

The two training programs described in this article were designed to help women of native ancestry develop the knowledge and skills they require to better control and make decisions about their lives. Both are based on a broad definition of literacy, one that extends beyond the ability to read, write and do basic numeracy, or possessing the job and living competencies our society requires. The definition of literacy upon which they are based is the idea fundamental to Paulo Friere's theory and instructional techniques. Literacy provides people with ways to critically analyze and then to act to change their political, social and economic environments.¹

style which takes them to the trapline in the fall and spring, or out to the fishcamps in the summer, those in school often interrupt their schooling. Compounding the educational difficulties are the English as a second language/dialect nature of the learning situation and the relatively frequent turnover of teaching staff, especially in the smaller and more isolated communities. As a result, students completing grade 9 often have reading and writing skills below that level.²

In the north, the family is still seen as a very important element of social organization. As well, there remains a strong sense of kinship which allows aunts and grandmothers to play a role almost as important as that of the mother in child-

In many communities, substance abuse is a major problem, and often it is accompanied by domestic violence and child neglect or abuse. These are the realities with which contemporary northern women live. The Women's Employment Access Training (WEAT) and the La Ronge Native Women's Council Counsellor/Program Coordinator (CPC) programs were designed to empower women to address these realities. The WEAT program was a twenty-two week course, offered in La Ronge through the Northlands Career College, and funded through the Canada Employment & Immigration Commission's Canadian Job Strategies (CJS) mechanism.³ WEAT qualified for funding as a re-entry program for employ-

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The programs are located in northern Saskatchewan, that half of the province's land mass located between the fifty-fourth and sixtieth parallels. The approximately 30,000 people who live in this region are scattered among 45 small, widely spread out and relatively isolated communities. Some only recently have acquired road access; others can only be reached by air or, during the winter months, by ice road.

There are two distinct cultural and linguistic traditions in the north — Woodlands Cree and Dene (Chipewyan). Both are rich in their reflection of proud traditions which pre-date European contact. For the majority of Northerners, English is a second-language. This linguistic reality has a bearing on literacy programming and on schooling in the north.

In most communities, schools have been built only within the last ten years; to complete grade 12, many northern children still must board in larger centers. Reluctant to leave their homes, children often quit after grade 8 or 9. As well, since many families maintain a traditional life

rearing. The closeness of family ties is a strong binding force in northern culture, and women are at its core.

However, as the north moves from dependence on a traditional land-use economy to a monetary-dependent economic base, there have been radical changes to traditional lifestyles and structures. Many have not been positive. For example, there has been an increasing dependence through the region on social assistance as the income sources of entire communities, especially when the trapping and hunting seasons are finished, or when seasonal jobs such as line cutting and forest fire fighting are not available.

More and more family units are headed by single women. Frequently, northern women in their early teens have children and so stop their formal education. The network of female kinship ties helps with the task of childrearing, but for the majority of women the responsibilities of raising children as single parents living on social assistance in small isolated communities is a reality from which there seems little escape.

ment of disadvantaged women. In fact, given the extremely high unemployment rates in northern Saskatchewan (65-75% is the average in many communities; in some it is as high as 98%), most of the women who were selected to participate in the program were entering rather than re-entering the paid labour force. Family responsibilities had served to keep most out of paid employment, even when it was available to them.

The fact that WEAT aimed at preparing women to participate in the paid labour force is reflected in some of its objectives. These included the development of positive work habits and attitudes, exposure to various educational and occupational opportunities, and, of course, actual work placements for the participants. However, in light of northern realities, the program's objectives didn't stop there. They went further to address the need for women to develop critical thinking and analysis skills as well. This was done by concentrating on activities which developed the participant's self-confidence, interpersonal communication skills, as-

sertiveness and decision-making abilities. Finally, an academic component aimed at improving actual reading, writing and math competencies rounded out the course content.

