

# *What do Youth Really Want in a Literacy Program?*

**Perspectives from Youth, Youth Workers and Potential Youth  
Employers**

**Core Literacy Centre, Waterloo Region Inc.**



Project Coordinator: **Melinda McCoy**

Project Researcher/Writer: **Shari Lynn Ladanchuk**

Published **Core Literacy Centre, Waterloo Region Inc.**

by: phone: (519) 743-6090  
fax: (519) 743-0474  
e-mail: [corelit@golden.net](mailto:corelit@golden.net)

**ISBN 0-9695074-9-6**

First printing: September 1996

Second printing: March 1997

*Core Literacy responds to the reading, writing and math needs of individuals in our community to assist them with maximizing their own potential.*

Core Literacy's youth and adult literacy programs are funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training

Charitable # 0895250-09

## **Thanks**

Thanks are extended to the National Literacy Secretariat for providing the funding support needed to research the issue of what youth really want in a literacy program.

Special thanks to the Steering Committee of this project who included Melinda McCoy of Core Literacy, Anne Ramsay of Project READ Literacy Network, Kerry-Lynn Wilkie of Langs Farm Village Association, Jeanette Parsons of Cambridge Youth Services and Anna Chapman, a youth from our community. Their expertise and guidance as well as invaluable resources added to the ease of the project development.

The many youth service providers and youth employers in our community who provided their input and opinions deserve great thanks. Of special mention is Lutherwood Youth Employment Services, Cambridge Youth Services, Langs Farm Village Association, the SOLO program of Family and Children's Services and The Ministry of Correctional Services - Probation and Parole.

A most special mention goes to the youth who contributed their creative ideas and communicated their opinions on the subject of youth literacy. Their stories and experiences about their learning history has driven this project from start to finish.

# **Executive Summary**

## **Primary Findings**

- Youth prefer to learn in one-to-one environments with a tutor who is around the same age as they are.
- Youth prefer to learn at scheduled times, once or twice a week in one-two hour sessions.
- Youth identified that getting a job was the most important reason to have literacy skills.
- Youth stated that their learning activities needed to be fun and interesting as well as individualized to meet their particular needs and interests. They also stated that hands-on and relevant activities were important.
- Youth identified feeling stupid, low self-esteem and having no support as barriers to their learning.
- All youth respondents felt literacy was important in their lives. They named task activities such as getting a job, filling out forms and reading directions as important reasons to have literacy skills.
- Potential youth employers shared that they were willing to hire youth with literacy challenges but they did not have the resources to support them in the work setting.
- Youth, youth workers and potential youth employers indicated that literacy issues in youth are often difficult to detect as youth have creative ways of compensating for their gaps.

## **Summary of Recommendations**

- The ideas generated by potential youth employers can be developed into curriculum for a youth literacy program.
- The model developed in this research should go back to youth for further feedback.
- Youth service providers require more information around identification of literacy challenges in their youth clients.
- More public education around the diversity of the literacy issues would be beneficial and might serve to enhance program participation.
- More research into youth who have had experience in a literacy program and those who have not is needed to identify the etiology behind low participation in youth literacy programs.
- To further break-down specific youth literacy needs, different age cohorts within the youth age bracket should be explored.
- A peer-focused model of tutoring should be developed.
- Traditional learning styles need to be explored and evaluated in order to accommodate the learning preferences of youth.
- Youth literacy programs need to be individualized to meet the needs of each youth who is participating.

# Introduction

Throughout the Waterloo Region, youth literacy has been viewed as a community need by various service providers (L.C.P.P., 1995). Lack of grade attainment as well as a general lack of reading, writing and numeracy skills have been identified as issues for many youth. More specifically, Core Literacy has experienced difficulties in reaching the community youth with literacy struggles through its current model of service delivery. Youth learners do not seem to hold the same commitment to a learning program as their adult counterparts. Thus, the purpose of this research was to explore the specific issues that face youth learners to assist in the development of better literacy programs geared specifically to youth.

This report will investigate what youth really want in a youth literacy program and identify how these requirements parallel or differ from the existing literacy program components. As Baydar et al (1994) suggested in their research, youth are in a developmental age bracket where their life experiences and priorities make their literacy needs unique from their adult counterparts. This research will utilize the ideas and opinions of youth who are out of school and not currently employed. As well, it will target the experiences of youth workers and potential employers of youth to develop a model of literacy program delivery which is unique to the youth population. The model will include the supports and materials that are needed by the youth participants to ensure their continued success and commitment to the learning process. There will be some discussion on pre-employment and employment skills and how these skills might be meshed into a youth literacy hence broadening the scope of the literacy field. First, an evaluation of the existing research will occur to add a foundation for the findings of this report.

Despite the overwhelming consensus within the human service community that youth literacy is an important issue there has been relatively little research done to support this claim. Most research currently available falls within the scope of adult literacy issues. Some assumptions may be made from the adult based research yet caution should be taken when attempting to generalize the findings amongst the various age cohorts.

From the research reviewed, it is suggested that older Canadians are more likely than younger Canadians to have literacy problems (Adult Literacy in Canada: Results of a National Survey, 1991). Despite this, the same research indicates that the current early school-leaver rates could be as high as 30%. Youth literacy problems relative to adult literacy issues seems to be low yet early school leaving is a major issue that may contribute to lower literacy rates among youth.

Many school drop-outs lack the literacy skills required to cope with their daily lives (Murphy and Cool, 1991). Kirsch and Jungeblut (1986) stated that about one-fifth of all young adults read under an eighth-grade level. Baydar et al (1994) suggested that grade attainment in early adolescence will be strongly associated with young adulthood literacy. In addition, various predictors of low youth literacy rates also seem to stem from the

youth's experience with the traditional school system. With youth, successful participation within the educational parameters seems to be contingent upon functional literacy skills.

Gillette (1972) stated that a new educational system based on relevancy was needed for youth with literacy challenges. He also suggested that linking the learning materials with the skills needed for middle-level workers was a good futuristic move in youth literacy programs. Over twenty years later, studies still indicate that youth's literacy challenges are generally not met by the traditional school system hence alternative programming is required (Gorman et al., 1993). The video "Literacy: Youth in Focus (1995) showed youth learners expressing frustration about the relevancy of certain school subjects and questioning why they should continue to attend school. Anisef and Johnson (1993) found in their research that alternative learning styles were important to address as they resulted in better quality education for the youth participants. Murphy and Cool (1991) indicated that up to 30% of students do not finish high-school. Gorman et al. (1993) found that the one common experience their survey participants had was that the regular school system had not met their learning needs. For the youth willing to give learning another try, it is important to capture their individual needs and multiply the potential benefits of learning.

Murphy and Cool (1991) in their study "Dropping Out and Dropping In" surveyed young Canadians who had dropped out of the regular schools system and had returned to a literacy up-grade program. They identified that a holistic approach to programming was critical for meeting the needs of youth learners. As an extension of "Dropping Out and Dropping In," Gorman et al. (1993) visited twenty-seven alternative learning programs in Canada to talk to youth learners and attempt to create a youth literacy network. In their study titled "More than Words", they found that youth learners should take responsibility for their own learning. Youth participation in all aspects of their learning process was found to positively affect the success of the youth learner.

