How to Engage Youth in Literacy

Lessons Learned from an Evaluation of a Cluster of Youth and Literacy Projects

presented to: **Literacy and Youth Cluster Steering Committee**

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The purpose of the Youth and Literacy Cluster was to explore and experiment with different ways of enabling out-of-school/out-of-work ("at risk") youth to get back into learning. At-risk youth, for various reasons, have not succeeded in the regular school system. Many have extremely limited literacy skills and face a variety of other barriers.

The cluster consisted of the following four projects, which each took a somewhat different approach to re-engaging at-risk youth with literacy:

Toronto ALFA Centre — An instructional program intended to explore ways of addressing the literacy needs of African-Canadian youth in the Davenport-Perth area of Toronto.

Centennial College — An instructional program carried out in partnership with the West Scarborough Self-Directed Studies Literacy Program, with a particular emphasis on the integration of literacy and employability skills.

Literacy Council of Lincoln — An outreach program in a rural area, aimed at interesting youth in returning to learning and facilitating their access to other programs and services. It also worked with other organizations to address community barriers to youth participation.

Conestoga College — This project had more of a process than a product orientation. Its objective was to develop and test a coordinated service delivery model ("enhanced delivery") for literacy and employment programs and services in a rural area.

Each project initially submitted an independent proposal. Given their overall common objective, the projects were asked to come together to form the Youth and Literacy Cluster. One objective of the cluster was to provide opportunities for cooperation and information-sharing across the four projects. The main objective, however, was to provide an opportunity to learn from the collective experiences of all the projects and to permit an evaluation of the entire cluster.

The primary focus of the cluster evaluation was to identify overall trends, lessons learned and implications from across all the projects. These findings about how at-risk youth can be assisted in returning to learning are presented in this report.

Themes and Lessons Learned: How to Engage Youth in Literacy

The evaluation identified ten major themes and lessons learned from the experiences of the projects in the cluster concerning how to engage youth in literacy. These are summarized in the following table, and discussed in more detail in the text of the report.

Theme	Comments
1. Literacy approaches need to start from the unique perspectives of youth.	A basic prerequisite is to adapt programming to what interests youth. This requires creative ways of constantly exploring means of getting youth interested and keeping them involved. Youth in general tend to live in the present. All projects have found that a "hook" of some form is critical.
2. A holistic approach is critical when working with youth.	A major learning from the cluster is that it is not possible to address the literacy needs of at-risk youth in isolation. Literacy interacts with many other factors. It is essential to consider and to address these factors, including the development of employability, social, and personal skills in combination with literacy.
3. Interest in literacy among youth is closely related to interest in employment.	The primary interest of almost all the youth who expressed interest in any of the cluster programs was in obtaining a job. However, many of these youth had few employment skills and very limited literacy skills, and were not always aware initially of how this was a barrier to getting a job.
4. Out-of-school youth need assistance in order to get back into learning.	At-risk youth have had negative experiences with the school system, and have been out of school for some time. All have limited self confidence and are facing a host of other difficulties. While it may be premature to say for sure, the cluster projects appear to have had some success in acting as a bridge to enable a number of youth to return to some form of schooling or to work.
5. Youth are not all alike, and they differ in many respects from adults and require somewhat different approaches.	At-risk youth are a diverse group, with widely varying characteristics, cultural backgrounds, literacy and other skills. They also vary in terms of their learning styles. Youth are different from adults in ways which require somewhat different approaches in how to assist them with their literacy needs.

Theme	Comments
6. Recognition is important to at-risk youth.	Recognition of their achievements was an important motivator to youth participants in instructional programs. Cluster projects provided recognition through informal as well as formal means, including formal graduation ceremonies.
7. At-risk youth require flexible programs and approaches.	At-risk youth, for many reasons, do not respond well to structure and require flexible approaches. If a program is overly rigid, it will not be suitable for at-risk youth. On the other hand, the two instructional projects in the cluster insisted that their students act responsibly, and assisted them in learning to understand the consequences of their own actions.
8. "Literacy" is not the most appropriate term to use with youth.	How youth are viewed by their peers is of critical importance to them. There is resistance to participating in what is referred to as a literacy program, which can be seen as demeaning. Youth, however, are quite willing to participate in academic upgrading or skill development programs, as well as in programs providing assistance in developing employment skills.
9. Connections with the school system are important.	Even youth who have left school frequently maintain some links with the school. High schools were a major source of referrals for the programs in the cluster. With return to school as one possible option for some at-risk youth, links with schools would seem to be important.
10. A range of youth-oriented instructional approaches and supports seems to work best.	Students in cluster programs seemed to respond well to a range of approaches including a combination of small-group and individual assistance, computers, "fun" activities and introductions to community information and employment resources.

Themes and Lessons Learned: How to Organize and Manage Youth and Literacy Projects

The evaluation also identified eight major themes and lessons learned emerging from the experiences of the cluster projects about how to organize and manage youth and literacy projects. These are summarized in the following table, and discussed in more detail in the text of the report.

Theme	Comments
1. The cluster approach had both strengths and limitations.	All the projects initially developed independent proposals, and were then asked as a condition of funding to come together to form a cluster. Given this beginning and lack of clarity over the purpose of the cluster, there was initial apprehension. Over time, however, and with the assistance of the cluster coordinator, projects came to see the benefits of a cluster for information sharing and for permitting the identification of commonalities and learnings across sites. By the end, all projects were extremely positive about their experiences with the cluster.
2. The organizational context affects how a youth literacy program can operate and its effectiveness.	Particularly given the importance of a holistic approach when working with youth, the experiences of the cluster projects suggest that they cannot operate in a vacuum and are affected by activities in the larger organization and in the community.
3. Partnerships with others are critical, and time and effort are required to create and nourish them.	The experience of the cluster projects is that connections and partnerships with a wide range of different types of agencies have numerous tangible and intangible benefits. However, the development of relationships and partnerships and the coordination of joint activities requires considerable time, effort and resources.
4. Program development is challenging and requires time and resources.	Establishing a new project requires involvement in a wide range of activities. All the projects underestimated what was involved in getting their activities up and running.
5. A formal planning and coordination mechanism helps keep projects focussed.	The experiences of the projects in the cluster reinforce the importance of a formal mechanism of some form to provide direction, coordination and support to the project. These mechanisms also have served as an opportunity to reflect upon what has been learned and to provide guidance for changes or modifications as applicable.
6. Outreach is challenging and requires considerable effort.	All projects found outreach more challenging than expected. The most effective approach for recruitment of participants was through networking with a diverse range of community agencies.

Theme	Comments
7. Projects served a relatively small number of youth.	The objective of the projects in the cluster was to try out a range of unproven approaches and to generate ideas about ways of getting at-risk youth back into learning, rather than to involve as many people as possible. It is clear that in order to break the cycle with at-risk youth who have been out of school, an intensive effort is necessary, requiring small numbers, with probably no more than eight to ten participants per program.
8. Short-term pilots are limited in what they can do.	The cluster projects were short term in nature. They were able to make a difference to the youth they served, to put at least something in place which might extend beyond the life of the project, and to identify many issues, such as those noted in this report. All projects, however, felt that a longer period of time would have allowed them to test out and to accomplish more.

Outcomes and Impacts of the Cluster Projects

The major purpose of the cluster was to provide an opportunity to experiment with various approaches for working with at-risk youth. The major outcome of the cluster is the identification of the lessons learned, such as those noted in this report, about how to re-engage youth with limited literacy, social and employability skills who have left the regular school system. All projects have increased their skills and knowledge about how to work with at-risk youth.

In addition, it is apparent that all projects, despite their short-term nature, have achieved some important successes and concrete outcomes. Examples of these include:

- Development and testing by ALFA of: *Youth of the Diaspora: Moving Forward with Education and Action,* a curriculum guide and tools, including an approach for working with learning outcomes.

- Measurable improvements in the literacy skills of student participants, with many moving on to other education programs or to employment.

- Changes in the sponsoring organizations and in their communities which appear likely to endure beyond the formal conclusion of the projects themselves.

- Continuing activities with respect to at-risk youth beyond the formal conclusion of the projects in all four sites.

These and other outcomes are discussed in more detail in the text, which also suggests some areas for future research in how to re-engage out-of-work, out-of-school youth.

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1.   Introduction

1.1.   The Youth and Literacy Cluster

The purpose of the Youth and Literacy Cluster was to explore and experiment with different ways of enabling out-of-school/out-of-work ("at risk")[1] youth to get back into learning. Each of the four organizations comprising the project took a somewhat different approach to this objective. This report identifies lessons learned from across these projects about how at-risk youth can be assisted in returning to learning.

