



# THE CHANGING FACE OF LITERACY IN OTTAWA

A Research Project for the  
Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for  
Literacy

*By Christine Pinsent-Johnson,  
Lianne Calvert Shefler & Lisa Hagedorn*

*April 2002*

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This has been an invaluable opportunity for me in many respects, and I hope that it proves to be a worthwhile contribution to the Ottawa adult literacy community.

Many thanks to all.

Christine Pinsent-Johnson,  
Research Coordinator

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# Introduction

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 formulated 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), addressed the following Issues:

- 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 emerge which, when viewed holistically, paint a picture of literacy that is both clearer and more complex than the image previously held. Not surprisingly, while some questions are answered, still others have surfaced, awaiting further exploration. 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. Again, there are no clear-cut answers, but the combination of both a community perspective and general view of the field may help us to begin to ask some clear questions. Such is the nature of a force as dynamic as the *ever-changing face of literacy!*

# Chapter One

## The Changing Face of Literacy Project

The current climate of change provided an opportunity to begin to explore the multiple and changing perspectives of the literacy community in Ottawa. One of the main motivations behind the project was to help the Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy, the regional literacy network that connects the various literacy and basic skills programs in Ottawa, gain a clearer picture of the literacy community. It was also hoped that any gaps and overlaps in services could be identified in order to provide programs with vital information when they are engaged in literacy service planning for the community.

The result, *The Changing Face of Literacy in Ottawa*, is a project that was designed to gather information from a variety of people involved in literacy education in order to provide a broad overview of the literacy community. The project was an attempt to capture in writing many of the thoughts, discussions and observations regarding the nature of adult literacy education in our community. To do this, information was gathered from multiple sources and by using a variety of tools.

- Semi-structured surveys for students, practitioners and community partners were conducted to understand each group's perspective.
- Both individual and focus group interviews were conducted.
- Research into changing perspectives in the literacy field was undertaken to gain insight into emerging trends and issues in the field of adult literacy education.
- Relevant statistical information was gathered to better understand the Ottawa community in relation to adults with low literacy skills.
- Current program initiatives were highlighted.

### Semi-Structured Surveys

The main information gathering tool was the semi-structured survey. The results of these surveys are presented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. To help shape the specific questions and delivery of the survey, three main ideas were used as a framework.

- The *society-profession-student dynamic* is the expression of literacy practice.
- There are *four working philosophies* underlying literacy practice-vocational, liberal, humanist and liberatory.
- People with low literacy skills often face a variety of *socio-economic and health issues*, which could interfere with learning.

## **The Society-Profession-Student Dynamic**

The society-profession-student dynamic as described by Niemi and Nagle in Quigley (1997) is an expression of literacy practice, and should be viewed as a fluid dynamic that constantly applies conflicting pressures to the practice. This dynamic has been explicitly acknowledged in the research process to ensure that each component of the dynamic is represented. In the research, the society component, referred to as community partners, is comprised of various social service and support service members within Ottawa such as Ontario Works, community centres and employment programs. The profession dynamic is represented by program administrators, and both paid and unpaid practitioners. Finally, the student group is made up of students currently enrolled in literacy programs.

## **Four Working Philosophies of Literacy**

According to Quigley (1997) there are four working philosophies underlying literacy practice: vocational, liberal, humanist and liberatory. These philosophies were used to guide the creation of questions in the semi-structured interviews with practitioners, students and community partners.

*Vocational literacy* education is essentially learning literacy in order to acquire or improve job skills. This form of education could take place in a classroom or community program, or an on-site workplace setting. The content would be job focused to help students develop skills that can be used in the labour market.

*Liberal literacy* education is a more intellectual approach to teaching and "rests on the premise that literacy education should be grounded in the cultural knowledge base of the Western world" (p.117). The main goal of this approach is to "enhance the cognitive reasoning area of the student's mind" (Bloom et al, 1956 in Quigley). The idea behind this approach is to teach students using historical, philosophical and literate content to help students expand their knowledge and understanding of the world. It is probably the antithesis of vocational education, which focuses on very narrow skills to be mastered and applied in context; conversely liberal education tries to capture "big picture" understanding.

*Liberatory literacy* "has been the prime means of empowering students for personal and social change" (p.119). One of the guiding proponents of this approach was Paulo Freire. In his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he introduced the term *conscientizacao*, which is "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1972, p.19). The content of the liberatory approach would come from the students, and the teacher would subscribe to a participatory approach to content and curriculum development. For example, a student may enter the class complaining about the high price of vegetables during the winter. This would then become the focus for class work; students would engage in activities related to budgeting and preparing meals during the winter and they may decide to join or even form a food buying co-op in order to negotiate cheaper prices.

Finally, humanist literacy education has "the greatest following among literacy teachers and tutors" and the emphasis is placed on "making students feel good about themselves" (p.122).

The humanist approach emphasizes the student-teacher relationship with a focus on building self-confidence, independence and self-esteem.

These four philosophical approaches to adult literacy education helped to shape questions about defining low literacy, reasons students participate in programs and the role of programs. The other questions focused on issues and barriers that may have an impact on a student's goals, elements of effective program design, and outreach.

The first part of each question was either a checklist or rating scale that was designed to get people thinking about specific issues and to provide a framework for discussion. This initial section was always followed by a section for general comments. It was within the comments section that we found the most revealing and insightful information.

The survey questions were delivered using a variety of different methods: focus groups, individual interviews, written response and telephone interviews. A total of 74 people participated in this part of the project.

## **Gathering of Relevant Statistical Information**

Existing sources of relevant information were consulted in an attempt to get a picture of the possible impact low literacy skills could have on people living in Ottawa. It was hoped that this project would help to unearth some meaningful statistical information regarding low literacy and demographic information within Ottawa, but such a specific profile was not found as of the summer of 2001. Instead, more indirect statistics were gathered that helped to paint a somewhat blurred picture of the impact low literacy has on people living in our community. Highlights of this information is presented in Chapter 2 and the complete statistical profile is also available through the OCCL.

## **Research into Changing Perspectives**

To complement the personal perspectives that were targeted through the surveys, it was also important to conduct more theoretical research into some of the emerging trends and issues in the literacy field. The main intent of this research was to present ideas that are influencing the field in order to promote reflection and discussion by front-line practitioners and literacy program administrators. The research, presented in Chapter 7, will help to inform the conclusions and recommendations of the project through an exploration of the following ideas:

- a description of the perspective that formed adult literacy education. and a description of the perspective that may reform it;
- reasons to change perspectives based on issues of non-participation and emerging socio-cultural theories of literacy;
- consideration of students' needs, societal pressures and program practice; and
- possible approaches that programs could use or adapt to support a changing perspective, such as matching student-practitioner philosophical views, a continuum of programs and situated learning.



## **Program Initiatives in Ottawa**

The literacy community has been proactive in many ways when faced with change. Several examples of this are highlighted in Chapter 8. Programs have developed a variety of initiatives to address changing needs including the development of an outreach model that targets social service organizations, the development of an employment preparation and support program, research partnerships, and the creation of new classes and courses.

## **Recommendations**

One of the main intentions of the project was to be able to make a small but highly relevant number of recommendations that could be readily addressed by the Ottawa literacy community and specifically the Local Planning and Coordination Committee (LPCC). In addition to these immediate recommendations are a couple of others that were significant enough to include despite perceived barriers.

## **Limitations of the Project**

As stated earlier, this project was an attempt to provide an overview of literacy program activities from multiple perspectives. The project did not attempt to answer a clearly defined research question within a theoretical framework. As a result, the methodology, data collection, analysis and representation does not stem exclusively from a theoretical or academic tradition. Rather, this project in its efforts to uncover the issues most pressing in the Ottawa literacy community, has used an approach that is only loosely linked to a theoretical tradition such as a framework for developing questions based on academic literature, the gathering and presentation of statistical information, and the combined experience and knowledge of the research team. One of the major limitations of the project is that it merely scratched the surface of a variety of issues, and does not claim to offer an in-depth or definitive view regarding any one of these issues. The ideal use of the information in the project is for discussion, reflection and the development of further research on specific issues.

## **Research Team**

*Christine Pinsent-Johnson*, the research coordinator, was a literacy instructor for eight years with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. She is now a program officer for the literacy program at the school board. She was also a tutor / student coordinator at Kingston Literacy. She is pursuing her Master's of Arts in Education at the University of Ottawa. Her thesis will focus on adult literacy education.

*Lianne Calvert Shefler* was a literacy instructor and program officer with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board for ten years. In June 2001 she relocated to Montreal where she is currently the Executive Director of RECLAIM, the largest English adult literacy program in Quebec. She has a Master's degree in Education from the University of Ottawa.

*Lisa Hagedorn* has been a literacy and second language instructor for the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board since 1991. Her recognized area of expertise is numeracy instruction for adults. She has coordinated and participated in a variety of projects including a survey of numeracy resources, and an income tax training and activities manual for low literacy adults. She has a Master's degree in Education from the University of Ottawa.

*Mary Wiggin*, the project manager, has been the executive director of the OCCL for 13 years. Previously, she was the coordinator of People, Words and Change, a community based program in Ottawa. She established the literacy program at the John Howard Society of Ottawa, and assisted in developing the program English Language Tutoring of Ottawa-Carleton.

# Chapter Two

## Having Low Literacy Skills in Ottawa

### A STATICTICAL DESCRIPTION<sup>1</sup>

*Improving the abilities of adults with poor literacy skills may present the biggest human resource challenge of the next decade (Crompton, 1996, p. 1).*

The above quotation is particularly true of Ottawa, a city that has significant education, employment and income gaps among its citizens. Our inquiry into the statistics that might describe the situations of adults with low literacy in Ottawa has found few studies that take into account adults' literacy levels. We have found that we can only describe the education, employment, income and social situation in general and make an educated guess at how an adult with low literacy skills would fare in such a society.

### Education

A survey of Literacy and Basic Skills students in Ottawa (Lothian, 2000), found that most students' goals require high school or college, and that 28 percent of students intend to go there after leaving an LBS program. Whether or not this is realistic for a particular student, these students are right to believe that living decently in Ottawa requires formal education. In Ottawa, education is particularly important in finding and keeping employment. A 1999 report from the Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton and the United Way includes the observation that, in the former Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton, between 1985 to 1995:

*Employer demand has risen only for workers with university degrees .... The employability of those with a high-school education fell by 16percent, while those with only 1-2 years of high school saw a 21 percent decline in overall employment (p. 12).*

The authors also report that, "While levels of education in the region are high by provincial standards, there is evidence of an education gap, and a significant number of persons who have not completed high school" (p. 5). To be exact, 74,015 anglophones over the age of 15 in Ottawa-Carleton did not have high school diplomas in 1996. This was 20 percent of the total number of anglophones that age. As might be expected, this lack of a high school diploma is particularly widespread among the poor in Ottawa's urban core, where 43 percent do not have a high school diploma (A+B=\$, 1996).

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<sup>1</sup> The complete statistical information compiled for the project is available from the OCCL.

# Employment

Overall, employment rates have been healthy in Ottawa. Unfortunately, this does not benefit the people we are interested in, and has occurred in spite of a general Canadian trend of occupational polarization, as outlined by Lee (2000). In a report for the Canadian Council on Social Development, the author states:

*In general, the occupational structure in Canada has become increasingly polarized, characterized by growth in high-skill, high-wage jobs at one end of the spectrum and low-skill, low-wage jobs at the other. While this pattern may suggest that there are more employment opportunities available for those Canadians with less human capital, it also suggests that the jobs available to them are increasingly of one kind only: those that pay poorly (p. 55).*

# Income

Occupational polarization, and the concomitant income polarization are particularly distinct in Ottawa, according to the Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton and the United Way:

*While incomes are increasing overall, the gap between high-income and low-income households is also increasing [1985 to 1995]. Income polarization is more pronounced for the RMOC and for the [old] City of Ottawa than in Ontario or Canada (p. 13).*

More statistics are available to illustrate and elaborate on this difficult reality. For example, the Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton and the Child and Youth Health Network of Eastern Ontario reported in 2000 that:

*The minimum wage is \$6.85/hr. and has been frozen since 1995. A minimum wage worker in Ottawa-Carleton would have to work 93 hours a week with no deductions, to keep his or her family of four above the poverty line (p. 4).*

While the minimum wage has been constant, large sections of the city have been expanding and prospering, and costs have risen. These costs include, importantly, housing costs. Landlords may now raise rents as the market allows between tenants. This has resulted in apartment rents in Ottawa increasing by an average of 19 percent in the five years leading up to 2000. Compounding these rising costs is the scarcity of rental units. The vacancy rate for rental housing in Ottawa is now 0.7 percent - the lowest in the country (City of Ottawa web site).

Similar difficulties exist for those in subsidized housing. The wait for a subsidized housing unit is five to seven years (Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton and Youth Health Network

of Eastern Ontario, p. 7), and those who get one of these units may still find themselves in financial difficulty:

*The amount provided on social assistance to pay for housing costs has a "maximum limit" which has not changed since 1995 (p. 7).*

*"Prior to the reduction of social assistance benefits in 1995, 36 percent of welfare recipients living in non-subsidized housing paid more than the maximum shelter allowance in rent. After October 1995, the proportion rose to 86 percent" (Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton and the United Way, p. 17).*

## **Social Situation**

The Social Planning Network of Ontario and the Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton stated in their 1999 report *The Quality of Life in Ottawa-Carleton* that:

*... the province of Ontario is experiencing a "social deficit". Our analysis of (quality of life' in Ottawa-Carleton supports this statement, emphasizing that (social deficit' encompasses declines in social, economic and health sectors .... These findings highlight the tremendous losses suffered by the most vulnerable groups in Ottawa-Carleton - those requiring health care, the unemployed, those living in poverty, and more specifically, women, elderly, youth and children (1999, p.22).*

We would like to add to the Social Planning Council's list of the most vulnerable groups in Ottawa-Carleton the category of 'adults with low literacy skills'. In so doing, we call for research into this group in order that we may proceed with clearer vision in taking up the "biggest human resource challenge of the next decade"; that is, of improving the abilities, opportunities and life situations of adults with low literacy skills.

## **Local Participation in Literacy Programs**

Lothian (2000) surveyed 322 students in Ottawa literacy programs for the Pathways to Success project. The goal of the project was to provide information in order to help students move from their literacy program to further education and employment. Valuable statistical information was gathered, and highlights of this information are presented to help understand the profile of students who were participating in Ottawa literacy programs at the time of the project.

**Table 1**  
**Highlights from Pathways to Success Report**

<b>Where do students attend programs?</b>	
College Programs	42%
School Board Programs	50%
Community Programs	8%
<b>How old are students?</b>	
< 19	1%
19-24	17%
25-34	31%
35-44	45%
45-54	10%
55-64	4%
65-74	1%
<b>What is their gender?</b>	
Female	58%
Male	52%
<b>What is their level of education?</b>	
Grade 5 or less	12%
Grade 6-8	22%
Grade 9-11	29%
Grade 12	20%
College	15%
Special Education	1%
<b>What is their first language?</b>	
English	46%
French	5%
Aboriginal Canadian	2%
American Sign Language/Other	4%
Other	43%
<b>What is their main source of income?</b>	
Ontario Works (general welfare)	50%
Employment	21%
Family	15%
Ontario Disability Support Program	7%
Other pension or insurance	7%
<b>What is their main reason for attending a program? (307 response)</b>	
Self-improvement	32.6%
Employment related	21.2%
College entry	19.7%
Personal independence	15.6%
High school entry	8.1%
Help children at home	2.6%

<b>What are their LBS levels?</b>	
Level 1	9.3%
Level 2	23.9%
Level 3	33.1%
Level 4	13.7%
Level 5	20.1%

## **A NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION**

This section attempts to put a face to the statistical information in the previous section. Four profiles of low literacy adults have been created to illustrate, in a much more personal way, a small number of low literacy students who participate in Ottawa programs. All the profiles are based on fictitious people-that means the individual may not be real but the description of that individual, based on experience and interaction with students is, in fact, very real. In other words, these descriptions can easily be applied to people, and front-line workers should be able to relate to each of the descriptions. It is also important to remember that these four profiles are representative of only some of the learners in Ottawa, and the profiles are by no means a complete picture of Ottawa literacy learners.