Both "Dropping Out and Dropping In" and "More than Words" spoke directly to youth who were participating in alternative learning programs. "More than Words" indicated that trust, support, responsibility and acceptance were all important components of the programs that the youth were involved in. As Anisef and Johnson (1993) suggested in their research, the recognition of individualized learning styles is a critical step towards the goal of learning success. It is clear that youth literacy programs seem most beneficial when the individual youth's needs are being considered when creating learning programs, environments and supports.

Pathways (1991) indicated that of the early high-school leavers surveyed 45% of the leavers cited wanting to make some money as a primary reason they had left school. In this study one-third of the leavers reported some type of barrier prevented them from seeking out further training or education. Marks and Slavin (1991) found that 37% of the employees surveyed were interested in a Basic English program being offered at their workplace. The employees in this research demonstrated a readiness to learn but were not willing to give up their wages in order to do so. As Murphy and Cool (1991) found in

their survey, 41% of their respondents stated that working in a low paying job was a difficulty they faced after they left school. Many of these respondents had disclosed that they left school to find employment but found they didn't have the skills to secure a job. Clearly, this research is indicating that learning and employment have a strong correlation which can be generalized to youth learners and should therefore be reflected in youth literacy programming.

# Methodology

To conduct this research, the grant proposal, relevant literature, the experience of the project researcher and a steering committee were utilized to develop a flowchart for the project (See Appendix One). The Steering Committee consisted of literacy providers, youth and youth service providers all of whom provided invaluable input and resources into the research project. To arrive at a process to explore the question of what youth really want in a literacy program it was decided by the above individuals that three groups of people would be surveyed. These three groups of individuals were youth, youth workers and potential employers of youth. It was decided that personal interviews would be done with the youth, surveys would be sent to the youth service providers and telephone questionnaires would be administered to the potential employers of youth.

## Youth

To begin the process, focus groups of youth were organized and implemented. One focus group was held in Kitchener-Waterloo while two were held in Cambridge. The breakdown is as follows:

### ***Kitchener-Waterloo Focus Group - See Appendix A***

- 3 participants in attendance
- Took place on a Thursday evening from 6-7:30 p.m.
- Advertised the focus group through flyers that were distributed to various youth service providers and places where youth frequent (drop-in centres and mall bulletin boards)
- Audio-taped the session

### ***Cambridge Focus Group - See Appendix B***

- 7 participants in attendance
- Took place on a Tuesday evening from 6-7:30 p.m.
- Advertised the focus group through flyers that were distributed to various youth service providers and places where youth frequent (employment centre, community centres and retail spaces)
- Audio-taped the session

### ***Second Cambridge Focus Group***

- 10 participants in attendance
- Took place on a Wednesday morning from 9-10:30 a.m.
- An invitation was extended by a service provider to implement a focus group with this group of youth.
- Audio-taped the session



In all the above cases the youth were not recruited to participate in the focus group because they had literacy challenges. It was a call to all community youth who were interested in exploring the issue of learning. The idea of the focus group was to identify themes and issues around youth and learning from the perspective of youth. Any youth interested in this topic was invited to attend. During the course of the questions and discussions during the focus groups, it was disclosed by some of the youth that they did struggle with reading, writing or math.

All the focus groups began with a brief introduction of myself, assurance of confidentiality and a request of permission to audio-tape the session. Each group had a brief opportunity for questions and then some questions were asked of each group. After this, the group split into smaller groups of two or three participants and completed the scenarios (See Appendix C). Following the small group discussion, each group reported their responses back to the larger group. All general points were recorded on flip chart paper. Each focus group ended with the participant building their own ice-cream sundae and enjoying it.

The issues and themes were then incorporated into questions for individual youth to answer in a one-to-one interview (See Appendix D). These questions were administered to 10 youth who in some way struggled with reading, writing or math. Of the ten youth interviewed, 4 were currently enrolled or active in a literacy or credit program while the other 6 were not.

The primary difficulties which arose during this phase of the research was advertising the focus group to a target population who may struggle with literacy and finding youth who actually disclosed literacy challenges and were ready to talk about them. The short-term nature of the research as well as limited funding led to the utilization of flyers for outreach despite its shortcomings. To compensate for this, youth service providers as well as other pertinent individuals were briefed on the focus group so they were able to communicate the event to youth. Finding youth not in a learning-based program was done by using youth as resources. The six youth not in a program were referred by other youth who were encouraging and supportive of their friends who spoke to me. In two cases, they actually set-up the interview.

## **Youth Service Providers**

To commence this stage of the research, the ideas generated by the youth were categorized into who, what, when, where and how were transposed onto flip chart paper to use as a starting point for the youth service providers' focus groups and individual surveys (See Appendix E). Three youth service provider focus groups were held. The breakdown is as follows:

### ***Youth Service Provider Focus Group A - See Appendix F***

- 6 youth service providers in attendance
- Advertised by flyer to human service agencies who have a mandate to serve youth ages 15-24 years.
- Took place on a Wednesday morning from 9:30-11:00 a.m.
- Audio-taped the session

### ***Youth Service Provider Focus Group B***

- 6 youth service providers in attendance
- Invitation by a youth service provider to run a focus group in their workplace
- Took place on a Tuesday morning from 11:00-12:00 a.m.
- Audio-taped the session

### ***Youth Service Provider Focus Group C***

- 7 youth service providers in attendance
- Invitation by a youth service provider to administer a focus group in their workplace
- Took place on a Wednesday afternoon from 1:30-2:30 p.m.
- Audio-taped the session

In all of the above focus groups the session format was the same. Each group was given general questions and ideas about youth and literacy to comment on in a large group. They split into groups of two or three to explore in questions of who, what, where, when and how using the comments and suggestions made by the youth as a guide (See Appendix G). All the individual groups reported their responses back to the larger group and general themes and ideas were recorded.

The ideas and concepts generated by the youth and in the youth service provider focus groups were utilized to formulate questions for surveys for youth service providers to complete (see Appendix H). Surveys were sent to various human service agencies who deal with youth aged 15-24. From the 30 surveys sent, 23 surveys were returned.

This stage of the research ran fairly smoothly although numerous follow-up telephone calls and/or visits were needed to ensure the response rate to the youth service provider survey.

## **Potential Employers of Youth**

The input of the youth and the youth service providers was used to generate a list of questions to utilize when administering a telephone survey to employers who might have youth aged 15-24 in their employ. A data base of employers who had at some point had youth in their employ was accessed and 25 introduction letters were sent to the attention of individuals in a hiring capacity as outlined on the data base (see Appendix I). Of these 25 employers, 5 fell into the recreation category, 5 fell into the food category, 5 fell into the retail category, 5 fell into the manufacturing category and 5 fell into the other category. Following this, telephone calls were made and the telephone survey was administered (see Appendix J). Of the 25 employers approached, 15 completed the questionnaire. Of these 15, 3 fell into the recreation category, 3 were in retail, 2 were in manufacturing, 2 were in food and 5 were in the other category.

This phase of the research was quite lengthy as it was difficult to connect with the employers at a time which was convenient. In addition, some employers were confused by the issue of English as a second language versus literacy difficulties. Many employers had experiences with youth employees who did not have a firm grasp on the English language. The researcher had to clarify continuously that there were distinct differences between the two issues. There may also have been some tendency on the part of the employer to respond to the questions in a manner that they deemed would be acceptable to the researcher yet was not necessarily the reality in their workplace.

