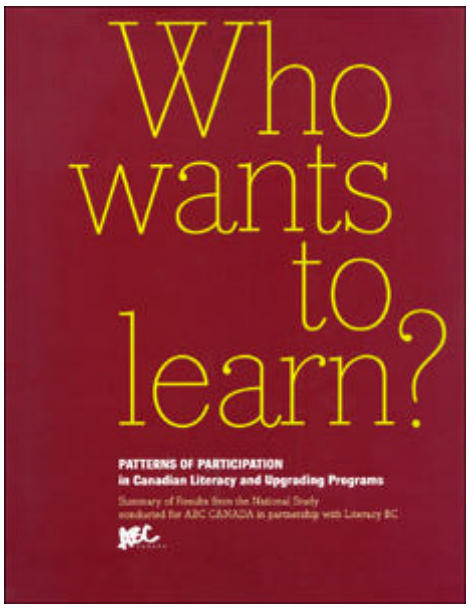

Who wants to learn

Patterns of Participation in Canadian Literacy and Upgrading Programs

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What this study attempted

Canada's low level of adult basic literacy has been well documented by numerous national and international studies.

The past decade has seen the development of a national consensus that basic literacy levels in the country's population must be improved, along with a corresponding rise in outreach efforts to potential literacy learners.

Still, despite increased public awareness of adult literacy issues, the recruitment and retention of adult learners in literacy and upgrading programs remain major challenges, and we have little nationally representative information about the experience of people who attempt to access literacy services.

Because follow-up research has typically been done with people who have either completed or dropped out of programs, little is known about the experience of those who attempt to enrol but are unsuccessful.

And that's why this study, "Patterns of Participation in Canadian Literacy and Upgrading Programs", was conducted for ABC CANADA, in partnership with Literacy BC. It addresses some important questions at a national level, such as:

- What percentage of those who attempt to access services ultimately enrol in programs?

- What are the reasons some people do not enrol?
- How long do people have to wait to start a program or begin meeting with a tutor?

- What do people think about the programs?
- What percentage of people drop out of programs?
- What are the factors associated with dropping out?
- How can we increase enrolment and retention in literacy and upgrading programs?

In a basic sense, this study addresses the degree to which individuals are being linked to services, and the extent to which the services axe meeting their needs. In a broader sense, the study provides some early answers to much larger questions about the capacity of the Canadian literacy field to meet the current demand for literacy services. By implication, the degree to which current demand is being met gives insight into the field's capacity to handle the potential demand for services, should ongoing outreach efforts achieve increasing success.

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PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION in Canadian Literacy and Upgrading Programs

- What percentage of those who try to access services ultimately enrol in programs?
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- What do people think about the programs?
- What percentage of people drop out of programs?
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Executive Summary

Results from the national study, "Patterns of Participation," conducted for ABGGANADA Literacy Foundation, in partnership with Literacy BG.

Access to literacy education critical in Canada

Although Canadians as a group are more formally educated and literate than ever before, a significant percentage of Canadians lack the basic literacy skills that help with daily life and are required for many jobs today. According to Statistics Canada (1996):

- Twenty-two percent of Canadians have serious difficulties with any type of printed material;
- A further 26 percent struggle with all but the most simple of reading and writing tasks.

The most shocking statistic may no longer be how many Canadians have low literacy skills, but rather how few are being helped by the country's current service delivery mechanisms.

- Only a small fraction (estimates range from 5 to 10 percent) of eligible adults have ever enrolled in a literacy or upgrading program.
- Among those who do enrol, dropout rates are high

Follow-up research has typically been done with people who have either completed or dropped out of programs. Little is known about the experience of those who attempt to enrol but are unsuccessful. That's why, in 1999, ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation commissioned a study called "Patterns of Participation in Canadian Literacy and Upgrading Programs" to learn about the experience of people who contact literacy groups for help.

Who is seeking literacy and upgrading education?

