Building Capacity to Attract and Retain Literacy Volunteers

A Research Report

Sheryl Harrow
Mary Leggett Ph.D
Susan Robertson Ph.D
Lynne Townsend
Sharla Daviduik

for READ Saskatoon

For more information about the Knowledge Development Centre, visit www.kdc-cdc.ca.

Canada

Table of Contents

Literacy is about more than reading and writing – it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relations, about knowledge, language and culture...Those who use literacy take it for granted – but those who cannot use it are excluded from much communication in today's world. Indeed, it is the excluded who can best appreciate the notion of 'literacy as freedom'.

— United Nations

Time will be considered our most valuable resource and its most prized 'investment' will be relationships.

— Sue Vineyard

If you look closely you will see that almost anything that really matters to us, anything that embodies our deepest commitment to the way human life should be lived and cared for, depends on some form – often many forms – of volunteerism.

— Margaret Mead

Building Capacity to Attract and Retain Literacy Volunteers

1. Introduction

The number of literacy volunteers in Canada is declining.[1] To address this problem, literacy organizations must understand what motivates individuals to commit their volunteer hours to meeting literacy needs. They also need to understand what relationships should be established, maintained or transformed in order to attract and retain literacy volunteers. As a starting point, our research project examined conditions and trends within the literacy community of Saskatoon and within READ Saskatoon.

READ Saskatoon is a community-based volunteer organization that offers free literacy services to adults and their families. Over its 25-year history, the organization has remained committed to its original mandate and purpose: "*to promote literacy awareness, community partnerships and development.*" The core of READ Saskatoon's program is one-to-one literacy instruction; the organization recruits and trains volunteer tutors who then meet with assigned learners for one or two-hour learning sessions in a branch of the Saskatoon Public Library. The Saskatchewan Department of Learning provides funding to this program.

READ Saskatoon and its funding partners recognize the critical role that volunteers play in promoting literacy in Saskatchewan and in facilitating broader participation of learners in their democratic society.

READ Saskatoon's volunteer tutor base has been constrained over the past five years because the demand for literacy services is high. At any given time, the number of learners outnumbers available tutors by four to one. Further, changing demographics in Saskatoon have resulted in a marked increase in requests for services from Aboriginal learners. To date, READ Saskatoon has registered only three self-identified Aboriginal persons for volunteer tutor training. To continue to meet the demand for tutoring, READ Saskatoon needs to bring more volunteers into the program, extend the length of time they volunteer with the organization, and find ways to serve increasing numbers of Aboriginal learners.

Literacy is recognized as a basic human right and a means to enhance the social, economic, and political outcomes of individuals, communities, and nations. But "*over 10 million Canadians are working at marginal or modest levels of literacy… [which represents] a massive loss of productivity for individuals, for society and for our economy…*" (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2003). To meet this challenge, community-based literacy organizations rely mainly on volunteers to provide the literacy

---

[1] Calamai, P (2005). *Can We Close Our Literacy Gap?* Ontario: ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation. Last retrieved August 10, 2005 from ABC Foundation website: www.abc-canada.org/public_awareness/literacy_matters_report.asp

training within Canadian communities. This should place the interests of volunteer literacy organizations high on the agenda of international, national, provincial, and local policy decision-makers (OECD and Statistics Canada, 2000).

However, research by Hall, McKeown and Roberts (2001) into volunteer trends in Canada reveal an overall decline in the percentage of Canadians who volunteer through charitable or nonprofit organizations. A relatively small percentage of the population (7%) contributes the vast majority of volunteer hours (73%). Further, there is an uneven distribution in the percentage of volunteer hours that are contributed to different types of organizations within the voluntary sector. Relative to other types of organizations, literacy organizations in Canada are experiencing significant challenges in recruiting and retaining a volunteer-tutor base that is suited to the literacy needs of local communities (Calamai, 2005).

READ Saskatoon is no exception in this situation as our tutor-learner ratio is one to four and we need to recruit and retain literacy volunteers to meet the demands of learners. Hence, we designed a research project to contribute to READ Saskatoon's ongoing efforts to build organizational learning capacity to meet literacy needs in Saskatoon. The objectives of the project were to identify:

- the factors affecting READ Saskatoon's capacity to recruit and retain volunteer tutors; and
- the factors affecting READ Saskatoon's capacity to recruit and retain Aboriginal volunteers.

We hoped to identify these factors and how to deal with them by addressing three questions:

1. How does READ Saskatoon's experience fit within the broader literature on the problem of a declining volunteer base? Can we learn from other's experiences?
2. What motivates or motivated current and former READ Saskatoon tutors respectively to volunteer and what caused former tutors to leave the literacy program?
3. What can READ Saskatoon learn from the experiences of its current and former volunteers and how can READ Saskatoon use this information to boost its capacity to recruit and retain literacy volunteers?

2. Methodology

To answer the research questions, we designed a four-phase research program incorporating three inter-related ways of collecting data.

Phase one consisted of a brief thematic review of selected literature aimed at identifying possible reasons for the decline in Canada's volunteer base nationally, provincially, and locally. We wished to explore what other people had discovered about factors that affect the ability of nonprofit organizations to maintain volunteer programs. We decided to not only look at the Canadian experience but also the general debate on factors affecting volunteerism. We were guided in our literature research by three ideas. We wanted to know what external factors might influence a nonprofit organization's ability to effectively meet its commitments. We also wanted to understand if there had been changes in the type of people who wish to volunteer. Finally, we

wanted to investigate if there had been fundamental changes in society that affected the inclination of people to volunteer.

Phase two consisted of two focus groups that explored and elaborated on the themes identified in the literature review and the perceptions and experiences of current and former READ Saskatoon volunteer tutors. The first focus group was composed of nine current tutors (tutors had between eight months and eight years of experience volunteering with READ Saskatoon); the second focus group was composed of eight former tutors.[2, 3] Analysis of data generated at the first focus group informed the collection of data at the second focus group. Findings from the focus groups were used to develop the surveys that were carried out in the third and fourth phases of the research.

In the third phase of the project, we attempted to survey, by telephone, all those who had been READ Saskatoon volunteer tutors between 1994 and July, 2004, a total to 269 individuals. We mailed 57 letters of introduction to current and former tutors informing them of the purpose of our research, the names of the researchers who would be contacting them, and the time when they could expect to be contacted. The tutors were invited to let READ Saskatoon know if they were unwilling or unable to participate in the survey. The final number of tutors in our survey was 195.

In the final phase of the project, we attempted to elicit information from a mix of people including some of Saskatoon's Aboriginal community. We distributed a self-administered questionnaire on International Literacy Day to 93 adult learners at the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology's (SIAST) Kelsey Campus.[4] The survey was distributed to adult learners from Kelsey's Adult 10, Adult 12, Literacy Centre and LINC programs.[5] Of the 93 people who completed the questionnaire, 41 (44%) identified themselves as Aboriginal and 42 (45%) identified themselves as non-Aboriginal. Ten (11%) respondents did not identify their ethnic identity as either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. Information gathered in this phase was used to address gaps in READ Saskatoon's understanding about how best to address the literacy needs of the Aboriginal community.

3. Review of Relevant Literature

Learning to Respond to External Factors

Hall, Andrukow, Barr, Brock, de Wit, Embuldeniya, et al (2003) put forward the linked concepts of organizational capacity and organizational capital. Capacity is the ability of an organization to work toward its goals and this capacity is dependent on the capital the organization can build up. Hall et al. (2003, p. 4) argue that "*the capacity of nonprofit and voluntary organizations to achieve their missions and objectives is considered to be dependent upon*

---

2 For continuity, the same two facilitators were used for the focus groups. In addition, a READ Saskatoon staff member observed and took notes during the sessions.

