

# Storying Progress

Documenting Non-academic Outcomes among  
Aboriginal Adult Learners in the NWT  
Research Report, 2009



**NWT Literacy Council**

# **Storying progress: Documenting non-academic outcomes among Aboriginal adults in the NWT**

**Research Report  
March 2009**

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# Acknowledgements

The NWT Literacy Council would like to thank the learners and instructors who were part of this study. We also want to thank the Canadian Council on Learning and the Government of the Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment for their financial contributions to this project.



This work was funded by a contribution from the Canadian Council on Learning.

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The NWT Literacy Council is a not-for-profit organization that supports literacy development in all eleven official languages of the NWT. For more information on literacy in the NWT, please contact us at:

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## Executive summary

Statistics show that overall Aboriginal learners perform well below non-Aboriginal populations, in school attainment and tests of adult literacy. Yet, Aboriginal learners in adult literacy and basic education (ALBE) programs, who have been impacted by the legacy of residential schooling, make many more gains in these programs than such statistics would suggest. Adult educators cite personal, social, and economic, as well as academic, changes in their learners. Non-academic outcomes, such as improved self-confidence, have been shown to have a strong correlation with learning, yet they are often ignored, partly because of the difficulties inherent in documenting them.

This study explored non-academic outcomes among current and former Aboriginal adult learners in three ALBE programs in the NWT. The research was designed around oral narrative, using the metaphor of a journey: stories reflect worldview, while the journey metaphor is commonly found among Aboriginal writings. Both fit with Aboriginal ways of knowing, learning and communicating. The study also incorporated characteristics of Aboriginal literacies, based on findings from a research project in the NWT: **multi-modal; storied; symbolic; holistic; remembered; relational; experiential; and metaphorical.**

In all, we interviewed 57 learners: 39 were currently enrolled in programs and 18 were former learners. The majority was Dene (71%), while the others were Inuvialuit (25%) and Metis (4%). Most were under 30 years of age. The majority had completed less than Grade 10 at high school. Seventy per cent had children, while 21% were single parents.

Learners started their journey from various places: some had dropped out of school and had negative feelings towards the school system; others lived with the legacy of the residential school system and its impact on their families and communities; and some felt they and their families just did not understand the importance of education. All learners believed education was important. Often a particular event like being turned down for a job, or having a child, motivated learners to return to learning. Friends and family members were also influential: they often

encouraged learners to go back to school. Learners' initial goals tended to focus on personal development, supporting children and/or getting a job. As learners progressed and became more confident, they began to aspire to higher levels of education, or careers that required higher levels of skills.

Learners did not always recognize their strengths. Those who did cited traditional skills, being a good parent or housewife, being good at hands-on activities and sports. All learners, however, faced multiple challenges, like fear, embarrassment and shame, family responsibilities and disruption, and financial difficulties. Learners were generally afraid of failing, of appearing stupid, of not being able to succeed, of speaking out, and of not being able to make a commitment to learning. Learners' family responsibilities often made it difficult for them to return to school, and sometimes interfered with learning. Balancing home and school responsibilities and finding affordable childcare were particular challenges for women. In some situations, going back to school involved moving to another community away from both immediate and extended family, which resulted in family disruption and homesickness.

Learner' perceptions of their achievements included 1) improved personal skills – confidence, self-esteem, independence, voice, commitment, changed attitudes to learning, life and work, and/or more able to handle challenges; 2) new practical skills for everyday life – being able to help children with homework, or being able to participate in community meetings, for example; 3) relationship building – improved interpersonal and communication skills; and 4) improved readiness for further education and employment – improved communication skills, being able to work in teams, or being able to problem solve. It was not uncommon for other family members or other community members to see learners as role models.

We also interviewed instructors to determine if, and where, their perceptions matched or differed from learners' perceptions of achievement. For the most part, the two correlated closely. Instructors emphasized the degree of support learners provided to extended family more than learners. As well, instructors sometimes assessed learners' levels in academic subjects to be lower than learners did.

None of the non-academic outcomes that learners referred to are new to experienced practitioners. The study was important for the NWT, however, because it is the first time we have formally documented these. The NWT has many Aboriginal adults with low levels of English literacy and other skills, yet only a small percentage enrolls in ALBE programs. When they do, it is often difficult to retain them. This study provides insights into the complexity of Aboriginal learners' situations.

We believe the findings from the study have important implications for assessing learner achievement. By not including non-academic outcomes as a part of assessment, we are short-changing learners because we are not recognizing all the gains they make in ALBE programs. Learners linked these gains to their real life situations; and educators need to do the same. We hope this report stimulates dialogue among policy makers and practitioners in the NWT about how best to address the issue of the value of non-academic outcomes and how best to document them.

This study tested an approach to documenting non-academic outcomes that could be more widely used in the NWT. We believe that the narrative approach we used was particularly effective, but recognize that other approaches may also be appropriate, such as using multi-media tools, or using learner portfolios or journals. To support moving forward in this work, we developed a set of principles and listed some benefits that accrue from documenting non-academic outcomes. We have also provided examples of non-academic outcomes, as well as possible indicators. This work is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather a starting point for further discussion. We hope this will happen next year as we present the findings to adult educators in the Northwest Territories.

# Introduction

This research project originated several years ago during a discussion with the Deputy Minister of Education, Culture and Employment in the Government of the Northwest Territories. As a former adult educator, he believed the learner outcomes we documented in the Northwest Territories (NWT) reflected only part of the gains learners make in adult literacy and basic education (ALBE) programs. The result was this collaborative project among the NWT Literacy Council, the NWT Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) and Aurora College, the NWT's community college. The Canadian Council on Learning and the Department of Education, Culture and Employment funded the project. Staff from the NWT Literacy Council, along with the three instructors involved in the study, conducted the research in 2007 and 2008.

The study was intended to reframe the achievements of Aboriginal learners by taking a more holistic approach to learning outcomes. At present, only progress in academic subjects is documented. We believed that documenting non-academic or “soft” outcomes, such as improved confidence or being more involved in the community, would enable us to paint a more complete picture of what constitutes success for adult learners. The project, in two phases, aimed to:

## **Phase 1**

1. Expand our knowledge of non-academic outcomes for Aboriginal learners in adult literacy and basic education programs (ALBE) in the Northwest Territories.
2. Develop and test a culturally appropriate approach to documenting those outcomes, one which stimulates critical reflection and gives voice to learners' lived experiences, thereby empowering learners.

## **Phase 2**

3. Develop a training plan and tool to support the documentation of non-academic outcomes in all ALBE programs in the NWT.

This report documents the processes and findings from Phase 1, the research phase of the project. In Chapter 1 – *The background* – we provide the context for the study. In Chapter 2 – *What others have said* – we look at the literature on non-academic outcomes. In Chapter 3 – *The research design* – we describe the approach that we developed for this study. In Chapter 4 – *How we did the research* – we describe the research methodology in detail. In Chapter 5 – *Learners talk about their lives* – we describe and discuss what learners told us about their lives: their demographics, their goals, strengths, and challenges. In Chapter 6 – *Learners talk about non-academic outcomes* – we describe and discuss learners’ (and instructors’) perspectives on learner achievements. In Chapter 7 – *What we learned* – we evaluate the findings and look at implications for policy and practice. In Chapter 8 – *A framework for the future* – we develop a framework to support documentation of non-academic outcomes. In the Conclusion we reflect on the project and articulate our vision for the future. In the Appendices we include all the documents we used during the research: information for learners; information for educators; a framework for collecting learners’ stories; a consent form; a learner demographic form; a review form; and an instructor survey.



# 1 The background

Up until the 1960s most Aboriginal people in the NWT still made their living on the land, so within the Northwest Territories, formal education is still a fairly recent phenomenon. In the early days of formal schooling, when there were only a few schools, even very young children were often removed from their family to attend residential school, a policy that was geared towards assimilation of Aboriginal people into mainstream Canadian society (Malatest, 2002). Then during the 1950s and 1960s, the federal and territorial governments began moving people into communities. Thus “[n]orthern communities were ‘made’ rather than ‘born’” (Chambers & Balanoff, 2008). Government schools were a part of these communities, but even up until about 1986, older students in smaller communities in the NWT still had to move to larger communities and live in student residences to complete high school. According to Malatest (2002), the residential schooling policy led to “a legacy of mistrust” of the education system, and had “the most debilitating and destructive effect on Aboriginal individuals and communities” (2002, p. 14). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) reported that many of the social problems in communities today, such as violence, alcoholism and loss of pride and spirituality, can be traced back to residential schools. While the educational situation has improved, this history of schooling continues to be a barrier to educational success for many learners in the NWT today.

Most educational statistics on student progress and program effectiveness in the NWT are quantitative. High school graduation rates showed the strongest growth in Canada from 1996-1997 to 2000-2001 (Statistics Canada, 2003). Despite these gains, in 2003-2004, the overall high school graduation rate was just over 43%. The graduation rate for Aboriginal students (Dene, Metis and Inuit) was 31.1% compared to 64.7% for non-Aboriginal students (NWT Bureau of Statistics, 2005). In 2003, in communities outside the four largest centres of Yellowknife, Hay River, Inuvik and Fort Simpson, the overall graduation rate remained at 24% (Northwest Territories Education, Culture & Employment, 2004). In 2005-2006, the overall graduation rate

climbed to just over 50%. Currently, the graduation rate for Aboriginal students is about two-thirds that for non-Aboriginal students.

Not surprisingly, given these graduation rates, the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) shows a significant portion of the adult Aboriginal population in the NWT has low levels of literacy: approximately 69% scored below Level 3 in prose literacy – the level considered necessary to function in today’s society. Meanwhile, approximately 70% of the non-Aboriginal population scored at Level 3 and above (Statistics Canada, 2006). While these statistics vary for the different groups (Dene, Metis and Inuit), overall they point to a considerable gap in the literacy levels of the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal populations. Statistics such as these tend to highlight educational deficits of the Aboriginal population.

In adult literacy and basic education programs (ALBE) in the NWT, adult educators report on participation, retention and completion rates (see Northwest Territories Education, Culture & Employment’s report on post-secondary education). In 2004-2005, only about 12% of those enrolled in English 110 (the lowest ALBE level in the NWT) completed the course. Within the classroom, adult educators use both informal assessment such as observation and notes, and formal assessments, such as tests, to measure progress in academic subjects. Adult educators are not required to document or report on non-academic outcomes, although some do so under a catch-all category entitled “Highlights”.

Within this context we wanted to document non-academic outcomes and examine their role in determining what constitutes success for Aboriginal adult learners, particularly from the learners’ perspectives.

## 2 What others have said

### What are non-academic outcomes and why are they important?

Non-academic outcomes, or “soft” outcomes, are outcomes that cannot be measured directly and that come about as a result of learner participation in programs. They may include achievements in areas like interpersonal skills, organizational skills, analytical skills and personal skills (Dewson, 2000).