"Patterns of Participation" interviewed more than 300 people who were seeking information about literacy and upgrading education across Canada (with the exception of French Canada and the Yukon).

- More than 80 percent identify English as their language of greatest fluency.
- Nearly half are employed.
- Nearly a quarter are receiving some form of social assistance.
- Close to half of potential learners live in households with annual incomes of less than $20,000 a year.

A number of barriers to literacy

The "Patterns of Participation" study found that less than half of those who contact a literacy group actually enrol in a program and of those who do enrol, 30 percent drop out.

Program/Policy-Related Factors

- Forty-three percent of those who don't enrol cite program/policy-related problems such as not being called back by a program contact person, long waiting lists, inconvenient course times, wrong content or teaching structure, and unhelpful program contact.
- Of those who enrol but drop out, more than a quarter identify program/policy-related factors as the main reason for leaving programs. These factors include wrong program level, content or teaching structure and program cancellation.

Socioeconomic-Circumstantial factors

- Thirty percent of those who do not enrol cite socioeconomic-circumstantial factors as the main barrier.
- Almost half of those who do not enrol in literacy or upgrading programs cite money problems as a contributing factor for not enrolling.
- Of those with children, more than 40 percent of women and close to 20 percent of men cite childcare conflicts as a factor in their decision not to enrol.
- Women are much more likely to cite socioeconomic-circumstantial factors than men, reflecting women's lower incomes and higher degree of responsibility for childcare.
- Socioeconomic-circumstantial factors are an even larger factor in dropping out of programs. Fifty-six percent of those who drop out cite reasons such as job-related conflicts and family responsibilities, especially childcare.

Cognitive-Emotive Factors

- Contrary to popular understanding, cognitive- emotive reasons – such as fear – are least likely (15 percent) to be cited as the main factor for not enrolling. Older callers and those with lower levels of formal education are the most likely to cite cognitive-emotive reasons as contributing factors.
- A relatively low proportion of learners (6 percent) offer cognitive-emotive factors as their main reason for leaving a program, although worry or nervousness about being in a program is a contributing factor for more than a quarter of those who drop out.

Problem is systemic

In addition to the underlying problems of poverty, childcare issues and job conflicts, there are dramatic regional variations in models of funding and service delivery across Canada that make it difficult to provide quality programs and service.]

Of the groups and programs who participated in this study:

- More than a third have no full-time staff.
- More than two-thirds have one or less full-time staff.
- Close to 40 percent are open less than 35 hours per week.
- Fifty-seven percent close for more than four weeks per year.
- High numbers use volunteers to cover critical teaching and referral work.
- Half do not provide special training for staff or volunteers who do referrals.

What it will take to solve the problem

Given the small fraction of people with low literacy skills who actually contact programs and all the socioeconomic-circumstantial difficulties they must overcome to do so, it is nothing short of tragic when they are not able to enrol because of policy- or program-related barriers.

But what will it take to change the picture of Canadian literacy and upgrading programs from one of low enrolment, high dropout, and precarious participation?

Certainly, it is tempting to direct individual literacy organizations to revamp their approach or slash their waiting lists; but without increased program funding and significant infrastructural change, that may not be possible.

Some of the problems facing literacy education in Canada can be alleviated by immediate action and increased funding. Most solutions, however, require longer-term strategies, which include moving away from our current patchwork of assorted programs and services, toward a genuine system for adult basic education.

For public and private sector action

Determine ways to eliminate the barriers, including socio-economic factors, associated with limited enrolment and high drop-out rates:

- Study means of reducing/eliminating student waiting lists through addressing the financial and staffing issues associated with meeting the current and future demands for services.
- Assess resource requirements and means of providing access to all literacy and upgrading programs up to and including high school completion, regardless of learner's age.
- Consider program funding/support that allows for and requires best practices relating to (a) training of intake and referral workers; (b) assessment procedures and program evaluation; (c) effective follow-up with potential learners; (d) assessment of learner support-service requirements.
- Investigate provision of on-site childcare and/or promote partnerships with community-based childcare providers, to offer learners effective childcare options.
- Encourage a diversity of programming, delivery and support models, including workplace basic skills, family literacy programs, distance learning and specialized approaches geared to those in the critical school-to-work transition years (ages 16-24) and those over the age of 45.