Youth[2] unemployment has been identified as a national problem in Canada, as in other jurisdictions, and a priority area for attention. There is substantial evidence — from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and from numerous other sources, about the critical importance of literacy to employment, to quality of life, and indeed to survival in our society. Poor literacy skills may be an even bigger barrier for youth than for adults. Youth have little work experience or other skills which might help them overcome these barriers. Being young, they face a lifetime ahead where change is the only certainty and where it is clear that literacy is an essential coping skill. Youth without essential literacy skills represent a loss of opportunity to society, and likely a drain on the public purse for many years to come.

At-risk youth, for various reasons, have not succeeded in a school system which did not work for them. They do not feel welcome to return, and frequently the schools do not want them. Most of the youth served by the programs in the cluster have come with quite limited literacy skills.

At-risk youth also face a variety of other barriers. Few have the work, social or educational skills which are a prerequisite for even basic entry-level jobs. Given their life experiences to date, they have little confidence in their own abilities. They frequently face many other problems and barriers which could include family issues or lack of a family which accepts them, abuse, encounters with the justice system,

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[1]The terminology used by the four projects to refer to their target population varies somewhat. All projects were set up to address the needs of youth who have dropped out or who have been asked to leave school, and who are not employed. As discussed later in the report, these youth have very limited literacy skills, few employment or employability skills, and in most cases, face many other barriers. Thus for simplicity, I have adopted the terminology of at-risk youth, which has been used to some extent by the cluster projects, to refer to this population.

[2]Youth are generally defined as between the ages of 16 and 24.

systemic racism, and extreme poverty which can result in lack of a place to sleep or regular meals. Many are transient and are often disconnected from regular community resources.

At-risk youth, however, are not all the same. There can be tremendous variation from individual to individual in terms of literacy ability, skills, experience with the school system, preferred learning styles and interests and aspirations. The barriers which youth face may vary in the context of an urban or rural setting.

At present, at-risk youth often fall through the cracks of established programs. It is not always possible for them to return to regular school. Yet they often are not considered adults and appropriate for adult literacy programs. They need help in seeking employment, but may not have the basic literacy and/or life skills to even gain entry to training programs. They may have complex needs which no single program in isolation may be able to address.

There is limited evidence about the best way to reach this target group and to assist them in returning to learning. To explore potential solutions, four groups each submitted independent applications at about the same time for funding by the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training and the National Literacy Secretariat.

Each submission proposed a somewhat different way of connecting at-risk youth with literacy. Given their overall common objective, they were asked to come together to form the Youth and Literacy Cluster. One objective of the cluster was to provide opportunities for cooperation and information-sharing across the four projects. The main objective, however, was to provide an opportunity to learn from the collective experiences of all the projects.

1.2.   Purpose of the cluster evaluation

The concept of a cluster evaluation was first defined by the Kellogg Foundation. Its key features include[3]:

•   Desire to use evaluation to improve programs, not prove scientific hypotheses.

•   Trust in the practical value of developing "lessons learned".

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[3]E.g. see: Connie C. Schmitz. "What Would an Ideal Cluster Evaluation Look Like?" Paper presented at the American Evaluation Association meeting in San Diego, 6 November 1997.

- Respect for diversity and the cultural lens through which we assess "merit" and "worth".

- Commitment to capacity building for grantees as an intended and direct benefit of evaluation.

- Concern for ways in which cluster evaluation informs systems change and policy.

Thus the primary focus of a cluster evaluation is to identify overall trends, lessons learned and implications from across all the projects in a cluster. Cluster evaluations seek not only to learn what has happened with a group of projects, but to identify why those things have happened and the implications of these lessons for the sites involved and for future initiatives. The purpose of a cluster evaluation is not to judge or to provide a critique of each individual project.

The focus of the cluster evaluation was discussed and agreed upon both with the cluster steering committee and with the key cluster contact within the Ministry of Training and Education.

1.3. Evaluation approach and methodology

The cluster evaluation method used a case study approach, treating each project as a separate case. This maximized the opportunity to learn not only what happened at each site, but in particular to identify why things happened and implications for future youth literacy initiatives. As discussed below, each project was quite different in terms of specific objectives and approach used, target groups, timing and other factors. Thus a common methodology or data collection strategy was neither desirable nor appropriate.

Evaluation frameworks were developed in consultation with each project. These varied in accordance with the focus of the project. Each project played an active role in the evaluation, maintaining some of the data used in the evaluation. This was complemented by independent data collection by the evaluator.

Methods used for the evaluation included:

- Multiple visits by the evaluator to each site.

- Observation.

- Interviews with staff and, to a limited extent, with others familiar with the program

- Focus groups with students[4] at two of the projects.

- Examination of program documentation at each site, such as student records, other program records, project proposals and reports prepared by staff, instructional materials, correspondence, minutes, products produced by the project as applicable, staff notes and "diaries", and publicity materials generated by the projects and by others.

- Liaison with the cluster coordinator.

- Participation in steering committee meetings and discussions.

In keeping with one of the principles of cluster evaluation, themes as they emerged were discussed with the projects. In particular, each project was provided with an opportunity to review an outline which included a listing of the key emerging themes and lessons learned from the collective cluster experience.

Limitations of the evaluation. As discussed above, the primary purpose of the evaluation was to identify themes and lessons learned from across all four projects. The scope and nature of the evaluation did not allow for a comprehensive evaluation of each project. The projects did not represent controlled interventions, i.e. with control or comparison groups. Given their experimental nature, they also involved small numbers of individuals. These factors may limit the generalizability of the findings to some extent. The evaluation was also dependent to a degree upon the data which program staff collected and recorded, and access provided to program participants. The short-term duration of the projects may have limited the potential for outcomes which might have emerged with longer trials. The time frame of the projects and the evaluation precluded extensive follow-up.

Nevertheless, as the rest of this report discusses, a largely consistent picture of key themes and lessons learned emerged from across diverse projects in different settings using a variety of approaches. This gives us confidence in the overall findings and implications of the evaluation.

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[4]"Student" is the term used by most of the projects in the cluster. The students interviewed also were comfortable with being identified as such.

1.4. The cluster projects

The cluster consisted of the following four projects:

Toronto ALFA Centre (ALFA)

ALFA's project was intended to explore ways of addressing the literacy needs of African-Canadian youth in the Davenport-Perth area of Toronto. Through a previous grant, ALFA undertook a research study which, in essence, was a needs assessment and provided recommendations for how to develop accessible and relevant programming for African-Canadian youth. This study indicated the need for an integrated model of literacy, incorporating considerations such as racism, sexism, rights within the justice system, human rights, black history and culture, drugs and health, employment search skills and life skills into small group learning and one-on-one tutoring.

Development of the program closely followed the results and recommendations of the research study. The first phase involved development of a comprehensive curriculum guide: *Youth of the Diaspora: Moving Forward with Education and Action.* This guide also included tools such as pedagogical exercises, a framework for using learning outcomes, and an approach to training of tutors. The curriculum is based upon an experiential learning-social investigation approach to youth literacy. As the curriculum guide states, it is based upon the understanding that youth with literacy needs have had very negative experiences with a school system that did not work for them. They need to see short-term benefits. In this context, it is critical to help the youth to rebuild their trust and self esteem. "Hooks" are important, involving youth-oriented activities such as creation of a video, visits to a television station and other community resources to provide interesting opportunities for experiential learning.

Following completion of the curriculum, a project facilitator/instructor was hired. A diversified outreach approach was used to attract both potential students and volunteer tutors. Tutors were assessed, selected and trained. Potential youth participants were also assessed. Those who were not suitable for the program were referred elsewhere.

Delivery of the 16-week program to the 8 students who were selected then followed (another 2 youth participated just in volunteer tutoring through the literacy centre). The program involved 20 hours of instruction over four days each week. Most of the instruction was done in a small group setting, complemented by excursions to the community, computer training, and individual attention. In addition, each student met weekly with her/his tutor, who also served as a role model/mentor. Guest speakers were drawn from the Black community who presented workshops on various topics.

Centennial College (Centennial)

Centennial's project was carried out in partnership with the West Scarborough Self-Directed Studies Literacy Program (SDS). A key feature of this project was the integration of literacy and employability, drawing upon the expertise of the college in these areas as well as of West Scarborough. The development of the program drew in part on ALFA's research study.

The project originally planned to build literacy training into the Pre-Employment Preparation (PEP) component of the Futures program funded by the Ministry of Education and Training. This component provided up to 16 weeks of employability/life skills workshops to youth who received a stipend on attendance. In 1997, Futures was replaced by the Career and Employment Preparation Program (CEPP, subsequently renamed "Job Connect"), which provided information and referral and counselling services, as well as on-the-job training. With this change, Centennial had to rethink how out-of-work youth with literacy needs could be recruited into the project. As a result, outreach became a significant project activity.

An intake assessment interview was conducted with all potential students. Literacy Level II was identified as appropriate for the program. Approximately one out of three interviews resulted in an attending student. In some cases, the literacy levels of potential students were too high, and they were referred directly to Job Connect or to other programs. In other situations, some potential students decided against attending for a variety of reasons — start time and daily schedule, lack of secondary school credit, location, and other factors.