# Findings

## **Youth Focus Groups**

General themes were developed from the questions and scenarios explored at the youth focus groups. The information gathered during the focus groups was used to create the following model:

### ***Issue One: Difficulty with task due to literacy problem***

Two scenarios given to the participants in the focus groups addressed the issue of task completion. Responses were as follows:

When faced with the task of completing a job application form the top three responses were:

- 1) Give up on the application form and leave.
- 2) Take the application form home.
- 3) Get a friend to fill out the form.

When faced with the task of getting a drivers licence the top three responses were:

- 1) Must know how to read and write before attempting to obtain a drivers licence.
- 2) Take an oral test.
- 3) Get help from a friend who can teach the material needed for the test.

### ***Issue Two: Asking for help***

Participants in the focus group were asked whether they would ask for help and where they would go for help regarding the completion of a job application form and obtaining a drivers licence. Responses were as follows:

Forty percent of respondents indicated they would not ask for help and 60% said they would ask for help. Of the latter group, the top four responses for where they would go for help were:

- 1) To a trusted family member or friend
- 2) To an agency
- 3) To a guidance counsellor
- 4) To a trusted service provider

### ***Issue Three: Literacy Program Design***

When asked to design an ideal literacy program for youth the participants' responses were varied. The following were the primary areas they addressed as well as a sampling of popular themes identified in each area in their responses. Please Note: The themes are in no particular order or priority.

#### Where to Learn?

- 1) at home
- 2) in library
- 3) in the park
- 4) in quiet places

#### How to Learn?

- 1) Fun and interesting ways
- 2) Go on field trips
- 3) Playing games
- 4) Magazines and newspapers

#### When to Learn?

- 1) Scheduled Times
- 2) In 1-2 hour sessions
- 3) Once a week
- 4) Whenever help is needed

#### Who will Help?

- 1) someone my age
- 2) someone who has also had literacy problems
- 3) a tutor
- 4) doesn't matter

### ***Issue Four: Why should youth have literacy skills?***

Responses were vast in this area but the 6 most frequent responses were as follows:

- 1) to get a job
- 2) to communicate
- 3) to follow directions
- 4) to work with money
- 5) to succeed
- 6) to "fit in"

### ***Issue Five: Barriers to learning***

The focus group participants generated a list of possible reasons they might stop learning. The 6 most frequent responses were as follows:

- 1) feeling "stupid"
- 2) no support
- 3) not progressing fast enough
- 4) problems at home or on the job
- 5) bored
- 6) peer pressure

## **Individual Youth Interview Findings**

The youth interviewed in a one-to-one capacity all responded differently when asked about how they identified that they had literacy problems. Forty-four percent indicated that they knew by actually attempting to complete a task such as reading what they write down or attempting to write and not being able to. Thirty-three percent said that they knew they had literacy problems by comparing themselves to others or by being tested. Finally, 22% indicated their knowledge of their low literacy skills was at a feelings level. For example, one respondent said they felt stupid when they attempted to read so they concluded they must be stupid. Of those surveyed, 56% said literacy skills were important to get a job while 44% said literacy skills made life easier and better. Signing leases, taking messages, reading menus and instructions, helping kids and working on computers were also mentioned as reasons.

When asked if they would tell anyone about their difficulties with reading writing and/or working with numbers 78% said yes they would while 22% indicated they wouldn't. Of the 78% who indicated yes, friends and family, a worker or anyone were the most frequent responses regarding who they would tell. In addition, school, Core Literacy, Open Door and no where were the responses when asked where they would go for help. One respondent also added that they would never return to a regular high-school setting to learn.

Individual youth respondents indicated that a job, fear of others' reactions, not enough time, children and pride issues were the main issues that might stop them from reaching out for help. Lack of finances, lack of patience and high expectations were also mentioned and three respondents indicated that nothing would stop them from trying to get help.

The questions of how to stay interested and motivated in a literacy program was responded to in two ways. The following is a complete list of all feedback received under the two categories.

### Tangible Activities

- 1) Copy things from books
- 2) Spelling exercises
- 3) Math
- 4) Writing practice
- 5) Playing Scrabble
- 6) Playing Hangman
- 7) Playing "Wheel of Fortune"
- 8) Learning vowels and consonants
- 9) T.V. Videos
- 10) Quiet things
- 11) Computers

### Learner Observations

- 1) I know I'm improving
- 2) If my tutor doesn't treat me like a student
- 3) If I'm motivated
- 4) Great tutor
- 5) Fun
- 6) If my helper recognizes my skills
- 7) If I'm not reading outloud
- 8) If I'm working at my own pace

When asked about how they'd like to learn 100% of the respondents indicated that in a one-to-one setting was their preference. Seventy-eight percent of the participants also indicated that they would be able to work on their own while 22% said that they would be able to work in a group setting. The youth interviewed indicated that their time to sit and learn ranged from between 1 and 2 hours at a time. One respondent added that their concentration span really depended on how they were feeling on that particular day. When asked about the frequency of these sessions 67% said they'd prefer more than once a week while 33% indicated that once a week was enough. When asked about where they'd most like to learn the top three responses were in an accessible place, in the library and in their home.

When asked specific questions regarding their preferences in a tutor all one respondent indicated they would like their tutor to be around their same age or older. Sixty-seven percent suggested that a tutor the same age as them would be their preference. One respondent indicated that it didn't matter. In addition, respondents named honest, open and patient as the three top qualities they would like in a tutor. They also suggested that treating them like normal and teaching them things were very important. When asked if their friends could help them learn 56% said yes, 33% said no and 11% said maybe.

### ***Youth Service Provider Focus Groups***

When asked to expand and comment on the ideas generated by the youth groups and individual youth, the service providers had the following additions to the youth responses:

#### Where to Learn?

- 1) not school
- 2) neutral place
- 3) youth agencies
- 4) non-threatening environment
- 5) not in the library
- 6) not at home
- 7) depends on community

#### How to Learn?

- 1) Scavenger hunts
- 2) Discuss music lyrics
- 3) With others at the same level
- 4) Combination of one-to-one and groups
- 5) Groups
- 6) Hands-on activities
- 7) Variety
- 8) Individualized

#### When to Learn?

- 1) consistent time
- 2) not mornings
- 3) not weekends
- 4) 2 times per week
- 5) drop-in times

#### Who will Help?

- 1) Friends
- 2) Volunteers
- 3) Role-Models
- 4) Any support people
- 5) People with a sense of humour
- 6) People who respect youth
- 7) Seniors

In response to why youth should have literacy skills youth service providers added the following:

- 1) for legal documents
- 2) to get the right bus
- 3) to break generational cycles
- 4) to figure out unit prices

In response to barriers to learning the youth service providers added the following:

- 1) stereotypes
- 2) can cope with learned methods of reading, writing or math
- 3) abilities - already functioning at their best
- 4) low self-esteem
- 5) behaviour



## **Youth Service Provider Individual Questionnaire Findings**

In response to identification of literacy problems in youth 56% of youth service providers said they would notice a literacy problem when the youth attempted to fill out their forms. Of the remaining, 39% said from their files or referral sources, 35% said clients would disclose literacy problems, 30% said from reading and writing activities and 22% said from other methods including assessment results and “passing” their turn in group exercises. Of those questioned about referral sources, 87% said they would refer to Core Literacy, 48% said to someone in the school system, 17% said to Adult Basic Education, 17% said to Project Read, 26% said Other and 40% had no response.