For public sector action

- Determine methods of overcoming complex jurisdictional issues that contribute to the current patchwork of programs and services and that inhibit the emergence of a coherent strategy for adult basic education.
- Encourage the development of a process that allows ministers responsible for adult basic education to meet formally to establish goals, review progress and assess new information.

For literacy field action

- Discuss forming a strategic alliance of relevant stakeholders to take a national leadership role in advocating for national access standards and for an improved and stable infrastructure for adult basic education.
- Work to identify and advocate for best practice protocols for referral, intake, follow-up, program evaluation and integrated service delivery.

The Statistics

POTENTIAL LEARNER DEMOGRAPHY

CATEGORY	% OF CALLERS
All callers	100
Gender	
Male	47
Female	53
Age category	
16-24	27
25-34	29
35-44	26
45+	18
Level of formal education	
Less than grade 5	7
Grades 5-9	28
Grades 10-12/13 (no diploma)	35
High-school graduate	18
At least some postsecondary	12
Community size	
Less than 15,000	30
15,000-99,000	15
100,000-499,000	26
500,000+	29
Employment status	
Full-time employment	31
Part-time employment	16
Receiving social assistance	28
Other income	25
Annual household income	
Less than $20,000	47
$20,000-29,999	27
$30,000-39,999	6
$40,000+	20

Language of greatest fluency	
English	82
Other	18

Who calls literacy and upgrading programs in Canada?

While the potential learners in this study constitute a broad cross-section of people, from all age groups and from communities large and small, with a very wide range of formal education and employment statuses, the following trends appear:

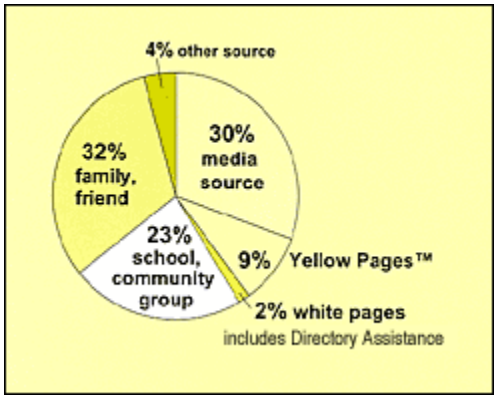
- More than 80 percent of callers identify English as their language of greatest fluency.

- Nearly half of the potential learners are employed.
- Nearly a quarter are receiving some form of social assistance.
- Close to half of potential learners live in households with annual incomes of less than $20,000 a year.
- More than a third of those who called have a high- school diploma or some post-secondary education. Those citing higher levels of formal education are more likely to have been educated in countries other than Canada.
- Callers over the age of 45 are dramatically underrepresented, especially given the low literacy levels in that age group. However, older callers have above-average rates of enrolment and are the least likely to drop out of programs, compared with other age groups.

SOURCE OF AWARENESS

How potential learners hear about literacy and upgrading programs

Almost three-quarters of callers remember having seen ads about adults going back to school, and more than half of these callers say the ads influenced them to call a literacy group.

