Exploring Northwest Territories Literacies

by **Helen Balanoff**

In recent years, researchers like Barton and Hamilton, Heath, Cairney, and Street have examined what literacy means to different individuals and groups, and how people value literacy and use it in their everyday lives. These studies have contributed to the idea of literacy as "social practice and collective resource" (Barton and Hamilton 1998: 3). The Northwest Territories (NWT) has a wealth of social practices and collective literacy resources, about which many people, including literacy practitioners, know very little.

Forty nine per cent of the NWT population is Aboriginal. There are eight official languages – six Aboriginal languages in addition to English and French. The health of the Aboriginal languages varies widely, but most are declining. The language shift is clear in the chart on the right. It shows the number of people whose mother tongue is an Aboriginal language compared to those who use their Aboriginal language in the home.

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In the NWT, English is the dominant language. Not everyone who identifies as English speaking is totally fluent: some interlanguage exists. School literacy is the "defining type of literacy" (Street 1995).

Literacy models and practices are socially situated. They are defined within a specific context, through the interactions of the members of a particular group. Increased use of English might suggest that we should adopt "English" approaches to literacy, but the literacy models and practices of many families and communities still reflect those of Aboriginal language and culture: their purposes for using literacy; their ways of supporting children's literacy development; their attitudes

Aboriginal Language Shift

	Inuktitut[1]	Slavey	Dogrib	Chipewyan	Gwich'in	Cree
Mother Tongue	835	2075	2000	515	250	185
Home Language	160	1190	1355	210	40	30
Change Index	-80.90%	-42.70%	-32.30%	-59.20%	-84.00%	-83.80%

[1] Includes Inuvialuktun and Inuinnaqtm   (Source: Government of the Northwest Territories)

towards literacy; and the role that family members play in literacy development (Cairney 1999). Thus home, community and school literacies may not always connect, which results in "matches" and "mismatches" (Cairney 1998). Little (1990) argues that the most effective learning environments are ones in which educators connect instruction (knowledge, learning orientations and strategies) to learners' previous instructional experiences. This creates "equilibria" between learners and educators.

To date, there have been few initiatives to describe literacies in the NWT. Now, however, The NWT Literacy Council, in partnership with an Aboriginal language community, is seeking funding to research traditional and present-day home and community literacies. We want to improve understanding of these different literacies among people involved in literacy development – families, early childhood educators, teachers and literacy practitioners – enabling them to create equilibria, regardless of the age of the learners. In keeping with

the Literacy Council's philosophy of building community capacity, we will:

- assist Elders and other community members to design the project themselves,
- help participants articulate research questions,
- ensure ethical standards about how the knowledge we develop in the project will be used, and
- train young Aboriginal people from the community to conduct the research.

We expect the findings from this study to generate three important results. We hope to:

- enhance understanding of Aboriginal literacy and its importance,
- change how literacy development in the NWT is supported in the future, and
- contribute to language revitalization. ∎

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