3 Of the former tutors, seven had stopped tutoring in the past year. The eighth is a READ Saskatoon board member who no longer tutors. Former tutors had had between two months and four years of experience volunteering with READ Saskatoon.

4 We distributed the questionnaire on September 8, 2004.

5 Offered to adults who were studying to complete grade 10, grade 12, those in further education or literacy classes at the Literacy Centre and those attending Language Instruction for Newcomers in Canada (LINC).

three types of capital that organizations can deploy: financial capital, human capital and structural capital.” The capacity to deploy this organizational capital is enabled or impeded by various external factors such as the economy and the legal and regulatory framework within which organizations operate and so on. The capacity of voluntary literacy organizations, for example, has been affected by changes to the fiscal and regulatory environment that includes cuts in transfer payments to the provinces and restructuring of social safety nets, employment insurance, and social services (Calamai 2005).

Furthermore, a recent paper prepared by the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation concludes “*that changes in total government funding patterns are likely to lead to few people deciding to volunteer…[estimating] that a one-percent decrease within expenditures will lead to a 1.5% decrease in volunteers*” (Dow, 1997, p. 10-11).

Kangisser (1985) reports that cuts to funding not only threaten “core funding” for volunteer literacy organizations but also their volunteer power. “*The trickle-down effect is monumental, especially when carefully examined in the adult literacy voluntary sector [relative to]… two prevailing myths about literacy volunteers: volunteerism is panacea, and the use of volunteers is low-cost or cost-free. The illiteracy problem of this country is simply too large to be solved solely through the use of volunteers, [and] although the use of volunteers can be cost-effective, it still demands an investment of program resources and staff time*” (p. 29).

“*It [becomes] unrealistic to expect the sector to simply draw upon unpaid volunteers to fill the void. Volunteers need to be screened, trained*

and managed, so it actually costs the majority of organizations money to bring volunteers on board” (quoted in Dow, 1997, p. 6).

A second external factor that affects voluntary organizations is the demand for increased accountability. “*Groups and agencies are taking greater responsibilities to insure that inappropriate behaviour for vulnerable populations is prevented… screening of paid and non paid staff [has] become a more in-depth part of bringing anyone into work efforts*” (Vineyard & McCurley, 1995, p. 63).

The Saskatchewan Literacy Network (2000) has put forward Best Program Practices, which is typical of a growing trend toward professionalization and standardization of management, training, and evaluation practices within literacy organizations.[6]

This has resulted in a significant increase in the amount of paperwork that local organizations must process and manage, and, in turn, has led to increased strain on voluntary organizations at a time when volunteers seem less inclined to make the long-term commitment that agencies ideally need.

Learning to Respond to the “New” Volunteer

There is a growing consensus that voluntary organizations must learn to respond to the changing conditions, motivations, and dispositions of volunteers. This consensus is grounded in the notion that there has been a general decline in what is

---

6 Saskatchewan Literacy Network (2000) *Best Program Practices*. Last retrieved August 10, 2005 from Saskatchewan's Literacy Network website: www.sk.literacy. ca/resource/pubs/selfeval/contents.htm

referred to as the "traditional" volunteer and an increase in the "new" volunteer. Dow (1997, p. 13) states that "*a generation or so ago, there were two main stereotypical categories of volunteers who were relied upon to volunteer: 'stay-at-home moms and sports-minded or executive-type dads'.*" Vineyard and McCurley (1995) agree and assert that these traditional categories of volunteer no longer exist and so organizations increasingly have to compete with one another to make their volunteer programs attractive to this "new" volunteer.

Findings of Community Literacy of Ontario (1996) reported on the National Adult Literacy Database website seem to provide some corroboration for this argument.[7] When managers of volunteer programs were asked about their volunteer environment, 78% indicated that they perceived a change in volunteer needs and interests in recent years. They cited as examples a perception that the reasons for volunteering have changed (e.g. people now volunteer to gain work experience, for skills development, and increased chances of gaining places in higher education institutions). It appears that volunteers are also more interested in short-term placements (e.g. university students may only be willing to volunteer during the summer), and there is a perception that increased administrative demands on volunteers (e.g. demands associated with maintaining high quality standards, outcomes-based learning) is a deterrent to volunteering.[8] The overall sense communicated by respondents was that a gap exists between the expectations of voluntary organizations and the needs and interests of most

potential volunteers. This seems to have a negative affect on the willingness to volunteer, which in turn contributes to increased competition among voluntary agencies for smaller numbers of volunteers. It also suggests that to succeed in attracting and retaining volunteer tutors, literacy organizations need to change their expectations and programs to respond to the needs and interests of the "new" volunteers.

Learning to Build Social Capital

A third theme in the literature attributes the problem of a declining volunteer base to a more general decline of social capital in modern society.[9] The concept of social capital emerged through the writings of Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988; 1990) and Putnam (1993; 2000).[10] Putnam (2000) explains social capital as follows:

> "*social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called "civic virtue." The difference is that "social capital" calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital*" (p. 19).

---

8 On Purpose Associates. (2001). *Outcome-based learning*. Last retrieved August 10, 2005 from Funderstanding website: www.funderstanding.com/ outcome_based_edu.cfm

9 **Social capital**: The degree to which members of a community or society collaborate and cooperate (through such mechanisms as networks, shared trust, norms and values) to achieve mutual benefits. www.icfdn.org/publications/ blurredborders/40definitions.htm

10 For more information on Pierre Bourdieu's ideas on social capital go to Wikipedia website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Bourdieu (Last retrieved August 11, 2005).

---

7 Community Literacy of Ontario. (1996). *Results of a volunteer management survey*. New Brunswick: NALD. Last retrieved August 26, 2005 from the National Adult Literacy Database website: http://www.nald.ca/province/ont/clo/results.htm

So social capital is where people create networks to share ideas and work together to improve their local environment and community socially and physically. The current concern for the nonprofit and voluntary sector in Canada is the possible decline in civic and voluntary participation because social capital within communities might be weakening.

Onyx and Bullen (2000) explain that social capital is created by a 'bottom-up' process of the many everyday interactions between people and results in strong social networks that are the foundation of communities. Such social capital can provide the source for volunteers that work to improve their local community.

Summary

From our exploration of the literature, the reasons for a declining volunteer-tutor base are probably due to many complex interacting factors affecting the capacity of nonprofit organizations to recruit and manage volunteers. There are the external factors such as funding cuts as a result of political and economic changes in Canadian society. There is the changing nature of volunteerism and expectations of volunteers. Then, there is also the larger change in Canadian society, i.e. the possible decline of social capital and sense of community. In our research project, the collective knowledge, understanding, and experience of current and former volunteer tutors at READ Saskatoon was seen as part of social capital that must be mobilized to help the organization address the problem of a declining volunteer-tutor base.

4. Findings

Importance of a Sense of Community

A theme that clearly emerged from the focus groups was the importance of being part of a group or community. Both current and former tutors expressed concerns about "isolation" and the "*need to know that they are not alone in their challenges.*" One of the participants described the tutor experience as being a "*little bit like a satellite.*" Another said, "*Support would have been nice because I didn't know what I was doing…*". A third participant commented that "*we never had that tutor group (we never met again) and I think that's a really important thing. Once the initial training was over, you were on your way.*" The consensus among focus group participants was that feelings of isolation have a negative impact on the confidence of tutors and, in turn, may be a factor in decisions to stop volunteering with READ Saskatoon. In contrast, developing a sense of community was seen as allowing for common experience and shared understanding. As one focus group participant noted, "*I became a board member, then…I really felt like I was a part of the group*".