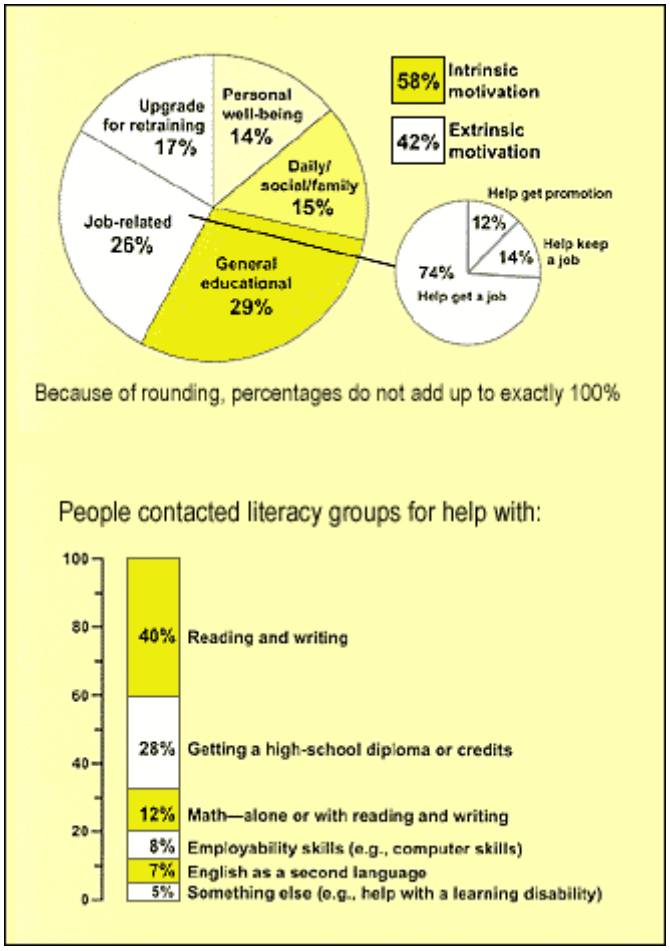


Although large numbers of people from all demographic groups said the ads influenced them to call, the ads are particularly effective among people with lower levels of formal education and those in larger urban areas.

What motivates potential learners to contact literacy groups?

The range of motivations includes (but is not limited to) extrinsic benefits, such as vocational mobility and economic need, and intrinsic benefits, such as enhanced participation in community life and increased ability to meet family responsibilities and negotiate life transitions.

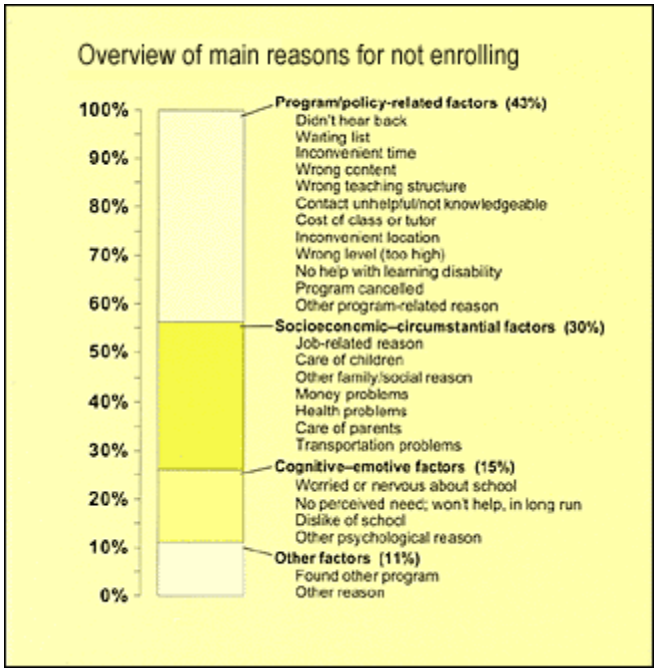
Motivations relating to jobs or retraining are stated primarily by younger callers and those with at least a high-school diploma.



Callers living in smaller communities and those with lower household incomes are more likely to offer extrinsic motivations than those in the largest communities or with higher household incomes.

Whereas older callers and those with lower levels of formal education are most likely to want help developing the specific skills of reading and writing, the goal of working toward a high-school diploma or vocational credentials is more readily articulated by younger people and those with more formal education.

