

RETENTION OF ABORIGINAL ABE STUDENTS

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ADULT BASIC EDUCATION RETENTION IN NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN:
SUGGESTED SUPPORTS AND STRATEGIES

By

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Abstract

This document involves an exploration of possible supports and strategies that could increase the retention of Aboriginal Adult Basic Education (ABE) students residing in Northern Saskatchewan. The document begins with an exploration of ABE literature that provides a theoretical basis (psychological, sociological, and economic) for understanding the issue of student retention in ABE programs, followed by a discussion of selected demographics of Northern Saskatchewan residents and the specific hurdles faced by Northern Saskatchewan Aboriginal ABE learners. These cultural, social, contextual, and demographic realities are then woven in with the theoretical underpinnings presented in the first section, to establish the rationale for the proposed supports and strategies for Northern Saskatchewan Aboriginal ABE students. These supports and strategies include the inclusion of family into the learning environment, the development of mentorship programs, the provision of counseling services, and changes to current funding models.

Adult Basic Education Retention in Northern Saskatchewan:
Suggested Supports and Strategies

The economic and educational landscape in Canada has undergone sweeping changes in the past twenty years, necessitating an increased need for literacy skills, in addition to the minimum requirement of a grade twelve diploma for entry into many careers (Pavan Kumar, 2009). Within the Saskatchewan landscape, access to and completion of these basic educational requirements have not been equitable for all citizens. In Northern Saskatchewan, 85% of the citizens self-identify as Aboriginal, with less than 50% of Northern students earning a grade twelve diploma (Conference Board of Canada, 2011; Irvine, Quinn & Stockdale, 2011) in comparison to the general Saskatchewan population achieving an 84 % graduation rate (Young, 2014). This educational inequality exists as a result of historical, colonial, cultural, and geographic factors which together serve to marginalize Aboriginal learners in Northern Saskatchewan and which contribute to the struggle to achieve educational and economic success (Malatest, 2002; Pavan Kumar, 2009; Richards & Scott, 2009). As a result of the low graduation rates, the Northern Saskatchewan population relies on Adult Basic Education (ABE)¹ programming to increase the educational attainment of those who failed to graduate within the mainstream system. For the sake of this document, ABE refers to all levels of adult learning up until Adult 12 (Grade 12). Examples of such ABE programs include Basic Literacy, Adult 10 and Adult 12 programs. Traditionally speaking, ABE programs are plagued with issues relating to high student drop out rates, with an estimated 50-70% of adults entering ABE programs dropping out before they reach either their personal goal or course completion (Dickinson, 1996; DuBois & Fitzgerald, 1989; Garrison, 1985; Learner Retention, 2013; Saskatchewan Action

Research Network (SARN), 2013; Watson, 1983). Current research findings related to the persistence of ABE students include psychological, sociological, and economic factors as forces that impact ABE completion, but fall short of providing specific suggestions and strategies applicable to Aboriginal student retention in Northern Saskatchewan. The populations included in these studies are so dissimilar to the Northern experience that they cannot account for the specific context and lived experiences of Northern Aboriginal students (Garrison, 1985; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Hansman & Mott, 2010). With this in mind, this essay will seek to answer the following research question: What supports and strategies are suggested by current research that could be used to enable Aboriginal adults to complete ABE courses in Northern Saskatchewan ABE programs? In order to answer this question, this essay will begin with an analysis of existing theoretical frameworks that contribute to an understanding of ABE retention. This analysis will then be integrated with the historical, social, and cultural aspects of the Northern Saskatchewan Aboriginal population. Such an exercise will lead next to a discussion of specific supports and strategies that could be included with (or encompassed within) the delivery of Northern Saskatchewan ABE courses to maximize the effects of Aboriginal student persistence and thereby increase completion rates.

Defining the Issue

Saskatchewan has been experiencing an economic boom characterized by an increased demand for skilled and knowledge-based employees who have at least a grade twelve education. As a result of the need for educated workers, the Government of Saskatchewan has sought to promote increased educational attainment for second chance learners by providing more ABE funding (Government of Saskatchewan, 2014). While the increased funding is a positive step for

supporting ABE programs in Saskatchewan, it is important to note that the improved funding so far has not positively affected the attrition rates in ABE classrooms (SARN, 2013).

