PARTICIPATION AND PERSISTENCE OF ADULT BASIC EDUCATION STUDENTS AT A RURAL COLLEGE CAMPUS ON MANITOULIN ISLAND

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Abstract

Little research has been conducted to examine the participation and persistence of adult basic education students in northern and rural Canada. This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study was conducted with adult learners to address this research deficit. The study consisted of questionnaire and interview phases. Using thematic analysis, five themes were identified from the participant responses: (a) positive, supportive, personal touch; (b) situational hardships; (c) friendships and community; (d) campus Indigeneity; and (e) program resources. Situational hardships directly affected students' program participation and persistence. A positive, supportive environment contributed to participation and persistence, while friends, community, and program resources influenced student persistence in the program. Participants identified campus Indigeneity and promotion of the program as areas for improvement.

Résumé

Peu de recherches ont été menées sur la participation et la persistance de personnes étudiantes en éducation de base des adultes au Canada nordique et rural. Cette étude séquentielle exploratoire à méthodologie mixte a été menée auprès de personnes apprenantes adultes pour combler cette lacune. L'étude consistait en une phase de questionnaire et une phase d'entrevues. À l'aide d'analyse thématique, cinq thèmes ont été identifiés dans les propos des personnes participantes : (a) touche positive, encourageante et personnelle; (b) difficultés situationnelles; (c) amitiés et communauté; (d) indigénéité du campus; et (e) ressources du programme. Les difficultés situationnelles avaient une incidence directe sur la participation et la persistance des personnes étudiantes au programme. Un environnement positif et encourageant contribuait à la participation et à la persistance, tandis que les amitiés, la communauté et les ressources du programme influençaient la persistance des personnes étudiantes dans le programme. Les personnes participantes ont identifié l'indigénéité du campus et la promotion du programme comme points à améliorer.

Although Canada ranks at the OECD average in literacy, it has a larger proportion of adults at the lower levels of proficiency than the higher levels of proficiency (Statistics Canada, 2015). Alarmingly, 48.5% of adult Canadians between the ages of 16 and 65, as measured by the Survey of Adult Skills, have literacy levels of 2 or below (Statistics Canada, 2012). ABC Canada (2008, as cited in Flynn et al., 2011) estimated that 5% to 10% of the Canadian population with low literacy skills enrols in literacy programs, and approximately one-third of this group drops out. As a result, although publicly funded literacy programs are available, 90% to 95% of Canadians who need to upgrade their literacy skills do not enrol, and 33% of Canadians who do enrol are not persisting in these literacy programs.

There is a strong need to improve the literacy skills and educational attainment of rural Canadians. In contrast to their urban counterparts, residents of rural areas have lower levels of literacy and educational attainment. In fact, the high-school dropout rate for rural Canadians between the ages of 20 and 24 is significantly higher than the dropout rate of urban Canadians, 14.9% and 8.3%, respectively (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). Relatedly, lower levels of educational attainment are significantly associated with lower literacy skills (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). More recent research by Looker and Bollman (2020) found that the high-school completion rate of a community decreases the farther it is from a metropolitan area. Generally, the more remote a community, the lower its high-school completion rate tends to be. However, the authors found a more disconcerting issue embedded in this trend: the rural/urban differences in high-school completion rates were significantly mediated by the outcomes of persons with Indigenous identity. In other words, the high-school completion rates of non-Indigenous persons remained relatively similar across geographic zones, but the high-school completion rates of Indigenous Persons significantly decreased as a community became more remote. Looker and Bollman alluded to this difference as being a consequence of the historical and continuing marginalization of Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

For many years, the Academic Upgrading program at Cambrian College's satellite campus in Little Current, Ontario, has been experiencing lower enrolment than desired by ministry funding models. Drawing on adult education, adult basic education (ABE), and rural education literature, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods study of the perspectives of stakeholders was conducted at the campus to learn more about the factors influencing student participation and persistence in the program. A secondary purpose of the study was to determine the relevance of the upgrading program to the communities and cultures of the participants. This study adds to the limited literature available regarding the participation and persistence of ABE students in rural Canada. Increasing the participation and persistence of upgrading participants can benefit individual students, the college, and their communities by increasing rates of literacy and educational attainment, which could contribute to better health, economic, and life outcomes for residents of Manitoulin Island as a whole. More specifically, "strong links have been found between literacy levels and wages, political efficacy, volunteerism, employment, and health" (Cathexis, 2016, p. 20). Increased community literacy and educational attainment are associated with an improvement in factors that contribute to the increased capacity for sustainable community development: poverty, family health and nutrition, environmental stewardship, green development, labour market participation, gender equality, and social justice (UNESCO, 2015).

The research outlined in this article was conducted in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This unanticipated, unprecedented circumstance required a significant pivot

from in-person human research to virtual data collection. As such, technological barriers, such as the lack of infrastructure to provide consistent Internet accessibility to many rural and remote localities in Canada, including Manitoulin Island, posed significant challenges to the promotion of the study, its recruitment, and data collection. Additionally, the impact of the fear and uncertainty caused by the pandemic on the mental health of the study population is inestimable. For example, one participant in the study communicated that their connections to friends, support network, and Internet at school were entirely severed due to the pandemic. This participant lived alone and did not have Internet access at home. The principal investigator of the research reported in this article is a second-generation Canadian of European refugees and a second-generation descendent of Canadians who at one point relied on the welfare state; he is also a treaty land inhabitant (Cuthand, 2021). He moved to Manitoulin Island 5 years ago to work at the satellite campus as the Academic Upgrading professor. Motivated by his experience of less-than-desirable community participation and persistence in the upgrading classroom at the satellite campus in contrast to his past teaching experience, the researcher chose to conduct this study with the primary goal of learning how to improve participation and persistence in his classroom.

In what follows, the data-gathering process for the study is explained and data are presented. After this, the article moves to a discussion of what the findings help to explain about the program participation and persistence of rural adult learners. First, we review the associated research literature and the theoretical underpinnings of the study.