"They told me they were booked up and there was a long waiting list. I didn't think there would be a place for me."
—Man age 27, grade 10-12.



What prevents people from enrolling?

Less than half of the respondents who inquire about literacy or upgrading services enrol in a program.

Nonenrolment is particularly pronounced in large urban centres (population 500,000 or more), where almost three-quarters of the respondents do not enrol.

Program/policy-related factors are the main barriers for 43 percent of those who do not enrol. In order of frequency, these factors include:

- Not being called back by a program contact person.
- Long waiting lists – having to wait a long time to start a program is a factor for close to a third of those who do not enrol. While prevalent in all types of communities, these factors are particularly pronounced in communities with population sizes between 15,000 and 99,999.
- Inconvenient program times (this is a central barrier in large cities).
- Wrong content or teaching structure
- Finding the program contact to be unhelpful or not knowledgeable.
- Having to pay for the program or tutor.

Socioeconomic-circumstantial factors are the main barriers for 30 percent of those who do not enrol.

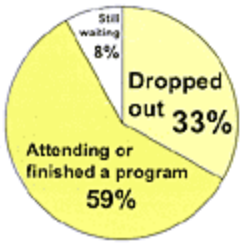
- Money problems are cited as a factor for close to half of all callers who do not enrol.
- Job-related conflicts are a factor for more than a third of all callers who do not enrol.
- Women are much more likely to cite socioeconomic- circumstantial factors than men, reflecting women's lower incomes and higher degree of responsibility for childcare.
- Of those with children, half of the women and a quarter of the men say they would have called earlier had there been on-site childcare. Upon calling, more than 40 percent of women and close to 20 percent of men cite childcare conflicts as a factor in their decision not to enrol.

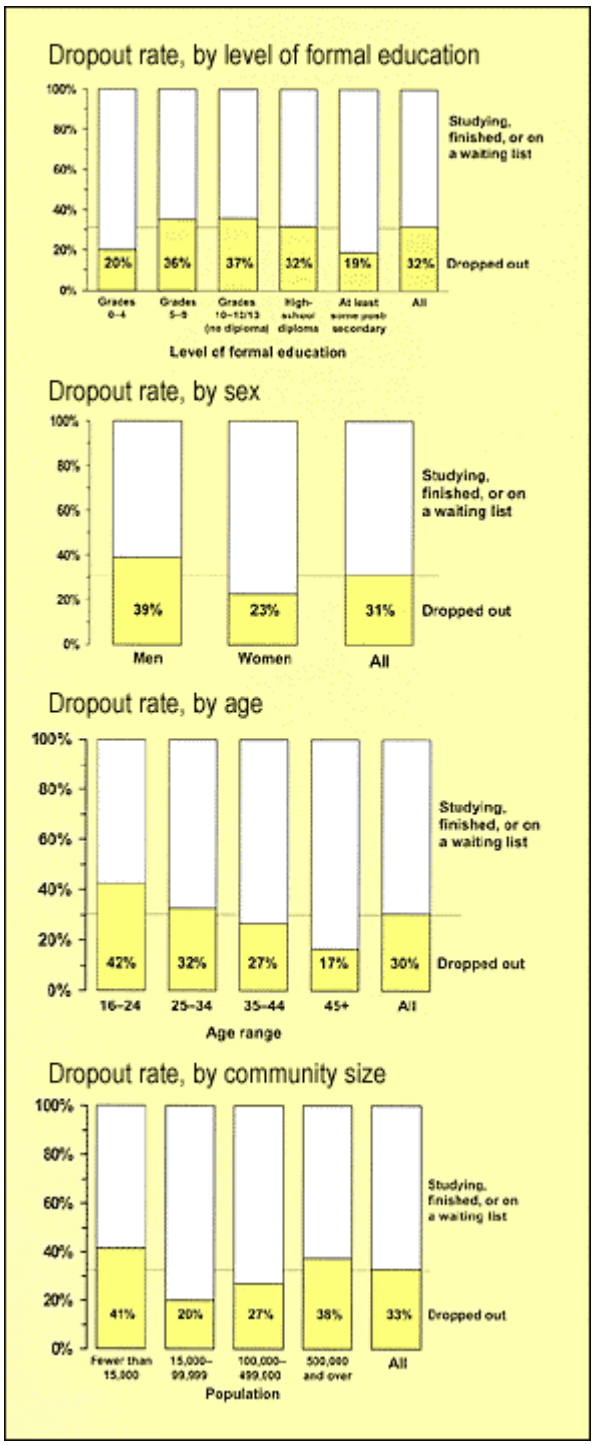
Contrary to popular understanding, cognitive-emotive. reasons – such as fear – are least likely (15 percent) to be cited as the main factor for not enrolling. Older callers and those with lower levels of formal education. are the most likely to cite cognitive-emotive reasons as contributing factors.