As stated in the introduction, Northern Saskatchewan is unique as a result of the high (and increasing) preponderance of Aboriginal learners (Painter, Lendsay & Howe, n.d.). Consequently, it is in Saskatchewan's best interest to provide adequate supports to Northern Saskatchewan Aboriginal ABE learners to better ensure that this increasing segment of Saskatchewan's population achieves educational success so as to be in a position to take advantage of the economic and social benefits of the booming economy (Painter, Lendsay & Howe, n.d.). Although educational achievement levels for Aboriginals have increased in recent years, Richards & Scott (2009) found that Aboriginal students with university educated parents were more likely to succeed in school, whereas those whose parents did not have a university education were more likely to be unsuccessful. This reality makes it imperative that educators and policy makers alike seek ways to support increased Aboriginal educational achievement in Northern Saskatchewan with the hope that such supports will result in greater educational achievement. A rise in educational achievement would foster both increased achievements for subsequent generations and increased socio-economic status within the region (Richards & Scott, 2009).

The Literature Search

The initial literature search explored sources from Canada and the United States that included: (1) retention of ABE students; (2) retention of Aboriginal high school and university students; (3); cultural elements of Northern Aboriginal population; and (4) selected demographics and socio-economic makeup of Northern Saskatchewan. Research found from this initial search were made into notes that focused on overarching themes and similarities

brought forth through these initial research documents. These notes were then further analyzed through disciplinary lenses, resulting in the emergence four existing disciplines: (1) Adult education; (2) Sociology; (3) Psychology; and (4) Indigenous Studies. These disciplines were then researched in relation to themes that emerged about Aboriginal and Adult education that led to the establishment of an underlying theoretical understanding of ABE & ABE retention. These theoretical understandings informed the supports and strategies proposed for Aboriginal ABE students that incorporates the cultural/contextual, and historical realities of Aboriginal ABE students in Northern Saskatchewan.

The ABE Learner and Persistence

For the sake of this essay, the definition of ABE includes a broad continuum of education that extends from basic literacy, Adult 10, Adult 12, and General Educational Development (GED) preparation (Zafft, Kallenbach & Spohn, 2006). Adult 10 and Adult 12 differ from high school qualifications in so far as pre-requisites are not required for the credit to be granted, and can therefore be completed in a shorter amount of time than traditional Grade 10 or Grade 12 courses. In considering this definition of ABE, persistence and retention refers to adults engaging and completing the various levels of ABE education as defined by the student's completion of the program in which they are enrolled (ie: Adult 12, literacy course, Adult 10, etc.).

Understanding the ABE Learner

ABE students are unique and experience different barriers to learning than do students in mainstream education systems. The conventional ABE learner faces numerous barriers that affects their decision to return to school, and, once they have returned to school, that affects their ability to complete their ABE programs. In exploring barriers for ABE and adult learners, Quigley (1998) and Cross (1981) referred to three kinds of barriers: dispositional, situational,

and institutional. Although Cross (1981) was not specifically referring to ABE learners, but rather to the adult learner in general, the barriers identified do inform the discussion about ABE learners.

Dispositional barriers encompass the individually held beliefs and perceptions of oneself as a learner that are formed by the student's psychosocial contexts, which are typically defined by the student's prior (often negative) experiences with mainstream educational systems (Dickinson, 1996; McDonald, 2003). Situational barriers refer to the individual's life context that can include lack of time, money, transportation, childcare, or addictions, to name a few (McDonald, 2003). Lastly, institutional barriers are created by the established institution(s) through which ABE programs are offered. These barriers can include class schedules, location of courses, and program/curricular offerings.

Within adult education literature, situational barriers have been found to be less easily mitigated at the level of the school, instructor, or support staff, while institutional and dispositional barriers can be addressed through policies and programs that are created at the institutional/college/classroom level (Quigley, 1998).

ABE Persistence from the Psychological and Sociological Perspective

At the most basic level, ABE participation and persistence in learning activities is theorized through Boshier's (1973) congruence model that looks to an incongruence between the self and other (Garrison, 1987). According to this model, when a participant's self-concept and key aspects (largely people) of the educational environment align, they will persist to complete a learning program. This alignment is depicted by their ability to maintain "inner harmony with himself [sic] and his [sic] environment" (Garrison, 1987, p. 213). Hence, an individual's psychological construct, that includes motivation, self-esteem, self-concept, locus of control, and

persistence, all point to the learner's personal harmony with their environment that enables course completion (Boshier, 1973; Dickinson, 1996; Garrison, 1987; Quigley, 1998;).

