

**WORDS OF PROMISE:
VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS'
EXPERIENCES WITH LITERACY**

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For International Literacy Year, 1990, Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada invited voluntary organizations to look at the literacy needs of the people who use their services. With grants from the National Literacy Secretariat, these organizations sent out questionnaires to their offices across the country, interviewed their clients and staff, and organized meetings to get people talking about literacy.

Voluntary Organizations

Literacy is not a main part of the work these organizations do. They have found that a low level of literacy skills is a concern for some of the people they serve. The organizations tried to find out how serious the problem is. They also looked at how well they serve people who don't read and write well, and what resources were on hand for people who wanted to improve these skills.

Seven organizations' experiences are related in this book. The **Canadian Home and School and Parent-Teacher Federation** brings together local and provincial groups which promote cooperation between parents and teachers, and increases public awareness of issues affecting children and youth. The **Canadian Child Welfare Association** addresses the special needs and problems of children and youth who are in the care of the child welfare system. Its members are the provincial agencies, associations, and individuals who provide these services for young people. The **National Youth in Care Network** is made up of youths in the care of provincial child welfare authorities, and promotes the youths' views and opinions of their own experiences.

The **YMCA Canada** provides a range of programs and services to individuals and families, to promote spiritual and mental growth, good health, and a sense of responsibility to each other and the human community. The **Salvation Army** is a Christian Church dedicated to improving the living conditions of disadvantaged people.

The **John Howard society of Canada** seeks to understand and respond to the problems of crime, and to work with people in conflict with the law. **One voice - The Canadian Seniors Network**, is dedicated to promoting the best possible environment for people to live and grow older in Canada.

How They See Literacy

Herein are some highlights of the challenges, problems, and possible solutions which these organizations identified in their reports to the National Literacy Secretariat. The observations don't necessarily reflect the organizations' views, or those of the Secretariat. What follows is a glimpse into places as different as elementary schools, correctional institutions, and seniors' residences, to look at the literacy needs of the Canadians these organizations serve. This is their story.

In 1989, the **CANADIAN HOME AND SCHOOL AND PARENT-TEACHER FEDERATION** began an eighteen-month pilot project focusing on "Literacy in the Information Age." The Federation sponsored "literacy exchanges" in urban, rural, and suburban neighbourhoods across Canada, so that people involved in promoting children's literacy could exchange ideas and concerns. Community organizations, civic leaders, business people, and youth workers joined with parents and teachers to discuss community resources and the children's needs.

Schools are for "Other" Parents

Research shows that children do better in school when their parents value education. Some parents, especially those who had difficulty in school, fear the school system. They see it as a place for other people, those who speak the teachers' "ten dollar words", who wear three piece suits, and who seem educated.

Parents' alienation from schools fosters difficulties for their children. A generation of parents who are poor readers, and who feel they were not successful in school, may pass their sense of failure on to their children. The literacy exchange provided a way to break this cycle by reaching out to those parents whom the schools never see.

Reading can't be that important. My dad doesn't read, and people look up to him. My mom is always hassling me about my homework, but I don't think she really cares. She didn't even finish school. It's just another excuse to get on my case. One good thing. She doesn't visit the school on Parents' Day. I think she's afraid of the teachers.

What good is school anyway? I'm not going to need math, and I don't understand too many of the words in all those books. Better to just hang out with my friends. It's cool not to study. Besides, I have important things to worry about. Mom and Dad might split up. She says his drinking is a problem.

I don't know what would happen if Mom left. I guess I'd have to go with her, but she doesn't have a job. How would we live? I don't want anything to do with foster homes, and I don't want to change schools, leave my friends

Through word of mouth and informal invitations, the organizers let parents know that they would be welcome at these get-togethers. The approach at the literacy exchanges was informal, with no intimidating microphones or panels of experts. The meetings were meant to be seen as no big deal -- a low-key approach to a very important subject.

The exchanges encouraged more parents to help their children read and let people know about literacy programs in their area. They also taught the teachers a few things about how they should approach parents.

Ten-Dollar Words

One of education's goals is to help people communicate and be understood, but parents don't always understand the notes their children bring home to them from school. Notes written with ten dollar words may impress some people, but they can intimidate others. Using fancy language can put up walls between educators and parents, the very people who need to work together to support children's education. By speaking and writing to be understood, teachers can help make parents feel that their children's school is a place that welcomes parents too.