Most respondents cite a complex constellation of reasons for nonenrollment, suggesting the need for multifaceted strategies that address a wide range of factors. **While identifying main factors is important, in the end, composite reasons offer a more sophisticated picture of the multiple, interacting factors involved in nonenrollment.**

Who drops out?

- Thirty-three percent of those who sign up for programs drop out by the point of follow-up (six- to eight-month mark).
- Young people aged 16 to 24, adults with low incomes, men, and those living in rural areas/ small towns or very large cities are the most likely to drop out of programs.
- Interestingly, more than three-quarters of those who drop out say they would seek help again in the future, supporting the idea that people drop in and out of programs in relation to particular circumstances rather than dropping out altogether. This gives us clear incentive to find solutions to facilitate better retention for these learners and others whose life circumstances may be similar.





"I never knew about the hours I had to work. The class was inconvenient and stressful... If I had another source of income, then I could go to school." —Woman age 22, grade 5-9.

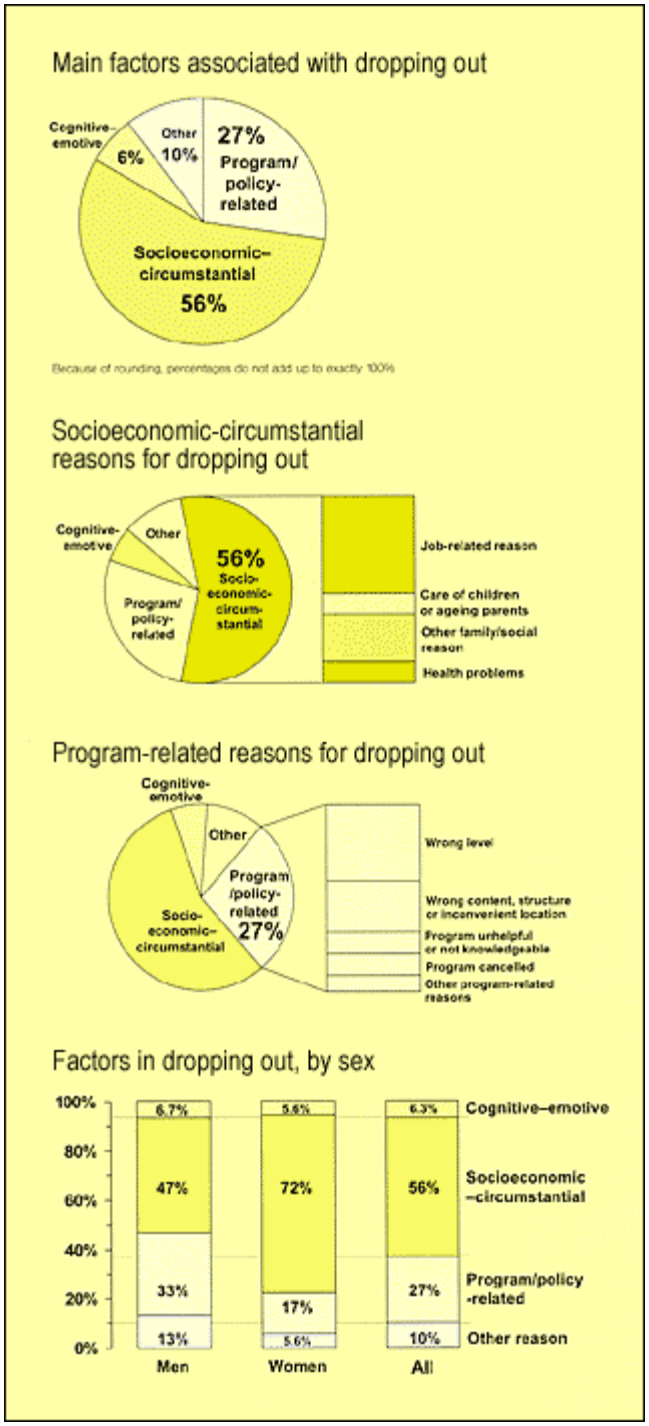
DROP OUT FACTORS

Why people drop out

- The main factor driving dropout rates in this study are socioeconomic-circumstantial reasons, cited by 56 percent of those who left programs. Job-related pressures, and family responsibilities (especially childcare) make up a significant portion of these reasons. Money problems are a contributing factor for more than a third of those who drop out.

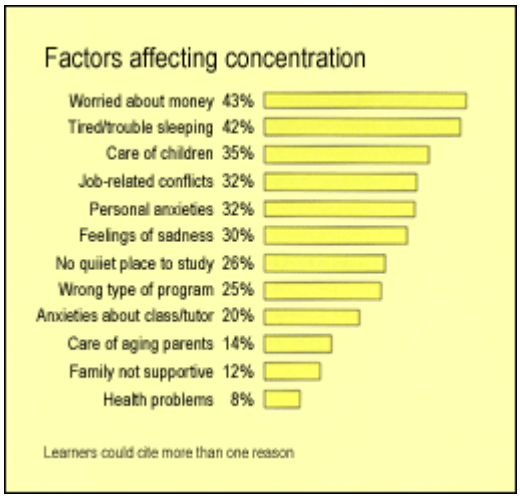
- Another quarter of those who dropped out identified program/policy-related factors as the main reason for leaving programs. These factors include wrong program level, content or teaching structure; and program cancellation.