### **Lawrence**

Lawrence came to Canada from Jamaica five years ago when he was 19. Since his arrival, he has worked as a cleaner, dishwasher and a cook's helper. He is currently working the night shift as a cleaner in a fitness centre. He enjoys this job the most because he is an avid soccer player, and once he's finished his cleaning duties he can use the work-out equipment. He attended school intermittently in Jamaica-more off than on, he said. There were a variety of reasons for this: his mom couldn't afford to buy the uniform, he had to work on his uncle's farm, and he said he was not a very good student. Despite this, he does read the sports section and is able to follow the results of soccer matches in Europe and South America. He also reads the occasional news article, but says there are a few words that he doesn't understand. Lawrence currently lives with his sister and her family. They are working towards sponsoring his mother and younger brother who still live in Jamaica.

When Lawrence heard about the literacy tutoring program, he thought this would give him the opportunity to improve his reading and especially writing. He said that he doesn't really write much now. He will fill out the occasional form, but will ask his sister to check his work, and have her complete more complex writing tasks. He hopes to one day go to Algonquin College or get into an apprenticeship program. He would like to learn a trade-maybe as an electrician or machinist. He meets with his tutor once a week in the afternoon for three hours.

## Donna

Donna is a 35 year old woman who had a serious back injury in a car accident six years ago. She has been unable to work since that time; she is in constant pain and is unable to sit for long periods of time. Donna is currently collecting general welfare and has been trying to qualify for disability benefits. She received no disability from her insurer after her accident. Before the accident, Donna held a variety of jobs as a waitress and housekeeper, and also collected welfare when she wasn't working to help support her and her two children. Her children, a son and a daughter, are now 15 and 18.

Donna dropped out of an Ottawa school when she was 16. She was in a technical high school and had completed some Grade 9 and 10 credits. She said they probably aren't worth anything because she "never even learned to put a sentence together." She wonders if she may have a learning disability. She was never tested as a child but theorizes that she probably passed on her disability to her children, particularly 1 her son who was diagnosed with ADHD. Her daughter also left school at 16 and is working in a restaurant. Her son, although still at school, often threatens to quit as soon as he turns 16.

She admits that she doesn't read or write much of anything. Occasionally she will skim through a supermarket tabloid or People magazine, and she can't remember the last time she had to write something, except for a signature. When asked why she was attending a school board literacy program, she said it was better than volunteering as part of Ontario Works.



## Daniel

Daniel is a 68 year old man who recently retired from his job as a brick-layer in Ottawa. He had worked in the construction industry since he emigrated from Portugal over 30 years ago. As a child, he did not attend school in his native Portugal, but worked on his family's small farm after the death of his father. When he arrived in Canada with his wife and two young children, he immediately went to work and did not attend school to learn English. Gradually, he did learn to speak English, although the process was slow because his co-workers were also Portuguese.

Both of his children are now married and Daniel has three grandchildren. His wife, who is 10 years younger, has not yet retired and works as a Health Care Aide in a nursing home. He now collects a pension, has income from a rental home and his wife's salary, and owns his own home.

Daniel began attending a school board literacy program two years ago. His wife accompanied him and jokingly said one of the reasons he was attending was so she wouldn't have to worry about him sitting alone in the house while she was away at work each day.

At the time, Daniel could write his name and copied his address. He admitted that his wife took care of all household activities that required reading and writing. When asked if he would like to learn skills so he could share some of these tasks, Daniel simply shrugged and smiled, "That's her job-not mine." He said he simply wanted to learn to read and write. Again when asked about what kinds of things he would like to be able to read and write, he had no definite answers.

## Asha

Asha was forced to leave her native Somalia and arrived in Canada as a refugee in 1990. She arrived with her husband and two young children but is now separated. She has five children between the ages of five and 13. Once the youngest was in school, she felt that it was her turn to go to school and registered in a literacy program held at her local community centre.

As a child, Asha attended school until she was 12. She said she can read Somali but has a hard time writing her native language. She also speaks Arabic and some Italian, but doesn't read or write either of these languages. When she first arrived in Ottawa, she attended ESL classes for less than a year. She currently lives in subsidized housing and is dependent on social assistance.

When Asha returned to school at the age of 30, she said her main motivation was to help her children and learn a little for herself. She wanted to specifically help her younger children with their school work. She believed that the older ones were too advanced for her to be of any help with homework. When asked what she would like to read and write better for herself she said she'd like to be able to read the paper, to understand what is happening in the community and the world. But she wasn't sure what she would write.

She does all her banking through a bank machine, relies on her memory rather than lists, doesn't know anyone she could write to in English (only Somali), and doesn't exchange birthday cards with her children because it has not been a part of her culture. Someday, she said she would like to get a part-time job-maybe in a daycare centre.

# Chapter Three

## Practitioner Perspectives

### **SURVEY DELIVERY**

A total of 50 literacy practitioners were invited to complete the survey through personal e-mail contact. Out of this group, 24 people agreed and surveys were sent or given to them. Nineteen surveys were completed. All but three participants opted to complete the survey independently. Two surveys were conducted over the phone. A focus group was also held with practitioners in a school board program. Four practitioners plus one research member participated in the discussion. This survey was not included in the total of 19 when the data from each question was analyzed. Only the comments from the focus group have been included. Three members of the focus group also completed individual surveys, and these have been included in the data analysis.

Of the 19 practitioners who completed the survey, seven were pro gram coordinators or administrators, eight were paid instructors or teachers (one from the college, one from a private company, and six from the two school boards), and four were volunteer tutors. The program coordinators or administrators had an average of 12.3 years experience in adult literacy education, the instructors or teachers had an average of 9.25 years experience, and the tutors had an average of 2 years experience in adult literacy education. Despite the tutors' lack of experience, and their own hesitation about the value of their participation, they provided very insightful and use full comments; their participation was truly valuable.

## QUESTION 1 - DEFINITION

**Which of the following statements should be used to describe low literacy based on your experience and interaction with students?**

*Check as many as are applicable.*

- Limited ability to **read and write text** in a variety of settings (e.g. home, work, community) using a variety of formats (e.g. forms, instructions, letters memos, lists, charts, graphs, reports articles, email, etc.)
- Limited ability to communicate and respond to **verbal** information in a variety of settings (e.g. home, work, community) using a variety of formats (e.g. meetings, presenting information, finding information, relating personal thoughts and ideas, etc.)
- Limited ability to calculate and manage **basic numerical information** in a variety of settings (e.g. home, work, community) using a variety of formats (e.g. budgets, bills, schedules, estimating, etc.)
- Limited ability to acquire and retain and use **new knowledge** in a variety of settings (e.g. home, work, community)
- Limited **personal management skills** (e.g. taking responsibility, organizing information/tasks, managing time, evaluating own strengths and limitations, adapting to change, working with others, working independently, etc.)
- Limited ability to **participate in a meaningful way** in a variety of settings (e.g. home, work, community)
- Others? \_\_\_\_\_

## Results

- 47% (9) of the participants checked an categories.
- 32% (6) checked at least half of the definitions, but an commented that the unchecked definitions could be applicable to certain students. Three of these participants checked more than half the definitions, and three checked an but one definition.
- 21% (4) of the participants checked less than half the definitions. Of these definitions, a *limited ability to read and write text* was always included and *limited ability to manage basic numerical information* was included three out of four times.

## Comments from Practitioners

Although it may initially appear that there could be a difference between those who checked all definitions and those who checked at least half of the definitions, the comments made by the participants in each of these groups are similar. Comments focus on the need to create definitions of low literacy based on the students and their individual needs.

*The previous statements vary in degree with each person and have greater impact with each person when they are dealing with people and events outside their home (community, schools, current events, service persons, etc.).*

(Volunteer Tutor)

*The class composition changes, and therefore the definition changes.*

(School Board Instructor)

One of the factors mentioned most frequently, which seemed to influence the definition of low literacy was the student's LBS level. Many participants commented that these definitions were more applicable to students at LBS levels 1 and 2.

*All of the above [definitions] describe my low level students. They have great stress in their Lives because they cannot manage finances and schedules.*

(School Board Instructor)

Two of the participants commented that it is the limited ability in reading, writing and numeracy that are connected to limited abilities in the other areas such as limited ability to retain and use new knowledge, limited personal management skills and limited ability to participate in a meaningful way. It is interesting to note that one comment focuses on the low literacy as the cause of other limitations, and the other suggests that it can work both ways: limited abilities in other areas are both a cause and result of low literacy skills.

*The last three statements [limited ability to retain and use new knowledge, limited personal management skills and limited ability to participate in a meaningful way] are often the cause or result of low literacy levels.*

(Community College Instructor)

*Because of limited ability in the two that I have checked [read and write text and manage basic numerical information] this can lead to lack of self-confidence and inabilities in the areas that I put 'possibly' [all other categories].*

(School Board Instructor)

A final issue that was discussed in this section of the survey was the limited ability students had to transfer their learning from the classroom to their community, home and work.

*[There is a] limited ability to transfer learning. Math is math class, not outside. Grammar is grammar class, not outside. The students do show limited ability to respond to verbal information in class-but they survive outside. Maybe classroom work is quite far removed from daily life.*

(School Board Instructor)

Of the four or 21% of participants who limited their definition of low literacy, one commented that the term literacy should focus only on a limited ability to read and write text but recognized that many of the definitions could apply to the individual.

*I don't believe that the term (literacy) should be used to include these other areas although many of them are often found in the same person.*

(Volunteer tutor)

Another participant commented that she knew the other definitions were often a part of literacy, depending on the students, but separated these definitions based on the mandate of the program she administered and the students' needs.

*I know others like verbal [abilities] are a part of it, but to me that's E8L-not literacy. I think E8L and literacy are two different things. My tutors aren't trained to do that.*

(Community Program Coordinator)

## Summary

Based on the responses to the question, it seems that the students themselves shaped a definition of literacy. The majority of practitioners had a changing definition of low literacy that was based on the needs of the people they were working with. Depending on the needs of the students, different aspects of the suggested definitions that were used in the survey question were applicable to some students and not to others.

Practitioners also suggested that there is a continuum of student needs. Many said the definitions used in the survey question applied only to their "lower level" students. Obviously, lower level students may have more demanding literacy needs, but it could be argued that they may also have other more indirectly related needs such as limited ability to retain and use new knowledge, limited personal management skills and limited ability to participate in a meaningful way. A couple of practitioners suggested low literacy is a cause of these other difficulties. Just as plausible is the argument that difficulty in these related areas could have been a cause of the low literacy.

The answer probably lies somewhere in the middle. A small number of practitioners limited their literacy definition to reading, writing and numeracy. For these practitioners, their students

had very specific goals and were often working at higher literacy levels. These kinds of students might appear at the higher end of a continuum of students' literacy needs.

## QUESTION 2 – ISSUES

In what percentage of your learners are these issues present?

*Place a checkmark in the appropriate column. Feel free to add issues that haven't identified here.*

	Less than 25% of my learners	Between 25 and 50% of my learners	Between 50 and 75% of my learners	More than 75% of my learners
Addiction				
Discrimination issues (race, sex, disability)				
Family/relationship problems				
Housing issues				
Lack of employment experience/skills				
Lack of participation in a community (work, cultural, religious, civic, etc.)				
Mental health				
Physical health				
Poverty				
Other.				
Other.				
Other.				

\*This item may seem obvious but has been included in the list in order for you to answer the next question.

*From the above list, select the three issues that present the greatest challenge for learners in their lives. Please rate in order of significance (item 1 presents the greatest challenge). Consider low literacy along with these other issues. Therefore, low literacy may or may not appear in your list.*

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_



**Table 2**

**Other Issues That Students Face According to Practitioners**

	Total Under 50%	Total Over 50%	<i>Only the right column was sorted</i>
Low Literacy*	2	15	Most students experienced these barriers
Lack of employment experience/skills	2	14	
Poverty	7	8	Many students experienced these barriers.
Lack of participation in a community	8	6	
Family/relationship problems	10	6	
Housing issues	9	4	
Mental health	12	2	Very few students experienced these barriers
Physical health	14	2	
Discrimination issues (race, sex, disability)	14	0	
Addiction	15	0	
Other: Parenting – single parents – child health	4	0	These issues are more difficult to judge because they did not appear in the main part of the question.
Other: ESL		2	

**Table 3**

**Top Issues in Rated First and Second and Third**

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Low literacy	11	2	1
<b>Lack of employment experience/skills</b>	1	8	4
<b>Family/relationship problems</b>	2	1	4
Physical health	1	1	2
Poverty		2	1
Discrimination issues (race, sex, disability)		1	1
Lack of participation in a community			1
Mental health			1
Addiction			1
Housing Issues		1	
Other: ESL	1		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>16</b>

1. 11 participants or 68% rated low literacy as the primary issue.
2. 8 or 47% rated lack of employment experience/skills as the secondary issue.
3. 4 or 23% rated lack of employment experience/skills and family/relationship problems third.

## **Comments from Practitioners**

One of the main comments participants had was the difficulty they experienced with rating the top three issues because the issues changed depending on the students, and the issues were often interconnected.

*I found it very difficult to rate the challenges-that which affects one student greatly, affects another not at all. For example, for a student with an addiction problem, that is often their greatest challenge, but only a small number have this problem.*

(School Board Instructor)

Other comments came from participants who filled in the 'other' category. Four participants said parenting, single parents and children's health were all issues for some of their students. These issues were often connected to others.

*...my client, a single mother, has allowed her children's needs to supercede her own almost entirely until very recently. As a result, at this point, her goals are not even clearly defined.*

(Volunteer Tutor)

Along with the acknowledgement that students face complex and interconnected issues is the recognition that these issues interfere with learning.

*There are some students who have great difficulty setting/ achieving goals. This is due to mental health, physical restrictions or family problems. They ((dropout" for a time and when they return there is regression.*

(School Board Instructor)

*I'd say 50% of my students have ongoing, serious problems with their spouse or children that distract them from their learning.*

(School Board Instructor)

A final group of comments focused directly and indirectly on mental health.

*This is the stuff that is more subtle. We've discovered other skills to compensate. They haven't had these kinds of opportunities.*

(School Board Instructor)

*With mental health, we have the medication problems and side effects.*

(School Board Instructor)

## Summary

Similar to the previous question, the respondents emphasized the difficulty of describing their students as a whole. The effects of other issues such as housing, poverty or addictions varied according to the students. The issues can be divided into three general groups based on the numbers of students affected by them.

In the first group, the only two issues which most practitioners overwhelmingly agreed were evident in over half their students were low literacy and a lack of employment experience and skills. In the second group, the effects of other issues such as poverty, lack of participation in the community, housing and family/relationship problems did not receive such strong support but appeared to have had an impact on almost half of all students. In the third group, issues such as physical and mental health, discrimination and addiction were much less prevalent.

The most often mentioned "other" issue was related to children-being a single mother or children's health. This seems to be a pressing issue for students based on the fact that four practitioners spontaneously added the category to the survey question. The issue may have been rated much higher overall if it had appeared in the original question.

## QUESTION 3 – PARTICIPATION IN LITERACY PROGRAMS

Based on information that you've received from your students, **why do students attend** literacy programs?

*Rate in order of importance where 1 = most important and 5 or 6 = least important. You do not have to rate all items.*

- To gain the skills that will enable them to get a job or advance in a job (e.g. further education, job training, entry-level job).
- To gain the skills that will enable them to gain entry into an accredited education program (e.g. college, high school, apprenticeship, other).
- To gain general academic knowledge (e.g. literature, geography, history, science).
- To gain self-esteem, self-actualization, confidence, independence, etc.
- To gain critical and political awareness (e.g. recognize socio-economic inequities and develop the tools to deal with them proactively).
- To gain reading and writing skills for no reason other than that these skills are lacking.
- To gain a sense of belonging and active involvement in the community.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### Results

Although all the returned surveys (19) were examined, each response in this section will not total 19. Participants often used one number more than once, did not rate all responses or used only numbers 1, 2 and 3 to rate the responses.

Listed below are the reasons that practitioners think students attend literacy programs. These reasons are rated in order from the most important reason to the least important.

