

Perspectives on Indigenous Literacy

by **Ningwakwe/E. Priscilla George**

For over two years, the National Aboriginal Design Committee (NADC) worked to develop a Position Paper on Aboriginal Literacy. The Position Paper documents issues and statistics pertinent to Aboriginal literacy. It also provides examples of best practices for each of the issues. Developing the paper was an essential step towards establishing the National Indigenous Literacy Association. This article describes the process we went through to develop the Position Paper, and how our recommendations were received by the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Documenting our perspective

The Position Paper was the first comprehensive study of Aboriginal literacy issues in the history of the literacy movement in Canada. While it incorporated the work of noted Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics, as well as position papers by people in other jurisdictions who are dealing with similar issues, it drew primarily on the experiences of the people most directly involved in literacy programs: learners, practitioners and Elders.

Information for the Position Paper was gleaned from a range of sources, including documents produced by Aboriginal organizations from International Literacy Year in 1990 through to the late 1990's, as well as post-graduate theses by Aboriginal academics. Findings from several gatherings and from meetings of the National Aboriginal Design Committee also provided information. Finally, the Coordinator contacted many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal literacy practitioners across Canada and in other jurisdictions, most notably Australia.

Some of the prominent themes that emerged include:

- The learner is the most important person in the program;
- The holistic approach, which recognizes that each individual is Spirit, Heart, Mind and Body, is most effective;
- Aboriginal literacy programming must affirm Aboriginal languages and culture;
- For Aboriginal Peoples, literacy is more than facility in the written word. That is, we have

our own Aboriginal types of literacies;

- Aboriginal literacy programs and organizations must be inclusive, serving all segments of the Aboriginal population, regardless of place of residence, or regardless of funding criteria;
- Aboriginal control of Aboriginal literacy/education is paramount; and,
- Long-term and adequate funding is imperative.

In fact, the Position Paper has a chapter on each of these issues, along with appendices that document best practices for each.

The Position Paper was distributed widely to both literacy and Aboriginal organizations. In addition, copies of this paper have been given to the UNESCO Institute for Education, and to practitioners and researchers working with indigenous peoples in

excerpt from *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The need for a Pan-Canadian Response*

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the federal government immediately begin consultations with the Aboriginal communities, and provincial and territorial governments, to develop an Aboriginal Literacy Strategy that: incorporates a holistic approach; respects Aboriginal languages, traditions and values; and is funded at a level commensurate with the seriousness of the problem of low literacy among Aboriginal peoples.

Recommendation 8

The Committee anticipates that the implementation of an Aboriginal Literacy Strategy will take some time. In the interim, the Committee recommends that a new National Literacy Secretariat funding stream be created – the Aboriginal Funding Stream.

The full Standing Committee report is available online at MCL's web site: www.literacy.ca

Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Mexico, and the United States.

In February of 2003, the NADC Coordinator presented the paper to the Standing Committee. The recommendations included in our Position Paper were:

- 1) Support a National Aboriginal Literacy Organization.
- 2) The Government of Canada should develop a national comprehensive whole-of-government Aboriginal adult literacy, numeracy and lifeskills policy.
- 3) Create a separate and coordinated Aboriginal literacy strategy.
- 4) Various funders need to hear more about what constitutes Aboriginal literacy activities, including Aboriginal languages.
- 5) Overall funding levels and policies for Aboriginal literacy must be commensurate with the reality

that Aboriginal Peoples have been among the most disadvantaged groups in Canada.

The Standing Committee report, *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*, was tabled in the House of Commons in June 2003. It includes an Aboriginal-specific section. In our view, the Aboriginal-specific recommendations from the Standing Committee are very heartening. Some of the wording from these recommendations closely resemble the recommendations in our Position Paper. We eagerly await the federal government's response to the Parliamentary Report. ■

OTHER RESOURCES:

Battiste, Marie (2000). *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Brant-Castellano, Marlene, Lynne Davis, Louise Lahache, eds. (2000). *Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise*. Vancouver: UBC Press.