READ Saskatoon currently offers individual support to tutors who ask for help in meeting the needs of their learners. However, this form of support may not be adequate to address tutors' need for a sense of belonging within the organization and the literacy community. For example, findings from the survey indicated that former tutors were less willing or able to take advantage of the support offered by the READ Saskatoon office and staff (e.g. accessing literacy materials, Internet resources, one-on-one guidance, or attending tutor conferences). Figure 1 demonstrates the difference in inclination toward

attending skill-building conferences between current and former tutors. Current tutors were more than twice as likely to attend such a conference than former tutors.

Figure 1: Response of tutors to the statements about attending a tutor conference
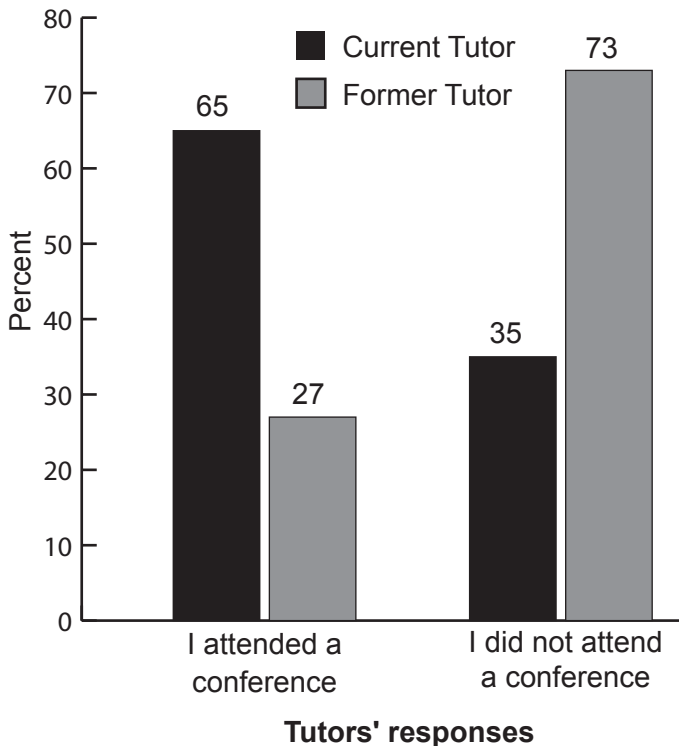
Definitions of Literacy

In the focus groups, both current and former tutors acknowledged that they frequently encounter challenges that relate to the life circumstances of their tutees. We observed a difference between how current and former tutors responded to the relationship between literacy and life circumstances of learners. Overall, current tutors recognized that the circumstances in which people live affects their ability to learn and that literacy involves more than just reading and writing. Conversely, former tutors tended

to describe the link between learning and people's life circumstances in relation to specific learners and, at times, to make value judgments of those learners: "*Somebody would just come in half drunk…*"; "*She lived in a basement with her four kids in her mom's house…*"; "*part of the problem was loneliness*"; "*her mom never learned to read, her grandmother never learned to read…*" Overall, former tutors tended to describe problems with the tutoring experience in terms of shortcomings the tutor associated with the learner's life experience.

The findings suggest that the empathy and understanding needed to deal with the circumstances of learner's lives are not the same for all volunteer tutors.

Not only do tutors differ in their empathy toward learners but also to some extent in their definition of what comprises literacy (see Table 1). Current tutors had a slightly broader definition of literacy than former tutors although the differences are not significant. An average of 62% of current tutors indicated each component was strongly related to literacy whereas only 53% of former tutors did. All tutors emphasized reading and writing as being the main component that defines literacy.

Data obtained from the questionnaire administered on International Literacy Day at SIAST's Kelsey campus revealed that the understanding of literacy is much narrower among adult learners.

Table 1: Tutors' ranking of components defining literacy

Components that define literacy	Tutors' relationship ranking of a component to literacy (Percentage of tutors giving a particular ranking)							
	Strong relationship		Less strong relationship		Neither strong nor poor relationship		Poor or no relationship	
	Current Tutor	Former Tutor	Current Tutor	Former Tutor	Current Tutor	Former Tutor	Current Tutor	Former Tutor
Using computers	29	30	29	33	43	33	0	3
Observing, representing	47	68	40	24	13	4	0	4
Speaking, listening	80	80	13	20	7	0	0	0
Foundation to learning	82	67	8	15	0	19	0	0
Writing, reading	100	83	0	13	0	3	0	0
Thinking critically	73	47	20	20	0	30	7	3
Understanding people, culture	67	47	33	27	0	17	0	10
Resolving conflicts	36	30	36	37	21	20	7	14
Achieving goals	67	40	27	47	7	13	0	0
Making decisions	47	34	47	52	7	7	0	6

Corresponding with the questions posed to READ Saskatoon volunteer tutors, Kelsey campus respondents were asked to indicate whether they believed there was a relationship between literacy and a variety of life skills (see Table 2).

Table 2: Adult learners' definition of the life skills contributing to literacy

Components of literacy (Life skills)	Adult learners at Kelsey Campus	
	Percentage who indicated a relationship existed	Percentage who indicated a relationship did not exist
Using computers	40%	60%
Observing, viewing, and representing	24%	76%
Speaking and listening	46%	54%
Foundation to learning	33%	67%
Thinking critically	31%	69%
Writing and reading	64%	36%
Understanding people and culture	41%	59%
Resolving conflicts	25%	75%
Achieving goals	38%	62%
Making decisions	29%	71%

On average, only 37% of adult learners at Kelsey campus indicated that all of the ten life skills in Table 2, taken together, defined literacy. Like the tutors, adult learners put reading and writing first as the essential life skill for being literate. Of the 93 respondents in the survey, only 43% were familiar with READ Saskatoon literacy training. This may be why most adult learners in the survey were less likely to identify a link between a variety of life skills and literacy.

Tutor-Learner Relationships

Tutors' expectations of themselves and their role in the tutor-learner relationship appear to have an impact on the tutor's experience and on the outcome of the tutor-learner relationship.

In the focus groups, current and former tutors were asked to describe how they perceived themselves and their role in the tutor-learner relationship. All of the current tutors used words that implied a social connection to the learner (e.g. partner, friend, mentor, buddy, or advisor). Conversely, former tutors used language that portrayed the relationship as one of

teacher to student (e.g. "*I found that **teaching** the adults…*", "*And also **teaching** with adults…*", "*...you know that education isn't our first field…*", "*I wanted to see if I could be a **teacher***", "*I could **teach**.*"). One former tutor noted that she "*had high expectations,*" which were somewhat opposed to those of her learner: "*You know, she had her own goals. I didn't really think about that too much.*" This comment stands in stark contrast to a comment made by a current tutor: "*I found it worked better when I gave her choices…We made it more her program.*"

A majority of both current and former tutors reported that the READ Saskatoon training had given them a good foundation for their tutor-learner relationship (see Table 3). However, in the six statements about training in Table 3, former tutors consistently agreed less than current tutors that their training had been adequate. The range of strong agreement that training was adequate varied from 67% to 100% for current tutors with an average of 86% agreement with all statements. For former tutors, the range agreeing strongly that training was good varied from 52% to 83%, the average being 70% over all statements on adequacy of training. None of the current tutors disagreed with the statements in Table 3. However between 4 and 21% of former tutors disagreed with the six statements that READ provided adequate training (average being 11%).