Creating a Learning Environment

The school alone cannot develop the literacy which children need to understand the world they live in. Parents and the community play important roles in providing a social environment that promotes learning. The literacy exchange reviews children's needs and develops projects to enrich this learning environment.

The Gate to Independence

Education is valuable. Economists and politicians emphasize that education is the key to prosperity, to helping Canada compete in the world marketplace. But education's value reaches far beyond economics. Once we have the basics of Reading, Writing and Arithmetic, we are able to learn of our past, our problems, our environment, and our potential as human beings. with education, it can be said, we become more human. Knowledge of physics or history, psychology or literature gives us power over our lives and our future. Literacy is the gate to independence.

Through education, children gain a sense of moral values and learn to respect themselves, others, and their environment. The values of caring, cooperation, moderation, and personal responsibility are becoming even more important in our ever-changing society. Education can help children become self-confident, independent problem solvers.

Our children's world is being changed daily by advances in science and technology. Children who believe in their own abilities, who know how to work with words and numbers, and who know something about science become adults who are in charge of their lives.

Well-educated children will have a better chance to do more than earn a living and become consumers. As adults, they will be able to think critically about the issues of their day and be active in their country's political, social, and economic life. As the Home and School and Parent-Teacher Federation points out, in this "information age", nothing less will do.

"I don't know the answer, *okay?*" I know I shouldn't have answered back to the teacher, especially with that "okay" at the end, and in *that* tone of voice. But he asked me the question about a million times, like I hadn't heard him or something. And that last time, it was like, "Are you *stupid*, or something?" What he really said was "I'm waiting ...". But you could tell he was showing me up to the rest of the class. He's got no right to talk to me like that.

So I'm at the principal's Office *again*. Mr. Baxter said I'm supposed to tell her I'm here for "insubordination." I don't know what that means, but I'll bet it's not high praise. I wonder if I'll remember how to say it. I have a pretty good memory, though.

The **CANADIAN CHILD WELFARE ASSOCIATION** looked for ways to improve literacy opportunities for young people in the care of the child welfare system. It studied their literacy needs, and identified the challenges, limitations, and barriers they faced in trying to improve these skills.

When Mom and Dad Can't Cope

A child who is placed in a foster home has been through one or more traumas. This may be an abused child, or one whose parents have separated or are unable, sometimes unwilling, to care for the child. The parents may have problems of alcoholism or drug addiction, or may be unable to cope for other reasons, ranging from the lack of adequate housing to a parent's imprisonment. In such an unstable environment, education, and the development of literacy skills, are generally not encouraged.

The **YOUTH IN CARE NETWORK**, an organization created by and for young people in the care of the Canadian child welfare system, documented the experiences of youths in care, and those who have become involved in the criminal justice system. Their stories point out the personal and social costs of low literacy and disrupted lives. As one youth stated on the importance of support at home:

"I think the parents have to help the children. Give them the push they need, be there to support them with their marks. .. I know a lot of people who don't have that. It's hard on them. They have nobody to push them, so they don't bother working for anything."

The composite picture of the child in foster care includes a poor family background, where the parents lack sufficient education themselves and, in a great number of cases, have separated. They often have an authoritarian approach to raising their children, but little interest in their education. There may be many brothers and sisters, and inadequate child care. The child of this home often develops an emotional or behavioral disorder.

According to the Child Welfare Association, a youth who is removed from an abusive or neglectful home and a disintegrating family typically moves from one foster home or group home to another, from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, school to school. When each new attachment is short-lived, the child can become lonely, believing that nothing can be counted on and that there is no one who can be trusted. The child's development may be delayed, life skills may be lacking, and school performance may suffer. From a Network interview on changing foster homes and schools:

"Just jumbled around so much. Too many new people. I didn't feel like trying. What's the sense in getting to know anybody in the school or getting any friends if you're just going to be moved around a couple of months from then?"

Road Blocks to Learning

A child from a troubled home usually benefits at first by being placed in foster care. However, the emotional turmoil and shifting environment can take a toll on the child's education. Children's Aid societies in Ontario found that 55 per cent of elementary school-age children in foster homes had fallen one year or more behind their peers. Sixty-one per cent of the high school children had also failed a grade or more. A study in Winnipeg showed that youth in care managed, on average, to achieve a grade eight level of education. Only 20 per cent made it to grade ten.

