

# Working lives of Adult Literacy Practitioners

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## **Executive Summary**

This research project was undertaken to explore the working lives of Adult Literacy Practitioners in the province of British Columbia. The objectives were to give a deeper understanding of the working lives of literacy practitioners; to define the challenges within this reality; to determine if certain work situations were better than others were and why; and to determine if certain support systems were more effective and why. Recommendations for the improvement of support and communication systems for literacy practitioners were also to be made.

This was a six-month project that was started during September of 1998 and completed on March 15, 1999. Information was gathered through the taping and transcribing of 26 in-depth interviews. The information from three interviews was used for historical and contextual information on literacy. There were 23 participant interviews from six community-based centres and six institutions. The three groups were based on occupation: there were six(6) executive directors/managers, eight(8) tutor coordinators and nine(9) instructors. The interviews lasted from 1 ½ to 3 hours,

The participants described their working lives from several perspectives. They spoke about: 1) job preparedness; 2) communication within the organizations and with the larger community; 3) roles in terms of role overload, role overlap or role ambiguity; 4) job satisfaction; 5) their vision of improved work conditions or “the best of all possible worlds”, and 6) the community centre’s relationship with the board.

Both the positions of executive director and tutor coordinator demand a wide variety of skills. The executive directors need to understand among other things: building relationships with the community infrastructure, fund-raising, administration, community

board education, and literacy issues. The tutor coordinators need such diverse skills as counseling, working with the community, administration, as well as a deep understanding of literacy issues, learning disabilities and a variety of teaching methods. Since many of the participants were among the first group who started the centres, they had little reference or context to support them. The experience and knowledge that they have acquired is a valuable asset for forming and enriching the knowledge base for adult literacy.

The instructors did not describe the same degree of stress that the executive directors and tutor coordinators experienced when they first started work. This may be because they gradually assumed the responsibilities for their present positions. Also, most instructors have colleague support on site; in addition, they have educational, counselor and advisor support systems. The instructors are, however, like the tutor coordinators and executive directors, the leaders in a new profession. The development and adaptation that they have done with course material and curriculum is extremely important for establishing a strong professional base.

When the executive directors described communication within their organizations, they spoke about the challenge of creating collaborative relationships within a hierarchical setting. The executive directors who valued collaboration had frequent informal meetings and regular formal meetings with a lot of shared-decision-making. This collaborative content appears to have offset the constraints of hierarchical form and created a more supportive atmosphere for the staff.

The tutor coordinators, who work without colleagues, described a high degree of isolation. Conditions that intensified isolation were too few formal and informal staff

meetings, staff and board who did not understand the nature of their work, hierarchical barriers and inadequate space. Conversely, centres that had a collaborative work environment mitigated the participants' feelings of stress and isolation. The Regional Tutor Meetings were highly valued because they provide strong moral and professional support thus alleviating the tutor coordinators' sense of solitude.

The instructors are not as isolated as the tutor coordinators. They work with colleagues in an environment that most described as highly supportive and collaborative. Also, they have support systems such as counselors and /or advisors. They, like the tutor coordinators, highly value their meetings with colleagues from other centres. Lack of understanding and appreciation of their work in the larger community whether it is the college or an agency has largely contributed to their sense of isolation. There are stressful consequences such as mandate conflict with inadequate time to work with fundamental literacy students. The other communication challenge is convincing the head campus that they must respond to the needs of the community: communities are not uniform in their structure and needs.

When the participants spoke about electronic communication, they described how dramatically communication has been altered. Now, satellite campuses have immediate contact with colleagues, supervisors and students in other towns and regions. Work loads, however, appear to have increased with this modern technology. A few participants expressed concern about e-mail being used when personal communication would be more appropriate and effective.

The strongest pattern that emerged from the data on roles for the executive directors was role overload. Both job descriptions and boundaries that were not well

defined contributed to work overload. Role overlap was also a consequence of ambiguously defined roles between the board and the executive director. An improved and more rational job description and the conscious awareness and effort to set boundaries have helped these participants achieve a healthier balance in their lives.

Like the executive directors, the most prominent pattern to emerge from the data of the tutor coordinators was role overload. It was the consequence of several factors: 1) assuming too many roles some which were inherently incompatible; 2) the need for tutor coordinators to recognize how much they can contribute while maintaining a healthy balance between their work and other aspects of their lives; 3) lack of understanding of the tutor coordinator's work by the board. The tutor coordinators found some resolution by recognizing and defining their work boundaries. This involved withdrawing from roles that caused an excessive workload or that were incompatible with their central role. Some also set boundaries by restricting the number of students and tutors with whom they worked to maintain the quality of the program and to avoid burnout. It was difficult to set these boundaries because they were not able to respond fully to the real needs of the community.

Like the executive directors and the tutor coordinators, the strongest pattern to emerge for the instructors was role overload. Role overload was based on several factors. Some assumed too many other roles which resulted in work overload and role overlap. There was a lack of understanding or awareness on the part of the larger institution or agencies; consequently instructors were not given enough time to work with their students. The fundamental literacy instructors were not given adequate time for marking and preparing class material. Many of the participants described the need to set



boundaries so that their work did not dominate their lives. Their response to work overload has been to try to redefine their work boundaries in order to avoid burnout.

All of the participants in the study described a very high level of job satisfaction. Their love of their work was based on doing something that they deemed worthy. The tutor coordinators and the instructors described their profound satisfaction from facilitating the growth and involvement of their students. This was intimately linked to their own self-actualization. All three groups based their job satisfaction on altruism, on intellectual satisfaction and on a sense of accomplishment. None of the participants in the study based job satisfaction on status or monetary reward.

All of the executive directors and the tutor coordinators valued the community-based centre. They believed that it was an effective way to reach adult literacy students. Ten of the 14 participants from these two groups believed that there should be a close working relationship between the adult learning centre and the community college. They both spoke about the need for educational and counseling support and the need for assured funding. They both addressed the fundamental need for raised public awareness.

The most imperative need that the instructors described was raising public awareness. They believed that the larger institutions' or agencies' lack of understanding and awareness about the nature of their work has led to mandate conflict and work overload. The instructors also spoke about the need for additional support to do research on various aspects of literacy. Two addressed the need for a storefront setting for literacy students: a community centre that retains its close connection to the community college. Two spoke about the divisiveness of competitively vying for funds. They believe that

communities would be better served if they were to work collaboratively in responding to adult literacy.

The group that discussed the community board consisted of four tutor coordinators and six executive directors. They described the need for community board education. It is important that board members understand the basic issues of literacy and the goals of the organization. This knowledge would enable them to be effectively supportive of the staff, to write policy and to fund raise. They also described the importance of board members having specific responsibilities or jobs. This increases involvement in and understanding of the organization.

The literacy practitioners I interviewed are a very dedicated, hard working, highly professional group of individuals. They are working to repair a serious wound in our society. Without the basis of literacy a large percentage of our society will remain disenfranchised at an economic, social, and political level. This study provided literacy practitioners an opportunity to speak about their working lives. These recommendations are made in response to the support that they need for this immense and worthy undertaking.

**IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT:**

1. The executive directors and tutor coordinators be key contributors in establishing a knowledge base for their professions and that they receive the support necessary to achieve this work.
2. Support be given to Adult Literacy Instructors so that they can research, generate, and document knowledge in their field.

3. Executive directors and tutor coordinators receive support for educational workshops that focus on subjects of teamwork and collaboration.
4. The Regional Tutor Coordinator meetings continue and that additional support be given for tutor coordinators to meet.
5. Literacy Instructors be supported in their initiatives to design course material that responds to the needs of the students in their communities.
6. Executive directors, tutor coordinators and instructors receive educational support on setting and defining work boundaries in order to avoid burnout and to maintain balanced healthy lives.
7. Literacy instructors receive a more equitable share of time for marking and preparing their class material.
8. The concept and the existence of community centres be retained and fully supported.
9. A close working relationship between the community centre and college be encouraged and supported.
10. The executive directors and tutor coordinators receive educational and counseling support. There is also a strong need for assured funding.
11. There be a continued and concerted effort to raise awareness of Literacy at a community, provincial and federal level. At the community level it can take the form of an outreach workshop in which the relevant agencies participate.
12. Further research on a paradigm for community collaboration in working with literacy be undertaken.

13. Communities offer board education for not-for-profit societies. This will lay the foundation for board members to work effectively and supportively within their own organization and to accept individual roles.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this research project grew out of my experience on the boards of two non-profit service-providing community organizations and out of interviews with the staff of six other non-profit service organizations. I became aware of a high level of stress among the service providers, which appeared to be induced by certain work conditions. The same patterns of stress emerged when staff from a community-based literacy centre talked to me about their work. One of the staff suggested that a study of this nature in which literacy practitioners reflected upon and described their working lives would be both timely and valuable.

I then attended a Literacy Research Conference that was held in Vancouver where I was able to discuss this project with various literacy practitioners from throughout British Columbia. They also saw the need and value in a study of this nature.

Thus, this research project was a response to an expressed need from the literacy practitioners who serve as **Executive Directors/Managers, Tutor Coordinators** or **Instructors** in both **Community-Based** and **Institution-Based** organizations.

The **purpose** of this research is to explore the working lives of Adult Literacy Practitioners. The **objectives** are:

- 1) To give both a broader context and deeper understanding of the working lives of literacy practitioners.
- 2) To clearly define the challenges within this reality.
- 3) To make a comparison between organizations: Are certain work situations better than others are and why?

- a) Are there support systems within organizations which are more effective and why?
- b) Conversely, what has caused certain organizations to experience undue stress in certain areas of operation?
- 4) To provide recommendations for the improvement of support and communication systems around literacy practitioners.

## **METHOD & PROCEDURE**

This is a qualitative study consisting of 26 in-depth interviews. I chose this method because I wanted data that were rich in context, which would allow the participants to fully express the many facets and dynamics of their working lives. This method requires word-by-word transcription of each interview. In this way, the participant's original meaning is captured without distorting or weakening her/his voice through interpretation.

Before starting the study, I interviewed three of the four people who became advisors for this project. Audrey Thomas has both a broad and profound knowledge of the historical and present reality of Adult Literacy in British Columbia. Margaret White has had considerable experience as a literacy practitioner in both colleges and community centres in several areas in Canada. Loretta Fedor has worked with family literacy. She is a teacher, has worked for several non-profits in varying capacities and I have found her comments insightful. The fourth advisor, Kate Panayotof, has a Masters in Social Work. She has worked in social service programs and policy development and for general management consulting for the Federal Government.

My initial review of the literature through various web sights including ERIC and NALD gave me additional insight into the world of the adult learner and the challenges which practitioners face in program development and teaching methods. I was not able, however, to find research which directly related to the working conditions of Literacy Practitioners. I then looked at related research in Caregiving. The literature covered such topics as role and communication; I realized from my initial conversations, interviews, and board experience that these were highly relevant issues.

I chose twelve centres: six community-based centres and six institutions within the province of British Columbia. I then contacted the literacy practitioners in each of these centres through an introductory letter and follow up phone call. I was able to answer their questions about the nature of the study and set up an interview time. A voluntary consent form was given to each of the participants.

I interviewed 23 literacy practitioners: nine(9) instructors, eight(8) tutor coordinators and six(6) executive directors/managers. The interviews took anywhere from 1 ½ to 3 hours. I was able to do from one to three interviews in a day depending on the distance traveled and the number of participants at a given site. Between interviews I transcribed the tapes.

Upon completion of the interviews, I finished the transcriptions, then coded the data. Abstractions were made from the data then summaries with the abstractions were made for each participant. The report was then written.

## **THE INTERVIEW FORMAT**

In creating the format for the interview, I referred to a study in which I had interviewed employees of service providing community-based centres. I also spoke to two employees and a board member of an adult learning centre. My interviews and conversations pointed to a few common themes that were based on communication, roles, and isolation.

Although I was unable to find any related research in Adult Literacy, I did find related literature in Caregiving. Literacy practitioners have described a holistic approach to working with adult learners that is a combination of caregiving and teaching. Counseling skills are required for intake interviews for tutor/student pairing and for facilitating these relationships. In Mary Vachon's articles on caregiver's stress, she examines several issues involving roles: role overlap, role ambiguity, role overload and inadequate role preparedness (21,24). The relationship between communication and stress is also discussed in the literature. Teamwork, collaboration, and regular meetings were important elements that reduced stress at work.

Role overlap may occur between the multiple professional roles which one individual holds; it may happen among one's work, social or domestic roles; it may also occur between colleagues especially if roles have not been well defined (role ambiguity). Thus role conflict can follow when several facets of one's roles in life, professional or personal are in conflict (22,23,24).

Role ambiguity can also be a cause of stress. To perform one's role a person must understand the expectations others have of their work. The employee must understand the rights, duties and responsibilities of the position (6,22). The more ambiguity one



experiences in one's role, the more tension and anxiety is felt. Thus to work confidently, flexibly and cooperatively an individual must first understand the boundary lines and responsibilities within the role.

Role overload is a very complex issue; it can be related to the nature of the work itself and/or the expectations of the organization; it may in part be self-induced (21,23). Emotional labour has been described as "the labour involved in dealing with other people's feelings, a core component of which is the regulation of emotions" (7). Women often perform this work. It is hard work as it demands that the worker give personal attention; this means that she must give something of herself, not just a prescribed response. Role overload may be a consequence of the organization placing inordinate or contradictory demands on the employee. Organizations that employ volunteers tend to have an implicit expectation of paid staff also volunteering many hours (21,23). There may be a personal component. Individuals who are nurturing and empathetic may have difficulties in setting boundaries. Their desire to heal a wound, whether in the individual or in society, is greater than their ability to achieve a healthy balance in their lives and to take care of themselves. They must recognize their own needs and this requires not allowing their occupational role to dominate their lives. "Caregivers must be aware of personal tendencies toward overwork and over-involvement that might lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout (24)."