Program structure involved attending Centennial College three days a week: Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. The project involved a combination of activities and structures, including small group literacy instruction with a Centennial instructor, intensive individual tutoring provided by tutors hired and supervised by West Scarborough, employability training provided through the CEPP program at Centennial, computer training, and other individual support and assistance from Centennial staff as required.

Originally the project planned a developmental stage to produce a curriculum. Following creation of the cluster, Centennial agreed to use ALFA's curriculum guide, rather than develop its own. Due to differences in timing between the two projects, however, it became necessary for Centennial to develop many of its own materials. Programming was provided to two groups of students which started in October, 1997 and January, 1998 respectively.

Literacy Council of Lincoln (Lincoln)

Lincoln's project (the Niagara West Youth-at-Risk Project) was quite different in focus from those discussed above. Unlike the others, it was not an instructional program. Instead, its focus was on outreach to at-risk youth and facilitating access to other programs and services. The project took a comprehensive look at barriers to participation and learning. It then explored ways, on an individual basis as well as through community development, to overcome these barriers. Its original objective was to establish a framework for a youth-at-risk support network.

Lincoln's project was rural in nature. It was based in Beamsville, serving the surrounding area as well. The project followed the recommendation of a research study (Niagara West Alternative Learning for Youth Research Project) carried out in 1996. The project tried out a wide range of outreach and promotional approaches to attract at-risk youth in its area. Activities included pizza nights, publication of a youth-oriented magazine (Zine), participation at community fairs, a Web site, cable television announcements, and many others. Through partnership with Niagara College, it secured the assistance of placement students to help with outreach, to serve as a role model to youth, to provide youth input into the project, and to assist with other tasks.

The project encouraged interested youth to come to the Centre and to meet with the youth coordinator. The project started from the individual's perspective, attempting to provide a non-threatening and non-judgmental atmosphere. Often youth who came to the Centre had immediate problems, such as a lack of a place to live or pregnancy, which were more pressing to the youth than learning was at that moment. The project, as required, assisted youth with goal setting, and provided assistance with employment needs, such as helping with resumes and referrals. It assisted youth, where appropriate, in using materials and the computer in the Council's resource centre, as well as in the adjacent public library. It referred youth to the Council's volunteer tutoring program, as well as to other settings.

The project played a very active role in liaising with other organizations in the community. In particular, it played a significant role in the creation of the Community Youth Forum (Council), which actually got going formally towards the end of the literacy project.

Conestoga College (Conestoga)

Conestoga's project was different still from all the others. It did not involve the development of a concrete program or activity as such. Its objective was to develop

and test a coordinated service delivery model ("enhanced delivery") for literacy and employment programs and services in a rural area. As such, the primary purpose of the project was developing new ways for the college to do business, and it was more of a process than a product orientation. It was not exclusively focussed on youth.

The particular focus of the project was to develop an integrated approach to outreach across Huron and Perth Counties on behalf of the formerly separate literacy, academic upgrading and employment preparation programs of the college. It involved the creation of new communication and coordination processes within the college, including joint planning and some integrated activities.

The project also involved the development of a different way of relating with the community. It incorporated a strong community development orientation and participated in a variety of committees and networks across its catchment area. The project also assisted in the creation of new partnerships and played an active role in bringing together different groups and acting as a facilitator and coordinator. This made possible joint activities, as well as the creation of new programs in various communities through additional funding or pooled resources.

Some key observations about the nature of the projects

The four projects in the cluster were discrete. They were planned and initially developed independently. They came together as a cluster after this stage.

There are some similarities, but many differences across the four projects. They were all interested in facilitating the reentry of at-risk youth into learning. They had similar, but not identical target groups. They employed quite different approaches, including direct instruction (Centennial and ALFA), outreach and referral and community development (Lincoln), and enhanced delivery (Conestoga). Two of the projects were urban based, while the others were serving rural populations.

The time frames for each of the projects, including start and end dates and planned durations, were different for each of the projects. Conestoga finished in March, 1997, before the start of the cluster evaluation and when the others were just getting under way.

Nevertheless, it still is possible to identify themes and lessons learned from across all the projects. These are discussed in the balance of this report. As will become apparent, the projects found that despite having different focusses, their experiences in working with at-risk youth and their key findings were quite similar.

2. Themes and Lessons Learned: How to Engage Youth in Literacy

2.1. Literacy approaches need to start from the unique perspectives of youth

The experiences of the projects in the cluster indicate that a basic prerequisite is to adapt programming to what interests youth. This requires creative ways of constantly exploring means of getting youth interested and keeping them involved. All projects have found that a "hook" of some form is critical.

Youth in general tend to live in the present. The projects have found that it is difficult in particular for at-risk youth, given the nature of their life experiences, to relate to the long-term benefits of literacy/education. They have indicated that establishing short-term successes is important to keep participants motivated.

Youth rarely have approached any of the programs just to go to learn or to improve their literacy skills. The major motivator for almost all youth in all the programs was to get a job. The literacy skills of most of the youth, however, were limited. Many of the youth initially had unrealistic expectations. But from an initial interest in employment, the projects sometimes were able to assist the youth participants in establishing realistic goals and to help understand that they first need to upgrade their skills in order to be employable. For example, introducing students to information about job opportunities, assisting them in working on resumes and application letters, and related activities helped them realize the need for improved literacy skills.

The projects also used a variety of other "hooks" to assist the youth participants in learning. For example, some of the approaches used by ALFA include: media, music, computer, and introductions to community resources (e.g. employment resource centres, libraries, museums). The curriculum developed by ALFA and tested as part of the project frequently provided for means to link these and other activities to academics, often in a way where reading/writing came naturally. In a focus group interview, the students spoke highly of these activities. It was clear that they were a stimulus which assisted in maintaining their interest and helped with learning in a variety of respects.

All projects made adaptations, based upon feedback from youth beforehand and during the program. In an effort to be able to relate as closely as possible with youth, Lincoln used placement students from Niagara College. The College assigned students from its Law and Security Program to work with the project. In the view of the evaluator, however, as well as that of the Cluster Coordinator and other informants, it is questionable if this is the most appropriate background in order to be able to establish rapport and a trusting relationship with at-risk youth.

2.2. A holistic approach is critical when working with youth

A major lesson learned from the cluster is that it is not possible to address the literacy needs of at-risk youth in isolation. It is essential to consider and to address many other factors in combination. As the title of a story used in ALFA's program states: "All things are linked." "Silo" approaches do not work.

From the experiences of the cluster projects, reasons have emerged that explain why a holistic approach to youth is essential. For example, as indicated above, for most youth who approached the projects, interest in learning was usually secondary. In order to make instruction meaningful and to maintain the interest and participation of youth, it is necessary to integrate literacy instruction to the primary interests of the youth participants.

All projects found that at-risk youth have multiple issues and needs. Many of these problems make learning difficult or impossible unless they also are recognized and dealt with initially and concurrently. The projects in the cluster found that youth are not always as effective as adults in compartmentalizing various aspects of their lives.

For example, some of the programs found that they had one or more participants who talked about experiences of personal abuse. Helping these individuals and making appropriate referrals and follow up frequently required significant amounts of program staff time.

Lincoln found that a number of youth who approached the program had basic needs, such as no place to live, lack of income, lack of regular meals, pregnancy, health problems and the like which took precedence over interest in learning. The project decided to address the needs which the youth themselves identified as important to them at the time; this sometimes meant that the program was helping these youth connect to other resources. Youth in these situations were not yet ready or in a position to work on their literacy skills. The program feels that by addressing these other needs, it has increased its credibility with youth. It expects that in the future, some of the individuals it has assisted in other respects will feel comfortable in returning when they are ready to work on learning. In fact, word of mouth has lead to some other youth approaching the program for assistance with literacy.

All projects found that at-risk youth, in addition to very limited literacy skills, also have limited life skills in a number of areas including personal, social, and employability skills. They found that it was impossible to get on with learning unless the other things in the lives of youth which are interfering with this are simultaneously addressed.

For example, some of the youth needed to learn how to interact with others, and in particular with members of the opposite sex. ALFA and Centennial found that they had to devote significant attention to factors such as: study and work skills, organizational skills, punctuality and attention, following up on commitments, teamwork, how to present oneself to others, and related factors. Attention to these considerations was necessary not only to permit learning while in the program, but to make it possible for students to participate in future educational settings, as well as employment. The reason for expulsion from high school for a number of youth has been the lack of appropriate behaviour. Both Centennial and ALFA indicated that the combination of group and individual instruction was very helpful in assisting students in learning appropriate behaviours and how to get along with others.

As indicated earlier, a major reason most of the youth approached the youth literacy projects was for assistance in being able to become employed. As the following section discusses, combining literacy with employment preparation in some way is essential in order to be able to address the needs of the youth — and to keep them engaged in literacy.