- A relatively low proportion of learners (6 percent) offer cognitive-emotive factors as their main reason for leaving a program, although worry or nervousness about being in a program is a contributing factor for more than a quarter of those who drop out.



While the findings related to dropping out point to the need for multifaceted solutions that would address all factors, the clear predominance of certain types of socioeconomic-circumstantial factors highlights the need to find immediate solutions to the childcare, job-related and financial pressures experienced by literacy and upgrading learners.

The experience of those who enrol



The great majority (88 percent) of callers who have completed or are still in a program report high levels of satisfaction with the program level, content and teaching structure.

However, a striking area of dissatisfaction is the low number of hours per week spent with a teacher or tutor. Other areas for improvement include the need for:

- smaller classes,
- more individual attention,
- more relevant material,
- more knowledgeable teachers and tutors, and
- diverse program locations.

In addition, the participation of many learners in literacy and upgrading programs can only be characterized as precarious because of the large number of factors affecting concentration. It is clear that many learners are dealing with multiple issues and concerns that make their involvement unstable in the absence of additional supports.

Waiting lists are a major problem

Close to 10 percent of those who enrol are still waiting to start a program 6-8 months after their initial call to a literacy group.

"With the bills, food, clothing, bus fare and rent there isn't a lot to spare. If my mom wasn't around to watch the kids, it wouldn't be possible for me to be doing this. If you don't have money you always feel you should be somewhere else than school, somewhere earning more money."

—Woman age 33, grade 5-9.