Table 3: Response of tutors to statements about their training

Statements about READ Saskatoon training	Type of Tutor	Percentage		
		Agree with statement	Neutral	Disagree
After completing the introductory training session, I had a good understanding of my role and responsibilities as a tutor.	**Current**	**80**	**20**	**0**
	Former	73	23	4
After completing the introductory training session, I had a good understanding of the boundaries of the tutor-learner relationship.	**Current**	**93**	**7**	**0**
	Former	83	10	7
After the introductory training session, I had a good understanding of tutoring techniques and methods.	**Current**	**67**	**33**	**0**
	Former	52	34	14
READ Saskatoon provided me with an introductory training that gave me a basic understanding of my learner's needs.	**Current**	**83**	**17**	**0**
	Former	66	14	21
READ Saskatoon provided me with an introductory training that gave me a basic understanding of literacy issues.	**Current**	**93**	**7**	**0**
	Former	76	17	7
READ Saskatoon staff was available to provide the support I needed.	**Current**	**100**	**0**	**0**
	Former	72	14	14

Not only did current and former tutors perceive differences in the adequacy of their training but they also differed in the language they used to describe their learners. Overall, current tutors described the tutor-learner relationship in relatively egalitarian and socially connected language. They described learners in the same way that they described themselves, as partners, readers, learners, students, friends, and buddies. Former tutors, on the other hand, consistently objectified learners, using the pronouns "he" or "she" to refer to learners and at times depicting learners as a burden. Table 4 shows more clearly the difference in how current and former tutors perceived their leaners.

In Table 4, an agreement with any statement means that the tutor thinks reasonably well of the learner. Current tutors scored highly in terms of agreeing with the statements, varying from 50% agreement to 92% (Average agreement being 78%). Former tutors varied from 46% agreement to 74% (average agreement being 56%). In terms of disagreeing with the five statements, current tutors varied between no disagreement and 8% disagreeing (Average disagreement being 6%). Former tutors showed between 13% and 25% disagreement with the statements (average disagreement with the statements being 21%).

Table 4: Response of tutors to statements about their learners

Statements about working with learners	Type of Tutor	Percentage		
		Agree with statement	Neutral	Disagree
1. *When working with my learner I did not have a difficult time establishing boundaries.**	Current	85	8	8
	Former	58	17	25
2. *I did not feel that my learner was too pushy.**	Current	92	0	8
	Former	74	13	13
3. *I felt that my learner's first need was reading and writing.**	Current	50	50	0
	Former	54	25	21
4. *I felt that my learner had clear learning goals.*	Current	69	23	8
	Former	50	29	21
5. *I felt that my learner could tell me what he/she wanted to work on.*	Current	92	0	8
	Former	46	29	25

* These statements have been reversed in terms of their sense from the originals. For example, the original of 1 in the questionnaire was "When working with my learner I had a difficult time establishing boundaries." In the table the statement is opposite in its sense so that it easier to compare the responses of current and former tutors across all statements. The sense of statements 2 and 3 has been reversed from the originals in the questionnaire for the table as well. We are then able to compare current and past tutors on how much they agree with all of the statements 1 to 5 in this table.

Figure 2: Response of current and former tutors to the questions, "Who should determine the lessons?" and "Who did determine the lessons?"
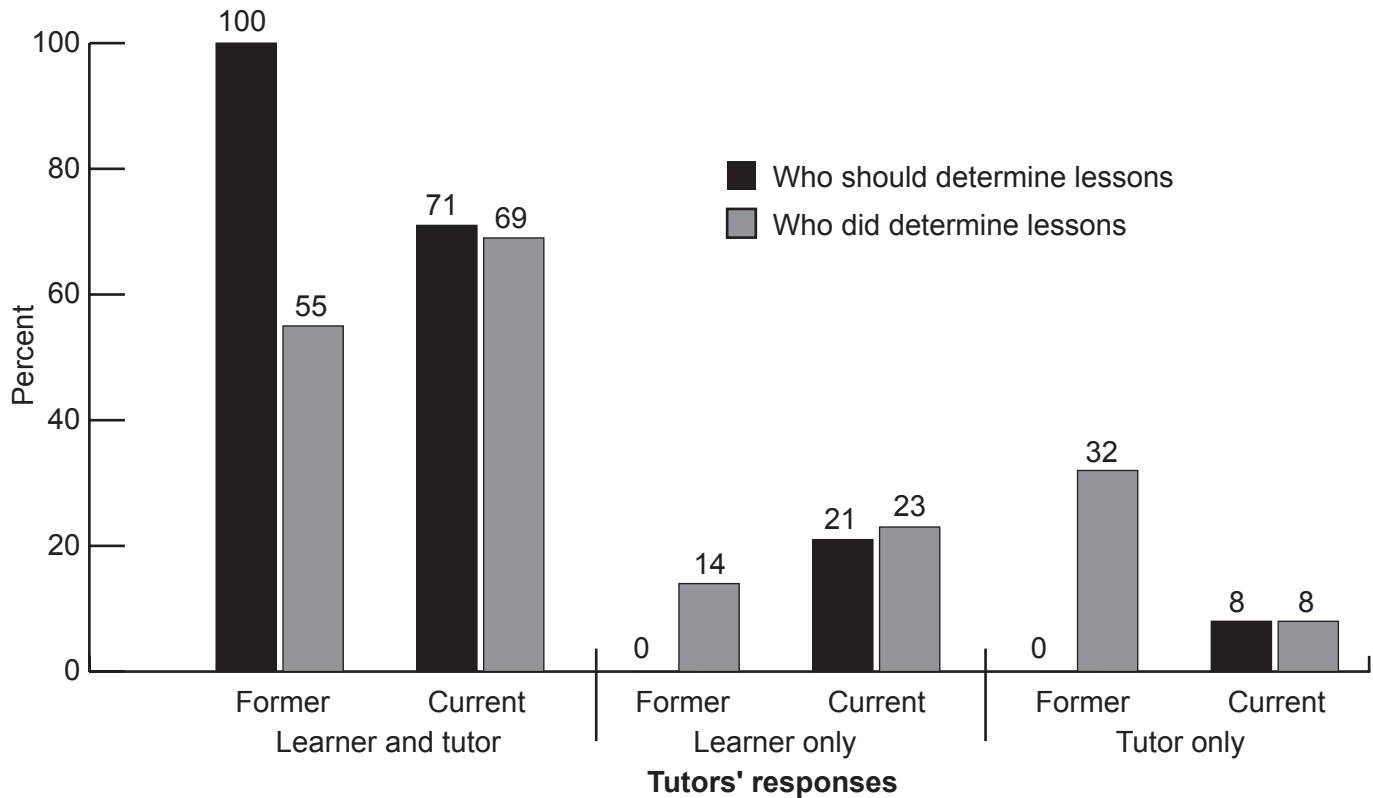

The tendency among former tutors to perceive learners as a burden and as occupying a position of lesser authority in the tutor-learner relationship was also evident on further analysis of our data (see Figures 2, 3, and 4). These figures illustrate the differences between what tutors believed would happen in the tutor-learner relationship and what actually occurred in practice. This difference was greater for former tutors than current ones.

For example, in Figure 2, when asked who should determine the lessons, all of the former tutors stated both the learner and tutor should determine the lesson together. However, in practice only 55% of the former tutors collaborated with their tutee to design the lesson but in 14% of cases, their tutee determined the lesson. Thirty-two percent (32%) of tutors determined the lesson on their own. In contrast,

current tutors allowed their learners to take a bigger role in determining the lessons. Twenty-three percent (23%) of learners were allowed to take the lead in determining the lesson and in a further 69% of cases, current tutors and learners worked together on lesson design. So in 92% of replies, current tutors said they were either working collaboratively with their learners or allowing learners alone to determine lesson design. For former tutors, only 69% did likewise.