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Previous Studies and Theoretical Underpinnings

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Limited research has been conducted on the participation and persistence of northern, rural ABE program participants. Most ABE studies carried out in rural areas have examined large campuses or distance programs. None of this research investigated ABE learners at small rural/remote campuses in Ontario. The literature on adult education, ABE, and rural education provided multiple lenses to explore the participation and persistence of ABE learners at Cambrian College's campus on Manitoulin Island and provided a theoretical foundation for this study's data analysis.

Adult Education

Cross's (198w1) work on the participation of adult learners identified three categories of barriers that affect adult participation in learning: (a) dispositional barriers, (b) situational barriers, and (c) institutional barriers. These barriers hinder the progress of adult learners and result in dropouts, stop-outs, and decisions not to undertake academic pursuits altogether. Some caution should be exercised in applying Cross's framework since, as McCann (1995, as cited in Sloane-Seale, 2011) noted, "Cross's framework does not address cultural and systemic issues such as sexism, ageism, and the politics of education, yet these may constitute major barriers for adult learners" (p. 20). Tinto's (1975) conceptual schema for dropout from college suggests that there are six categories of factors affecting student decisions to persist or drop out, including their (a) family background, (b) individual attributes and previous schooling, (c) goal and institutional commitments, (d) experience with institutional academic and social systems, (e) academic and social integration, and (f) career goals. Despite the model's prominence, its generalizability may be limited since it focuses on traditional U.S. college students rather than non-traditional adult learners.

In a quantitative analysis of the U.S. results for the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), causes for non-participation in adult education for those with the lowest level of education included situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers, such as age, parental education level, work responsibilities and schedule, income, familial responsibilities, health, lack of interest in education, minimal social trust, trouble integrating new knowledge into practical life applications, and disabilities (Patterson, 2018). In a separate qualitative study of 125 adults from five different U.S. states, Patterson and Song (2018) found that deterrents to participation in adult education also comprised various situational, dispositional, and institutional factors: transportation, family responsibilities, economic precarity, lack of support, past influences, health concerns, disabilities, motivation, limited personal time, fear, anxiety, lack of confidence, institutional policies, educator support, and lack of knowledge of local educational opportunities.

Due to varying backgrounds and experiences, the barriers that adult learners face in education are diverse (Petty & Thomas, 2014; Windisch, 2016). These vary from individual to individual, and certain disadvantaged groups of adult learners may face numerous compounding barriers that contribute to negative educational outcomes. Petty and Thomas's (2014) compendium of effective approaches to a successful adult education program recognized that successful adult education programs orient and motivate students, employ well-trained and prepared instructors who are committed to retention, integrate career development and literacy programs, and help students in developing goals. Sloane-Seale's (2011) study of Canadian adult learners found that students stopped out due to various situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers. She noted "that understanding the nature of these adult learners is critical for retention and persistence" (Sloane-Seale, 2011, p. 15).

There are additional factors to be considered when discussing the participation and persistence of Indigenous Peoples in the Canadian adult education system, such as the continuing historical injustices that affect the representation of Indigenous Persons in higher education (Nelson, 2017). Much harm has been caused to Indigenous Peoples and their communities in what is now Canada, including the removal of Indigenous children from the care of their families (Sinclair, 2016), the abuse suffered in the residential school system (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a, 2015b), attempts to erase Indigenous cultures (Native Women's Association of Canada Accord, 2018; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a, 2015b), discrimination suffered due to the *Indian Act* (Leddy, 2016; Native Women's Association of Canada, 2018), the failure of the Canadian government to honour treaty agreements (Craft, 2011), and the systemic racism in Canadian society. In efforts to remedy these historical injustices, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada published its 94 Calls to Action (2015c). Of these, four call upon all levels of government to collaborate with residential school survivors, Indigenous Persons, and educators to make essential changes to educational curriculum and delivery methods at K–12 and post-secondary educational institutions—although there is still considerable uncertainty as to how the relevant calls to action should be implemented in Canada's post-secondary system. Littlechild et al. (2021) proposed three transformational ways to do so within academia: (a) teach students ethical ways to interact with Indigenous Peoples, (b) strive for transformational change, and (c) embody humility, reciprocity, anti-racism, and decolonization.

Adult Basic Education

ABE learners can encounter more barriers and undesirable educational outcomes than more advanced adult learners, such as low self-confidence, social disapproval of education, negative attitudes, and low personal priority toward schooling (Hayes, 1988). One study of potential adult learners in London, Ontario, who had not participated in the adult education program due to illiteracy, found that "family values, socioeconomic status, parental educational level, culture, race, and gender were all major determinants of academic interest and achievement" (Flynn et al., 2011, p. 55).

Regarding student persistence, a study of ABE students by Comings et al. (1999) found that managing positive and negative forces, supporting student self-efficacy, setting achievable goals, and assessing progression toward goals helped adults persist. Zacharakis et al. (2011) found that ABE learners faced many personal, institutional, and program barriers that affected their educational participation and persistence with the relationship between student and teacher significantly contributing to persistence. The researchers identified four assets that positively impacted adult learners: (a) dedicated, passionate instructors, (b) friendships and support networks, (c) reinforcement of participants' tenacity, and (d) empowerment derived from learning and building on successes.

In Ontario, the literacy curriculum framework mandated by the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training, and Skills Development is generally unsuitable for the contemporary literacy needs of Ontarians. This topic deserves to be addressed in a paper of its own; however, two of the most pressing concerns pertaining to the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF) are its unsuitability for the Aboriginal streams in the Literacy and Basic Skills system (Cathexis, 2016) and its nonexistent considerations of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. The OALCF was implemented in 2011 (Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2018), which was well before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its calls to action in 2015. Consequently, reconciliation was not a design consideration during the development of the OALCF. Therefore, the OALCF presents a significant barrier to the participation and persistence of Indigenous learners in Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills program.