Boshier's (1973) psychological congruence model is further developed by the sociological perspective by pulling from social role theory and Reitzes (2003) social role constructs that influences an adult's engagement in life and productive activities. Reitzes' role constructs include: (1) role satisfaction; (2) commitment to the role; (3) role salience; (4) role centrality; (5) identity meanings (as cited in Smith & Taylor, 2010). While Reitzes' (2003) writing was not specific to learning as he focused on engagement from a social role theory perspective, the five psychological constructs identified by Reitzes (2003) point to the need to have the adult learner comfortable with their role and identity as an adult learner. Consequently, it is the learner's ability to accept and integrate their diverse social roles, that includes the individual's educational, social, geographical, and cultural realities (Merriam & Brockett, 2007; Reitzes, 2003; Smith & Taylor, 2010) that influences in part, whether they will persist to completion.

In considering Boshier's congruence model (1973) and Reitzes' (2003) social role constructs, it is important to note that many ABE learners do not enter the classroom possessing the psychological constructs and congruence required to successfully complete ABE programs. As a result, it is recommended that psychological, goal, and career counseling be part of every program to support individual alignment with their new student role, by encouraging students to engage with the required psychological steps to achieve their educational goal and role satisfaction (Dickinson, 1996; Smith & Taylor, 2010; Reitzes, 2003).

From a sociological perspective, one overarching theory for understanding the retention, persistence, and success of ABE students is social capital theory (Albertini, 2009; Butterwick &

Egan, 2010). Social capital theory explores the societal and structural relations of personal and social relationships through the lens of material and symbolic exchanges by analyzing how these relations impact engagement in social systems (Albertini, 2009; Bourdieu, 1986; Butterwick & Egan, 2010). Individuals and groups obtain social capital through agents of influence that are defined by the relationships that exist along family, community, economic, and political lines (Albertini, 2009; Bourdieu, 1986). Strawn (2003) identifies three measurements of social capital that include: (1) underlying organization of networks that structure social interaction; (2) processes of exchange that build trust; and (3) presence of associations (Strawn, 2003). Hence, from the social capital perspective, the numbers and types of associations and personal/organizational networks possessed by a student will influence their ability to engage with social systems, and in the case of ABE, the networks available to students enable, or lack of which disables, their ability to complete ABE programming.

In applying social capital theory to the ABE settings, it has been found that familial associations and activities have a strong influence on ABE completion rates; when traditional family activities do not include educational activities, students are less likely to successfully engage in the ABE process (Strawn, 2003). As a result, the familial activities and associations of ABE students can play a large part in a student's persistence in ABE programs (DuBois & Fitzgerald, 1989). Furthermore, the role of the family extends beyond family ties and embraces the entire community and the norms of the community. When the norms of the school, teachers, families, and students echo the norms of the larger community, students tend to perform better in school, thereby increasing their persistence and success in ABE or other educational programs (Albertini, 2009; Coleman, 2011). Additionally, making links to the external community is also important where there exists both bonding and bridging functions to social capital (Albertini,

2009; Narayan, 1999). Bonding functions refer to the community's and cultural group's social networks, whereas bridging functions make links to networks external to one's immediate community (Albertini, 2009; Narayan, 1999). For example, having close family ties and bonds would be an example of bonding functions, whereas having links to various social services, community members, and community organizations outside one's immediate social (family, friends, immediate community) and cultural circle would be an example of bridging functions. Consequently, having close community connections and established community norms are important, where both these entities are strengthened through strong internal and external community network ties.

ABE Persistence and the Economic Perspective

The economic point of view frames educational attainment through human capital theory (Reese, 2013). Human capital theory draws from rational choice theory and rational action theory (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Coleman, 2011; Reese, 2013). These theories assume that individuals have the capacity to make rational decisions based on calculations that assess the benefits through a cost-benefit analysis (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Reese, 2013). This view illuminates how students frame and assess their current financial and social circumstances with the possibility of future circumstances, where investment in further education is required for skill development and productivity (Coleman, 2011; "The Basics of Human Capital Theory", n.d.). Essentially, the economics perspective relates to adult education under the concepts of: (1) skills; (2) productivity; (3) costs; (4) benefits; and (5) liabilities.