1. To gain the skills that will enable them to get a job or advance in a job (e.g. further education, job training, entry-level job).
2. To gain the skills that will enable them to gain entry into an accredited education program (e.g. college, high school, apprenticeship, other).
3. To gain self-esteem, self-actualization, confidence, independence, etc.
4. To gain reading and writing skills for no reason other than that these skills are lacking

5. To gain a sense of belonging and active involvement in the community.
6. For their children – role model, help with school.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
To gain the skills that will enable them to get a job or advance in a job (e.g. further education, job training, entry-level job).	12	8					
To gain the skills that will enable them to gain entry into an accredited education program (e.g. college, high school, apprenticeship, other).	7	3	5	2			
To gain general academic knowledge (e.g. literature, geography, history, science).			2	1	3	2	1
To gain self-esteem, self-actualization, confidence, independence, etc.	5	5	4	3	1		
To gain critical and political awareness (e.g. recognize socio-economic inequities and develop the tools to deal with them proactively).				2	3	3	1
To gain reading and writing skills for no reason other than that these skills are lacking.	2	4	6	2		2	
Other - For their children - role model, help with school	2	1			1		
Other - They are required (OW)	1						

## Comments from Practitioners

There are comments which reflect the finding that most students want to gain the skills that will enable them to get a job or advance in a job, and gain the skills that will enable them to gain entry into an accredited education program, which will also lead to a job.

*The majority of our students come to us for a dual purpose: to upgrade and improve literacy skills so they can be accepted in a course leading to employment. Many of these already work and want to advance or are in low level jobs and would like to move out of them by improving their literacy skills.*  
(Community Program Coordinator)

There are also comments that acknowledge students have some difficulty setting and or articulating their goals.

*Most students join literacy programs because of an immediate need related to employment and independence goals in the short term. Many are unclear as to how to set specific goals that may lead to improved employment opportunities.*  
(Community Program Coordinator)

*My student can only vaguely articulate her goals:*  
(Volunteer Tutor)

*Some students, especially the ones who have been around a long time and have appeared to 'plateau', are very out of touch with who they are and what they want. They can 't even say what their interests or hobbies are. What they know goes inward and not outward. They seem to have shut down a long time ago. We're trying to bring them somewhere but we can't bring them there.*  
(School Board Instructor)

*I don't think our students have had the luxury of deciding what to do... they haven't had a lot of choice in their lives. But it's not all doom and gloom. As long as we're able to adjust our expectations and the expectations of people who are referring people then we're succeeding.*  
(School Board Instructor)

*Their goals or motives are often discovered after the student is in the program.*  
(School Board Coordinator)

There are also comments that reveal not all students have employment goals, even if this is what they say they want from the literacy program.

*Many of my students are mothers who probably don't want to get a job (even though this is what they say) as much as they want to help their children.*  
(School Board Instructor)

*I believe there are many students who come to literacy classes to improve their reading and writing skills and who would like to get a job. However, I often sense that they tell us what we want to hear. Many have been conditioned (by form filling, interviews, and evaluations) to give the 'right' answer. They have learned that the 'right' answer gets them in the door.*  
(School Board Instructor)

Finally, there are also those who are not stating that they are looking for work and are in a literacy program simply because they want to learn the skills they are lacking or they want to prove they can learn.

*It's often only the older students who want to gain the skills for no other reason other than that these skills are lacking.*  
(School Board Instructor)

## Summary

It was not surprising to see that the top two reasons these practitioners think students attend programs are to gain job skills and to gain the skills needed for accredited education programs. This view is consistent with Question 2 regarding the issues students face, which were low literacy and a lack of employment experience and job skills. What may be more interesting is the third reason practitioners think students have for attending a program, and that is to gain self-esteem, self-actualization, confidence, independence, etc.

The two practitioners who stated that their students have very clear and well-defined goals were the same practitioners who had the narrowest definition of low literacy in Question 1. These two practitioners were also involved in very different programs: a college program and a community based volunteer program. Yet their students and perspectives seemed to be very similar. It could be said that the students and their specific needs fuel the practitioners' perspectives, as much as program structure and delivery models.

Practitioners suggested that some students have difficulty stating goals because they don't know what their goals are, don't understand the purpose of setting goals, or feel they must give the practitioner the "desired" answer. Again, this perceived diversity of students supports the need to view students on a continuum-to understand they have different definitions of literacy, different reasons for attending programs, a variety of other issues (or no other issues) to face, a varied ability to state their literacy goals, and a variety of perceptions regarding the importance of these goals.

## QUESTION 4 – PROGRAM DESIGN

The following are features of **current program design**. As a practitioner, please rate what you think is the most effective for students. Also, if there are any features not listed, please add them. This rating is based on personal experience and opinion only-**not** the current design of your organization.

*Please check each line.*

**Most Effective      Not Sure      Least Effective**

	<b>Most Effective</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Least Effective</b>
<b>Program Delivery</b>			
Small group instruction (6-12)			
Large group instruction (12+)			
One-on-one instruction			
Part-time (2-12 hours per week)			
Full-time (15-25 hours per week)			
Daytime			
Evening			
Drop-in			
Independent study			
Set intake times and class duration			
Continuous and on-going intake and duration			
Other			
<b>Program Setting</b>			
On-site workplace delivery			
Classroom (school board)			
Classroom (college)			
Personal choice (home, library)			
Other			
<b>Program Staff</b>			
Volunteer tutors			
Paid instructors			
Adult education experience and training			
Teaching experience and training			
Other			
Location			
How important is the geographical location?			



## Results

Overwhelmingly, practitioners who responded to the question, support the need for a variety of programs that offer a variety of delivery models based on students' needs. However, there were a few consistent comments related to items that were deemed least effective for students. The items that were checked least effective more than once are listed below. Most of the least effective items focused on various features of program delivery: a drop-in format, independent study and large group instruction were consistently noted to be least effective for students.

**Table 5**

### **Elements of Program Design that are Least Effective**

<b>Program Delivery</b>	<b>Least Effective</b>
Large group instruction (12+)	9
One-on-one instruction	2
Part-time (2-12 hours per week)	2 (<6 hours)
Full-time (15-25 hours per week)	3
Evening	4
Drop-in	10
Independent study	7
Set intake times and class duration	2
Other – Multilevel	3
<b>Program Staff</b>	
Volunteer tutors	2

## Comments from Practitioners

Comments focused on two areas: program delivery and geographical location. Practitioners stressed the need for a variety of delivery models that suited the needs of their students. These comments also stressed the importance of a supportive environment that was also structured and had expectations of the students such as regular attendance and punctuality. There were also some attempts to define program delivery according to the specific needs of the students. For example, one-on-one tutoring was more appropriate for students who were very nervous about

returning to school. Then, when confidence was higher, a classroom model might prove to be more appropriate.

*We have found that many adults come to our program to get some one-on-one help to support them in their classroom work, especially large classes where they can be lost in the group and not have much opportunity for individual help. I have found that students who attend a class for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week tend not to drop out as much because they still have time to deal with family issues, get homework done, perhaps work part time. If they have one of our volunteer tutors to meet with once a week for extra help, reinforcement, review, etc., all the better.*

(Community Program Coordinator)

*I think a variety of types of classes are necessary to accommodate different learning styles. The more a student attends, the more he/she will learn, but this population is trying to fit learning in around family and work so a variety of times and length of classes should be available to them. It is my experience that a student makes better progress if he/she makes a conscious commitment to the process. Regular attendance and punctuality are indicators of the student's commitment. ..*

(School Board Instructor)

*A program like ours is good for those who need to begin the process of 'going back to school'. Once they are comfortable with learning, have gained some self-esteem and confidence, they can 'graduate' to classroom situations if they choose.*

(Community Program Coordinator)

There were also a few comments regarding the program staff. A couple of comments suggested that a well-trained tutor could be just as effective as a paid practitioner. It seemed to be the person and his/her personal qualities that were more important than whether he/she was paid or unpaid.

*Trained volunteers can be and should be a part of classroom programs as I see that this is the only way students can get the one-on-one help they need but don't always get in a classroom setting.*

(Community Program Coordinator)

*In my experience, well-trained and supportive volunteers give effective training. The weakness is the lack of consistent quality tutoring-hard to guarantee in a large program. But I suppose this could be true in a college or school board setting as well.*

(Community Program Coordinator)

There were also comments regarding the importance of geographical location for a program. Most practitioners who answered the question agreed that location was very important, and ideal locations encouraged participation and regular attendance.

*The location is very important. The easier, more accessible the program is to transportation, times and days ... then attendance is much more regular.*

(School Board Instructor)

*Even if the better or more suitable program is offered but it is a little further away, the student will likely pick the closest geographical location and not the more suitable program.*

(Community Program Coordinator)

## Summary

The practitioners who responded to the question, supported a variety of different approaches and formats. There was also an attempt to define which program models best suited different student needs. For example, one-on-one programs were viewed by some as a "stepping-stone" to classroom programs for students who had negative experiences in large classes and needed to build their confidence before entering a classroom setting.

No matter what the overall format is, whether it is one-on-one or a classroom, these practitioners seemed to be saying that structure, consistency and support are much more desirable than independent learning and drop-in formats. Practitioners also expressed the need for the students to reciprocate through regular attendance, punctuality and commitment.

The respondents emphasized the need for quality instruction, whether delivered by a paid instructor with adult education training or a volunteer who has undergone a well-developed training program. Some acknowledged that volunteers can be effective but it is difficult to guarantee consistency. Others said trained literacy professionals may be ideal, but training alone does not automatically guarantee a quality instructor. One respondent suggested that it may be much more effective to attend a program daily, but when this is not an option, volunteer programs can provide an opportunity for some literacy education, which is far better than none at all.

## QUESTION 5a – OUTREACH

In your opinion, as a literacy practitioner, what is the role of literacy programs?

*Rate in order of importance where 1 = most important and 5 or 6 = least important. You do not have to rate all items.*

- To equip students with the skills that will enable them to get a job or advance in a job (e.g. further education, job training, entry-level job).
- To gain the skills that will enable them to gain entry into an accredited education program (e.g. college, high school, apprenticeship, other).
- To teach general academic knowledge (e.g. literature, geography, history, science).
- To assist students in the development of self-esteem, self-actualization, confidence, etc.
- To teach students to think critically and gain political awareness (e.g. recognize socio-economic inequities and develop the tools to deal with them proactively).
- To teach students reading and writing skills for no reason other than that these skills are lacking.
- To gain a sense of belonging and active involvement in the community.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

## Results

Two participants did not complete this question so the total number of responses is 17. Similar to Question 3, each response will not total 17. Participants often used one number more than once, did not rate all responses or used only numbers 1, 2 and 3 to rate the responses. Listed below are practitioners' views of the role of literacy programs. These roles are rated in order from the most important to the least important. The top two reasons are essentially tied. Both received the same number of responses when the first, second and third ratings were combined. The first reason (self-confidence) received one more first rating than the second reason (job skills).

**Table 6**

**The Role of a Literacy Program  
Number One Rated Reason in Order From Most to Least Important**

1. To assist students in the development of self-esteem, self-actualization, confidence, independence, etc.
2. To equip students with the skills that will enable them to get a job or advance in a job (e.g. further education, job training, entry-level job).
3. To gain the skills that will enable them to gain entry into an accredited education program (e.g. college, high school, apprenticeship, other).
4. To teach students reading and writing skills for no reason other than that these skills are lacking
5. To gain a sense belonging and active involvement in the community.

**Table 7**

**The Main Role of a Literacy Program According to Practitioners**

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
To equip students with the skills that will enable them to get a job or advance in a job (e.g. further education, job training, entry-level job).	8	6	2	1		
To gain the skills that will enable them to gain entry into an accredited education program (e.g. college, high school, apprenticeship, other).	6	4	3	3		
To teach general academic knowledge (e.g. literature, geography, history, science).		2	1		5	1
To assist students in the development of self-esteem, self-actualization, confidence, independence, etc.	9	2	5	1		
To teach students to think critically and gain political awareness (e.g. recognize socio-economic inequities and develop the tools to deal with them proactively).		1		5	2	2
To teach students reading and writing skills for no reason other than that these skills are lacking.	2	4	2		3	
To gain a sense of belonging and active involvement in the community.	1	2	2	4		1
Other - Managing their daily lives	1					

## Comments from Practitioners

The comments in this section suggest there is a need to focus beyond the skills of job preparation, academics or reading and writing, and take a much more holistic view of the student and his or her overall needs.

*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, and this comes partly from awareness of their own value and knowledge of what the customs are.*

(Volunteer Tutor)

There was also a caution about the dangers and difficulties of moving beyond the skills approach to literacy education, and into a more holistic approach.

*Who knows what these people have been through? Who knows what they've seen or experienced, and why do we want to open that?*

(School Board Instructor)

## Summary

This question is essentially the same as Question 3, which asked for the reasons that practitioners thought students attended programs. In Question 3 practitioners said that the number one reason their students attended a program was to help them enter into or advance in employment. In Question 5a, practitioners were asked a slightly different question about the role of a literacy program, and were presented with the same possible answers as Question 3. The practitioners who responded shifted their focus slightly and emphasized the need for programs to assist students in the development of self-esteem, self-actualization, confidence, independence, etc. These practitioners seemed to be saying that students may express one main reason for attending a program-to get a job or a better job-but there was just as great a need for programs to address more personal issues such as building confidence and self-esteem. A comment from a volunteer tutor seemed to capture the impact that increased self-confidence can have on other goals:

*[The students'] rise in self-confidence affects most areas in their lives-and can boost their general, everyday ability to deal with their situations.*

## QUESTION 5b – OUTREACH

Should literacy programs develop stronger ties with community partners that may be beneficial to students?

No Why not? \_\_\_\_\_

Yes

*Check as many as are applicable*

Addiction counselling

Discrimination issues

Family/relationship problems

Housing issues

Lack of employment experience/skills

Lack of participation in a community (Work, cultural, religious, civic)

Mental health

Physical health

Poverty

Ontario Works/Employment Insurance/Ontario Disability Support Program

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## Results

All participants who completed this section (18) said literacy programs should develop stronger ties with community partners.

- 8 or 44% checked all items
- 4 or 22% checked all but one or two items – no apparent trend
- 5 or 27% focused on specific items – the only item that was the same for all five was Ontario Works

## Comments from Practitioners

All practitioners recognize the need to have some sort of connection with other community services, but most are not sure how this could be done. Many also commented that there have been efforts to forge connections and these often disappeared when funding ran out or were very time-consuming to establish. Practitioners are also cautious about being the ones who help make these connections for their students.

*I don't know how to do it but I have often wanted to have access to all of the above to help a student with a difficulty that was getting in the way of learning.*

(School Board Instructor)

*I imagine that people with low literacy skills would almost always have other issues that they need help with. Literacy tutors) especially volunteer tutors) cannot and should not be dealing with these issues in any major way. So although community outreach can be complex and time consuming) I think literacy programs must make it a priority to support both students and tutors.*

(Volunteer Tutor)

## Summary

These practitioners supported the creation of connections with community services in order to help students, and to make learning more meaningful. Some of these connections are already in place to various degrees. For example, some community based programs provide literacy services as part of a comprehensive array of support for their specific client group.

Unfortunately, these kinds of comprehensive services are more often found in closed access programs, and are not often seen in programs open to the general public. The one exception is the literacy program at the college that is able to access a variety of student services provided for the general college student population.

Recognizing the need to be better connected to the community, other programs are making these connections on their own. Recently, two community based programs moved from previous locations (one was in an office building, the other was in a community centre) to a newly created community centre. This move was made because both programs felt it was beneficial to be connected to a variety of community and education services. Another possible model, currently in use by a school board program, is holding literacy classes in a community based social service and health care centre. Despite these attempts at forging links in the community, there is a need, based on these practitioners' comments, for stronger and more obvious ties.



## General Comments

Practitioners who added general comments at the end of the survey focused on the need to view literacy as more than reading and writing skills. They also seemed to suggest that literacy needs should be addressed within a specific context. One practitioner then wondered why so few low literacy adults attended programs, and how we go about identifying and attracting non-participating students.