Caregivers experienced stress when they were inadequately prepared and did not have the time or support to take needed educational courses. Thus educational opportunities were imperative for inadequately prepared staff (24,21).

Regular staff meetings, at which there is shared-decision-making, goal setting, evaluation and reflection, were found to reduce the level of stress (21,23,24).

Conversely, caregivers who had less control in decision-making, less opportunity to discuss work related problems were likely to experience greater stress. The need to work through team dynamics and decision-making is crucial and often difficult. It requires respect of one another's knowledge and value. Communication skills are required, the ability to recognize role overlap and the flexibility to deal with it.

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The content of the interview contained open-ended questions about the literacy practitioners' working lives. The research and conversations with staff provided me with a base on which to give some structure to the interview. Two members of the advisory committee reviewed the interview format. Suggestions were made for a few changes or additions and alterations were made.

**These were the main points covered in the interview:**

**Background of the Participant:** What was the participant's background in relation to becoming a literacy practitioner?

**Organization:** What is the organization's situation within the community? What are its connections to other educational centres and to the infrastructure?

**Work:** The inner structure of work, role description, goals, and responsibilities. How much unpaid or volunteer time does the participant contribute?

**Communication:** How is communication accomplished in its diverse forms and what aspects are effective and valued?

**Roles:** All aspects of roles are considered from role delineation, to role overload, to role conflict.

**The Best of All Possible Worlds:** How did participants believe that their work situation could be improved?

**Relationship with the Board:** A description of the board's relationship to the centre and the staff.

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## **A Brief Description of Adult Education in B.C.**

### *Historical Development*

In 1910 the province's Public School Act was amended allowing school boards to introduce night courses. The University of British Columbia was established in 1915 and shortly after extension work started. In 1963 the Public Schools Act was revised in a manner favourable to adult education: it allowed the formation of community colleges. Over the following fifteen years, five institutes and fifteen colleges were created. In the same year the Universities Act (B.C.) created Simon Fraser University and the University of Victoria. Both of these developments were the consequence of a report, *Higher Education in British Columbia and a Plan for the Future*, by the then President of the University of British Columbia. All of the new post-secondary institutions had a mandate for continuing education. Also, occupational training programs and facilities were expanded with funding from the federal government's Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act (1960)(18).

In 1976 the government appointed committees to investigate three aspects of the province's educational system: the commissions on University Programs to Non-

Metropolitan Areas (Winegard Commission); the Commission on Technical, Vocation, and Trades Training (Goard Commission); and the committee on Continuing and Community Education (Faris Committee). As a consequence of this activity, the Colleges and Institutes Act (1977) was passed; the Open Learning Institute was created with the goal of developing a provincial distance education program. In 1980 educational broadcasting started with the formation of the Knowledge Network. The province's initiatives in distance education, educational broadcasting and open learning were brought together under the aegis of the Open Learning Agency (18).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a lot of activity around Adult Basic Education in British Columbia. Policies were developed related to Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language, Adult Special Education and Aboriginal Education. It was at this time that colleges developed their volunteer outreach programs; there were funds available to do needs assessments, to develop a model and to continue with this model. A tutoring presence was started on many of the smaller campuses as well as a volunteer program (VALT) at some colleges (20).

The formation of the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) was announced in 1987 and took its full form in 1988. Some of the provinces that were ready, B.C. being one of them, did get projects funded. It was after the formation of the NLS that a lot of the community-based centres started (20).

“The one area of adult education which has been maintained by way of policy is that of adult basic education”(18). Adult basic education includes basic literacy, academic upgrading, pre-vocational training, and English language training. A policy statement was issued in 1980 that recognizes responsibility of the Ministry of Education

to “foster and extend learning opportunities for all adults in British Columbia who have not had the opportunity to develop some or all of those affective and cognitive skills required to function successfully in Canadian society” (15). The policy of this Ministry is to provide “to all adult citizens and landed immigrants residing in the province, reasonable access to adult basic education programs of a high quality” (15).

### General Situation of Adult Education

In the early 1970s school districts were encouraged to give over their adult education to the newly formed community colleges which many of them did. However, all public educational institutions have the latitude in their governing legislation that enables them to be active in the area of adult education (18). In 1988 the Ministry of Education extended free education to adults over the age of 19 to the grade 12 level in the province’s public schools (18). The fees for fundamental students of ABE were dropped in 1990 and effective July 1, 1998 tuition fees for all of adult basic education were removed (14).

There are two ministries responsible for education: The Ministry of Education and The Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology.

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In the following chapters I will present the findings. The main themes and patterns that emerged from the data were closely linked to the interview format. From the background of the participant came the patterns on preparedness. The information that the participants expressed on work and the organization was closely connected to the categories of communication and roles. The remaining patterns or themes came from job

satisfaction, their vision of better work conditions (the best of all possible worlds) and their relationship with the community board.

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In Chapter II, Preparedness, the participants describe their backgrounds in relation to becoming tutor coordinators, executive directors or instructors. In the following Chapter III, Communication, they discuss various aspects of communication at a formal and informal level. Chapter IV is a description of various aspects of their roles; such issues as the need to set boundaries and role overload are discussed. Job satisfaction: the degree of reward that they feel from their work and the basis for this satisfaction is described in Chapter V. In Chapter VI, the participants visualize changes in the work environment or work condition that would improve their situation: the best of all possible worlds. Relationships between the boards and the centres are discussed in Chapter VII. In the final chapter there is a summary of the strongest patterns and recommendations are made.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **PREPAREDNESS**

Many of the participants I interviewed are **pioneers** in this field; they were part of a group who started the community centres or were among the first instructors teaching literacy in satellite campuses. Thirteen of the twenty-three participants have university degrees in education, eight have degrees in other disciplines and three have diplomas in education or business administration. Although they brought talent and knowledge to the various positions, a multitude of skills is required for the work of tutor coordinating, instructing or administrating and managing a centre.

#### **Executive Directors/Managers**

Of the six participants in this group, two had backgrounds in education and had worked in adult literacy. One had worked in adult literacy as a tutor and had a business background. The remaining three had university degrees in other disciplines and did not have a background in adult literacy.

#### Work Requirements

The work of an executive director is complex requiring diverse skills and knowledge. They must understand the community infrastructure and how to work collaboratively within this structure to form liaisons between the centre and the community. They require an in-depth understanding of literacy in order to advocate and to represent the organization in the larger society. Executive Directors need to understand the financial aspects of running a centre such as effective fund raising, proposal writing, forming relationships with funders and the administration of these

funds. They must work with staff in developing teamwork; thus an understanding of interpersonal relationships, collaboration and good communication skills is a strong asset.

### Background Preparedness vis-à-vis Key Requirements

Two of the executive directors had started work without a background in either education or adult literacy. One of the main responsibilities of an executive director is to strengthen the relationship between the community centre and the community. This includes other educational centres, many of the service agencies, and the service clubs. One executive director described her most immediate need to learn about literacy and all of its complex issues as quickly as possible in order to serve as an advocate in the community. “So to answer your question, was I adequately prepared when I started the job? No, because I did not feel that I was familiar with the literacy field.”

The managing of the financial aspect is daunting if one is not prepared: it involves building a relationship with the funders, proposal writing and the administration of the funds. As one participant said, “what I did not realize was that we had so many projects with different funding sources”. Although there was some funding put aside for training, the participant describes it as “putting the cart before the horse because until you have worked for a while you do not know how that money is best spent.”

Another manager who had taken a tutor training course and has worked with adult students before becoming an executive director describes her role in forming the community-based centre. She assumed many responsibilities without having had prior experience.

I had never been involved in running a community centre, I didn't know what a board of directors was; I did not know how to run a meeting. I didn't know how to fund raise or apply for a bingo license. There was that and so much more that I had to learn on the job.



Other managers moved from a position of teaching or tutor coordination to managing the organization. One describes her initial situation, “When I started I had never sat on a board but now I sit on several—I am trying to have the community become more involved with us by becoming more involved with the community.” She has developed a network with the executive directors of other community serving agencies. There was much to be learned through these connections, “from them I got ideas about board development, fund raising and policies.” Another executive director also describes the initial steps in creating an adult literacy program and the growth of her knowledge as the centre developed.

### Observations

Several of the executive directors I spoke to were the founding members of the organization. They started this work with little reference or context; however, through experience, workshops, conferences, and summer institutes they have acquired a profound knowledge about working with community infrastructure, literacy issues, fund raising, administration, and the formation and roles of boards. Their awareness of and expertise in this field is of great value for forming and enriching the knowledge base of the profession so that future executive directors do not have to start at the same point which they did.

### **Tutor Coordinators**

When the tutor coordinators spoke about preparation they described a multitude of skills which were required within one profession. Six of the eight tutor coordinators had post secondary education with degrees in varied fields such as education, languages, business and liberal arts. The remaining two had diplomas in adult education and

business administration. Five of the eight participants spoke about the challenges of developing and managing a program without adequate preparation or support.

### Work Requirements

Diverse skills such as counseling, social work, public speaking, building community relationships and administration are all required. This is apart from the essential core of understanding literacy issues, learning disabilities and a variety of teaching methods.

### Background Preparedness vis-à-vis Key Requirements

Even a background in education and training as a literacy tutor had not prepared this participant:

There was just this blank sheet when I created the program. I did go to my supervisor quite a bit and asked her to evaluate. I was working a lot more at the college at that point and I needed some feedback because I was so much on my own and I wasn't really sure. I never did get feedback so I decided that I would just proceed and do what I thought was best.

Three of the tutor coordinators emphasized that although there is a considerable amount to be learned about the social, psychological and political aspects of adult literacy, "teaching methodology should not be enclosed or boxed in to any one method". It is important that literacy practitioners "be in the same place philosophically as the method or methods they have chosen". They also spoke about the passion that one must bring to the job. One defined her work as parent, social worker, counselor and teacher. What was not anticipated was the degree one is called upon to use counseling and social work skills. Thus there was "the need to think on your feet" in order to respond to situations or problems which demanded assistance or resolution.

The following participant expressed frustration that was a consequence of lack of preparedness:

Training toward being the tutor coordinator? Just being a tutor, that was the only training I had had, so I did not feel prepared. The educational facilitator did not have a background in adult literacy so there was no one on site I could talk to—I wasn't even sure what I should be asking her. What am I doing, why is no one coming in? I did some advertising. I just didn't have the direction that would have been nice. Some direction of exactly where to go.

### Observations

Although they may have entered the field lacking some of the required skills, the tutor coordinators like the executive directors now have a profound knowledge of many facets of their work. Their knowledge and experience are a valuable source in building a knowledge base for the profession.

### **College Instructors**

College instructors described a gradual assumption of full time careers. Eight of the nine instructors have a background in education; five of the nine have additional education in learning disabilities or adult special education.

### Gradual Movement into Careers

They started as part time instructors or tutors and gradually moved into positions of greater responsibility. One participant, who illustrates the patterns followed by most of the group, described her movement from elementary school teacher to instructor. She received her degree in education and then became an elementary school teacher. Much later, after raising a family, she did postgraduate work in learning disabilities. After teaching “the entire gamut” from grade one to grade twelve she moved to an area that was downsizing and had few work opportunities. While she was working as a volunteer tutor for children in school, she took the opportunity to work with an adult who had many

disabilities. That was “an extremely rewarding experience”; she realized that she wanted to work with adults.

She was successful in an application at the college to work with the literacy portion of a program. Following this experience she became an instructor in fundamental ABE.

Another participant said that she and her colleagues have gradually taken on new responsibilities and learned along the way. “We came to the college and started part time then worked into more and more full time positions. All of us have taken on a variety of different roles and different duties including administration. Really the whole thing has evolved very slowly but very positively too.”

#### Observations

When the instructors spoke about their initial work experience in literacy, they did not describe the same degree of stress as some of the tutor coordinators or executive directors. This may be because the majority of the instructors are able to refer to colleagues. They gradually assumed the responsibilities and positions they presently hold. Furthermore, they have built-in educational, counselor, and advisor support systems.

They, like the tutor coordinators and executive directors, are the innovators and leaders in a new profession. Through their own initiative they have continued to develop curriculum and course material for their students and the profession. The research and documentation they do is extremely important for establishing a strong professional base.

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In the following chapter the participants describe their work from the perspective of communication. They speak about the nature of their meetings both formal and informal and the degree to which communication has been helpful, informative and supportive. The participants also talk about communication between the centres, the campuses, the larger institution and the community.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **COMMUNICATION**

The participants described communication at several levels: 1) communication within the immediate environment such as the staff at a community centre or colleagues in fundamental literacy; 2) communication between the fundamental literacy group and the rest of the campus or between the staff of the centre and the community board; 3) communication between Fundamental Literacy and the community infrastructure or between the centres and the community; and 4) communication between the satellite campuses and the head institution.

Communication was discussed under three main headings: formal meetings, informal meeting, and electronic communication. In coping with stress, regular team meetings have been found to be important (24). Such meetings should provide for shared-decision-making, goal setting, evaluation and reflection. Employees who participate in work related decisions feel ownership of their work; this allows them to accept responsibility with corresponding power. Regular formal and informal communication also diminishes isolation. Many of the literacy practitioners must make difficult decisions that will affect the lives of other human beings. Decision-making of this nature is particularly difficult and stressful when made in isolation.