Rural Education

Rural adult learners confront combined barriers associated with being an adult learner in a rural setting, such as geographical isolation, low income, poverty, out-migration/declining enrolment, lack of transportation, and limited employment opportunities (Ryan, 2014; Schafft & Prins, 2009). Leis (1994) identified barriers specific to teaching and learning in rural communities of Northern Ontario as "isolation; increased expenses due to travel, long distance and reduced numbers; limited supporting services; negative connotation of 'literacy'; limited relevant materials; and minimal research into the problems and literacy programs of rural Ontario" (p. 29). Unfortunately, 27 years later, research into literacy-related issues in Northern Ontario continues to be scarce. In studies of adult student persistence in rural settings, retention has been positively associated with staff and faculty responsiveness and encouragement, institutional flexibility, and family support (Howley et al., 2013; Spivey, 2016). Factors found to challenge the success of rural adult learners include personal and situational hardships, lack of family and community support, low self-esteem, stress, and poverty. Steel and Fahy (2011) suggested that strategies to attract students from rural/remote communities

to post-secondary programs should focus on improving access to transportation, child care, institutional supports, and conveniently located services. To improve student retention, the researchers proposed that institutions should incorporate flexible programming for students who stop out, offer predictable and easily accessible supports, and provide tutorial and technical assistance to learners.

Indigenous populations are forecasted to grow faster than any other segment of the Canadian population, and their communities are also highly concentrated in rural areas (Looker & Bollman, 2020). There is a pressing need for more research into the intersection of Indigenous cultures and rurality (Looker & Bollman, 2020). Indeed, Corbett and Gereluk (2020) proposed that understanding this "cultural interface" in rural areas, an example of what Little Bear (2000) conceptualized as "jagged worldviews colliding," is pertinent to responding to calls for reconciliation. Scott and Louie (2020) found that there is a continuing problem of anti-Indigenous racism in the rural northwestern Canadian school district they studied. The authors noted that this is comparable to other rural research where racism was found to be a problem in rural communities. The researchers also identified several other findings that impeded the promotion of Indigenous cultures and the creation of a welcoming, respectful atmosphere for Indigenous students in the school district. Examples of these impediments included the failure of school administrators to provide the leadership and support (including financial) necessary for teachers to promote the inclusion of Indigenous cultures and languages and the tendency of some teachers to unconsciously defend colonial mandates. Among other solutions, Scott and Louie proposed relationship building between schools and the Indigenous communities they serve along with a move away from a deficit model of Indigenous education as remedies to the issues identified in their study.

Place-Based Education

Ritchey (2008) argued that the "literature on adult education…has paid relatively little attention to the issues important to rural places and the educative needs of rural residents" (p. 8). Howley (2009) emphasized that rural knowledge and ways of life are frequently devalued and often omitted from educational programming, with middle-class, professional values and ways of knowing taught to rural children instead. There is a frequent lack of recognition that "rural communities have unique, multidimensional cultures and material realities" (Bracken, 2008, p. 91). As a result, rural communities may frown upon educational culture and programming that do not align with their knowledge and values (Marchant & Taylor, 2014). In his Digby Neck, Nova Scotia, case study, Corbett (2007) noted a phenomenon of historical disconnectedness from education, likely inculcated by the local educational system's rejection of the rural community's ways of knowing. Some community members perceived education to be for the rich and for those who could not tolerate the dangerous occupation of fishing on the Atlantic Ocean. To many Digby Neckers, schooling imparted useless knowledge that did not translate well to the occupation of fishing.

Corbett (2007) identified that the most successful young persons in Digby Neck were more likely to be groomed by relatives and teachers to first study and then to eventually reside and work in urban communities away from home; this process of grooming provided the young students with an asset that Corbett termed "mobility capital." In this context, the most privileged youth left Digby Neck to flourish elsewhere while many of the least privileged remained in Digby Neck to work in precarious, low-paying jobs if they could

find employment amid a floundering fishing industry. For many rural residents, education is perceived as a threat because higher education is often associated with young persons leaving rural communities to study in urban locales (Corbett, 2007; Howley, 2009). In many instances, "the out-migration of younger residents also disrupts the social networks that older residents rely on for informal help to obtain health care and other important services and, potentially for a more organic sense of connection to others in the community" (Erickson et al., 2012, p. 409). Consequently, decisions concerning education in rural areas are strongly influenced by peers and family members; social pressure can deter some from pursuing education (Goto et al., 2009; Marchant & Taylor, 2014). Limited opportunities for work and education in rural settings may also "lessen the perceived long-term benefits of schooling" (Irvin et al., 2009, p. 31). Consequently, rural residents are less likely to pursue further education if it does not align with local opportunities (Wright, 2012).

In light of these findings, place-based education has been recommended for rural educational institutions as knowledge and activities relevant to rural interests and attachment may increase student motivation and engagement and facilitate improved outcomes (Irvin et al., 2009; Twyford et al., 2009). Troublingly, place-based education can be associated with antiquated understandings of a community and its needs. Corbett (2014) warned against romanticized conceptualizations of community because perpetuating such perceptions risks the continuing oppression of marginalized groups. Additionally, Corbett (2020) argued that contemporary ideas of place-based education have been influenced by rurality, colonization, globalization, standardization, and the romanticization of rurality. As a result, place-based curriculums can be oppressive, lack specificity of place, and lack relationality.

Place-based education may not be an appropriate concept when considering Indigenous cultures. Instead, land-based education may be a more appropriate concept. In many instances, Indigenous Peoples are advocating for a return to land-based education, partly because place-based conceptualizations do not foster the decolonization of education (O'Connor, 2020). The "delivery of land-based education must always be rooted in place and the histories of Indigenous peoples from those places" (Wildcat et al., 2014, p. XII). Land-based learning is anticipated to foster the resurgence of Indigenous cultures (Simpson, 2014), enable decolonization of Indigenous Peoples (Simpson, 2014; Wildcat et al., 2014), and potentially contribute to reconciliation (Wallin & Peden, 2020). Not surprisingly, there is uncertainty pertaining to the place of non-Indigenous educators adopting land-based pedagogies for the purposes of decolonization (O'Connor, 2020), Indigenization, and reconciliation. This raises an important question: how can non-Indigenous educators integrate Indigenous knowledge into their pedagogies without culturally appropriating it (Wemigwans, 2021)?

