



# THE CHANGING FACE OF LITERACY IN OTTAWA

A Research Project Summary for the  
Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy

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# The Changing Face of Literacy Project

The past few years have been an interesting time in adult literacy in Ottawa-Carleton. A number of variables converged, including the publication of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1999, the launch in 1998 of provincial initiatives to standardize literacy practice in Ontario, the implementation of Ontario Works, and the amalgamation of 11 municipalities from the former region of Ottawa-Carleton (RMOC) into the City of Ottawa in January 2001. In the midst of these tumultuous times we, as a literacy community, began to look with fresh vision at our students, our programs, our approach to outreach, and the very definition of literacy itself, and we began to recognize that the face of literacy was ...and is ...changing.

Change demands a response, and this research project was developed in an effort to engage the key players in the formulation of a collective response. Together, literacy students, literacy practitioners and representatives from community partners (those organizations that interact with the same target groups that are served by literacy programs), were asked the following questions:

- What is a working definition of "low literacy" in the new City of Ottawa in the early days of the 21st century?
- Aside from low literacy skills, what other issues are present in the adult literacy student's life that have an impact on their ability to achieve the goals they have set for themselves as literacy students?
- Why do adults seek out the services of a literacy program? What motivates them to participate in a program?
- Given that there are several different types of literacy programs to choose from in Ottawa, are some program models more attractive to students and referring agencies than others?

By asking these questions of students, practitioners and community partners, different perspectives emerged which, when viewed holistically, paint a picture of literacy that is both clearer and more complex than the image previously held. To complement the perspectives of students, practitioners and community partners, the project also briefly explored some new directions regarding program delivery in the field of adult literacy, collected relevant statistical information to better understand the Ottawa community in relation to adults with low literacy skills, and current program initiatives were highlighted.

Not surprisingly, while some questions are answered, still others have surfaced, awaiting further exploration. There may be no clear-cut answers, but hopefully the project has generated some clear questions. Such is the nature of a force as dynamic as the *ever-changing face of literacy!*

# Comparing the Three Perspectives

The perspectives of the three groups involved in adult literacy education—practitioners, students and community partners—were compared in order to examine the issues the participants raised during the project. Although the three groups share some common perceptions about literacy and literacy programs, and are not too far away from each other in other areas, there are some gaps, and even misperceptions.

## Definition of Low Literacy

It may be no surprise for those working in the field that the word literacy was most often viewed negatively by students, or was not even understood by many. Although program funders use the word to describe programs, and have in fact made the use of the word even more transparent by calling the provincially funded program Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) as opposed to its previous name, Adult Basic Education (ABE), the interviewed students rarely used the word *literacy*. Instead, when students were asked to describe what it is they were doing they most often referred to their work as *upgrading* or reading and writing *skills*.

The discussion about a definition of low literacy became somewhat more complex when students were asked to define a word that they rarely used. Instead of being asked to define low literacy, students were asked what it meant to need *upgrading* or reading and writing *skills*. The students interviewed focused mostly on the need to increase functional reading and writing abilities, and sometimes on math or listening and speaking skills. They rarely discussed other definitions such as difficulty learning, organizing information or fitting into the community.

Students seem to be saying that they want to be able to express their thoughts in writing independently, in order to be readily understood by others. As one student said during an interview, "It's about putting your thoughts on paper properly." This kind of comment connects to the student's own sense of self, and the student's attempts to fit into a society that places a high value on literacy skills.

Both practitioners and community partners suggested that their definitions of low literacy reached beyond the traditional view that sees literacy as only a set of functional skills. Practitioners consistently held a wider view of low literacy compared to both students and community partners. Often, practitioners commented that their definition of low literacy was based on the students they worked with. They also suggested that for some people, literacy may only be about reading and writing, but for others, low literacy was about many other issues, such as a limited ability to retain and use new knowledge, or a limited ability to participate in their communities in

*When I hear literacy, I think illiteracy. To me I'm not illiterate. That's not me. (Student)*

*I don't use the word literacy—it's depressing to me. I say I want to improve my writing skills. (Student)*

*The previous statements [definitions] vary in degree with each person and have greater impact with each person when they are dealing with people and events outside their home. (Practitioner)*

*The class composition changes and therefore the definition changes. (Practitioner)*

a meaningful way. It was usually the lower level students who needed the wider view of low literacy. It can be argued that practitioners see their students on a sort of continuum, in which higher level students with fewer learning needs are at one end, and lower level students with a greater number of learning needs are at the other end.

