

Indigenous Approaches to Adult Basic Education Research: Lessons from the Elders

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Abstract

Adult basic education (ABE) programs provide secondary school courses that enable adult learners to complete high school, often as a next step to higher education and improved employment opportunities. In Canada, several ABE programs across the country offer culturally relevant curricula that emphasize the teaching and learning of Indigenous ways of knowing, including the values of language, family, Elders, and community. Elders are the cornerstones of education within Indigenous communities and schools: they are the knowledge keepers who connect the past to the future, carrying traditional teachings from the previous generations so that the cycle of knowledge sharing is sustained. The voices of Indigenous Elders and ABE students are seldom heard in academic literature. In a recent case study of an urban Indigenous college in western Canada, ABE students spoke about returning to school as adult learners, and noted how Elder support has enriched their experiences. Elders' traditional teachings informed the overall approach to this work in adult education research, by emphasizing how protocols are embedded within language and culture, and illustrating how Cree language terms provide structure and substance to a conceptual framework. In sharing their wisdom, the Elders gave foundation to the study and support to the researcher. More research is needed to examine the roles and contributions of Elders in adult and higher education, both within Canada and internationally.

Keywords: Adult Basic Education, Canadian Indigenous Adult Education, Indigenous Methodologies

1 Introduction

Not everyone completes high school the first time around. Learning difficulties, discordant family situations, and financial challenges are some explanations for why youth drop out of school before completing their secondary education, while for Indigenous secondary school students, a lack of culturally relevant curricula and school supports may also be contributing factors (Cherubini 2014). Many adult education centres within the provinces and territories of Canada offer adult basic education (ABE) secondary school programming. ABE provides a bridge for adult learners to

complete high school coursework (in person or by distance via online programs), in order to receive a grade 12 diploma. This is different from the General Education Diploma or General Education Development (GED), which offers tests for high school equivalency certification without requiring student participation in specific secondary school coursework. Some adult education centres offer culturally relevant ABE programming, where Indigenous ways of knowing and learning are recognized, and where Indigenous Elders play important roles in the interpretation and communication of oral teachings that centre on life and lifelong learning. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it offers a brief review of some examples of adult education centres in Canada where culturally relevant ABE programming is offered for Indigenous students. It is an overview, and is not meant as an exhaustive list of all such schools. Second, it examines the contributing roles of Indigenous Elders within a case study of one such school in Vancouver, British Columbia (BC). Specifically, it inquires into how the traditional teachings of Elders supported an Indigenous approach to the overall research process, and contributed to understanding the language within the theoretical framework that described the journey of the adult learner.

To fully introduce this topic, it is important to clarify how the term “Indigenous” is used, and to describe the perspective from which these observations are stated. In this writing, “Indigenous” is used to refer to and respectfully acknowledge the different ways in which Canadians of Indigenous descent self-identify, as for example, with terms such as “Indigenous”, “Inuit”, “Aboriginal”, “Native”, “First Nations”, and “Métis”, or with others such as “Anishinaabe”, which further describe specific cultural groups. In referring to literature where a specific term has been employed to describe Indigeneity, the same term has been retained to show respect for the author(s). As an Indigenous scholar of Cree and Ukrainian descent, I am a member of the Ochekwí Sipi Cree Nation in Canada. I do not in any way speak for other Indigenous peoples in Canada, or elsewhere. My words, unless referenced otherwise, come from my own experiences with Indigenous adult education, where I have been both a student and a teacher, and with Indigenous traditional teachings, where I am very much a student. Further, I respectfully acknowledge that different Indigenous cultures and communities within Canada and elsewhere have their own teachings and their own understandings of how traditional teachings are carried and shared by Elders. Positioning myself is an essential part of acknowledging Indigenous protocols that also extend to how academic writing and research are carried out.