For the purposes of the research discussed in this article, place-based education was defined as educational programming, delivery, curriculum, and resources that are developed for and relevant to the cultural, social, and economic needs of a community.

Methodology

Study Setting

Manitoulin Island is situated in the northern waters of Lake Huron and has a population of 13,255 full-time residents (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Approximately, 41% of the population identifies as having Aboriginal descent. The 2016 census found that the island

had an unemployment rate of 13.4% and that 24.3% of the population did not have an Ontario Secondary School Diploma, high-school equivalency, or any other certificate, diploma, or degree (Statistics Canada, 2017a). These percentages are significantly higher than both Ontario's unemployment rate and the percentage of persons with lower educational attainment—7.4% and 17.5%, respectively (Statistics Canada, 2017b).

Historically, major resource-based sectors that employed residents on Manitoulin were the agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting sector and the mining and oil and gas extraction sector. Both sectors have contracted significantly over time. Specifically, between 2001 and 2016, the former decreased by 17.6%, and the latter decreased by 47.8% in terms of the number of persons employed (Moazzami, 2019). By far, the largest economic sector of the island is the service sector, which is significantly bolstered by tourism (Moazzami, 2019). However, because tourism is seasonal, many residents are precariously employed in seasonal and/or part-time capacities. Outside of the summer (peak) and fall (hunting) seasons, many residents rely on part-time work or employment insurance to pay their bills. At the time of this research, no public transportation was available on the island, so residents needed to arrange alternative means of motor transport, such as personal motor vehicles, carpooling, taxis, and hitchhiking, to traverse the lengthy distances between adjacent towns and hamlets on Manitoulin Island.

Cambrian College's campus in Little Current offers an Academic Upgrading program to the communities of Manitoulin Island. Many students who enrol in the program have experienced interrupted schooling and are challenged by compounding cultural, economic, and geographical barriers related to residing in a rural area. Due to barriers and life circumstances, many students frequently stop out or drop out of the program.

Research Design

The participation and persistence of ABE learners at Cambrian College's campus in Little Current were studied using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. This mixed-methods design used both quantitative and qualitative data to investigate the research problem (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The collection of both types of data enabled the development of a more thorough understanding of the research problem than the analysis of solely quantitative or qualitative data would otherwise allow.

There are three basic mixed-methods designs: convergent, explanatory sequential, and exploratory sequential. An explanatory sequential design consists of two main phases. The first phase involves the collection and analysis of quantitative data. The results of the quantitative data can provide insight into the research problem while also providing data that can be further elucidated by qualitative data collection and analysis. The second phase involves the collection and analysis of qualitative data. It is important to mention that the quantitative results can inform the measures and procedures of the qualitative step. Since the qualitative portion of the study design can be influenced by the quantitative data, the qualitative data not only provide more depth of insight into the research problem but can assist in further understanding the quantitative data. In fact, the quantitative data and qualitative data can be compared to better understand the results of both phases of the design and, ultimately, to better understand the research problem.

The research consisted of two phases. In the first phase, past and current students were recruited to participate in an online questionnaire, which consisted of mostly Likert-type

questions that were analyzed with quantitative methods. In the second phase, past and current students and past and current campus staff were recruited for interviews. Ethics approval for this research was obtained from Cambrian College's research ethics committee.

Research Questions

The study was designed to address the following questions about the upgrading program:

1. What factors affected student participation?

2. What factors affected student persistence?

3. Is the program culturally relevant to the community?

Participants

The sampling strategy used was homogeneous purposeful sampling, where all participants shared at least one commonality: the experience of being an adult learner in Cambrian College's Academic Upgrading program on Manitoulin Island. All participants were registered as learners or were employed at the campus between January 1, 2013, and January 1, 2020. As an incentive to participate, participants entered in a raffle for a $100 gift card.

Student participants for the study were recruited using college learner files at the study site. A database of 112 past and current learners was compiled. Persons in the database were invited to participate in the questionnaire by email or by telephone contact. Of this population, 11 individuals completed a questionnaire. Questionnaire data collection began in May 2020 and ended in mid-June. Questionnaire data were collected electronically using the Qualtrics platform or by mail using paper copies of the questionnaire.

Two groups of participants were invited to participate in individual semi-structured interviews: past and current students who completed the questionnaire and past and current staff. A total of 14 staff who had supported students were invited to take part. Three students who completed the questionnaire and two employees participated in interviews. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom or telephone. Transcriptions and summaries of the interviews were sent to participants, who were asked to review these documents for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were analyzed using two methods. Firstly, closed-ended questions were analyzed using frequency distributions and bar charts. Secondly, data from the open-ended questions were analyzed in relation to the data collected from the interview questions, using thematic analysis. Open-ended questionnaire questions and interview data were not analyzed using software.

Transcribed data from interviews were also analyzed using thematic analysis. This analysis involved coding the qualitative data and comparing codes across documents to reveal themes in the data. According to the School of Psychology at the University of Auckland New Zealand (n.d.), this process of carrying out thematic analysis may involve six steps: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) coding, (c) generating initial themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) writing up. The process of coding, generating, defining, and naming themes involved numerous iterations until the

principal investigator was satisfied that the qualitative data were suitably categorized into appropriate themes.

Coding the qualitative data from the questionnaires and interviews was a lengthy process. Following the transcription of the interviews, each transcription was read numerous times, so the researcher could familiarize himself with the data. Additionally, the qualitative data from the questionnaires was reviewed many times, which allowed the principal investigator to familiarize himself with the open-ended questionnaire data. Through the data-familiarization process, the researcher began to recognize patterns of ideas/thoughts/words that repeated throughout the interview transcriptions and questionnaires. Once the researcher recognized these emerging patterns, he began to colour-code emerging themes, using varying colours of highlighters and pencil crayons.