Youth Service Providers had diverse responses to question of impact on poor/low literacy skills on youth. The most frequent responses follow:

70% - Low Self-esteem

43% - Lost Employment Opportunities

30% - Delayed or Absent School Accomplishments

26% - Negative Attitude and Avoidance of Responsibility

26% - Embarrassment/Feeling Different

26% - Other (Includes substance abuse, receiving social assistance, family impact, computer access)

17% - Decreased life-skills

13% - Criminal Activity

13% - Inability to plan for the future

When asked about what themselves and their programs did to address literacy issues 35% of the youth service providers said they referred clients out, they reviewed their literature for literacy levels or they arranged for help within their agency. The remaining 65% suggested that their agency still assumed literacy or that their attention to literacy was minimal. Seventy-four percent of youth service providers surveyed indicated that they had no minimal literacy requirement in order for youth to access their programs and services.

When asked about possible improvements on current youth literacy programs, youth service providers indicated the following suggestions:

- 1) consistent helpers
- 2) Mentoring programs
- 3) increased alternative educational opportunities
- 4) accessible learning locations
- 5) early identification
- 6) more outreach and resources
- 7) more awareness of literacy programs
- 8) practical activities
- 9) same age tutors
- 10) encourage parents to read to their children
- 11) tutor networks
- 12) small group programs
- 13) literacy friendly pamphlets
- 14) better support of low literacy disclosures
- 15) no waiting lists

Youth service providers identified that writing, spelling, grammar, reading and comprehension were the skills most lacking in the youth that they worked with. Seventy-four percent of all youth service providers questioned indicated that they thought youth could somewhat identify their own literacy gaps while 22% thought that the youth could not.

Youth service providers offered many suggestions and ideas for a youth literacy program. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents suggested that youth literacy programs should be fun and relaxed, 30% indicated that the topics covered should be relevant, practical and hands-on. Another 26% said the activities should relate to job skills, be individualized and be varied. A further 22% suggested there should be one-to-one activity, group activity and that resources should be relevant to current youth interests. Finally, 17 % indicated that the activities should be life-skills based and be simple enough to be accomplished by the learner within a short period of time to increase learner self-esteem.

## **Potential Youth Employer Questionnaire Findings**

Of the potential youth employers responding to the telephone survey 93% would hire youth aged 20-24 years, 79% would hire youth aged 17-20 years, 50% would hire youth aged 14-17 years and 14% would hire youth aged 12-14 years. The most popular types of work available for youth included labourers, drivers, clean-up, maintenance jobs, landscaping jobs, child-care, packers, telephone work, dog walkers, restaurant work, gas pumping, cashiers, general accounting and sorting. Potential youth employers identified the following areas where youth would use reading, writing and math skills in their jobs:

- 1) Reading instructions from supervisor, co-workers or customers
- 2) Filling out application forms or resumes
- 3) Counting items
- 4) Measuring items
- 5) Computer work
- 6) Following schedules
- 7) Alphabetical sequencing
- 8) Writing
- 9) Reading labels and signs in workplaces to ensure safety
- 10) Reading names, dates and phone numbers
- 11) Communication both verbally, non-verbally and written

When asked if they would hire a youth who was in a literacy program 57% said yes, 21% said maybe and 21% said no. Of the employers who responded yes or maybe 72% indicated that they would not be able to support the youth. Reasons given were that workers had to work independently, the job was fast paced and superiors had no extra time.

The question of what youth employers would do if they discovered that a youth in their employ struggled with literacy was met with the following responses: 50% indicated they would monitor the job performance; 43% indicated they would not fire the youth employee because they had difficulties reading, writing or working with numbers; 29% indicated that they would take the youth employee aside and talk to them; 7% indicated they would put the youth employee on a probationary period.

Examples of responses include: It wouldn't be literacy that affected their job performance...just no work ethic. Literacy level wouldn't matter in a routine job like weeding gardens. It would depend on how close the youth worked in relation to the customer as we can't afford to make a mistake with a customer.

When asked about referring the youth for help, employees indicated that they would use Core Literacy, other literacy programs or educational service providers, the phone book and counselling. Sixty-four percent of the youth employee respondents had no response to this question.

Youth employees questioned indicated that 64% of them didn't know if they had a youth employee with literacy challenges in their employ. The three employers surveyed who knew they had youth in their employ with literacy struggles stated they knew because mistakes were made in measuring, spelling was bad or incomplete on lead sheets and the spelling, grammar and writing were bad on reports. The two employers who said no indicated that they knew this as a youth with literacy challenges couldn't do the jobs in their workplace.

Topics and skills to be addressed in a youth literacy program were commented on by youth employers. The following is an inclusive list of their suggestions and recommendations:

- 1) reading a tape measure and other measuring instruments
- 2) learning key safety words such as caution, stop and flammable
- 3) all forms of communication
- 4) customer service
- 5) computers
- 6) reading
- 7) working with money
- 8) time management and scheduling
- 9) time concepts
- 10) reading lists
- 11) filling out forms
- 12) reading phone numbers
- 13) reading phone books
- 14) reading scripts
- 15) sequencing
- 16) following directions
- 17) driver's licence
- 18) attendance sheets - reading names
- 19) writing up goals and plans
- 20) vocabulary
- 21) alphabetical and numerical sequencing
- 22) proper grammar
- 23) common sense things

Of the employers surveyed, 38% require no minimal education level for their youth employees. The primary areas they were interested in were work ethic, experience and attitude. Of the remaining, 38% of the employers require grade 9 or 10 education, 14% required grade 12 education, 7% required grade 11 education and 7% required grade 8 education.

When asked if they'd ever had a youth with literacy challenges in their employ, 43% of employers surveyed said yes and 57% of those questioned said no. Responses from employers who answered yes included:

- 1) I hired him based on his potential despite his literacy problem. He is able to work very flexible hours which is very important in my industry.
- 2) He told me in the interview. I hired him as he had such a great rapport with children.
- 3) I didn't realize it until later because there is no paperwork at the time of hiring. He was a good worker but it was a little more work for me to go over his work to double check.
- 4) I tried to support them but I ended up getting rid of them.
- 5) I hired them...literacy had nothing to do with the job.

# Interpretation of Findings

## Final Model Containing Input from All Groups Surveyed

The following model is a compiling of information gathered from youth, youth service providers and potential employers of youth. It serves as a mechanism for reflecting both similarities and differences in responses.