2 Culturally Relevant Adult Basic Education

What does culturally relevant Indigenous adult basic education look like? While Indigenous cultural content in ABE is not a popular subject within academic literature, Emmonds (2018), Little (2013), and Mackinnon and Silver (2015) note that it is important to student wellbeing and to positive educational outcomes for Indigenous

learners. It matters to students that they can see and relate to images, voices, language, and stories that are reflective of Indigenous worldviews and the values within those perspectives, such as family, community, Elders, relationality, and reciprocity. Meaningful cultural content acknowledges, respects, models, and works to establish and sustain Indigenous ways of knowing, language and culture within the curriculum, classroom, and school environments, as well as within the governance and administrative policies and practices of educational institutions. Places of culturally relevant adult education are spaces where learners can feel a sense of belonging within an Indigenous community. This is brought about in part, for example, from Indigenous authored content within course materials and school activities, and from kind and considerate guidance given by school staff, including Elders. For students, it is often an intangible sense of being and belonging in a supportive, inclusive community of family, where importantly, they don't have to explain themselves or their situations: others understand what it is like to be an Indigenous adult learner returning to school to finish grade 12.

There are several examples of adult education institutes within Canada where culturally relevant Indigenous programming and curricula are emphasized, and where high school upgrading in the form of online or classroom ABE or GED is either offered directly or access is provided via another institute. A number of these schools are mainstream non-Indigenous education institutes that have over time brought in or increased existing academic space for Indigenous content and focus. For instance, in eastern Canada, Cape Breton University (CBU) in Nova Scotia is located within traditional Mi'kmaw lands. As part of CBU, Unama'ki College provides culturally relevant post-secondary curricula, including Mi'kmaw language courses and Indigenous adult learner support services, such as an Elder-in-residence program (Cape Breton University 2018). In western Canada, The Iniiikokaan Centre at Bow Valley College (BVC), Alberta, is another example of an Indigenous program located within a larger institution that is dedicated to supporting culturally relevant Indigenous adult education. Both of these Indigenous education centres offer connections to Elders as part of student supports. Bow Valley College is located within the "traditional territories of the Blackfoot and the people of Treaty 7 region" as well as the "Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III" (Bow Valley College 2018).

It is important to acknowledge the Indigenous Peoples of a particular area. This is protocol that shows respect for our connections to the land, and to our respective cultures and places of home upon the land. If praxis can be seen to represent theory described by visible motion, then this is praxis flowing from an epistemological foundation of Indigenous theories, beliefs, and principles. This is a demonstrative example of the *being* and *doing* within Indigenous ways of knowing.

The mission statement of Bow Valley College (Bow Valley College 2018) describes an educational perspective that "integrates Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and values," and which is further seen in its programming goals that consider student success as part of "a learning environment that supports a sense of place and belonging, and that reflects Indigenous cultural values and perspectives." In addition

to a regular ABE program, the college also offers an Aboriginal upgrading program for Indigenous students who wish to pursue post-secondary coursework after completing their grade 12. This culturally specific program aims “to help students strengthen their self-esteem” and “to strengthen students’ cultural identities through various activities [...] as well as building relationships with and learning from Elders and Knowledge Keepers throughout the community” (ibid.). The Iniikokaan Centre provides support services including counselling and cultural teachings from Elders for Aboriginal upgrading students. In order to fulfill the provincial government’s prerequisites for high school diploma certification, ABE programs include specific academic content for each grade level. Within its Aboriginal adult upgrading program, and in addition to provincial education courses, BVC also offers secondary school studies that present coursework on Aboriginal history, culture, and topics such as land claims and Indigenous worldview (ibid.).

Certain other schools, such as Native Education College (NEC) and Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) in British Columbia (BC), Six Nations Polytechnic (SNP) in Ontario, and Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies in Saskatchewan (SIIT), are some examples of private or public Indigenous post secondary schools governed by Indigenous education offices. For instance, NEC is an urban, private Indigenous post secondary institute in BC, located within traditional Coast Salish territories, that offers Aboriginal ABE coursework as one part of its adult education programming. In northern Canada, the Northern Adult Basic Education Program (NABEP) offers courses within the three northern territories of Nunavut (Nunavut Arctic College), Northwest Territory (Aurora College), and Yukon Territory (Yukon College) (Nunavut Arctic College 2018). These schools offer culturally relevant places of adult education that either provide ABE, or as in the case of SNP, link to other sources of ABE. In addition, all of these adult education centres have Elders on campus as part of regular or periodic programming and/or student support services. In this way, Elders are acknowledged as an integral part of delivering Indigenous education and culturally relevant student supports.