Human capital theory is based on the assumption that individual actors make decisions based on their current resources by examining the present value and future return (Sauer & Zagler, 2011). Within the Northern Saskatchewan ABE context, the majority of students enroll

with the hopes of continuing on with their education with the final goal of eventually obtaining employment so they can adequately provide for their families. As such, inequalities exist because various social "actors" (i.e. students) do not possess the adequate resources (financial, social, psychological) to pursue education. This view helps explain the current disparities in persistence that exist with Northern Saskatchewan ABE students, as student's current resources may be insufficient to provide the support and skills required for successful ABE completion.

Northern Saskatchewan: Demographics and Historical Influences

As cited in the introduction, Northern Saskatchewan Aboriginal ABE students exhibit specific demographic, socio-economic, and historical realities of the region. In addition to the low graduation rates (less than 50%) and the high concentration of Aboriginal people (85% of the population), Northern Saskatchewan is considered to be one of the five poorest regions in Canada with an annual median income of \$13,600 (Poverty Free Saskatchewan, 2010). From these statistics, it can be concluded that the majority of Northern residents (predominantly Aboriginal) are living in poverty (Poverty Free Saskatchewan, 2010; Langen, 2013). While it is difficult to find specific statistics in regards to the number of Northern Saskatchewan residents relying on social assistance due to the combination of federal (on reserve) and provincial (off reserve) systems for providing social assistance to the region, it can be concluded, based on the low median income and personal experience with students, that the majority of ABE students are relying on social assistance when they enter the ABE program.

The economic and social realities for the Aboriginal population in Northern Saskatchewan are the direct result of colonialism. Up until 1944 the region existed in relative isolation from the rest of the province with a distinctive culture, society, and economy (Quiring, 2002). After 1944, the Government of Saskatchewan destroyed many of the Aboriginal

economic and social systems through assimilative policies and practices, resulting in the current struggle to build a workable new society and economy (Quiring, 2002). All of this change has contributed to the poverty and social dysfunction so visible in Northern Saskatchewan (Quiring, 2002).

As a result of these historical colonial forces, combined with its geographic isolation, the Aboriginal population in Northern Saskatchewan is marginalized, and largely excluded from the economic prosperity of Canada (Barsh, n.d.), a fact that deepens feelings of exclusion, rejection, and powerlessness in Aboriginal communities. Furthermore, due to economic and perceived and real racial marginalization, there is high degree of bonding social capital within Aboriginal groups and communities (Mignone, 2009), but there is a lack of bridging social capital that is reflected in the exclusion of the Aboriginal population from other socio-economic groups and activities in the North (Narayan, 1999). As a result, within the northern Saskatchewan context, many of the supports and strategies that will be outlined in the coming sections center around the need to facilitate the formation of cross cutting ties between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups to create opportunities for those belonging to the less powerful or excluded groups (Aboriginal) to benefit and be included in economic and social prosperity (Narayan, 1999).

From the psychological perspective, the legacy of Eurocentric education, colonialism, and residential schools in Saskatchewan has resulted in low self-esteem and a general apathy and mistrust towards education (Berry, 1999; Pavan Kumar, 2009); there is an inability to maintain harmony with the Aboriginal learner and their educational environment (Garrison, 1987). As a result, when the Aboriginal student enters the classroom, academics are not the only hurdles; they must also attend to the inherent institutional racism that built classroom practices and that

also exist at the systemic/organizational level, where both these levels of institutional racism have an impact on educational completion and success (Smith & Taylor, 2010).

Supports and Strategies

As it can be seen from the previous sections, the barriers for Aboriginal ABE are more pronounced than with most other groups, as the gap in educational achievement includes historical, contextual cultural, individual, personal, and systematic barriers (EKOS, 2010). This behooves educators and policy makers alike to develop programs specific to the needs of these students that respect and build upon cultural values and community strengths, while also providing adequate supports to increase the learner's feelings of belonging and create new relationships that increase the learner's social capital (EKOS, 2010).