Although community partners also held a wider view overall, they separated their definition of literacy from other personal management skills. In the checklist part of their question about low literacy, over half of those who responded restricted their definition of low literacy to skills related to reading and writing. Only two of the 16 participants identified limited personal management as a literacy issue. On the other hand, in the comments section, the same community partners seemed to focus on the importance of addressing all needs, including personal management, which their clients might have. They may be saying that their interpretation of the word literacy is narrowly defined and unable to address all the issues that their clients face. They may also be saying that it is important to view the learning-related needs of their clients beyond the narrow definitions associated with literacy.

## **Other Issues that Interfere with Life Goals**

Although all three groups recognized that there were often other issues that interfered with students' abilities to reach their goals, it is the discrepancy between the students' and practitioners' perceptions of these issues that needs to be discussed. Practitioners overwhelmingly agreed that low literacy and a lack of employment skills and experience were the issues that were most likely to interfere with students' goals. In contrast, students placed less emphasis on their literacy skills and said issues such as discrimination, lack of experience and opportunity, and physical and mental health interfered more with the achievement of their goals.

Two students commented that their literacy skills had little to do with their ability to get a job. They claimed that they could get jobs that didn't require a high level of reading or writing skills, and it was the knowledge that their literacy skills were low, and not their ability to do a job that became an issue with employers. At the same time though, they also recognized that their job opportunities were limited by their low literacy skills. Although this kind of comment was made by only two students; it does raise questions that could be explored in future research.

The college participants added another layer to this issue, and their views related more to the practitioners' than the other students. Many of the college participants had worked in recognized professions in their native countries. When they emigrated, they often found themselves in jobs different from their training, and without benefits, stability or personal

*Why do we distinguish between literacy skills and these other skills, like communication skills and other skills that people need in order to be successful? I think it would be helpful to see these things as a package deal and work with the problems as a whole. (Community Partner)*

*Other things get in the way of getting what you want. Experience is very important. If I don't have experience, I can't get anything. (Student)*

*I worked for 25 years ... I trained guys and they end up getting promoted and get more money. They had more education than I did. I'm not going back to cleaning and a minimum wage job where they treat you like dirt. (Student)*

satisfaction. These participants felt they needed a recognized diploma or certificate to obtain better employment. Their barriers were often related to issues of acceptance and recognition of their non-Canadian experience and education.

From this survey, there is some evidence to suggest that practitioners and community partners need to acknowledge that a student's low literacy skills may have much less of an impact than they think on a student's ability to achieve their goals. This is not to say literacy is not important to the students, after all that is the reason they have come to a program. What is being said, is low literacy may be less related to the achievement of extrinsic goals such as employment, and more related to intrinsic goals, such as self-improvement, personal satisfaction and self-confidence.

A research and materials writing project recently completed by the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (2001) contributes to this idea that it is not primarily the functional literacy skills that even employers value. Various employers who had entry-level positions in the Ottawa area were interviewed and asked to rate some of the general skills that their employees needed. Employers consistently rated personal management and oral communication skills above reading, writing and numeracy skills.

Again, these issues point to the need to begin viewing students based on their needs and goals, and not just their functional literacy skills. While those in the field may recognize this diversity amongst students those who are not directly involved in the field may not. In order to better explore this diversity, questions that reach beyond, "What is your reading and writing level?" need to be asked to begin to build a more accurate profile of our students and their needs.

## **Reasons for Participation**

Similar to the above issue, there is a gap between practitioners' and community partners' views compared to students' views regarding the reasons people participate in programs. Students again emphasized more intrinsic and personal reasons for attending a program, such as increased confidence and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, community partners, and to a lesser extent, practitioners focused on more extrinsic reasons for attending, such as further education or employment.

Practitioners, like students, did acknowledge that students attended programs both to gain confidence, self-esteem and self-actualization, and to pursue further education and employment related goals. Practitioners may be caught between the demands of community partners (and it could

*You need to know all about the society and the language if you want to have an active role. The language is the key (College Student)*

*It feels like there is a thick glass between me and society. This is a problem newcomers experience. (College Student)*

*I'm tired of not being able to explain myself. I want to write what I'm thinking. want to use the word in my head-not some simple word. After I can do this, then I can do what I want. (Student)*

*We want to be understand and understand the community. It's important to improve yourself. (Student)*

be argued the provincial funding agencies) who tend to view literacy only as a means to further education or employment, and their students who tend to view literacy in a much more personal manner. This could also provide some insight into the difficulty some students have expressing their goals. If practitioners are thinking of literacy in a more extrinsic way and asking students about their employment and further education goals, and students are thinking of literacy in a more intrinsic way, there may be a large gap between a number of students and practitioners during the goal-setting process.