Literacy training also takes place in a community context. Projects found that they could not successfully address the literacy needs of youth without also considering other factors. ALFA's program, by design, was oriented around African-Canadian culture. It chose all its volunteer tutors and guest speakers from the Black community, in order to provide positive role models which the students could relate to. Similarly, the project facilitator as well as all project support people from outside ALFA were drawn from the Black community.

Conestoga participates on a number of inter-agency committees in the Huron-Perth area dealing with a variety of youth issues. Many of these issues go beyond literacy. But these activities are essential to establish appropriate relations with other agencies, which in turn can assist with referrals of youth, where appropriate, to college programs and in helping with follow up and with other needs of the youth. Similarly, Centennial works with social service agencies dealing with issues of homeless youth and education.

The Lincoln project is located in a small community with many residents who are not comfortable with youth. For example, the community centre is used primarily by the seniors who are not willing to share this public space with youth, and youth find no place where they can congregate. As a result, there is a tendency for youth to feel alienated, and in this context, they may be even less likely to come forward to adults and to indicate their interest in learning. The Lincoln literacy project has been working together with a variety of other agencies to clarify the nature of the situation and to seek solutions.

Lincoln has also worked in partnership with libraries in its area, which serve as the information centre in small communities. In particular, it has been involved with the Community Access Program, making available free Internet training for all residents. While this is not specifically a youth or a literacy activity, the project views this as an important way of attracting at-risk youth.

Taking a holistic approach to at-risk youth which goes beyond the narrow silo of literacy has many implications, including the organization and structure of programs, staffing, use of materials, type and nature of programming provided and other ancillary activities, the importance of being flexible, and the importance of establishing relationships with other non-literacy agencies in the community. These are touched upon elsewhere in this report.

2.3. Interest in literacy among youth is closely related to interest in employment

All projects found that the primary interest of almost all the youth who expressed interest in their programs was in obtaining a job. However, many of these youth had few employment skills and very limited literacy skills, and were not always aware initially of how this was a barrier to getting a job. Others realized that they needed upgrading in order to be employable.

The experience of the projects in the cluster is that the at-risk youth with whom they came in contact *want* to work and want to be economically independent. To be sure, the youth who participated in the literacy programs may be more motivated than others. Nevertheless, this is contrary to the common stereotype of youth who have dropped out of school and who are not working.

All four projects integrated literacy with employment preparation in some fashion. Both program staff and the students indicated that this combination was a major strength. Centennial in particular combined specific employment preparation with both small group and one-on-one literacy training. Graduates of the program, as applicable, were referred for further assistance with employment preparation and job search. Employment preparation was not a formal component of the ALFA project as such. Nevertheless, the program included visits to employment centres and to other employment resources. It introduced them to the types of places where they could get further assistance in finding a job, as well as some help with job search skills. The students spoke highly of these activities.

A major component of the enhanced delivery approach of Conestoga was to provide for more contact and integration between its literacy and academic upgrading programs and its employment preparation. Conestoga indicates that this provides for more liaison and joint activities across staff in its different programs, and also makes it easier to provide a fuller range of options and assistance in order to address the needs of its students. Conestoga also mixed youth and adults in some of its computer classes, and feels that this has provided youth with positive adult learner role models.

A key component of the Lincoln project was counselling and referral with respect to whatever the needs were of the youth who requested assistance. When youth who approached the project requested assistance in finding employment, the project either assisted them directly in this regard (for example, helping to prepare resumes, connecting the student with job search materials in its resource centre), and/or connected them with other agencies.

2.4.   Out-of-school youth need assistance in order to get back into learning

The youth served by the projects in the cluster have all failed in the regular school system. They have either dropped out or been asked to leave regular schooling, often with the school acknowledging that it could not address their needs at the time. Many of the youth have been out of school for some time. All have limited self confidence and are facing a host of other difficulties.

Under these circumstances, it is extremely difficult or impossible for these youth to return to school without some form of assistance. Indeed, until entering the programs, they have not been able to do so.

While it may be premature to say for sure, the cluster projects appear to have had some success in acting as a bridge to enable a number of youth to return to some form of schooling. Various participants have provided concrete indications of their intentions to return to high school, to enter college programs (academic upgrading and technical programs), and to explore one-on-one tutoring.

As indicated earlier, the youth in cluster projects started with extremely limited skills. The projects were able to assist in the development of some basic skills, and in providing assistance with reading and writing. Students who were interviewed in the ALFA and Centennial programs felt that they have made significant improvements in their reading, writing and numerical abilities. But given both the short-term nature of the projects and the initial levels of the students, this assistance could only serve as a

starting point. The greatest value of these projects appears to have been in getting youth pointed in the right direction and assisting them in developing confidence in their own ability to learn and to make progress. This in turn appears to have given a number of students enough of a foundation to be able to return to further schooling and to be in a position to benefit from this.

2.5. Youth are not all alike, and they differ in many respects from adults and require somewhat different approaches

A major lesson learned from the cluster is that youth differ from adults in ways which require somewhat different approaches in how to assist them with their literacy needs. All four projects have had experience working with adults as well as with youth. They found that in working with youth, they needed to design approaches which were consistent with the characteristics of youth.

Projects have found there are many ways in which their youth participants frequently differ from adults, including the following:

- The importance of peer group expectations and pressure, and the desire to be accepted by other youth, which often results in a reluctance to acknowledge learning difficulties.

- The presence (or absence) of families.

- Limited life experiences (or conversely, too much too soon, such as living on the street, experiences of abuse, etc.), combined with limited personal and social skills and lack of maturity.

- The interconnection of literacy with other needs, including employability and other social skills.

- Lack of awareness in a number of instances of what constitutes acceptable behaviour and how to relate to others.

- Recent experiences — rarely positive — with the school system.

- A short-term perspective, such that literacy is rarely valued for its own sake, sometimes coupled with unrealistic expectations.

- Difficulty in making or keeping to commitments.

- Motivators for youth which are quite different than for older adults.

- Frequent lack of predictability and consistency, presenting many surprises to a literacy program.

- Usually many other things going on in their lives, which interact very directly with a willingness and ability to learn.

These factors, and how the projects in the cluster addressed them, are touched upon in many of the themes identified below. It should be noted that some of the above factors are not necessarily unique to youth. For example, for many adults, literacy also is closely related to other needs, such as employability and social skills. Nevertheless, these factors are of particular relevance when working with youth.

As the same time, the projects found that at-risk youth vary considerably from one another. They caution that it is important not to stereotype youth, that it is essential to recognize their differences and to be able to respond appropriately. For example:

- Some youth live at home with their family. In some cases, a parent re-ferred them to the program and was a source of support, where for others, a dysfunctional family situation was the source of stress and severe problems. Other youth live independently or even on the street.

- Skill levels, capabilities, ethno-cultural backgrounds, life experiences, interests and learning styles vary considerably from one individual to another.

- Similarly, youth vary considerably in their levels of maturity and motiva-tion.

The projects in the cluster found that it was a challenge to be able to respond to the often extreme differences among individual youth. This required more attention — and more time from program instructors and coordinators than with adult-oriented literacy programs. In order to be able to address the needs of the youth, some degree of individual attention is a basic prerequisite. At the same time, interaction with other youth is also important. Many at-risk youth need assistance in learning how to interact and to work together with others. It is also critical that approaches be flexible enough to be able to respond to the ways in which youth are different, as well as to unexpected events.

The two instructional projects in the cluster, Centennial and ALFA, used various combinations of group and one-on-one literacy instruction. In addition, individual support outside of instruction was frequently required. Both projects found this combination of approaches important in dealing with youth. While individual attention was essential, youth also needed the group activities to stay motivated. This also provided opportunities to learn how to work with others, and resulted in group members providing support and assistance to one another.

2.6. Recognition is important to at-risk youth

Centennial and ALFA, the two instructional projects in the cluster, both found that the youth participants greatly valued recognition of their achievements. This was an important motivator to them. All the youth have had considerable experience with failure. In contrast, these projects provided an opportunity for student accomplishments to be recognized. This greatly assisted with self esteem and motivation to do more. To be sure, recognition may be important to all learners, irrespective of age. But it appears to be of particular importance to at-risk youth, given their life experiences to date.

Both projects provided recognition through informal as well as formal means. For example, each staged formal graduation ceremonies. In focus group interviews, the students indicated in other ways how recognition was important to them. For example, the Centennial students indicated that they liked the idea of getting a certificate of participation in a college program. One of the most needy students at ALFA, with very limited literacy skills and poor self esteem, indicated that he liked learning how to use the computer because when he returns to regular school, he will now have a skill which he can show off to others.

2.7. At-risk youth require flexible programs and approaches

At-risk youth do not respond well to structure. Indeed, one of the prime reasons they did not fit into the school environment and have been unable to obtain or to hold down a job is difficulty in responding to authority and to structure. Many at-risk youth are transient, and others are facing problematic living conditions and other factors which makes consistent attendance, for example, difficult or impossible at times.