#### Electronic Communication

The participants discussed electronic communication. They described the positive effects of bringing satellite campuses closer to each other and closer to the main college or university. The employees from centres were beginning to communicate with their colleagues in other areas. Obviously this communication has altered the barriers of time

and distance in a positive way. However, five of the twenty-three participants spoke about some of the negative effects. There were no differences between the groups when they spoke about this topic so it will be covered at the end of the communication section with all of the participants in one group.

## **Executive Directors**

### Organization Context for Communication

Five of the six executive directors described several of the challenges in creating a collaborative atmosphere such as the need to make decisions quickly and efficiently as opposed to shared-decision-making. The structures are essentially hierarchical with the board being at the top of the hierarchy, then the executive director followed by the staff. The challenge is creating democratic and collaborative content within a hierarchical form. This profession, which, in its essential nature, is based on collaboration, cooperation and egalitarian communication “must fit” into a traditional, patriarchal form that is hierarchical and competitive.

### The Dilemma

One participant described the dilemma in these terms: “I do want their input where it is feasible. Where it is feasible is subject to interpretation. I think that the staff would like to be more involved in some of the decisions that affect the whole centre and after what I have learned I am more likely now to go back and get feedback from them.” In this particular setting there was a breakdown in communication and teamwork with a loss of trust and confidence among staff members. Again the manager discussed the challenge in healing wounds, in reestablishing trust and teamwork. “With the problem, I could see that there was a split and they “chose sides”. It was hard on everybody.”

### Power's Responsibility

Later on when they tried to solve the problem:

It was not entirely resolved. I think there is some lack of trust in the sense that I am ultimately the supervisor; I have the power for some things but I think we are doing okay. It was a hard time but we also spent some time during our staff meetings talking about that loss. I started being more honest about things that they had not been aware of. Even then I had a professional pull saying these things should be confidential, but I also realized that they were hearing only one side and they had to realize how the Board was perceiving the situation.

### Input versus Decision-Making

Another manager said that she did not have regular meetings with the staff, however, she did meet with them individually as needed. She described her position as working for the board and that the people she worked with, her peer group, were the executive directors of other community serving agencies. This participant describes the dilemma of making decisions as a director and collaboratively including staff input:

There are bounds to collaboration. Sometimes they want to have input and I want their input but I think they confuse input with direction. They have a small vision; I must have, because of my role, a much broader frame of reference. So when I ask for their input and then make a decision, they sometimes wonder why I asked them because my decision is different than their input. I have to take their input, the board and the community into account.

She stated that the most difficult part of her work is personnel issues. She does have regular formal meetings with the board, with various committees of the board, with community colleagues and with organizations and clubs where she represents the centre. The support from and communication with the board and colleagues in the community was described as excellent.



### Formal & Informal Communication—Awareness of Collaboration

Another executive director described her position as working for the board but with the staff and volunteers. She meets daily with the staff member who is in the same building. “We talk daily, and if need be we even call or e-mail in the evening. Our communication is excellent. We do disagree but we are able to discuss things. There is a basic element of respect and trust.”

There was a breakdown in communication when a prior tutor coordinator spent just half of her time at the centre and half at the college. “We soon realized that we had to have regular meetings to discuss what was going on and what was changing.” She also has meetings twice a week with a staff member who is working in a separate building. During these meetings there is a mutual input of information and shared-decision-making. She meets with volunteers as well because “whenever you are working with volunteers they have to feel ownership of what they are doing: they contribute a lot”. She described her relationships and communication with staff as excellent.

The following executive director described her position as “working with everybody and working for everybody. I work with everybody and I am here to provide a service for everybody.” She described communication as always a problem in any organization but more challenging in an organization that is growing and having to adjust. The structure is hierarchical but the meetings have a lot of collaborative input:

The two coordinators talk to their individual staff informally then once a month they all sit in one room and talk to one another. They have an agenda that has been formed through staff input. They discuss current issues, set goals and objectives and set time aside to handle problems—there is a lot of shared-decision-making.

Issues that are not resolved at that level are brought to the director who has “asked them if they want to add anything or change anything, so it is very consultative”.

Although the organization is highly structured, the executive director has focused on achieving democracy and collaboration within the structure. “On the Board, we also have a person who is from the staff, as a representative. This serves as a check and balance to me so there is another voice at the board level besides my own responding on staff issues.”

This director was very aware of staff communication and when she noticed “that people on staff were talking about one another”, she decided that they should have professional development in conflict resolution:

We have gone through a huge conflict resolution thing. We hired a consultant last year and everybody on staff was required to attend the sessions. We were able to see how it works, role-play and discuss it. Now we are implementing it. Everybody understands conflict resolution: the dispute resolution process and the appeal process that is clearly laid out in the personnel manual.

She described her management style as very open, “I would say that you could talk to anyone of these people out there and they would know where I am at any given time of the day”.

### Summary

The executive directors described the challenge of creating collaborative relationships within a hierarchical setting. The participants who placed a high value on collaboration had frequent informal meetings and regular formal meetings with a lot of collaborative input. This pattern was maintained even at the board level where a person from staff was also a representative to serve as a check and balance to the executive

director. Through content that was high in shared-decision-making they appear to have offset the constraints of hierarchical form.

## **Tutor Coordinators**

### Organization Context for Communication

The tutor coordinators whether they work out of community centres or colleges are alone. Two of the community centres are closely connected to the colleges. In one case the tutor coordinator is an employee of the college and in the other the college and the community centre share the cost of the tutor coordinator's salary.

The Key Issue—Isolation. Related Issues: Lack of Understanding, Hierarchical Barriers, Lack of Support Staff, Inadequate Space.

The most significant pattern that emerged from the tutor coordinator data was isolation; seven of eight participants spoke about it. They have no colleagues in the community or even nearby surrounding communities. Reaching other tutor coordinators often involves an extensive journey. Working in a large urban centre does not free these employees from isolation; there is just one tutor coordinator in each of the larger cities. What exacerbates this isolation is the lack of understanding by others about the nature of their work. These others may be employees at the centre, the college or the board. The tutor coordinators who do not have a close working relationship with a college do not have support staff such as a counselor with whom to consult when they encounter sensitive or difficult issues involving students, tutors or community related challenges. Other factors that increased their sense of isolation were hierarchical barriers that impeded communication. In two cases lack of space left the tutor coordinator and tutors without a place to meet and work as a group. On the other hand, isolation was alleviated

through the regional tutor coordinator meetings and collaborative staff meetings that included reflection, goal setting and shared-decision-making.

#### Communication: What Works/What Does Not

This tutor coordinator works at a community centre and is an employee of a school district. She described communication and support systems as excellent; this alleviated much of the stress in her work:

We have staff meetings once a week; we have shared-decision-making and goal setting. We have the professional development days that are more in-depth and that is what we do: goal setting, mission statements, we also rethink and rework our philosophy.

Her informal communication is available as needed:

I quite often go after work; drop off a time sheet for instance and because my supervisor is one of my favorite people, I just go and talk to her. If there is a problem I can always call ahead of time and arrange to see her.

She did describe one breakdown in communication and in teamwork when a teacher replaced her during her vacation. This person did not understand their basic philosophy of working with adults and “treated the students as though they were still in grade school. The centre suffered; everybody suffered”.

They have resolved this situation “by making certain that anybody that is involved in the literacy program receives the philosophy at the meetings: it is spelled out loud and clear. Another way it was resolved is people who do not want to work here, do not have to work here.” This is the only tutor coordinator who did not speak about isolation. She described strong support systems, meetings which were high in collaborative content and a colleague/ supervisor who understood her work and thus was able to truly “hear” her and to work with her.

The following participant described the isolation that she experienced when she started working as a tutor coordinator:

In the past there was nothing; there was just this blank sheet where I created the program. I did go to my supervisor quite a bit and asked for an evaluation. I was working a lot more at the college at that point and I needed some feedback because I was so much on my own and I wasn't really sure. I never did get feedback so I decided that I would just proceed and do what I thought was best.

One resource that did assist her was the Adult Literacy Evaluation Kit put out by Audrey Thomas. It was very helpful as "it enabled me to reflect upon my program and to systematically go through every small component of the program. It made me more aware of the needs to set goals."

Another tutor coordinator from a centre described extreme isolation. She was able to meet informally with her supervisor but no one had a background in adult literacy. She had just started this position with little preparation and describes the dilemma of wanting to do the work but not having the preparation or support which was necessary for her to work effectively.

There was no one on site that I could talk to. I would mention it to my supervisor and she would tell me that I was doing just fine. But I didn't see that; I didn't see any results so I didn't see it as a great job. I ended up sitting in a little cubicle and reading a lot on adult literacy. I was basically on my own and I didn't know where to or how to promote the program.

### Lack of Understanding

A tutor coordinator, who frequently attended the board meetings of the community centre, realized that there was not a great deal of understanding of what she did; this perception was underscored when she was asked about the classes she taught.

I felt that the board was members of the community who were sort of interested in Literacy but I didn't feel that they were really involved or really interested. I guess that bothered me in the beginning because I was still starting up and I was looking for feedback. I was feeling rather isolated and I would go to the meeting and there was

nothing. I would read my report and they would just pass it. There were no questions, never a comment.

She said that the board members were supportive of her work but many lacked a basic awareness of the nature of her work. This deepened her sense of solitude.

The following participant also described communication problems with the board. She believes that this stems from their not understanding her role:

I have sent them intermittent reports just to keep them updated on what has been going on and I don't get responses from them. If I express a concern in a report, I don't get a response. It is a major problem because they make decisions that affect my program and I have no input into those decisions.

### Colleague Support

The regional tutor coordinator meetings are highly valued because they offer strong support and assistance to the tutor coordinators. This participant described how the meetings alleviated her isolation:

I thought it was fabulous because we are so isolated. I feel more comfortable about what I am doing now. I am now more certain of what my role is and I feel that I am doing what is required of me. So I feel not as isolated as I used to be. It is so beneficial to get together with other people doing the same work. It is so different. When I go to the college everyone will ask a question like, 'so what do you teach?'. I am part of the college but I am there only one day a week. I do not fit in the category of an instructor. It is so helpful to talk to people who have the same concerns: to discuss the issues and challenges which we all share.

She said that these meetings were not only a moral support but also an aid in learning and improving some aspects of her work.

Another participant who described the college staff as supportive and congenial said that she was alone as a tutor coordinator. The regional tutor coordinator meetings gave her the opportunity to meet with her colleagues. These meetings were of great significance. It gave her the opportunity to discuss work issues with peers, to examine and to affirm her actual work situation.

I find them great. It is so nice to talk to people. I was putting in so much volunteer time at the centre. Aside from that, I was putting in much more than double my work time in duties directly related to tutor coordination. I felt that it was my responsibility to do this. I started asking questions at one of our meetings. I asked the other tutor coordinators about their roles and their relationships with their superiors. It was a real eye-opener, I realized that I was allowing myself to be abused. I had to set boundaries.

### Staff Support

This participant described the atmosphere of the college as both supportive and collaborative. “The instructors are very supportive and so are the office staff. When you have the support of the people around you; you can do anything. That is a key stress reliever.” She meets with the principal once a month for 1½ hours and they talk about the status of her work: specific problems and what is working well.

A tutor coordinator who is employed both by the college and the community centre described her communication within the centre as excellent. They communicate daily and are able to discuss problems or issues in a very open manner. She described this communication as based on trust and respect.

She said that the college literacy coordinator does e-mail her regularly. The staff is a congenial group. They do have regular staff meetings at the college but “they do not relate to my program so I do not always go”.

### Inadequate Space

The next participant works within the college. They have regular staff meetings but much of what is on the agenda does not pertain directly to her issues as a tutor coordinator. She describes the atmosphere as highly collaborative and democratic, a workplace where she is trusted and respected.

She is the only tutor coordinator in this area. The campus facilities and space are completely occupied. There is no area for the tutor coordinator, the tutors and the students to meet and for the resource material to be made available for the volunteers or the learners:

I think the problem with the job here is that there is no spot, there are no rooms available right now. The college is really busy so there are not spare rooms. There isn't a place for the tutors who want to work with their students in the daytime.

This situation in turn affects communication with her tutors and students:

I am able to meet with the tutors as a group just yearly. So our main contact is through my mailing and telephone calls. Because there is no space for the tutors there is a kind of isolation about the whole thing, even for the students and tutors. That is the part of this job that really bothers me: I feel that my tutors are really isolated.

### Hierarchical Barriers

Two tutor coordinators described isolation that was exacerbated through hierarchical barriers within the centres and at board levels. One spoke about staff meetings that were filled with directives rather than shared-decision-making and mutual input. The other said that there were very few staff meetings so there was little opportunity for staff to communicate with each other and the director as a group. Their inability to talk to anyone on the board was seen as another hierarchical block:

You see, I thought the structure here with the board at the top, then the manager and then the staff was not a good structure as it established blocks to communicating—big time. I didn't think that was very good. There was absolutely no discussions allowed for me with any of the board members.

The consequences of communication breakdowns are truly devastating. Teams that were working cooperatively may be shattered as they “chose sides” over an issue. The basic foundation of trust and support deteriorates. “I no longer felt respected for anything which I had done or knew or could offer. I felt that I was not being heard.”



### Lack of Peer Group and Support Systems

When they spoke about isolation, they discussed the actual nature of the work that involves working with a vulnerable group of people. Interviewing the students requires counseling skills: the information is often highly confidential. Unfortunately there is no peer group available for the tutor coordinator; there is also no support system such as a student counselor which is usually available in the institution setting.