The words, phrases, and sentences that represented emerging themes were transcribed into data spreadsheets: one spreadsheet was created for each interview transcription. Additionally, the coinciding open-ended questionnaire themes and interview transcription themes for each student who participated in a questionnaire and an interview were combined in the same Excel spreadsheet. Furthermore, emergent themes from the questionnaire data of students who did not participate in interviews were transcribed onto a separate spreadsheet. Emergent themes from the interview transcriptions and qualitative questionnaire data were closely compared to the spreadsheets to ensure the transfer of data was accurate. The emergent themes in the spreadsheets were colour-coded with highlighters and pencil crayons.

The initial themes in the data were compared to each other to review the themes that had emerged. Following this review, the emergent themes that repeated in at least three more separate spreadsheets were named and defined. Additionally, to be reported in the findings, each theme or subtheme that arose from the data was required to be triangulated by the data of at least one student and two employees or two students and one employee. This process was time consuming because properly categorizing the data under the appropriate themes and subthemes was an iterative process. Numerous times in the process, themes and subthemes were required to be renamed and redefined, and the data were required to be reclassified.

Quantitative questionnaire data enhanced the qualitative data collected from the questionnaires and interviews. When possible, qualitative and quantitative data were compared to the findings and theories available in the relevant adult learning, ABE, and rural education literature that was reviewed in this paper. This process helped to generate the discussion section of the paper.

Limitations

Limitations were encountered during the research. Firstly, the response rate on the questionnaire was low, 9.1%. As a comparison, when surveying in-person Literacy and Basic Skills learners across all sites in Ontario, Cathexis (2016) achieved a response rate of 9.9% for past learners. Thus, the response rate for this study reflected the response rate achieved during a government-funded evaluation of the entire Literacy and Basic Skills program across Ontario. As mentioned previously in the introduction, the emergence of the COVID-19 global pandemic in the months immediately preceding the periods of recruitment and data collection in April 2020 significantly affected participation in this

research. Due to the small number of participants, the results of the study may not reflect the experiences of past and current students who did not participate in the study.

Results

Table 1 provides a variety of details about the adult learners who completed the study questionnaire. Most respondents were female, and 36% of respondents identified as being of First Nations descent. About half of the participants indicated that they had taken part in the upgrading program at the college for more than 4 years, with more than half having stopped out of the program at some point. When asked if they had "achieved their goal" in the program, most of the students suggested that they were still working toward their goals.

Table 1: Student Participant Profiles

Characteristic	Frequency
Gender	
Female	10
Male	1
Members of designated groups	
I choose not to disclose/I am not a member of the mentioned groups	6
First Nations	4
Time spent in the upgrading program	
3–6 months	3
1 year	2
2 years	1
More than 4 years	5
Exited the program more than once?	
Yes	6
No	5
Upgrading program goal achieved?	
Yes	2
No	3
I'm still working on achieving my goal	5
No response	1

In responding to questionnaire items, most of the students who participated indicated that they were confident in a school setting, had a positive attitude toward learning, and felt their community regarded education positively (see Table 2). Most saw the upgrading program as relevant to their communities and cultures and regarded community and culturally relevant college programming as important aspects. These students indicated that they were attracted to enrolling in the program because of the college's reputation and location, and most suggested that they enjoyed the flexible aspects of the program, including the opportunity to work independently and at their own pace. While there were exceptions that ought not be overlooked for the purposes of this study, most respondents noted that they felt a sense of community in their classroom, received help from friendships, and felt supported in the upgrading program.

Table 2: Responses to Selected Questionnaire Questions

Question	Response on a Likert-Type Scale					
	1	2	3	4	5	Nil
I am self-confident in a school setting.	1	1	0	4	4	1
I have a positive attitude toward learning in school.	1	0	0	2	7	1
My community has a positive view of education.	1	1	0	3	6	0
The upgrading program is relevant to my community.	1	0	1	2	7	0
The upgrading program is relevant to my culture.	2	0	2	1	6	0
Programming relevant to my culture is important to me.	1	0	3	1	6	0
Programming relevant to my community is important to me.	2	0	0	2	7	0
Cambrian College's reputation positively affected my decision to enrol in the program.	1	0	1	2	7	0
The campus location positively affected my decision to enrol in the program.	2	0	1	1	7	0
I enjoyed learning at my own pace when I participated in the program.	0	0	1	2	8	0
I enjoyed learning independently when I participated in the program.	1	0	1	2	7	0
I felt a sense of community in the upgrading classroom.	1	0	1	2	6	1
The friends I made in the classroom helped me progress toward my goal.	2	1	2	2	4	0
I felt supported in the upgrading classroom.	2	0	0	2	7	0

Table 3: Theme 1—Positive, Supportive, Personal Touch

Subtheme	Qualitative Data
Positive	"The experience I had was very good. It was satisfying, helpful, and I really enjoyed going to school." "It's great. It was a great experience…I have no complaints." "I don't see anything that should be improved." "Everybody is friendly and happy." "Nothing can be better for me at Cambrian College." "I think the college has a friendly atmosphere, and I think it's a quaint place where someone could feel comfortable that they want to go to, every single day."
Supportive	"The instructor is always ready to help you whether it's with a subject you're having problems with or just there to listen." "Cambrian College, as well as the instructor, have been supportive to me over the years…so I cannot really tell you how much more they can do to support a person…In my case, they have and continue to be supportive." "They are very understanding when you tell them about your hearing problem." "They are always ready to assist you in whatever it is you need." "Their patience is helpful." "Cambrian College is great. You know, they're actually helpful…They sort of just encourage things, and it suits me perfect." "Teacher was very helpful with any questions and always encouraging"
Personal touch	"Cambrian College has a positive reputation in the community." "It really does have that personal touch to it. I think that's something that probably keeps people coming back…they feel that personal touch and connection with the supports they can find there." "Having the face-to-face experience with the instructor and the other supporting instructors really helps to boost their confidence and to help show them that they have people there that are supporting them." "At the same time, you guys are really personable, motivating and positive. You guys have a good atmosphere." "I would also say people attend Cambrian College because of the reputation of success people have by attending Cambrian College." "One-on-ones with the instructor. Very helpful."

