

# Healing the Spirit

*Elva Lickers*  
*Life Is Simple*

---

*This article addresses overcoming barriers in respect to life histories of trauma, completing literacy training programs, and the benefits of a life skills program combined with a literacy program. The Six Nations Literacy Achievement Centre has combined the life skills and literacy programs with great success. The Insights program is a pre-employment program that is fundamental to the Six Nations Literacy Achievement Centre. This part of the program provides life skills in self-development.*

## *Introduction*

In this article I address overcoming barriers with respect to life histories of trauma, completing literacy training programs, and the benefits of a life skills program combined with a literacy program. The Six Nations Literacy Achievement Centre has combined the life skills and literacy programs with great success. The Six Nations Literacy Achievement Centre is located at the Six Nations of the Grand River community, which is home to the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora peoples. With over 20,000 members, Six Nations is the most populous Aboriginal community in Canada.

I begin with a description of barriers relating to literacy learners and practitioners. I briefly examine historical influences that affect the present-day situation in Native communities. A brief examination of the three components of the literacy program at Six Nations Literacy Achievement Centre follows. I also describe the types of lessons presented and how this approach has increased the success of the literacy program participants to a 90% success level. Written testimonials of past and present participants are included.

## *Barriers*

The word *barrier* means something that obstructs passage or retards progress. The word barrier in this article relates to literacy programs. Language barrier, lack of transportation, need for babysitting services, and lack of money are some of the barriers the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) mention when they address barriers to completing literacy programs. These are barriers the MTCU is willing and even eager to provide funding support for in the literacy field. Then they wonder, with the financial support they are giving, why Native learners are still experiencing such low success rates in Native literacy programs. Planning and problem-solving help to overcome these barriers.

The MTCU does not recognize the greatest barriers of all: mental, emotional, and spiritual dysfunction. These barriers are the greatest hindrance to the success of Native students. The effects of these barriers reflect Native reality: Natives have the highest school dropout rate, alcoholism rate, drug addiction rate, suicide rate, and the highest percentage of people in jails.

### *Historical Influences*

Residential schools contributed greatly to the deterioration of Native culture and values. Their families placed some students in residential schools when they were unable to care for them in the home. Some were placed in residential schools in the hope that they would receive a "white man's" education and be better able to survive in the cities. Other families were forced to send their children: some children were literally kidnapped and taken to the residential school. Few families have parents or grandparents who escaped being in a residential school.

The treatment our Elders received in those residential schools negatively influenced their future lives and the lives of their children and grandchildren. When they were forced to speak English, forced to adopt a new religion and lifestyle, many came to believe that it was not a good thing to be Native. They were beaten when they spoke their own language even though many did not speak any English at all. Beating children as a form of discipline was not an accepted practice in many of the Native communities. This is one practice many Native people learned and passed on to their children.

My grandmother was a prime example of what a profound and long-lasting effect the residential school experience had on people. She was a strong, reticent woman, who worked hard every day on the farm and never complained. She dealt with pain, broken bones, and even the deaths of her children with quiet, resolute strength. I never saw her cry. She was fluent in Mohawk, but would never allow me to speak it. I was allowed to attend the Longhouse, but I also had to attend church on Sunday. When she was 82, blind and senile, she would panic if she heard me speak Mohawk. She would cry and beg my mother to make me stop or she believed her teacher at residential school would beat me. She may have forgotten many things in her senility, but this was one thing she remembered clearly. At the age of 18 our children were sent back to their communities, but many never recovered from the shame and fear associated with being Native. That shame and fear was passed on to the children.

Until 1985 the Indian Act listed four ways a Native person could lose his or her Indian status. A Native woman could lose status by marrying a non-Native man (if a man married a non-Native she would gain status, devastating for a matriarchal society). An Indian man or woman could lose status by voluntarily enfranchising, enlisting in the armed forces, or receiving a postsecondary degree. If Native people received a university

degree they lost their status. Few Native people were willing to trade their status for a degree. The government went even further in keeping Native people "in their place." In Canada four groups of people could not legally sign contracts: minors, mental incompetents, criminals, and Native people. This hindered us in purchasing material things such as houses, cars, or furniture or obtaining loans. We had to pay cash for all our major purchases. Consider that Native people had the highest unemployment rate and the lowest yearly incomes; many lived in extremely impoverished conditions. When our children attended high school off reserve, they experienced cultural shock. Even the poorest non-Native people had running water and electricity; few Native people had these luxuries: imagine what this did for their self-esteem.