Non-academic outcomes are usually defined as intangible and not concrete, subjective, a matter of degree and not absolute, and personal (Dewson, 2000; Ward, 2002). Dewson (2000) differentiates between soft and hard outcomes, arguing that hard outcomes can be measured directly. She claims that soft outcomes are intermediate – that is, they measure progress towards hard (measurable) outcomes like further education or employment. Ward (2002), on the other hand, believes the division between hard and soft outcomes is not as simple as it seems.

As we saw above, statistics commonly used to measure learner achievement do not generally include changes in the kinds of skills included in the definition of non-academic outcomes. Battiste (2005) argues that the data currently collected focus on deficits and reflect little on learners’ potential for influencing positive change in their own lives and in society generally.

Adults who leave school early face multiple barriers to labour market participation and are often severely disadvantaged (Dewson, 2000). Many overcome considerable obstacles when they decide to return to learning (Taylor, 2008; Ward, 2002). Changes in interpersonal, organizational, analytical and personal skills are often the first, and sometimes the most obvious, changes adult educators notice in learners, yet those are rarely documented. Thus many adult educators believe the picture we paint of adult learners is incomplete because it does not reflect the true gains learners make in ALBE programs (Dewson, 2000; Parkdale Project, 2006; Trent Valley in Westell, 2005). Experienced practitioners have long advocated for a definition of progress that is broader than academic or hard outcomes (see Parkdale Project, 2006; Ward,

2002). Given that non-academic outcomes are an integral part of overall learner achievement, Dewson (2000) argues that measuring non-academic outcomes is simply “general good practice” (p.3).

For Aboriginal learners, non-academic outcomes are even more integral to their success, given the holistic worldview of Aboriginal people, one that is reflected in Aboriginal learning (Antone, 2000, 2003; Antone & Cordoba, 2005; Balanoff & Chambers, 2005; Doige, 2001; Gamlin, 2003; George, n.d; Paulsen, 2003). Isolating academic and non-academic outcomes does not resonate with a worldview where interconnectedness is fundamental to life.

*Aboriginal literacy practitioners continually seek ways to nurture the spirit, heart, mind and body...and treat the learner as a whole person, an individual with skills and strengths that he/she may not have recognized. (George Ningwakwe, n.d.)*

The processes of colonization which assimilated Aboriginal people into Western cultural practices discounted Aboriginal worldviews and placed Aboriginal learners in unequal power relationships with government institutions, such as schools (Battiste, 2005; Doige, 2001). Battiste (2005) argues it is time to reframe curriculum to reflect Aboriginal worldviews, a process that would enable the achievements of Aboriginal learners to be viewed in a more positive light. Documenting non-academic outcomes, as well as academic outcomes, would be more in harmony with Aboriginal worldviews, more holistic and would reframe the achievements of Aboriginal learners to be more positive. This more holistic approach to outcome measurement is consistent with the Canadian Council on Learning’s three lifelong learning models, which, according to Cappon (2008), present innovative, holistic approaches to measuring the progress of the First Nations, Inuit and Metis populations.

## **Why are non-academic outcomes often ignored?**

Educators and researchers alike agree that measuring individual progress in ALBE programs is difficult. They cite issues like disagreements about definitions (What is “literacy?”), difficulties in demonstrating cause and effect (Is this change a direct result of the educational

program?), and the complexity of adult learning (Westell, 2005). Measuring intangible outcomes and quantifying improvements is even more difficult (Dewson, 2000; Greenwood, 2001; Ward, 2002). For example: How do you verify what someone's (self-reported) level of self-confidence really is (Greenwood, 2001)?

Such issues and complexities make policy development problematic. This may in part explain why so little attention is paid to non-academic outcomes (Carlisle, 2004). As well, today's tendency towards rigorous accountability frameworks privileges measurable outcomes over hard-to-measure (non-academic) outcomes. Such frameworks fail to differentiate between "what is valuable" and "what is measurable" (Turner & Watters, 2001, p.6). Wiliam (quoted in Westell, 2005) claims, "We start out by making the important measurable, and end up making only the measurable important" (p. 18).

Despite the difficulties inherent in measuring outcomes, Westell (2005) found that all studies on outcomes in adult education programs included at least some non-academic outcomes. A number of studies have explored effective ways to measure non-academic outcomes, and some have taken the next step and documented the outcomes (see Battell, 2005; Beder, 1999; Bingman, 1999; Dewson, 2000; Greenwood, 2001; Malicky & Norman, 1996; Royce & Gacka, 2001; Scottish Executive, 2001; Turner & Watters, 2001; Ward, 2002). Many of these studies recommend the need for more research in this area (e.g. Battell, 2001), as well as the need to build capacity within programs to conduct such research. In the United Kingdom, several projects have developed systems to measure non-academic outcomes (Dewson, 2000), suggesting that the problems associated with measuring soft outcomes can be overcome to some degree.

### **What are the key non-academic outcomes?**

The key non-academic outcome mentioned in the literature is self-confidence – sometimes described as self-determination, self-direction, self-esteem, agency, choice, control, independence and standing up for oneself (Westell, 2005). The correlation between improved self-confidence and adult learning is strong (Westell, 2005). Royce & Gacka (2001) contend

self-esteem is not simply an offshoot of ALBE, but is “the sparkplug that ignites self-efficacy and social action” (p.8).

Other common outcomes include independence (being able to do things related to the learners’ everyday lives that they had previously been unable to do, like take the bus); attitude change (developing a new found love of learning); relationship and community building (being able to help their children with homework; being unafraid to talk to a teacher or a social worker (Battell, 2001); becoming involved in community activities (Jones & Charnley, 1979; Ward, 2002); and learning to learn (Westell, 2005).

Dewson (2000) notes that, while one size may not fit all, soft outcomes may be categorized as follows: key work skills; attitudinal skills; personal skills; and practical skills.

### **How can we document non-academic outcomes appropriately?**

Researchers have used a variety of techniques to document non-academic outcomes. The most common include: individual and group interviews; portfolio assessment; use of multi-media tools, such as audio and video recordings; and questionnaires. Battell (2001) believes the technique itself is unimportant: what is important is focussing on non-academic outcomes and helping learners reflect on their learning.

Learner perspectives are integral to a truly learner-centred agenda (Ward, 2002) and provide greater insight into the complexity of learning (Parkdale Project, 2006). Involving learners gives them a voice and enables them to describe and interpret their own experiences – not have them interpreted by someone else. Reclaiming voice is important for individuals who may have been marginalized or silenced, such as Aboriginal peoples as part of colonization (Battiste, n.d.). Involving learners provides an opportunity for self-reflection and allows them to embrace and celebrate their own achievements, thus empowering them and promoting self-development (Ward, 2002). Learner input usually involves responding to surveys and/or participating in structured interviews (Westell, 2005). Seeking learner input is consistent with current philosophy, policy and curricula in the NWT that emphasize the centrality of the learner.

### 3 The research design

Narrative is central to Aboriginal literacy and learning (Cruikshank, 1991, 1998; Paulsen, 2003). Despite today's emphasis on the written word, orality is still the primary means by which those narratives that form Aboriginal social identity continue to be (re)created and circulated (Balanoff, Chambers & Kudlak, 2006). Using narrative avoids asking direct questions, a practice that may not resonate with Aboriginal ways of knowing, learning and communicating. Inuit children, for example, are taught never to ask the question "Why?" (Shouldice, 2007).

Stories are not simply accounts of events, but reflect worldview and encompass multiple meanings that may not be obvious to outsiders (Cruikshank, 1997). According to Cajete (1994), story is the basis of **all** teaching and learning.

*Humans are one and all storytelling animals. Through story we explain and come to understand ourselves. Story – in creative combination with encounters, experiences, image making, ritual, play, imagination, dream and modelling – forms the basic foundation of all human learning and teaching. (Cajete, 1994, p. 68)*

Thus stories and a narrative approach are appropriate tools to use with Aboriginal learners.

Analysis of literacies and learning that exist today in Ulukhaktok, NWT suggests indigenous literacies there are highly complex and have the following characteristics: **multi-modal** (often involves more than one mode – oral, visual, aural, written – at the same time); **storied** (involves narrative); **symbolic** (involves use of symbols); **holistic** (involves the whole, rather than parts) ; **remembered** (involves recollection); **relational** (involves interconnections); **experiential** (involves practical, hands-on); and **metaphorical** (involves use of imagery) (Balanoff, Chambers & Kudlak, 2006). To be relevant for Aboriginal learners, the research design needs to adhere to, and allow for, these characteristics.

In Aboriginal writings, learning is often referred to as "a journey".

*Broadly speaking [Aboriginal literacy] is “a journey” in which learning enables the person to be free to achieve and to maximize her self-development potential for the good of society as a whole. (Antone et al., 2003, P. 22)*

Cajete (1994) argues that this learning journey is a process of recreation and renewal.

*...in every learning process, we metaphorically travel an internal and many times external landscape. In traveling a pathway, we make stops, encounter and overcome obstacles, recognize and interpret signs, seek answers, and follow the tracks of those entities that have something to teach us. We create ourselves anew. (Cajete, 1994, P. 55)*

Using a metaphor of a learning journey fits with Aboriginal ways of knowing, learning and communicating, as well as with the ties to the land Aboriginal people have, and their lived history of migration.

We therefore opted to collect learner input through narrative based on the metaphor of a journey (see Ward, 2002 for a description of use of this metaphor).



## 4 How we did the research

### Project description

Aurora College, the only post-secondary institution in the NWT, is the delivery agent for most adult literacy and basic education (ALBE) programs, either on its three campuses or through its community learning centres. Two non-government Aboriginal organizations also offer programs. This project was intended to involve learners and instructors from the three different types of ALBE programs: a campus-based learning-centre program, a community-based learning centre program, and a community-based non-government program. Campus-based learning centre programs tend to be larger and more structured, usually serving learners with higher levels of literacy. Community learning-centre programs are more informal, and attract a broader range of learners. The non-government programs attract learners who may be reluctant to return to more formal educational programs within educational institutions, or who have lower levels of literacy. Campus learning centres are found in only the three largest regional centres in the NWT, while community learning-centre programs are found in mid-size and smaller centres. Non-government programs are found only in Yellowknife. Information about the project was sent to the Chairs of Developmental Studies at the college (Appendix A). The selected programs were intended to cover the range of literacy programs offered in the NWT and were based on the Chairs' recommendations. Several criteria were used: region of the NWT; type of program; ethnicity of instructor and learners (Dene, Metis, or Inuvialuit); size of community; and length of instructor service in the community.

In the end, it proved impossible to involve the non-government programs. As the project was starting, one program had a fluctuating group of learners, while the other lost its instructor. Consequently, we recruited a campus learning-centre program, a community learning-centre program from a mid-sized community, and a community learning-centre program from a small community. The communities were located in both the north and south of the NWT. The learners in the campus-based learning program had higher literacy skills than those in the community-

based learning centres. Former learners whom we interviewed also (now) had higher literacy skills, but had lower literacy levels when they first entered the program.

