Food Box program
- Sunrise Healing Lodge Society
- Calgary Pregnancy Care Centre
- Calgary Counseling Centre
- Wood's Homes
- John Howard Society
- SORCe
- 211
- Calgary Sexual Health Centre
- Horizon Housing

An important note is that the findings from this question found that 87 out of the 152 (57%) were accessing support from the Calgary Food Bank, and they were also accessing support from USAY for food insecurity. This is an indication that food insecurity is a prevalent and pervasive challenge facing the community.

Recommendations

Reflecting on the systems of support currently being accessed by Indigenous participants, it would be wise to connect with those agencies to act as partners primarily as referral sources to the program. Understanding that creating a network of services around Indigenous participants would be necessary for their success in the project.

Systems Change

Due to the fact that many of the participants were experiencing intense food insecurity, unemployment, mental and physical health conditions, and other ailments that created barriers to their participation in the workforce, it would be recommended that there be a form of basic or guaranteed income. Beyond the current system of social services, which still prohibits families from meeting their basic needs, this system's change would have positive outcomes in reducing critical needs and providing more opportunities to participate in literacy projects and others that would improve their lives.

The findings found that 57% of participants were accessing support from the Calgary Food Bank, and they were also accessing food support from USAY. This is an indication that food insecurity is a prevalent and pervasive challenge facing the community.

LITERACY

The objective of the information gathering process was to assess 152 Indigenous adults' level of literacy. As stated, USAY utilized the Read Forward Literacy Assessment, which provides a final predicted literacy level to indicate an approximate reading and comprehension level of a person.

For all participants, USAY found that 93% had a 1B reading level (100% of foundational learners had a 1B). According to Read Forward, a 1B reading skill means that participants are able to:

- Identify and use familiar words
- Know where to write their name on a form
- Understand simple lists such as shopping lists and simple menus
- Choose words from a list of words
- Use common structures such as phone numbers, addresses and prices

Feelings about literacy were relatively comparable between groups, many of the participants had 'mixed' feelings about their literacy, the quotes below illustrate the complexity that literacy plays in the lives of people:

- "I wish I could be better at reading so I would feel better about getting a job for my children"
- "I am confident in my level, I've been to post-secondary"
- "I feel colonial English literacy has made me more successful in an English colonial world + trauma from cultural genocide"
- "I feel I would have more confidence in everyday life if I had the higher level of literacy"
- "I am comfortable with my literacy level. My positive impact was a good experience with the right teachers/professionals I am connected with on my own through self advocating"
- "Sometimes I feel awkward"
- "Confident, I've had great jobs"
- "I feel content with my literacy level but I would like to gain more knowledge and confidence"
- "Limited especially when it comes to helping my children"
- "I confident in my literacy level it has impacted me positively"
- "I have trouble with math which makes it near impossible to help my kids in school"
- "I feel positive and I am able to access more resources because of it"

Overall, many of the participants felt positive about their level of literacy because they were able to access employment, post-secondary and resources in their community. However, many indicated that confidence, math skills and presentation abilities negatively impacted their lives and ability to support their children with their education.

To better understand the literacy journey of Indigenous adults in Calgary, participants were asked whether they had completed a literacy assessment in the past, accessed a literacy program and, if yes, how those experiences impacted their literacy skills. The goal was also to understand why community members might not have accessed support to improve the ways in which program awareness is built and maintained ongoing.

In both groups, approximately 20% had previously been assessed for their literacy level and had obtained those assessment through:

- SAIT
- Bow Valley College
- CDI College
- Columbia College
- Elementary School
- Mount Royal University
- Old Sun College

Only 7% of all participants had attended a literacy program or course from various locations including:

- "Employment Centre"
- Riel Institute
- Parenting Class
- Bow Valley College
- USAY (note: USAY does not have a literacy program)

Those that indicated they had attended a program, 100% said their involvement in that program improved their literacy skills.

USAY also wanted to understand why people had not wanted to attend literacy programming, and 30% said, 'they didn't know those programs existed'. However, 73% of foundational learners would be willing to attend a literacy program, while 66% of those who had completed grade 10 and beyond would be (67% overall), indicating that there is significant interest in literacy programming among Indigenous adult learners.

67% of participants were interested in attending an adult literacy program

Recommendations

Participants were asked what types of activities they felt would increase their literacy, the majority of participants felt that Indigenous cultural programs, followed by life skills, math programs, writing, digital and then book reading club.