*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 adult students opportunities to learn and grow and meet their goals.*

(Community Program Coordinator)

*When I worked in an Ottawa Housing setting, I thought my students should be considered the whole neighbourhood-not Just the students who attended my class. Classes would actually be sessions on all issues; helping people respond would be the literacy work.*

(School Board Instructor)

*The survey seeks out information about needs, problems, etc. But if we identify these-based on our current population-are these really the needs of all who could benefit from our programs? If they are, why are our classes so small? If they aren't, how will their needs be established?*

(School Board Instructor)

# Chapter Four

## Community Partner Perspectives

### SURVEY DELIVERY

A total of 20 community partners were contacted by telephone and asked if they would like to participate in the survey. Of this number, 16 agreed to participate. Participants were told that they would receive the survey by mail or e-mail, but that the survey would be completed with the interviewer either by way of a telephone or in-person interview. Participants were discouraged from attempting to complete the survey independently. In total, 10 of the participants completed the survey by way of a telephone interview and six by way of an in-person interview. With permission of the participants, some of the in-person interviews were also audio-taped.

### Participants

The 16 participants in the survey represented the following community partners:

#### **The City of Ottawa People Services - Employment and Financial Assistance**

- Project Coordinator, working directly with Ontario Works
- Front-line Case Coordinators
- District Office Managers

#### **Human Resources and Development Canada**

- Employment Coordinators

#### **Job Connect**

- Employment Services Supervisor
- Employment Counselor

#### **Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities – Apprenticeship Branch**

- District Director

#### **Centretown Community Health Centre**

- Employment Counselor

#### **Carlington Community Centre**

- Social Worker
- Health Services Promoter

#### **Centretown Emergency Food Centre**

- Coordinator

#### **Tecsalt Consulting**

- Placement Counselor

## QUESTION 1 – DEFINITION

Which of the following elements would you include in a definition of ‘low literacy skills’?

*Check as many as applicable*

- Limited ability to **read, process and respond to information** from a variety of text sources in a variety of formats (e.g. forms, instructions, letters, memos, lists, graphs, reports, articles, email, etc.)
- Limited ability to **communicate clearly through writing** (e.g. forms, reports, lists, letters, etc.)
- Limited ability to **communicate by speaking** clearly and appropriately
- Limited ability to **process and respond to oral information**.
- Limited ability to **manage basic math skills** in the performance of everyday activities.
- Limited ability to **acquire, retain and use new knowledge** in a variety of settings (e.g. home, work, community).
- Limited **personal management skills** (e.g. taking responsibility, organizing information/tasks, managing time, evaluating own strengths and limitations, adapting to change, working with others, working independently, etc.)
- Limited **ability to participate in a meaningful way** in a variety of settings (e.g. home, work, community).
- Others? \_\_\_\_\_

## Results

- All of the participants checked the first two categories - those related specifically to reading and writing
- Fewer than half (between 25% and 38%) of the participants identified speaking, listening, and math as literacy issues
- Fewer than half (31%) of the participants identified limited ability to participate in a meaningful way in a variety of settings as a literacy Issue
- Only 2 (12%) of the participants identified limited personal management skills as a literacy issue

## Comments from Community Partners

The results of the checklist appear to indicate a fairly narrow view of literacy. The comments from the participants suggest that, rather than perceiving the other issues as falling outside of the mandate for literacy service providers, they are simply unaware of the full range of services offered by literacy service providers. The comments further implied that the participants consider these "other" issues as significant and needing to be addressed. Still other participants clearly distinguished between what is perceived as a literacy issue and a non-literacy issue.

*I think literacy programs should offer more than just reading and writing. What about math? What about life skills? All of these things combined definitely affect a person's ability to get a job and keep a job.*

*Just because a person can 't read or write doesn't mean that they don 't have, or can 't acquire, strong personal management skills. In my experience, people who lack these [reading and writing] skills have developed excellent 'coping' skills that enable them to function well at work, at home, and in the community in spite of their inability to read or write.*

*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 problem as a whole.*

## Summary

While the majority of the participants defined "low literacy" in fairly narrow terms, Le. reading and writing, they also recognized that other issues, such as personal management skills and general learning skills, present barriers that need to be addressed if the client hopes to be successful in achieving his or her goals. The question that arises is how far do literacy programs go in addressing issues beyond the somewhat narrow scope of reading and writing?

## QUESTION 2 – ISSUES

In what percentage of your client population are these issues present? (Please note that this question refers to all of your clients, not only those who have been identified as having low literacy skills)

*Place a checkmark in the appropriate column. Feel free to add issues that haven't been identified here.*

	Less than 25% of my clients	Between 25 and 50% of my clients	Between 50 and 75% of my clients	More than 75% of my clients
Addiction				
Discrimination issues (race, sex, disability)				
Family/relationship problems				
Housing issues				
Lack of employment experience/skills				
Lack of participation in a community (work, cultural, religious, civic, etc.)				
Low literacy				
Mental health				
Physical health				
Poverty				
Other:				
Other:				
Other:				

From the above list, select the three barriers that present the greatest challenge for your clients.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

1. lack of employment experience/skills rated by 10 participants or 63%
2. poverty rated by 7 participants or 44% rated
3. low literacy rated by 5 participants or 31%

**Table 8**

**Numbers of Students Who Experience Other Issues  
According to Community Partners**

	Less than 25% of my clients	Between 25 and 50% of my clients	Between 50 and 75% of my clients	More than 75% of my clients
Addiction	10	4	2	0
Cultural-racial issues	7	5	2	2
Family/relationship problems	4	6	4	2
Gender issues	12	4	0	0
Housing issues	11	3	2	0
Lack of employment experience/skill	3	3	6	4
Low literacy	7	8	1	0
Mental Health	14	1	1	0
Physical health	14	1	1	0
Poverty	3	6	3	4

In the “other” category, participants identified these additional issues: lack of education/training, English as a Second Language, lack of social/life skills, access to child care

## Comments from Community Partners

One of the chief concerns raised by the participants with regard to this question was that they didn't feel that they have sufficient exposure to/knowledge of the underlying issues that have brought the clients to the point of requesting assistance/ support. A couple of participants stated that, while they suspected that some of the issues identified above were barriers for their clients, they had no "official" knowledge of this and, therefore, were not entirely comfortable making this determination.

*I know my clients have complicated lives; otherwise they wouldn't be in the situation of needing assistance. I don't have the opportunity to really explore all of the factors that have contributed to their current circumstances. That isn't my job. My job is to work with the clients to set priorities and then take the most direct action. I'm working against the clock, and that's Just a reality of the job.*

*My clients have a lot of issues, but they aren't always up front about what they are or what they're prepared to do about them. I have to work with the information that they give me) and ifs often incomplete.*

*I'd like to see a team approach to service planning and delivery ... some way of maintaining on-going contact with programs that I refer my clients to... that way, as issues surface over time, we could address them as a team and make the appropriate intervention.*

## **Summary**

The results indicated that the client population served by these community partners presents a range of issues that affect their ability to achieve their life goals. These issues also have an impact on literacy programs in that they can interfere with regular attendance and full participation. While some of these issues, such as lack of employment experience/skills and lack of social/life skills, can to some extent be addressed by literacy programs, other issues, such as addiction and mental health, clearly fall outside of the mandate of literacy programs.

## QUESTION 3 - PARTICIPATION

What are the reasons you would refer a client to a literacy program?

*Check as many as applicable*

- The client wants to upgrade so that she/he can be admitted to a credit (high school) program and eventually complete grade 12
- The clients wants to prepare for admission to a college program
- The client wants to prepare for admission to a training program (e.g. hairdressing school, truck driving school, etc.)
- The client wants to develop skills that will allow him/her to go directly from the literacy program into an entry-level job
- The client wants to develop new skills that she/he can use on the job
- The client wants to develop new skills that s/he can use in his/her personal life (e.g. managing money, helping children with their schoolwork, reading for pleasure, applying for a driver's license, etc)
- Others? \_\_\_\_\_

## Results

Between 89% and 94% of the participants selected the following as reasons for referring a client to a literacy program: preparing for admission to a high school credit program, preparing for admission to a training program, developing skills that will allow a client to obtain an entry-level job, and developing new skills for use in one's personal life.

Only 2 of the 16 participants (12.5%) selected preparing for admission to a college program or developing new skills that can be used on the job as reasons for referring a client to a literacy program.

In the "other" category, one participant added the following:

*People with low self-esteem who would just feel good about learning new skills, lonely people who want to meet like-minded friends, disabled people, etc.*

Overall, these results indicate that community partners view literacy programs as places where clients can develop basic level reading and writing skills in preparation for further education and/ or employment and/ or for personal use. Fewer participants connect literacy programs with 'higher' levels of education, such as those offered at a college. Similarly, developing skills



related to work on an on-going basis was not a popular reason for referring clients to a literacy program.

## Comments from Community Partners

In addition to the reasons cited above, community partners have their own reasons and conditions that apply when referring clients to a literacy program. Some of the comments revealed the community partners' frustration when faced with a client whose goals are not necessarily realistic.

*The emphasis in our program is on short-term intervention. I need to see results quickly. Can a literacy program deliver these results?*

*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 something 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. So many of my clients have so many issues, and I'm under pressure to refer them somewhere!*

## Summary

The community partners referred clients to literacy programs when the presenting need is upgrading in basic reading, writing, and math skills that will lead to further education, training or employment opportunities. Some of the challenges that the participants said they faced in referring clients included lack of expertise in determining whether or not a client's goal is realistic, lack of options for clients with multiple barriers, and limits on the amount of time clients can spend in a program. There was a recognition from community partners that their clients may not be suited to a literacy program, but often, there are no other alternatives for the client. Also, community partners suggested that they may intrinsically realize that their clients may not be able to obtain high levels of formal education, such as a high school diploma or post-secondary education, but without access to an assessment process, they are unable to assist clients in shaping realistic goals.

## QUESTION 4 – PROGRAM DESIGN

The following are features of current program design. Please rate what you think is the most effective for students. Also; if there are any features not listed, please add them. This rating is based on personal experience and opinion only.

*Please check each line.*

	<b>Most Effective</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Least Effective</b>
<b>Program Delivery</b>			
Small group instruction (6-12)			
Large group instruction (12+)			
One-on-one instruction			
Part-time (2-12 hours per week)			
Full-time (15-25 hours per week)			
Daytime			
Evening			
Drop-in			
Independent study			
Set intake times and class duration			
Continuous and on-going intake and duration			
Other			
<b>Program Setting</b>			
On-site workplace delivery			
On-site community centre delivery			
Classroom (school board)			
Classroom (college)			
Personal choice (home, library)			
Other			
<b>Program Staff</b>			
Volunteer tutors			
Paid instructors			
Adult education experience and training			
Teaching experience and training			
Other			
<b>Location</b>			
How important is the geographical location?			

## Results

The responses to this question provide valuable information to the literacy community in terms of what elements of program design are of greater and lesser importance to the referral agencies. The results contain some surprises; for example, the issue of formal information-sharing protocols was of less concern to the participants than may have been anticipated. Overall, however, the participants are asking for a range of options from literacy service providers. A "one size fits all" model of service delivery is not the answer!

Several of the participants left spaces blank; hence the answers in the three columns do not always add up to sixteen. Some of the reasons given for leaving the spaces blank are as follows:

*I don't feel qualified to respond to this category .... This category doesn't really apply to the client population I deal with I don't know enough about the issues to give an informed answer....*

**Table 9****Total Responses for Program Design**

	<b>Limited importance</b>	<b>Moderate importance</b>	<b>Strong importance</b>
<b>Location of program:</b>			
• How important is the location of the program?	2	5	8
<b>Access to program:</b>			
• On a main bus route	1	4	11
• Wheelchair accessible	6	7	3
• On-site childcare	2	6	8
<b>Program delivery:</b>			
• Group instruction	2	7	7
• One-on-one instruction	2	10	4
• Part-time program	1	7	1
• Full-time program	3	9	1
• Daytime	0	11	3
• Evening	3	9	3
• Drop-in	6	6	3
• Set intake times/restricted program duration	7	2	0
• Continuous intake/unrestricted program duration	0	10	5
<b>Program setting:</b>			
• On-site workplace delivery	7	1	1
• On-site community-based delivery	0	7	7
• Classroom	2	8	5
• Personal choice (e.g. home, library)	8	3	3
<b>Program staff:</b>			
• Volunteer tutors	5	3	4
• Paid instructions	0	7	8
<b>Information-sharing protocol:</b>			
• Attendance reports	6	5	4
• Progress updates	2	5	6
• Training goals/timelines	3	4	5

In the "other" category, participants identified these additional features of program delivery: links to other service providers, as made possible by sharing space with a community health centre, are an important part of program delivery and program setting

**Features a program delivery results clustered by rating of importance:**

**Table 10**

**Strong Importance**

<b>Feature of program delivery</b>	<b># of participants</b>	<b>% of total participants</b>
Location of program	8	50%
On a main bus route	11	69%
On-site childcare	8	50%
Group instruction	7	44%
On-site community-based delivery	7	44%
Paid instructors	8	50%
Progress updates	6	38%
Training goals/timelines	5	31%

**Table 11**

**Moderate Importance**

<b>Feature of program delivery</b>	<b># of participants</b>	<b>% of total participants</b>
Wheelchair accessible	7	44%
Group instruction	7	44%
One-on-one instruction	10	64%
Part-time program	7	44%
Full-time program	9	56%
Daytime	11	69%
Evening	9	56%
Drop-in	6	38%
Continuous intake/unrestricted program duration	10	64%
On-site community-based delivery	7	44%
Classroom	8	50%
Paid instructors	7	44%

**Table 12**

**Limited Importance**

<b>Feature of program delivery</b>	<b># of participants</b>	<b>% of total participants</b>
Drop-in	6	38%
Set intake times/restricted program duration	7	44%
On-site workplace delivery	7	44%
Personal choice (e.g. home, library, etc.)	8	50%
Volunteer tutors	5	31%
Attendance reports	6	38%

**Table 13**

**Features of program delivery clustered by combining moderate importance and strong importance responses when the combined total is equal to or greater than 75%**

<b>Feature of program delivery</b>	<b># of participants</b>	<b>% of total participants</b>
Location of the program	5 + 8 = 13	81%
On a main bus route	4 + 11 = 5	94%
On-site childcare	6 + 8 = 14	88%
Group instruction	7 + 7 = 14	88%
One-on-one instruction	10 + 4 = 14	88%
Daytime	11 + 3 = 14	88%
Evening	9 + 3 = 12	75%
Continuous intake/unrestricted program duration	10 + 5 = 15	94%
On-site community-based delivery	7 + 7 = 14	88%
Classroom	8 + 5 = 13	81%
Paid instructors	7 + 8 = 15	94%

## **Comments from Community Partners**

Comments from community partners focus on many of the features they found to be most important, and are organized using the following headings:

- location
- access
- program delivery
- program setting
- program staff
- information sharing protocol

## **Location**

*Services of this type need to be in a location that is familiar and convenient to the clients. In my experience, clients won't go out of their way to attend a program ... even if it's something that they could really benefit from. When the location is convenient, you don't have to rely so heavily on the client being highly motivated.*

*Location in a community centre where a range of services is available in the same location is a very good idea. We've seen a lot of success by combining our services with other types of services ... all serving the same population ... under the same roof.*

*Location is so important. For some clients, it's better to be in their milieu .. for others, it's beneficial to actually get them OUT of their milieu ... it depends on where they're at personally. Choice is important.*

## **Access**

From this category, access to public transportation and on-site childcare emerge as the strongest features. Wheelchair accessibility also received moderate - strong support, particularly from those participants who work with the physically disabled.

*Easy access through public transportation and on-site childcare are the silver bullets of service delivery! If you've got these two features, you're in business.*

*As long as some of the programs in operation are able to accommodate wheelchairs, I don't think it's necessary for all of them to adhere to this standard. The important thing is for disabled people to have options. They shouldn't all get referred to the same place just because it's the only program that has ramps and an elevator.*

## Program Delivery

The results from this section indicate that having a range of options is critical. Both group instruction and one-on-one instruction scored 88%, and classes offered during the day and evening also received high ratings (88% and 75% respectively). Part-time and full-time options received similar scores in the 'moderate' category (44% and 56% respectively). The importance of being able to offer a range of flexible program delivery options received further support from the comments from the participants. Continuous intake received very strong support from the participants (94%). The comments indicate that this is a particularly beneficial feature for referring agencies.