Student and employer responses to extended response questionnaire items and interview questions were analyzed using a grounded theory content analysis approach (Bengtsson, 2016; Krippendorff, 2013). Following a systematic analysis of these responses, a number of key themes were identified: (a) positive, supportive, personal touch; (b) situational hardships; (c) friendships and community; (d) campus Indigeneity; and (e) program resources.

Positive, Supportive, Personal Touch

One aspect of the upgrading program reported by students and instructors was the positive, supportive, personal touch they associated with the campus, their program, classmates, and campus personnel. A sampling of student and staff comments on this broad recurring theme is provided in Table 3.

Situational Hardships

Reflecting on their college experiences, students and staff highlighted several personal situational hardships that acted as barriers to students' program participation and persistence. They suggested that their success as learners might be improved if the following issues were not inhibiting their progress: (a) health issues, (b) transportation issues, and (c) personal matters. Table 4 provides some examples of student and staff comments corresponding to each of these subthemes.

Friendships and Community

The importance of friendships and a sense of community within the upgrading program were raised by students and staff as important characteristics of their experience that encouraged students to continue toward their educational goals. Table 5 provides some of their comments on this theme.

Campus Indigeneity

Responses provided by the study participants illuminated their perspectives on Indigenous knowledge and practices in their program and at their campus. Two subthemes, identified under the broader theme of campus Indigeneity, were the common desire for more Indigenous curriculum and more Indigenous supports. A selection of student and staff comments on these subthemes are provided in Table 6.

Program Resources

A fifth and final predominant theme was organized under the broad theme of program resources. From the collection of student and staff comments provided in Table 7, one gets a sense of student appreciation for the broad range of program resources and flexibility that students in the upgrading program rely on. Another subtheme in this area was program promotion, particularly a perception that promotion of the program was lacking.

Table 4: Theme 2—Situational Hardships

Subtheme	Qualitative Data
Health issues	"My reasons for not achieving my goal so far are because of my depression, which became worse when my mother passed away. I still have the depression but it's not as bad as it was." "I was getting too depressed, so I didn't have the energy. You know, if you're depressed, you don't have the same enthusiasm." "Right now, the specialist is looking at my heart. That's also probably another reason why. I'll walk to school: get out of breath, start getting dizzy, and my blood pressure has been dropping." "I think that people would drop out from the program based on external factors, not necessarily what happens at Cambrian College or the upgrading program. It would have a lot to do with their physical health and mental health."
Transportation issues	"The only barriers that prevented me from enrolling at an earlier time was transportation issues." "People would be more interested in going to school if they had a ride to get there. I think that would help a lot." "The instructor was driving the students home because everything is far, and there is no access to public transportation." "Some reasons why people would not enrol…would be because of transportation issues."
Personal matters	"I think things like having to go to work to support their family or having to stay home and look after their children are definitely two things that could make them stop out." "People keep telling me, 'I should go to school too.' Money is always a problem too. Some people have kids. They have to pay the babysitter so they can go to school. That's another reason why most of them don't go to school too." "Just God knows what happens at their house or what happens in their lives. Talk about serious talks for sure. If you read the statistics, the number of women and kids that are abused or go through different trauma, like rape, most of this happens inside the house from family…We don't know what's going on or why they are really stopping. Is it financial? Is it your parent? Because you're involved in drugs?" "Was in bad relationship in past that stopped me."

Table 5: Theme 3—Friendships and Community

Subtheme	Qualitative Data
Friendships	"Made lots of friends, a lot of new friends." "Since the COVID-19 and the library is also closed, I've been cut off from computers and friends."
Community	"As an example, carpooling, you see it firsthand. When someone is coming to school and they know they have a ride, and that one person is dedicated. They create a community to come to school." "Friendly classroom." "It's a community. They become part of a community, which is an important part about their learning." "Everyone is friendly." "I think the college has a friendly atmosphere."

Table 6: Theme 4—Campus Indigeneity

Subtheme	Qualitative Data
Indigenous curriculum	"Well, to learn about the Aboriginals. It's important to know. They have a different culture from me, from you. They went through different problems, culturally, than you and I. I think it's very important." "Not enough culture. Like a lot of it, I'm finding, is hidden." "There is not the true Ojibway being offered." "I think we could probably look at having more culturally relevant material, and I think, specifically given the Indigenous community on Manitoulin Island, I think looking at different Indigenous resources might make a lot of sense." "I would say there is a significant lack of cultural inclusion at the Manitoulin campus." "I definitely can think of implementing land-based programs. One day you harvest sweet grass, or you go to smudge outside or an opening prayer if you guys are going to have lunch together or have someone do Aboriginal language classes. I guess those are ways to implement culture, not necessarily what is happening right now." "If there was the same working relationship with Kenjgewin Teg and Cambrian College then you could be offering programs together that are more culturally based."

Subtheme	Qualitative Data
Indigenous support	"I know there is a lot of this kind of help on the island for different reasons: kids involved with drugs, parents with problems. Things like that. But I think that if you had something related to school. Somebody who the students could talk to, and they may be able to talk to more about their difficulties. In this way the school is going to find out more about what it can do to help the students." "You know how First Nations students stop going? They need somebody that they trust to talk to." "Maybe more training and understanding of the Indigenous cultures for instructors would be very helpful. Maybe getting a better understanding of the resources that are available for supporting our students. Whether they be within the local First Nations or within our communities. What is available, and how they can support our students, so that we're better prepared to make those referrals." "There is no Aboriginal worker there. There is no Aboriginal individual even, so for Manitoulin to be predominantly Aboriginal and White, there needs to be an emphasis on the Aboriginal culture too." "If there was support, like they have at Wabnode in Sudbury, there would probably be more of that demographic, but higher success rates with people still being able to navigate what's happening in their lives as well as continue with the upgrading program."