Each program was very different, but all learners valued the program they were in. The campus-based program was located in a regional centre, and served learners from all communities in the region, so more than half the learners in the program had moved to the larger centre from other communities to further their education. It was the most highly structured program and offered higher level (130 and 140 level) ALBE programs, but still had a strong feeling of community. During the time of the study, learners had to relocate temporarily from the learning centre to the main campus building where they joined over one hundred other students. They lamented that they missed the more informal atmosphere and feeling of community. They also felt somewhat isolated from their instructors in the new location and looked forward to moving to their new learning centre, and re-establishing the close relationship they had with their instructor.

The class we worked with in the mid-sized community learning-centre program was the smallest, with only five learners in total, but again it had a strong sense of community. It operated more like tutorials, with learners working somewhat independently. Each learner there was a single parent who struggled to balance responsibilities, and who needed to be continually (re)motivated. The learners there particularly appreciated the instructor's wide knowledge and his ability to motivate them.

The smaller learning centre program had the highest number of learners with lower literacy levels. The program was extremely holistic. The instructor, who was Aboriginal, incorporated many traditional activities into the program, including Aboriginal language lessons. Learners studied academic subjects, but often through hands-on activities, like cooking to learn fractions. They went out to the bush for both spiritual and practical experiences. Learners in that program were also involved in many community activities. For example, they cooked for community events as a way of fund raising. They also ran family literacy programs, which meant they had to read aloud. This holistic approach to learning suited the learners in this program. The

program was very popular in the community. “Everyone in town knows this program.” One learner told us, “If you want to see success, you have it right here.” The learners prided themselves (rightly or wrongly) on being the only learning centre with learners who were always there and who stayed until the course was over. Since the learning centre was located in the school, parents were close to their children, which moms really appreciated. Each program was different, but each met the unique needs of the learners who went there and gave them something special.

The principal investigator (PI) and project coordinator was the research coordinator from the NWT Literacy Council. She did not know any of the learners, although she knew all three instructors fairly well. She (and later her colleague from the Literacy Council) conducted all the interviews with learners and instructors. The instructors agreed to act as co-researchers. Their role was to recruit participants according to established criteria and set the scene for them; assist in the development of support materials, such as the interview protocols and prompts; assist in the analysis of the data; and review all final products. Of the three instructor/researchers, two were non-Aboriginal, long-time northerners. The third was Dene. All were trained and certified educators who had lived and worked in their particular community over an extended period of time.

Because of the small numbers involved, where we had to select learners we had decided to use non-probability sampling within each program to try to represent the composition of learners in the NWT as a whole. Participation was voluntary, but researchers encouraged all learners enrolled in their current program to participate. We had such an overwhelming response from learners in programs that, in the end, we did not select participants but interviewed every learner in the three programs: that is, we used convenience sampling. As well, instructors identified former learners, whose perspectives were longer term, and invited them to take part. Former learners were people who were still in the community and were readily available – again partly for convenience, because we knew from experience how difficult it is to track down and engage people in communities when there is no one there to chase them up. Some of the former learners were unemployed over the longer term; others were unemployed, but had been

employed (in seasonal work); others were employed; and some were enrolled in other college programs. In all, we interviewed fifty seven people. The sample included males and females, aged from 20 to over 50 years of age, and Dene, Metis and Inuvialuit, depending on who was enrolled in the program.

The instructors were given the information sheet for educators that had also been provided to the Chairs of their programs. An initial telephone meeting of the research team enabled the researchers to explore the approach in more depth and to discuss the development of supporting materials. They also discussed developing a common approach for the introductory session.

Following that, the PI developed an information sheet for learners (Appendix B) that would allow the instructors to recruit participants for the study. Then, with assistance from the instructors, the PI developed an interview protocol (Appendix C) that would guide the learners as they went into the story sessions. A number of prompts in the form of photographs, presentations, cue card and objects were also prepared in the event some learners might need them to begin their stories. For example, a picture of a brick wall represented a barrier. The PI also developed a form to collect demographic data from learners (Appendix D), as well as a consent form (Appendix E).

The story sessions were designed to include individual and small group sessions. The premise was that individual sessions would provide participants with an opportunity for confidentiality, while group sessions would provide opportunities for peer support, encouragement and collective remembering. This did not work out exactly as planned. During the introductory session, we asked learners how they would like to proceed. Some were eager to sit down with a friend and discuss their journeys, while others were more comfortable doing it on an individual basis. Seventy four per cent of story sessions took place in pairs by mutual consent.

Current learners were supposed to take part in two story sessions. We assumed that reflecting on progress would empower and encourage learners to continue in the program, so we originally scheduled one session towards the end of the first term, and the second session

towards the end of the academic year. While in theory ideal, the timing proved to be impossible. We were unable to interview during the first term for several reasons:

- 1) In the NWT, all research must first be granted a research license. Community bodies, in particular land claims organizations, have to approve the research. Because of the three locations, approval had to be sought from a total of 16 bodies. The research could not begin until the appropriate approvals had been received.
- 2) Staff turnover at the NWT Literacy Council meant the PI had to assume other responsibilities.
- 3) Having to identify an alternative third program took time.
- 4) One of the programs had to relocate at the beginning of the study.

As a result, the research was spread over two academic years, which made follow up more difficult. However, because the instructors knew most of the learners, we were able to follow up with 70% of them to review their profiles and stories. The most difficult follow up was in the campus-based program where learners had completed the program and had either returned to their home community or gone on to further education somewhere else with no contact information. Even those for whom the program did have contact information it proved difficult to track them down, if they were in another community.

We had planned only one session for former learners, with a follow up to review their stories. Eighty per cent of former learners opted for individual sessions, but, where people were related, they paired up.

For learners currently enrolled in programs, the instructor and/or PI conducted an introductory session using the approach the research team had developed. The instructors informed all participants about the purpose of the research and the process. They then discussed a) the idea of learning as a journey; b) the notion of distance travelled; c) obstacles they encountered; and d) changes that occurred along the way.

The PI reviewed this same information before the story sessions began. Learners were asked to sign the consent form to take part in the project, and were told they could withdraw from the project at any time. They first filled in the information sheet that collected their basic demographic data. They were then asked to tell the story of their own learning journey. This was framed (but not asked directly) as: *Why did you go on the journey? Where did you start from? How fast did you go? What helped you? What obstacles were in your way? What changes did you make along the way? Where did you get to? What would you tell others who want to go on the journey?* As it turned out, only a few participants required prompts; most told their story enthusiastically with little prompting.

All the sessions were recorded digitally and the information transcribed and provided back to the learners for verification, and revised as necessary. In most social science research, anonymity is important, but in this project, we hypothesized that the concept of anonymity might conflict with the importance of giving marginalized learners a voice. When learners verified their stories, they were asked if they wished to use their name and photo, their name only, or if they wished to remain anonymous (Appendix F). Some learners preferred to remain anonymous; some preferred to use their name, but not their photograph; and some were keen to attach both their name and their photo to their story. Because of the time constraints, we did not ask learners to represent their journey visually, which had been in the original plan, although we still believe that supports the multi-modal characteristic of Aboriginal learning. The same process was repeated for former learners, although the instructor explained the project by telephone, or individually in person.

In the final step, the three instructors provided their perspectives on each learner's achievements to allow us to examine where their perspectives mirrored and/or deviated from those of the learners. An interview framework was framed as: *What changes did you see in the learner during the program? How do you think returning to learning impacted his/her life?* (Appendix G). Since the instructors continued to come into contact with many former learners from their programs, particularly in the small and mid-sized communities, and in the campus

program if learners went on to take other programs of study, we also asked, where appropriate, *What changes did you see in the learner after the program?*

One aim of this project was to pilot test the approach for future use in the NWT, so instructors and learners were asked to provide feedback orally on the approach: *How appropriate was the concept of a metaphor, particularly the metaphor of a journey? How effective was it? How can we improve on it? How easy was this approach to use?* As well, since we believed that the process would be empowering, we asked learners to talk about how reflecting critically on their own learning impacted them.

The PI and her colleague did the initial analysis of the data, and developed a preliminary list of common themes and patterns. The other researchers then repeated this process for five samples. This process produced the following headings: motivators, goal(s), strengths, challenges, pace, what people achieved and impacts on their life. The themes of motivators, goals, strengths and challenges provided background for us on each learner, as well as their starting point. Under the themes of what people achieved and the impacts on their life, similar concepts were grouped together into subheadings. This process was repeated several times until the researchers were satisfied that the categories truly reflected what learners had told us. The subheadings that emerged were improved confidence and self-esteem, increased commitment, attitude change, new practical skills they had learned, improved readiness for further education and employment, and relationship building. These subheadings were the non-academic outcomes we were interested in.

All headings and subheadings were laid out on charts, with instructors' perspectives added to the chart to enable comparisons to be made. The research team reviewed the data and refined the groupings as necessary. Individual profiles were developed using the background information and the non-academic outcomes for each individual, and then we examined the non-academic outcomes among the learners as a whole to create a composite picture. The next two chapters provide the background information on the learners as a whole, as well as the findings on the non-academic outcomes. We use the term 'learners' to refer to all participants. When it is

necessary for us to clarify which specific group we are referring to, we break them down into ‘current learners’ and ‘former learners’.

1. Instructors identified learners and former learners according to established criteria.
2. Instructors provided introductory session on the research.
3. Principal investigator (PI) reviewed project and process with learners.
4. Learners decided format (individual, pairs, or group) of story sessions.
5. PI reviewed consent forms for learners to sign.
6. PI interviewed learners and recorded interviews digitally.
7. Learner stories were transcribed and coded.
8. Principal investigator met with as many learners as possible in follow-up meeting.
9. Learners reviewed stories and profiles, and signed review form.

**Table 2: The research process at a glance**



## 5 Learners talk about their lives

Fifty seven current and former learners told us about their learning journeys. Thirty nine were currently enrolled in ALBE or access programs, while eighteen were former learners. During the later stages of the project, one former learner withdrew.

Learners told us who they were, where they started from, what motivated them to go on their journey, where they were going, what strengths they had, what challenges they faced, what they achieved and what impact their achievements had on their life, learning and work. They also gave us insights into what had helped them to get to where they were at that point.

### Who the learners were

The majority of learners (71%) in the study were Dene (Fig. 1). In the small community-based program, all learners identified themselves as Dene. In the campus-based program, two thirds said they were

Inuvialuit (Inuit of the Western Arctic in the NWT),

while the other third said they were Dene. In the mid-sized community-based program, 40% was Dene, 40% was Metis and 20% was Inuvialuit.

Fifty two percent of participants were below thirty years of age (Fig. 2). The youngest learners were in the small community-based program, while the oldest were in the campus-based program. Instructors told us that this demographic had changed in recent years: learners in their programs are younger now than in the past. Seventy three percent of learners were female.