### Evaluation/Affirmation

Another consequence of isolation is lack of evaluation and affirmation. Not only must the tutor coordinator handle some very complex sensitive problems alone, she isn't given support or affirmation through job assessment.

### Summary

The tutor coordinators described a high degree of isolation. They work alone without colleagues even in the same city or area. Work of this nature that entails aspects of counseling and social work is very stressful when done without peer or colleague support. Their isolation was intensified by lack of regular formal and informal meetings and by staff and board who do not understand the nature of their work. There were additional conditions that impeded communication such as inadequate space and hierarchical barriers. Conversely the centres that created a highly collaborative working environment mitigated the participants feelings of stress and isolation. The regional tutor meetings were highly valued because they provided strong support and diminished the practitioners' sense of solitude.

## **College Instructors**

### Organization Context For Communication:

The college instructors did not describe the same degree of isolation as the tutor coordinators. The instructors have colleagues on site with whom they are able to exchange thoughts, ideas and solve problems. They also have support staff such as counselors and advisors.

### Isolation: A Lack of Understanding Beyond Fundamental ABE

Seven of the nine instructors did, however, describe isolation at another level. Their work is not understood in the larger campus setting. Unless one is directly involved in teaching literacy or fundamental ABE the actual process of teaching adult students at this level is neither understood nor appreciated. In the world beyond the campus this lack of understanding has stressful consequences. Agencies send students to receive upgrading in a term when the student actually requires intensive instruction over a much longer period of time. Instructors have to continually struggle to advocate for the real needs of their students so that they are given adequate time; they also have to struggle to keep the profile of literacy raised in the college.

### Struggle for Autonomy

Some of the outlying campuses have tried to achieve greater autonomy in order to respond to the needs of the community in which they are based. There is conflict between maintaining uniformity and continuity of course material and the desire to create curriculum material that is specifically suitable for their students.

### Nature of the Isolation: Lack of Understanding beyond Fundamental ABE

This instructor described the nature and cause of isolation experienced by many literacy instructors. She feels support, recognition and respect from her colleagues. But within the larger college:

People think that upper level stuff is more important than literacy or at best, that it is *okay* to teach literacy in a certain kind of supportive way. I think that the big thing that I would like is some way to deal with the isolation of the instructor. Now I have a good situation here because I have a few people to talk to. There is nobody except another literacy instructor who knows what goes on in that classroom. You get in a classroom and as long as they don't have to call the police or fire department, they don't know and they don't care what you do. You could be working miracles or you could be selling dope and as long as you don't get caught—there is little understanding and appreciation of what it takes to teach adults at this level of literacy.

A colleague from another campus said that although their colleagues are supportive, she believed that the true nature of her work was not understood or appreciated by the rest of the college faculty. “I think at times people may pay lip service to ABE but you know that the prestige courses are the university courses and ABE, well—that's kind of down there.”

The following participant is the only basic literacy instructor on campus. She described a greater degree of isolation than many of her colleagues at other centres. The staff meetings do not relate directly to the challenges and issues with which she is faced so they are not considered highly valuable or productive. She also described the lack of understanding and appreciation of her work by the larger environment, be it the rest of the campus or the community infrastructure:

So really it is kind of isolating in a way for me. My colleagues are on other campuses or centres. I am the only one teaching this level of literacy. It is not the same as being close to the ABE people who teach fundamental; they are the only ones who know what I am doing.

She has found the meetings with colleagues from other campuses valuable but difficult to manage because of demands on her time and long travelling distance.

Another instructor spoke about some of the stress in her work caused by a lack of understanding on the part of the agencies that send students to the college. This causes conflict in two ways. As an instructor, she is not given sufficient time to bring students from a low level of literacy to a grade 10 level. This requires intensive and constant work for a much longer period of time than what the mandate advises. Secondly, some of the students are not properly screened and are wrongly placed. “Their time is wasted; they are given false hope and that really upsets me.” Also, there are people who are too disturbed to be part of a class. “ Their disruptive and angry behavior destroys the dynamics of a class in which vulnerable adults are trying to build self-esteem and confidence.” She spends time and effort talking about the nature of literacy in order to raise awareness; her hope is that mandates and screening will become more appropriate.

She has experienced both a collaborative and a control centered atmosphere. Much of the stress is reduced if a principal works collaboratively with the staff and the community and if he or she understands adult literacy.

Her colleague on another campus described how lack of understanding of the literacy learning process has caused mandate conflict. This can be stressful.

Sometimes my mandate is to bring the student up two or three grade levels in one term. If a student has a more typical background of the students we see, there is not the time to do what I see as my mandate. That is something that really concerns me.

#### Collaboration/ Colleague Support:

In describing the quality of communication in their meetings both formal and informal, an instructor spoke about the coordinator who is a very skilled facilitator and

mediator. They do have shared-decision-making at meetings but this is because the coordinator has already talked to individuals, listened to various complaints and has answered objections. At the actual meeting people have already agreed. She does say, however, that this does not make them a team. “I think it makes us separate cogs who work without a lot of friction.”

She described the meetings with colleagues from other campuses as very important:

The literacy instructors have always had a strong connection. I have always made sure that we have a meeting once and even twice a year—from all of our campuses together. We have found these meetings really useful and productive.

The next instructor spoke about collaborative meetings and interactions with colleagues. She says that they are supportive and they are able to discuss things openly.

“That is not to say that there are never problems, but we have matured and we have become a very good team. Our collaboration has really enriched what’s happening.”

Shared-decision-making is an important aspect of their formal meetings. She described a collaborative theme that runs through all they do from teaching to relationships with colleagues and supervisors:

All of our students have individual needs and some have greater needs in one area so there is a lot of tailor-making. My role then is collaborator. I have to identify the areas they need to work on; thus, my role becomes that of diagnostician.

Our communication and support are very good within the boundaries of the budget. I am very supported by my coordinator, she has been here and done this herself. If I want to do something innovative, I have a great deal of freedom. Nobody is likely to bite my head off.

We have a new principal here and coincidentally when she began last year we were given our money for the campus. How she spends it over here is at her discretion. She is very democratic. So basically we divided up the pie together; it is a collaborative effort.

Her colleague described a similar atmosphere of working collaboratively and of policies which have encouraged innovation, and new initiatives. She spoke about monthly meetings, at which there is goal setting, and shared-decision-making. They do not have time for much reflection; this she considered necessary especially in an evolving profession but largely missing because of a too busy schedule. The meetings with colleagues from the other campuses are appreciated because they are able to exchange information, ideas and support.

Two colleagues from another campus who instruct fundamental English and Math gave a positive description of the communication and support systems within their college. The most valuable meetings were the ones they held with their colleagues from other campuses.

Once a term we meet with our colleagues. We get together for two days. We look at goal setting, mission statements and we give each other a lot of support. We struggle with how to manage flexibility for students within the institution in which we work.

The atmosphere was described as supportive with good communication:

I feel that if I need to talk to somebody and I know who it is I want to talk to, well, I can talk to them. There is always somebody to talk to. There is a lot of support from my colleagues. There is a lot of support and trust.

The following instructor described a supportive and flexible relationship with her colleagues who have worked together for more than a decade.

We are all friends as well as colleagues. We work well together. In the past we have covered each other's classes; we meet together; we plan together; we organize college functions, we consider ourselves a team.

She described her meetings with colleagues from other campuses as very rich and productive. "We share a lot of stuff with each other; we share ideas; we share resources; we support each other."

In this setting the main focus of the campus is ABE. The instructor has never sensed that her work was devalued or not appreciated; all of her colleagues have had the experience of teaching some aspect of ABE.

The following instructor works out of a community centre. She described communication within her organization as collaborative in nature: a very necessary part of maintaining a positive healthy environment. “We meet once a month, we have on occasion let it slide but that is a major mistake. We form agendas through staff input and the meetings are collaborative in nature.” On an informal basis she communicates often with other coordinators and teachers.

She said that collaboration was “something I fully believe in although every once in a while it makes your job just that much more difficult. It requires a lot more coordination and a lot more time but the results are more solid and enduring.” She described the benefits of these efforts:

They have produced an atmosphere where communication is so important. We share a warm, trusting and caring relationship. I am fortunate in this organization because I have a lot of support and a lot of laughs.

### Struggle for Autonomy

An instructor spoke about the struggle of the campus to respond to the needs of the community rather than following the mainline of the campus:

We have tried to form a greater focus and effort on meeting the needs of our students. We have taken a stand to achieve that. The issue was addressed last year and we are moving toward greater autonomy in working with students and the community. We’ve been told that we should have continuity in course material on the different campuses. Sometimes that is an impossibility to do because we are different communities and you have to serve different people.

Another participant also spoke about the relationship between the head campus and the satellite campuses:

After talking to people from other colleges in other centres, I've come to realize that we all seem to work quite differently and I think that these differences are due to the differences in communities. And another thing, Adult Basic Education is in many ways a new field; we are all pioneers in a sense and we are all inventing the wheel.

The following instructor described the relationship with the head campus. She put it in a historical context saying that there has been a positive improvement in communication, in decision-making and in resource distribution. Her words express the core value in shared-decision-making:

Historically, the college looked after all of these issues, the powers that be. Over the past 10 years, there has been a little bit of letting go and the department themselves have taken on responsibilities. Yes, and now we are expected to make more of these decisions and take on more of these responsibilities so there is some more work involved in it but we have ownership in these decisions and they are more meaningful to us.

Another participant said that communication with the head campus has improved immensely during the last couple of years; she now has no problem receiving the material that she needs.

### Counselor Support

Another important support is having a counselor on staff. An instructor said that it is far less isolating if there is a professional with whom you have a platform or meeting point on which to discuss the student. It has freed her to spend more time with the class actually teaching rather than counseling or advising.

### Inadequate Space

An instructor spoke about the importance of sufficient space. Because of insufficient space they have had to split their office location. The staff did not have easy access to the executive director in one of the offices so she has had to divide her time between the two locations. It is cumbersome and impedes the flow of communication.



## Summary

The instructors describe less isolation than the tutor coordinators. They work with colleagues in a work environment that most described as highly supportive and collaborative. They also have support systems such as counselors that allow them to spend more time teaching students rather than counseling them. They, like the tutor coordinators, highly value their meetings with colleagues from other centres. Lack of understanding and appreciation of their work beyond their immediate group has caused their isolation. This has had stressful consequences: the time that they are given to work with fundamental literacy students is not adequate. The other challenge is convincing the head campus that they must respond to the needs of the community: communities are not uniform in their structure and needs.

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## Electronic Communication

All of the participants spoke about the positive effects of electronic communication. They can easily and quickly exchange information regarding their work or agendas. It is an aid and a means in instructing whose full potential has not yet been fully realized. However, five participants expressed a cautionary note. Although it has reduced isolation between centres or campuses it can have the opposite effect in the confined area of a campus or centre. One of the participants described this saying, "I was just talking about e-mail today. It sort of takes away from communication. We send messages instead of talking face-to-face. I would much rather pop down to somebody's office and talk to them." They also said that if there are communication problems, e-mail should not be used as a means of avoiding direct contact.

Another participant after deep reflection spoke about the “accelerated time” in which we live and how all of our communication technology has not made work easier or less stressful. She described her mother’s teaching career and continues saying:

A thought struck me the other day that my mom never in all of her life put in a day like I do. Even though she taught full time—they did not have the technology to deal with. I had had a day like no other. I had e-mail messages and phone messages and people called me that their books had not arrived. My computer, I could not log on to the server, the photocopier was not working so I was running around in circles trying to get all of these things completed. The thought struck me that my mother in all of her years of teaching had never had a day like this and then I thought of my daughter. I never put in a day like she does when I was her age. I kind of wonder what is coming. The things I have to cope with on a daily basis—what is my daughter going to have to cope with? What kind of a day is she going to have? Are there going to be more stresses. These technologies are supposed to make our lives easier but I worry sometimes that they add too much stress. I go home at the end of the day and sometimes, I can hardly function. Preparing a meal is too much and I end up with cereal for dinner.

### Summary

Modern technology has dramatically altered communication. It is now possible for satellite campuses to have immediate contact with colleagues, supervisors and students in other towns and regions. Work loads, however, appear to have increased with these modern tools. A few participants also expressed concern about e-mail being used when personal communication would be more appropriate and effective.

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In the following chapter the participants discuss their work from the perspective of roles. They talk about issues such as role conflict, role overload, role ambiguity and the necessity of defining boundaries.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **ROLES**

The participants discussed their work in terms of their roles. What emerged from the data are patterns such as role conflict either within their own roles or with colleagues. Role conflict can occur between roles at work or between work and home. The most significant pattern was role overload. This was initially expressed as the amount of unpaid time that the practitioners are contributing. The effects of role overload are discussed and the need to define their roles and to set boundaries.

#### **Executive Directors**

##### Role Overload

Four of the six participants described role overload that was caused by having a multitude of responsibilities without adequate support. The essential work of administration, fund raising and creating liaisons within the community was sabotaged through having to do clerical, reception and “housekeeping duties”.

The other reason for role overload was a poorly defined job description that did not properly assess workload and the paid time to meet these responsibilities. There were unrealistic expectations on the part of the board and on the part of the participant. The unreasonable job expectations on the part of the board occurred because of their lack of understanding of the employees’ roles and their excessive workloads. The participants were trying to do it all; they simply expected too much of themselves. There was the need to draw back, re-examine their lives and draw appropriate boundaries whether in the work place or at home. One participant also spoke about how she had to work with her staff on issues of role delineation. Another consequence of poorly defined roles is the

blurring of lines of responsibility between the executive director and the board. This in turn can lead to breakdowns in communication and duplication or gaps in the work that is done.