### ***Barriers to Youth Learning***

- Feeling Stupid/Low Self-Esteem
- No Support
- Not Progressing Fast Enough
- Bored
- Problems at home or on the job
- Peer Pressure
- Behaviour
- Abilities - already functioning at their best
- Stereotypes
- Coping with learned methods of reading, writing or math

### ***Why Should Youth Have Literacy Skills?***

- To get a job
- To communicate
- To follow directions
- To work with money
- To succeed
- To “fit in”
- For legal documents
- To get the right bus
- To break generational cycles
- To figure out unit prices

## **Literacy Program Design**

### ***Where to Learn?***

- At home
- In the library
- In the park
- In quiet places
- Not in school
- Neutral place
- Youth agencies
- Non-threatening environments
- Not in the library
- Not at home
- Depends on the community

### ***When to Learn?***

- Scheduled times
- In 1-2 hour sessions
- Once a week
- Whenever help is needed-drop in times
- Consistent time
- Not mornings or not week-ends
- 2 times per week

### ***How to Learn?***

#### **Activities**

- Fun and interesting ways
- going on field trips
- Playing games: Some examples: Scrabble, Hangman, Wheel of Fortune
- Magazines and newspapers
- Copying things from books
- Spelling Exercises
- Math
- Writing Practice
- Playing
- Learning vowels and consonants
- T.V. videos
- Quiet things
- Computers
- Scavenger hunts
- Music lyrics
- Variety of activities
- Hands-on activities

### Methods

- One-to-one setting
- On their own
- In a group
- Combination of one-to-one and group
- With others at same level

### ***Who Will Help?***

- Someone the same age as the youth
- Someone who has also had problems with literacy
- A tutor
- Doesn't matter
- Friends
- Volunteers
- Role-models
- Anybody who is supportive
- People with a sense of humour
- People whom respect youth
- Seniors

The final model as developed from the input of youth, youth service providers and potential youth employers has areas of congruency but also sections of contradiction. It should be observed that all groups feel youth need literacy skills.

In particular getting a job and communication seem to be the primary reasons identified why youth should have literacy skills. Communication was noted by employers as the most prevalent reason that youth employees would need literacy skills. Job skills were identified by all groups as being priority yet there was minimal reference to how job skills could be addressed in a literacy program.

Of the youth interviewed individually, all indicated that they felt literacy was important yet 60% of those questioned were not currently in a literacy program. Many felt that even given the option of attending a program that was totally geared at their individual needs they might not attend. Reasons given were fear around actually realizing how far behind they were and the longevity of the commitment required to reach a functioning level. One youth responded that perhaps focusing on the alternative methods she had developed to cope was a more promising alternative than actually going back and learning everything the "right way."



Youth seemed to focus on tasks such as getting a job, filling out forms or reading directions as their primary reason why having literacy skills were important. Emotional reasoning such as feeling good about myself or fitting in seemed to be secondary. One youth suggested that being able to read and write gave her a reason to get out of bed in the morning. It might be concluded that the lower the literacy level the more emotional the response as the issues are more internalized. The youth at the focus groups who were not necessarily struggling with literacy seemed to be more inclined to list task-oriented reasons. Youth who struggled with literacy seemed to highlight a more emotionally driven response that emerged from their own reality.

Youth and service providers both suggested that hands-on and relevant activities were critical to address in a literacy program. Although some reference was made to traditional learning activities such as spelling exercises and learning vowels and consonants, the general consensus seemed to indicate that youth learning activities should deviate from “school-based” curriculum. More indirect methods of learning such as games, computers and music were suggested of inclusion in a youth literacy program. One youth suggested that a set of books be created that are geared towards youth in content but written in a form that addresses various literacy concepts. The premise behind this is that if the topic is relevant and interesting to youth, the skills required to learn about it will develop more naturally. In addition, this youth speculated that there will be a higher degree of motivation and success as the youth will feel they have learned something that bears some importance to their life.

The themes of fun and variety were highlighted in the responses by both youth and youth workers. There was considerable focus on creating learning sessions in which the learning was somehow disguised in stimulating and innovative activities. Interestingly enough though, youth still associated learning with traditional environments such as quiet places and the library. They also indicated that books and exercises were also acceptable methods of study. Youth workers went further with this concept by suggesting that anything not related to the school environment would probably be more effective. Youth seem to hold some value to traditional learning tools, perhaps in an attempt to add validity to their learning process. Youth commented that fun and interesting ways of learning were most appealing to them but they seemed to be unclear of how fun activities could teach them anything. Youth workers were able to make the connection between alternative activities and their merits to the learning process. This may be a barrier for youth participation in literacy programs if they feel they must partake in traditional learning processes when they really want to do something that is congruent with their interests. It would appear that youth really need to see some of these activities in action before they can assess and evaluate the creative tools’ influence on their learning.

Across the board, all youth suggested that a one-to-one format was the best way for them to learn. On the other hand, youth service providers suggested groups were important at least in combination with one-to-one activities. In this instance, the voice of the youth is critical to hear. Their feelings of insecurity around being judged or labelled leave them to seek the “safest” environment. Here they can focus on learning without the worry of feeling stupid or inadequate. Perhaps groups are a good method of interaction in some youth programs but it seems that a one-to-one environment is what youth want when dealing with literacy issues. Youth’s emphasis on the one-to-one setting also reinforces their need for some confidentiality when dealing with their literacy issues.

The youth and youth service workers interviewed both agreed that the person helping the learner in the one-to-one setting should either be someone who had struggled with literacy themselves or who was a role-model to youth. The youth suggested that working with an individual who had overcome their literacy barriers would be a great motivator for their success. To add to this, same age was very important for youth in a helper as they felt there would be more in common and the topics covered would be relevant and of interest to both the learner and the helper. The youth workers agreed with this but also stressed that it’s the actual relationship which is important and that people in any age bracket may have a connection with the youth population. The downfall of this is that if you do not target appropriate age links there is a risk of workable relationships never forming. It might be suggested that youth are not going to feel very positive about too many failed tutor-learner matches. The main point emphasized by both these groups was that it was important that it be a good relationship between the learner and helper based on mutuality and respect. It was repeatedly stressed that the teacher/student relationship would not produce a good learning environment satisfying and beneficial to all involved.

Youth service providers and youth generally agreed on what should be contained in the literacy program. Potential youth employers took a more traditional stance and suggested reading and writing type exercises. Employers did not address specific topics relevant to their workplace that could be incorporated into a youth literacy program. Instead, they emphasized they were looking for youth with a hard work ethic who were pleasant and sociable. Employers suggested that the specific job skills could be learned if basic values were present. It seems that employers were not clear regarding the relationship between literacy skills and other skills and values a youth may possess. Although there was mention of specific job skills that might be addressed in a youth literacy program most employers commented that their first hiring priority would be a hard worker. It might be suggested that creating a sound youth literacy program which keeps youth both motivated and progressing would assist the development of the work ethic identified as a priority by employers.

Youth service providers maintained strong consensus as to the importance of addressing youth literacy issues. Almost all youth service providers indicated that they could use some training around identification of youth with literacy challenges. As well, the vast majority stated that their agency or program could become more equipped to deal with youth who had literacy concerns. Although some of their more specific ideas conflicted

with those of the youth, they all advocated strongly that literacy programs needed to be individually based so they met the needs of the youth learner. One youth service provider indicated that youth with literacy issues had already “slipped through the cracks” once so everything possible should be done to provide the services necessary for each youth who needed help.