As a result, the cluster projects found that it is important to be flexible, in order to be able to cope with surprises. This was a characteristic of all the cluster projects. Centennial, for example, found that attendance fluctuated from day to day. Lincoln tried a broad range of activities, some of which appeared to work better than others, and it dropped those which seemed least effective.

Thus if a program is overly rigid, it will not be suitable for at-risk youth. Nevertheless, perhaps paradoxically, both Centennial and ALFA felt that an important part of their role was to assist students in learning how to taking responsibility for their own actions, in learning self discipline, and in learning how to cope with at least some degree of structure. Both programs, in different ways, devoted considerable attention to helping their students in this way.

Both programs insisted that their students act responsibly, for example acting appropriately with other students and coming to the program regularly and on time, unless they called in when this was not possible. Both programs were flexible in this regard, however, working with students with attendance or behaviour problems. How much structure is appropriate? Centennial felt that the structure it required was essential in order to help students learn appropriate behaviours at future jobs. Despite the allowances it made and assistance it provided, it found that one of its students could not cope with this, and a few left the program or were asked to do so when their behaviour was too disruptive to others. ALFA planned a number of excursions which were not always announced in advance. These were a major attraction, and if students did not show up or did not indicate that they were going to be late, they missed out on these. Thus both programs helped their participants learn the consequences of their own actions.

2.8. "Literacy" is not the most appropriate term to use with youth

As indicated earlier, how youth are viewed by their peers is of critical importance to them. In particular, they do not want to be seen as "stupid" or inadequate. Youth who have not succeeded at school already may have very fragile egos. The projects in the cluster found that not wishing to appear inadequate can affect the ability of individuals to acknowledge that they have a "literacy" problem or learning needs.

Consequently, there is resistance to participating in what is referred to as a literacy program, as this can be seen as demeaning. How such a program is positioned can affect the impact of outreach. Youth, however, are interested in participating in programs which are seen as assisting them in further developing their skills. Lincoln, for example, found from initial youth input that the "literacy" word is taboo. As a result, it changed its telephone message and other publicity to refer to "learning".

The students at Centennial talked about participating in "upgrading"; they were very happy to be given the opportunity to participate in a college-based program. ALFA modified the name of its program depending upon the audience. For example, it originally referred to its program as the Black Youth Literacy Project when doing

outreach with agencies. Its students renamed it the Build Your Skills Youth Program. Conestoga, as indicated earlier, found that few students came for learning for its own sake, but as a means to an end which usually was employment. It stresses this in its own publicity, referring to academic upgrading and workplace preparation.

2.9.   Connections with the school system are important

Adult literacy programs are for adults completely outside the school system. The projects in this cluster found that for youth, the situation is not so cut and dried.

The projects found that even for many youth who have dropped out or were asked to leave school, there frequently are still some links with the school. With some youth whose school attendance has been sporadic, their schooling status may be ambiguous. The schools also readily acknowledge that there are some students whose needs they cannot address but who may be able be benefit from assistance with learning in a different setting.

Thus perhaps it is not surprising that high schools were a major source of referrals for the programs in the cluster. Both ALFA and Lincoln report instances where high school guidance counsellors requested them to work with students whom the school could not help. Centennial reports that the Scarborough Overflow Centre was a major source of referrals to its program. In some cases, school guidance counsellors were able to provide useful advice about students' needs and capabilities.

Also, with return to school one possible option for at-risk youth, links with schools would seem to be important. As the ALFA program coordinator indicated, in order to be able to prepare students to return to school, it is essential to know what the school is doing and its expectations.

Furthermore, as IALS and other sources have documented, there is not a perfect correlation between level of schooling and literacy abilities. Some students could get through school, yet have inadequate literacy skills. Lincoln, for example, found that a number of individuals who came to its program had actually completed Grade 12, yet nevertheless could hardly read and required considerable assistance.

ALFA indicated that one need which came up again and again is the need for tutoring programs for high school students who require additional support and are at risk of not being able to complete their schooling. ALFA's advisory committee felt that community-based literacy programs may be one of the best places for this tutoring. The committee identified the need for partnerships between high schools and literacy programs.

2.10. A range of youth-oriented instructional approaches and supports seems to work best

As noted earlier, a major component of ALFA's project was the development of a curriculum guide for youth literacy programming, which was then used in the second phase of the program with students. Development of the guide followed completion of a research project carried out by ALFA, as part of an earlier grant, about how to develop accessible and relevant literacy programming for African-Canadian youth. The curriculum guide is comprehensive in nature, incorporating a variety of tools, including assessment tools and an approach for working with learning outcomes. It emphasizes an experiential approach, to assist African-Canadian youth in being able to translate their own circumstances and situations into learning and positive action. It also emphasizes the importance of a culturally relevant curriculum and program, in particular for youth experiencing an identity crisis and who are having difficulties fitting in to the regular school system.

ALFA closely followed the curriculum guide in its programming. The major form of instruction was small group, led by the project coordinator. A variety of instructional approaches were used. As indicated earlier, ALFA introduced its students to a variety of community resources, ranging from employment centres to libraries to the media. Learning was combined with a variety of "fun" activities, including the development of a video. Students were also given instruction in use of the computer. In addition, students met with volunteer tutors who were specifically recruited and trained as part of the project. According to project staff as well as the students themselves, the tutors served as role models and mentors, and this may have been their most valuable function.

Centennial also used a range of instructional approaches. It combined group instruction with a college instructor, intensive one-on-one tutoring by paid tutors provided through the West Scarborough SDS program, employability skills training provided by the college, and computer literacy training. Centennial also provided a number of "fun" and social activities, to help keep the students motivated and to help develop their self confidence. Centennial was originally scheduled to use the ALFA curriculum guide. Due to differences in timing across the two programs, however, it started its program before the guide was completed. It later drew from the guide to a limited extent.

Both programs were different in many respects. They were similar, however, in incorporating a range of complementary instructional approaches, including "fun" activities, appropriate for youth. They made changes as they went along, in response to feedback from the youth. This combination of techniques offered on an intensive basis seems to work best at engaging youth in learning and in leading to tangible achievements. It also provided a means of accommodating the many differences among the youth.

It is unclear which type of setting is most appropriate for at-risk youth. The Centennial students indicated that they liked going to college and receiving recognition for this. The ALFA students liked the flexibility of a community-based program and its ability to introduce them to a range of community resources. There probably is no single best setting. The key, based upon these pilot projects, is using a range of youth-oriented approaches which help develop self confidence and provide opportunities for real progress to be identified.

3. Themes and Lessons Learned: How to Organize and Manage Youth and Literacy Projects

3.1. The cluster approach had strengths and limitations

All four projects initially developed their own separate proposals independently. They were then required by the funder as a condition of funding to come together and to form the cluster. Each of the projects was apprehensive at first, wondering about the process and the time commitment. By the end of the overall project, however, all were quite positive about the cluster.

All four projects were designed to address the literacy needs of at-risk youth in some way. But they each had different objectives, and somewhat different philosophical orientations and cultures. For example, two of the projects — Centennial and ALFA, were Toronto-based and were designed to provide instruction. In contrast, the purpose of Lincoln was to assist youth through outreach and access and to establish a youth-at-risk support network. Conestoga's purpose was different still. It was process rather than project oriented, exploring means of enhanced delivery of college academic upgrading and employment programs and through collaboration with others. Unlike the others, it was not exclusively focussed on youth. Both Lincoln and Conestoga are rural based.

Each of the projects was also on a different timetable, making coordination challenging. Conestoga's project was essentially finished before the others even began. ALFA's project was planned to extend over a longer time frame than the others, in order to allow for completion of its preliminary research project for development of the curriculum guide, and to provide for delivery. Through delays in receiving funding approval resulting from the creation of the cluster, Lincoln missed a window to align its project with the timetable of the YMCA and Niagara College, two of its partners.

The cluster concept posed particular challenges to Centennial and ALFA at first. Centennial originally planned on developing its own resources. With the creation of the cluster, however, it agreed to use the resources to be developed by ALFA. But as noted above, each project was on a different timetable. Centennial needed to start its project to coincide with the school year and availability of staff, before ALFA had planned to develop the curriculum and resources. While ALFA tried to accommodate Centennial's needs, this was not fully possible, given its own resources and schedule.

A "cluster" approach can have different meanings. (1) On the one hand, it can refer to a joint approach to delivery at multiple sites. (2) Or it can refer to projects undertaking

similar work maintaining contact with one another primarily for information sharing purposes. (3) A cluster evaluation also has a specific meaning, as in this project, referring to the identification of themes and lessons learned across a range of similar projects, without attempting to make an assessment of each site.