Psychological and Sociological Supports

First and foremost, traditional educational systems tend to be individualistic and fragmented; the whole person (body, mind, and spirit) and community/familial relationships are isolated from the educational endeavors of the classroom. This disjointed and individualized system works in direct opposition to traditional Aboriginal cultural beliefs that center on the importance of family and community, and the interconnectedness and holistic nature of the world (Pavan Kumar, 2009). Such beliefs are reflected in Pidgeon's (2014) interviews with Aboriginal graduate students at the University of British Columbia, where it was found that when Aboriginal students tell their stories of educational success, they accentuate the connections between their success, their family, their geographical location, and their cultural group; successful students recognize the whole person that includes their surrounding relationships. This identification embraces traditional Aboriginal culture that, in the words of an Aboriginal

elder, “taught you to look at the world in a holistic way” (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000, p. 51).

To apply this holistic worldview to an ABE program, the entire person needs to be embraced, including the student’s family and community ties. From a practical standpoint, this includes inviting members of the student’s family into the ABE classroom and creating the space for the student’s family to buy into the importance of the program. As brought forth in the section on social capital, family is central to student success because educational success depends on the conditions of the family and familial support (Castellano, 2002; Dickinson, 1996; DuBois & Fitzgerald, 1989; Johnsson & Hojer, 2012; Strawn, 2003). Henceforth, inviting the family into the ABE classroom can lead to open discussions about the type of support required for the student to further their educational success. Furthermore, the importance of familial support and the involvement of family in the ABE classroom is even more crucial in considering Aboriginal students because of the generational mistrust of some students towards Westernized educational systems based on the history of colonialism and residential schools (Berry, 1999; Butterwick & White, 2006). Making the educational environment welcoming to family allows family to embrace the importance of educational success, thereby promoting greater harmony for the student between themselves and their familial environment that could lead to a greater chance of course completion (Garrison, 1987). Opening up the ABE classroom to families serves three purposes: (1) it embraces the Aboriginal worldview of the interdependence of individuals and families; (2) it recognizes the generational mistrust of Westernized education systems, and (3) recognizes the importance of family to ABE success as suggested by researchers within the field (Albertini, 2009). However, it is important to note that this recommendation is made on the assumption that families want to be included in the ABE experience. As such, the institution and

faculty must be prepared for the fact that not all families will want to participate in such activities.

In hosting these family days, the events should center on traditional cultural activities that pull from the knowledge sets of the families and students, thereby creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment for families. A study in British Columbia that focused on the K-12 system found that hosting events for Aboriginal families that incorporated traditional/cultural activities helped remove the barriers between the family and the education system (Malatest, 2002). Thus, in working to include families in the educational system, it is important that such events work “outside the [school] box”, which can be accomplished by seeking to deliver programming and supports in an innovative and culturally supportive manner (Malatest, 2002, p. 23). Making such events culturally inclusive by pulling from the knowledge of the local Aboriginal community and the students where they become the main resources and experts (Malatest, 2002) is key. Shifting the power from the school to the students and their families in planning these programs helps break down the racial barriers as well as the psychological barriers of not belonging and solidifies the student’s role as learner and expert within the classroom, thereby contributing to the student’s self-esteem and self-concept in relation to the educational environment (Pirbhai-Illich, 2011).

Embracing the holistic worldview also requires that educational institutions in the North recognize the psychological and spiritual needs of their clientele, which can occur through the inclusion of counseling services for ABE students (Dickinson, 1996). While the individual institutions do not need to necessarily employ counselors to provide such services, instructors and support staff need to be working as student advocates, making referrals to external community resources and providing students with assistance in accessing and engaging with

these resources (Butterwick & White, 2006). How these external resources are comprised (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) is dependent on what is available within the wider community. Making such ties to resources in the external community increases student's bridging capital by creating a larger community of support for the students.

Additionally, counseling services should also exist to provide learners with specific career goals related to their educational endeavors; ABE students need to see the importance of education in achieving their future goals and a feeling of hope about their future. Research shows that having specific goals, a defined plan, and identifying potential barriers to these goals, can aid ABE students in staying in the program (Dickinson, 1996; NCSALL, n.d). A report published by Alberta Education (n.d.) indicated that Aboriginal learners require assistance in setting goals and developing a plan to achieve these goals. In developing such plans, there is a need to change and alter this plan several times throughout the year through ongoing career counseling to identify possible barriers to goal achievement (Alberta Education, n.d.; Dickinson, 1996). Such practices need to be made mandatory for all students, where the counseling is integrated and worked into every ABE program to better ensure that educational plans align with students' goals, thereby increasing the perceived relevancy of the program for students' future goals.