Culturally relevant ABE programs are also found within smaller urban and rural adult learning centres that are independent of larger post secondary institutes. Some individual Aboriginal communities that are largely rural have smaller adult education centres that may operate continuously by semester, or periodically when enough student interest is generated. In urban areas, smaller Aboriginal learning centres are often part of individual organizations or community service centres. For example, the Kijipuktuk Aboriginal College is an adult upgrading program administered by the Mi’kmaw Native Friendship Society in Nova Scotia, on the traditional lands of the Mi’kmaw peoples. It is a smaller program that serves urban and rural Indigenous adult learners who wish to complete high school coursework or attend other courses, such as life skills training (Mi’kmaw Native Friendship Society 2018).

There is a broad spectrum of culturally relevant adult learning centres that offer ABE programs in every province and territory of Canada, and these are but a few examples. How does this kind of cultural content matter to Indigenous adult learners

in terms of retention and quality of education? What are the roles of Elders in establishing and sustaining communities of cultural learning within these schools? An area of interest for future adult education research is to address the relative sparseness of Indigenous ABE student and Indigenous Elder voices from across Canada and elsewhere, and examine how these groups might view and critically assess the manner in which culturally relevant curricula and learning supports are delivered and received.

3 The Roles and Contributions of the Elders to a Case Study of Indigenous Adult Basic Education

In 2017/2018, I carried out a case study at Native Education College (NEC), an urban Indigenous private college in BC. The purpose of the research was to examine the experiences of Indigenous adult basic education students who had returned to school to pursue grade 12 diplomas. Not much is heard from these Indigenous ABE voices about what it is like to return to secondary school studies as adult learners, and this is reflected in the limited amount of literature on this subject (Emmonds 2018). As part of the preliminary fieldwork for this study, Cree Elders were contacted within the author's home area of Ochekwí Sipí, and were respectfully asked if they would share whatever teachings they might find pertinent to research, education, and protocols. As an Indigenous scholar, it was important to me that this research was planned and carried out in a way that valued Indigenous ways of knowing, and demonstrated respect for cultural protocols. In order to seek guidance on these matters of theory and praxis, it was necessary and right to consult the knowledge keepers of my community.

By their very nature, Indigenous ways of knowing and learning incorporate theoretical principles and cultural protocols that demonstrate a particular holistic, spirit-centred, relational world view (Absolon 2011; Battiste 2013; Kovach 2015; Smith 2013). Elders are highly respected, usually older members of a community who both hold and share this knowledge. They are often the language keepers and the story keepers, and in their teachings these elements are woven together in a way that honours the past and brings the lessons forward into the present. *How* we know about traditional teachings from the past is a function of our oral epistemologies (Wilson 2008). Gregory Younging speaks of the role of Elders as the knowledge keepers of the past and the guides of the present who carry the cultural teachings, noting

“the internal cultural imperatives of Indigenous Peoples, and the ultimate responsibility of the current generation to be the link between the ancestors and future generations. Elders, especially, assume this ultimate responsibility, which requires knowledge, vision, observation, synthesis, and communication” (Younging 2018, p. 36).

The teachings of Elders contributed in three ways to the research process of this adult education study. First, their teachings informed how the research was planned

and carried out in a respectful way that honoured and acknowledged Indigenous protocols. Second, the teachings illuminated how Cree language terms gave structure and substance to the conceptual framework and methodology. Third, by sharing their wisdom the Elders gave support and encouragement to the overall research process, as well as to the researcher.

4 An Indigenous Approach to Research – Honouring Cultural Protocols, Language, and Ways of Knowing

Elders were invaluable for their guidance and teachings about protocol, and how this mattered within Indigenous ways of doing academic research. My own requests to Elders for their guidance and words involved cultural protocols of offering tobacco with small gifts, to recognize the knowledge that they carry and the act of sharing that I was requesting. Tobacco is one of the four sacred medicines from my Cree culture, and it is used in prayer and ceremony. Jacob (2010, p. 25) describes the protocol of the offering of tobacco to Elders:

“Elders who walk with dignity are appreciated as leaders in Indigenous communities. They carry the oral traditions of history, law, languages, and knowledge of relationships. In meeting with an elder for counsel, the offering of tobacco is the sign of respect for the elder and his or her stature. However, not all Indigenous cultures share the same cultural approaches. Elders in the far north, for instance, do not offer tobacco in their protocol; instead it is a handshake accompanied with an appropriate gift. If the elder accepts the offering, then the elder is protocol-bound to answer questions truthfully and honorably, share knowledge, and spend time with the one requesting information.”