The students from the college, unlike the students in other programs, readily connected their literacy program participation with improved job opportunities. In general, they were more extrinsically motivated. An argument can be made that the college group, which has higher levels of formal education, recognized the impact formal education levels have on job opportunities, and more importantly, have a learning history that will help them achieve their educational goals. This is not to say that the other students don't recognize this importance, but their levels of formal education are significantly lower. They may realize that the gap between their current literacy levels and a level that leads to enough formal education to make a difference in the kinds of jobs that are currently available to them, may be too wide to bridge.

The results of this question seemed to point to a division between intrinsic and extrinsic reasons that students might have for participating in literacy programs. The interviewed students participating in the college program were primarily extrinsically motivated, whereas students participating in other programs were primarily intrinsically motivated. It is likely not the program that determines this division, rather a variety of factors such as previous level of formal education and current literacy level. Students attending other literacy programs who may appear at one end of a continuum of learning needs may also be more extrinsically motivated.

The issue of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations is a complex one. For example, students at the college are usually preparing for entry into a post-secondary program (an extrinsic motivation) but they also want to create secure and stable lives for themselves and their families. Conversely, students in other programs seemed to be primarily focused on intrinsic reasons for attending a literacy program, but many hope that personal gains and improvements will lead to more extrinsically based opportunities. One student may have summed up this complexity best when he said that his reasons for attending were "in a package. I come for a job, myself and my family."

*If you can't read and write yourself, your secrets go to another person because you have to get someone else to help you.  
(Student)*

*My goal is a stable life. Without education, there is too much insecurity. Returning to school will also stop me from being exploited.  
(College student)*

*Sometimes when I don't know what else to do with a client, I'll refer them to a literacy program because then I can put something on their file that says same thing is happening with this client. I'll be honest, I don't really know if a literacy program is where they belong, but I don't always know what else to do with them. 50 many of my clients have so many issues. (Community Partner)*

## Program Design

Overwhelmingly, all three groups agreed that there needs to be a wide choice of program delivery formats in a variety of locations throughout Ottawa. The three groups also recognized the important role played by volunteers in programs, and emphasized that the quality of the interaction far outweighs employment status or certifications. Practitioners said a program should provide structure, consistency and support. In return, students needed to fully participate, be committed and have regular attendance. Community partners were interested in sharing information regarding students' goals and progress but not attendance. Students said program support such as counselling would be helpful. They also said that they would be willing to travel further in order to attend a program that was better able to meet their needs.

Somewhat surprisingly was the issue of group interaction that was raised spontaneously by a few participants. In a community-based one-on-one program, two students talked about a desire to be able to work with others in small groups to share common goals and interests. Participants in the college program (although they work in classes, they are engaged in self-paced and independent learning) also expressed a desire to spend some time working and interacting with others to apply their skills, get to know each other and work together to achieve common goals.

Recent research with the University of Ottawa and the Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board focused on collaborative practices in adult literacy classrooms. Preliminary findings indicate that students have a very positive view of group learning. They feel that it assists them with their own learning and helps to make their learning experience more relaxed and enjoyable.<sup>1</sup>

## Program Role

In order to better understand the reasons students go to programs and possible outreach strategies, both practitioners and students were asked what they thought the main role of a literacy program should be. Community partners were asked a slightly different question, which focused primarily on why they made specific referrals. The combined information could help programs better understand how they are perceived, possible gaps in these perceptions, and what areas students and community partners feel are most important for programs to address.

*Different people need different things. If every literacy program in the city is offering the same model ... same type of instruction ... same schedule ... it really doesn't serve the needs of the target population.*  
(Community Partner)

*Although I'm in a one-on-one program, I could see that a small group would work well-not simply based on a general idea, but a specific idea like religion or health.*  
(Student)

*I don't know enough about what kinds of services are available. In the past I've always referred people to the same literacy program because I thought it was the only one.*  
(Community Partner)

*It seems that there's a lot more going on in these literacy programs than I had previously realized.*  
(Community Partner)

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<sup>1</sup> This comment is based on personal involvement with the research project.