As most participants would like activities that focus on cultural knowledge and traditional teachings. Through a deconstructed approach, there could be written instructions, journaling and even utilization of written English words combined with learning oral traditional languages. Language learning was of importance to participants, and therefore uniquely combining a dual language learning process could be innovative, while resonating with participants.

Secondarily, they would like to engage in life skills programs that increase their ability to engage in the workforce and post-secondary system. Although including more internal motivations within activities like this would improve outcomes overall. Program outcomes should be focused on increasing literacy skills among participants without attachment to particular external motivations, but instead allowing participants to self-determine their motivations for accessing support. Alberta Reading Benchmarks also captures this sentiment by stating,

"learning is a lifelong journey that integrates all aspects of one's being (body, mind, spirit and emotions). Given that authentic learning requires the integration of all levels of being (holistic learning), it is very difficult to separate reading literacy from other aspects of literacy development and treat it in isolation. To do this is almost counterintuitive to Indigenous culture-based learning principles" (ARB, pg. 7).

It would seem that the activities within the program itself are not as important as building connections, creating cultural learning and supporting the family unit. Literacy can be included in ways that increase skills without it being the primary focus of the project. More importantly, literacy should not be the only objective in the project, as it seems like it might be a deterrent to attendance.

One of the biggest ways to support participants in engaging in long-term programmatic support is to provide holistic or wrap-around services. This may include:

- Financial supports such as honorariums for attending or incentives for participating
- Indigenous specific programming such as Indigenous staff, worldview and discussions about history
- Cultural activities such as Elder teachings, prayers, smudging and other ceremonies
- Transportation supports such as bus tickets or passes, as well as free and accessible parking
- Healthy relationship resources or opportunities to discuss family conflict and harm reduction without fear of ramifications
- Childcare and/or family programming that allows for caregivers to have time to connect to their peers, and children the opportunity to connect to their community
- Mental health and family counseling such as conflict resolution and traditional parenting and mental health approaches
- Alternative housing resources including referrals to safe housing, discussions about housing plans and other ways to ensure safe and adequate housing is part of the discussion for participants
- Addiction supports that are from an Indigenous perspective and are focused on harm reduction
- Access to learning disability supports and assessments and ensuring people understand their diagnosis in terms of their literacy

Overall, ensuring that participants feel supported within the program setting and that it reflects their worldview, teachings and interests, while not focusing solely on literacy as the primary outcome.

An ideal project would be long-term, allowing families to return to the project for multiple years in a row, without a particular time limit or barrier to continued support ongoing. Ideally, there may be a graduated system in which cohorts could increase their literacy skills on a continuum. There might even be opportunities for those that have been in the project for longer to become mentors to others that are new. The intention is to build connection between staff, participants and the community, as the findings have shown that building relationships was key to increasing literacy skills.

Based on USAY's understanding of the community, the program should align with the school year (September to June) with a pause during the summer months for community members to participate in cultural activities. The participants said in the findings that they would like projects to take place during the day, evening or on weekends to accommodate their school and work schedules.

The following are the ways in which participants hoped literacy would improve their lives overall, or the intended outcomes they would like from a literacy project. Those benefits included (in order from most to least important):

- Access to better employment opportunities
- Education and lifelong learning opportunities
- Access to culture
- Opportunities to support their children
- Being able to understand forms
- Ability to text and use apps

In alignment with Alberta Reading Benchmarks, many learners outside of the mainstream cultural influence, such as Indigenous peoples, have internal motivations such as enhancing their whole life. As shown above, many participants indicated that they wanted to improve holistic impacts of their lives, including external outcomes such as employment and education, but as internal motivators such as their cultural empowerment and success of their children, as well as social interactions.

OUR LEARNINGS

The standout learning for USAY was the complexity of literacy, and how intrinsically it is tied to feelings of self-worth, confidence and historical trauma. Unpacking literacy through long-term connection, support and holistic approaches is the primary way in which to invest in literacy skill development among Indigenous adults in our opinion. Literacy will not be improved without building relationships and connections beyond simply trying to invest in skill building, for example reading and writing being the sole and only objective.

After completing this project, USAY has a better understanding of literacy in our community, the complexities that exist and the ways in which we may be able to integrate literacy skills building within our current programming for Indigenous peoples. Understanding that literacy can permeate all of our programming in a way that builds confidence, worth and strength is a simple way that we can generate change. As USAY reflects on this project, we have chosen to integrate literacy in a deconstructed way into our program model and continue to assess the ways we are on this literacy journey with the community.