I have heard the Elders speak of protocol, sometimes using words from their own languages to more finely describe what this term means. From them I heard how protocols are rooted in traditional teachings and in the language that expresses a good way to go in this life. One example of this is *mino pimatisiwin*, a Cree word that describes “a good life” and alludes to how we choose to fill our lives with good and respectful teachings according to Creator, as we go along in our intent to live this good life. Meanings within the language are shaped by an Indigenous paradigm that gives rise to lived teachings. What we know and how we know comes from our oral teachings, our beliefs and our ways of demonstrably acknowledging these in our daily practices. This also relates to learning and following cultural protocols of a good life, so that the relations we have with ourselves and with others are grounded in a way that respects our ontologies and epistemologies (Wilson 2008). I recognize protocol to be an understanding of expectation of behaviour. We are expected to respectfully communicate and interact with others; it is a way to practice *mino pimatisiwin*. The Elders acknowledged how protocols may shift with cultural differences, although the intent for respect and reciprocity remains. They reminded me that even if I were going far away from my Cree community, I would carry with me the teachings

that they shared, and the teachings that Creator had instilled in all people, about walking with intent for *mino pimatisiwin*. By asking the Elders for teachings to help guide this academic work, I was observing an important action of grounding the research within my own cultural systems of Indigenous knowing. This showed respect for the way I was entering in to the research process, and entering into the relationships I would have with the research participants and co-researchers in this study. By bringing my cultural teachings of the *being* and *doing* of right and purposeful action that are demonstrated in the traditional teachings of *mino pimatisiwin*, I was bringing intent for meaningful practice of Indigenous epistemologies.

Kovach (2010, p.40) discusses how “Indigenous methodologies are a paradigmatic approach based upon an Indigenous philosophical positioning or epistemology”. She further notes that within Indigenous knowledge systems “our doing is intricately related with our knowing” (ibid.), citing the acknowledgement and understanding of protocols as an illustrative example of *how* we walk our teachings. Protocols that derive from Indigenous epistemologies are carried within the teachings of the Cree Elders, and are also contained within the language that has informed the conceptual framework and methodology of the adult education study. Elder contributions were essential to understanding how the knowledge theories of the Cree language were demonstrated within the theoretical framework. As Michell (2013, p.13) states, “Indigenous knowledge is inseparable from Indigenous languages. You cannot have one without the other”. The Elders frequently reminded me of this.

The Elders with whom I conversed and listened to one by one, for long hours over many cups of tea, were patient with me, as I am a beginning learner of my Cree language. To really know the structure of my theoretical framework and the overall approach to this research, I needed to understand more about the Cree terms that described the *maskikimiskanow*, and *mino pimatisiwin*. It was not enough that I knew “generally” what they meant, and that they seemed to fit nicely into my study. In order to demonstrate respect for protocols around knowledge, language and education, before I wrote about these terms, I needed to learn about how they described Cree worldviews and epistemologies. I needed to sit with the Elders, and to listen to how they shared their traditional teachings of education that are embedded within the language. This was part of my learning. The Elders I sought guidance from noted that it was important for me to hear these teachings, so that I might then present them within my research in such a way that others might gain insight of Indigenous understandings of education. Their message was that it is important for others to know about these understandings. The conceptual framework of this study was based upon the Cree understanding of the *maskikimiskanow*, which is a medicine journey through life. My Elders shared with me some of the teachings of the *maskikimiskanow*, as had been shared with them by their Elders some time ago. We all travel on a sacred journey around the circle of life. This is our *maskikimiskanow*, where we are on a *miskanow*, a journey to look for teachings and guidance to make a good life. It is a non-linear path that describes our lifelong learning as we experience the teach-

ings that Creator has set out for us along the way. Each teaching that we are offered is *maskiki* (medicine) for our life education, where the intent is to practice *mino pimatisiwin* – a good life.