Generally, the potential youth employers’ comments served to add a practical dimension to the comments of the youth and youth workers. Over half of the youth employers suggested that they would hire a youth in a literacy program yet almost three quarters of them said they did not have the resources to support them. It does not seem feasible then to hire youth and set them up for potential failure. Perhaps the employers were being somewhat idealistic in their responses yet they were also indicating that they would not discriminate against the youth due to their involvement in a literacy program. The youth employers unanimously agreed that they would not fire a youth for the sole reason of a literacy problem. Unfortunately, almost two-thirds of the employers surveyed did not know where to refer a youth for assistance with literacy. This suggests that more outreach about literacy is needed into the wider community. As well, more partnerships with literacy service providers and employers could be formed in quest of skilled youth employees.

All groups surveyed mentioned that youth can find creative ways of compensating for their literacy gaps. Well over half of the employers did not know whether they had youth in their employ with literacy challenges. Either youth are covering their literacy gaps or the job requires only the literacy skills which they possess. This might indicate that there are youth who are employed who have literacy problems but have found a place where they can function at an acceptable level. One youth reported that she was currently employed in a job where her lack a literacy skills was not relevant. She stressed that she could stay there and work but she wanted a more stimulating job. In order to meet this goal, she knew she would have to disclose her literacy problem and reach out for help. Hence, it was not getting a job that was an issue for her but her ability to seek satisfying and rewarding employment was affected by her literacy level.

In summary, a youth literacy program should ideally be:

- One-to-one
- Individualized
- Peer tutor focused
- Fun and centred around issues relevant to youth
- Job skills related
- Diversified in learning tools and materials utilized
- At times scheduled
- In 1-2 hour sessions
- Supportive
- Focused on communication skills
- Not administered in a school environment

## Recommendations

From this research, various recommendations can be made regarding youth and literacy as well as areas where further probing would be beneficial to expand on themes identified in this research.

1) There is room for expansion on the idea of youth literacy programs based on the information received from youth employers. Youth employers might actually develop a skills-based program with youth who had difficulties with literacy. An example might be a training program for working in the grocery industry. In this program, specific areas would be targeted such as deli, bakery, dairy and produce. In each of these departments, the skills required to do the job would be the focus of the literacy program. The employer's responsibility would be to provide an outline of required tasks as well as providing on the job experience while the youth was in the program. The literacy program would address these job tasks with a youth learner in a manageable format geared to the level and learning style preference of the youth. The benefits of this would be two-fold as youth would be gaining youth employees already skilled in their area of work. The skills gained by the youth learner, although specific to one job, would also be transferable to other areas of their life.

2) The final model developed by youth, youth service providers and potential employers of youth should go back to youth for their feedback and recommendations. There are some clear inconsistencies within the model that need some prioritizing. Since the model is based around exploring what youth really want, youth should be the ones to have the final input. The components within the model which are agreeable to the majority of youth should be the ones implemented while keeping individual needs as a priority. Youth may need the opportunity to explore what they think might work for them versus what works for them in reality. As well, more research needs to go into exploring the perspectives of youth who are not already in a literacy program.

3) This research unleashed a clear call from service providers for more information around identification of literacy issues in the individuals they service. As well, the youth service providers requested further education in the field of literacy and resourcing as to the scope of alternative learning environments and programs available to their clients. It would be beneficial to explore if youth workers are aware of the diversity and magnitude of youth literacy issues before they are educated on the topic or if they are cognizant of youth literacy struggles because of their prevalence in their work with youth.

4) It was mentioned by some youth and youth service providers that the word literacy itself has a very diverse interpretation scope depending on individual experiences. Some broad education around the meaning of literacy and clarification around impacts and degrees could be beneficial to enhance program participation. Perhaps a more grassroots approach needs to be administered in order to ensure everyone is abreast of the value of literacy. For some youth struggling with literacy "word of mouth" is the only mechanism

available for outreach. If they are not connected with some type of an agency or community group that is cognizant of literacy resources they will need to be reached through their own social network. Some youth may be struggling with literacy and not even know it because they either have nothing to compare their abilities with or they have no means of labelling their struggles as “literacy.”

5) In addition, further research on looking at youth who have been involved in programs and stopped versus youth who have never been involved in a literacy program might be beneficial. The youth who have been in literacy programs will have some mechanism of evaluation while the ones who have never attended will not be able to comment on literacy programs from an experiential perspective. They will however, be able to give opinion based on their personal assessment of their needs. Perhaps another dimension would be to include youth currently participating in a literacy program and the reasons why they continue to attend and what value they see in the program.

6) Further research should be completed on the different age cohorts within the youth category. This research provided basic information over the broad age category of 15-24 years. Within this category there were some themes and priorities that began to develop depending on the age of the individual respondent. This information cannot be coded for the purposes of this research as age category was not identified for each individual youth surveyed. Two clear trends that came from this research that could be built upon were: 1) that older youth were more inclined to think of literacy and how it related to employment while younger youth were more concerned about how a lack of literacy skill might affect their relationship with their peers. It is recommended that service providers respond to the differences that they see within the different youth age categories as well.

7) Considering the findings in the area of the helping relationship, it is recommended that further exploration focus on the possibilities suggested by the findings. Specifically, the idea of learners graduating into tutors might be explored in order to cultivate a system focused on success and role-modelling. In addition, the concept of peer-tutoring might bring about mutually rewarding results as the learners would increase their literacy skills while the tutors would gain either credit in a scholastic sense or volunteer experience.

8) Along the theme of youth literacy program curriculum there needs to be some investigation into the perceptions which society holds about learning. Youth are saying in this research that they need things that are fun and diverse. Perhaps more probing into different learning styles needs to occur before society is more accepting of the range of methods available for learning. Youth commented on their inadequate and sometimes unpleasant experience in the school system. Many specifically named the education system as one of the reasons for their low literacy level. It seems logical that other systems must be developed to meet youth learners’ literacy needs. New and creative methods need to become acceptable in the eyes of society as they serve only to enhance the learning experience.

9) Considering the diversity of the responses in this research, the idea of individualized programs seems to take a firm root. If the small sampling of individuals surveyed did not reach consensus in many areas perhaps the message points to individualized curriculum and programming. The different levels of literacy among the youth also leads to this suggestion as one or two standardized programs are not going to meet all the individual needs of the youth learners. Youth not only need a program centred around the unique needs and priorities of their age bracket but also around each individual youth's requirements and skills.

10) Since the youth in this research are all saying that a one-to-one environment is their preference for learning, a youth literacy program referral system might be established. This referral network would list literacy programs within the community that were able to serve youth's literacy needs in a one-to-one setting. This would be a valuable resource for youth service providers to ensure accurate referrals and prevent a long assessment process for youth. This would assist in expediting the referral process so youth could be participating in appropriate literacy programs sooner.

## **Conclusions**

This research has captured the ideas of youth, youth workers and potential youth employers and formulated a model which can be utilized when planning and implementing youth literacy programs. The information gathered from the potential youth employers has been used to create input into the model which relates to employment skills. Implementation of the various recommendations described in this report will produce a more youth centred literacy program with stronger and more effective links to the needs of the youth learner. The ideas generated by the model can also be utilized to enhance or alter existing youth literacy programs as well as to rework adult literacy programs into a “youth-friendly” format. The resulting model holds the promise of broadening the youth literacy field, enhancing the magnitude of youth literacy supports and further educating the broader community in the area of young people’s literacy issues.