### Boundary Setting

An executive director described the importance of learning to define roles and responsibilities. She was putting in an extra 50% above her paid time in volunteer hours. “It was conflicting with my life outside of work. I was physically tired; I simply could no longer cope.” Having her role more carefully defined so that boundary lines could be drawn improved these conditions. When this participant ended up working a bingo and running other fundraising efforts with little assistance, she finally confronted the board. A personnel committee was drawn up “which formed a buffer between me and the board”. They sat down and carefully defined her job description. After this formal process, she was able to draw boundary lines and learn to delegate some of the work.

The final participant in this group spoke about role overload that was a consequence of trying to do everything for everybody. She described the essence of a dilemma that applies to her and to many of the other women in this study:

I think we are really good at nurturing and caring and teaching and facilitating and being empathetic. I don't think we are very good about setting boundaries and understanding where we have to stop.

She continued, describing her particular situation. “At a personal level what happened to me is that I felt that in literacy, in teaching, in being a mother, in being a female, you are a nurturer, you are an accommodator. I came from a very traditional background that reinforced those values.”

She was exhausted, burned out and sought help from both medical doctors and counselors. She had to set boundaries not only at work but also at home, where she was met with a lot of demands and very little support. She described how very difficult and necessary it was for her to redefine her position.

We are all each other's friends but I am now having to say as an executive director, as a manager, as a supervisor, to staff that report to me that I am setting a barrier and that they cannot access me at just any time. Now it is so important to me to take care of myself. I will now put myself first in some instances, I set my boundaries, and I am clear about my boundaries. So it was **no** to staff when I needed to and **no** to the board when I needed to; I had to stop being so accommodating. I needed to have consequences when people did not give me what I thought they should because we had an agreement.

It was not just a matter of this participant learning to set her own boundaries. She was fully aware of her staff and their tendency to assume too much responsibility in resolving complex personal problems which students brought with them. As an executive director she has had to help staff define their roles in order to avoid burnout.

I have had to help people identify their roles and their limitations in these roles. What is your role as a teacher? Where is the boundary between teacher and personal counselor? How much of this do you take home at night?

This participant also discussed role overlap that occurred between members of the staff. It was a consequence of trying to help colleagues when they actually needed independently to go through a problem solving process.

So every one of us has had the problem of listening to a conversation and butting in: learning about a problem and trying to solve it. And doing things that in some way impede someone else's ability to make progress or become self-actualized. Frequently, if you go in and rescue people they never get the opportunity to do it themselves.

As a group they have had to work on this: to improve that sense of when support is needed and when support becomes interference.

### Assistant Needed

Another described her stress from overload in these terms, “I was frustrated and overwhelmed. We did not have someone to come in to do so many of the little things which I had to end up doing.” She was making the adjustments of starting a new job; she did not have the necessary support so that she could concentrate on what she deemed her central responsibilities: advocator, representative in the community, and administrator of all fiscal details. Since an assistant was hired, she has been able to focus on and meet key responsibilities without working excessive volunteer hours.

### Executive Director and Board Role Ambiguity

The following executive director spoke about role overlap that occurred between her and the board. “The problems that we had in the past is blurring of roles where the board was doing staff work and the staff was doing board work. We were not clear on who was supposed to be doing what.” Through board education and experience, roles have been more clearly defined. As executive director, however, her relationship with the board is not a rigid one. If she is heading a project and recruits board members to assist for that period of time she is in charge of them as she is of other volunteers. Also, the relationship between the chair and executive director still has gray areas. The solution in this case was regular and open communication so that they can openly discuss problematic areas and find a solution.

### Staff Not Understanding Their Own Roles

Two participants in this group described the difficulties when members of staff do not understand their roles. It is crucial that the staff has an understanding of adult literacy and of the duties for which they have been given responsibility. The possible

consequences of employees not understanding their work are tension, loss of funding sources, and loss of clients.

### Summary

The most salient pattern to emerge from this data was role overload. Ill-defined roles and boundaries contributed to work overload. Role overlap was also a consequence of ambiguously defined roles between the board and the executive director. Roles that had not been realistically or well defined in terms of workload and the time allotted to accomplish this work led to role overload. Participants who tried “to do it all” realized that they had to set boundaries that allowed them to achieve a sounder balance between work and leisure. An improved and more rational job description, the conscious awareness and effort to set boundaries and, in one case, the hiring of a much needed assistant have helped these participants to achieve a healthier balance in their lives.

## **Tutor Coordinators**

### Role Overload

Four of the tutor coordinators described role overload. In two cases this was a consequence of assuming additional responsibility such as managing or working on the community board. Role overload was exacerbated by a tendency for tutor coordinators to put in too much volunteer time. They spoke about their struggle to define boundary lines among various roles and between their work and home life. The problem was aggravated by the lack of understanding of their work by others such as the board or staff.

Participants also felt pulled between two separate areas of responsibility. One tutor coordinator talked about the need to redefine the manager’s and tutor coordinator’s role.

### Multiple, Incompatible Roles

One participant described having multiple roles that were inherently incompatible. The consequence of managing so many responsibilities led to role overload and the need to redefine her role and to set boundaries.

The college employed her as a tutor coordinator but she was also chair of the board of the community centre where she worked.

I was wearing different hats. It was a combination of role overlap and role overload. Being in these two positions tended to obscure boundaries; it was a horrendous situation for me and I realized this when I was into my third year.

### Role Overload

The consequence was extreme role overload. She was being paid for 20 hours but put in an additional 20 hours in order to meet what she deemed were her obligations as a tutor coordinator. She was also putting in another 15 to 20 hours at the centre.

I was starting to feel that there was something wrong with me. I believed that I should be able to continue to do this. It was my responsibility to do it.

It was at this point that she started to pull back and set boundaries.

### Lack of Understanding

Part of this problem arose because the inherent conflict of holding a board position at a centre at which she worked was not understood. Secondly, her work as a tutor coordinator was not fully appreciated by the board. When she held the position of president on the board, a lot of responsibility and volunteer time was expected of her. Thus she was asked to provide support for the centre rather than receiving support from them in her position as tutor coordinator.



## Boundary Setting

Although she has achieved a healthier balance in her life, this participant is still putting in as many volunteer hours as paid hours. There is a greater need in the community than she is able to meet in a 20-hour week. Although it is very difficult for her to draw these boundaries, she has had to step back and say no to a further increase in her workload.

Another tutor coordinator who faces this same challenge has had to make a decision of putting quality before quantity. They are successful in their work and this leads to an increased number of students; however, there has been no corresponding support in assistance or increased hours. This has been a difficult decision for them to make, as they cannot respond fully to the needs of the community.

When the following tutor coordinator assumed more than one role at a community centre, she was faced with both role overlap and work overload. “I had to put more into managing and the administration of funding. So of course, I felt extreme guilt over all of the things I wasn’t doing for the tutors and students.”

She had to sharply define boundaries and adhere to them. “If I had not been able to do that, I would not have been able to do anything.” In spite of this, she described stress from role overload and how her work started to dominate her entire life:

When I was home on weekends, if I wasn’t working directly on the project, my head would be filled with work. The whole weekend I would be strategizing, thinking about the proposals that had to be in and mostly the management part.

The final two participants also have multiple roles. The total number of hours however does not exceed a full time position. Although one does work an additional 50% beyond her paid time in volunteer hours, her stress is not related to role overload.

They both relate it to the “pull between two jobs” or role overlap. One describes her struggle in trying to set boundaries between the two areas of work:

They both have emotional investment as I really want to see the students succeed and sometimes I just have to decide which ones I’m going to spend my efforts on; which one am I going to put aside.

### Supports That May Work

The following tutor coordinator described **clear role delineation** between the executive director and herself. They were able to support each other without any negative role overlap:

I like the way our roles are so clearly defined, because I know what our individual responsibilities are. She knows her strengths are not in my area and my strengths are not in her area.

This participant had experienced both conflict within her role and role overload. She has since resolved this problem. An assistant was hired and this has freed her to do the essential aspects of her role such as training of tutors, matching with students and giving support to these relationships. By defining her role, setting boundaries and job sharing, she has been able to bring an essential balance to her life.

### Appropriate Role Definition

One of the tutor coordinators described an aspect of role overlap that was a consequence of the way roles were defined for the coordinator and the executive director. One of responsibilities of the executive director is working with the community infrastructure in developing relationships with agencies, service clubs and other educational institutions or centres. The tutor coordinator was not included in any of these discussions and does question these role boundaries. She believes that since the tutor coordinator works daily with the issues surrounding literacy she is at the heart of the

matter and as such should be included in some of the meetings. Part of the tutor coordinator's role is "managing" the program. Thus, the boundary lines between these two roles in this particular area of community relations and advocacy need not be so rigid or perhaps need to be redefined.

### Summary

The strongest pattern to emerge from this data was role overload. There were several contributing factors to work overload: 1) assuming too many roles, some inherently incompatible; 2) lack of understanding of the participant's work by the board; and 3) the need for the tutor coordinators to recognize how much they can contribute while still maintaining a healthy balance in their lives.

The tutor coordinators addressed these issues and were able to find some resolution by recognizing and defining their boundaries. This entailed withdrawing from additional roles that had caused an excessive workload or that were not compatible with their central work. They restricted the number of students and tutors with whom they work in order not to diminish the quality of the program. Setting these boundaries was difficult because they are not able to respond fully to the real needs of the community. One of the tutor coordinators has resolved the problem by job sharing so that she can focus on the essential aspects of her work.

## **Instructors**

### Role Overload & Role Overlap

Eight of the nine participants in this group described their roles as very well defined so there was little or no role conflict or overlap between colleagues. However, seven instructors describe overlap that occurred within their own roles. On many of the

smaller campuses instructors can have up to three or four separate work positions. The consequence of taking on these diverse roles can lead to role overlap, role overload and the need to set boundaries. All of the instructors put in unpaid hours and it varied from 10 to 100 % beyond their regular paid work day with the majority working more than 30% beyond regular hours. Some who were doubling their work time had to redefine their work boundaries and cut back on the heavy workload.

The other strong pattern which emerged was the lack of understanding on the part of the larger institution or agencies about the learning and teaching of literacy: the knowledge, the dedication and the actual time which is required if adults are to improve their literacy skills. In the previous chapter, this issue was discussed because lack of awareness about the nature of literacy work led to mandate conflict; the other consequence is role overload. In addition, lack of appreciation of the adult learning/teaching process has led to a large inequity in time allotted for preparation and marking.

Role conflict also occurred because of the nature of literacy instruction. Other skills such as counseling are required and if there is inadequate support in the form of advisors or counselors, instructors may be drawn away from their central responsibility of teaching.

### Multi-Roles & Boundary Setting

One of the instructors who holds multi-roles gave a detailed description of the resulting stress and the need to set boundaries:

Because of our situation at the college everybody gets part time at something: a little piece of this and a little piece of that. In the past, I was in a situation where I was writing the manual for a cost shared program for literacy evaluation. Part of my time was as a coordinator of the job readiness program and part of the time, I was instructing fundamental literacy. Was I stressed! There is no question—that was overload. I had put it on myself. I learned from that. If I wanted to do a good job, I

had to cut down on the number of things I was doing. You cannot be all things to all people.

This participant also spoke about the overlap between positions and the resulting pull or conflict:

I guess there is a certain degree of overlap because when I am teaching English I am alone. I'm doing it myself. In the other job the students are very needy, they need to have a lot of one-on-one, a lot of counseling, a lot of emotional work. So there are times that I am in conflict, I am pulled in two different directions. I would like to spend more time with my English class.

Another instructor described accepting duties as a tutor coordinator on a purely volunteer basis while she was working as an instructor of literacy at the college. She became exhausted and had to pull back on her volunteer duties.

#### Lack of Understanding by Larger Community

One of the major challenges which this instructor and her colleagues from other campuses face is the lack of understanding about their roles as instructors of literacy or their work in preparing students who have low levels of literacy for the job market. Some of the agencies and institutions appear to have little or no understanding of the literacy learning process. Many of her students in the job readiness program have literacy problems but that is not part of the mandate:

I can't deal with them without dealing with it; they cannot read and access material to understand why they are where they are and how to get out of it. And so we are really in an awkward position. My employer says these people need to be made job-ready as soon as possible and at the same time we know that is impossible in the time frame given.

This participant placed this lack of understanding in a broader context:

I think that may be part of the problem nationally, as far as the literacy program is concerned. I am speaking about institutional programs; they don't understand that adult literacy is a long-term thing.

She goes on to say that they do not understand that everybody is an individual; they have different capacities and different circumstances. “You cannot say that everyone is going to do it in five months. We have to work our way around that, as repeating is so detrimental.”

Another instructor spoke about mandate conflict caused in part by agencies that send their clients to the college without understanding the literacy teaching/learning process:

No matter who the student is or what their background is, I am expected as the literacy instructor to be moving those students through a grade 4 to grade 9 level in one year, and then on to a grade 10 level. That was the expectation and even though I tried, it did not happen.

She also spoke about the lack of understanding by the institution. She has had to struggle to keep her English class structured on three semesters rather than one:

Unfortunately my reality here is that while there is support there is not a lot of understanding. There is no appreciation of how complex the process really is. I only have this amount of time because I keep fighting for it. New administrators should learn what the programs and the students are about.

Two colleagues said that their roles were very well defined and there was no role conflict either between colleagues or within their roles. They did, however, speak about the issue of literacy not being understood by the agencies with the consequence of mandate conflict. Again, as expressed by their colleagues on other campuses, they are expected to bring a student up two or three grade levels in one term. “If a student has a more typical background of the students we see, there is not the time to do what I see as my mandate.”