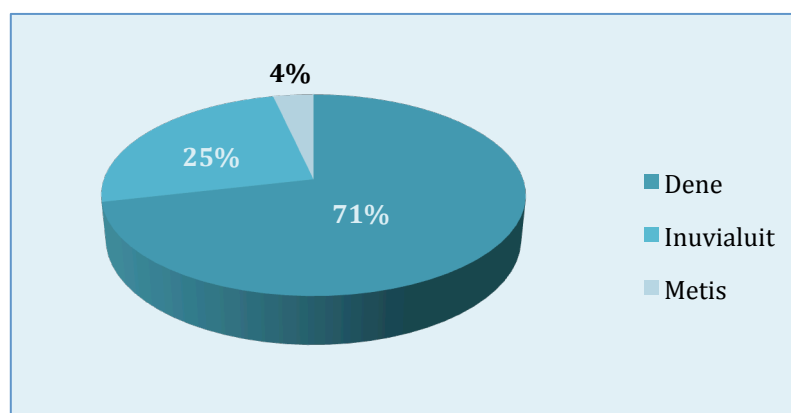
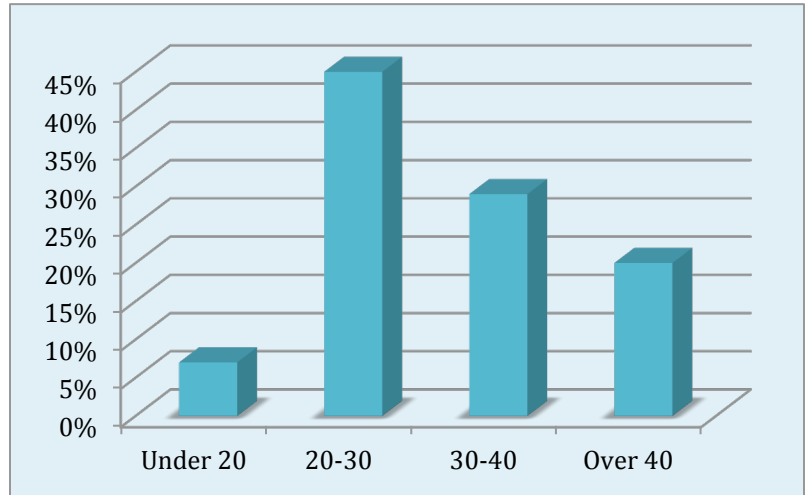


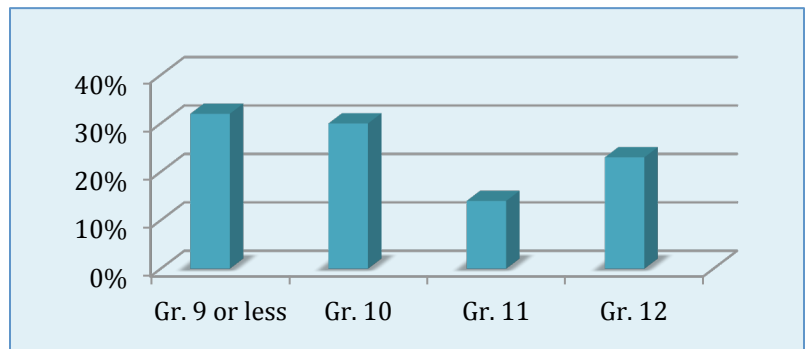
Fig. 1: Ethnicity of participants

Learners had completed from Grade 6 to Grade 12 (Fig. 3). The majority of learners (62%) had completed Grade 10 or less. Approximately 30% had completed Grade 9 or less. Ninety eight per cent of those over the age of forty had attended a residential school for some of their schooling. A number of current learners reported they had graduated from Grade 12, but had either been out of school for a number of years and needed to improve their basic skills before enrolling in other programs, or they needed to upgrade specific academic subjects (usually Math or Science) to enrol in another program. Instructors suggested a third possible reason why some of those learners enrolled in ALBE: that the learners had graduated from Grade 12, but their skills did not correspond to Grade 12 standards. As a result, learners were now discovering they did not have the skills they needed for employment or further education. (This was in response to a question from interviewers to an instructor when they noticed a learner who reported she had Grade 12 struggling with the learner demographic form. The instructor said she had assessed the learner at a Grade 3 reading level when she entered the program.)

Learners outlined the history of their involvement with ALBE, but sorting and analyzing this data proved to be problematic. 1) Some learners had returned to ALBE programs several



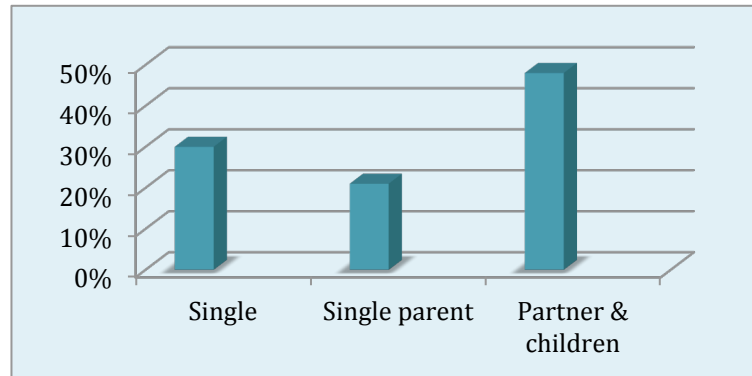
**Fig. 2: Age of participants**



**Fig. 3: Highest grade level completed**

times over several years and were unable to recall which program and when, and sometimes how often. This was particularly true for older learners. 2) Others had attended ALBE programs and then enrolled in pre-employment or other access-type programs, such as Building Trades Helper, Teacher Education Access Program, or the Nursing Access program. 3) Others had completed ALBE and enrolled in certificate or diploma programs. Often, learners did not distinguish among the different programs sufficiently well for us to analyze the data. We did notice, however, that a number of learners returned to ALBE programs (2 - 3 times on average) before completing ALBE and enrolling in other programs or finding employment.

Almost 30% of learners were single (Fig. 4): most of those were in the younger age groups. Several of those learners, however, were responsible for caring for family members: siblings, older family members or those with a disability. The remaining 70% had children, ranging in age from babies to adults. Family size varied from one child to eight children. Twenty one percent of learners were single parents.



**Fig. 4: Family status**

The data that we collected appears in the remainder of this chapter, and the next chapter. We have tried to keep the learners' voices as much as possible. Learners with an asterisk beside their names are using their real names. We have changed the names of those who wished to remain anonymous.

## **Where learners started from**

In order to get as full a picture as possible of learners' achievements, it was important for us to note where each learner started from.

- The educational levels they had attained at school would give us a picture of their starting point and their literacy levels when they entered adult education.
- Their motivation to return to learning would contribute to their ability to remain committed.
- The goals they set for themselves would motivate them to achieve their desired future, and give them something to measure their achievements against.
- By recognizing their strengths, they would be able to build on these.
- They needed to understand and overcome the challenges they faced to make progress.

### **Learners' prior educational experiences and attainments**

Not surprisingly, many learners (70%) referred to their school experiences as their starting point. Four of the younger learners, who had returned to make up only one course, felt they had done fairly well at school. Most learners, however, did not do well at school for various reasons. Forty five per cent felt the school system had not served them well and had dropped out of school, leaving them with negative feelings towards school. Katherine<sup>\*</sup>, for example, felt forced to move on before she understood things, and got left behind. Colin and Mary<sup>\*</sup> both felt class sizes prevented people from getting the assistance they needed. Randy, an older learner, thought school was too authoritarian with “too much strictness.” Approximately 65%, like Robert, regretted leaving school early, “Oh man, I could have done better. I wish now I did.”

Residential schooling had a large impact on learners, even if they had not attended residential schools themselves. Every learner over thirty used either their own experiences with residential schooling or the experiences of other family members as their school reference point. One current learner in his thirties described himself and his peers as “Generation X” – the children of people who had attended residential schools. “The effects of residential schooling not only affected [our parents] it affected their children – us – in a negative way.” Another said, “I didn’t realize residential schooling had such an impact on our people, like all the social

problems, the alcohol and drugs, community violence, family violence, break ups and everything like that. I thought those things were normal.”

A number of learners felt they and their families didn't understand the importance of education. Jonas\* and Jean attributed their lack of understanding to age. Almost half of the learners thought their parents (or grandparents, who raised them in eight cases) did not understand how to support their children's education. For example, Evelyn's grandparents had limited experience with formal education, "... so they didn't really monitor how I was doing in school and what I was doing. They didn't really understand it..."

### **What motivated learners to go on their journey**

All learners believed education was important in today's world. Often a particular event like being turned down for a job, or new responsibilities, such as having a child or being divorced, sparked learners' initial desires to improve their education. Fifty four per cent of learners wanted better jobs, while twenty three per cent returned to school because of their children. Evelyn and Robert went back to school immediately after their little girl was born. "We didn't want to end up in a dead-end job and only have so much to offer her." Sometimes, learners' particular life circumstances motivated them. This was especially true for women who had stayed at home to raise their children, and who could focus more on their own lives now that their children were older.

Twenty per cent of learners returned to school as a result of family and friends motivating them, either as role models, or sources of encouragement. Gina's friend, for example, went to school first and sounded "pretty excited" about it. Sara\* had two strong female influences in her life: her mother, who went back to school at the age of forty-two, and her grandmother, who had been upset when Sara had previously quit school. "An eighty-five year old woman being really mad is not a pretty sight," said Sara\*.

### **Where learners were going**

Learners had specific goals in mind when they first returned to school. Initially, those often focused on 1) personal development; 2) supporting their children; and/or 3) getting a job –

not necessarily in that order. As learners progressed through the program, their goals tended to change to focus on higher career paths that required higher levels of education, or to pursue long-held dreams.

### **1) Personal development**

Personal development included areas such as improving confidence and self-esteem, developing a more positive attitude, (re)building identity, and increasing opportunities and improving potential. Improved personal development often included upgrading skills. For example, both Roy and Marie wanted to make something of themselves. Cecilia liked the challenge and the rush of learning. After being unemployed for a number of months, Julia's self-esteem had gone down. She was worried about the change she saw in herself, so she wanted to reverse that before it was too late.

### **2) Supporting their children**

Children factored into the stories of every learner with children. Single mothers, in particular, wanted to be able to provide a stable and comfortable environment for their children. For example, as the breadwinner after a divorce, Ramona\* realized that her children's security depended on her. Rose, who was also divorced with two young children, did not want a dead-end job. Jeanette had only odd jobs while her daughter was young. One day she said, "That's it. I'm going to do something....This is for my girl. It's not for anybody else."

Almost all parents wanted to be able to help children with school work. For example, Lisa wanted to help her daughter with her homework at home, rather than send her to the school's homework club where she seemed to spend a lot of time on the Internet. Two learners, Russell\* and Cindy\*, returned to school to be role models for their children who were refusing to go to school. Russell\* thought his choices were affecting his children, "Geez, I never even finished school and they're starting not to like it. That might have a negative impact on them." Cindy\* struggled every day to get her daughter to Kindergarten and decided she herself needed to model going to school.