In the survey, the issue of program duration was not separated out from the issue of intake; therefore, it was not possible, based on the survey results, to determine the participants' views on restricted versus unrestricted program duration as a stand-alone category. In the comments section, however, this issue was addressed to some extent.

*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. Some of these people [literacy students] are working during the day. Some of them do better in a group setting, some of them do better one-on-one. It's important to offer the kinds of services that meet the needs of the clients you're trying to attract. .*

*I think it has a lot to do with the goals of the clients. If someone is in a hurry to get going...to get a job, or a high school diploma...then the full-time option would work best. But if you're working and you just need to sharpen your skills for your job, then part-time may be the route to take.*

*Continuous intake is critical. If someone says 'I want to go to school', then I have to be able to get them in as soon as possible. That's a huge obstacle for people to overcome, for people to reach the point where they're ready to take that action, and if I have to say, "Wait six months", that would almost certainly turn them off. So, when the client is ready, I like to be able to take immediate action.*

*I don't have a problem with restricting the length of time spent in a literacy program. Again, I think it comes back to the client's goals. What do they want to achieve, and how long will it realistically take to achieve those goals? Realistic timelines can be great motivators to the client, and it makes it more likely that I'll be able to refer people to literacy programs. I can't refer people to programs that have no end in sight!*



*I really like the idea of continuous intake, but my clients really need something that produces fast results. I'm working under very stringent time restrictions...I can't refer my clients to a program that takes months and months to complete.*

## **Program Setting**

In this category, on-site community-based delivery and classroom received the strongest support (88% and 81% respectively). On-site community based delivery is defined as literacy that is delivered in a setting such as a community or health centre. Classroom is defined as a school setting. On-site workplace and personal choice both scored in the limited importance category, receiving scores of 44% and 50% respectively. Stigma was cited as the reason for the low rating of the workplace setting.

*This gets back to the question of location. If you want to attract disenfranchised members of the community to your program, you really need to locate your program where the people are. I think it's a good idea to be in places - community centres, health centres – where people have already established connections and a comfort zone.*

*I really like the idea of services being right on the spot. If I could refer a client from my office to your office down the hall, at least for an initial contact and assessment} I think the referral rate would go through the roof.*

*For some of my clients, it would work best if the literacy program was located in a place that they're familiar and comfortable with, like a community centre. But for others} it would be better if the program was more formal in a school-like setting. I really like the idea of choice. Students who start off in a less formal community setting could move up into the more formal setting once they have more confidence and clearer educational goals.*

*The idea of locating an upgrading program in a workplace has a certain practical appeal, but overall, I think it would create a stigma for the two or three attending. It would be different if this was something that all employees were required to participate in.*

## **Program Staff**

Half of the participants gave a *strong importance* rating to the staffing model of paid instructors. When the strong and moderate ratings were combined, this rate climbed to 94%. In their comments, the participants acknowledged that literacy programs operate on limited funds, and that volunteer tutors make it possible to deliver literacy services to clients who otherwise may not be served.

*In a perfect world, literacy instructors would be part of the education system, along with elementary and high school teachers. They should be treated as education professionals.*

*I want my clients to receive the highest standard of services possible, and in my experience, that means dealing with professionals who have been specifically trained to do the job and who are paid accordingly. This is the only way to ensure a high standard of commitment and accountability in any field.*

*It's important to reach as many people as possible with limited resources, and volunteers do their part to make this happen.*

### **Information Sharing Protocol**

Interest in the sharing of information was limited, with the exception of the participants representing Ontario Works and Human Resources Development Canada. In these cases, interest was focused primarily on working in collaboration with the client and literacy service provider to establish clear training goals/timelines and to be apprised of the client's progress by way of both formal and informal reporting protocols (38% of the participants rated progress updates and 31% rated training goals/timelines in the strong importance category). None of the participants was concerned about having access to attendance reports (38% rated attendance reports in the limited importance category).

*When I refer a client to a literacy program, it's because I've identified that literacy is a barrier to the client's employment goals. Therefore, it's important that these goals are communicated to the literacy program, and that mechanisms are in place to share information regarding progress and timelines.*

*I work under stringent timelines. It's important that the literacy program is made aware of this so that everyone involved is clear on how much time we have and what we want to accomplish in that time-span ...what's realistic.*

*I'm not so concerned about formal reporting, but I'm interested ... I want to stay on top of what's happening with my client. .. that way they feel like I haven't just passed them off to someone else and I'm no longer interested in what's happening to them.*

*Absolutely, reporting protocols are an essential part of the referral process. It's not just about meeting quotas, it's better for the client. Without follow-up, the plan becomes fragmented, and that's how people slip through the cracks.*

# Summary

The responses to this question strongly supported a number of key program design features:

## **Location:**

- *In close proximity to other services*
- *Choice of locations - some community based; some centralized*

## **Access:**

- *Easy access by public transportation*
- *On-site childcare*
- *Accommodation for people with disabilities*

## **Program Delivery:**

- *Choice and flexibility - group instruction and one-on-one; part-time and full-time; day and evening; continuous intake*

## **Program Setting:**

- *Choice of community and classroom settings*

## **Program Staff:**

- *Paid literacy instructors viewed as more professional than volunteers - better trained} more committed. Volunteers are valued for their contribution to a field that is under-funded.*

## **Information-Sharing Protocol:**

- *Some interest in sharing information related to training goals, timelines and progress; limited interest in access to attendance records.*

## QUESTION 5 – OUTREACH

In the past year, have you/has your agency made any referrals to literacy programs? If you answer is Yes, please complete the rest of this section on Outreach. If you answer is No, please go directly to the last page of the survey.

In the past year, how many referrals has your agency made to literacy programs?

- Fewer than 10
- Between 10 and 25
- Between 25 and 50
- More than 50

Using the following list, please indicate with a checkmark which literacy programs your agency refers to and give the reason(s) why referrals are made to those particular programs:

- Algonquin College
- Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board
- also (Alternative Learning Styles and Outlooks)
- People, Words, and Change
- CNIB Literacy Program for Deafblind Adults
- Neil Squire Foundation-Access Program
- John Howard Society of Ottawa
- Ottawa Deaf Centre
- La Magie des lettres
- Le Trésor des mots
- La Cité Collégiale
- École des adultes le carrefour

## Results

All of the participants said they had made referrals to a literacy program in the past year. When asked how many referrals the agency had made, some of the participants were aware of exactly how many referrals their agencies had made; others, particularly those who work in large organizations such as the City of Ottawa People Services, were not. Those who could not answer on behalf of the agency as a whole, answered as individuals.

**Table 14**

**Number of Referrals Made in the Past Year**

Fewer than 10	3
Between 10 and 25	6
Between 25 and 50	5
More than 50	2

In the next part of this question, participants were asked to indicate which literacy programs their agency refers to and give the reason(s) why referrals are made to those particular programs. In some cases, participants referred clients to the ABC Line and were not aware of which program the client had ultimately been referred on to.

Some literacy programs are "open-access", meaning that anyone can attend, and some are "restricted-access", meaning that participation is limited to people who meet the requirements of the target population. Programs that fall into this category include CNIB Literacy Program for Deafblind Adults, Neil Squire Foundation, and Ottawa Deaf Centre.

While francophone literacy programs are included in this list, it is important to point out that this research project was primarily targeting services to the anglophone community. Therefore, the responses indicated in the table below pertaining to referrals to francophone literacy programs, are not necessarily indicative of actual referral activity. Most of the numbers that appear in the Number of Referrals column in the table below are estimates.

**Table 15****Agencies That Received Referrals and Reasons for Referrals**

<b>Name of Program</b>	<b># of Referrals</b>	<b>Reasons for Referrals</b>
Algonquin	75-100	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I refer clients to the Algonquin program because they seem to be the ones who are motivated to succeed ... they're the cream of the crop.</i></li> <li>• <i>It's a high profile program.</i></li> <li>• <i>I didn't know there were other programs to choose from.</i></li> <li>• <i>It [the literacy program] leads directly into a diploma program. *</i></li> <li>• <i>That's where my clients ask to go.</i></li> </ul>
Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board **	20-30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Convenient location ...</i></li> <li>• <i>It's the only one I know about.</i></li> <li>• <i>My clients told me about it.</i></li> </ul>
Ottawa-Carleton District School Board **	25-35	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Convenient location ...</i></li> <li>• <i>It's part of the Adult High School. ***</i></li> <li>• <i>It has a high profile.</i></li> <li>• <i>I'm familiar with it, so it's easy.</i></li> </ul>
also	5-10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>They really helped a couple of my clients.</i></li> <li>• <i>I know someone who volunteers there.</i></li> </ul>
People, Words, & Change	5-10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>My clients told me about it.</i></li> <li>• <i>I've been referring people there for a long time.</i></li> </ul>
CNIB	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>This was the only option available to my client.</i></li> </ul>
Neil Squire Foundation	2	
John Howard Society of Ottawa	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>My clients asked to go there.</i></li> <li>• <i>My clients asked for the referrals.</i></li> </ul>
Ottawa Deaf Centre	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>My clients are deaf ... this was the most appropriate referral.</i></li> </ul>
La Magie des Letters	5 – 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>This is the only French literacy program I know about.</i></li> </ul>
Le Trésor des Mots	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I refer clients here for the same reasons I would refer them to Algonquin College.</i></li> </ul>
La Cité Collégiale	10-15	
École des adultes le Carrefour	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>My client asked for a referral to this program because the location was convenient.</i></li> </ul>

\* It is not necessarily true that all adult students who attend the literacy program at Algonquin College will qualify for a diploma program; many will never reach the level of literacy proficiency required for admission into a diploma program.

\*\* It became apparent that a number of the participants were confusing these two programs and were not clear on which program they had actually referred clients to.

\*\*\* Three of the participants who cited this reason were mistaken in their perception that the Adult High School is directly related to the adult literacy program of the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board.

## Summary

The results indicated that referrals are often based on limited and sometimes erroneous information. With the exception of "special needs" clients, community partners tended to refer clients to literacy programs that were familiar to them, whether or not these programs best matched the needs and goals of the clients.

## General Comments

In the final section of the survey, participants were given the opportunity to make general comments on adult literacy as it relates to their jobs and the needs of their clients:

*I don't think I 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. Now I know that there are other options and that there are people out there who can help me to determine which choice best suits the needs of my clients. I'm not an expert on adult literacy, and I don't need to be. That's good news.*

*It seems that there's a lot more going on in these literacy programs than I had previously realized. It's good to know that people are prepared to listen to what it is that we want and need from these types of services. We need to open up the communication.*

*I've learned a lot from participating in this survey, but I'm still not clear on the difference between adult literacy and English as a second language. Most of my clients are new Canadians, and language is a major barrier to employment. Do I refer them to a literacy program or an ESL program? I'm still confused.*

*A central assessment and referral service would be very helpful. There are all of these different literacy programs, but I don't know which one is best for my client. Also, I don't always know for sure that 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. That way, I don't have to know everything about literacy and all of the different programs.*



# Chapter Five

## Student Perspectives

### SURVEY DELIVERY

A total of 34 students participated in the research in various ways. Ten students had individual interviews; these students represented both school based programs and one-on-one community based programs. Four focus groups were also conducted; two of these included students from a school board program. Students were drawn from both academic programs that helped to prepare them to enter high school or college programs, and a job skills program that helped to prepare them for entry-level work. The other two focus groups included students from the college preparation program. A total of 25 students participated in the four focus groups. All of the students attended their programs during the day for a minimum of four hours per week and a maximum of 24 hours per week.

The type of data collected varied according to the two interview methods. Those who had individual interviews were usually able to respond to all check- lists and rating scales. Participants in the focus groups did not usually complete these rating scales and checklists. As a result, the collected data as a whole relies more heavily on participants' comments than discrete measures if compared to the practitioner and community partner perspectives.

From the researchers' point of view, data collected from personal interviews was much more revealing than data collected from checklists and scales. Also, the students' low literacy skills often prevented them from completing the checklist or rating scale independently. Most may have been able to read the text but were confused by what they were being asked to do with it. Many had no previous experience with a survey. Attempts to complete this part of the survey were sometimes abandoned even during the individual interviews.

The information gathered from the two focus groups held at the college has not been fully integrated with the main discussion. A separate section called College Responses will appear after each question in this section. This decision was made when it became apparent that the profile of the college students was markedly different from the general profile of the other student participants. Eight of the eleven college focus group participants said they had completed their high school education and had acquired either post-secondary degrees, diplomas or certifications in languages other than English. It is important to note that the college deals with funding sources other than LBS, and as a result, is able to provide educational programs to a broader range of students than agencies that receive only LBS funding. The combination of additional funders and a college setting, has helped to create a student population that is distinctly different from those found in other Ottawa literacy programs.

# Participants

Some very basic demographic information was collected from the participants and is presented below.

<b>Total number of participants for the following is</b>	<b>34</b>
Male	10
Female	24
First Language is English	10
First Language is not English	24
Did not attend school as a child	2
Attended school 1-4 years	2
Attended school 5-9	13
Attended school 9+	5
Received a high school diploma	4
Received a post-secondary degree/diploma/certificate	8
Attended school in Canada	9
Attended school in another country	22
Did not attend school in another country	2
<b>Total number of participants for the following is</b>	<b>23</b>
Main income is a job	2
Main income is social assistance (OW, ODSP, EI)	17*
Main income is other (retirement pension, family)	4
Live with spouse or partner (may also have children)	5
Live with children (no spouse)	5
Live with other relatives or friends	2
Live alone	11
* This number appears unusually high because only students attending day programs were interviewed. The majority of students in LBS in Ottawa attend a program during the day, including the three largest programs in Ottawa. Often, students in an evening program are employed.	

## QUESTION 1 - DEFINITION

**What does the word 'literacy' mean to you?**

What does it mean for you to have low literacy?

*Check as many as you want.*

- Having low literacy means I have a hard time with **reading and writing** at home, at work, or in the community.
- Having low literacy means I have a hard time **speaking and listening** at home, at work, or in the community.
- Having low literacy mean I have a hard time with **math** at home, at work, or in the community.
- Having low literacy means I have a hard time **learning new things** at home, at work, or in the community.
- Having low literacy means I have a hard time **organizing myself and getting things done** at home, at work, or in the community.
- Having low literacy means I have a hard time fitting in at home, at work, or in the community.
- Any others?** \_\_\_\_\_

## Student Comments About the Use of the Word 'Literacy'

Many of the students interviewed associated negativity with the word *literacy* and automatically related it with the word *illiteracy*. Some students felt the word was more neutral and a couple simply didn't know what it meant. Nearly all the students said that they used words other than literacy to describe what they were doing when talking to friends or family about their time spent learning.

*When I hear literacy, I think Illiteracy. To me I'm not illiterate. That's not me.*

*They should drop the ward because when they use it I think it means someone is slow or dumb.*

*Literacy means retard. I tell people I'm going to school to read and write.*

*I don 't use the word literacy-its depressing to me. I say I want to improve my writing skills.*

A smaller number had a more neutral response to the use of the word literacy.

*..it's about someone who studied a little... they didn't go to school and are missing what they didn't get as a child.*

*Literacy doesn't bother me. I am literate. I tell friends I'm at school to read and write.*

A couple of students really didn't have a sense of the word.

*I think it means something about reading and writing ... bringing order ...*

Nearly all the students used words other than literacy to describe the work they were doing to themselves and friends or family. Most said they were attending programs for reading or writing upgrading, and reading or writing skills. Some liked to say they were learning to use computers and others liked to be more specific, and say they were working on grammar or spelling.

*When I describe this to my son, I say I'm doing reading, writing and dictation ..*

*When I first heard LBS I didn't know what it was. I say I want to improve my writing skills.*

### **College Response**

Most of the students were unfamiliar with the word literacy and only one suggested that it meant someone couldn't read. When asked how they describe their program to others the focus group participants said they used words such as college preparation, high school equivalency or the program's acronym.

## **Results for Question About What it Means to Have Low Literacy**

Only one student checked three items or more, the rest checked three items or less. Two of the focus groups came to an agreement and checked items as a group. One student was unable to respond to the question. There are therefore a total of 11 responses to the question.