One of these participants described various aspects of this issue:

Often the agencies dictate because they are footing the bill and he who pays, says. However I think that their expectations are not realistic. I think sometimes there is a

perception that ABE is easy to teach because we are working at ‘lower levels’. Yes, there are some things that I can look at and quickly know the answer, etc. On the other hand, teaching people to read and to write—people who have very few skills to begin with—that is an extremely taxing job. It took us 12 years when we were young and that was our job, our role. How can we possibly expect mothers and fathers, people who are working full or part-time, to do this in three and a half months without tremendous support?

### Inequity in Preparation and Marking Time

All of the instructors who teach literacy spoke about the inequity in time they receive for preparation and marking. This is a large contributing factor to work overload. Again it appears to be a lack of appreciation or understanding of the nature of the role they perform. An instructor gives this description:

According to the agreement we are obligated to be in the classroom 24 hours teaching. Now everyone else in the system works 12 hours. That shows you right there that what the rest are doing is valuable, that they need all that other time to do their prep and marking. And that what we do—we are working with such low-level people so what kind of prep and marking would we have? Well I have prep and marking every night. There is not a night that I don’t have marking because how do people learn how to write if you don’t have them writing. These people are writing for me every single day.

### Role Conflict, Role Overload & The Nature of Literacy Instruction

An instructor and a colleague from another campus described the multitude of roles that are inherent in being a literacy instructor and how the support of a counselor has freed them to some degree to concentrate on teaching:

You have asked me to define my work: I am parent, social worker, teacher and counselor. I will tell you that after we started getting counselors I could better attend to the task of teaching.

Aside from assuming other roles, the actual task of teaching is very hard work.

Her words best describe this work:

A literacy instructor has “to be on” in the classroom all of the time. You cannot sit around. You don’t give them an exercise and you sit down. There has to be interaction all of the time. The students don’t learn unless it is hands on. So you do a

little teaching and then we do a little work. By the end of the day, yes, you are exhausted. Often you have been on your feet the whole day. Also there is more to it than that. It takes an instructor a month to get the dynamics of the class worked out so that they can work as a cohesive group. So for the first month when I go home, I die, I hit the couch; I just die.

The second participant described the support that counselors give and about how essential it is to set boundaries in order to avoid burnout.

I used to do a lot more counseling that I don't do anymore. We now have counselors to do much of that work. I have learned better now how to deal with those emotional issues without getting myself too involved; it makes me crazy. I have learned to set boundaries. I feel good about not letting myself get too overloaded.

She spoke about teaching in a larger institution; she believes that it is easier to avoid burnout in the larger setting because there are so many factors over which you do not have control. In the little centre the individual knows that the success of the program largely depends on his or her effort thus can put in excessive time trying to save the program.

### Boundary Setting

When an instructor reached the point where she was putting in more volunteer hours than she did at her regular paid work; she began to suffer from extreme exhaustion. She finally had to set boundaries within her work life and is trying to adhere to this redefined position. This instructor accepts a lot of personal responsibility for this situation.

You do it to yourself. To tell you the truth, I don't think that anyone even knows what I do in here. I could do half of what I do. I just got off track and I tried to do too much. I can see somebody being swallowed up by this kind of work. There is no end to what you can do with these students.

Another college instructor in describing the role overload that she has experienced speaks about it in terms of time.



The thing is the amount of work you are given and the time in which you have to achieve it. What you perceive as your responsibilities in this little time. Well right now, to be quite honest with you, I sometimes wonder how I will manage to get through this term. In order to get everything done we will have to take a lot of work home on a regular basis. My concern for us is that there is just too much.

The following participant has taken on multiple roles and this has caused some conflict. One consequence is role overload; she puts in an additional 50% above her regular hours in volunteer time. She views part of this issue as a personal challenge: she needs to improve her ability to set boundaries.

I am asked to do things and I am not very capable of saying no. I just became the chair of another committee. Initially, I thought that I would not be in the committee but now I am actually chairing it.

### Rigid Roles

An instructor spoke about colleagues who are too rigidly set in their roles:

There are people who are rigidly stuck with wanting to maintain a system that is not adapting to the needs of the students any longer. There is hesitancy to be very innovative and there are always the people who are locked into bureaucracy.

### **Summary**

The strongest pattern to emerge from this data was role overload that was a consequence of several factors: 1) instructors had assumed more than one job; this resulted both in role overlap and role overload; 2) there is a lack of understanding or awareness on the part of the larger institution or agencies, consequently the instructors are given inadequate time to respond to the needs of their students; 3) there is inequity in the time that fundamental literacy instructors are given for preparation and marking; 4) many of the participants described the need to set boundaries so that their work did not dominate their lives

Two instructors spoke about the need for people in this profession to be flexible and innovative: they are in a stage of discovery about adult literacy and creative thinking is needed rather than a rigidly conservative attitude.

Their response to role overload has been to try to redefine their boundaries of work in order to avoid burnout.

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In the following chapter the participants discuss their degree of job satisfaction. They analyze their work and speak about what aspects of work give them gratification or conversely what has detracted from job satisfaction.

## CHAPTER V

### JOB SATISFACTION

I asked the participants about their degree of job satisfaction. Job satisfaction may be based on many factors such as status, monetary reward, intellectual satisfaction, congenial atmosphere, accomplishment, self-growth and altruism. Altruism can be the sense of someone feeling that his or her work is worthy, that it is somehow making the world a better place.

With the exception of two participants, all of the literacy practitioners had worked in the centres or institutions for a minimum of four years. In spite of the many challenges that the participants described in this study they all spoke about a very high level of job satisfaction. They love their work. Their job satisfaction was based on doing something of real value—of making the world a better place, on a sense of accomplishment and on intellectual satisfaction. They did emphasize that job satisfaction is also related to a supportive collaborative atmosphere, one where there is openness, respect and trust among staff. Eight of the participants had experienced a degree of breakdown in teamwork and although it greatly increased their levels of stress it did not diminish their appreciation of the work itself: working with adult learners.

#### **Executive Directors**

All the executive directors described a high degree of job satisfaction. Executive directors have a diverse range of responsibilities from building community relationships to fiscal management to administration and working with staff. Although they understand much about this profession as advocates of literacy, they do not share the same intense working relationship with students as instructors and tutor coordinators.

Even though there is this distinction, they expressed the same basis for job satisfaction as instructors and tutor coordinators. They believe that they are working for a worthy cause, certain aspects of their work intellectually stimulate them and they enjoy a sense of accomplishment. The following participants expressed the reasons for job satisfaction, which were echoed by the rest of their colleagues.

#### Altruism, Intellectual Satisfaction, A Sense of Accomplishment

This executive director described job satisfaction that is based on doing something of value and on intellectual gratification. “It is because I am affecting someone else’s life in a positive way; actually accomplishing something.” She started managing with little knowledge of this field and the learning process has continued as the centre grew: “Yes, I am learning; and it is a whole new thing which I have learned. When I came into this I had never been involved in running a community centre.” She has learned about non-profit boards, fund raising and forming collaborative connections with the community.

The following executive director says that she enjoys her work because she has never been bored. Although she does not work directly with students, she does have contact with many of them.

There is joy for an adult, whose world has just opened up, or a tutor that tells me what a wonderful experience they have had in the past half-hour working with a student. There is joy at the end of the night after putting on a large literacy event, having a large audience leave with smiles on their faces; there are a million reasons everyday to make me feel good about doing this job.

#### Summary

All of the executive directors expressed a high level of fulfillment that they received from their work. Their enjoyment of their work was based on a sense of accomplishment, on intellectual satisfaction and on working for a worthy cause.

## **Tutor Coordinators**

### Beyond Status and Money

All of the tutor coordinator expressed a very high level of job satisfaction. They love the very nature and process of the work itself: the relationships they share with tutors and students, the facilitation of learning and growth in other human beings. They described not what they gave but what they received; in this process they feel that their lives have been enriched and that they have reached a higher level of self-actualization. They all said that a congenial atmosphere that was open and collaborative in nature was an important aspect of job satisfaction. Their job satisfaction was not based on status or high monetary reward.

I will use their words that eloquently describe the many aspects of gratification that they derive from their work. These are the words of an extraordinarily dedicated, committed group of professional women. One of the tutor coordinators who I interviewed expressed both the personal and spiritual reward that she has received from her work:

### Altruism, Intellectual Satisfaction and Accomplishment

I have experienced joy, I mean joy at work. So in terms of being satisfied with work itself, I don't know if it could be any better. Helping people with literacy—being given the opportunity to witness a life changing experience is a blessing. It is very hard to articulate the whole of it but for every person, who walks in the door, I just have such a deep appreciation of what it takes for him or her to just come in. It is the most rewarding work at a personal and spiritual level that I have ever done.

She also said that there was intellectual satisfaction and a deep sense of accomplishment.

I am able to match people: there is so much involved in putting two people together that is more than what is concretely written or expressed. There is the intuitive part of putting people together and I had satisfaction in knowing that I could do that. I see it on a global level too. *Helping people that way can change a community; it can change the world.*

Another participant likes going to work in the morning because she knows that the work she is doing is important and valuable. She continues by saying that “I could not do a job where I thought that I was not benefiting somebody somehow and in return I feel a great deal of benefit from it.”

The following tutor coordinator does not describe mere “job satisfaction”: she describes a passion for her work that is echoed by all of her colleagues:

I love my work. I love what I do. I would not be doing it if I did not love it. This is the only job I have had that actually gives me goose bumps. When you see that a student walks in, standing straight, shoulders back, head up after two months of tutoring, you know that you are succeeding. When you see that tutors are so involved with their students, that is job satisfaction.

The following participant described how deeply rewarding it is to facilitate people in the movement from feeling marginalized to feeling that they are part of the central group. She also spoke about one of the differences between working with children and adults:

This is the most wonderful work in the world. When you see somebody like—a fellow said to me the other day, ‘I never used to read the newspaper because it was too difficult. It made me so mad I would just throw it down. I would turn the news on and watch it on TV because I could understand that. Now I read the newspapers all of the time.’ You know when you hear stories like that: an adult who could not read properly, write properly, experiencing the joy of being able to do this. There can be nothing more rewarding in the world. Working with a child is one thing but it’s different with an adult. You see the joy. I know children are happy when they learn to read. But this is a different thing because of the long journey. Oh yes, I very much like my work.

### Congenial Atmosphere

She describes a collaborative atmosphere that enhances her job satisfaction, “it is a very congenial atmosphere because everybody is equal and everybody is learning together”.

All of the tutor coordinators spoke about the importance of a collaborative and supportive atmosphere at work. Three of the tutor coordinators to whom I spoke described varying degrees of teamwork breakdowns which has led to tense relationship without the elements of openness, trust and respect between staff. As indicated in the research, teamwork and collaboration alleviate stress and subsequently increase job satisfaction (24).

### Summary

The tutor coordinators, like the executive directors, described a very high degree of job satisfaction. They love the very nature of the work: interviewing, conducting workshops, facilitating and supporting the relationships between tutors and learners. They know that they are doing and contributing to something of real value. They also receive intellectual stimulation and a sense of accomplishment from the work they do. Although all participants said that a congenial supportive atmosphere at work is an important part of job satisfaction, some have experienced a breakdown in teamwork.

### **The Instructors**

All of the instructors spoke about intellectual satisfaction, about a sense of accomplishment and about the pure joy of teaching: of facilitating the learning process and about doing something in life that they recognized as worthy. None thought that their job satisfaction was based on monetary reward or status.

### Altruism

This instructor expressed the essence of the joy and reward that she receives in her work. All of the instructors described a similar basis for what has drawn and held them in this profession. I have used the word altruism in describing this facet of job

satisfaction. The word, however, seems inadequate as it implies “selfless giving”. This participant speaks instead about what she feels “privileged to receive”.

I listen to somebody who for the first time has ever read in front of another person in his life. There is this big sigh of relief and he says, ‘I did it’. This is a 47 or 48 year old man and everybody is sitting around telling him how great it was and saying ‘Way to go Ray, way to go’. It is an incredible experience. But they don’t know about it out there. You have to be in it, you have to experience it to know what this feels like. Whether that person ever gets to grade 8, or 10, or 12—maybe that person just can’t do that—but he couldn’t read at all before, and now he has had the satisfaction of knowing what it is when people say that they have read something. I remember when one woman sat beside me and she was reading a very simple book but she said, ‘did I read—is that reading?’.

These participants described many facets of teaching that enhances their job satisfaction. This instructor spoke about growth of self-confidence in her students, “I also get satisfaction when I see that students who arrive here scared out of their wits begin to lose that fear and feel better about themselves”.

### Intellectual Satisfaction

These two instructors described aspects of their work from which they derive intellectual satisfaction:

I enjoy challenges, I found it very challenging to write the new curriculum. I thought it would be a piece of cake, just to rewrite the tests—take no time at all. Well, months and months later trying to fit this into little bits of time here and there—it was challenging.

And:

I think I have the best job in this area. Last year I gave up teaching literacy and I spent two terms doing administration and I am very, very glad to be back teaching. It is part of that puzzle, figuring out what is needed to make this group work. So it is partly that kind of challenge, that is the intellectual part. The other part of it is that they are remarkable people. So that is very important as well.

A colleague spoke about the intellectually satisfying aspect of her work:



I enjoy using a computer and learning how to use one. I like word processing, working with literacy materials. I enjoy facilitating whether it is a classroom or a meeting.

### Congenial Atmosphere

This participant described both the relationships with colleagues and the strengthening of her own self-esteem that she received from her work:

I feel a high degree of job satisfaction. A lot of it is from the interpersonal relations and certainly it builds my self-esteem working with people who feel that I have helped them. But just seeing their accomplishments and their ability to go on, I don't think there is anything more wonderful.