### 3) Getting a job

With the exception of current learners under twenty years of age, all the other learners had experienced hardship when it came to the labour market and their own financial security. All learners wanted a job, a “good” job, or a “better” job and saw education as a prerequisite. Kate, for example, wanted to be more independent, to be able to “pay for herself” after being a stay-at-home mom. Randy watched his colleagues advance at work while he was restricted by his low education level. Mary Jane\* was tired of not getting jobs she wanted because she didn’t have the required qualifications: her goal was to have a full-time job with benefits and to buy her own house one day. About one-third of the learners, particularly women, hated the jobs they were presently in. Maggie had a low-paid job, and didn’t want to be in a kitchen for the rest of her life. Lily had a higher-paid job, but didn’t want to “clean bathrooms and other rooms.” Other learners had specific careers in mind. Paul had “a set goal.” He wanted to create new opportunities by opening a film school for Aboriginal students. Others, like Judy, needed to upgrade their skills to enrol in a specific program, such as a science, nursing or cooking program. Roy’s goal was to finish the program and get a good job, but also to finish something that he had started. Often, learners had multiple goals, like Esther. “I want to find a job that I enjoy and get security for the future. I want to make sure that my kids have what they need to get their education, as well as a home and food in the fridge.”

### 4) Changing goals

As learners acquired new skills and became more confident, their goals changed, usually from simpler to more complex and more ambitious. For example, initially Mary\* just wanted to improve her grades, but by the end of the program, she wanted to teach younger people, including her own children.

Cindy’s\* journey exemplified the changing goals that many adult learners experienced. Initially her only goal was to get her daughter to Kindergarten. She started at the lowest level of ALBE, then “jumped” into a University College Access Program to raise her grades. She won several awards and was Valedictorian. As she found out who she was, what she liked to do and

where she wanted to be, she considered different career options, like nursing or teaching, but decided those were not really what she wanted to do. She wanted to go into Management Studies but thought the standard was “really high” and that it would be too “tough and challenging.” Instead, she enrolled in an Office Administration course that would familiarize her with an office environment. That course prepared her for Management Studies, including giving her some credits. She has now almost completed the two-year Management Studies course, and has a part-time job at the college.

### **Strengths learners brought**

Learners generally found it difficult to talk about strengths: younger learners tended to be more able to do so than older learners. About half indicated they were good at traditional indigenous skills: they could hunt, skin animals, dry meat and fish, drum and sew, for example. One learner was a “good mother,” while five other women were good at cooking and cleaning. Five learners indicated they were strong in academic subjects, such as Math. One learner liked helping people. Ten learners were good at practical, hands-on activities. One younger learner had good people skills and good communication skills, and was a quick learner. A few male learners were good at sports. One learner was highly motivated to go back to school, while another had good positive influences in his life. Six learners did not name any strengths. However, it should be noted that one of the values that Aboriginal people hold dearly is modesty, which may have been a contributing factor in the difficulty learners had when talking about their strengths. Later in their narratives, about one third of the learners indicated that one outcome of returning to school was that they became more aware of their strengths and weaknesses.

### **The multiple challenges learners faced**

Learners who wanted to return to school often faced multiple challenges, which they had to confront in order to progress with their learning. Each learner was unique in the barriers they had to overcome, but there were several common themes. These were 1) fear, embarrassment and shame; 2) family responsibilities and family disruption; and 3) financial difficulties. Although learners overcame some of these challenges once in school, often many challenges



remained. Learners reported, however, that they were more able to deal with these challenges as a result of returning to school, through increased self-confidence, for example.

### **1) Fear, embarrassment and shame**

Perhaps the greatest and most debilitating challenge for learners was fear, often associated with negative views of their own abilities. Paul (who appeared extremely confident) was terrified, “I was nervous when I first came back. I admit I was scared shitless. I didn’t think I could do it.” Others were self-conscious and were afraid to speak out, to ask questions, to ask for help, or to read aloud. Gina, for example, thought other learners would say she was too old to go to school. Mary\* was worried that what had happened to her previously would happen again. “In the residential school, students pointed fingers and picked on me. I was kind of afraid of that.” Fear was often accompanied by feelings of embarrassment and shame.

Initially, many learners were concerned that they had forgotten much of what they had learned in school. Learners, like Archie, were afraid to make mistakes and fail, “... until I came here I didn’t know I could do it...My brain had blacked out for a while.” Kate described it as “trying to bring your brain back.” Learners were relieved when they realized being back at school helped them to remember: “It help[ed] refresh my memory.” “It restores your brain.” “I lost [my brain] and got it back.”

As well as fear of not being able to do the course work, having to make a commitment to come every day and finish the program was stressful for about half the learners. They cited difficulty getting up in the morning, being on time, and getting the work done. Wendy was afraid she wouldn’t be able to stick to the program through to the end. Males worried most about being able to get up, and about being able to last through the program.

### **2) Family responsibilities and family disruption**

Family relationships are important for Aboriginal people so dealing with family separation and disruption was a challenge for learners who had to relocate (to the campus-based program). Russell\* sold his house and moved his whole family. Mary’s\* immediate family accompanied her to the regional centre, but her extended family remained in her home

community, making her homesick. “I almost gave up a lot of times because of homesickness. When people pass away at home I want to go home, or if my family is sick.” In all, eight learners experienced a death in their family during the course of their program, which tested their commitment. Mona’s family was not with her, and she found it hard on her own, “I’ve got all this homework and I can’t set my mind to it – I just want to be home.” A number of learners preferred to attend programs in their home community or on their nearest campus rather than access programs on other campuses. For example, one learner told us she wanted to enrol in the Teacher Education Program on another campus, but when we returned the following semester, she was enrolled in an office program. “It was just too hard to leave home,” she said.

Family responsibilities often made it difficult for learners to go back to school. It sometimes created conflict in their lives, and sometimes interfered with learning. Balancing home life and school was particularly challenging for women. One woman let her dishes sit “for days.” Childcare was especially difficult: it was hard to find reliable childcare, and expensive. Judy had “gone through a lot of babysitters so far” and it was “very expensive.” Mary Jane\* had returned to school twice in five years, and had quit each time because “things weren’t working out at home. I didn’t have babysitters. I didn’t have the money to pay my babysitters and things like that.” Illness in the family was a challenge for moms like Rose, “In winter time when you have two kids, at one point or another there’s always somebody that has a cold or something, so because I don’t have any family to look after them, I’m completely alone for that.” Ramona’s mother provided free child care for her family, “I thank God everyday for her help. I would not be able to do it without her....I could not have done all this without [my family’s] support financially and mentally....They are my rock. I will never be able to repay them for all that they have done for me.”

One man, who was generally supportive of his partner attending a program, on several occasions accused his partner of having “no more time” for him because she was always doing homework. Paul, “almost quit a few times for family reasons. I managed to hang in there by a thread....This is a real uphill struggle.”

### 3) Financial challenges

Many adults who enrol in adult literacy programs are unemployed, on social assistance, or have low paid jobs. To compound their already difficult financial situation, adults who enrol in adult literacy and basic education programs in the NWT are unfunded, although learners in access programs such as the University College Access Programs (UCAP) or the Teacher Education Access Program receive student financial assistance. Some learners in ALBE received funding through Income Support, others through the Aboriginal Human Resources Development Agreements (AHRDAs), and others through their Band or land claim organization, but many learners struggled financially. Both Cindy\* and Mary Jane\*, single moms with children, had no funding at first. Evelyn and Robert had both been working. When they returned to school, their budget was cut in half, so “just to make ends meet was a challenge.” Darlene lived with her father, “I just thank God I’m living with my dad because I wouldn’t be able to afford to get an apartment for me and my daughter.” Bill, who struggled financially, got country food like meat and fish, from his family. “I eat a lot of traditional food. It saves us a lot of money.” One learner knew a lot of people who should have gone back to school, but wouldn’t (or couldn’t) because of their financial situation.

Individually, each of these challenges can be overwhelming, but for many learners, particularly women, the challenges were multiple: they were afraid of going back to school and not being able to complete the course; they were ashamed because they had limited literacy skills; they had family responsibilities, especially if they were single moms; and, they often faced financial difficulties, sometimes holding down one or two jobs, as well as attending school, to make ends meet. For Jean, “Everyday life is a challenge.” Cindy\* reconciled herself to her challenges, “It’s hard financially, it’s hard mentally, emotionally, it’s too much work, but that’s just how life is.”

## 6 Learners talk about non-academic outcomes

Non-academic outcomes are generally not captured through traditional reporting mechanisms. However, we felt that documenting non-academic outcomes was especially important in the NWT, where such information has never been collected, and where we believe they are important outcomes for adults here who return to learning.

The purpose of the research study was to identify non-academic gains that learners felt they had made, and could attribute in some way to their attendance at an adult literacy and basic education program. Our first finding was that learners were very keen to discuss non-academic outcomes – all of them saw a real value in doing so. They also all commented that they had never had the opportunity to discuss non-academic outcomes with other learners, or instructors, although some instructors sometimes pointed out informally changes that they saw in their learners.

All learners cited a broad range of both academic and non-academic outcomes: in fact, since one often seemed to lead to another, it was sometimes difficult to disentangle the two types of outcomes, as Ward (2002) suggested when she notes that the division between the two types of outcomes may not be as simple as it appears.

In all, learners reported 82 non-academic outcomes. Many of those outcomes were related, however: many were changes in skills or behaviours that indicated a broader change. For example, more than 50% of learners reported that they were able to speak out more, a skill that suggests increased confidence. Others indicated that they had changed their view on the importance of education and now thought it was a priority, suggesting a change in attitude. We used these skills and behaviour changes as indicators of a more comprehensive change and grouped them into 1) improved personal skills; 2) new practical skills for everyday life; 3) relationship building; and 4) improved readiness for further education and employment. Learners also had a broader view of the world, and felt they now had many more opportunities.

The changes learners reported are interconnected, inseparable and complex, so the divisions into these groups are somewhat arbitrary. For example, if someone has increased self-confidence, and has learned to read, they are much more likely to apply that skill by reading to their children. In turn, this may well improve their relationship with their children. It may also change their attitude to reading. Because we chose to do the study using a narrative form, rather than, for example, a carefully constructed questionnaire, we were left with making some difficult classification decisions.

### **1) Improved personal skills**

Here, we include increased self-confidence and self-esteem, increased commitment, and changes in attitude as part of personal skills. While improved interpersonal skills may be considered part of personal skills, we have included those under the theme of relationship building because the learners placed so much emphasis on relationships.

#### ***a) Increased self-confidence and self-esteem***

All learners, with the exception of two, identified increased self-confidence and self-esteem as their number one gain. Some learners identified these directly, while others noted changes in behaviours and attitudes that are closely linked to, and reflect, confidence and self-esteem. Learners described themselves as: less shy and more able to speak out; able to present themselves better; more independent; able to handle challenges, like fear, as well as personal problems; more of a risk taker; more relaxed; more open; more able to stand up for themselves; more able to go out; a stronger, better person; and, happier.