### *Community Partners and Referrals*

Community partners made referrals based on limited and sometimes erroneous information. They tended to make referrals to programs that were familiar to them, and not necessarily to the program that was best able to meet a client's needs. It is apparent that potential referral agencies know very little about the diversity of Ottawa literacy programs. An obvious question is, what can programs do to inform community partners about their services? A second but related series of questions is, should programs work towards their own descriptions of their roles, and what would this be based on? Should a program define itself merely based on program design qualities such as hours of operation and one-on-one versus classroom based delivery? Or should programs move more towards a definition based on student goals and needs? This is not to say that the structural qualities are not important, but what is to distinguish one classroom-based program from another, or a one-on-one program from another similar program?

### *Students' and Practitioners' Views of a Programs' Role*

Students, with the exception of those at the college, emphasized the need for literacy programs to have a role that could help to address their more intrinsic and personal motivations for attending a program. Students stated that helping them to gain confidence and independence was just as important as reading and writing. Other intrinsically based roles, such as participation and learning about the community, were more important to students than employment and further education. When students were asked about the need to learn about the community and deal with problems, it is interesting to note the different responses between the questions that addressed reasons students participate and the role of a program. Although many respondents said that learning about the community and addressing problems was not a strong reason for participating in a program, they did feel it should be part of a program's role. This was a commonly held view amongst the interviewed students, with the exception of the students at the college. Predominantly, the students at the college were focused on entry to post-secondary programs within the college.

Practitioners, also (with the exception of those at the college) seemed to recognize the more intrinsic needs of students. They said it was just as important for a program to help build students' confidence and independence, as it was to prepare students for employment and further education. Practitioners seem to be saying that increased self-confidence, independence and self-actualization are an important foundation if students are to achieve their goals. A question that emerges is what is the role of literacy education in fostering this personal growth?

*A central assessment and referral service would be helpful. There are all these different literacy programs, but I don't know which one is best for my client. Also, I don't always know for sure if my client has a literacy issue. If there was a central location I could refer to, then the client would be assessed and placed from there.*  
(Community Partner)

*Feeling welcome and a sense of belonging [are the roles of a program]. I want to connect with the community.* (Student)

*A literacy program shouldn't teach only reading and writing. It should be taught in relation to other things.* (Student)

*It should not be a drop-in centre:*  
(Student)

*On the practical side, students need*

*skills to work in this society, but they also need to feel part of their community to achieve integration. This comes partly from awareness of their own value and knowledge of what the customs are.* (Practitioner)

## Community Connections

Stronger community connections were fully supported by practitioners, and mostly supported by students. Some students said that they knew where to get help if needed, and didn't feel community support within programs was necessary. Other students had access to a variety of supports. What may be more of a pressing need, is making connections in order to inform community partners about literacy services and literacy-related issues in the community.

## Recommendations

The Ottawa literacy community is a dynamic, committed and innovative community of adult literacy educators, administrators and supporters. There is no doubt that front-line practitioners who are either volunteers or work for the most part on a part-time basis without job security, benefits and the support of a union, are personally committed to their students and the ideals of adult literacy education. Paid practitioners view themselves as professionals, despite a system of funding that suggests otherwise, and are committed to professional practices. This is evidenced by their demand for and high level of participation in professional development and training activities. Administrators and program coordinators display foresight and initiative when addressing the needs of their students. As highlighted in the previous chapter, many programs are moving beyond a traditional view of literacy education and developing new program models, reaching out to the community, and continually thinking of and applying innovative approaches to support both students in programs and potential students who may have previously never considered participating in a program.

Finally, those who support literacy, such as the community partners who were interviewed for this project, may not always have a clear picture of the literacy community in Ottawa, but appear to welcome initiatives that would help them serve their clients better.

In this light, the following recommendations can be seen as further steps that can be taken by the dynamic and committed community in Ottawa.

*Students need to have as many opportunities as possible to learn about the usefulness of their literacy skills. Partnerships with other community groups that offer services in a wide variety of areas are crucial in offering adults opportunities to learn and grow and meet their goals.  
(Practitioner)*

## **Number 1 - Share information about programs with community partners and each other.**

The Ottawa literacy community needs to educate community partners, and to some extent each other about various programs and initiatives. Community partners admitted that they knew very little about the differences between programs and the reasons that one program may be more appropriate for a student over another. Based on past experience with outreach initiatives, **it is recommended that the Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy resume its practice of making presentations to various referral agencies.**



In addition, programs, especially front-line practitioners who work directly with students, need to know more about each other. To some extent, this is already happening as administrators from various programs take turns hosting monthly Local Planning and Coordination Committee (LPCC) meetings. A second step needs to be taken though, and that is to share this information with practitioners. There are a variety of informal avenues to do this, such as staff meetings or through newsletters. Another way to do this is to highlight special courses and initiatives that are being offered by various literacy programs once or twice a year. This could then be distributed through programs to their practitioners in order to share with interested students. **It is also recommended that a more structured information sharing method be implemented so both students and practitioners are well-informed of the variety of literacy services in Ottawa.**