The Elders say it begins in the East, which is the place of new beginnings. We come into this life in the East, holding inherent knowledge within us. These are Creator's teachings that we bring with us into this world when we are newly born. As we travel along the circle of life to the South and beyond, there are other teachings of *mino pimatisiwin* offered to guide us as we grow. In the South we find teachings of family – of respecting and honouring the roles and contributions of our parents and grandparents, our children and other family members. We see our responsibilities within our families, communities and nations. Moving to the West we find a place of introspection and reflection. This is where we look back at the journey we have made so far. It is here that through critical self-examination that we may decide to retrace our steps to previous teachings, from the East all along to the West, sometimes going back and forth like a pendulum to visit and revisit old teachings, or to pick up new teachings that we passed by on our previous walk. Our intent is to go to the North, and the place of wisdom that sits there with its own teachings. What the Elders have emphasized and what I have learned most of this *maskikimiskano*, is that when we stop to pick up the teachings along the way, whether on our first, or second, or tenth time walking this path, we are gathering *maskiki* – we are gathering medicine for our journey through life's sacred circle, and this is what matters most. When or how we travel and stop for the teachings is different for each of us – this is what makes our individual stories of lifelong education.

5 The Journey of the Adult Learner

As the Elders spoke of the medicine journey we make in our lives, they reminded me that as a graduate scholar seeking understanding of Indigenous ABE, I too was walking the *maskikimiskano* of a student, which was not much different from the paths my ABE student co-researcher participants were walking. I was encouraged to be mindful and respectful of where the students were on their path. Not every adult goes back to school in the same way, to revisit opportunities for secondary education. The Elders described that "it's time when it's time", and that the "when" and the "how" of returning to school looks different for everyone (Emmonds 2018, p. 217).

The Elders' lessons reminded me of the non-linear direction of the *maskikimiskano* we follow in life as students. Each part of our academic journey has teachings for us, as set out by Creator. Even though we hold intent to go towards the North, and the place of wisdom there, it is anything but a straightforward path from East to North. The Elders stressed that it is not the final destination that matters most; it is really what we learn along the way that brings us to a deeper, more critical understanding of the *being* and *doing* of Indigenous ways of knowing, and of our own learning. For the students and for myself, the teachings we choose to pick up provide

knowledge and medicine for us, so that we can go on with greater intent and awareness of *mino pimatisiwin*.

Through other teachings, sitting with cups of tea across many different kitchen tables, I was also encouraged to practice *mino pimatisiwin* by respecting the *tapwewin*, or truth that was evident in the stories shared by the adult learners. Part of this respect was demonstrated by honouring the stories as belonging to the students, as part of their *tapwewin* in telling a bit of their personal life stories of returning to school as adult learners. The Elders explained protocols around story sharing, emphasizing that this was something that varied with different cultures and peoples. The words of the students were their own, and it was my responsibility to communicate an intent of how they were to be respected and acknowledged as such, both within my writing and within citations and paraphrasing by others who might refer to my written thesis. This was something of great importance that was discussed with student participant co-researchers. I was grateful for all the teachings I received from the Elders about language and culture, and the ways they not only informed and gave substance to the case study of adult education, but also supported and encouraged me in this research journey.

6 Conclusion

Adult basic education is an important link for adult learners who want to return to school and complete their grade 12 diploma certification. Within Canada, there are several examples of adult education centres which include Indigenous cultural content in curricula, and within student support services for adult basic education learners. Elders play an important role in places of adult learning, where they share the cultural teachings they carry for the next generation. They are a vital student support within ABE. Elders contributed in several ways to a case study of adult learning in an urban Indigenous private college in British Columbia. The teachings of the Elders emphasized how protocols are embedded within language and culture, and illustrated how Cree language terms provided structure and substance to the conceptual framework. In sharing their wisdom, the Elders gave foundation to the study and support to the researcher. There is a limited amount of academic literature that features the voices of Indigenous ABE students and Indigenous Elders. There is room for more academic inquiry into how culturally relevant ABE programming is carried out and how it is received by Indigenous students. More research is also needed to examine the roles and contributions of Indigenous Elders in adult and higher education, both within Canada and internationally.

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