With regard to setting lesson goals, the differences between former and current tutors are similar to those of who determined the lessons (see Figure 5). All current tutors worked with their learner to set lesson goals or allowed the learner solely to decide the goals. Ten percent of former tutors did not allow their tutees to set goals.

Figure 3: Response of current and former tutors to the questions, "Who should set the goals?" and "Who did set the goals?"
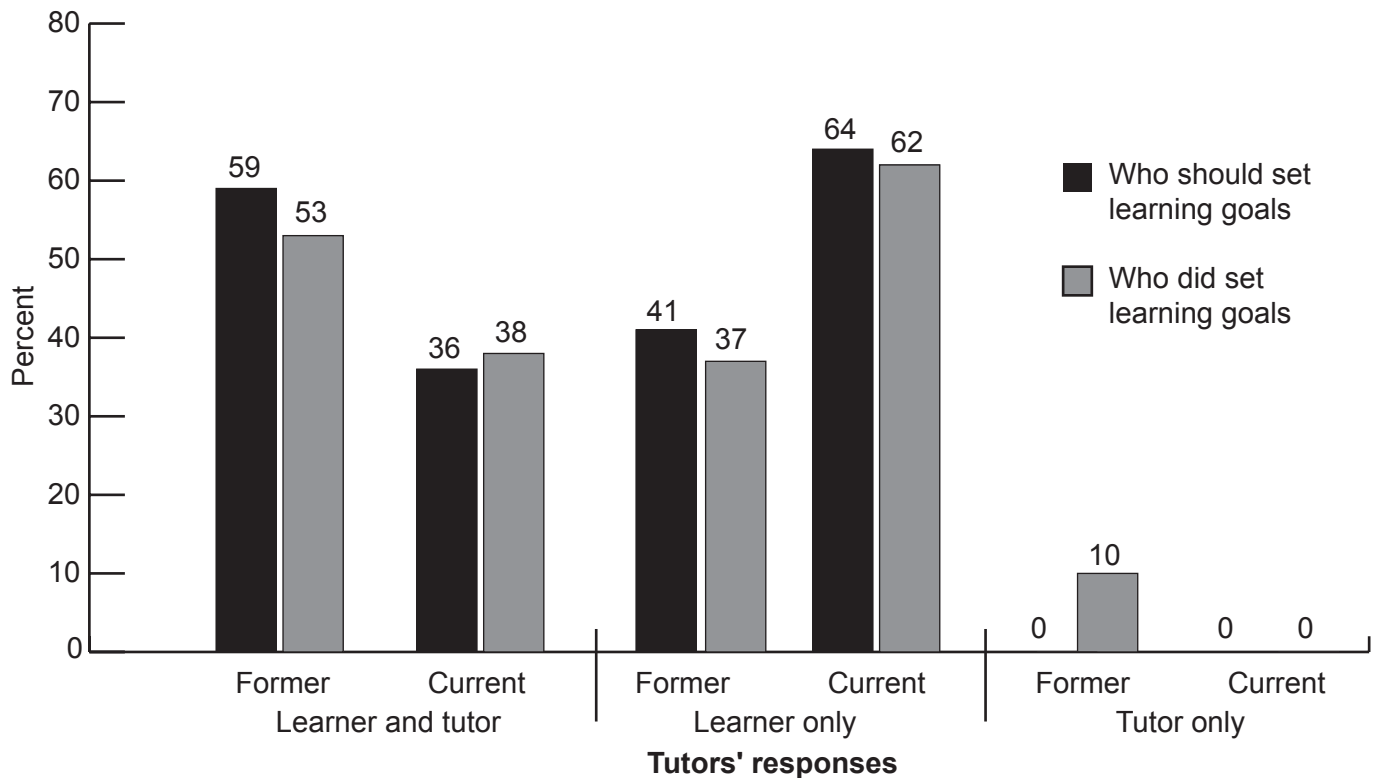

There is also a difference between current and former tutors as to who they thought should select the learning materials and who did select them in practice (see Figure 4). For current tutors, 66% of them either worked with their learners to select lesson materials or allowed them to do it alone, whereas only 52% of former tutors did the same thing with their learners.

Overall, the gap between what tutors expected and what actually happened in their tutoring relationship was larger for former tutors than for current tutors. This, coupled with an inability to fully access the resources of the READ Saskatoon office and staff, may have played a significant role in the decision of former tutors to stop tutoring.

When former tutors were asked why they had stopped tutoring, two thirds (67%) cited lack of time or changes in their personal situations (e.g. health problems, change of job, new baby, etc.). However, a significant percentage (51%) cited lack of progress in the tutor-learner relationship.

Former tutors were also asked if they had plans to tutor in the future. Nearly half (47%) said that they planned to do so and only 9% said that they did not. Nearly one third (32%) said that they did not know if they would tutor again, and 12% did not respond to the question. Nearly one fifth (18%) of former READ Saskatoon tutors reported that they were now volunteering elsewhere.

Figure 4: Response of current and former tutors to the questions, "Who should select the learning materials?" and "Who did select the learning materials?"
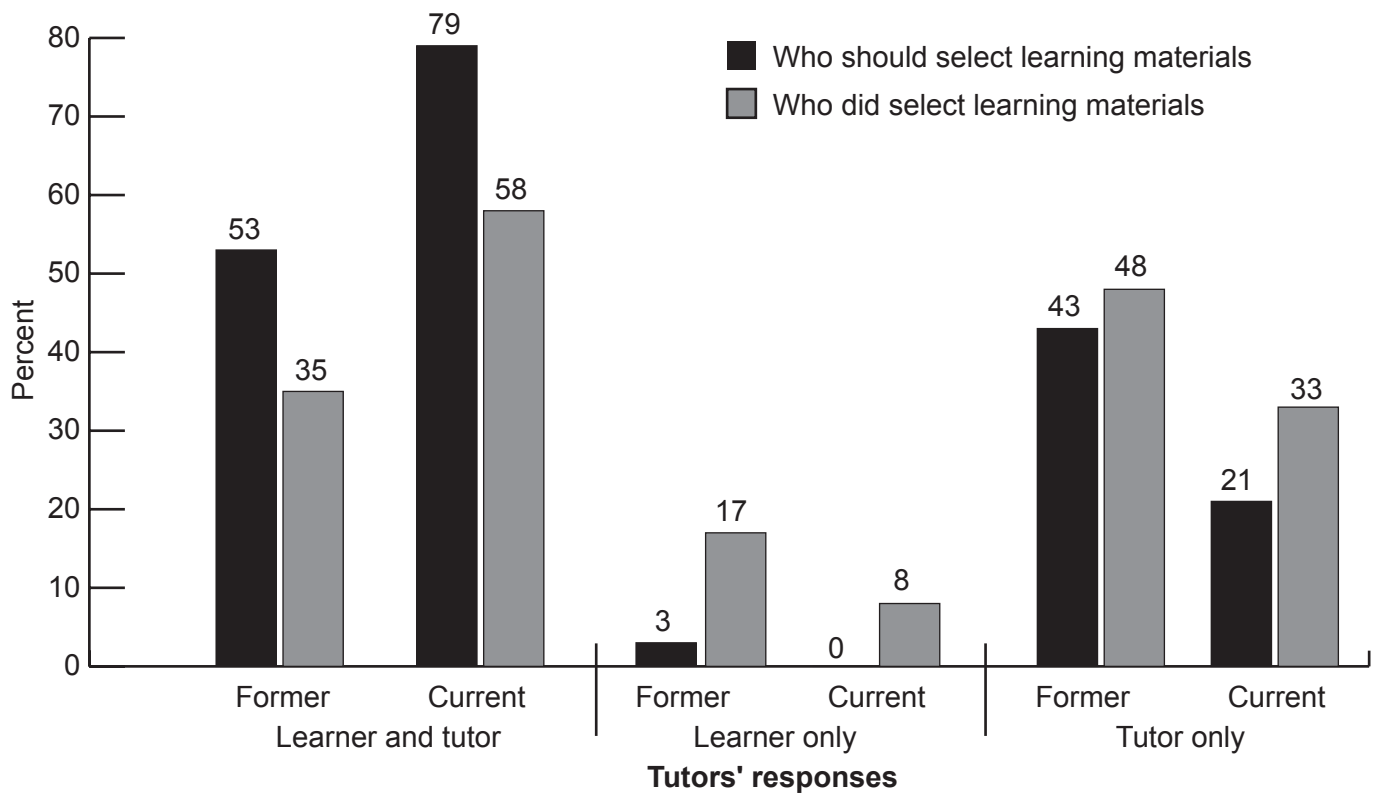
Motivations for Volunteering