Fifteen women, ranging in age from 18 to 45, started the program. All but one had children; some had grandchildren as well. The majority were single parents, with from one to six dependents. While in the program, the women received training allowances from CEIC. These varied according to the number of dependents a woman supported. The academic skill level of the women selected for WEAT ranged from basic literacy through university; the average, based on last completed grade at school, was 6-7. Most of the younger women had dropped out of school because they saw little relationship between schooling and their lives. Many of the older women simply had not had the option of attending school either up to or beyond that level.

In addition to the WEAT academic and work placement program, there were workshops on a variety of themes: sexual harassment; first aid and CPR; alcohol and substance abuse; wife battery; assertiveness; basic carpentry; budgeting; sexuality; birth control and sexually transmitted diseases; resume writing; familiarization with computers. Finally, there were a number of field trips to educational institutions and training programs in places such as Prince Albert.

Eleven women completed the WEAT program; in addition, three received grade 11 standings on the GED. Four of the eleven have gone on to further employment-specific training; two are in jobs resulting from their work placements; four hope to take academic upgrading (ABE) through the local college, and one has opted to remain at home with her family.

There were four women who did not complete the program. Of these, some were simply young and only committed to taking WEAT because it was expected by social services. Others found the change involved in living in La Ronge proved too stressful for them and their families. One woman left because of the program's emphasis on helping women take control and make positive decisions. Another, although highly successful at both the classroom and work placement sections of the course, decided that being at home

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with her child was a priority at this point in her life. She withdrew before completing the program.

In their final evaluations, instructors, students and work placement supervisors agreed that the program had met its objectives. For example, attendance had been identified as a major problem area. At the beginning of the program, the women often neglected to phone if they were going to be late or absent. In part, this oversight must be attributed to the fact that many Northerners do not have telephones and so have not come to rely on them. As well, punctuality and time, so highly valued by mainstream society, are not seen as so crucial by traditional northern cultures, which tend to emphasize face-to-face contact and spending time with people rather than "at things." In any case, by the end of the WEAT program, the women had developed the habit of phoning in to explain lateness or absence, which almost invariably were related to family responsibilities.

Overwhelmingly, the women who took the WEAT program commented on the fact that the course had taught them about themselves — their strengths and weaknesses; their skills and abilities. All feel they have more options since taking the course. They are aware of the fact that they have choices, and they are confident in their ability to make a choice and take charge — not just of their education, but of health and childbearing and rearing issues as well. Some commented on their pride in the fact that they had started and finished a course and that they can learn quickly. Many noted that they had learned patience through the experiences

they had had in classroom exercises and on work placements. This is an attribute they now find invaluable when coping with family responsibilities. The WEAT program, by combining academic skill-building with self-awareness, communications and employment skills development, began the process of addressing the literacy needs of its participants. The northern women who were affected by it have developed some of the tools they need to better analyze and act to change their realities.

The La Ronge Native Women's Council Counsellor/Program Coordinator Training Program (CPC) is also designed specifically for northern women. It is being offered by the La Ronge Native Women's Council, which is a proactive organization of women working to affect social change in La Ronge and throughout the north.

Funded by Canadian Job Strategies for a 52-week period and certified by the Northlands Career College, the CPC program started on August 29. In describing the program and its target group, local Native Women's Council member Lillian Sanderson notes, "the council has identified needs of native women and, hopefully, this program will help fill the gap for the twelve successful applicants. Many native women have no working skills, little self-confidence, low education levels and serious child care problems."⁴

The program has both classroom and work placement segments. The classroom portion includes focused, skill-specific training, including 6 weeks of lifeskills and 12 weeks of counselling

skills development. In addition, shorter, intensive workshops will deal with issues such as alcohol and drug abuse and cross-cultural communications. The guest speaker program will include local elders who will help provide a sense of traditional native approaches to social issues.

The program coordination segment of the course will consist of classroom theory presentation followed by work placement practice. It will last for 18 weeks, with women moving between the job and the classroom on a weekly basis to learn and practice skills like needs assessment, program objective writing, evaluation, and proposal writing.