### Summary

The instructors enjoy their work. This satisfaction is based on the nature of their work and altruism. They find their work intellectually satisfying and they experience a sense of accomplishment. The instructors said that the friendly, supportive atmosphere at work that they have experienced is an important aspect of job satisfaction. None of the participants in this study based their job satisfaction on status or monetary reward.

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In the following chapter the participants reexamine their working lives and describe the changes that would produce better working conditions or, in a broader sense, provide a stronger base for work in literacy. They spoke from a perspective of the best of all possible worlds: given the reality of fiscal restraints what might be doable.

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## CHAPTER VI

### THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

#### Recommendations From Participants

In this section participants looked again at their working lives. They spoke about changes that would improve their working conditions. The best of all possible worlds was visualized with an emphasis on the word “possible worlds”. They described changes that would improve their immediate environment within the centres. They also spoke about a more fundamental change: how learning centres are structured and run within communities.

#### **The Executive Directors:**

This group of participants in visualizing the “best of all possible worlds” spoke about several topics. They talked about the value of a community centre, the need for a close connection between an adult learning centre and a college, the need for better support in education and funding and the need to raise the public’s awareness of literacy.

#### Community Centre: Best of All Possible Worlds

All of the executive directors value a storefront setting as an outreach for literacy students. They said that a significant number of the students they attract would never have entered an educational institution. In the words of one of the participants: “However, what is important, is that we remain downtown and keep the every day grass roots setting: next to a bus stop, a house. It is essential because of the group we are serving who have such a negative relationship with institutional settings.”

## Close Working Relationship Between Community Centre and College

Four of the six executive directors believe that the community centre and the college should have a close working relationship. This was a strong pattern in the data. Some of the main challenges that they face are isolation and lack of stability. They thought that the support and higher profile that a centre would receive from close association with a college would alleviate some of the stress. This would allow them to focus on their central goal of improving literacy skills among adults who have this need.

Two of the executive directors who do not have close working relationships with the respective colleges strongly believe that a more supportive connection would greatly strengthen the centres' positions.

“Yes, ideally, what we wanted to see was the tutor coordinator being hired out of the college. If we could work more closely with the college it would give a lot more security, stable funding, raised status, and higher profile.” The other participant had struggled to reach a closer relationship with the college. There was some frustration felt by this participant because the centre and the college share a common basis: the education of adult students. It was felt that if they both have the interests of the community at heart a closer relationship should develop.

The following two participants do share a close working relationship with their respective colleges. One, in speaking about the best of all possible worlds, believes that this relationship should continue:

Well I think that within this community, in terms of an adult learning centre—I think it should be run by a college and there should be downtown intake. The centre should be well staffed, open long hours, weekends. It should be storefront, easily assessed, a friendly drop-in environment. The important thing is that the college must want to do it.

The second participant said that, “we really appreciate our partnership with the college. Also in terms of settings, I think it is important for the students to have a non-institutional place to go to.”

#### Need For Support Systems: Assured Funding

Three of the six participants spoke of the need for educational support and assured funding. There is a broad spectrum of knowledge that is required by an executive director. Insecure funding is also a major issue which adds stress and detracts from their ability to focus on their main areas of work.

Although the conferences and summer institute have assisted the learning process there are gaps which individuals have experienced. Some are specific skills and others are broader questions that perhaps could be addressed if the college and community centre would collaboratively work together.

I think that some computer training and some specific financial training—this has been hanging over my head a long time. Another frustration that I have faced is not understanding what else is out there and where we fit in the bigger picture. Are there gaps between the college’s and our responsibility? If there are gaps, how do we fill them?

#### The Need to Raise Awareness

The final participant addressed the issue of lack of awareness of literacy issues. All of the participants: the tutor coordinators, instructors and the executive directors have spoken about this problem. There is a lack of awareness about the population who cannot read, write or express themselves at an adequate level to function competently within the social, economic, and political arenas. The public, the bureaucracy, and large segments of institutions of learning do not understand the social, psychological and political issues of literacy. The literacy practitioners all described various aspects of the lack of

awareness and its effects. The isolation, the lack of recognition, and the inappropriate period of time they are given to do their work are just a few of the consequences. This executive director addresses the lack of awareness; she speaks about what must occur if we are ever to approach the best of all possible worlds in adult literacy education.

I think that literacy is a fairly new field. We are in a field where we still have not got to that critical mass where people understand what literacy means. If I am working with adult literacy students, people do not automatically click. They say, 'Oh yeah'? So we have not reached that critical mass. In reaching the best of all possible worlds, I would like to say that one of the major issues is awareness of what this really means to folks. It has to be in everybody's understanding of the world. They don't understand that by grade three, a child who has not learned to read is developing defense mechanisms that will stay with him forever. These are the problems that we as literacy practitioners have to deal with in a 40-year-old. Because this child who grows into an adult cannot say that so and so did it to him, he cannot blame his parents or his economic situation or the government. All he can really say is that he is dumb. Because he has to own that, there is a huge shame around it. So this is why I think it is so critical for these people to get the support to understand that there is more to it than, "they failed". We have to develop a system, a culture, and an environment where we are given support of doing that very important job of turning these folks around.

She continues by saying that we do not have to reinvent the wheel, the model, the way to increase public awareness is out there. It has been used in bringing out other issues from behind closed doors:

We have the model for increasing public awareness. We have done it with sexual abuse, with child abuse. With this (literacy) we have not got anywhere near critical mass. Again, I think you have to think about this as being a very new field; there is very little understanding but the model is there for increasing awareness.

The effects that lack of awareness has on the working lives of literacy practitioners is negative: they work with inadequate support, recognition and in isolation. The effect of this lack of awareness on the adult who is struggling with inadequate literacy skills is devastating:

We are dealing with a group of people for whom these issues are so dramatic. In my experience, these people are in the worst situation because they have the shame of

this problem. My experience in working with these folks over the years is that they would rather tell me: that they were sexually abused, that they have sexual orientation problems, that they were beaten up, that they have alcoholic parents, that they have drug and substance abuse. I have heard people disclose that they have all sort of things and still not disclose that they have a reading problem. We are dealing with a body of people for whom the problem is extremely shameful to them personally.

We have to get to a point in literacy, in awareness, so that someone who is 35 and struggling can say out loud that they have a reading problem and the response will be empathetic and supportive; it won't be, 'what do you mean, you can't read?'. That is the world that I would like us to reach.

### Summary

All of the executive directors valued a community-based adult learning centre. Four of the six participants thought that a close relationship with the community college would bring more stability and a higher profile to the community centre. They also said that educational support and more secure funding would improve their working conditions. One of the participants spoke about the need to raise awareness of literacy at a local, provincial, national and global level. Without this awareness, literacy will not receive the support and concerted effort which is required to reach the "best of all possible worlds"

### **Tutor Coordinators**

#### Community Centre:

Like the executive directors, all of the tutor coordinators I interviewed including the ones who work within colleges believe that the community centre is a very effective way to reach adult learners. All but one of the tutor coordinators I interviewed had a minimum of four years of experience in the field. The participants who work out of community centres are fully confident that they have reached a significant proportion of their population because of being in an accessible storefront setting. Many of the students have been traumatized by their school experience; the institution symbolizes

both shame and failure so they avoid any association with it. Through the centres, however, some of the students have made a transition to college. Thus, all of the tutor coordinators valued the concept of the community centre as a part of the best of all possible worlds.

### Close Working Relationship Between the Community Centre and College

A strong pattern to emerge from these data was the tutor coordinator's belief that there should be a close working relationship between a community centre and a college. Six of the eight tutor coordinators expressed this belief; they thought that the tutor coordinator should be an employee of the college. A close link with a college would give them more stability and support and the college in turn would reach a larger spectrum of the adult learners. The tutor coordinators also spoke about the need for improved educational and counseling support and the need for raised public awareness.

Two tutor coordinators who work within colleges spoke about the need for a community centre. One said:

My dream is to have a community centre, the ideal place would be a drop-in centre which has a liaison with the community. The connection with the college would be very important because that would give a sense of security and stability.

A colleague on another campus believes that they need a storefront for the basic level literacy learner:

There needs to be a learning centre because not every person who cannot read and write is going to be comfortable walking through the door of a college. Attracting literacy students—the ones who need one-on-one—they do not flood the hallways here. That is why, in the fact, we do not have a literacy class at level 1.

Two tutor coordinators who are hired by colleges and work out of community centres strongly supported this close association. One participant says, “that a close working relationship between the college and a community centre is the way”. The other

tutor coordinator describes all of the support which she has received through this relationship: “You see another reason that a connection with the college is so valuable—I am provided with all of these supports—resource material, educational, and added salary benefits.”

However, there was a cautionary note added by one of the participants, “it is crucial that the board and the college clearly understand their individual roles and work in collaboration so that they do not make decisions that are inherently incompatible or not supportive of the employees’ working conditions”. Both participants have experienced the negative consequences of decisions being made without close consultation between the college, board and the employee. It becomes extremely important that roles are clearly defined and that communication remains both open and constant when a college and a community centre work together.

Two tutor coordinators who do not have a close working relationship with their respective colleges also support this relationship. One of the participants said, “there are differences between a college and a community centre but the similarities are so great that it is really important that they connect. We do not have a close relationship with our college and we are so isolated.” The other suffered from extreme isolation and lack of support; she believes that a working relationship with the campus would have alleviated much of the stressful isolation.

#### Need For Support Systems & Assured Funding

The other patterns that emerged from this group’s data are an expressed need of additional support systems and assured funding. Because they work with a vulnerable group of people, their work is much more than training tutors and matching these



students with tutors who in turn teach Math, Reading and Writing. They have a holistic approach and work on social and psychological issues such as building self-esteem and self-worth so that a person is able to express their thoughts, their feelings. Thus six tutor coordinators expressed the need of continued educational support, counselors, and clerical assistance.

Two of the tutor coordinators who are college employees working within the college spoke about the support systems which are already in place and how very necessary they are:

All the departments have a yearly retreat. It is a combination of an annual meeting: some form of professional development with the group. This is very positive.

Although they already do have some counseling support, one participant said, “it would facilitate things greatly to have counselors available a lot more than they are available. In an environment like this, we need a lot of counseling by people qualified to give it.” She described workshops that have been put in place to help instructors deal with the emotional issues that they are faced with every day:

Like how do you teach somebody math when her face has been beaten in the day before. How do you cope with what people tell you. It is extremely difficult and emotional; it can get in the way of your doing your job.

The other participant thinks that having professional development and educational support is very important. She does have this through the college.

The following two participants are employed by colleges and work out of community centres and the colleges. One said that a capable assistant would free her so that she could focus on her core work:

I do not like to do administration. I want to work with the tutors and students; I want to teach the training. I want to develop programs. I don't like administration as it seriously cuts into the little time I do have to teach and coordinate.

The other participant, who was working with a newly hired assistant, said that she now has more time to do her essential work.

Two tutor coordinators who are not closely associated with a college expressed the need for educational support and counselors. One suggested that “ a comprehensive training program would remove some of the stress with which new workers are faced”. She also said that another important component would be a counselor for the students and the staff. The second participant also spoke about the need for counseling support: “Counseling support should be an important part that is built in for the staff. But this would only happen if it were deemed important by the funders and board.”

Funding issues were discussed in this part of the interview. All of the tutor coordinators said that secure and adequate funding would diminish much of the stress in their work. Most of the tutor coordinators, who are employed by community centres, just have basic employment benefits: they do not get sick leave, holiday pay or pension. Their work is secure only for the length of the contract. Some thought not of more funding but of how the available funding is spent. One participant spoke about a collaborative community model rather than one that is competitive:

The competition for funding is divisive and how you deliver it becomes different. It has been a big wish of mine that we could work together and share resources. Maybe if a community had a larger umbrella and under this umbrella you had: the multicultural centre, family services, the various employment services, the nursing centre, and the adult literacy centre. If there were one board responsible for these centres...

### Reducing Isolation

The issue of isolation was already covered in a previous chapter on communication. Six of the tutor coordinators spoke about their isolation, the lack of

recognition and the lack of public awareness of literacy that contributes directly to their sense of isolation. In this part of the interview, one spoke again about the importance of close communication with colleagues; another described how recognition of the work they do would greatly enhance their job satisfaction and working conditions.

This tutor coordinator spoke directly about isolation: “I guess aside from the funding part then the next thing would be working in isolation. It has been relieved somewhat by having a regional literacy coordinator for the tutor coordinators.” She goes on to say that one of the most isolated tutor coordinator lives in a large urban centre, “so isolation is really a big one, you can be isolated even in a city. So meeting with people who have a real understanding of your work which would be another tutor coordinator is an important need.”

### Receiving Recognition

The following tutor coordinator addressed the importance of being recognized:

We do this job; we don't get evaluated. We don't get reports; we have to feel somehow that what we are doing is important and valuable. It would be nice to occasionally get a pat on the back but they never come. We need some feed back, just affirmation. We are isolated; instructors from the college get feedback from their students constantly but this is a different kind of role where we are always giving to the tutors and to the learners. I think the same is true of executive directors: they have stuff just dumped on them with directives and there is not a sense of thank you for what you've done.

### Raising Public Awareness

Another participant speaks about the need for increased public awareness of literacy issues. Not only does the lack of awareness leave the tutor coordinator isolated and the profession marginalized, the affect on society is devastating.