Lack of housing and employment on reserves forced many Native people to move to neighboring towns, or more often to the larger cities farther away. Many people from our reserve moved to the United States. We now have second-generation children who have never lived on the Six Nations reserve and who have had few opportunities to visit any reserve. Many are the only Natives in their school.

#### *Present-Day Results*

Learners from the Six Nations Literacy Achievement Centre talk about the isolation they experienced and the lack of knowledge about their people and culture. These learners said they never quite belonged with the non-Native people, and many of them lost connections with their relatives and friends on the reserve. Many felt unaccepted by both the Native people on the reserve and the non-Native people off the reserve. The identity crisis created by these kinds of situations is the foundation for low self-esteem. Intergenerational welfare recipients, a low work ethic, and academic indifference have contributed to a defeatist attitude. They do not believe that there is even a reason to try.

The cycle of shame, blame, and self-loathing must stop. These are the most devastating barriers that our people must overcome. A lack of self-esteem, self-confidence, and a confused cultural identity impede our students as no physical barriers can. We can teach people to read and write, but without the self-esteem and self-confidence to use these skills, they are no better off than they were before. When they do not feel they are "as good as," "as smart as," or "as deserving of good things as" other ethnic groups in our society, they do not use their talents and skills to improve their lifestyle. These are the barriers the MTCU is not willing to fund. The MTCU cannot see immediate results and therefore have no valid way to test the level of a person's self-esteem.

#### *Supports*

Literacy practitioners need to address these barriers and to unite in their efforts to obtain funding for this purpose. I hope that the success of the Six

Nations Literacy Achievement Centre's method of incorporating life skills into the program will inspire other literacy practitioners to set up a similar format in their literacy centres.

### *Outline of the Literacy Program*

The following is a brief outline of the 12-week Insights program. The Insights program is a pre-employment program provided by the Six Nations Literacy Achievement Centre. "Life is Simple" is a personal enhancement seminar program that is an integral part of the Insights program. This part of the program provides life skills in self-development.

### *Insights Pre-Employment Training*

The overall objective of the course is to help an individual develop a repertoire of problem-solving behaviors and skills. The lessons will enhance and enrich the participant's sense of self-worth and remove the destructive barriers of low self-esteem and self-confidence. Members of the class participate in exercises that provide opportunities for learning, practicing, and reinforcing the lessons presented. At the end of the program, participants are encouraged to expand their educational achievements and/or enter the workforce in a field of their choice. Figure 1 shows the three parts of the literacy program that work together for the success of the learners.

Upon completion, participants choose from the following options:

- remain at the Literacy Centre for one-on-one tutoring;
- continue their education at an accredited institution;
- enter the workforce or start their own business.

Insights is called pre-employment training, but it really is a journey of self-discovery. It is a unique program in that it does not teach anything that the student does not already know, but rather enhances the skills they already have. The success rate is approximately 90% for people obtaining jobs, returning to school, or starting their own business.

### *Success Stories of the First Insights Class*

The following statement is an example of comments made by a past participant.

For the past week it's been great. The people in the group are great. I've learned the first few steps towards my self-esteem. It's like a baby taking his or her first steps toward life. That's what this group is doing, bettering themselves, getting themselves motivated on getting a job. I'm really glad I decided to take up this program.

The following comments were made after the first week of the Insights 1997 pilot project. These comments were published in the local Six Nations newspaper called *Tekawennake*. These comments make my job as the facilitator of the Insights program exciting and exhilarating.