Although it is likely that people volunteer at READ Saskatoon for a variety of reasons, the current and former tutors who participated in this study indicated that it is important that volunteers get something out of the experience. In particular, focus group participants identified a need for reciprocal relationships with the agency, staff, other tutors, and learners. Specific reasons cited for volunteering included: "*partly personal satisfaction*," "*helping someone*," "*…you can gain skills with volunteering*," "*opportunity to meet people.*"

When survey respondents were asked to give all of their reasons for deciding to volunteer with READ

Saskatoon, the majority (78%) said that they wanted to help someone, nearly two thirds (61%) said they wanted to tutor because they loved to read, and more than half (57%) said that tutoring was a way to give something back to the community (see Table 5). Fewer than one in ten (6%) said they tutored because it would look good on their résumé. Respondents who offered additional reasons for their decision to become a volunteer tutor used some of the following words: reading, helping, teaching, giving back, community, and tutoring. These reasons for volunteering are in contrast to the findings from our literature review on 'new' volunteers who indicated that gaining work experience and building up their skills were the main reason for volunteering.

Table 5: Motivations for volunteering

Reason	Percentage of respondents who said it was very important
Because I wanted to help someone	78%
Because I love to read	61%
Because I thought it was a way to give something back to the community	57%
Because I thought the experience would provide a sense of self-satisfaction	34%
Because I thought it would help me to develop useful skills	14%
Because I thought it was a way to meet people	8%
Because I thought the experience would look good on my résumé	6%

When current tutors were asked why they continued to tutor with READ Saskatoon, most (75%) described their experiences in words that denoted satisfaction. Nearly one third (32%) cited displays of enthusiasm by their learner or learner motivation as a reason for continuing.

Findings from the focus groups and surveys suggest two significant points:

- Tutors are more likely to continue tutoring if they experience satisfaction with the experience and if they have a motivated learner.

- Tutors are less likely to continue tutoring if they:
  - have low self confidence;
  - have inexperience in handling the demands of tutoring; and
  - are reluctant, or have the inability, to take advantage of the human and material resources provided by READ Saskatoon.

Overall, the findings from this research indicate that volunteer tutors who seem to find their tutoring experience less stressful and more rewarding are the ones who are:

- empathetic in dealing with learners' life situations;
- capable of working in partnerships with learners to design and plan lessons; and
- willing and eager to utilise READ Saskatoon's human and material resources when necessary.

5. Discussion

Tutor motivations, perceptions, and expectations

The demographic data collected in our telephone survey suggests that READ Saskatoon's volunteers do not fit the profile of the "new" volunteer who participate in the expectation of receiving specific benefits. Most current and former tutors volunteered for altruistic reasons, i.e. because they "wanted to help" (78%) and because they wanted to "give back to the community" (57%). Only a minority volunteered out of a desire to reap personal benefits. For example, only 14% were motivated by a desire to learn new skills and only 6% volunteered in order to make their résumés look more attractive.

Findings from our research suggest that the success and longevity of the tutor-learner relationship rests on the level of enjoyment or satisfaction experienced by tutors, which, in turn, rests on the learner's motivation, appreciation, and progress. If learners are motivated, show progress, and appreciate the relationship with their tutors, tutors feel satisfied and are more likely to continue tutoring. As well, satisfied tutors and motivated learners feel committed to each other and connected to and supported by READ Saskatoon.

Findings also suggest that tutors fall roughly into two categories: teacher-tutors and mentor-tutors. Teacher-tutors are those who perceive that their role is to transfer knowledge to the student. Their relationship to the learner is based on what the adult learner cannot do and cannot bring to the learning experience. Mentor-tutors, on the other hand, perceive that their role is to facilitate the learning process. They have a larger vision and definition of

literacy and allow learners to share the responsibility and the work. The mentor-tutor relationship tends to be reciprocal and empowering: mentor-tutors believe that both tutor and learner bring something to the table and that each can learn from the other.

The majority of current and former tutors said that the tutor and learner should set learning goals together, choose materials together, and plan lessons together. But when asked what actually happened, current tutors were more likely than former tutors to have established a balanced relationship in which they and their learners jointly made decisions. For example, their view could be reflected in the following statement: "*While I might be the expert in this language at this place and time, the learner is the expert in his or her life. If I am going to figure out how this particular learner learns, I had better listen more than I speak and watch more than I perform.*" (Sauvé, 1999).

Former tutors were more likely than current tutors to view themselves as teachers. We believe that, based on our data, this self-perception leads to a gap between tutors' expectations of the tutoring experience and the reality of the situation, which, in turn, causes the eventual breakdown in the tutor-learner relationship and a decision by tutors to stop tutoring. Tutors who perceive themselves as teachers rather than as mentors have difficulty implementing a learner-centered method of tutoring. Moreover, tutors who use and rely on workbooks to establish and guide their tutoring sessions may become frustrated. One former tutor expressed it this way: "*I thought it would be more structured…more like school. More like that person would just be waiting there, they'd be there 10 minutes early, so eager to learn [laughter].*" However, this frustration can be avoided by matching "materials-oriented tutors" with learners who have

clear goals for learning (e.g. learners who want to get their TOEFL). Current tutors, on the other hand, were more likely to view themselves as mentors. They were more resilient and better able to cope with any gaps between their expectations and reality. They were also more willing or able to use the resources (human and material) available through the READ Saskatoon office, the Saskatoon Public Library, and the Internet.

These findings suggest the need for an introspective component in READ Saskatoon's tutor training. This could allow tutors to discuss and reflect on how they see their roles and what they hope to accomplish with their learners (e.g. one READ Saskatoon tutor said, "*I had no idea. I guess I had heard things about people having shame around not being able to read, but I had no idea about the emotional impact it would have on that person. She continually compared herself to some of her friends, who always did better than her. It was unbearable to watch the emotional turmoil she put herself through.*"). Tutors who understand that they can't solve every problem their learner faces will have a much more positive tutoring experience.