Like youth in care, students who drop out of school before completing grade twelve tend to be from families with low income, a single parent, little emphasis on education, and low expectations. The children do poorly in school, are streamed into general level or vocational programs, and develop learning difficulties.

- Learning Disabilities

A learning *difficulty* is different from a learning *disability*. Children with a disorder in their central nervous system are said to have a learning disability. These children may have high, average, or low intelligence, but they have a neurologically-based challenge to overcome. Their special needs are usually met best through programs designed to help them with their specific disability.

- Learning Difficulties

Any child can develop a learning difficulty. Learning difficulties have nothing to do with a child's intelligence or ability to learn. Poor nutrition or an unstable environment can lead to difficulties in learning; so can the loss of a parent through divorce, separation, or death, when the child is in the early years of elementary school. Substance abuse, or mental or physical abuse, can trigger problems, and poor teaching of basic reading or arithmetic skills at the start of schooling can bring difficulties later.

The child with learning difficulties is more likely to learn from a teacher who is up-beat and empathetic, who consistently treats the child with respect, and who is supportive and confident of the child's ability to learn. The child will respond to a caring relationship, personalized teaching, and a highly-structured program with clear, demanding, but attainable goals.

A child in care who has developed learning difficulties needs to be assessed for any special educational programs that can help the child regain lost educational ground. The child has faced social stigma, emotional or physical distress, alienation, and many other barriers to learning. Help from teachers and caregivers is needed to develop self-esteem and the expectation that the child can succeed. With a structured program designed with and for the child, learning is possible. Then, when the child has developed the skills that were lacking, a realistic assessment of the child's potential can be made.

I'll Never Amount to Much

Youth in care tend to have low expectations. And people tend to expect little of them. Teachers, aware of the child's difficulties at home, may lower their expectations for the child's performance in school. Unfortunately, the child's own lack of self-esteem combined with low expectations among care-givers and teachers, can result in those low expectations being fulfilled. And an insensitive word can further undermine the child's potential. From the Network's interviews:

I guess I should be thinking about what I'm going to say to the Principal. I've only been at this school two months, and I've been sent to Ms. Atherton's office seven times. The teachers are all out to get me. And I've got that court appearance tomorrow. My second time for B & E. I wouldn't have gotten caught if my foster father hadn't answered all the cop's questions, as if he wanted me to go to jail.

I liked my last foster home better. I was there for almost six months. But two months ago, they had to kick me out because their oldest son came back home to live. So I moved -- homes and schools. six schools in the last two-and-a-half years. Wonder how long this one will last. When I'm sixteen, I'm going to be out of here. They won't miss me.

"...other kids in school may make fun of (kids in care), picking on them all the time, won't give you the time of day. Make you feel like a loner, an outsider. Then you lose confidence in yourself and you don't want to do anything ..."

When a child is shifted from school to school as foster placements are changed, a long-term education plan, which documents the child's progress and problems, should be maintained. This file of information can improve the child's chances for success in the new school. Without it, the child facing yet another new school must start all over again with problems, assessments, and frustration. A youth who had been through seven placements told the Network:

"Like I wasn't really in a school for a long period of time. It was like bing, bing, bing. I didn't really get a chance to learn, like, some of it was my fault, but most of it wasn't. They were switching me all over, like I couldn't really learn anything until I came to a stable place like S----. That's when I like started learning."

When decisions about foster care are made on a child's behalf, it is important to assess whether a change in school is really needed. For some children, the school may be a more stable element of their lives than their ever-changing "home."

Too Little, Too Late

The Child Welfare Association found that programs to improve literacy skills often come too late for children in care. Designed for adults, these programs are after-the-fact, available to youth only after they have finished school or dropped out. Catch-up literacy programs could be offered through the regular school system instead of through child welfare agencies. The schools are better equipped to deal with the problem, and being taught in the regular school stream helps the children avoid being labelled.

Literacy programs for youth should be sensitive to their needs. For older youths in care, the programs should relate to the realities of their lives, and their real-life needs, such as completing a job application form, taking a driver's test, and signing a lease.

Without intensive, well-planned literacy programs, these youths may end up trying to work in a world that demands the fundamental skills they lack. They may experience failure and frustration, and ultimately, they may come to abuse the system that failed them. According to the Network:

"When I'm filling out an application form, there are things I don't understand, right? Same with the handbook. I failed it five times. I have trouble understanding it."