## **Number 2 - Develop a research strategy and set research priorities to address some of the questions raised in the project as well as other relevant issues.**

This project attempted to put into writing many of the observations, discussions and concrete actions that have occurred within the Ottawa literacy community in the past few years. There was a sense that change was occurring and some evidence of this change was apparent, but what was really happening and what were the people involved in literacy thinking and doing? The findings may contain few surprises but hopefully they provide a confirmation of people's observations and actions, and provide a basis for new explorations. Many questions have been raised throughout the report, and **it is recommended that a small working group be established to set research priorities and develop a three-year research strategy to assist in the development of research projects.**

### **Number 3 - Initiate a study that attempts to describe our students in an in-depth and qualitative manner.**

One of the largest gaps that presented itself in this project was the apparent distance between intrinsically based motivations for attending literacy programs, and the generally more extrinsically based motivations. In general, students, especially those who were not in the college program, were motivated to attend programs and felt that the main role of the program was to address personal goals and needs such as self-esteem, a feeling of connection and the desire to be understood, rather than more objective goals such as employment and further education. Essentially, we need to find answers for the following basic questions:

1. Who are our students?
2. What are their goals and needs?
3. What kinds of programs best suit them?

**It is recommended that the literacy community in Ottawa undertake a way to describe our students that goes beyond a simple description of literacy skill level.** Practitioners view students on a continuum of abilities. And students voiced many different personal reasons for participating in programs. So what could this continuum look like, if factors other than LBS levels are used to create it? We need to gather information that informs the community about the following:

- basic demographics
- socio-cultural issues
- barriers and challenges
- literacy and personal meaning-making
- literacy and identity.

As an example of what this continuum could look like, at one end, are students who view literacy education as a functional gap that needs to be filled in order to achieve their goals. At another end, students might view literacy education as connection and belonging to a community. In between, literacy education may also be viewed as job preparation, an opportunity to overcome barriers of low confidence and self-esteem, or an opportunity to learn about mainstream culture. These groups along the continuum would likely have very different needs, and be made up of very different kinds of people. As a result, they would need different kinds of classes and programs to meet their needs.

Once a full description of students has been developed, programs can then begin to look at their own philosophies and service delivery in order to begin to state which of the groups on the continuum they best serve. Is a program geared only to students who view literacy as a functional gap or does the program help foster a sense of belonging and connection to a community? It is unlikely that one program can be everything to all people, but it is likely that throughout the Ottawa literacy



community, we can address all the student groups described. Once programs identify their target groups, it will then be crucial to identify overlaps and gaps in services.

**Number 4 - Move beyond a functional skills approach to literacy and begin to think about the program possibilities that can evolve with *education for adults with low literacy skills*.**

*It is recommended that we begin to shift our thinking about literacy education from literacy education for adults to education for adults with low literacy skills.* This will permit the Ottawa literacy community to think about education first-education that is designed to meet the goals and interests of students, and not just their lack of literacy skills. Many will ask, "Aren't we already doing that-isn't that what individualized training plans do?" The answer is yes and no. Yes, students have individualized training plans that help practitioners develop instruction to meet their goals. But, how is that being implemented? Are only the functional skills such as phonics, sentence writing and grammar being taught as a stepping-stone to reach their goal? Or do students also learn the actual skills related to their goals? For example, a mother says she wants to learn so she can help her school-age children. Is she only learning grammar, spelling and paragraph writing? Or is she also learning how to support homework activities, understand the school system in Ontario, how to participate effectively in parent-teacher conferences, and even how to volunteer in a class?

Is all this literacy education? That depends on your thinking. If one only thinks of literacy education for adults, these ideas may be a stretch, but if one thinks of *education for adults with low literacy skills*, these ideas about learning could fit right in.

The Changing Face of Literacy project has been a rare opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue, reflect and look to the future. Most often, those involved in literacy service delivery are caught up in the immediate concerns of their students, clients and programs. The past few years have been particularly hectic in programs as people adapt to the many changes in service delivery and accountability. At times, it may seem that those to whom we are most accountable, our students, are too easily forgotten. By engaging in a dialogue that places students at the forefront, The Changing Face of Literacy Project and its recommendations, is a step towards re-establishing the balance between the needs of our students and funders. It is hoped that this initiative has served as a first step that will lay the ground-work for the future in the Ottawa literacy community.