Their new-found confidence, and their ability to speak out, gave many learners, especially women, a voice that they were genuinely happy and proud of. Gina said, “I’m not shy anymore and I’m happier. It’s like I opened a brand new book and let it all out.” Another had to remind herself to stay quiet at council meetings: she described her new voice as “opening the door to happiness.” Some learners described how they no longer hung back and waited for others. For example, Esther now spoke out on committees she sat on. “Before I wouldn’t say anything because I thought that was for other people, but now I’m finding myself. I can talk and

express myself more. I like it.” Elsie and Susie\* too no longer waited for others. “Before I started school...I’d sit in the back and listen to everybody. [Now] I’m right in there...I’m the first one,” said Susie. If Julia felt really strongly about something and thought she was right, then she made sure she was heard. In the past Mary\* could not speak without stuttering or turning red, but had now managed to overcome her embarrassment, “It’s like your second childhood is finally growing up.” Overcoming shyness provided some learners with new opportunities. For example, it enabled one young learner to speak to visitors as a volunteer cultural guide at the Arctic Winter Games. “I wouldn’t have been able to do that if I hadn’t been part of this program.”

Younger learners reported that they had matured, partly because they had to accept more responsibility when returning to learning as adults. As a result, they found they were more able to handle life’s challenges. Julia, for example, was proud of how she handled problems with her self-esteem when she was unemployed. “I got myself into trouble, but I got out of it again, and I’m doing much better. I’m happy for myself.” Sara\* was “a stronger person” and was able “to push” herself through a series of problems that she dealt with throughout the year, including deaths in her family.

More than half the learners had negative views of themselves when they first entered the program. They used words like ‘stupid’, ‘dumb’, ‘degraded’, ‘looked down on’, ‘failure’ to describe themselves. Learners noted that success in academic subjects boosted their confidence, and vice-versa, and sometimes helped turn around their negative views of themselves. For Aline\* being in the class proved she could do things. “You know you always think you’re so dumb, but you’re not.” Archie had been afraid he would fail and felt really good when he finished, “...it really helped my confidence knowing that I still had it in me.” Evelyn thrived on success, “One success made me want more successes.” Research shows a close correlation between increased confidence and successful learning (Westell, 2005). Robert recognized this, “Confidence is a big thing. It helps with the learning process.”

Learners learned lots about themselves, and were quick to point this out. They often used examples of academic subjects to illustrate this. While they were proud of their academic gains,

their low self-esteem meant many were often surprised at being able to learn new things, like Kate when she passed her Math exam. Rob, too, found out he could do things he didn't know he could do before, like higher level Math. Kendra\* needed Biology to enrol in a cooking program. "I didn't think I'd be able to do what I do in Bio class. I've now got the confidence to know that I can learn it." Others, like Julie and Susie\*, found out they now liked subjects they had previously feared or hated. Susie had hated anything to do with Math, but now she and her friend were really enjoying it "Every day at nine o'clock we just hurry to go to Math class, we never miss." Mary Jane\* learned about her own personal qualities, "I know my qualities. I know my potential. I know what I'm able to do, how far I'm able to carry it on."

### ***b) Commitment***

Learners quickly recognized the commitment required to go to and stay in the program. Many were afraid that they would not be able to maintain that commitment, particularly those who had left school without completing. Four learners noted that they had never stayed committed to anything in their lives before.

When they did manage to stay committed, it was often a source of pride and gave learners a strong sense of accomplishment. Next to improved self-confidence, staying committed and finishing the program was mentioned most frequently by learners as their greatest achievement. Walter was most proud of "getting through the program – getting a routine again, getting up early, showing up and being here." Archie's biggest success was making a commitment to go every day. For learners like Roy, just getting up in the morning was an accomplishment. Melissa never missed a day. "Me and my son, we've not missed once in my life....It feels good that I managed that every day." For a number of learners, like Colin, Wendy and Cecilia, proving that they could "do it" (complete the program) was their biggest success. Nora was proud that she didn't get left behind, "[T]hat's quite an achievement for a mom of two kids." In one program, learners signed contracts, which Geraldine\* believed motivated learners.

All learners talked about the strong feeling of "community" that developed within each classroom. In many ways, the support from other learners contributed, at least in part, to some of

the outcomes that learners reported. For example, learners' support for each other enabled some learners to maintain their commitment and complete the program. Mary\* noted that learners wanted to help each other fulfil their ambitions, "Ask everybody... stick to the course, come to school, don't miss. It's like nobody gets left behind." Everyone worked together, "like a team." Friends woke each other up in the morning, helped with homework, and supported people when they were down. Russell viewed the new relationships as "a new support group" and believed that friendships formed there were "more lasting... There's a bond there." Paul felt that bond and related it to the common experiences Aboriginal learners have had. "Our parents and our grandparents went through such hardship in residential schools and boarding schools, so we can relate on some level. We all know that life isn't easy for each one of us." This support and empathy went a long way to helping people maintain their commitment, and many learners acknowledged that it would have been difficult to remain committed without that peer support.

Learners felt rewarded for their commitment when they finished the program. Jonas\*, for example, learned it wasn't easy to finish the program, and felt like crying when he did so because he was so happy. All learners felt that the ability to remain committed was an important outcome that would help them in the future.

### ***c) Attitude change***

Approximately 30% of learners reported that their attitudes to life, work and learning changed and were more positive. Esther had developed a more positive attitude and did not worry as much about her life. Russell\* felt he had a whole new outlook on life, "Coming back to school makes me feel more positive. I don't feel the same as I did last year. I don't even look at the world the same as I did last year, totally different." Going back to school helped learners like Jennifer realize what was important in their lives: in her case, it was her daughter. In terms of learning, Sara\*, for example, now reviewed her work, while another learner went back to fix mistakes she had made, something that neither woman would have done before.

Two female learners, in particular, changed their attitudes about the role of women. Elsie, an older learner, thought a woman was supposed to "stay home and be a mother." Cindy\*, who



was young when she got married, thought her husband would take care of her and provide for her. “Okay, this person is going to love me, take care of me, be there for me and help me raise kids, and I’ll be a stay-at-home mom until they get to school....Now I realize that life is about hard work and you need determination to keep going in every job.”

Taking part in ALBE programs broadened horizons for some of the learners. For example, when Esther went back to school she found out, “there’s so much more out there that I didn’t know about before....[Learning] just gives you a really good feeling inside.” Rose was a stay-at-home mom for many years, “[Y]ou just see four walls. Your whole life revolves around that, so being out and being around people has made me comfortable. It made me see that there is a whole other world out there....Being here opens up a door to a whole different way of life.” Russell wasn’t good in many subjects, but these subjects opened his eyes to a lot of things that were going on around him. Rose realized that education stretched her mind, and that learners were learning to learn, as well as learning the content of each subject area.

## **2) New practical skills for everyday life**

All learners felt they acquired new skills while they were in the program: from personal skills, to social skills, to academic skills, to economic skills. The skills they reported on tended to be those that made a difference in their own or someone else’s life. Learners often described their new skills in terms of practical things they could now do in their everyday lives, like reading and writing, or being able to help others. Esther, for example, began to take an interest in current affairs. Her worst subject in high school had been Social Studies, but as she learned about political and economic systems, she began to understand things she hadn’t understood before. “Now when I watch the news I get what they’re talking about and how it affects me. Before it was just, ‘Switch the channel, I’m not interested.’” Susie\* could help people in the community because she now felt she knew how to.

Learners reported that their return to school had a positive influence on their children and other family members. Fifteen learners were able to read to their children or grandchildren, something they had never done before. Gina expressed delight at her daughter’s reaction. “I

wouldn't have read to her before. I wouldn't have known any of those words in those books, but now I've got books and I read to her, and she likes it!" Betty and Katherine\* could now say "big words", which helped them read to younger family members. Cindy, a mother of three, met her own needs by reading her text books to her children. Occasionally, she'd read their own books.

Others could now help children with school work. Modelling doing homework and being able to help with homework were important skills to have acquired, particularly for moms. Mary Anne's\* skills made "a big difference" in her family because her daughter would come to her for help with homework, and with Math and problem solving. Geraldine's children saw her doing homework every day. Rena's daughter not only got help with her homework, she was also motivated by having her mother do homework with her. "If I hadn't come back to school I probably wouldn't have been able to[help her]...If I just told her to sit down and do her homework, she would probably fight with me a little bit, but when I'm doing it with her, she feels good about herself and it also motivates her." Susie saw changes in her children. "Going to school also changed my kids. They were happy that mom's going to school. Now it's making them confident in themselves that they can be like me." Everyone did homework together in Rosa's home. "I put music on and have tea. I am doing my work, [my children] have got their things out and it's good training." Learners also reported spending more time "playing" and "doing more things" with children.

Particularly in the small community-based program, learners reported that their new skills allowed them to contribute to both their families and the community. After learners learned to cook and bake, for example, different organizations hired them to cook for community events. As a result, they raised more than \$10,000 in one year for class trips to visit colleges in the NWT and Alberta – something they were extremely proud of. In addition, several learners started to cook healthier meals for their families, and many, including one man, continued to bake the instructor's "famous buns" even after they left the program. Other people in the community, like Elsie's friends and daughters, wanted the recipe for the buns and asked Elsie to teach them to make them. Another learner cooked stew, bannock, chilli and stir fry at the youth centre as a volunteer. When the local family literacy coordinator went on maternity leave, several learners

ran the program – a very positive experience for them. “I would never have done family literacy before coming back to school.” “I feel like I’m contributing to my community,” said another. One learner has since become the new coordinator, while others attend the sessions with their children.

Learning her Aboriginal language helped one mother teach her son her language. Being able to speak her language meant another learner was now able to translate for her mother-in-law at places like the doctor’s office, which had helped improve their relationship.

Several learners improved their organizational skills. They developed routines and became more organized, which they thought were positive skills for life, learning and work. Sara noted this change in her work and life. “It has helped me be more organized in terms of my work. And also my clothes! I usually just throw layers of clothes on, like a sweater over another sweater, and then pants over another pair of pants and then sweats, and two pairs of socks and shoes. Now I’m wearing just an ordinary little shirt and a sweater.”

While financial struggles were a common theme among learners, several learners actually felt that the financial struggles they faced when they went back to school enabled them to manage their money better, and to be able to develop a budget and to stick to it.

Some learners changed from being people who were looked down upon in the family or community to being role models for others. Archie’s example gave his brother the confidence to graduate. Bill, an older learner, thought he was seen as a role model for younger people in his community. Several learners’ partners enrolled in courses themselves. In fact, learners are perhaps the best advocates for returning to learning, a reflection of the successful outcomes (academic and non-academic) learners feel they have achieved through the programs.

### **3) Improved readiness for further education and employment**

All learners recognized that the skills they were acquiring would help them in the future,. Former learners, in particular, were quick to note the benefits they derived from attending an adult education program. Upgrading courses helped people like Robert, who went on to college, “I did really good in the college. I was top student in the course. I wouldn’t have done as well in

college if I hadn't come [to the learning centre]." Evelyn, who is now doing university science, wouldn't have picked the path she is currently on now if she hadn't attended the learning centre.

Often learners described themselves as "ready to work more." Lily, for example, had always been too embarrassed to ask for help with application forms: now she felt comfortable doing that. Several learners got jobs as a result of being in a program, while others went on to apprenticeships. Elsie obtained full-time employment at the seniors' home where she had job shadowed during the program. Marie now volunteered where she had job shadowed. Terry saw what he could do in the program and thought, "[M]aybe I could do that in the workforce." Cindy\* learned that coming to school on a daily basis and on time was part of life, and part of work. Going back to school changed Roy's life. "It changed my attitude to learning. I learned about teamwork. That's important for my job now." Learners, like Wendy, recognized that going back to school not only gave people opportunities to earn money, but also gave them valuable experience towards employment.