Dead-End Dreams

A large majority of youth in care work at unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, often at minimum wage. They dream of better jobs, but are stymied by their poor education and lack of life skills. Unemployed youth who are not in school are supported by social services, but at age eighteen they will graduate into a world that demands high levels of literacy. As the Network points out, these are the young people who may end up on the street or on welfare, unless they are lucky enough to find minimum-wage, dead-end jobs with which to support themselves.

I'm seventeen, been out of the detention centre for three months. I figure it's time to move on. So I quit my job at the fast food joint. They didn't fire me. That kind of work is only good for kids anyway. I couldn't get enough hours to make any real money. I'm still in school, because I got to live in one place between times at the Juvenile Detention Centre. I know a lot of kids in the school. I didn't learn much there, but the teachers passed me, just to get me out of their classes, I bet. I don't care. That school is the closest thing to a home I've had in a long time.

I'm living in a group home and taking a course at the YMCA, "Work Orientation," to try to find another job. The people there talk a lot about school, saying I shouldn't quit, and they're trying to help me with my reading. The YMCA program is pretty good, but I've got to earn money. I want to get my own place, be independent. Someday, I'm going to have my own business. I won't have to answer to nobody.

People with low or no literacy skills adapt their lifestyles so that their inability to read and write is not a profound barrier. When people decide they want to improve these abilities, it often comes from a desire to do something, such as use a car repair manual or pass a driver's test, that requires them to read or write. So they might get some help by taking a course at the YMCA.

The **YMCA CANADA** looked at its programs and services, to see how it was meeting peoples' literacy needs. The YMCA offers literacy upgrading, but it also helps people improve their literacy skills in its other programs.

I Read it in the Manual

In Montreal, the YMCA invited youths who had been in trouble with the law to join their "Club de diversion". The club encouraged these young people to get involved in activities that would lead them away from crime. But the YMCA didn't do that with boring lectures or high-minded advice to go out and do some good in the world. Instead, the youth workers zeroed in on the youths' interest in motorcycles, and started a club where they could learn more about riding the bikes and doing bike maintenance.

The youths worked in groups and developed rules for the maintenance of the bikes. They learned about team work and discovered that they were trusted with the expensive machines. As they studied motorcycle manuals to learn how to maintain the bikes, the youth workers learned who had difficulty reading the material. A trusting relationship developed between youth workers and group members. With that trust, the youth workers were able to talk about what the youths could do to make reading the manual easier. Perhaps a Literacy Upgrading program could be of help.

Quality of Life

The YMCA offers a range of programs designed to respond to its clients' needs. Where literacy problems need to be overcome, programs such as English as a Second Language, Literacy Upgrading, or Employment Support, can help the individual function independently. The YMCA also provides daycare to allow parents to participate in the programs, and offers Immigrant and Refugee Settlement programs to help people settle into a secure environment, and be free to pursue their other goals.

Literacy is more than a survival tool. So YMCA programs that help enhance people's quality of life also help them improve their reading and writing skills. Programs such as retirement planning, career counselling, and assistance with pronunciation for those who have learned English or French as a second language, all offer ways to enrich people's lives and improve their literacy skills.

Not everyone who lacks functional literacy skills will try to improve them. Some people don't complete their literacy courses, because they find it involves too much work and time, or because of the difficulty of having to cope with a whole new range of responsibilities they hadn't faced before. Individuals with mental handicaps may not be able to progress beyond a low level of literacy.

The YMCA provides courses to help people whose abilities to read and write are not likely to improve beyond a low level, to help them live independently. It works with employers and social service agencies, to ensure that adults with low literacy skills can work productively. It also teaches those adults life skills, trains them in trades such as dressmaking, and helps them find jobs.

A song called "Bread and Roses" says that people need more than bread in order to survive. The YMCA recognizes the need for recreation and pleasure, and offers driver education programs for slow learning adults, and craft and cooking courses for those with low literacy levels.

Giving People What they Want

The YMCA's programs vary from city to city, from one part of the country to another, as the YMCA tries to be responsive to community needs.

It works with its clients to develop programs that will keep their interest and help them reach their goals. The YMCA offers its programs where its clients live, and adapts them when the time-honoured traditions of one approach don't work any more.

