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### ■ EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

# From coloured blocks to rabbit snares

By Libby Stoker-Lavelle

Indigenous cultural integration is becoming a key element of early childhood education (ECE) classes at University College of the North (UCN).

Professor Barb Carlson was part of the curriculum design group for the post-secondary early childhood education course offered at UCN. Knowing that most of the students in the program, and many of the children these students would teach, would be of First Nations background, the team designed a two-year program that would reflect a true integration of Indigenous and Western knowledge and approaches to learning.

For example, while most ECE educators learn to teach language through music, the UCN students develop this skill with an added layer of cultural understanding. “We take them through the process, so each one of the students will make a drum with an Elder, learn about the customs and traditions around the drum, the significance of the drum, and then they learn how to use it to teach language through song,” Carlson explains.

The program is offered in The Pas and Thompson, with 18 graduates this year. Land-based lessons also extend learning for the ECE students. “We have them involved with going out on the land to learn about ice fishing and rabbit snaring...things that are relevant to children in the north,” says Carlson,



Photo contributed UCN Early Childhood Education student Kulwant Kambo learns how to craft a traditional drum with professor Barb Carlson

“so they have some understanding of the background of the children in the northern areas, and how they can bring that into the childcare centres when they’ve graduated.”

While the primary goal of this integrated curriculum is to help ECE students better meet young children’s needs, a secondary purpose is to help the adult students connect with another part of themselves.

“Most students are First Nations, but many haven’t encountered these traditions before,” says Carlson. “It’s reconnecting them to their roots, and how they can carry that on, and pass that on to their children and to the children that they work with.”

Carlson has found a great deal of interest internationally in the school’s approach to cultural integration. She presented twice at the World Forum on Early Care and Education and also welcomed a visit from an Australian professor who wanted to learn more about the techniques used in the UCN ECE courses.

“I think we’re one of the unique ones,” says Carlson.