Suggestions for Action

"Patterns of Participation" provides some early answers to questions about the capacity of the Canadian literacy field to meet the current demand for literacy services.

For public and private sector action

Determine ways to eliminate the barriers, including socioeconomic factors, associated with limited enrolment and high drop-out rates:

- Study means of reducing/eliminating student waiting lists by addressing the financial and staffing issues associated with meeting the current and future demands for services.

- Assess resource requirements and means of providing access to all literacy and upgrading programs up to and including high school completion, regardless of learner's age.

- Consider program funding/support that allows for and requires best practices relating to:
    - training of intake and referral workers,
    - assessment procedures and program evaluation,
    - effective follow-up with potential learners,
    - assessment of learner support-service requirements.

- Investigate provision of on-site childcare and/or promote partnerships with community-based childcare providers, to offer effective childcare options for learners.

- Encourage a diversity of programming, delivery and support models, including workplace basic skills, family literacy programs, distance learning and specialized approaches geared to those in the critical school-to-work transition years (ages 16-24) and those over the age of 45.

For public sector action

- Determine methods of overcoming complex jurisdictional issues that contribute to the current patchwork of programs and services and that inhibit the emergence of a coherent strategy for adult basic education.

- Encourage the development of a process that allows ministers responsible for adult basic education to meet formally to establish goals, review progress and assess new information.

For literacy field action

- Discuss forming a strategic alliance of relevant stakeholders to take a national leadership role in advocating for national access standards and for an improved and stable infrastructure for adult basic education.
- Work to identify and advocate for best practice protocols for referral, intake, follow-up, program evaluation and integrated service delivery.

"I liked your survey. It was good to talk about some of the good things I'm doing and some of the problems. I just hope you can find solutions to some of the problems."
—Man age 52, grade 10-12

How the study was conducted

In 1998, 60 groups that work in cooperation with ABC CANADA's LEARN Campaign were chosen randomly from a pool of 314 and asked to participate in a study that would follow up the experience of people (callers) who contacted the groups about their programs. Of these 60 groups, 55 agreed to participate.

The sample included community-based providers, school boards, community colleges, phone referral lines, government literacy agencies, literacy networks, and urban and rural groups.

In January and February of 1999,505 of the 729 people who called the literacy groups participating in our study gave ABC CANADA permission to contact them for a follow-up phone survey six to eight months later.

In late August through early October 1999, the Institute for Social Research at York University successfully contacted and interviewed 338 of the 505 subjects – a response rate of 67 percent.

The limitations of this study

To help conceptualize the findings of this study and to understand what they could potentially mean for adult literacy work in Canada, it is important to note that this study does not include the experiences of the vast majority (somewhere between 90 and 95 percent) of people with low literacy skills who have not participated in literacy or upgrading programs.

Nor does the study address the phenomenon of continuous learning, whereby people with low literacy skills enter into a pattern of ongoing, long-term engagement with formal education.

What the study does look at is the experiences of people who:

- Contacted a literacy group for basic information but did not enrol in a program.
- Attempted to enrol but for some reason did not start.
- Enrolled in a program but dropped out after a time.
- Enrolled and were progressing in or had completed a single program.

However, the findings do not include the experience of potential learners who are:

- Among the one-third of callers who could not be contacted for follow-up. (Most of the people who could not be reached had likely moved. Their phone numbers were out of service, with no forwarding number.)
- From French Quebec (the organization that receives all French calls declined to participate).
- From the Yukon (because of a technical error in obtaining permissions to call back).

Because of this:

- Enrolment figures may be overestimated.
- Drop-out rates may be underestimated.
- Callers receiving social assistance may be underestimated.
- The impact of socioeconomic factors may be underestimated.
- Callers who speak English as a second language may be underestimated.

ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation is a joint initiative of business, labour, education and government, supporting the development of an educated and adaptable workforce through the fostering of a lifelong learning culture.

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