Literacy programs at the YMCA are offered in workshops, small groups, on a one-to-one basis, and, sometimes, with the use of computers. In a Halifax Job Generation Program, which teaches employment and other life skills to people who have been unemployed for a long time, the introduction of computers brought about major changes in the program. The program participants keep personal journals on their computers to help them get used to working with words. Then, as they progress, they use the computers to help them in their job search activities.

Before the computers were introduced in the Halifax program, the smoking breaks were the most popular part of the day. But learning to use computers increased people's motivation to learn. Learners who had poor handwriting found they could turn out attractive printed pages. They were able to correct their mistakes without others' knowing how often they had to do so. Best of all, there is no stigma attached to taking a computer course, as there is to taking a literacy course.

I'm Taking a Computer Course

In Ottawa, the SALVATION ARMY has used computers in a pilot project to help people learn to read. This innovative approach reaches out to street youths and other homeless people, Native Canadians, new immigrants, single parents on social assistance, and people recovering from drug and alcohol addiction. With positive results from the project, the Salvation Army may promote a wider use of the computer course.

The computer-based literacy program lets people work at their own pace, and shows them how well they are doing as they go along. The participants learn computer skills, and build an exercise book to keep track of their progress. And students with special needs, those challenged by Down's Syndrome or Tourette's Syndrome, for example, are also welcome in the program. They gain confidence as they witness their own success.

The typical learner in the Salvation Army program is a man in his late twenties or early thirties, who dropped out of school and who is unemployed. He has very low self-esteem, and a history of drug and alcohol abuse, minor crime, and family separation. He finds it difficult to get a job. Once he finds one, he has trouble holding on to it.

Back in court tomorrow. It's not great to be in the adult detention centre, but it's a roof over my head. They've got me for a string of B & E's and an armed robbery -- it may be hard time this go-around. I was doing really well, too, until I got kicked out of the rooming house. I wasn't any worse than the other guys, the owner just didn't like me is all. The only reason I wasn't paid up is that I lost my job. I was going to pay everything I owed.

The worst thing is I'm going to miss my "computer course." One day I dropped in to the Salvation Army and found out about this course. I figured I'd better be able to read if I was going to get a job, and they got me started with a computer. I was doing great. No one saw my mistakes on the computer screen, and I was able to tell people I was going to a computer course, instead of learning to read. I don't want people thinking I'm some kind of dummy.

I wasn't going to get into any trouble, but the weather was really bad and I was sick of Sleeping outside. I needed money. Maybe the judge'll give me a break.

His lack of self-confidence may have contributed to his inability to maintain relationships, so he has no outside support for his efforts.

Some of the people who sign up for the program have managed to obtain responsible jobs, and have created successful lives for themselves. They join the program after their weak literacy skills have limited their lives in various ways for years.

"Ken's" fear of making a mistake in filling out forms for official identification kept him from getting any ID other than his birth certificate. He had lived in foster homes and detention centres from the age of six, skipped school and never got around to learning to read. At 20, realizing that he needed reading skills to reach his goals, he joined the literacy program and progressed from a grade three to grade 10 level of ability in just five months. He went to a Justice of the Peace and was able to get proof of his identity. That was just a beginning. Ken plans to go to college and become an addiction counsellor.

Wanting to Learn Isn't Always Enough

"George" was very motivated to learn, even though he had no support system. He had dropped out of school in grade six, worked at a series of jobs, then developed a drinking problem. At twenty-four, he spent a month and a half in jail for assault and battery. When he got out, he was no longer welcome at home, and started to move from boarding house to boarding house. He was often asked to leave these homes too.

When George joined the literacy program, he brought enthusiasm to the task. He was well-spoken, but shy and quiet in class, and courses with him would often turn into counselling sessions. On the last day George attended class, he announced that he had been kicked out of his boarding house. He stayed at the Salvation Army hostel for two nights, then was never heard from again.

Illiteracy is one of many problems people face that may lead some to crime and to jail. Not being able to read and write is no crime, of course, but it can keep a person from getting a good job or even keeping a not-so-good job. The frustration it causes can contribute to alcoholism, drug addiction, and crime. People with low literacy skills are more likely to be poor. They have little control over their lives. They may have trouble reading a newspaper, a manual, a TV guide, a map, a street sign, a restaurant menu. They have to limit their lives to the familiar, close themselves off from new things, things that require learning. In general, these are powerless adults.