- 11 said low literacy means they have a hard time with reading and writing
- 6 said low literacy means they have a hard time with math
- 4 said low literacy means they have a hard time with speaking and listening
- 2 said low literacy means they have a hard time learning new things
- 2 said low literacy means they have a hard time organizing and getting things done

# Student Comments About What it Means to Have Low Literacy

Comments reveal a very functional definition of literacy. Students who had a first language other than English, wanted to focus on grammatically correct conversation as much as writing. This was most likely a major concern because these students have only their English oral abilities to depend on when trying to write. Without strong literacy skills in their native language(s), these students have no other written grammatical structure to make reference to as they are learning English literacy skills. Native English speakers wanted to focus on the technical aspects of writing, such as spelling and paragraph writing.

*My work [in a literacy program] is focused on spelling and writing. I have no big problems with other issues.*

*I need help with basic writing skills. It's about putting your thoughts on paper properly.*

*It's very good to practice conversation so you know how to speak properly.*

## College Response

Since most of the college participants were unfamiliar with the term, the question was not asked. It was also not raised because the majority in the group were highly literate in their first languages.

## Summary

Most of the students who responded to the question have a strong, usually negative, reaction to the word literacy. It was sometimes associated with illiteracy or being slow and intellectually inferior. Some were confused by the word and weren't sure what it meant, especially students who did not speak English as their first language. Only one student thought it was okay to use the word because it was direct and understandable. Nearly all the participants said that they use other words to describe what they are doing to friends and family. Words such as *upgrading*, *skills*, and more direct descriptors such as spelling and grammar seemed to be used often.

When asked what it means to have low literacy or what it means if someone has trouble reading and writing, the participants had a somewhat narrow view and focused mostly on reading and writing and sometimes on math or listening and speaking. Often, when talking about reading and writing, students emphasized that it is the writing that is cause for concern much more than the reading. Students who did not have English as a first language said their reading and writing was a concern but also commented more on speaking / listening compared to native English speakers.

## QUESTION 2 - BARRIERS

**Do you have problems that get in the way of the things you want in life?**

*Check each line.*

	Never	Some-times	Often	Always
Discrimination (race, sex, disability)				
Family problems				
Housing				
Finding and keeping a job				
Feeling isolated and alone				
Mental health (feeling sad)				
Physical health				
Low literacy				
Being poor				
Drinking or drugs				
Other:				
Other:				

From the list, choose three issues that are the biggest problems for you.

Put number 1, beside the biggest problem.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## Results

Ten students (including one focus group) completed the issues chart and rated the top three issues that get in the way of the things they want in life. Three of the ten students said none of these issues ever get in their way. Their attitudes will be discussed further in the comments section. The issue of low literacy was mentioned but not as much as issues such as discrimination, physical health and finding and/ or keeping a job. Only six respondents, a very low sample for drawing any conclusions, rated the issues they had checked in the chart. Five of the students said they did not rate the issues because they said there were no major problems that needed to be rated.

**Table 17**

**Issues That May Interfere With a Student's Goals**

	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Always</b>	<b>Total</b>
Physical health	1	2	2	<b>5</b>
Discrimination (race, age, disability)		2	1	<b>3</b>
Finding and keeping a job		3		<b>3</b>
Mental health (feeling sad)		2		<b>2</b>
Low literacy	2			<b>2</b>
Other; Confidence		2		<b>2</b>
Housing	1			<b>1</b>
Being poor	1			<b>1</b>
Other; Cultural differences		1		<b>1</b>
Feeling isolated and alone				<b>0</b>
Family problems				<b>0</b>
Drinking or drugs				<b>0</b>

**Table 18**

**Top Three Issues Rated First, Second and Third**

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Physical health	2		
Discrimination (race, age, disability)	1		1
Finding and keeping a job		1	
Mental health (feeling sad)	1		
Low literacy		2	2
Other; Confidence	1		
Housing		1	
Being poor			
Other; Cultural differences	1		
Feeling isolated and alone			
Family problems			
Drinking or drugs			

## Comments from Students

Four individual students clearly stated that none of these issues or any others interfere with their goals. All four spoke English as their first language, two were men and two were women, three had emigrated from Jamaica and one was born and raised in Ottawa.

*Nothing really stands in the way of doing what I want.*

One of the focus groups was comprised of mostly female students, originally from East Africa. Their conversations focused on the difficulties they experienced understanding and being understood in a different culture.

*It's hard to look for a job. At the interview they ask you a question and you don't understand it.*

*Sometimes I volunteer but they won't hire me. We need a chance.*

*Sometimes you have a goal but while you go this way, money problems get in the way. Eight months ago I had a goal to learn then get work but now I think I have to work. I'm looking for any job.*

Other individual students felt they also faced issues of acceptance and discrimination, although these were not based on culture. Instead they stemmed from age, lack of education and learning disabilities.

*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.*

*Discrimination was big for me. I fought with the union for 11 years to get full-time because they found out I couldn't read and write properly. The supervisor told me you won't get full-time because you can't read and write. I can read what they want but it's not good enough. I trained my boss. But because I can't read and write, I don't get promotions. I train all these people but I can't read and write properly. I couldn't work full-time.*

The other focus group, which had a more diverse student demographic, had a discussion about the significance and often the insignificance of literacy on the job.

*Its not important if you know what you 're doing. Let's say there's a big technical ward that's this long [stretches arms wide]. Who cares? If you know how to fix it then the word is only this long [brings hands together].*



*You need writing and reading. It would still be important even if I didn't need it for a job.*

*If I get a job working with my hands, I don't need reading and writing.*

*Other things [besides literacy] get in the way of getting what you want. Number one, your brain is open. Experience is very important. If I don't have experience, I can't get anything.*

Amongst the final group of students, both physical and mental problems or emotional difficulties interfered with a student's goals and progress.

*I was sick for many months. I had pain and allergies. The doctor gave me pills so I left school.*

*I had an aneurysm and stroke 11 years ago. I was in a wheelchair. I've made a lot of progress but I have trouble with names and trouble with small words.*

*I've had mental health problems in the past but not now. Being on disability has given me the opportunity to go to school.*

## **College Responses**

For most of the college participants, their main barrier was the realization that their previous formal education would not be recognized or would not lead to the similar kinds of employment they may have had in their native countries. Many also looked to the future and wanted to provide an improved way of life for their children. In fact, going to school as an adult was also seen as a way to set a positive example for their own children, particularly teenagers. Family could be both supportive and add additional pressures, especially if children were younger. One student was even questioning her ability to continue in the program because of family and financial pressures. Other issues that were raised included age and disability. Although discrimination based on race was not mentioned directly, a few students said that they felt like outsiders and wanted to gain direct access to main stream society.

All but two of the students in the college program wanted to gain entry into a post-secondary program at the college in order to retrain in different fields or add Canadian education to their previous qualifications. One of the remaining students wanted a high school equivalency, and the other simply wanted to improve her English writing skills.

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

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

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

*I want to show my children the importance of going to school.*

## **Summary**

The comments reveal that there are many other issues, more significant than literacy or formal education, which have an impact on students' abilities to achieve their goals. Issues of discrimination, recognition of qualifications, the need for Canadian education and job experience, and physical and mental health all play a major role in students' lives. Some students commented that their literacy skills really had little to do with their ability to get a job. They acknowledged that they could get jobs that didn't require a high level of reading or writing skills. Many students, particularly those in the college program, recognized that their job choices were limited by their education levels and country of original education.

A couple of students also commented that it was the knowledge that their literacy skills were low, and not their ability to do a job that became an issue with employers. Both had trained others and said they had never received negative feedback from employers, but were refused promotion or full-time status because of their low literacy skills. One of these students had received a basic-level diploma from an Ottawa high school.

Some of the students displayed a great deal of strength and fortitude when they bluntly said nothing interferes with their goals. This is an area that obviously needs much more research. One place to begin is with the students themselves to investigate the impact that low literacy skills compared with other barriers has or doesn't have on students' abilities to reach their goals.

## QUESTION 3 – PARTICIPATION IN LITERACY PROGRAMS

### Why do you go to a literacy program?

*Put 1 beside the reason that is most important to you. Then put 2 beside the reason that is next important to you, and so on. Don't put anything beside a reason that isn't important to you.*

- To get a job or get a better job.
- To go to high school, college or another education program.
- To learn new things about geography, history or science
- To feel better about myself.
- To learn about my community and how to deal with problems
- To learn to read and write better for no other reason.
- To feel like I have a place to go and something to do.
- To learn more about myself.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### Results

A total of 10 students, including the participants in one of the focus groups, completed the chart. A checklist was used instead of a rating scale when it was discovered that the rating scale was confusing for many of the participants. Two students usually checked at least two items.

- 9 students said they go to a program to feel better about themselves
- 9 students also said they go to a program for no other reason except to learn to read and write better
- 6 students said they go to a program because it gives them a place to go and something to do
- 5 students go to a program to get a job or a better job
- 4 students want to go to high school, college or another education program
- 4 students want to learn new things about geography, history or science
- 2 want to learn more about themselves
- 1 wants to learn about the community and how to deal with problems

## Comments from Students

The students' comments are strikingly similar and focus on very personal and intrinsic reasons for attending a program. Students attend programs primarily for self-improvement, to gain confidence, to gain a sense of belonging and participation, and to feel better about themselves. Only sometimes, did students say that they attended a program primarily because it would lead to a job or better job, or entrance to a higher education program, with the exception of students from the college.

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

*It's important to get out of the house daily. I want to make myself useful.*

*I returned for myself. It was the right time in my life.*

*I want to learn to write without mistakes. I haven't really learned to write so I don't know what I would do. I'm learning things I never learned before.... it's better than volunteering [through Ontario Work]j.*

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

*We want to be understood and understand the community ... it's important to improve yourself.*

*It's in a package. I come for a job, myself and my family. I especially want to build more confidence.*

### College Responses

Overwhelmingly, students at the college, wanted to improve their education in order to acquire a post-secondary education. Many had already attempted to gain entry to post-secondary programs such as Nursing, Social Work and Graphic Design but had failed entrance tests. These students were then advised to upgrade their reading and writing skills in order to meet the demands of a post-secondary program. Students felt that this level of education would help them to secure levels of employment that were not too different than their former jobs. For example, a former Arabic language and literature teacher wanted to continue to work with people, and hoped to retrain so she could work with the elderly as a social service worker.

## Summary

The results of this question seem to point to a division between intrinsic and extrinsic reasons that students might have for participating in literacy programs. Intrinsic reasons include the

following: *feeling better about myself, feeling like I have a place to go and something to do, and learning to read and write better for no other reason.* Extrinsic reasons, on the other hand, are considered to be the following: *to get a job or a better job, to go to high school, college or other education program, and to learn about my community and how to deal with problems.* At first glance, it seems that students participating in the college program are primarily extrinsically motivated, whereas students participating in other programs are primarily intrinsically motivated. It could be argued that it is not the specific program that determines this division, rather a variety of factors such as previous level of formal education and current literacy level. It is likely that higher-level students in other literacy programs 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."

There is a fair amount of research available regarding reasons for participating in literacy programs. Most recently, the Ontario Literacy Coalition (OLC) in partnership with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) visited Ottawa literacy programs as part of a province-wide study designed to investigate issues regarding participation. Results of the longitudinal study, commonly known as *Seeing the Need: Meeting the Need* will be made available through the OLC.

## QUESTION 4 – PROGRAM DESIGN

The following are features of **current program design**. Please rate what you think is the most effective for students. Also, if there are any features not listed, please add them. This rating is based on personal experience and opinion only.

*Please check each line.*

	<b>Important</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Not Important</b>
Small group instruction (6-12)			
Large group instruction (12+)			
One-on-one instruction			
Part-time (2-12 hours per week)			
Full-time (15-25 hours per week)			
Daytime			
Evening			
Drop-in			
Independent study			
Set intake times and class duration			
Other			
<b>Program Setting</b>			
On-site workplace delivery			
On-site community centre delivery			
Classroom (school board)			
Classroom (college)			
Personal choice (home, library)			
Other			
<b>Program Staff</b>			
Volunteer tutors			
Paid instructors			
Adult education experience and training			
Teaching experience and training			
Other			
<b>Program Supports</b>			
Daycare			
<b>Transportation</b>			
<b>School Supplies</b>			
<b>Counselling</b>			
<b>Activities (sports, social, art...)</b>			
<b>Other</b>			
<b>Location</b>			
How important is the geographical location?			

# Results

The chart in this question was completed by eight participants. One focus group didn't answer the question due to time restraints. Of the three individuals who didn't respond to the chart, one got very confused and was unable to respond, another could only relate to the elements in her program and also had difficulty understanding the question, and the third simply gave her comments. For the most part, students expressed the need for a variety of program delivery formats, and had no real preference for the physical setting or the staff as long as there was a supportive and comfortable environment. Marked in grey are the specific elements that received the most responses.

**Table 19**

**Elements of Program Design That Are or Are Not Important for Students**

	<b>This is important to me</b>	<b>I'm not sure</b>	<b>This is not very important to me</b>
<b>Program Delivery</b>			
Small group instruction (6-12)	5		2
Large group instruction (12+)	1	1	6
One-on-one instruction	6	2	
Part-time (2-12 hours per week)	4		
Full-time (15-25 hours per week)	1		2
Daytime	5		
Evening	2		
Drop-in			4
Independent study	3		1
	(supported)		
Set intake times and class duration	3		
Continuous and on-going intake and duration			
Other			
<b>Program Setting</b>			
On-site workplace delivery			
On-site community centre delivery			
Classroom (school board)			
Classroom (college)			
Personal choice (home, library)			
Other			
<b>Program Staff</b>			
Volunteer tutors			
Paid instructors			
Adult education experience and training			
Teaching experience and training			
Other			

Most often, students said none of these elements mattered; it was the people who were important. Only one student said they did not like being in college and school classrooms.

Most students said training, experienced and paid staff versus volunteer staff didn't matter. The most important element was the attitude and personality of the practitioner. One suggested practitioners should receive training in helping students gain confidence.

<b>Program Supports</b>	
Daycare	1
Transportation	2
School Supplies	3
Counselling	6
Activities (sports, social, art...)	3
Other – Job Placements	1
<b>Location</b>	
How important is the geographical location?	Most students said they would be willing to travel a little further in order to attend the program that best suited their needs.

## Comments

Students made some general comments that touched on different issues.

*It's important to have objective knowledge of work and accomplishments-maybe a certificate to acknowledge progress.*

*It's very important to feel welcome and comfortable and have a sense of belonging.*

*There's no real difference [between a volunteer and paid instructor]. Maybe it's even better to have a volunteer-you know they want to be there. It's mostly about attitude and personality.*

*In a classroom there's too many people. The teacher doesn't have time to explain things. Here [a one-on-one program] someone is always available if you need help. It doesn't feel like a classroom and I learn better.*

*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.*

The only comments that supported a specific program setting came from the discussion that was held with the focus group, comprised of mostly female students who did not speak English as a first language. They all felt that it was very important to be in a formal classroom setting.

*If you really want to learn, you go to school.*

*Last year I was in the community. We had fitness, cooking and conversation. It was nice but it wasn't for me. But others liked it.*



## College Responses

During the two college focus groups, students most often focused on issues regarding program design compared to the other sections in the survey. They expressed very definite ideas about the elements that can make a program successful or deter from its success. Comments from their discussions are presented below.

### *Elements that Lead to a Successful Program*

- self-paced learning
- clear learning goals and objectives
- a focus on foundational skills
- learning without pressure
- supportive teachers
- use of testing to show progress and achievement
- need to work through a program as quickly as possible
- a combination of independent and group study
- an opportunity to apply what is being learned
- working in a group where others are working on the same thing
- opportunities to discuss and present
- listening, talking and interacting

### *Elements that Deter from a Successful Program*

- feeling that time is being wasted because specific needs are not met
- the students' own attitudes
- not accounting for individual differences in a program
- a lack of clear time lines for completion of a program

## Summary

The students who responded to the question expressed a clear desire for a variety of program delivery formats, including supported independent learning. The only format that wasn't desired was large group instruction. When it came to the program setting and staff, overwhelmingly, students said it is the people who counted more than any physical elements, certifications, or paid / volunteer status. The staff element was not discussed by participants at the college. It can be argued though, that these students chose to attend the college in order to receive specific qualifications, and would want to know that they are being taught by qualified and professional staff.