At the beginning of the cluster project, it was not clear which of the above meanings would apply. As already indicated, ALFA and Centennial, to some extent, were required to work together, somewhat in keeping with definition (1) above. But for the most part, it gradually became clear that the major purpose of the cluster was in accord with definitions (2) and (3) above, which permitted a cross-site evaluation. This focus appears to be somewhat different than that of some other clusters in the literacy area.

The projects gradually were able to see the benefits of the cluster, once its focus became clearer. It provided a forum for the sharing of experiences, and to some extent learning from each other. It also enabled the projects to recognize their commonalities, in spite of differences in context and specific approaches. At a joint presentation at the Ontario Literacy Coalition conference in November, 1997, the benefits of a cluster approach became clearer to the participating organisations.

The projects gradually realized that they were all in it together, and were able to draw upon the entire cluster for support. For example, the funder initially withdrew approval for the second phase of funding for one of the projects, but reversed this decision when realizing that this could affect the entire cluster. Projects were also able to identify tangible benefits arising from the cluster. For example, ALFA indicated that a definite advantage to them was the assistance they received from the cluster coordinator and from Centennial with its Advisory Committee and hiring committees.

All projects demonstrated their genuine interest in learning about how to reach at-risk youth, and in identifying these learnings across sites. In this regard, all were supportive of the cluster evaluation. The cluster approach to evaluation was less threatening, especially given the experimental nature of the projects, than an evaluation of an individual project would be. The overall cluster permitted a type and level of evaluation which would not have been possible if restricted to just one project.

One of the keys to the turnaround from initial apprehension to support for the cluster was the role of the cluster coordinator. The coordination role initially was not well defined. As with the concept of a cluster, coordination can take on different forms. With budgetary responsibility and authority, the role of a coordinator can take on a control function. It gradually became clear that this model of coordination could not apply in the present case, as each project had its own budget and was not required to report to the cluster coordinator.

Instead, coordination followed a collegial model. The coordinator took a collaborative, cooperative approach which was helpful in overcoming the initial resistance. The coordinator was responsible for overall cluster administrative tasks, such as liaison to funders, arranging meetings, and supporting and assisting with the evaluation. The coordinator offered assistance to individual projects, and did so as requested. She also shared information about approaches used from project to project, so that projects could learn from the experiences of others and avoid making similar mistakes.

Thus, despite the initial uncertainty, the cluster approach eventually gained support and proved useful. By the end, all projects were extremely positive about their experiences with the cluster.

3.2. The organizational context affects how a youth literacy program can operate and its effectiveness

Theme 2.2 stressed the importance of a holistic approach when working with youth. One of the implications of this is that youth literacy programs cannot operate in a vacuum, and are affected by activities in the larger organization and in the community. For example, one of the major objectives of Conestoga was to develop a model of enhanced delivery to provide for greater coordination across various staff and departments within the college, as well as with the community. Centennial developed its project proposal when the FUTURES program was still operating. By the time its grant was approved, FUTURES had evolved into CEPP/Job Connect. This had major implications for the project, such as with respect to recruitment of program participants, as discussed below under Outreach.

ALFA experienced the challenges of operating an ambitious project within a small organization. It was influenced by other events within the organization. For example, a temporary staff vacancy in the early stages of the project as well as funding uncertainties inevitably led to delays.

Lincoln demonstrated the need to respond to factors affecting youth which go beyond strictly literacy or employment. As indicated elsewhere, there was some hostility towards youth in its community, tending to leave youth feeling unwanted. It was not possible for Lincoln to move towards its objectives without working with others in order to create a more supportive atmosphere for youth in general.

3.3. Partnerships with others are critical, and require time and effort to create and nourish

3.3.1 Importance of partnerships

The experience of the projects in the cluster demonstrate the importance to a youth literacy project of connections and partnerships with a wide range of different types of agencies. In particular, it is important to work together with other agencies outside the literacy area who have some contact with youth.

Partnerships have a number of tangible and intangible benefits. For example, as discussed earlier, literacy programs for youth need to take a holistic approach. This means that literacy programs cannot do this totally on their own without the cooperation of others. Indeed, the experience of these projects is that joint involvement and participation is essential to the development and implementation of effective programs. As discussed below, other agencies tend to be the best source of referrals to youth literacy programs. It is important to be in contact with other agencies who can provide further assistance to youth while they are participating in the literacy program, as well as after they leave.

Involvement of others is also essential for sustainability, when ongoing activities are expected to extend beyond the life of a time-limited project. There are frequently situations where joint action is warranted. For example, Lincoln has needed to work together with other agencies in order to be able to address the problem of lack of meeting space for youth in Beamsville. Similarly, as a result of joint action, arrangements for transportation from Beamsville to Niagara College in St. Catharines are now under consideration.

The intangible benefits of partnership may be even greater. For example, joint activity can result in ideas, solutions, and the identification of resources which would not have occurred otherwise. Joint participation can help various parties better understand the needs of youth and the capabilities of other agencies, which can have long as well as short-term benefits.

3.3.2 How to establish partnerships

The experiences of the cluster projects provide some lessons learned about what is involved in effective partnerships. A key message is that partnership and coordination take time and require resources. They do not happen just on their own.

Effective partnerships also cannot be forced. While a marriage perhaps can be arranged, trust and cooperation do not follow automatically. The situation is even more challenging when there is no obligation for "partners" to cooperate.

It is hard to depend upon others unless a relationship with mutual trust is already established. Trust does not arise overnight, and requires a period of time to develop. Effective partnerships also require a common purpose and philosophy, good and close communications, and the identification of mutual benefits.

The experience of the projects within the cluster itself is instructive. As discussed earlier, it took time for the projects to understand the perspectives of others and to see the benefits of collaboration. This did not happen right away.

There can be particular challenges in forming partnerships with different types of organizations which have different cultures, different styles of operating, and different time frames. For example, the Centennial project was a partnership with West Scarborough SDS. Because of the differences between a formal college structure and a less structured community group, the partnership initially faced a number of challenges. Both organizations indicated that they felt that the collaboration was worthwhile and that they learned to work together effectively. This did require some degree of flexibility and adaptability by both parties, which was facilitated by frequent communications and a commitment to a common purpose.

Lincoln found that its plans to form partnerships with the YMCA and with Niagara College were frustrated by the delay in obtaining funding approval for its project. As a result, the project timing no longer fitted with the timing of its intended partners. Niagara College agreed to provide placement students for the project, who also received a stipend. Lincoln, however, was not involved in the choice of the program from which the students were drawn (Law and Security) nor in the selection of the specific individuals identified by the College to work with the project. Varying descriptions provided by the project and the College and other information suggest that there may not have been complete understanding about the nature of the placement student responsibilities. Nevertheless, Lincoln feels that it obtained valuable assistance and that this arrangement may have set the stage for further collaborative activities. For example, the College has agreed to provide placement students in the future, after the formal end of the project, even without the stipend provided for by the initial pilot project.

ALFA used a somewhat different approach in its cultivation of partnerships. For example, it actively involved Centennial, as well as the cluster coordinator, throughout all aspects of the selection process for its curriculum developer. This collaboration

helped make both organizations more aware of the needs of the other. It also provided for added assistance with a number of aspects of the recruitment and selection. ALFA also had an established partnership with the Niagara Coalition, which had been developed before the project was started. Members of the Coalition provided support of various forms during the project. ALFA continues to work together with the Coalition on education issues affecting Black youth.

The development of partnerships for short-term projects such as those in the cluster can be particularly challenging. Conestoga was engaged in an ongoing process rather than a time-limited project. Perhaps for this reason, it seemed to have the most success with partnerships of various forms. Its experience may be instructive.

Conestoga participated actively on a number of inter-agency committees, networks and joint activities throughout its catchment area. Through this work, a number of informal personal relationships were developed which in turn led to a number of direct and indirect benefits. For example, a major outcome was increased contact and coordination among literacy and employment programs.

Conestoga will set up instructional programs, in literacy and employment as well as related topics, in communities across its catchment area when a need has been identified. Formerly, the college would establish a program in a community when an agency had indicated a need. This, however, only had limited success. For example, often the individuals expected to participate in the program did not materialize.

Now, Conestoga only develops programs in communities where local groups assume ownership and do much of the work. The planning and arrangements are decided jointly. In this way, the program is seen as emerging from the community rather than parachuted in by the college, and it is more likely to be appropriate for local needs. A range of agencies working together, are often adroit at coming up with locations, frequently at little or no cost, and in using effective approaches at publicity.

Conestoga has found that a common interest is not sufficient to bring about effective partnerships. There is also the need for someone who can devote the necessary time to make things happen, in a timely fashion. Other factors which lead to successful collaborations include the sharing of responsibilities, close communications and joint planning.

3.4. Program development is challenging and requires time and resources

All four projects found that getting a new project going takes considerable time and effort. This is a major finding in and of itself. All projects appeared to underestimate what was involved in getting their activities up and running.