Powerless Adults

When powerless adults turn to crime to get money or power, the criminal justice system inherits their problems. The **JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY OF CANADA** took a look at how Canada's correctional institutions deal with illiteracy among offender populations, and reviewed its own literacy programs for adults who have been in trouble with the law.

Researchers have estimated that 50 per cent of inmates in Canada are unable to read and write. That's double the rate of illiteracy among other adult Canadians. John Howard Society (JHS) programs such as life skills development, employment support, or client casework, include literacy upgrading as an essential part of the support offered to clients. Other programs are geared expressly to improving clients' literacy levels. The programs vary across the country, according to local needs. JHS workers also refer clients to community programs available.

One of the approaches JHS workers have used successfully to teach adults to read and write is the life experience approach. This approach recognizes that, unlike children, who learn about the world as they acquire literacy skills in school, adults come to learn to read with a wealth of their own knowledge and experience in the world. Teachers can use this background to make the learning experience meaningful for the adult learner.

Stories of My Life

The teacher can focus on manuals, sports stories, news events, recipes, or any other material that is of interest to the learner. These are tools to help learn vocabulary, spelling, and the way words and ideas are organized. The learner is a partner in this kind of program. For an adult, relating new knowledge to things one already knows reinforces the idea that one has already accomplished much, and that the new knowledge and abilities being learned will be useful and relevant to one's life in the future.

It's the old carrot and stick approach. Yeah, you can work in the pen, but only if you go back to school first. They tested me when I came in here, and they say I read at a grade three level. They want me to pass grade eight. If I don't, they won't give me a job. A lot like the outside. But if I take the program, the other inmates'll figure I'm a real dummy. That's all I need in here. Some choice"

I figure half the guys who take the program don't learn much anyway. The staff pushes them through so the government can brag about all the good they're doing. From what I hear, when the guys get outside, they're flunking tests and can't get into training programs. Thanks for nothing.

For adults who are learning to write, this approach might include starting a daily journal to record ideas, experiences, and impressions from the learner's life. What better way to learn than from the familiar terrain of one's home, community, work, and family. For the inmate, this approach can lend value to a life that has gone awry, to experiences that have seemed only bleak.

Institutional Help

In 1987, the Correctional service of Canada (CSC) introduced a program to improve inmates' literacy levels. The Adult Basic Education program set a target of reducing inmate illiteracy by one-half, to the level of the general population. The CSC raised its own standard of literacy from grade five to a grade eight level of competency.

The Service introduced testing of inmates entering federal institutions to assess their skills level, and determine each new inmate's educational needs. Then, to "encourage" inmates to participate in these programs, the CSC made the adult basic education course a condition for most inmate jobs and some privileges in federal institutions. The CSC reasoned that this would mirror the situation inmates would face on their release from jail.

The CSC program focused national attention on the problem of low literacy among inmates in all institutions, and spurred provincial institutions and the JHS to pay more attention to literacy problems. However, for all the good intentions and good effects, there have been problems too.

Just Another Sentence

The John Howard Society found that inmates felt forced to follow the literacy program because they didn't want to be unemployed in the institution. Choosing not to take the program sentences the person to years without productive work -- if the inmate chooses not to follow the basic education program, he or she can't get most jobs in the institution. As an ex-inmate says, "Don't sentence me to learn."

The inmates who took the basic education program were labelled and ridiculed by other inmates. Inmates who can't read or write well are victimized in the institutions, just as they were in school. The sense of powerlessness they felt on the "outside" is magnified in the institution. Here, society has removed many of the inmate's rights and privileges as a citizen.

For inmates and ex-offenders, learning to read and write is only part of the answer. Literacy alone will not necessarily lead to a productive life, or keep someone from breaking the law

The last time I got parole I said I wasn't going back inside, but this time I mean it. I'm thirty-five, spent half my life in jail practically.

I'm this model parolee. My caseworker at the John Howard tells me it's the only way. You gotta play their game. If there's one thing I learned in jail, it's how to beat the system. It's the same on the outside.

My caseworker helped me fill out application forms, and I got a job, lasted nearly six months. There's another one I'm trying for, and I'm trying to get in a machining course – you got to have a skill.

