
Reaching the Rainbow: Aboriginal Literacy in Canada

A review by
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Reaching the Rainbow: Aboriginal Literacy in Canada delineates step-by-step how to set up or expand a community-based literacy program. This comprehensive resource includes not only a binder full of pertinent information, but a video featuring two successful programs as well. What makes this kit so powerful is that it is produced by and targeted for aboriginal communities.



The kit explores what is Aboriginal Literacy and why it is so important in today's changing and challenging world. It describes how Aboriginal people traditionally lived by hunting and fishing in a highly sophisticated oral culture -- a culture where reading and writing were not a necessity. (In fact, the Cree and the Inuit, for example, did not have a written form of their languages until the mid-19th century.) But today's Aboriginal people walk in two worlds: the traditional and the technological. Reaching the Rainbow emphasizes how to best marry these diverse worlds -- how to best meet the demands of Aboriginal Literacy that come in a "rainbow" of different types.

Not only are there steps and pointers for setting up a community-based program, but also a needs assessment form and a sample grant application -- filled out in simple, clear language. There are also a list of national literacy organizations, and provincial and territorial contacts. The reader can easily locate information on funding and publishers and distributors of national literacy resources. The video drives home the necessity for and goals of Aboriginal literacy programs, and includes interviews with both students and teachers.

The "rainbow" concept comes into play when the kit takes a detailed look at the different kinds of literacy for Aboriginal people. They colour code as follows:

- Red:** Mother Tongue Literacy
- Orange:** Oral Literacy
- Yellow:** Literacy of Symbolism
- Green:** English and/or French Literacy
- Blue:** Literacy Using Technology

Indigo: Spiritual Literacy

Violet: Holistic Literacy

But how can communities entice/encourage their members into a literacy program? By making it culturally relevant, they suggest. No more Three Little Pigs; instead a workshop on how to make and play drums -- and the production of a manual for future learners. This approach is based on a belief that a successful learner is a whole person, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically. Literacy programs can include not only drum-making workshops, but also life skills workshops, learning and healing circles, parenting programs, recreation and sports--all geared towards a balance in life.

Of course, for many Aboriginal people in Canada, life has been anything but balanced. The road to literacy has been strewn with obstacles -- not the least of which is the destructive legacy of the residential school system where children were torn from their families and culture, and where the education was inferior and the abuse rampant. This legacy has been instrumental in the death of Canada's Aboriginal languages: out of an original 53, only three are not in danger of extinction: Cree, Ojibway, and Inuktitut.

Which brings me to the special interest I have in Reaching the Rainbow as coordinator of the Cree Literacy Program offered through the Office of First Nations and Inuit Education at McGill. We oversee literacy courses delivered in the nine Cree communities of Quebec. This program upgrades the participants' skills in reading and writing Cree syllabics. We are also looking at a similar program to be delivered to Micmac learners in Cape Breton. The majority of our participants are teachers in immersion programs --- but we also have included parents, day care workers, administrators, etc. Recently I have begun working with Aboriginal constables in the James Bay region of Quebec where the police face a particularly demanding dilemma. When out on a call, a constable may listen to a victim or witness report the incident in Cree; he must then write the preliminary report on the spot in English or French.

All of this leads me to believe that the more Aboriginal Literacy programs are set up across Canada, the more potential First Nations and Inuit peoples have to sustain and strengthen their languages and cultures. Reaching the Rainbow is a powerful tool for such an endeavour.

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