For example, the types of activities involved in establishing a new project include identifying potential partners and cultivating relationships; developing a common approach; researching alternative strategies; establishing teams and clarifying responsibilities; providing overall coordination; publicizing the project as appropriate and recruiting participants; preparing funding applications and negotiating with funders; establishing appropriate financial and administrative procedures and controls; arranging for space, equipment and materials; identifying requirements for staff, volunteers and contract help, and engaging in recruitment and training; identifying specific tasks; making sure that there is someone who can devote the time and energy to making sure that things are on track and intervene as necessary; coordinating plans with the larger organization, as well as with other agencies; arranging for supports for program participants; dealing with the inevitable changes and surprises; etc.

One of the functions of Conestoga has been to take a lead role in the program development process in a number of communities in the Huron-Perth area. This has resulted in the funding and establishment of youth projects which would not have happened otherwise. Conestoga has indicated that developing and following through on program proposals is time consuming, for many of the above reasons. This is particularly so for projects which involve coordination with others. Program staff with full-time teaching responsibilities find it difficult or impossible to find the time to do this.

Centennial indicated that it spent much more time than anticipated on developing and managing its project. One of the strengths of its project was the collaboration with the West Scarborough SDS program. The two organizations had different cultures and organizational styles which required give and take on both sides, as well as time to sort out relationships and responsibilities. As indicated earlier, the end of the Futures program resulted in the need to devote considerable extra time to planning and to outreach.

3.5. A formal planning and coordination mechanism helps keep projects focussed

The experiences of the projects in the cluster reinforce the importance of a formal mechanism of some form to provide direction, coordination and support to the project.

These mechanisms also have served as an opportunity to reflect upon what has been learned and to provide guidance for changes or modifications as applicable.

These mechanisms took on a different form in each project. For example, Centennial had regular meetings involving its staff and those of West Scarborough, along with the cluster coordinator. This group acted as a planning committee. Similarly, ALFA established an advisory committee with representatives from its staff, Board of Directors, other informed community members, Centennial, the cluster coordinator and the evaluator. The advisory committee was able to review plans and to provide guidance to the project at various stages, as well as to provide tangible support in some instances.

Conestoga has held monthly team meetings. These meetings have provided an opportunity for information-sharing, joint planning and coordination and have helped staff from different areas of the college to feel part of an overall team, rather than operating in silos. It has also led to a number of tangible benefits, such as a literacy instructor mentioning a student who is looking for a job and a job developer indicating a potential match. Conestoga, as indicated earlier, was also an active participant in a number of networks throughout its catchment area. These groups provided opportunities for joint discussion on how college programs and activities could be made more relevant.

Lincoln participated on community networks, where the focus network was on community-based activities. However, it did not appear to have a formal planning mechanism specifically with respect to the focus and direction of its youth and literacy project. In hindsight, and taking into account the experiences of the other projects, a planning committee or equivalent with broad representation might have assisted the project in becoming more focussed. One of the strengths of the project was that it tried out a wide range of outreach activities. Some of these appeared to have some potential, while others which did not seem to work were dropped. In retrospect, the project might have been better off focussing on a smaller range of activities. A formal committee might have been able to serve as a sounding board and to provide assistance with priorities.

3.6.   Outreach is challenging and requires considerable effort

All projects in the cluster found that outreach and recruitment of at-risk youth was difficult, and more challenging than expected. All needed to devote more time and effort than planned. The projects were not suitable, for various reasons, for all youth who were referred or who approached them. Thus the projects also needed to devote some effort to referring these individuals elsewhere.

In retrospect, this perhaps was not so surprising. At-risk youth, by definition, are often poorly connected and hard to reach. Many are limited in their ability to read, they often do not relate well to authority figures, and have little faith in their own abilities. They have met with disappointment and failure on numerous occasions. Often their first priority is employment, and they are not always aware of the importance of acquiring literacy or skills. Thus at-risk youth rarely are proactive in seeking help.

The projects in the cluster tried a wide range of outreach activities. By far, the most effective approach was networking with other agencies. The projects in the cluster found that it was important to network with a wide range of agencies, including social service agencies, who come in contact with youth. As indicated earlier, schools paradoxically were often a good source of referrals.

As discussed above, networking is most effective when contacts and relationships are already established. This obviates the need for cold calls seeking referrals. When long-term relationships with a range of other agencies and networks are already established, others start with a better understanding of what the program is about and who it can help. With personal relationships, cooperation is also easier to obtain.

The ability to do effective outreach was limited to a significant extent by the time-limited nature of the projects. This made the development of long-term relations and tapping into these difficult. For example, Centennial originally expected to be able to recruit participants from its Futures program. When this program evolved into CEPP and then Job Connect, Centennial was forced to engage in outreach to recruit program participants. Because its project was not intended to be ongoing, it wanted to limit its outreach so as not to create unrealistic expectations. It was challenging to forge the right balance between overly aggressive outreach and not enough. In contrast, outreach was not so challenging for Conestoga. As discussed earlier, it was not a time-limited program. It already had an opportunity to establish relationships and networks across its catchment area.

Outreach also seems to be facilitated by a focussed approach. For example, responsibility for recruitment for programs offered by Conestoga in partnership with local groups in small communities rested with the local partners. Because the communities were small and these local groups were locally based, they usually were able to determine the most appropriate forms of publicity and outreach. Conestoga would only put on programs when local groups had already determined the need and identified potential participants.

ALFA project was targeted to the African-Canadian community. It was able, to a significant extent, to use its contacts within this community; this aided the outreach process.

For the most part, direct outreach was of limited effectiveness. ALFA found that its media announcements were more effective at recruiting potential tutors than youth participants. Nevertheless, both ALFA and Lincoln did obtain a limited number of referrals through media publicity. Lincoln also suggested that word of mouth, among youth as well as with agencies, was an effective way of spreading the word. It spite of the challenges of direct outreach, projects did feel that "street outreach" might be necessary in order to reach youth not connected with other organizations or networks. Even when direct marketing is done, working with established networks of people in touch with at-risk youth may help to identify the most appropriate ways of making contact with these youth.

3.7. Projects served a relatively small number of youth

The projects in the cluster were demonstration in nature. Their objective was to try out a range of unproven approaches and to generate ideas about getting at-risk youth back into learning. This is quite different from an objective of serving as many people as possible. If this had been the objective, the projects would have taken different approaches.

How many people can a youth literacy project serve? Conclusions can only be tentative at this stage. Centennial had two groups of students. Initially 10 started in the first group, with 4 staying to the end. The second group had 6 students. This was close to what it had initially planned for. ALFA initially had projected having 15 students start the program, with the expectation that probably only half would attend regularly. It started students in its program gradually. It assessed 14 and after experiences with the initial group, it deliberately limited enrolment to 8. Average attendance was 6 to 7 throughout the entire duration of the project.

The experience of ALFA and Centennial, the two instructional programs in the cluster, was that at-risk youth who have been away from school require intensive support in order to be able to make a difference and to get them pointed in the right direction. Based upon their experience, both programs feel that six to eight students per class, given their need for considerable support and personal attention, seems to be the maximum that could be effectively accommodated. Staff at both sites, however, did speculate that it might be possible to work with a different model, involving a some-what larger group, provided that there was ample opportunity for smaller breakout sessions.

Lincoln's project was quite different in nature. It had primarily an outreach and counselling/referral focus. It encouraged youth to come to the Centre for assistance of any form, which could involve one or multiple individual sessions. During the course of the project, 20 youth were in touch with the organisation, with a few more in 1998 following its formal completion. Given the nature of these activities, it is hard to say if this is a reasonable number or not and how many people could be served by an ongoing program.

3.8. Short-term pilots are limited in what they can do

The projects in the cluster, with the exception of Conestoga, were all short term in nature. They were all able to try out a variety of approaches with youth, and to identify many considerations, such as those discussed in this report. They all were able to make a difference to the youth they served, and to put at least something in place which might extend beyond the life of the project.

All projects, however, felt that a longer period of time would have allowed them to accomplish more. For example, approaches to outreach and to building partnerships with others, as previously discussed, were limited by the short-term nature of the projects. A considerable amount of time and resources was needed for start-up and for program development, such as development of curricula, establishing contacts with others, recruitment of staff, volunteer and program participants. It also takes time to develop trust and rapport with youth. A longer period of time would have provided more opportunity to revise approaches based upon initial experiences.

ALFA's and Centennial's instructional programs ran for 16 weeks (Centennial's second group was for 10 weeks). This was sufficient to make a difference for many of the students, some of whom were able to get a job or carry on with their schooling. Nevertheless, the feeling of the two programs is that 16 weeks was a minimum length of time for dealing with the target group they were serving. Staff felt that six months would have been better.

4.   Summary and Conclusion

4.1.   Outcomes and impacts of the cluster projects

The major purpose of the cluster was to provide an opportunity to experiment with various approaches for working with a very challenging target group and to identify issues arising from the collective experience of the projects. All sponsoring organizations, as a result of their cluster projects, have increased their skills and knowledge about how to work with at-risk youth. The major outcome of the cluster is the identification of lessons learned such as those identified in this report.