Most of all, I've got a family to take care of. Linda's expecting in the summer. We've got a place, she keeps it nice. Home like.

again. The offender's life experiences have led to a moral code and behavioral standards that lead to crime. Effective education should help the offender and the ex-offender think critically. JHS programs encourage inmates to evaluate their actions and challenge themselves to behave with virtue, character, duty, and responsibility.

Education should provide inmates with the skills to be in control of their destiny as human beings. Their choices must be their own. with a solid set of values, an ability to make rational judgements, and the skills to earn a living, those choices may be productive ones. Education helps give them the power to choose right over wrong. Society can also give them the choice to learn. Many inmates' experiences of school have been only negative:

"I used to read at grade four -- I couldn't read and write but had grade eight on paper. I was pushed through -- I failed grade seven three times."

Some inmates have learning difficulties or learning disabilities. Others were labelled because of other family members' misbehaviors. When their learning needs weren't met, they learned instead to protect themselves:

"...forcing people who are already embarrassed and who've been taught to keep all your weaknesses hidden in places like this -- in jail -- to then sit in the beginning class so's everyone can see you're a dummy; man, that's just plain stupid ...maybe if they stopped forcing the issue, we might really go ...on our own ..."

Literacy training isn't a cure-all for crime. But it is one thing, along with vocational training, for example, that can help ex-offenders stay out of trouble once they are back out in society. It is a crime to waste the productive years an ex-offender can contribute to that society.

Retirement years, the golden years, should ideally be a time to celebrate one's achievements, enjoy the family, and live securely with a pension income from a productive life. However, many people may find their retirement years to be a far cry from their expectations.

As a first step in looking at literacy and seniors, **ONE VOICE - THE CANADIAN SENIORS NETWORK** looked at programs and services for elderly people in Canada to find out what assistance is available to seniors who have difficulty reading and writing. One voice reports that more than 50 per cent of Canada's seniors lack formal education beyond grade nine. Between 28 and 52 per cent of seniors have significant reading and writing difficulties. And among elderly immigrants, and those in rural areas, the problem may be even more severe.

Different Lives

Today's seniors grew up in a world vastly different from the one we know today. Teenagers during the Great Depression, many left school to help support their families. Others missed out on school to help with the planting and the harvesting on the many family farms that have long since disappeared. And teaching methods may not have been as effective in the early days of this century -- especially for immigrants and other children with language problems, whose special needs may not have been met.

Whatever the reasons for the low level of literacy among many of Canada's seniors, its effects are far-reaching. While income levels among the elderly are already lower than the Canadian average, those of illiterate seniors are dramatically lower still. Literate seniors have an average income of \$20,700 per year. Seniors with low level reading and writing skills have an average income of only \$11,500 per year.

It's Harder to Cope

Illiteracy exacts a high price. As we age, we come into contact with a complex web of governmental, social and medical programs, many of which require forms to be completed and information booklets or letters to be read. Seniors don't have as many resources as they may once have had to help them get around their literacy problem. They tend to see fewer people, so it's harder to get information second-hand. If one's sight and hearing deteriorate, television and radio can become less helpful than they once were. Retirement may change the person's ability to deal with the world, and declining health may make it harder to cope with it all. With the greater literacy demands of a changing society, even after fifty, sixty, or seventy years of coping, illiteracy is a problem that won't go away by itself.

I've got three grandkids now. No wife, though. She left about ten years ago. Said she didn't like my drinking. Well, a guy's got to have something at the end of a hard day.

The kids try to get me to read to them. I say I don't have my glasses, or I'm too tired, or I change the subject. I've been saying those things to people for years. The kids don't catch on, no more'n anyone else ever did. I've done my bit. Worked on and off for thirty years, get my old age cheques now.

Sometimes not being able to read is a real problem. I've got forms to fill out, for taxes and the housing authority, letters from social services, even labels give me trouble -- prescriptions, household cleaners. I get people to give me a hand, use the usual excuses. When they ask nosy questions or look at me funny, I get mad. I can be pretty sarcastic when I want to be. Who are they to say I can't read? Even if I can't, it's my business. No one's going to tell me what to do. I'm a person too.

One-half of illiterate older adults surveyed said that they would like to learn to read and write. And they can learn, with appropriate support. The ability to learn does not diminish with age, but it may take longer. The elderly often need more time to process and retrieve information. But their maturity and desire to accomplish a goal can help balance slower progress. As one senior said:

"I went to a night school program for basic education and I didn't pass, so I went back the next year and passed. I am now working on my G.E.D. (High School Equivalency), but I don't understand it all. I may have to go to that class two or three times before I'm done. But I plan to stay until I pass."