This initial perception that many tutors have, which may be described as "*I'm going to empower the learner,*" can be contrasted during training to the reality of learners for whom English may be a second language, who may have a learning disability, immigrants or visible minorities, and/or who may have low socio-economic status. As one READ Saskatoon tutor expressed it: "*I did have the expectation to be trained and have all the skills that I needed. I was going to be matched with a person, just like me, except he or she didn't know how to read. I didn't think about the social stigma or anything like that. And I guess I also wasn't considering that this person is also an adult, a mom, and so wise in so many other ways. In actuality, the reading part was so small to what she was dealing with: her mom never learned to read; her grandmother never learned to read.*" Tutors may also have to deal with the unexamined expectations of learners, such as, "*All I have to do is call READ Saskatoon to be a better reader.*"

Table 6: Age distribution of surveyed tutors (both current and former)

Age group (years)	Number	Percentage
15-24	6	8
25-34	10	13
35 - 44	11	14
45 - 54	18	23
55 - 64	13	17
65+	19	25
Total	**77**	**100**

Volunteer Recruitment and Retention

Findings from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating show that:

- Saskatchewan residents aged 35 to 54 were the most likely to volunteer followed closely by those aged 15 to 24. Those aged 65 and older were the least likely to volunteer.
- Volunteering in Saskatchewan tends to increase with the level of formal education attained.
- Women in Saskatchewan were more likely than men to volunteer, however, men who volunteered contributed more hours on average than did women."

The demographic data collected in our survey of current and former tutors only partly support these trends. READ Saskatoon tutors had the following age distribution:

A volunteer tutor with READ Saskatoon tends to be older than volunteers in general, 65% are 45 years and over. There are also 25% who are seniors over 65 years. However, the gender distribution among READ Saskatoon volunteers is similar to that of all volunteers in Saskatchewan with 86% of tutors being women and 14% men.

Over half of the READ Saskatoon tutors in the survey had university degrees. As with the pattern for all volunteers in Saskatchewan, the highest numbers of volunteer tutors was associated with a high level of education.

According to Dow, understanding current trends and creating strong recruitment strategies and even stronger volunteer retention strategies can help to slow the "continuing erosion of the traditional volunteer base" (1997, p. 13). Dow also noted that "… *time is actually on the side of the nonprofits wanting to tap into the Boomers' vast human resource potential: within ten years the majority of their children will be old enough and their careers well-established enough to free up some of their time for outside activities.*

In fact, the oldest Boomers are now turning fifty, and, due to a combination of corporate downsizing and lifestyle choices, it is expected that a large number of them will be retiring early and still have many years ahead of them to do productive work on Boards and in various direct services." The Baby Boom generation may be a very valuable volunteer population in the future.

Table 7: Educational attainment of surveyed tutors (both current and former)

Level of education	Number	Percentage
Less than high school	2	2
High school diploma	6	7
Some post-secondary	19	23
Post-secondary diploma	12	14
University degree	45	54
Total	**84**	**100**

Kangisser has made some key points about retaining adult literacy volunteers, including the following: *"instruction is rarely intensive, resulting in slow student progress and thus, many become discouraged and drop out; since volunteer programs must serve two groups – students and volunteers – paid staff may be distracted and program purposes diluted; and unless effective managerial procedures are established, it is difficult to maintain quality control and adequate record keeping and to administer evaluation procedures"* (1985). More importantly, adult literacy agencies are continually challenged by the number of hours of training that volunteers are required to complete before they can begin volunteering. Schierloh (1992) asks some very pertinent questions about this: *"What kind and amount of training is necessary? Most of the literature on the adequacy of training claims that existing training for adult education teachers…and volunteers is glaringly inadequate for the job of teaching adults basic literacy skills. There is little research-based data to support or contradict this claim"* (p. 24).

Aboriginal students who were surveyed at Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology's Kelsey campus on Literacy Day cited a variety of barriers to volunteering as literacy tutors. Many are related to the lack of resources faced by many marginalized groups: lack of daycare, lack of transportation, lack of education, and the need to earn money rather than volunteer. Many of the ESL students surveyed indicated their "English wasn't good enough." Lack of time was also a large deterrent for both groups.

Kangisser also sounds a warning: *"…It must be emphasized again that volunteers alone cannot solve the problem of adult illiteracy. The current delivery system is stretched thin and can go no further without additional resources. Recruiting more volunteers will only add to the burden unless the system as a whole receives major new support"* (1992, p. 34). As reinforced by the research, as long as READ Saskatoon has a waiting list of learners, the agency will struggle with turning away volunteers. But that begs the question: Is everyone capable of being a good literacy tutor, especially when literacy is more than just reading and writing? And when an organization relies on volunteer tutors, when can or should it turn learners away? As one participant in this study noted: *"I think there is a responsibility when there is an organization like READ, that does rely on volunteers who are not particularly skilled in social work or counselling or whatever [and who]…have to meet people who have needs that maybe weren't screened to begin with…the screening process is really important. I mean that is a responsibility that I think READ has to have…"*

Literacy learners

Learners' reasons for approaching READ Saskatoon may extend far beyond wanting to learn how to read or to improve their reading skills. READ Saskatoon must assess the needs of each learner and either match that learner with an appropriate tutor (if one is available) or refer the learner to other supports or resources in the community.

Learners have different views on what learning materials they prefer. Aboriginal literacy learners have told READ Saskatoon that they don't necessarily need or want an Aboriginal tutor but that they would like to have learning materials that reflect their culture (READ Saskatoon, 1994). ESL students from foreign

countries, on the other hand, want to learn about Canadian culture and language customs.

There are also expectations about profit and performance and that the most beneficial outcome for literacy learners is paid employment. But achieving this outcome can be a slow and time-consuming process. Learners must first move through many life stages that are in themselves rewarding, such as an increase in self esteem, development of skills, and democratic participation, in order to arrive at paid employment. A case in point is the following personal achievements of a READ Saskatoon learner as described by a tutor:

"Literacy is crucially important because it is a measure of the wellness of a society. It improves our economy and the health of our nation. It allows our citizens to participate more fully in our society and with their families. I know this is true because my learner has taught me this. In our years together I have seen her start a business, become a regular user of the public library, become a volunteer and a voter, as well as become a reader of our daily newspaper. And if her personal achievements are astounding, even more significant is the impact her learning is having on her children" (personal communication, READ Saskatoon tutor, 2004).

6. Further Suggestions

The following section provides principles that organizations can integrate into their volunteer programs every day. We believe that even some of these small suggestions can make significant differences.

Reconstituting a volunteer association to address literacy

1. Adopt a philosophy that is conducive to building collaborative relationships.
2. Move away from deficit models.
3. Provide a forum to discuss the benefits of sharing a "community of practice" among volunteer organizations.
4. Model and encourage interested volunteer organizations to adopt similar philosophies.

Reconstituting the volunteer association

1. Reflect on the impact that year-to-year funding has on the board, staff, volunteers, and clients of the volunteer organization.
2. Re-examine administration responsibilities and time allocation.
3. Re-define the role and mandate of the volunteer association and its staff.
4. Ensure adequate funding and staffing capacity to meet the mandate.
5. Communicate on a continuous basis with other volunteer and literacy organizations.

Volunteer recruitment

1. Establish volunteer positions beyond the one-to-one program.
2. Reconnect with discontinued volunteers on a yearly basis.
3. Review and consider adopting the Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement. This can be downloaded from Volunteer Canada's website at www.volunteer.ca.
4. Maintain networks and build on established partnerships.
5. Improve publicity and promotion strategies. Establish a recruitment strategy that includes all persons of the community.

Volunteer training

1. Review training materials to ensure the language develops and strengthens the one-to-one matches.
2. Build cultural sensitivity into the training.
3. Encourage self-reflection during volunteer trainings: to examine beliefs about volunteering and how these beliefs will affect the one-to-one match.
4. Emphasize that the new volunteer is also participating in a larger volunteer community through the association.
5. Demonstrate websites that provide resources to volunteers.
6. Encourage new volunteers to maintain a healthy relationship with association staff and resources.
7. Provide new volunteers with instruction about the most common warning signs that the one-to-one relationship is in danger.
8. Discuss worst-case scenarios and possible solutions.