I am a 37-year-old mother who attends a program called Life Skills. I was really leery about coming to the centre. I had second thoughts and almost did not come—but I'm glad that I

<i>Six Nations Literacy Achievement Centre</i> provides instruction in the following:		
Basic Parts of Speech	Spelling Rules	Basic Rules of Grammar
Word Groups	Punctuation Rules	Basic Math (addition to ratios)
Types of Sentences	Parts of Sentences	Native Traditions
<hr/>		
<i>Life Is Simple</i> provides life skills instruction in the following subjects:		
Communication	Assertiveness Training	Building Self-Esteem
Conflict Resolution	Problem-Solving	Decision-Making
Reality Therapy	Goal-Setting	Anger Management
<hr/>		
<i>Assignments</i> completed over the 12-week period include:		
Autobiography	Book Report	Essay Writing
Three Collages	Résumé	Covering Letter
GED Pre-test	Career Interest Quiz	Two Lesson Presentations

Figure 1.

did. This is only my first week attending. I took one step to find out about myself, there are other steps too, and that there were others similar to myself. Keep climbing. My eyes have started to open; they are not closed so much. This course was almost cancelled as there wasn't enough enrolled, or should I say, that attended the first few days. As the days went on our group began to fill out and I really, truly am grateful for the others that came out. This opportunity will help me to grow each day. I thank Elva for starting this course.

Another comment by a 35-year-old participant the first week was:

This course is very stimulating and informative. I thought there wasn't much to it but the first week so far I've learned to tell myself, "I'm good." I'm learning different ways of dealing with problems and who they belong to. This course is enjoyable, informative and I wish everyone could take this course to find what is inside our heads and deal with life itself.

The content of this program enabled the participants to realize their potential self-development. It is with complete satisfaction that I can report that everyone from the 1997 class has reached his or her five-year goal.

*Comments From More Recent Graduates (printed with their permission)*

The author of this reflection comment currently attends Mohawk College.

I started this program on October 1, 2002. Why did I start? My friend was very interested and she thought I would like to attend with her (the buddy system). I knew, or at least thought, that this program would be a waste of my time and it was not for me. My friend gave me a push, and how it has changed my life! The friend I have showed me the way and I had to make a choice. I decided to do it for myself and finish this class.

After being here for 11 weeks, this course is one of the best things that I could have done for myself. Well, it turned out that I found something interesting in me, the belief in myself, the

will to do it for me. All it takes is time. I didn't have time to waste. I needed to take action. I must take responsibility for myself. I have to make a better future for my children. I am proud of the person I found, the one who has the qualities and qualifications that are needed. Everything I do now shows improved self-esteem and self-image and I feel better. I am now more confident about where I am going in my life.

This class has given me the will to do for myself in the future. The desire in myself to do for me and the opportunity is mine. Life is too short to be sitting around the house. I know now I can be a better person than I was. This program helped me get back on track and showed me how to stay focused.

Take the boredom out of your life by taking this class. Everyone should take this course because it gives you insight, focus, and determination. It's all in the black book that I've prepared for myself, with the excellent help and support that I received from Elva and Vera. It's all in the team that you choose.

The learners using this program have expressed great satisfaction from taking the literacy program, which incorporates life skills with employment skills. They have indicated that they have more self-confidence and self-esteem after completing this literacy program.

Although there are many more quotes, these examples give an idea of the importance of having literacy programs such as Insights. Insights works because the learners are able to develop the necessary skills for employability and independence. Most important, Insights is a place to heal the spirit.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the Six Nations Literacy Achievement Centre has done an excellent job in providing a place for Native learners to experience positive self-development. Learning experiences have not always been positive. Much destruction was caused in Native communities through the residential school system. The legacy of residential schools is that many of our people lost their self-esteem and self-confidence. This literacy program with the Insights component counters this legacy by providing the participants with skills to expand their educational achievements and/or enter the workforce in a field of their choice.

The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities funds Native literacy programs that provide services to enhance reading and writing in English. The MTCU is reluctant to fund programs that deal specifically with life skills that would enhance personal self-worth and self-confidence.

As we see, this does not stop the Six Nations Literacy Achievement Centre from seeking funding support to enhance literacy development in all aspects of human development: spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical. The Six Nations Literacy Achievement Centre provides a place for individuals to experience situations to heal the spirit.