Table 7: Theme 5—Program Resources

Subtheme	Qualitative Data
Program benefits	"The best thing is to promote that the upgrading program is free, and it is sought out higher, in most cases, than a GED." "At your location, there are a lot of resources available, so who wouldn't want to go there everyday!" "Free breakfast program." "Good textbooks (gave clear instructions), free supplies (pens, pencils, USB stick, etc.), excellent free lunch program." "Sometimes there was food. We had all the material you photocopy." "Making it free, so anyone can attend." "Free education and free rides to school and back."
Program flexibility	"It's nice to be given the option on whether to go everyday to school or to break it up." "Well, the flexibility. The flexibility of when I can take a test. The flexibility of going to see the instructor to ask questions because the class, in reality, started a bit earlier than when I was going in the afternoon. That is a good help, yeah." "I wasn't rushed to do anything." "They can go along quickly, or they can go along slowly."
Program promotion	"When I moved to Manitoulin, I didn't know that there was an upgrading program available to this area. It was only after living on the island for quite a while that I found out about Cambrian College's upgrading program through an acquaintance." "I just wish there was an open house or something, so they could actually just come in and see. This is an actual classroom." "I think that lack of knowledge the program exists could be one (barrier)." "Advertising on Manitoulin Island would be having to invest in an advertising budget to be in the newspaper, to be on the radio and to really have a strong social media presence. Marketing and advertising need to continuously happen. I think that it's not done to the level it could be."

Discussion and Future Research

A Personal Touch: Positive, Supportive Experiences

The participants in this study felt that campus staff and professors were supportive, happy, encouraging, friendly, helpful, and patient. Staff participants viewed the campus's reputation as positive and supportive as an attractive attribute for current students, which could attract other new entrants. In fact, 82% of questionnaire participants reported that the college's reputation positively affected their decisions to enrol. Evidence of responsive staff/professor-student relationships was found in the personal anecdotes of support that participants had received: "They are always ready to assist you in whatever it is you need."

According to the questionnaire data, 55% of the student research participants had exited the program more than once, and 83% of these participants had also spent 4 or more years in the upgrading program. Student-staff/professor relationships, a positive and supportive environment, and a positive perception of institutional commitment to student welfare may have encouraged students who stopped out to return on numerous occasions in attempts to accomplish their goals. This is consistent with the view that student persistence is related to student commitment to an institution and to their perception of an institution's commitment to their well-being and success. For example, Braxton et al.'s (2004) revision of Tinto's integration model theorized that institutional commitment to student welfare is one of the factors that directly affects their social integration and has a direct effect on persistence. Likewise, Schreiner et al. (2011) found that high-risk students who made positive connections with institutional instructors were more likely to persist.

Participant descriptions of the quality of their relationships with professors highlighted the importance of their support. The questionnaire results indicated that student participants felt supported in the classroom, and staff participants also noted the importance of the student-professor relationship to the student experience. Research with ABE learners has consistently affirmed this connection of the teacher's role in student success and persistence, especially the quality of student-teacher relationships and the support ABE teachers provide to the students (Braxton et al., 2004; Petty & Thomas, 2014; Spivey, 2016; Zacharakis et al., 2011). This research with students at Cambrian College further demonstrates the value of instructor encouragement, attitude, enthusiasm, and patience in supporting persistence. Most student participants lauded their experiences with their professors, using phrases such as "always ready to help," "always attentive," "he is flexible," "dedicated teaching instructors," "very helpful," "always encouraging," "patient," and "calm" to describe their experiences.

Situational Hardships: Health, Transportation, Personal Matters

Adult education, ABE, and rural education research literature is rich with examples of how situational barriers in a person's life, such as poverty, violence, living situations, and familial support, impact students (Flynn et al., 2011; Hayes, 1988; Leis, 1994: Ryan, 2014; Spivey, 2016; Steel & Fahy, 2011). Falling under three subthemes, situational hardships affected the participation and persistence of the upgrading program participants in this study: (a) health, (b) transportation, and (c) personal matters. Close to half of participants reported that one or more of these situational hardships affected their own or other students' participation and/or persistence in the upgrading program. While difficult financing and securing child care was an issue for female students in the past, the participants in this study did not report child care as a barrier to their participation and persistence in the program.

The participants saw health—mental or physical—as one of the major factors impeding program participation and persistence. They also regarded transportation barriers as negatively impacting participation and persistence. Transportation is a barrier that has been found to affect the delivery of ABE programs, with limited access to transportation having more of an impact on rural students because of the lack of public transportation infrastructure in many rural communities (Ryan, 2014; Steel & Fahy, 2011). Personal matters, such as work, family, finances, child care, and balancing multiple priorities, were noted as factors that prevented some from taking part in and succeeding in the upgrading program. While ensuring that students have appropriate supports and accommodations to help them navigate these barriers, personal challenges are sometimes unavoidable for students. One participant in this study summed this up as follows: "Stuff just happens, and there is just no way around it."

Friendships and Community

Wlodkowski's motivational framework for culturally responsive teaching suggests that inclusion within the classroom is one of the essential conditions for culturally responsive teaching (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2019). A greater sense of inclusion in the classroom helps students to develop relationships, which are important to their learning experience and to their integration (Townsend & Delves, 2009). For Indigenous students, inclusion can be fostered through cultural change by decolonizing and Indigenizing all levels of educational institutions (Pidgeon, 2016). At the practitioner level, inclusion in the classroom involves incorporating Indigenous ways of knowledge acquisition, culture, pedagogies, and history into classroom delivery and curricula (Pidgeon, 2016; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015c). More specific to the Anishinaabe culture on Manitoulin Island, ecological relational knowledge is foundational to its ontology (Peltier, 2016), and this form of knowledge can be taught through traditional land-based learning (Simpson, 2014) and, possibly, storycircle work in the classroom (Peltier, 2016). Moreover, Indigenous students deserve to be treated with dignity and respect within the educational system with reciprocal relationships of trust, culturally relevant education, and guidance (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001).