While this report provides a vision and a general model for youth literacy program development for youth ages 15-24 years, it is clear that more detailed work will be necessary to develop the specific recommendations and avenues for change. The area of youth literacy needs more research and resources to support the trends that seem to be developing in the area of youth learning. In some areas of this report, additional research will be needed to address the problems, challenges and possibilities identified. Youth learners’ needs deserve unique exploration and attention so youth can receive a learning experience which is of top quality and tailored to youth as a community, youth as an age cohort and youth as individuals.

## Bibliography

Anisef, P., & Johnson, L.C., (1993). *The Young Adult Learner: Fifteen-to-eighteen-Year-Old Students in Ontario English Language School System*. Vol. One, Toronto: MGS Publications Services.

Baydar, N., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Furstenburg, F.F., (1994). *Early Warning Signs of Functional Illiteracy: Predictors in Childhood and Adolescence*. Philadelphia: National Centre on Adult Literacy.

Ellis, D., (1995). *Literacy in Waterloo Region: An Update. Literacy Community Planning Process Report*. Project READ Literacy Network: Unpublished.

Gillette, A., (1972). *Youth and Literacy. You've Got a Ticket to Ride*. New York: UNESCO.

Gorman, J., Elmore, L., & Hill, B., (1993). *More Than Words: Meeting the Needs Of Youth Literacy Learners*. Ottawa: Canadian Youth Foundation.

Kirsch, I. S., & Jungeblut, A., (1986). *Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults*. Princeton, N. J.: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Marks, C., & Slavin, E., (1991). *A Successful Workplace Learning Needs Assessment: Using the 100% Employee Interview Method*. Unpublished.

Murphy, H. C., & Cool, J., (1991). *Dropping Out and Dropping In. A Study of Youth and Literacy*. Ottawa: The Canadian Youth Foundation.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Pathways: A Study of Labour Market Experiences and Transition Patterns of High School Leavers*. (1989). Ontario Ministry of Skills Development.

Statistics Canada, *Adult Literacy in Canada: results of a national study*. Statistics Canada, Ottawa; 1991.

Wellington County Literacy Council, (1995). *Literacy: Youth in Focus*. Video, Arthur, Ontario.



## **Appendix One**

### ***Plan For Focus Groups and Interviewing for Youth Literacy Project***

#### ***Focus Groups With Youth***

***(One In Kitchener-Waterloo And One In Cambridge)***

- Specific questions will be targeted (See Appendix A).
- Sessions will be taped at the approval of the youth present.
- A report will be developed including a synopsis of the focus group and the key issues raised by the youth.

#### ***Interviews With Youth***

***(At Least Ten In Total)***

- Interview protocol for specialized youth groups will be developed from the information gathered at the focus groups. An interview will be held with five youth from each of the following identified groups:
  - 1) Youth in a Literacy or Credited Program
  - 2) Youth not in a Literacy or Credited Program

Using the themes and issues raised by the youth in the focus groups and the interviews a model of service delivery will be developed which will include the who, what, where, when and why of youth literacy program delivery.

#### ***Focus Groups For Youth Service Providers***

***(One In Kitchener-Waterloo)***

- Using questions/ideas in appendix B as well as key themes identified by the youth in focus groups and interviews.
- Feedback on the model of service delivery as developed by youth.
- A report will be created to incorporate themes and issues further to youth themes, identify key concerns about implementation and modify the model of service delivery to include new information.

#### ***Interviews With Youth Service Providers***

***(At Least Six In Total Covering K-W, Cambridge And Rural Areas Of Region)***

- Interview service providers regarding the feasibility of the proposed model and furthering the exploration of themes formulated in the service provider focus groups/
- Report on the new information and modifications to the model of service delivery.

Using all themes and issues raised the model for service delivery will be edited to reflect all the information.

***Interviews With Potential Employers Of Youth  
(At Least 10 Employers Of Youth Covering K-W, Cambridge And Rural Areas)***

- A telephone questionnaire will be used to gather information around employers' reactions and opinions around youth literacy. The model of service delivery will be utilized to guide the question formulation for employers. (see Appendix C for ideas on possible employer questions)
- A telephone interview format will be used for this process.
- Employer input will be incorporated into the existing model.

Using all themes and issues raised from all groups a model for service delivery of youth literacy programs will be finalized to reflect all the information gathered.

## **Appendix A**

**Come in a group...**

**Come in a pair...**

**Come by yourself...**

**As long as you're there!!!**

# **Let's Talk About Learning**

**Who:** 15-24 year olds

**What:** Exploring new ways to learn how to read, write and work with numbers

## **Build Your Own Ice Cream Sundae**

Every voice is important so come out and be heard!

**Where:** Lutherwood Youth Employment Centre, 165 King Street East, 2nd Floor

**When:** Thursday June 6, 1996 at 6:00 p.m.

Call Shari Lynn at Core Literacy (743-6090) if you need more information, bus \$ or child-care!

## **Appendix B**

**Come in a group...**

**Come in a pair...**

**Come by yourself...**

**As long as you're there!!!**

# Let's Talk About Learning

**Who:** 15-24 year olds

**What:** Exploring new ways to learn how to read, write and work with numbers

## Build Your Own Ice Cream Sundae



Every voice is important so come out and be heard!

**Where:** Cambridge Youth Services (Cambridge Place) 73 Water Street North

**When:** Tuesday May 28, 1996 at 6:00 p.m.

Call Shari Lynn at Core Literacy (743-6090) if you need more information, bus \$ or child-care!

## Appendix C

Barb (15 years old) was having a hard time reading and understanding the questions on a job application for a summer job. Would Barb ask for help? Who might she tell that she could not read the application form? Where are some places she might go if she wanted help?

If Barb worked at an ice cream parlour, would she need to know how to read or work with numbers? Could she “Fake it”? Would Barb get hired if the employer knew she had problems reading and working with numbers? What other jobs might Barb be interested in?

Rob (16 years old) really wanted to get his driver’s licence. He was not able to read the questions on the test for his beginner’s licence. What steps should Rob take to get his licence?

How many people in your group have their licence? \_\_\_\_\_

How many people in your group do not have their licence? \_\_\_\_\_

Do the people in your group think having a licence is important? Why or why not?

\_\_\_\_\_

Do the people in your group think having a driver’s licence would help you get a job?

\_\_\_\_\_

Kelly (21 years old) has made a decision to get help learning to read, write and work with numbers. Help Kelly design her own Program using the questions below as a guide.

a) Would she want to work on her own or in a group? Would she want to work with people her own age? Older? Younger?

b) How old would the person who helped her be?

c) What are some fun and useful activities that would help her learn? Examples: reading books, magazines, newspapers, playing games, doing crosswords, doing real life things like application forms.

d) Would she want to have a set appointment or just drop in whenever she felt like it?

e) How often does she want to learn? How long should the sessions be? Should there be breaks?

f) Where would the best place be for her to learn? Examples: coffee shop, pool hall, at home, in the library?

g) What might stop Kelly from learning?