In discussing the importance of counseling, it should be noted that counseling need not only include support staff within the college and counseling experts; local Aboriginal and peer mentors can also provide psychological support. Within the mainstream K-12 system, the Ministry of Education in Saskatchewan introduced the Elder/Outreach Program that connected schools to Elders, Community Outreach Workers and Cultural Advisors (Berry, 1999; Saskatchewan Learning, 2001). The Ministry of Education found that having access to Elders increased Aboriginal students' "sense of belonging, which results in higher self-esteem, higher

academic achievement, and a lower transiency rate” (Saskatchewan Learning, 2001, p. 4). Such an approach would require that institutions offering ABE programs employ Elders, who would then work with instructors, support staff, and individual students to better ensure that the needs of students are being met at the cultural, spiritual, psychological, and academic level.

Furthermore, having a respected community Elder within the institution increases the learner’s self-concept by creating an environment that demonstrates valuing the knowledge of Aboriginal peoples, thereby increasing the likelihood that the students’ self-concept and educational environment align.

Beyond the Elder, Aboriginal peers should also be viewed as important sources of support for students. Pidgeon (2014) explored University of British Columbia Aboriginal graduate students' perspectives and found that those who participated in a program entitled Supportive Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement (SAGE), a culturally relevant peer support group, had a greater likelihood of academic success as it fostered student and peer accountability and created a space for student support. The creation of such an organization at the ABE level for Northern Saskatchewan Aboriginal students could demonstrate to students the knowledge and strength of their peers, and could ultimately translate into individual and cultural empowerment (Christens & Lin, 2014). A network of peer supporters for Aboriginal learners could also foster a sense of belonging that allows students to pull from the various support systems within a peer group (combined with counseling provided at the college level) to cater to their individual needs at any given time (Alfred & Nanton, 2009; Looker, 2014). This works to increase students' bridging social capital beyond their immediate familial communities and promotes the creation of bonds with their larger peer groups in a culturally relevant manner, while building upon (and

valuing the strength of) personal, familial, cultural, and community resources (Government of Alberta, 2007).

Including a peer support group could lead to a larger mentorship program, wherein previously successful Aboriginal ABE students mentor current ABE students. Such a program has been applied at the high school level for Aboriginal students across the country based on the fact that “the positive relationship between mentor and student helps increase confidence, contributes to the achievement of goals, and fosters an understanding about learning and life challenges” (Wolters, n.d., p.1). Programs across the country range from face-to-face group mentorship programs to e-mentorship programs (Anderson-Fennell, 2011; Government of Alberta, 2007; Wolters, n.d). Through these Aboriginal mentorship programs, it has been found that regardless of the kind of mentorship program (face-to-face, e-mentorship), a mentorship program that pairs successfully graduated Aboriginal students with a current student increases cultural awareness and student success by providing the student with personal relationships and role models, enabling them to see success, learn coping mechanisms based on the experiences of the mentor, as well as opens doors to previously unknown opportunities for the mentee to a range of possibilities through the success of the mentor (Anderson-Fennell, 2011).

Thus, as presented in this discussion, it is clear that including family, counseling, and mentorship together work to increase the bridging and bonding capital of students. While such supports do not remove the situational barriers of the students, they do help to build a network of support for students to pull from when they require further support (Moschetti & Hudley, 2014). Providing and facilitating access to psychological, spiritual, and peer counseling, as well as including the family within the educational process brings together the psychological and

environmental/communal realities of the student. Learners and their communities cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive entities (Stahl, 2000; Thomas, 2001).

Economic Supports

It is important to note that when any student enrolls in a full time ABE programs (off reserve) in Saskatchewan, the student is taken off of welfare and is provided with a Provincial Training Allowance (PTA) (which is equivalent to welfare) to attend the program (EKOS, 2010). The amount of PTA received is based on the number of dependents the student has, and the living situation of the student (living with parents or living on their own). Although PTA is a positive program, from an economics perspective, it can be suggested that an adult's decision to engage in ABE programs is based on a cost-benefit analysis (Commings, 2007). Since both the welfare and PTA programs apply to all Saskatchewan ABE students, the following points are not exclusive to Aboriginal students, but relate to non-Aboriginal students as well.