Beyond friendship, relationships fostered in the classroom provide students with an essential learning support network. These are especially consequential for learning and persistence at rural institutions (Braxton et al., 2004; Townsend & Delves, 2009). Participants in this study noted the importance of friendships at the campus and in the classroom as well as the contribution of a sense of a friendly campus community to the learning experiences of students in the upgrading program. On the questionnaire, 80% of student participants indicated a sense of community in the classroom, and more than half suggested that the friendships they made in the classroom helped them progress toward their goals. At the same time, a large proportion of students (45%) indicated that they did not feel sufficiently supported by their peers. This is possibly an indication of only partial inclusion in the classroom. In addition to the considerations mentioned above, a useful resource in conceptualizing how to foster a "sense of community," prepared by McMillan and Chavis (1986), proposed four essential elements: (a) membership, (b) influence, (c) integration and fulfillment of needs, and (d) a shared emotional connection.

Campus Indigeneity: Culture and Community

Since people from the Anishinaabe culture are a significant portion of the population who live on Manitoulin Island and participate in the upgrading program, it is crucial to include curriculum that is tailored to their perspectives and needs. While most of the student study participants suggested the upgrading program was relevant to their communities and their cultures, the First Nations participants expressed a stronger desire for programming that is relevant to their communities. In interviews, participants who did not identify as Indigenous suggested including curriculum that is more relevant to the local First Nations culture and history. They also pointed to a need for more educational material and activities that are relevant to Indigenous cultures. This perspective is summarized in the words of one participant who said, "I think we could probably look at having more culturally relevant material, and I think, specifically given the Indigenous community on Manitoulin Island, I think looking at different Indigenous resources might make a lot of sense." The participants also felt that campus programming could be enhanced though Indigenous-specific student supports, training in local First Nations culture and resources, and more outreach to prospective Indigenous supports in the local communities.

Program Resources: Benefits, Flexibility, Promotion

Participants spoke positively about the supports available in the upgrading program, but they also criticized the program's promotion. Some of the available supports noted were resources provided free of charge, such as the absence of tuition fees, free school supplies, and occasional free meals for program participants. They also valued the flexibility of the program, including the opportunity for self-paced study and independent learning, allowing for students to progress through their program and adjust their goals as life circumstances may dictate. The importance of program flexibility in the promotion of student retention and persistence has been reflected in other studies of adult education in Canada (Sloane-Seale, 2011; Steel & Fahy, 2011). In a study pertaining to improving the retention and persistence of continuing education students at the University of Manitoba, participants communicated that time extensions and flexibility were important considerations that could potentially increase their retention and persistence (Sloane-Seale, 2011). Some participants expressed their frustrations with the institution and the program because accommodations did not take the unique life circumstances of individual students into account. Another strategy suggested by researchers working with under-represented populations in rural and remote communities included "options for entry and re-entry into programs, as stop-outs become necessary" (Steel & Fahy, 2011, p. 44). Responses from participants in this study further identified the need for the upgrading program to be advertised and promoted more to improve local knowledge of the program's availability. One participant noted, "When I moved to Manitoulin Island, I didn't know there was an upgrading program available to this area. It was only after living on the island for quite a while that I found out about Cambrian College's upgrading program through an acquaintance."

Future Research

Given the lack of research in the available literature, the participation and persistence of ABE students in rural and northern areas of Canada should be further explored. As well, the effects of rurality and place-based education on ABE student participation and persistence are worth exploring further with rural and Indigenous communities in Canada's North. Additionally, research into the particular efforts, if any, of Literacy and Basic Skills service providers across Ontario to further reconciliation would be worthwhile to identify and assess potentially effective pedagogical, classroom, and institutional interventions for this purpose. Furthermore, what similarities and differences exist between rural and urban delivery sites with respect to their efforts to pursue reconciliation?

Conclusion

Despite the small number of study participants and the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, this study identified factors that positively impact the participation and persistence of adult learners in an isolated educational setting. For one, there was strong participant consensus on the positive impact of an encouraging and supportive campus community. In the professors and campus staff, campus friendships, a sense of community, and the flexibility in program requirements, the adult learners were able to find supports they needed to continue their program enrolment and progress.

Though most study participants gave the cultural and community relevance of their program positive reviews, some highlighted a need for the increased inclusion of local First Nations culture and history in the curriculum and culture of the campus. The need for additional supports for Indigenous students and outreach to the surrounding Indigenous communities was also identified. The need for measures such as these is not unique to Cambrian College's satellite campus on Manitoulin Island and is reflected in plans for reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization underway across Canada at present. In contrast to the plans and efforts of Canadian institutions, there is a call by some Indigenous scholars for a "radical break" from the Canadian educational system so that Indigenous Peoples can rebuild and/or strengthen their nations, cultures, sovereignties, knowledge systems, governance systems, and political systems (Simpson, 2014). This "requires generations of Indigenous peoples to grow up intimately and strongly connected to [their] homelands, immersed in [their] languages and spiritualities, and embodying [their] traditions of agency, leadership, decision-making and diplomacy" (Simpson, 2014, p. 1). However, should Indigenous Peoples choose this path, academic institutions are not absolved of their responsibilities mentioned above. Over time, by building consensual, respectful, and reciprocal relationships, Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures in Canada can walk a common pathway to the Eighth Fire, a better world, together (Nelson, 2017).

As this study shows, this campus has important assets and strengths to build upon in this regard, including a positive and supportive environment with dedicated and supportive staff and faculty. As well, the campus has an adult upgrading program that is regarded by students and employees as flexible, non-judgmental, accommodating, and low pressure for students. There are clearly identified areas for improvement, however, such as fostering a greater sense of inclusion in the classroom, identifying and addressing individual student situational hardships, and referring students to the appropriate resources before students reach the point where they consider withdrawing. Building on the campus's existing

community connections and increasing promotion of the upgrading program may provide more opportunities to advance the cultural inclusion of the local First Nations communities.

Despite these important opportunities, some students may still find themselves in situations that are beyond the reach of institutional supports. Some participants in this study were affected by situational hardships that caused them to stop out of their program and discontinue their studies at least once. In general, these participants felt that there was nothing the campus could do to assist them with their barriers to participation and persistence. As one participant stated, "Sometimes life just happens."

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