This evaluation was not longitudinal in nature. Thus it is premature to establish long-term impacts. Nevertheless, it is apparent that all projects have achieved some important successes, and have created legacies which are or appear likely to endure beyond the formal conclusion of the project itself. Both Conestoga and Lincoln finished their projects before the evaluation was completed. For these programs, it was possible, to some extent, to identify outcomes arising from the project which occurred after the project was formally completed and which could be attributed directly to the project activities.

For example, Conestoga's project, by design, resulted in a new integrated way for the college to work internally and with the community, which has continued past the formal conclusion of the project. The primary focus of the project was on joint marketing of foundational literacy, academic upgrading and employability training programs. Other included increased coordination and links, as well as some integrated activities among formerly separate program areas.

The project also enabled Conestoga to play a key role in bringing together literacy, education, employment and social service agencies who are involved with youth. In addition to increased communications and coordination among different agencies, joint efforts have led to the launching of new projects in three communities through additional or shared funding. During the course of its project, Conestoga played an active role in the development of these projects, for example through identifying possible funding sources and preparing applications. While much of the developmental work for these projects took place during Conestoga's funding, they were not approved nor launched until afterwards.

In Lincoln, a community youth council was established towards the end of the project. Interviews with other participants indicated that the Lincoln project played a significant role in the development of this council. The council has held three public forums. It has initiated action on some of the priority areas identified by the youth literacy project, such as exploring ways of creating a space for youth to come together and

dealing with transportation issues. One area under consideration is providing bus transportation from Beamsville to Niagara College, which could enable youth who have left the school system to attend college upgrading programs. The town of Beamsville has also included youth within the mandate of a new staff position.

Niagara College has agreed to continue to provide a placement student to the youth literacy project, even without a stipend. The literacy council has expanded its mandate to serve youth, and in essence is carrying on with its youth project, albeit on a reduced scale given the end of dedicated funding. Lincoln currently is looking into funding for other youth-oriented projects.

Other tangible outcomes resulting from the project include *Youth of the Diaspora: Moving Forward with Education and Action,* the curriculum guide and tools, including an approach for working with learning outcomes. This curriculum was developed and tested by ALFA and also to some extent by Centennial which has developed and tested a variety of instructional materials and an approach to tutor training. These resources can be used by others. Following the completion of the project, the Toronto ALFA Centre has expanded its mandate to include youth. It currently is looking for funding for future activities in this area. Centennial also has identified the need for continuing its work with youth who have multiple barriers, and recently received funding to carry on additional activities in this area.

The cluster projects were serving youth disillusioned by their previous experiences with schooling, with minimal literacy and communication abilities, and frequently with poor social and employability skills and little idea how to get started. They were so lacking in self confidence that many had difficulty at first in making eye contact. While it was not possible to follow up the long-term impact of the projects on indivi-dual participants, program records, staff reports, and interviews with the students at Centennial and at ALFA indicate that most participants have made significant im-provements as a result of participation in the programs, and that they are likely to engage in further education or to obtain a job. All participants, at the conclusion of the projects, were placed or referred elsewhere, and all seemed eager to continue.

For example, program records at ALFA and at Centennial document improvements students have made in terms of learning outcomes. The instructors reinforced this, giving other examples of increased learning, as well as improvements in personal and employment skills. The students themselves were able to provide examples of what they have learned during the program and how this has benefited them and affected their future plans. Several of the students who were interviewed at ALFA indicated that they would be returning to high school in the fall. The ALFA project coordinator

confirmed this, and was helping with the registration and reentry procedures. Of Centennial's students, one applied for and was later accepted in a college engineering program. At least one had obtained a job offer while still in the program. The others indicated that they were either planning on applying to a college upgrading program or in obtaining a job. Centennial was providing further support to these students, even after the conclusion of the project.

Conestoga's project did not involve project delivery. From the joint projects which Conestoga helped get off the ground, most students went on to find jobs or to further schooling. Lincoln's contacts with its "participants" was of a different nature than with the other projects. Of the youth who approached the project for assistance, most were still in exploratory stages or had other more pressing needs than further education. But the project was able to refer some individuals to the Literacy Council's volunteer tutoring program, and to refer a couple of others to other schooling or to employment.

4.2.   Areas for future research

These projects have identified the *potential* to re-engage at-risk youth with limited literacy, social and employability skills. Because they were short term in nature, they have raised a number of questions which could be explored through future research and/or longer term demonstration projects. Following are examples of potential areas for future research:

- Questions about program delivery, such as:

  - The optimal amount of program intensity, in terms of overall length of program, hours per day and days per week.

  - Optimal degree of structure and flexibility.

  - Which instructional and related techniques are most appropriate and in what combination, including conventional small group or one-on-one tutoring, as well as innovative methods such as those the projects in the cluster experimented with.

  - Optimal numbers of participants in a program, and in particular in small-group activities.

  - Which "hooks" are most effective at attracting and engaging at-risk youth.

- Documenting the inter-connection of literacy with other factors and then examining how the role of a comprehensive or holistic approach can address these issues.

- Exploring alternative forms of outreach, in particular means of reaching youth who are not connected with traditional services.

- How to assess outcomes, including:

  ○ Identifying learning outcomes which are most appropriate for youth, tested on a larger sample with more extensive instruction than was possible to date;

  ○ A more comprehensive assessment of other tangible and intangible outcomes and benefits which can result from at-risk youth participating in literacy activities.

- Exploring ways in which literacy programs and schools can work together, e.g. with respect to youth struggling at school and in danger of dropping out.

- Longitudinal follow up, including:

  ○ Long-term interventions for youth who start with limited literacy and social skills.

  ○ Exploration of long-term impacts resulting from participation in a youth literacy program.

4.3.   Summary of major findings

This report has identified and discussed numerous lessons learned about how to re-engage at-risk youth with limited literacy, social and employability skills who have left school.

The major findings which have emerged from the evaluation can be summarized as follows:

- **Flexible, holistic youth-oriented approaches are needed.**

  The cluster projects have demonstrated the importance of an integrated approach which recognizes and addresses the range of needs faced by at-risk youth. Approaches restricted just to literacy, which do not also consider other factors of concern to these youth, are not likely to be successful. In particular, these projects have demonstrated the importance of integrating literacy with employment skills development.

  Engaging youth with a history of failure and difficulty in functioning in a regular school setting is challenging. Using incentives and "hooks", such as music, media, computers and current events which are of interest to youth can help keep them interested and motivated. There is a need for culturally relevant programming, materials, and role models. Programs need to be flexible, in order to accommodate youth with many other problems in their lives and little experience in coping with structure. At the same time, it is important to assist at-risk youth in learning how to develop self discipline and to comply with basic responsibilities and commitments, such as regular attendance and showing respect for others.

- **These projects demonstrate the potential of even short-term interventions with at-risk youth, provided that there is a minimum level of intensity and a variety of learning approaches are used.**

  The ALFA and Centennial programs provided less than full-time instruction for 16 weeks or less, using a combination of individual and group learning approaches. These were sufficient to get the students interested and motivated, to make significant progress in the development of skills, and for students to continue with learning or instruction. The sense of the staff at both programs, however, based upon their experience with their pilot projects, was that this was the minimum amount of time required to develop rapport and trust, to begin to deal with the many barriers which at-risk youth face, and to make progress possible. They felt that a five day a week program, close to full time for six months, would be preferable.

- **Partnerships with a range of different types of agencies are essential.**

  Implementation of an effective program for at-risk youth requires a holistic approach which no single agency can do on its own. Other agencies, including those outside the literacy agency, can be a major source of referrals, as well as a place for program graduates to go for further assistance. Community development activities have led, on a number of occasions, to subsequent action by

others on behalf of youth, including joint initiatives which no single organization could do on its own. Nevertheless, the experience of the cluster projects is that the development of meaningful partnerships and relationships takes time and effort and does not happen on its own or overnight. But the rewards may be worth it.

- **Outreach is challenging.**

  All projects found that recruiting at-risk youth was more challenging and time consuming than expected. The most effective means of recruitment was through contacts and networks with other community programs and agencies, including schools.

- **A cluster approach can have potential**

A cluster can be a useful vehicle for information sharing and for identifying lessons learned across a range of similar projects. The success of a cluster, however, depends upon how it is established and coordinated. The four projects were originally required to participate in an arranged marriage as a condition of funding. Initial apprehension was gradually overcome when the purpose of the cluster became clearer and the benefits started to emerge. The role of the cluster coordinator, acting in a collegial fashion and providing assistance on an as-needed basis, was important to the ultimate success of the cluster. Thus, despite the initial uncertainty, the cluster approach eventually gained support and proved useful. By the end, all projects were extremely positive about their experiences with the cluster.