#### **4) Relationship building**

All learners referred to the importance of the relationships in their lives, whether within the program, their family, their workplace or the community generally. In many cases, learners felt that their relationships with others changed in positive ways, because they had improved people skills and communication skills. In some instances, learners reported that family relationships improved. Both Russell\* and Mary\*, for example, felt their families had become stronger. (In both cases, their families had relocated with them to where the program was held.) Other learners' families, like Sara's\* and Judy's, were proud of them, for finishing what they had started. Darlene's daughter thought her Mom was cool! "My daughter is pretty proud of me for coming back to school. Because I drive her to school every day, she thinks it's pretty cool that her Mom was also going to school." Sara's father, who had previously done well in the same program, took her out for supper. Jennifer felt her family appreciated her more, "They're happy for me, they think I'm actually going somewhere. I can see the change. I can feel it in the air. The atmosphere is so different. They look at you and say, 'Wow! This is my kid. Look at where she is now.'"

Learners talked about the stigma associated with having low levels of literacy and/or being unemployed or working in unskilled jobs. A few learners felt that attitudes of a few people in the community improved towards them. One learner thought people had previously looked down on him. He said to himself initially, “Wear my boots one day and see what it’s like.” Later, as a student, he no longer felt “degraded.” Eight learners talked about the pressure friends put on them to go out in the evening. Frank stood up to his friends, “Are you going to do all my homework? Can you not bother me until the weekend?” He believed that after that incident a lot of people looked up to him, and saw he was serious about improving his life. For five learners, however, changes in relationships were not all positive. Some, for example, lost friends, because they refused to be distracted. Paul, who had experienced this, thought it was because “you sort of become a hermit because of your education.”

Learners often suggested that they were at the place they were at today because of some of the non-academic outcomes they had achieved through the ALBE programs. This would appear to support Dewson’s (2000) view that non-academic outcomes are intermediary – that they measure progress towards more measurable outcomes like further education. There is no doubt that increased confidence, ability to remain committed, a positive attitude, the ability to do everyday things for yourself and problem solve, good people skills, and good communication skills, along with improved academic skills, go a long way in supporting people’s ability to go on to be successful in further education and training, or employment.

### **The instructors’ perspectives on non-academic outcomes**

We sought instructors’ perspectives on the non-academic outcomes their learners had acquired because we anticipated there might be some significant differences between what learners saw and what instructors saw, and we wanted to know what these differences might be. None of the instructors reviewed their learners’ stories before being interviewed for their perspectives. Two of the instructors knew their learners really well. The third was less familiar with his learners because he had been teaching them for a much shorter time. For the most part, the instructors’ perspectives on non-academic outcomes matched closely those of the learners.

In the campus program especially, the two perspectives correlated closely. This might have been because some of the learners and former learners were in the college for more than one year. However, the instructor tended to emphasize some areas, particularly the challenges that learners faced, more than the learners. One important area that she highlighted was the huge role many learners played in looking after extended family, and the additional responsibilities that brought. Learners often referred to extended family in the interviews, but did not emphasize the responsibilities as much as the instructor. This may be because it stands out for the instructor, whereas for Aboriginal learners it is “normal” to look after family: everyone does it. The instructor also noted that the legacy of residential schools, financial difficulties and childcare problems were huge issues for learners. In terms of non-academic outcomes, she emphasized how far learners had progressed, given the challenges they had to overcome. She underscored improved confidence and some of the things learners could do as a result of that, and the achievements of learners in being able to complete the program.

In the smaller community-based program, there were some differences between the instructor’s and the learners’ perspectives in terms of learners’ skill levels. Some of the learners who reported that they had completed Grade 12, had their skill levels assessed at a much lower level, for example in literacy, by the instructor. In that program, the instructor emphasized the achievements learners made in areas of improved self-confidence, Aboriginal language and culture, and community involvement.

In the third program, the instructor (who was less familiar with the learners) commented generally on the commitment of the learners and the challenges they had overcome.

It is not surprising to us that instructors recognized similar non-academic outcomes: these outcomes are familiar to many adult educators. However, what was surprising was how closely they correlated. Perhaps this was because all of the instructors were long-term northerners, who understood the northern context and the communities they worked in, as well as being committed educators.

## 7 What we learned

Many of the non-academic outcomes discussed in this report are ones that experienced practitioners know well, and other researchers have already identified, so most of them came as no surprise. This project is important for the NWT, however, because it has allowed us to document non-academic outcomes formally – for the first time, and, more importantly, from the learners’ perspectives. It also allowed us to reflect on the value of documenting these outcomes, as well as a possible process to document them.

Without exception, the learners we interviewed were hopeful and optimistic, despite the challenges many still faced. By returning to school and experiencing success – sometimes for the first time in a very long time, or ever – learners gained new hope. In many cases, these were individuals who previously had had little hope for a multitude of reasons, and who now saw that they would be able to make something of themselves. Adult basic education and literacy programs are often the first-step back into formal education for people who have multiple disadvantages. These programs play a key role in this transformation to hope, by giving adults a second chance. Hope is an important non-academic outcome that none of the learners mentioned, but all of them portrayed, and which the interviewers observed.

For years, researchers and experienced practitioners have argued that non-academic outcomes give a more well-rounded picture of learner achievement, which is complex and synergistic. Non-academic outcomes are an important part of that achievement: gains in non-academic outcomes support learning, and gains in learning enhance non-academic outcomes. Learners’ stories in this study reinforced that notion. Many referred to the progress they had made in academic subjects with pride, but their broader focus was on other achievements, especially the practical everyday things they were now able to do: they could read new words in their children’s storybooks; they got a job; they cooked healthy meals.

While we profess to believe in a learner-centred approach, learner assessment continues to be skills-based. By documenting non-academic outcomes, as well as academic outcomes, we are moving learning beyond the classroom into the learner’s real world. Without non-academic

outcomes we are short-changing learners on the overall gains they make as a result of attending a program.

## **Reflecting on learning in a non-threatening way is an empowering process**

We had hypothesized that reflecting on their own learning would be empowering for learners, so we asked both learners and instructors for feedback on the process to determine if that was, in fact, the case. Both groups overwhelmingly endorsed the process as empowering and thought it was effective. One learner, on returning to her class, told the instructor, “That was really empowering. I didn’t know I could do all these things.” Another reviewed her story, looked up in amazement and said, “I thought I was reading about someone else, and then I realized it was me! ME! I’m so excited.” One instructor told the interviewers that when the learners returned to class, they were excited and happy. Another read her learners’ stories and commented how great the stories were, how much she had enjoyed reading them, and how proud she was of the learners in her program.

## **The implications for policy and practice**

The findings from the study have important implications for assessing learner achievement. If, as Dewson (2000) argues, non-academic outcomes are intermediate, that is they are a measure of progress towards harder outcomes, then they are a vitally important part of measuring learner achievement. Progress cannot be measured simply by counting how many adults enrol in a program, or how often they attend class. Nor can it be measured only by the assessment of academic skills. It is incumbent on the adult education system to ensure that learners are not short-changed, that we recognize all the gains they have made, and that we link these gains to their real lives.

We need more discussion on how to help learners realize the strengths they already have and how to best recognize these skills. We also need to discuss what we recognize as learning within the formal education system; what we consider to be valued (and valid) outcomes; and



how we document those. We hope this report will stimulate dialogue on these topics within the adult education system among policy makers, service deliverers and learners.

Perhaps the thing we learned most was not about non-academic outcomes per se, but about the effort learners had to make to achieve them. Each learner brings strengths to the learning process, along with their own ways of knowing, doing, communicating and learning. The non-academic outcomes for each learner vary according to the learners' motivations, their starting points, their strengths and challenges, the pace at which they progress, their feelings of success, and so on. It is relatively easy to say "so and so has increased self-confidence," for example, but that is only part of the story. It is much harder to measure and convey the distance learners have travelled.

Only a small percentage of adults with low levels of English literacy skills enrolls in ALBE programs, and, when they do, it is often difficult to retain them. The legacy of residential schooling that affects both families and communities in the NWT adds greatly to the complexity and dynamics of learning here, and affects the outcomes – both academic and non-academic – that learners achieve. The recent apology from the Government of Canada has enabled the healing from the pain of residential schooling to begin, but it will take many years (perhaps generations) before some people are able to move on. The learners we interviewed, with all their challenges, were those who had overcome adversity and were successful. They understood the intensity of the pain people were suffering and were prepared to support each other through the healing process.

We can expect that it will continue to be difficult to recruit and retain learners. Some learners will enrol in our programs and then drop out because the challenges for them are too great to overcome. We need to acknowledge this is the case, avoid being judgmental about something most of us have neither experienced nor can comprehend, and provide as much support as possible to meet the needs of adults in this situation. Perhaps this study will give us insights into why we struggle to recruit and retain learners with lower levels of literacy by

providing us with a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of learner achievement in this context.

## 8 A framework for the future

Given the importance of non-academic outcomes, they should be an integral part of any adult literacy and basic education program. As Dewson (2000) said, “It’s simply good practice” (p. 3). To this end, we recommend that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment in the Northwest Territories, along with Aurora College, make the documenting of non-academic outcomes an integral part of learner assessment.

We believe strongly that it is empowering for learners to reflect on their learning. We asked learners to reflect on where they started from and where they had arrived at, at that point in time, so that they could assess for themselves how far they had come. We were developing and field-testing an approach which adult educators could potentially use to assess non-academic outcomes. We used a narrative approach, which we had believed would be effective, given the participants. As part of the study, we asked the instructors a series of questions about the process: *How appropriate was the concept of a metaphor, particularly the metaphor of a journey? How effective was it? How can we improve on it? How easy was this approach to use?* They endorsed the approach as very effective. They thought the metaphor of a journey made it easy for learners to talk about their learning, and were pleased that we did not use a question and answer format, which two of them thought would be too structured and limiting. They thought the approach would have been better, if we had been able to do it twice in one academic year. All the instructors thought the approach was somewhat time-consuming for the interviewers.

We agree that the process was time consuming, but this is not the only approach practitioners can use. Other approaches might involve the use of multi-media tools (e.g video recordings), the use of learner portfolios, journals, or surveys or questionnaires (where appropriate). Perhaps learners can even be involved in interviewing each other. Battell (2001) noted that the act of documenting non-academic outcomes was more important than the technique used, and we agree with her.

What we have developed here is a starting point for a framework for documenting non-academic outcomes. The framework is intended as a guide only. We expect that policy makers and service providers will discuss this to develop their own more detailed approach.

## Principles

- Non-academic outcomes are an integral part of the learning process.
- Learners must be involved in documenting learning outcomes.
- Recognizing prior learning and experience ensures a strength-based approach.

## Benefits of documenting non-academic outcomes

Many benefits accrue to learners (and the program) when learning outcomes include non-academic outcomes.