## **Appendix D**

### ***Questions for Individual Youth with Self-Identified Literacy Challenges***

1. How do you know you have problems reading or writing or working with numbers?
2. Would you tell anyone that you had a problem? If yes...who would you tell? Where might you go for help?
3. What kinds of things would stop you from asking for help?
4. What kinds of things would keep you interested in the program?
5. Do you work best by yourself? With one other person? In a group?
6. Why do you think youth need to know how to read, write or work with numbers?
7. Do you think your friends could help you learn to read, write or work with numbers?
8. Should the person helping you learn be younger than you, around the same age or older than you?
9. What kinds of things would you find interesting to do in a program? Examples: computers, reading or crosswords?
10. How long should the learning sessions be? Example 1-2 hours.
11. Where would you like to learn? Examples: In your home or in the park. Should they be scheduled times or when you feel like it?

## **Appendix E**

### ***Themes and Issues Raised by Youth in Focus Groups and in Individual Interviews***

#### Where Do They Want to Learn?

- at home
- in the library
- in the park
- in quiet places
- in school

#### When Do They Want to Learn?

- at mutually agreed upon times
- scheduled times
- at unscheduled times - whenever they need help with something
- in 1-2 hour sessions with a break
- once a week
- everyday
- in 1-2 hour sessions, a lunch break then another 1-2 hour session

#### Who Will Help Them Learn?

- someone their age
- someone a bit older but not too old
- individuals who have struggled with literacy themselves
- supportive peers
- a person who is a teacher or who would fit into this role
- a person who is a friend or who would fit into this role
- an individual program
- a tutor or another person (one-to-one)
- a group but not until they are sure they “know” something
- never in a group

### How Should Youth Learn?

- go back to school
- participate in “exciting” activities
- go on field trips
- go to places to apply what they’ve learned (example: go to the supermarket to shop after learning how to read labels)
- use picture books geared to mature learners
- comic books
- teen magazines
- newspapers
- playing games
- crosswords
- doing “real life” activities (example: filling out job application forms)
- computer activities
- structured curriculum
- budget forms
- copying words and sentences
- television and videos



### Why Do Youth Need to Know How to Read, Write and Work With Numbers?

- to get a job - source of income
- communication
- to be able to “fit in”
- to build relationships with their child(ren)
- to help them form an identity
- to follow menus, directions, recipes, pay bills, drive, read maps and signs, to go grocery shopping
- so they don’t “miss out” on opportunities
- to read leases and rent agreements
- to help their friends
- to graduate from school

### What Might Stop Youth From Learning?

- peer pressure
- embarrassment
- feeling “stupid”
- not progressing fast enough
- children’s needs
- illness
- lack of transportation
- family commitments
- lack of money
- lack of motivation
- problems at home or on the job
- might not know what literacy is
- bored
- not enough support
- no self-confidence
- threatened by change
- are in control of their partner
- lack of patience
- family history of literacy
- no “click” between tutor and learner

## **Appendix F**

Are you involved with individuals aged 15-24 who are facing learning challenges? Do you have difficulties finding them a literacy program to meet their unique needs? Are you finding that youth are not learning the skills that they require?

**If these are issues you want to explore then come out and talk about them during....**

# **A Focus Group on Youth Literacy**

**Your input will be integrated into a model on youth literacy that is generated by youth, youth employers and yourselves.**

**Fresh Bagels and Coffee will be Provided!!!**

**Where: Core Literacy, Market Square, 25 Frederick Street, Kitchener (Core is on the lower level by the public washrooms)**

**When: Thursday June 20, 1996 at 9:30 a.m.**

**Contact Shari Lynn at Core Literacy (743-6090) for more information and to RSVP.**

## **Appendix G**

What might stop youth from learning?

Why do youth need to know how to read, write and work with numbers?

Where should youth learn?

When would youth learn?

Who will help youth learn?

How should youth learn?

## **Appendix H**

### ***A. Questionnaire for Youth Service Providers on Youth Literacy “What Do Youth Really Want?”***

1. Do You See Youth 15-18 and/or 19-24?
2. What kinds of settings do you work with youth in? (Ex: office, recreation program, their home). Please list all that apply.
3. How would you know if a youth was facing a challenge with literacy?
4. To whom would you refer a youth whom disclosed to you that they struggled with literacy?
5. What impacts do poor literacy skills have on the youth you see?
6. Are your programs adaptable to youth with literacy needs? Does your current job description allow you to support youth with literacy challenges? To what extent?
7. What is the minimal literacy requirement for youth to access your program?
8. What do you think could be done better to meet youth’s literacy needs?
9. What do you see as barriers for youth with literacy challenges?
10. What are the literacy skills missing with the youth you work with?
11. Do you feel that youth can identify their own literacy gaps? Why or why not?
12. Briefly describe what a literacy program that would keep youth motivated and involved would look like.
13. What activities, resources and/or curriculum would be appealing to the youth you see who have literacy issues?

## Appendix I

Core Literacy  
25 Frederick Street  
Kitchener, Ontario  
N2H 6M8  
(519)-743-6090  
Fax: (519)-743-0474  
Charitable Number 0895250-09

July 26, 1996

Dear

My name is Shari Lynn Ladanchuk and I am conducting some research on youth, literacy and employability. I am hoping you will be able to answer a few questions during a brief telephone survey. Your responses will be incorporated into my research. The goal of this research project is to discover what youth really need in a literacy program with a particular focus on job skills.

Some of the questions will include:

- 1) Do you hire youth in your workplace? If so...what type of work do they do?
- 2) Do the youth who might be in your employ require the skills of reading, writing and working with numbers?
- 3) Would you consider hiring a youth if you knew they had difficulties with reading, writing or working with numbers?
- 4) What would you do if during the course of your employ, you discovered that a youth had a problem with literacy?
- 5) From your perspective of an employer, what are some general topics which you feel are important for a youth literacy program to address?
- 6) What is the minimal education level that you expect your youth employees to have?

I am hoping to contact you on Thursday August 08, 1996 in the afternoon. If this is not satisfactory for you, please call Shari Lynn at 743-6090 to set up a more convenient time.

Thank you in advance and I look forward to hearing your valuable perspectives and opinions on this important topic.

Sincerely,

Shari Lynn Ladanchuk  
Researcher/Writer

## **Appendix J**

### ***Youth Employer Telephone Survey***

NAME OF EMPLOYER: \_\_\_\_\_

TYPE OF BUSINESS: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **QUESTIONS:**

1. What is the age range of youth whom you would hire for employment?
2. What types of work are available for youth to do in your workplace?
3. In what ways do youth who are employed by you use reading, writing and math skills?
4. Would you consider hiring a youth with literacy issues if you knew they were in a literacy program? If yes...how would you be able to support them?
5. Do you currently have youth in your employ who struggle with either reading and writing or math? If yes...how do you know?
6. What would you do if during the course of their employ, you discovered that a youth had a problem with literacy? Where might you refer the youth to for help?
7. From the perspective of an employer, what topics/skills do you feel are important to address in a youth literacy program?
8. Is there a minimal education level which you expect your youth employees to have? What are the important skills required for the type of work your company does?
9. Have you ever had a youth apply for a position who was facing literacy challenges? How did you know and what did you do?
10. Do you have any additional comments about youth and literacy?

Good afternoon. My name is Shari Lynn Ladanchuk and I'm researching youth and literacy for Core Literacy. Did you receive my introduction letter? We are looking to improve literacy programs for youth and focus on job skills that are currently required in today's job market. Will you be able to take a few minutes out and answer some questions. Your answers will be confidential and be used to develop a realistic perspective on youth with literacy challenges and what they need in order to be able to develop marketable skills.