When students find themselves considering dropping out of the ABE program for various reasons, they may ultimately decide to leave the program because there is no perceived immediate financial benefit from remaining in the program (ie: the student can simply go back on Welfare when they withdraw from the ABE program). Moreover, since the PTA program directly mirrors the welfare program (in terms of dependency and accountability) in that students are paid a flat rate regardless of days attended or academic success, there is little to no accountability or financial reward that would encourage students to stay with the program and complete their ABE. When applied to the Aboriginal population, PTA mirrors welfare insofar as it, in the words of Noel Pearson an Aboriginal lawyer and activist “[it] promotes detrimental relations of passivity and dependence which have now become deeply embedded within Aboriginal society and culture” (as cited in Martin, 2001, p. 1). Programs that are not based on

student accountability and that do not encourage students to excel, further 'Aboriginal dependency' by encouraging a “lack of independence...and power...” (Berry, 1999, p. 23). In this sense, PTA being paid out regardless of student attendance, grades, or engagement with the program encourages dependency and a lack of commitment, as students are not held accountable for their academic success or engagement with the ABE program.

If the PTA program promoted a greater financial benefit (ie: students were given more money) for achievement and was paid to students based on the days they attend, academic achievement/engagement would encourage student success on two fronts. Firstly, it would result in a financial loss to the student for leaving the program and returning to welfare. Secondly, paying only for the days attended and for academic success shifts responsibility and accountability to the student. Thus, in this case, were students to consider the cost-benefits from a purely economic perspective, it is clearly in their best interest to attend, stay with, and successfully complete the ABE program because it can result in more funding over welfare funding, while also rewarding students for their successful persistence in the academic program. This approach would align with the recommendation by Ziegler, Ebert & Cope (2004) who found that in the US that the use of cash incentives for economically disadvantaged individuals allows them to persist in ABE programs.

Final Recommendations

Taken together the recommendation made in relation to economic incentives as well as a range of psychological, social, and cultural supports can promote personal social identities within Aboriginal students, thereby influencing the development of a shared and culturally relevant identity within the structure of the educational system (Berry, 1999). Designing programs and policies at the institutional level can respond to and mitigate against the high dropout rate of

Aboriginal students in northern Saskatchewan ABE programs. However, it is important to note that these suggested supports and strategies can be modified to meet the needs that exist at the community level; there is no all-encompassing approach that will guarantee success for all Aboriginal ABE learners in Northern Saskatchewan. Support staff and instructors must adapt to meet the needs of individual learners and to address the barriers each learner faces to educational attainment. Although the history of colonialism and its ill effects run deeply within Northern communities, pulling from the strength and successes of the individuals in these communities, while strengthening ties to people and resources that exist outside the student's immediate community, can work to ensure that Aboriginal students are receiving the required supports to facilitate the successful completion of ABE programs.

Conclusion

The retention of ABE students is an ongoing struggle for ABE programs. Previous research indicates that psychological, sociological, and economic factors are driving forces that impact the retention of ABE students, but do not address the cultural component, critical to the success of aboriginal students. So, while this research provides a strong base for understanding retention and ABE students, clear mechanisms for improving the situation for Aboriginal ABE students have not been forthcoming. Integrating the psychological, sociological, and economics research related to ABE retention with the cultural and historical realities of ABE students in Northern Saskatchewan resulted in this proposal encompassing specific supports and strategies for Aboriginal ABE learners. These strategies include: integrating family into the ABE classroom, providing varying levels of counseling for students, establishing a mentorship program, and changing the current funding model for ABE students. While these suggestions are by no means comprehensive they can serve as a practical guide for individual communities and

instructors wanting to influence the retention rates of Aboriginal ABE students in Northern Saskatchewan. Tackling the PTA system is a much bigger issue, but one that can be started by encouraging discussion about this among Aboriginal and Northern Saskatchewan residents. The status quo can no longer be supported. Doing so, only serves to marginalize even further, an already marginalized population.

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