- Documenting non-academic outcomes provides a more rounded and complete picture of learner progress.
- Documenting non-academic outcomes links learning with the real world.
- Documenting non-academic outcomes ensures learners are able to demonstrate to employers they have skills, like confidence and communication skills, as well as academic skills.
- Documenting non-academic outcomes may be key indicators of success for learners who face multiple challenges and may make slow progress academically.

## Outcomes and indicators

It is possible to group non-academic outcomes in many different ways. The grouping we developed here is based on the findings from the study. We have also included examples of indicators.

<b>Types of Outcomes</b>	<b>Possible Indicators</b>
<p>Personal development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Confidence and self-esteem</li><li>○ Commitment</li><li>○ Attitude</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• More able to speak out or stand up for themselves</li><li>• More able to present themselves better</li><li>• More independent</li><li>• More able to handle challenges</li><li>• More of a risk taker</li><li>• More relaxed</li><li>• More open</li><li>• Happier</li><li>• Healthier</li><li>• More mature (for younger learners)</li><li>• Improved relationships</li><li>• Less worried</li><li>• Better understanding of what’s important in their lives</li><li>• More motivated</li><li>• Recognize strengths as well as weaknesses</li><li>• More open to learning</li><li>• More able and willing to help others</li><li>• More careful with their work, not afraid to make mistakes</li><li>• Attend regularly</li><li>• Punctual</li></ul>

Improved practical skills for everyday life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family involvement               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Able to manage money</li> <li>○ Able to be involved in their children’s learning (reading to them, helping with homework)</li> <li>○ More organized</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Community involvement               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Take part in community events</li> <li>○ Attend community meetings</li> <li>○ Vote in elections</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Everyday skills               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Able to fill out forms, and/or ask for help</li> <li>○ Able to access information e.g. from the health centre</li> <li>○ Able to talk to the teacher or social worker</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Improved ability to build relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved interpersonal skills</li> </ul>
Readiness for further education and employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpersonal skills</li> <li>• Communication skills</li> <li>• Able to work in teams</li> <li>• Able to cope with challenges</li> <li>• Able to problem solve</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Examples of non-academic outcomes and indicators**

The principles, benefits and examples outlined above are not intended to be comprehensive, but rather a starting point for further dialogue.

## Conclusion

This study gave learners a voice. It provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their achievements and feel positive about them. Without exception, they told us the project was worthwhile. In turn, their insights were worthwhile for us, and, we would like to think, valuable for the adult education system in the Northwest Territories, as well as for other places in similar situations.

We hope this study leads to serious consideration of how non-academic outcomes can contribute to a fuller picture of learner achievement. Our vision is that before too long adult educators will be reporting on non-academic outcomes, just as they currently report on academic outcomes, and that learners will understand the full extent of their achievements.

Rose thought people should be told the positive things about going back to school, the possibilities and what it can actually do for them. She also recognized that not everyone would be able to make it, “It could change their lives... There might be seven people that quit that really don’t do anything with it. But even if there is one person that did something with it, it’s worth it. If you inspire somebody to do something with their life, that’s worth it... You can’t save everybody.”

We want to say “Thank you very much,” “Mahsi cho,” “Quanaqpiaqtit” to all the learners who shared their stories with us. It was a privilege to work on this project with them. As we listened to learners recounting the challenges they had overcome and still faced, we felt extremely humbled, as well as awed by the strength people could summon in adversity. And as we heard about their successes we celebrated with them. We also want to thank the instructors for so enthusiastically embracing this project, and for helping us fit our rather tight time schedule.

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## Appendix A: Information Sheet for Educators

Statistics show Aboriginal learners perform well below non-Aboriginal populations, in school attainment and tests of adult literacy. Yet, Aboriginal learners in adult literacy and basic education (ALBE) programs, who are impacted by the legacy of residential schooling, make many more gains than such statistics would suggest. Adult educators cite personal, social, and economic, as well as academic, changes in their learners. Non-academic outcomes, such as improved self-confidence, have been shown to have a strong correlation with learning, yet they are often ignored, partly because of the difficulties inherent in documenting them. Despite that, a number of studies have explored non-academic outcomes and recommend that more work needs to be done in this area.

This study explores non-academic outcomes among current and former Aboriginal learners in three ALBE programs in the Northwest Territories (NWT). It builds on a recent study of Aboriginal learning and literacy in the NWT by incorporating principles of Aboriginal literacies into the research methodology. These include **multi-modal; storied; symbolic; holistic; remembered; relational; experiential; and metaphorical**. We use the metaphor of a journey, a metaphor that is commonly used to describe learning in Aboriginal communities. We ask learners to tell the story of their learning journey and to represent it visually. We will compare learners' perspectives on their achievements with those of instructors to determine similarities and differences. We will develop a profile of each individual learner, along with a composite profile of non-academic outcomes in the NWT. This project is a pilot project that will test the metaphor and storied approach. If it proves effective, as we anticipate, we will create a tool using the approach, and a training plan, so that other adult educators in the NWT and elsewhere will be able to use the tool in their programs.

## Appendix B: Information Sheet for learners

Think of a journey you've been on!

- Where did you go?
- Why did you go there?
- Where did you leave from?
- What places did you pass?
- What did you take with you?
- Did you run into any obstacles?
- How far did you go?

What would you tell people who are going on the same journey?

Think about the journey you're on now – your learning journey. And think about these same kinds of questions. That's really what this project is about.

This is a research project that will give learners (past and present) an opportunity to tell stories about their learning journey. We want to know about your journey but we especially want to know what the outcomes of your journey were. What did you learn along the way? We're not just talking about how much English or Math you learned. We want to know what other things you achieved. Are you more confident? Do you help your children with their homework more than you did before? And so on. We're also hoping you might give us something visual that describes your journey—a drawing or a collage, for example.

Once we have the information from everyone, we're going to develop a picture of each learner, as well as a picture of learners across the NWT. The NWT Literacy Council and the instructor from your ALBE program will be working with you on this. We're excited about hearing stories from learners in different communities.

## Appendix C: Interview Framework

### Prompts with Questions

- **Map**

- Why did you want to go on this journey?
- Where did you want to go?
- Where did you start from?
- What markers did you pass along the way?
- Did you change your route? Why?



- **Duffle bag**

- What did you start with?
- What did you need that you didn't have?
- What did you add along the way?



- **Collage of plane, train, bus, truck, backpacker**

- How fast did you go?
- Were you satisfied with your progress?



- **Photo of brick wall**

- What obstacles did you run into?
- How did you overcome them?



- **Photo of Successful Person**

- Where did you get to?
- What changes did you make along the way?



## Appendix D: Storying Progress Learner Information Sheet

Thank you for answering these questions. We want to “paint a picture” of the learners. However, all the information you provide will be anonymous.

1. Which community do you live in? Please circle your community.

Fort Providence

Inuvik

Yellowknife

2. What age are you? Please circle the number that describes you.

16-20 years

21-25 years

26-30 years

31-35 years

36-40 years

41 or over

3. Are you male or female? Please circle the one that describes you.

Male

Female

4. Which group do you belong to? Please circle the one that describes you.

Dene

Metis

Inuit

Non-aboriginal

5. What is your first language? Please circle the one that describes you.

Aboriginal language (Which language?) \_\_\_\_\_

English

Other (Which language?) \_\_\_\_\_

6. Do you speak another language? Please circle the one that describes you.

Aboriginal language (Which language?) \_\_\_\_\_

English

Other (Which language?) \_\_\_\_\_

7. What was the last grade you attended in grade school? Please circle the one that describes you.

Less than Grade 9

Grade 10

Grade 11

Grade 12

8. Are you in an adult program now? Please circle the one that describes you.

Yes

No

9. What type of adult program are you in now or were you in? Please circle the one that describes you.

ALBE

Pre-employment training

Access Program

Other (Please write the name of the program.) \_\_\_\_\_

10. How long have you attended or did you attend this program? Please circle the one that describes you?

Less than one year

1 year

2 years

3 years

More than 3 years

11. Do you have a partner? Please circle the one that describes you.

Yes

No

12. How many children do you have? Please circle the one that describes you.

0

1

2

3

4

5

More than 5 (Please write the number.) \_\_\_\_\_

13. How old are your children? \_\_\_\_\_

14. How would you describe your family income? Please circle the one that best describes your family.

Less than \$20,000



\$21,000 - \$30,000

\$31,000 - \$40,000

\$41,000 - \$50,000

More than \$50,000

15. Do you have a paid job? Please circle the one that describes you.

Yes (Please write what your job is.) \_\_\_\_\_

No

16. Do you belong to any organizations (for example, church, sports, etc.)? Please circle the one that describes you.

Yes (Which ones?) \_\_\_\_\_

No

**Thank you for your information.**

## Appendix E: Consent Form

In this research project, we want to know what adults learn when they are in an adult education program. To find out, we will collect stories from learners (past and present) about their learning journey.

We are inviting you to take part in this project. Here is how the project works:

- We (your instructor and Helen Balanoff from the NWT Literacy Council) will introduce the project to everyone in a small group—about 1-2 hours.
- Then Helen will interview you individually—about 1 hour.
- Finally, we will meet together to hear what everyone thinks—about 2 hours. That may help you to add to what you said earlier.
- If you want to, you can also illustrate your journey by drawing a picture or making a collage, or any other way that you can think of.

We will record the interviews on audio and video tapes, and then write down what you said. All the information you give us will be confidential. At any time during the project, if you don't want to be a part of it, all you have to do is tell your instructor. She will talk to you about what you want us to do with any information you have already given us. We will use these interviews:

- To develop an outline, of each learner's challenges and successes
- To develop an outline of successes for the whole NWT

Before we publish anything you will have a chance to review it to make sure it is what you said. The research team will not use the interviews and images for any other purpose without your permission. By taking part in the project, you will be helping other learners to learn from your experiences. You will also be helping many people to understand the benefits of adult education programs.

If you have any concerns or questions about this project, you can ask your instructor or contact Helen at this address:

Helen Balanoff  
NWT Literacy Council  
Box 761  
Yellowknife, NT X1A 2P6.  
Phone (Toll free): 1-866-599-6758  
Fax: (867) 873-2176  
Email: helen@nwtliteracy.ca

If you are willing to take part in the project, we would like you to sign below.

-----

**The researchers have told me about the project. I understand its goals and how they will use the information I provide. I am willing to take part in the project.**

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*I agree to use the information as we have explained above.*

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Community:**

**Interviewer:**

**Participant:**

## Appendix F: Release Form

This is a draft of the story you told to the NWT Literacy Council a few months ago about going back to school. The Literacy Council would like to publish your story. Please read over the choices you have, and circle the answer you want.

1. I have read over my interview.

Yes                  No

2. Do you want to make some changes?

Yes                  No

If you want to make some changes, please talk to Helen or Jill.

3. It's OK for the NWT Literacy Council to publish my story.

Yes                  No

4. It's OK for the Literacy Council to use my name with the story.

Yes                  No

5. I've seen my photo. It's OK for the Literacy Council to put my photo with my story.

Yes                  No

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