Some seniors remember early, bad experiences with school, and are fearful of returning there. Others didn't get the chance to attend school in their youth. They may be anxious about the new teaching methods, the new technology, new vocabulary. They tend to be more concerned with getting things right than are younger adults, and can choose to remain silent rather than to risk making a mistake.

Seniors generally have a strong preference for subject-and task-oriented learning. Nutrition, home health care, widowhood, finances, and other subjects are relevant and of interest to many seniors. For most seniors, and unlike younger people, learning to read is not linked to finding

a job. Instead, they are motivated by their desire to live independently. They may want to read to their grandchildren or-to enjoy a light romance novel, a biography, a western, or a mystery.

Make Learning Comfortable

One Voice found that the best way to involve seniors in literacy programming is through direct contact with a sincere and trustworthy person. Like other adult learners, seniors need to be involved in planning their program. They look for an accessible building and small classes that aren't held too often, don't last too long, and take place during the day, not in the evening. At this time of their lives, they'll choose to participate in activities that fit around *their* schedules.

Special Needs

Elderly immigrants and elderly people living in rural areas have needs that are not easily met. According to the Seniors Network, many elderly immigrants aren't part of a large, closely knit ethnic community, as one might assume. In learning English or French as a second language, they may require teaching methods that differ from those provided to people who need literacy upgrading. In rural areas, seniors face the barriers of distance from city programs, and a lack of public transportation.

Seniors with low literacy skills enjoy the verbal communication they can share with others, but are aware of a gulf between them and their literate peers. When illiterate seniors use the resources of seniors' centres, banks, and government offices, they have to ask for help in reading and filling out forms. Their sense of helplessness can make workers' kindness an indignity. At a time when seniors are becoming more and more independent, the elderly illiterate person must seek out help from family, friends and service workers. In turn, that help can become a heavy load for social and health professionals.

To avoid embarrassment, seniors, like anyone else, may use avoidance or denial to get" around their problem, or pretence and false excuses to get help.

Sharing the Legacy

Seniors who enjoy high literacy levels are a tremendous resource as volunteers for literacy programs. Many eagerly join in reading circles for youngsters, generously sharing their experiences and time. Seniors who wish to learn to read and write deserve the support of the community they helped build. The community can respond with programs designed with and for seniors, to meet their needs.

Lives of Dignity

There will always be seniors who do not use literacy training programs. Illness, mental or physical disability, pride, or isolation may keep them from the learning they missed earlier in their lives. They may need assistance with housing forms, bank deposits and cheques, emergency procedures, drug prescriptions, and the many ordinary tasks of life so many of us take for granted. The community that can help them extends beyond government, to banks, stores, medical professionals, and others.

Seniors are active participants in our social, economic, cultural and political life. They instill in us a respect for learning as a means to freedom and independence. We enrich our society by sensitively accommodating their literacy needs. Our actions can be a fitting response to their inspiring words of promise.

The National Literacy Secretariat, Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, would like to thank the organizations whose research is summarized in this volume. Their stories can serve as guideposts for voluntary organizations, and others who find that an inability to read and write well is a problem for the people they serve.

The original reports on which this summary is based are available from the organizations themselves:

The Canadian Home and School
and Parent-Teacher
Federation
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K1N 7Z2
Attn: Ms. Maybelle Durkin

The Canadian Child Welfare
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401 - 2211 Riverside Drive
Ottawa, Ontario
K1H 7X5
Attn: Mr. Rix Rogers

The National Youth in Care
Network
401 - 2211 Riverside Drive
Ottawa, Ontario
K1H 7X5
Attn: Miss Ruby Lavers

YMCA Canada
180 Argyle Avenue
Ottawa, ontario
K2P 1B7
Attn: Ms. Pat Thompson

The Salvation Army
304 - 120 Holland Avenue
Ottawa, Ontario
K1Y OX6
Attn: Lt. Col. Bruce Halsey

The John Howard Society of
Canada
55 Parkdale Avenue
Ottawa, Ontario
K1Y 1E5
Attn: Mr. James MacLatchie

One Voice - The Canadian
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901 - 350 Sparks Street
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