Volunteer retention

1. Create a more rigorous volunteer screening process so that matches are more successful.
2. Provide brochures and information about other support agencies.
3. Continue regular telephone contact with current volunteers.
4. Develop and maintain an organization newsletter.
5. Consider creating a volunteer mentorship program within the organization.
6. Continue to upgrade resources and support for the volunteers.
7. Six months or a year later, have a meeting for volunteers from each group to get together and talk about their experiences. Ask questions such as: what is working?, what do you like?, what is challenging?

7. References

Information sources cited in the report

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood Press.

Calamai, P. (2005). *Can We Close Our Literacy Gap?* Ontario: ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation. Last retrieved August 10, 2005 from ABC Foundation website: www.abc-canada.org/public_ awareness/literacy_matters_report.asp

Coleman, J. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, Supplement, 95-120.

Coleman, J. (1990). *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge Mass: Havard University Press.

Community Literacy of Ontario. (1996). *Results of a volunteer management survey*. New Brunswick: NALD. Last retrieved August 26, 2005 from the National Adult Literacy (NALD) Database website: http://www.nald.ca/province/ont/clo/results.htm

Dow, W. (1997). *The voluntary sector – trends, challenges and opportunities for the new millennium*. Vancouver: Volunteer Vancouver.

Government of Saskatchewan. (2003). *The premier's voluntary sector initiative: A framework for partnership between the government of Saskatchewan and Saskatchewan's voluntary sector*. Saskatchewan: Government of Sakatchewan.

Hall, M., Andrukow, A., Barr, C., Brock, C., de Wit, M., Embuldeniya, D., Jolin, L., Lasby, D., Lévesque, B., Malinsky, E., Stowe, S., & Vaillancourt, Y. (2003). *The capacity to serve: A qualitative study of the challenges facing Canada's nonprofit and voluntary organizations*. Toronto ON: Canadian Centre for Philanthropy. Last retrieved June 24, 2005 from Imagine Canada library website www.nonprofitscan.ca/ccp_library.asp.

Kangisser. D. (1985). *Pioneers and new frontiers: The role of volunteers in combating adult illiteracy*. New York: Business Council for Effective Literacy.

Movement for Canadian Literacy. (2003) *Literacy in Canada*. Last retrieved August 10, 2005, from Literacy Canada's website: www.literacy.ca/ litand/1.htm.

OECD & Statistics Canada. (2000). *Literacy in the information age: Final report of the international adult literacy survey*. Paris, France and Ottawa, Canada: OECD and Minister of Industry, Canada. Last retrieved August 10, 2005 from OECD website: www1.oecd.org/publications/e-book/ 8100051e.pdf

Onyx, J., & Bullen, P. (2000). Measuring social capital in five communities. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 36 (1), 23-42.

Putnam, R. (1993). *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster Publishing.

READ Saskatoon. (1994). *Literacy needs assessment for Saskatoon – Report for National Literacy Secretariat*. Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada.

Saskatchewan Literacy Network (2000) *Best Program Practices*. Last retrieved August 10, 2005 from Saskatchewan's Literacy Network website: www.sk.literacy.ca/resource/pubs/selfeval/contents.htm

Sauvé, V. (1999). *Voices and visions: An introduction to teaching ESL*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Schierloh, J. (1992). *Research to practice: The major national adult literacy volunteer organizations*. A review of the Westat Report. Last August 26, 2005 from Ohio Literacy Resource Center (Kent State University) website: http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/Pubs/0200-4.htm

Vineyard, S., & McCurley, S. (1995). *101 More ideas for volunteer programs*. Downers Grove, IL: Heritage Arts Publishing.

Voluntary Sector Initiative. (1999). *Working together: A government of Canada/voluntary sector joint initiative*. Last retrieved August 29, 2005 from Voluntary Sector Initiative website: http://www.vsr-trsb.net/pagvs/workingtogetherenglish.pdf.

Additional information sources

Canadian Centre for Philanthropy. (2000). *Volunteering in Canada*. Toronto: Canadian Centre for Philanthropy (Now Imagine Canada). Last retrieved August 29, 2005 from the Giving and Volunteering website: http://www.givingandvolunteering.ca/factsheets.asp?fn=view&id=8253.

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.) (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications.

Hall, M., de Wit, M., Lasby, D., McIver, D., Evers, T., Johnston, C., McAuley, J., Scott, K., Cucmel, G., Jolin, L., Nicol, R., Berdahl, L., Roach, R., Davies, I., Rowe, P., Frankel, S., Brock, K., & Murray, V. (2005). *Cornerstones of Community: Highlights of the National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations 2003 revised*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Last retrieved August 23, 2005 from Statistics Canada website: http://www.statcan.ca:8096/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=61-533-X&CHROPG=1

Hambly, C. (1998). Behaviour and beliefs of volunteer literacy tutors. *Working Papers on Literacy*, 3. Quebec, Montreal: The Centre for Literacy, Montreal McGill University.

Institute for Media and Policy in Civil Society (IMPACS). (2005). *Thaw the chill on advocacy by charities: A charities and democracy project learning workshop*. Retrieved May 20, 2004, from www.charitiesanddeomcracy.net

Lautenschlager, J. (1993). *Volunteering in the workplace: How to promote employee volunteerism*. Ottawa: Department of Canadian Heritage.

Lesser, E., & Prusak, L. (1999). Communities of practice, social capital and organizational knowledge. Cambridge MA: IBM Institute for Knowledge Management. Last retrieved August 29, 2005 from the Provider Edge website: http://www.providersedge.com/docs/km_articles/Cop_-_Social_Capital_-_Org_K.pdf

Matsuura, K. (2002). *Education: Education, an essential human right*. Paris, France: UNESCO. Last retrieved August 29, 2005 from UNESCO website: http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=19766&URL_DO=DO_PRINTPAGE&URL_SECTION=201.html

McDaniel, S. (2002). Women's changing relations to the state and citizenship: Caring and intergenerational relations in globalizing western democracies. *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 39 (2), 124-150.

McDaniel, S. (2003). Social cohesion and gender: Reflections on tensions and tendencies. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 28 (1), 43-50.

Kretzmann, J. P., & McKnight, J. L (1996). *Building communities from the Inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. Chicago Il: ACTA Publications.

Seidel, J. (1998) Ethnograph v5.0: A user's guide. Thousands Oaks, CA: Scolari, Sage Publications Software, Inc.

Smith, M.K. (2003). *Communities of practice*. The Encyclopedia of Informal Education (infed). Last retrieved August 26, 2005 from infed website: http://www.infed.org/biblio/communities_of_practice.htm

Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning as a social system. Systems Thinker. Last retrieved August 29, 2005 from Community Intelligence Labs website: http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml

Walden 3-D. (2002). *Definition of Best Practices*. Barker, TX: Walden 3-D. Last retrieved August 29, 2005 from Walden 3-D website: http://www.walden3d.com/og1/bp.html

Notes

Notes

Notes

This and other Knowledge Development Centre publications are also available online at www.kdc-cdc.ca, or as a special collection of the Imagine Canada — John Hodgson Library at www.nonprofitscan.ca.

Knowledge Development
Canada Volunteerism Initiative
Développement des connaissances
Initiative canadienne sur le bénévolat

www.kdc-cdc.ca