Added to the student survey was a question regarding student support, such as counselling. Most students said that the addition of counselling support to a program would be helpful, and they would like to seek assistance on occasion from someone other than their instructor or tutor. Students from the college generally agreed that they knew about and had in fact accessed many of the support services at the college. Students also said that they would be willing to travel further to a program that best suited their needs. This finding is contradictory to the widely held

belief amongst both practitioners and community partners that students primarily want a location close to their home. Most students who responded to the question, including those at the college, agreed that it was more important to attend a program that best suited their needs than it was to be in a program simply because it was conveniently located.

One of the comments that many students made spontaneously, including those in one-on-one programs and those at the college was the desire to be in an environment where there was a planned level of interaction with other students. This interaction was seen as an opportunity to practice skills, listen to others, get to know other people, work together towards similar goals, and share common interests.

## QUESTION 5a – OUTREACH & PROGRAM ROLE

What should a literacy program do for you?

*Put 1 beside the reason that is most important to you. Then put 2 beside the reason that is next important to you, and so on. Don't put anything beside a reason that isn't important to you.*

- A literacy program should teach me to get a job or a get a better job.
- A literacy program should help me enter a high school, college or other education program.
- A literacy program should teach new things about geography, history or science.
- A literacy program should help me to feel better about myself.
- A literacy program should teach about the community and how to deal with problems.
- A literacy program should teach reading and writing only.
- A literacy program should give me a place to go and something to do.
- A literacy program should help me learn about myself.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

## Results

Nine individual students and one focus group completed the chart, one declined and said the programs must remain highly flexible to suit the individual: "The minute you try to say literacy should be like this, you'll run into someone who doesn't fit-too much structure will ruin it." One focus group did not complete the chart because of a lack of time.

- 7 students said a program should help them feel better about themselves
- 6 students said a program should teach only reading and writing
- 6 students want a program to teach about the community and how to deal with problems
- 5 students said the program should give them a place to go and something to do
- 5 students want a program to teach them to get a job or a better job
- 4 students want a program to prepare them for high school, college or another education program
- 4 students want a program to teach new things about geography, history or science
- 4 want a program to help them learn more about themselves

This question mirrored Question 3 - Reasons Students Attend a Program. For the most part the responses were listed in the same order except for the response regarding learning about the community. In Question 3, only one student said this was a reason they go to a program, but in the above question, 5 students said one of the roles of a literacy program was to learn about the community and how to deal with problems.

## Comments from Students

Most of the comments stated that it's important for a literacy program to have a role that is not simply focused on reading and writing. One of the main roles should be to help build confidence and make connections. A smaller number disagreed and said the role of a program is to focus on reading and writing only. Students rarely mentioned that the role of a literacy program was to gain employment or a promotion or even gain entrance to higher education.

*[The role of a program] is to give me more confidence to want to be here. If I feel more confident, that will make me come even more.*

*Feeling welcome and a sense of belonging [is the role of a program]. I want to connect with the community. It is an opportunity for friends and family to see what is happening-to understand what you are doing.*

*It's not just about reading and writing but it is also about other things. Helping with confidence and feeling welcome is very important.*

*[The most important thing] is talking and having friends.*

*[A literacy program] should not be a drop-in centre. There's all sorts of places to go in the community.*

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

*Literacy in my opinion is not geography or history or even math-it's about spelling and reading. Improving my writing gives me choices.*

## College Responses

The main role of the literacy program for the college participants is preparation for post-secondary education. All of the participants were motivated to improve their skills as a result of predominantly extrinsic factors-college entry. This of course, is not the only factor, but was most often discussed by group members.

## Summary

This question contains identical answers as Question 3. It was important to see if there would be a difference between the reasons students participated in a program and their perceived role of the program. Similar to Question 3, students who were not in the college program, rated the more extrinsically based program roles such as employment and further education below the more intrinsically based roles of a program such as developing self-esteem and a feeling of belonging.

One significant difference between the two questions is the rating of teaching / learning about the community and how to deal with problems. Although most students said they didn't attend a program for this reason, they did feel it was an important role for programs to undertake.

College responses remained consistent with Question 3, and most students said that the role of their program was preparation for further education.

## QUESTION 5B – OUTREACH

**Should literacy programs work with other groups?**

No Why not? \_\_\_\_\_

Yes

*Check as many of the groups that you think literacy programs should work with.*

Drug and alcohol counsellors

Groups that help with discrimination

Groups that help with family problems

Groups that help with housing

Organizations that help you find or keep a job

Organizations that help you get involved in the community

Mental health organizations

Poverty organizations

Ontario Works/Employment Insurance/Ontario Disability Support Program

Other \_\_\_\_\_

## Results

There were a total of 10 responses: one focus group did not complete the questionnaire due to time restraints and one individual was not able to complete the questionnaire. Of this number, three (including the focus group) said it was not necessary for literacy programs to work with other programs, and seven said literacy programs should work with other community organizations. The three who said it was not necessary to make a link with other organizations said they knew how to access these organizations if needed, including the use of local community centres.

- 3 students checked all issues
- 3 students checked over five issues
- 1 student checked two issues

**Table 20**

**Community Organizations**

Groups that help with housing	7
Physical health organizations	6
Ontario Works/Employment Insurance/Ontario Disability Support Program	6
Groups that help with discrimination	5
Groups that help with family problems	5
Organizations that help you find or keep a job	5
Organizations that help you get involved in the community	5
Mental health organizations	5
Drug and alcohol counsellors	3
Poverty organizations	3
Other: Transit problems	1

## Comments from Students

Students seemed to express two ideas: either have all these services in one building or have someone available who could help the student access the services.

*Literacy programs should work with other programs indirectly-help get you to the right place with counselling.*

*It could save a lot by having all these services in one building. It would be a heck of a lot easier to deal with people. It would be easier for teachers and students.*

## Summary

There is a need for better connections within the community, but not for all students. Literacy programs housed within a centre of related services might be ideal, such as a community centre. But counselling, whether it is on-site or located in some sort of centralized location would also be beneficial. Students who attend programs at the college are able to access a variety of support services and this is often facilitated by their teachers. It is assumed that educational counselling would be a priority, but more research would be needed to see what other sorts of community supports would be most helpful.

## General Comments

Students' final comments touched on a wide range of issues. Some were personal and provide more insight into their struggles with literacy and education. Others were more pragmatic and provide suggestions for program improvement.

*I went to [another literacy program] and didn't like the program. I didn't know what to do or who to talk to. I got mad. I cried. Why did I waste my time? The next day I went to the office and said this wasn't for me. I stayed a month and a half then I stopped. I went to work. Now in this program, I am in a group with everyone who is the same. At [the other program] it was too fast. The best thing is to go with your level-the same people.*

*This is an excellent program. I have been in a classroom and it was difficult. I never had a good time in school. With one-an-one I don't have to worry about what other people are thinking.*

*You need to recognize that everyone has a different purpose for coming. It would be nice to put small groups together-maybe 3-4 people-people working on the same topic like math or creative writing or business writing.*

*It's important to be treated as an individual. It's not a good idea to have everyone reading the same book- everyone has their own interests.*

*It would be good to have a program or school for Learning Disabilities-to test people so it doesn't cost \$800. DO-to see where they are in education, a multi-program system with testing, high school, job preparation, college preparation, an all purpose program with no barriers and open to every aspect of adult education and upgrading. It would be good to have counsellors on-site to meet with and talk about and plan education.*



# Chapter Six

## Comparing the Three Perspectives

In this chapter, the perspectives of the three groups involved in adult literacy education—practitioners, students and community partners—are 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 the 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 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 oilier 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.

*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.*

## **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 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 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."

## **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 surprising was the issue of group interaction that was raised spontaneously by a few participants. In a community-based one-an-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>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This comment is based on personal involvement with the research project.

# 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.

## *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 Program's 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?

## **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.

# Chapter Seven

## Changing Perspectives in the Field of Adult Literacy Education

*Literacy educators are also adult educators. Literacy is not a narrow set of skills; it is a vehicle that informs our knowledge of the world. If we believe that learning about literacy can take place simultaneously with learning about life, then educators and students together must construct a vision of literacy education that transcends the classroom and allows adults to pursue learning on their own terms. (Zieghan, 1992, p. 48).*

So just what does the author of the above quotation mean? What is a vision of literacy education that transcends the classroom? What would this look like? The ideas presented in this chapter are just that-ideas. It is an opportunity to step back from day-to-day practice and take a quick peek at some of the issues being explored in the field of adult literacy education. In turn, these ideas may serve as a springboard for discussion. The chapter will touch on the following topics:

- descriptions of the more traditional view of adult literacy education and a changing view;
- possible reasons that are fuelling a changing perspective, such as participation in programs and emerging socio-cultural theories of literacy;
- balancing student needs and societal pressures;
- and possible approaches that support a changing perspective.

### Traditional and Changing Views of Literacy Education

There have been numerous calls for adult literacy education programs to shift their view of literacy as a set of discrete, hierarchical and objective skills to the view that literacy is a contextual, social and personal practice (Kazemek, 1988; Zieghan, 1992; Street, 1995; Imel, 1996; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). The field emerged from, and, for the most part hasn't really left, an approach to education that was based on traditional school-based learning. Yes, there are programs set in the community, one-on-one tutoring, and innovative approaches, but for the most part, the methods, materials, and teaching techniques are entrenched in a school-based approach to reading and writing that focuses only on building literacy skills.

Often, when talking about a skills-based approach to literacy education, the terms school-based literacy, academic approach or classroom literacy are used interchangeably. Kazemek (1988) states that in practice, "This usually means the ability to make efficient use of various decoding skills, to recognize appropriate sight words, or to perform at an arbitrarily determined grade

level" (p. 467). This approach to literacy has likely evolved from a combination of traditional (many would argue that they are questionable) primary reading approaches used with children, and vocational education and training. These ideas are embedded in the names of programs in both the United States and Canada such as Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS). Both program names draw on the word 'basic', which suggests elementary, primary, even simplistic, and the word 'skills', which suggests the use of a learning model that incorporates vocational, behaviourist, and discrete learning.

Several different terms are also used to describe the more social and subjective nature of literacy. These include participatory, integrated, and social practice. Again, based on Kazemak's (1988) interpretation, "Literacy is a relative phenomenon, one that is both personal and social: it occurs in different contexts, situational as well as cultural; it depends upon the reader's and writer's purposes and aims for engaging in literacy acts; and it varies according to the nature of the text" (p. 467). This approach to literacy can be connected to the work of Heath (1982) who was one of the first to study literacy development within a socio-cultural context. Other more recent research, such as the work of Barton and Hamilton (1998), acknowledges the contribution of Heath and others, and has continued to examine the uses of reading and writing within a specific socio-cultural setting.

The influential work of Freire (1972) could also be included here. He too focused on the socio-cultural nature of literacy, but he added another dimension to this concept and suggested literacy is not only tied to the life situations of people but it should also be used to empower those who are oppressed by an unjust society. He promoted the use of literacy to help students "... perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p.19).

## **Reasons to Change – Participation in Literacy Programs**

Participation in Canadian literacy programs is dismally low, considering the number of people who have been identified as having low literacy skills. According to the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), 22% of Canadians have very low literacy skills (Statistics Canada, 1996). If we then compare this to rates of adult participation in formal education, the lowest rates are found among those who have the lowest levels of education. Essentially, the less formal education adults have, the less likely they are to participate in education programs. Only 5% of Canadians with 0-8 years of education participate in any form of adult education or training (Statistics Canada, 1994).

When searching for possible reasons for these low rates of participation, the two paradigms-school-based literacy and socio-cultural literacy-come to the forefront. Those who advocate the need to teach literacy based on the understanding of the individual within a cultural/ social group, point out that one of the main reasons most adults with low literacy skills choose not to participate in programs is because literacy education is equated with school-based learning. This school-based learning views literacy as a set of discrete skills that rarely address the personal and cultural realities of the student. The term often used to describe the non-participation of adults in literacy programs is resistance.



Quigley (1993) interviewed adults who resisted participation in literacy programs, and found that low-literacy adults valued education and learning but resisted the idea of school. He also found that those who displayed resistance to participation did not view the terms 'school', 'education' and 'learning' as being interchangeable. Ziegahn (1992) also studied the views that adults with low literacy held towards learning and literacy. Similar to the findings of Quigley, Ziegahn suggests that adults with low-literacy skills view learning as separate from literacy, and most deterrents to participation relate to literacy education rather than learning. She also found that practical application, understanding, and challenge motivate low-literacy adults to learn. Both researchers point out that non-participating adults view literacy within a school-based learning paradigm, whereas learning is viewed separately from this.

For the low-literacy adults who do actually contact literacy programs, what motivates them? In a recent survey of callers to literacy hotlines across Canada, Long (2001) found that over half of all callers were motivated to participate in a literacy program because of intrinsic goals, such as personal, social or general educational reasons: the remainder were motivated by more extrinsic goals such as employment or retraining. The argument could be made that since more than half of potential participants are intrinsically motivated, they would be better served by an approach that addressed their personal needs and social context.

## **Reasons to Change - A Socio-Cultural View of Literacy**

The study of literacy has shifted from the "...dominant view of literacy as a 'neutral', technical skill [to] the conceptualization of literacy instead as an ideological practice, implicated in power relations and embedded in specific cultural meanings and practices" (Street, 1995, p.1). In other words, it is no longer sufficient to view literacy education strictly within the confines of traditional skills-based learning. Research into the social nature of literacy has revealed that written text is inextricably linked to the people, cultural dynamics and balance of power within society. The term social practice is used to capture the idea that literacy, like most human activity, is essentially social and is "...located in the interaction between people" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 3).

According to Barton and Hamilton (1998) the following elements need to be considered to fully understand the social nature of literacy:

1. Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events, which are mediated by written texts.
2. There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
3. Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.
4. Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
5. Literacy is historically situated.
6. Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making. (p. 7).

The concept of literacy as a social practice is not a new one for literacy programs and has been promoted in literacy education through the work of Paulo Freire, as mentioned earlier. Unfortunately though, the message that literacy is embedded in a social context may have been lost in the more powerful and politicized message that literacy education should be an emancipatory activity that will help to liberate those who are oppressed.

Freire's approach to literacy education has been embraced by some, especially those in community education programs (Norton, 2000), but it could be argued that it has also been dismissed by many who were not comfortable with the highly political nature of the approach. At the same time though, important ideas of power relationships, dominant cultures and the socially embedded nature of literacy may not have been given the attention they deserve by the field as a whole. The idea that literacy is linked to a specific social context needs to be re-examined through a different lens, while also considering the balance of student needs, program practice and societal pressures.

## **Balancing Student Needs and Societal Pressures**

In order to effectively shift perspectives of literacy education, the needs and goals of the students, program practice, and societal pressures will have to be carefully balanced. Each of the groups involved in this dynamic will be examined more closely in order to better understand the views that need to be taken into account if a changing perspective is to affect program design.

### **Societal Pressures**

Literacy education has been inextricably linked to employment; specifically, low levels of education and skill are linked with unemployment and poverty. According to Statistics Canada (1990) less than half of all social assistance recipients (including those receiving unemployment insurance) in Canada have graduated from high school. The D.S. experience is similar. Martin and Fisher (as cited in Dirkx, 1999) point out, "Welfare recipients have low educational skills; nearly half of adults on welfare do not have a high school diploma or GED. Recipients' level of educational skills is correlated with length of time on welfare ... [and the] educational level of welfare recipients is closely linked to their income level" (p. 84).

There is significant evidence to suggest that adults with low literacy levels and low levels of formal education have lower incomes, and depend more heavily on social assistance compared to adults with higher levels of education. But this is a very simplistic understanding. There is very little information about who these people are, and the myriad of other issues they face besides low literacy. The result of a superficial understanding of low-literacy and welfare is the assumption that participation in a literacy program will help students either to get a job or to get a better job. This assumption may not always be correct. In a three-year study that recorded the employment status and vocational goals of participants in a Canadian literacy program, Malicky and Norman (1994) found that most participants returned to the same sort of low-paying jobs they had before entering the program.