Women selected for CPC come from communities in the north-central part of Saskatchewan. They range in age from 21-50. Some have experienced the social problems that they will learn to help others cope with — alcohol abuse, battery, child abuse and neglect. Most are single parents, two are helping to raise their grandchildren. Some have virtually no work experience outside the home, and those who have had jobs in the paid labour force have not worked recently. Many of the women selected are strong community leaders, and it is hoped they will be able to use the knowledge and skills they obtain to further community-controlled and directed development in their home towns and villages.

On the academic side, abilities range from a rudimentary ability to read and write through GED 12 and some university level classes. Most of the women would not qualify for ABE courses because they function below the grade 8 level. The CPC program provides them

with an opportunity to develop skills they can use in a job situation, while helping them upgrade their academic qualifications as well. Attainment of some level of the GED is an academic objective of the program. While in the program, the women will be employees of the La Ronge Native Women's Council. They will be paid minimum wage, which amounts to \$180/week.

Successful as they are, these two programs merely signal the immense need in Northern Saskatchewan for literacy programs for women. Even those not admitted to the CPC found the information they garnered at their interview about other educational and training options and social assistance helped them realize they did have more choices and options than they had believed. Those who did not complete their program still learned how to gather information that can help them make decisions; they have increased their confidence and trust in themselves. Even these "small" changes reverberate as the women carry on their crucial role as the main community organizers in northern society and serve as positive role models for others with whom they have contact. Most important, these programs provide the women with an enhanced sense of self-respect and the understanding that they have the right to change their world in ways they deem important. This is the core of effective literacy programming; for northern Saskatchewan, these programs are a good start.

¹Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 30-43.

²According to a study done by Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, almost 45 per cent of Native people in Saskatchewan have less than grade 9 education. This compares with 22 per cent of the non-Native population of the province. See Olijnyk, "Desire to Leave School Traps Many Natives in Dead-end Jobs," *Star-Phoenix Special Report* (Regina: *Leader-Post*, 1987), p. 42.

³This particular project was for a limited term. The College hopes to offer similar programs in other northern communities.

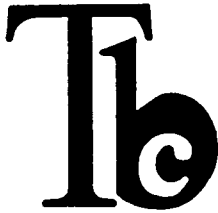
⁴"New Project for Native Women's Council", (La Ronge: *The Northerner*, August 24, 1988), p. 7.

Peggy Buckley is an adult educator living in La Ronge, Saskatchewan. She has worked as an educational consultant for government, and as a private consultant in the areas of ABE, ESL/D and literacy. Ms. Buckley has also taught university courses in social work and teacher methodology. Most recently she served as literacy coordinator for the La Ronge Program Region of the Northlands Career College. Currently, Ms. Buckley is without wage labour.

Penny Carriere is also an adult educator living La Ronge. She is presently on leave from her position as ABE Co-ordinator with the Northlands Career College to coordinate the CPC program. Ms. Carriere has worked and lived in northern Saskatchewan for 20 years where she has worked in a variety of educational capacities with children and adults. She is presently Deputy Mayor of La Ronge.

A NOTE ON OUR CONTRIBUTING ARTIST JANICE ANDREAE

Janice Andreae, whose artwork appears on pages 35, 40 and 67 of the current issue of **Canadian Woman Studies**, is a Guest Editor of our forthcoming **Canadian Women Artists** issue (Vol. 10, No. 3), which will appear in September 1989. Her work will be included in an upcoming group exhibition at Garnet Press Gallery entitled **HOME WORK**. The exhibition opens on 14 January 1989 and continues until 25 February 1989. It also includes the work of John Abrams, Jane Buyers, Nataka Husar, Lisa Neighbor and Tom Slaughter. For further information, contact Carla Garnet, Director, Garnet Press Gallery, 580 Richmond St. West, Toronto, Ontario M5V 1Y9, or phone (416) 366-5012.



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