There is a need to carefully examine the assumption that participation in literacy programs will lead to employment or a better job. Also, where there is success, what were the elements of the program that created this? Was it an increased literacy level or other factors such as increased confidence, communication and a stronger sense of self that contributed more to success? It would be wise to keep in mind the warning of one researcher regarding the assumption that increased literacy skills equal employment: "This approach is not a panacea, either for the economy or for literacy" (Quigley, 1997, p.112).

## Student Needs/Goals

In a study by the U.S. National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), 1500 students from across the U.S. expressed their literacy goals in writing. Their goals were categorized into the following four themes. Students expressed the desire to:

- Have access to information and orient themselves in the world;
- Give voice to their ideas and opinions and to have the confidence that their voice will be heard and taken into account;
- Solve problems and make decisions on their own, acting independently as a parent, citizen and worker, for the good of their families, their communities, and their nation;
- Be able to keep on learning in order to keep up with a rapidly changing world (Stein, 1995, p. 5 or 6).

Although these goals have been used as a call to action, urging literacy programs to change the nature of their delivery to better address the expressed needs of students (Imel, 1996), they were not based entirely on the students' own words or expression. They may very well reflect the personal goals of students, but specific questions were asked to elicit these ideas, and the students had to complete pre-written sentences when expressing their answers. For example, to answer one of the questions, adults were asked to complete the following statements:

- In my community, competing in the global economy means ...
- To me, having the rights and responsibilities of citizenship means ... (Stein, 1995, p. 2 of 20).

Their answers to these questions may not be genuine expressions of the students' goals in a literacy program, but may in fact be a direct reflection of societal pressures. It is important to compare this information with more general and unguided questions about students' goals and motivations for attending programs.

As stated earlier, more than half of all callers to Canadian literacy hotlines were motivated to participate in a literacy program because of intrinsic goals (Long, 2001), but they were also motivated by more extrinsic goals. The 338 respondents to the survey were asked an open-ended question, and these responses were then matched to possible answers on the survey form. Responses were more purposeful in nature, compared to the conceptual responses of the NIFL study, and were limited to statements on the survey. The following is a more specific breakdown of both the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of the callers. Students wanted to:

- improve general education (29%)
- get a job or a better job (26%)
- upgrade for retraining (17%)
- improve daily living skills, or attend based on family or social reasons (15%)
- enhance personal well-being (14%).

A couple of issues arise from these studies. There is a need for a more qualitative examination of student goals and literacy purposes, which allows students' own voices to be heard. Also, there is a need to ask these questions outside the context of a literacy program, without the influence of societal pressures. When students are visited by researchers in a program or asked to complete sentences, their answers may very well express the school-based discourse of the program or the discourse of the survey designer. Whereas, talking to students in their home, may produce a different discourse and more revealing information.

## **Possible Approaches to Support a Changing Literacy Perspective**

In order to address many of the issues that have been raised-participation, emerging theories of the socio-culture nature of literacy, societal pressures, and student needs and goals-the following section will provide a brief overview of a couple of potential approaches to program planning. These approaches have not been formally researched, but there are reasons to believe that each has something to offer literacy programmers who are searching for new and innovative ways to deliver adult literacy education. "In this new era of literacy programming, adult literacy professionals are presented with an unprecedented opportunity to experiment with a number of different approaches to literacy instruction." (Martin, 1999, p. 55).

### **Match Program and Student Philosophies**

As described in Chapter One, Quigley (1997) outlines four working philosophies that underlie literacy practice. These philosophies can be used by programs to better define their objectives and instructional approaches. Then, students who share the same basic philosophy, as expressed by their goals, could be matched to the program or class that matches their own philosophies.

Although the matching philosophies approach has not been formally researched, it does seem to make sense to match students and programs or practitioners based on their common philosophies. This could work as long as the philosophy also met the students' goals. For example, what if one student stated a primary goal was employment, which is reflected in the vocational philosophy, but the student had very low self-esteem and needed a humanist approach? The next model, which incorporates a more integrated approach to adult literacy education, may answer this question.

**Table 21****Four Working Philosophies Underlying Literacy Practice. (Quigley, 1997)**

<i>Political Perspective</i>		<i>Popular Perspective</i>	
<i>Vocational</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Humanist</i>	<i>Liberatory</i>
Literacy is mainly for job preparation and financial independence.	Literacy is mainly for acquiring cultural knowledge.	Literacy is mainly for personal growth, self-actualization, and self-esteem building.	Literacy is mainly for critical thinking and political awareness.
<i>A. Early Advocates</i>			
Skinner	Livingstone	Rogers	Freire
Watson	Adler	Maslow	Alinsky
<i>B. Current Advocates</i>			
Sticht	Hersh	Fingeret	Heaney
<i>C. Methodological Underpinnings</i>			
Behaviorism	Pedagogy	Andragogy	Case Studies
Competencies	Great Literature	Discussions	Site Visits
<i>D. Content Applied</i>			
Technical	Great Literature	Inspiring Stories	Case Studies
Work-related	History	Student-authored	Conflict

## A Continuum of Programs

In light of the societal pressures on literacy education, Martin (1999) proposes that programs incorporate a continuum of models, which meet the different employment needs of students. Although he has modeled the creation of a continuum of programs based on United States welfare reform, his ideas could be easily translated to Canadian, and Ontario programs. Nearly half of the literacy students who enrolled in Canadian programs were on some form of social assistance (Long, 2001). With the introduction of literacy testing for Ontario Works recipients, even more students on social assistance could be expected to participate in Ontario programs.

Martin (1999) proposes that a continuum of program models be established. Students, based on their employment needs, would then be matched to the various models.

1. *Academic Programs* – GED programs, competency-based programs, and so on.
2. *Literacy Integrated with Soft Skills* – job readiness, family literacy, and so on.
3. *Literacy Integrated with Occupational Skills* – machine training, Personal Support Worker, welding programs, and so on.
4. *Situated Context and Cognition* – workplace programs.

Although this approach is based on matching students who are receiving welfare or other employment-related social assistance with a specific learning model, its premise could be adapted to meet the needs of all students in programs. A stay-at-home mother who wants to upgrade her skills to get into community college, could benefit from a traditional academic approach. A retired student with no desire to complete high school, could benefit from the literacy integrated with soft-skills approach. Similar to Quigley's (1997) philosophy-matching approach, no formal research has been done to examine the success of Martin's (1999) continuum of programs. A drawback to the continuum, with the exception of situated context, is that it does not address the type of learning approach that could be used with each model.

## **Situated Learning**

Closely linked to the idea of literacy as social practice discussed earlier, is the emerging theory of situated learning. Taylor (2001) suggests that this approach could lead to a deeper understanding of adult literacy and learning. According to Stein (1998) to situate learning is to "place thought and action in a specific time and place, involve other students, the environment, and activities to create meaning, and locate in a particular setting the thinking and doing processes used by experts to accomplish knowledge and skill tasks (p. 1). Stein (1998) also describes the elements that guide the situated learning process-content, context, community and participation.

To better understand this approach, it is useful to apply it to a learning situation that could take place within an adult literacy class. A group of female students, all of whom are mothers, have expressed concern and confusion over new school report cards and upcoming parent teacher interviews. This concern would form the content of a situated learning approach. The content is based directly on the students' experiences with report cards and parent-teacher interviews. Students would not be learning facts and trying to retain information, rather, they would engage in problem-solving activities and derive meaning through reflective thinking.

The literacy instructor situates the students within a classroom environment that reflects the real-life environment of parents dealing with their child's school-the context. This real-life environment would allow students to acquire the knowledge, thought processes, and cultural interactions of parents coping with the socio-cultural dynamics of their child's school. This classroom environment (the context) allows students to actively participate in the event. Issues of power, politics, competing priorities, students' interaction with the values, norms, culture of the school and their families would have to be directly acknowledged. At the same time, students would be able to re-experience events from multiple perspectives. The instructor facilitating this learning would help to establish a community of practice that provides students with a setting for social interaction to engage in dialogue. It would also need to be recognized that the instructor is also a community. Practitioner knowledge and cultural knowledge are considered to be communities in which a new member must learn to perceive, interpret and communicate experience. As an individual who may be perceived to represent the education system, even though regular K-12 education is removed from adult literacy education, the instructor may be looked upon to share knowledge, both cultural and objective. Students, in turn, would need to reflect upon this.

Accompanying the establishment of a community of practice is the active participation of students. All elements of the learning situation—content, context and community—are fuelled by participation, which guides the interchange of ideas, attempts at problem solving and active engagement of students with each other and the materials of instruction.

This approach has also not been formally studied in an adult literacy setting, but there are indicators that it could address some outstanding issues. For example, Purcell-Gates, Degener and Jacobson (2000) found that the use of authentic, contextualized materials in a literacy class had a positive effect on the increased use of literacy in the home environment. If contextualized materials had a positive effect, what would contextualized thought, understanding and interaction add to these results? Also, situated learning addresses many social issues, such as balance of power, use of authentic materials, students' cultural experience, and socio-cultural communities that Paulo Freire and others who follow the liberatory philosophy have claimed to be at the heart of literacy education. These issues are addressed though without the emancipatory element that has politicized, even marginalized the liberatory approach.

## Conclusion

Changing perspectives in adult literacy programs is a complex issue with numerous considerations that need to be addressed. There are some common themes that have surfaced.

- A one-size-fits-all approach to programming, based only on traditional school-based learning can no longer be considered the only approach to adult literacy education.
- The real life experiences, needs, contexts, and cultural realities of the students must also be considered when planning and implementing programs.
- Consideration of these needs must reach all levels of program delivery, including the materials, texts and discourses of the learning environment.
- An array of programs (including some traditional, skills-based models) is needed to address the variety of goals, affective needs and purposes for literacy that students may have.
- Programmers will need to balance societal pressures, the realities of students, and program practice.

There needs to be a method to frame the development of changing program models. A possible first step that could be taken to guide this process of change is to begin to think of adult literacy education in a slightly different manner. If literacy educators begin to talk about *education for adults with low literacy skills* instead of *adult literacy education*, a whole new dynamic is possible. *Literacy education for adults* forces us to view literacy first and shape education programs around literacy needs. The structure of programs is based on skill levels as opposed to personal need. On the other hand, *education for adults with low literacy skills* switches the paradigm: now education, in whatever shape or form, is primary and literacy is shaped to meet the varied educational goals of adults. We could begin to define programs based on student goals and needs, such as a class for mothers who want to help their school-age children, a group for students who left the Canadian education system with a feeling a failure, or a program for students who want to find a job but lack skills and confidence. Sometimes the simplest shift in thought can lead to the greatest change in practice.

# **Chapter Eight**

## **Program Initiatives in Ottawa**

Many programs in Ottawa have taken the initiative to move beyond a traditional, skills-based approach to literacy, and are investigating, developing, and even delivering programs that view adult literacy education as something much more than functional skills building. In other words, these programs and projects are helping to transcend traditional school-based approaches to literacy education, and are shifting the paradigm to provide education for adults with low literacy skills. They are also helping to forge partnerships between literacy programs, and between programs and social service organizations.

### **ALSO (Alternative Learning Styles and Outlooks) and the Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy (OCCL)**

1. The OCCL and ALSO are collaborating on a project to develop models of outreach to clients in related social agencies, particularly those serving young families. The Ottawa Public Library (OPL) is also a partner in the project. The connection with the OPL has opened doors to library initiatives such as One, Two, Three, Read to Me, and provides an opportunity to encourage clients to join their local library. More than 20 agencies have been contacted by the Project Coordinator, and many others have expressed keen interest in the project. The major finding to date is that agencies want more information about literacy and basic skills services in the city. Many have requested presentations, which the OCCL has already begun to provide rather than waiting until the end of the project.

### **Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board (OCCSB)**

1. Beginning in 2000, the OCCSB has worked with local private and public trainers of Personal Support Workers to develop modules that prepare students for the accredited Personal Support Worker programs. This pre-training program addresses the specific content, language, study and test-taking skills, and job search skills that PSW workers have identified as needs for their clients.
2. With funding from the National Literacy Secretariat, the OCCSB has developed plain language workshops that help parents, guardians and grandparents help their children understand the school system. The workshop content includes topics such as: Understanding the Provincial Report Cards, Helping with Homework, Families and Schools: Working Together, Provincial Testing: What's it an about? and lastly, Summer Fun, an additional topic requested by parents to help them learn about educational opportunities for their children over the summer months.



3. The OCCSB and the University of Ottawa are working together to identify how group and collaborative learning takes place in an adult Literacy and Basic skills program. Through observation, interviews and focus groups researchers from the university will bring to light the conditions and contexts of effective group learning. We hope to translate the academic study into a publication that will be useful to all adult literacy programs.
4. "The World of Work" is a new program, beginning April 2002. This program is offered in modules with accompanying activities that promotes discussion around expectations employers have of employees as well as actual workplace behaviours. It includes tours of various workplaces, understanding of literacy based activities of workplaces (e.g. What do invoices do? Who are they for? Why are they done?), and practice doing various literacy based activities of workplaces. This new program will help students prepare for the workforce and keep their chosen jobs when they get them. It will be useful for jobs beyond entry-level positions.

## **Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB)**

1. The OCDSB offers a unique program, *Skills to Go*, that combines literacy education with employment readiness skills and on-the-job training. The intention is to help students learn general work-related skills that can be transferred to a variety of work places. The students participating in the program work in an on-site coffee shop on one day and learn related employability skills the second day. They learn skills such as customer service, using a cash register, team work, basic accounting and inventory control, reading work related forms and documents, resume and interview preparation, and even supervisory skills. These work related skills are reinforced and expanded upon during the three other days that they are in the program in a traditional class setting. An accompanying curriculum guide has also been developed.
2. Through special project funding, *Skills to Go* has been expanded to include a field placement component. Students can be placed in a variety of jobs that may or may not include food services. Placements have included a daycare, a furniture refinishing company, and a hospital kitchen. The placement integrates on-site support from a job coach and continued participation in the literacy program.
3. Two new programs, referred to as Targeted Literacy Classes, have been initiated this year. A Health and Well-Being class that helps to prepare students for entry into health care and childcare training programs and/ or jobs began January 2002. A second class, designed to help school board custodians use work related forms and documents is also being offered.
4. A research study involving the University of Ottawa will be implemented at the school board in the fall. The study will investigate situated learning in an adult literacy class.

## Algonquin College Career and College Preparation

1. Algonquin College is offering two new programs in partnership with the City of Ottawa. The *Job Readiness Training Program* will help students discover a job that they enjoy and try it out for two weeks while improving workplace skills in computers, math and English.
2. The second program, the *Focus for Change Program* is for women only. It will give participants the opportunity to visit workplaces, improve workplace skills in computers, math and English, and meet role models.
3. The college is also offering an Auto Body Repairer program with support from the Ottawa Joint Collision Repair Association. This unique program, open to participants with a Grade 8 reading level, combines academic and skills training with a paid job placement. Students can complete their GED while learning a highly marketable skill. It should be noted that none of the above programs are funded by LBS.

These programs and initiatives are examples of how our community is moving beyond the concept that literacy education is comprised of only functional skills. Literacy education or *education for adults with low literacy skills* is a much more dynamic, responsive and integrative process. It is these kinds of efforts that are at the forefront of a changing perspective of adult literacy education, and are in fact the most concrete examples of the changing face of literacy.

# Chapter Nine

## 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.

### **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. It is recommended that the Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy resume its practice of making presentations to community agencies in order to publicize the variety of literacy services in Ottawa.

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 method of information sharing 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. It is recommended that the Local Planning and Coordination Committee form a small working group be established to set research priorities and develop a three-year research strategy to assist in the development, funding and implementation 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?

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.

It is recommended that the literacy community in Ottawa undertake a way to describe our students that goes beyond a simple description of functional literacy skill level.

## **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. These plans guide practitioners in developing instruction to students meet their goals. But, how is that being implemented? Are only the functional skills such as phonics, sentence writing and grammar being taught? Or do students also learn the actual skills related to their goals? For example, take a mother who 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 could be very appropriate.

*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.

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