It's important that people understand that there is this need. It is a growing need because the level of literacy required of people is rising. Even to operate machines such as bank machines requires a lot of reading and understanding. We have a

growing group of people who are being disenfranchised. Yes, the requirements of literacy are growing, work is one central issue but it is also demanded of people just to function in the most mundane ways in society.

The second tutor coordinator spoke about her community where the economy is mainly resource based.

Although they are skilled, with the logging and fishing down, their skills are not enough. I would like the community to be more aware of that. I'd like the service groups—the infrastructure—to be aware of that.

### Summary

The tutor coordinators valued the community centres; their work experience has convinced them that they reached many of these students because of being in a highly accessible setting. Six of the eight tutor coordinators believed that there should be a close working relationship between the centre and the community college. They also spoke about the need for education, counseling supports and the need for more secure funding. They, like the executive directors, addressed the fundamental need for raised public awareness.

### **The Instructors**

Although the instructors have educational and counseling support in place, they do lack time to do the research and development of new material that they believe is needed in this field. Four instructors spoke about the need for greater public awareness of literacy issues. Three instructors questioned the grade 12 entrance standard that is required for most jobs; one spoke about alternatives. Two instructors spoke about the competitive vying for funds for literacy programs. They questioned how much duplication is actually happening and, if so, could funds not be spent more efficiently.

Two participants visualized community centres for literacy students that retained their connection with a college.

#### Need to Raise Awareness

Four of the instructors addressed the need for a greater understanding and knowledge of literacy. This includes educational institutions, the bureaucracy and the general public. They must contend with this lack of comprehension every time they are mandated to move students from a grade 4 level to grade 9 or 10 level in a term or two. It occurs when they are expected to prepare students for the work force without paying attention to their low literacy skills. Or when they are given inadequate preparation time and marking, the implication being that their work is so easy. One participant in commenting on the lack of awareness says, “certainly I would like to see more awareness of literacy in the bigger world but now if we could just have it in our immediate environment—the college”. Another says, “they do not have an understanding of literacy problems, we have a long way to go”.

#### Support Systems and Assured Resources

Five of the instructors described their educational support and counseling support as much appreciated and very valuable. Three of these participants stressed the importance of education that included workshops on setting boundaries, teamwork and collaboration. Since they are the pioneers in this field, there is a pressing need to use, test, rewrite and develop new material, new ideas, and new curriculum. Thus they need the time and resources to meet, discuss, reflect and develop new concepts. They work with a vulnerable group of students. Although they said that they cannot exclude

counseling completely from their work, it is imperative that there are counseling services that allow the instructors to focus on teaching.

Although they have educational support, three instructors said that they do not have adequate time to do research on curriculum material that needs to be done. They are already putting in so many unpaid hours that one instructor viewed the best of all possible worlds as “a little daylight hours in which to do my marking and preparation”.

### Arbitrary Standard

Three instructors questioned the arbitrary standard that requires a minimum of high school graduation as a prerequisite for employment or training entrance. One said, “we have to make changes in how we look at certain kinds of work and people and their skills; we must watch that we are not demanding a Grade 12 education which does not actually need a grade 12 level of education”. The second participant spoke about the stress that she feels as an instructor; she does not want to create false expectations in her students so that once again they feel excluded when searching for employment. A third instructor described an innovative change that is a high school-campus effort. Students begin their trade school education during high school.

There has been a new initiative at the main campus in cooperation with the school district. This allows students from the high school to be able, in their last two or three years, to prepare themselves for work and get their high school graduation. They actually get the first year of post-secondary training in the trades while they are in high school.

### Collaboration Versus Competition For Funding

The following two participants questioned how funding is distributed and whether collaboration would not be a more effective and efficient way to respond to the challenge of literacy. The first instructor addressed what she considered much duplication with

wasted funding. “It absolutely infuriates me that there are all these literacy programs, literacy money floating around the country—I wonder what is it funding?” The second instructor speaks more about the divisiveness of competition and the benefits of collaboration.

You know, all of this funding which keeps going in all different directions; wouldn't it be a lot better to try and centralize all of that. I would think there is inefficiency now and there would be problems in making the other system work but in the end it would at least stop duplication. Everyone is trying to do the best they can but doing it in isolated pockets and it is the isolation that hurts. This type of work should not be done in isolation. We should work toward collaboratively rather than competitively.

### Community Centre

Two of the instructors visualized a community centre for literacy level students. One spoke about the need for a place that was more student centred. Thus she believed that a non-profit community centre run by the students with instructors from the college is an ideal setting. In such a situation students could exercise more control over their lives.

The second instructor says, “that my ideal setting for a literacy program would be a setting that would be somewhat separate from the regular ABE setting”. She thought that life skills could be taught within the program and that it would be important to have a direct connection with support agencies outside.

### Summary

The most imperative need that the instructors described is raising the larger community's awareness about literacy. They believe that the lack of appreciation by the larger institution or agencies which has led to mandate conflict and work overload is based on lack of awareness about the nature of their work. The educational and counseling support systems that they already have in place are very necessary and much

appreciated. However, they do need additional support to do research on many aspects of literacy. Three instructors questioned the arbitrary grade 12 standard that is required to enter the trades or certain kinds of employment. Two instructors spoke about the need for a storefront setting for literacy students, a community centre that retains its close connection to the community college. Two instructors discussed the divisiveness of competitively vying for funds. They believe that communities would be better served if they were to work collaboratively in responding to adult literacy.

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In the following chapter, the tutor coordinators and executive directors speak about the community board and the relationships between the boards and the centres. Issues such as the need for community board education, role delineation, and board involvement are discussed.



## CHAPTER VII

### THE COMMUNITY CENTRE BOARD

In this section the community board is discussed in terms of their support of the employees and of their understanding of literacy, the employees' roles and their own roles. The executive directors also spoke about their efforts to achieve clearly defined roles between themselves and the board—in particular the chair. This group consists of four tutor coordinators (four do not have direct contact with a community board) and six executive directors.

#### Lack of Understanding of Roles

The strongest pattern to emerge is the board's lack of understanding of the employee's role and of their own roles. Seven participants in the group said that the board did not understand the nature of the work being done by the staff. One participant said that they did not understand her role or the actual relationship between the centre and the college. In this case, where the college and community work closely together, it is imperative that they have clearly defined roles and that they understand their individual responsibilities.

The other consequence of board members not understanding the work of the employees is that it does not allow them to be effectively supportive. One tutor coordinator, who was isolated, looking for some type of affirmation did not find it when attending board meetings.

I was feeling rather isolated and I would go to a meeting and there was nothing. I would read my report and they would just pass it. There were no questions, never a comment. They listened but obviously did not understand.

In the second case, not understanding staff roles led to their making decisions that impaired rather than supported the work being done by the employees. They made decisions about the tutor coordinator's workspace, time schedule and computer software all without consulting the employee which had a disruptive and negative impact on her work situation.

Four of the executive directors spoke in detail about the need for the board to understand the goals and philosophy of the organization: furthermore, not only to understand board roles but to have specific responsibilities. They also spoke about the inherent difficulty in achieving clear role definition between the board chair and their own role. Sometimes it is difficult to see the difference between a management issue and a policy issue. They have resolved some of these challenges though arranging board education and through establishing honest, open communication.

#### Need for Board to Have Specific Responsibilities

The following executive director describes the need for the board to have individual roles:

It was important for the board to set goals and objectives independent of my role and my job that makes them responsible for what they do in the year. So they are not just coming to a meeting and listening to what I have done and going away again. It is not busy work and it is not management work. One job is to find us a new facility, one is to manage the personnel policies, and to do all of that from a policy perspective.

Another participant said that she believed that it was her responsibility as the executive director to organize education for the board. "I think it is the job of an executive director to insure that your board receives proper board training and I think it is important that the executive director be a part of that training." She also expressed the belief that boards do not need to know the fine details of your job but they do need to

understand the work of the organization so that they can develop policy and fund raise. She also commented on the importance of board members having individual responsibilities. Without these specific roles they tended to meddle in work which was actually the responsibility of the executive director:

I think part of that problem was that the board did not have jobs of their own. They did not have anything to take ownership of, other than coming to a meeting, listening to reports and grilling the treasurer.

### Need For Role Delineation

The following executive director spoke about the fine line that exists between their roles and how sometimes, they cross over: “They evaluate my performance so in that sense they are my boss. However, if we are working on a project and I recruit a board member, they become a part of the pool of volunteers whom I manage.” She describes how in the past there was a blurring of roles where the board was doing staff work and the staff was doing board work. Through education they have achieved better definition on who is supposed to do what. She also sees her responsibility as keeping the board out of trouble:

I advise them of opportunities and threats I see in the community because I am actually more connected with the actual work than they are. If they come up with an idea that is impractical or economically disastrous, I need to be giving them that kind of advice.

### Summary

This group of participants described the need for community board education. It is imperative for board members to understand the basic issues of literacy and the goals of the organization. This knowledge enables them to support the staff effectively, to write policy and to fund raise. The second need is for board members to have specific

responsibilities or jobs. This moves them from a position of mere interest to real involvement in the goals of the organization.

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In the final chapter a summary is made of the previous chapters findings. Recommendations are made which are based on these results.

## CHAPTER VIII

### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter a brief synopsis is made of the findings from the previous chapters. One of the objectives in this study was to provide recommendations for the improvement of support and communication systems of literacy practitioners. I spoke to just twenty-three literacy practitioners from six institutions and six community centres. However, the interviews were very rich in context; the participants were given the opportunity to reflect and speak in detail about their working lives from a number of perspectives. Out of the data emerged several strong patterns upon which the recommendations are based.

#### **Preparedness**

##### **Executive Directors and Tutor Coordinators**

The majority of the executive directors were among the first group of individuals who started the adult literacy programs and the centres. They described having to learn and develop many aspects of their profession such as forming connections with the community infrastructure, becoming effective literacy advocates, fund raising, and facilitating the formation of effective community boards. They now have experience and knowledge that could benefit the profession in several ways.

The tutor coordinators have gone through a similar process. They came from various educational backgrounds and have had to develop their programs; they have acquired skills and a deeper understanding as they worked. The tutor coordinators like the executive directors have a wealth of knowledge that can be used to form and to enrich the profession's knowledge base. This in turn will directly benefit future literacy

practitioners through providing context, reference and the basis for a strong professional discipline.

### **Recommendations:**

It is recommended that:

**I\* The executive directors and tutor coordinators be key contributors in establishing a knowledge base for their professions and that they receive the support necessary to achieve this work.**

Since both groups of literacy practitioners came from diverse work and academic backgrounds, consideration can be given to the following:

- 1) Part of the task would be to understand what in their past experience, education and interests was an asset in this work; how was this knowledge adapted? This information could form part of the knowledge base.
- 2) What precisely did they have to learn at their work and how was this accomplished.
- 3) What are the ongoing needs for research and educational support?

### The Instructors

The instructors also brought with them knowledge from their previous experience that they have adapted and expanded. Many described a collaborative atmosphere where they have actively adjusted and created curriculum and teaching material.

This is a new field; all of participants in this study are pioneers generating new ideas and concepts. Therefore a significant part of the knowledge base which we presently have about adult literacy lies within the experience of the literacy practitioners. “Teacher researchers are uniquely positioned to make visible the ways students and teacher together construct knowledge and curriculum (11). It is recommended that:

**II \*Support be given to Adult Literacy Instructors so that they can research, document and generate knowledge in the field.**

The tutor coordinators, instructors and executive directors described time constraints. They are already struggling to maintain a healthy balance between their work, home and social lives. There must be consistent and strong support to give them the opportunity to work collaboratively. Through working together they can consolidate the knowledge which they have and deepen their understanding of the present situation. This will provide the platform for generating new knowledge.

## **Communication**

### **Executive Directors**

The most salient patterns to emerge from the executive directors' data on communication were the challenges faced by the executive directors in creating collaborative relationships within a traditional hierarchical form. Executive directors, who supervise and represent the staff at board meetings, have had to struggle with this challenge.

### **Recommendations:**

Based on these findings it is recommended that:

**III \*Executive directors and tutor coordinators receive support for educational workshops that focus on issues of teamwork and working collaboratively.**

### **Tutor Coordinators**

In sharp contrast to this hierarchical setting is the work of tutor coordinators that is based on skillful communication and working collaboratively with students and tutors. The strongest pattern to emerge for the tutor coordinators is their high degree of isolation. The conditions that decrease their isolation are regular staff meetings at which they are able to participate in decision-making: especially those decisions that involve or affect

their work. The opportunity to meet with other colleagues is profoundly important. All participants placed a very high value on the regional tutor coordinator meetings. This was their opportunity to share and discuss challenges, ideas, and methods: to generate and consolidate professional knowledge and give each other moral support. Thus, because of the nature of their work, there is a strong need for an open supportive atmosphere and regular meetings with colleagues (see Recommendation III).

Based on the strong support that the meetings with colleagues provided to the tutor coordinators it is recommended that:

**IV \*The Regional Tutor Coordinator Meetings continue and that additional support be given for tutor coordinators to meet.**

#### **Instructors**

Instructors, as well, described isolation when they spoke about communication. Most of the instructors work with colleagues and there are support systems such as counselors or advisors. They described their work relationships with colleagues as collaborative and supportive. They are isolated, however, in the sense that the world beyond adult basic education does not understand the nature of their work. They have to struggle with mandates that do not have realistic time frames for adult students who are moving from a basic to an intermediate level in ABE. The main impact is role overload that is discussed in the following chapter (see Recommendation XI). Instructors also spoke of the need to respond to the needs of the students in the community where they are working. This means the freedom to use their own initiative to adapt or design course material so that it works for their students. They have learned through their experience that effective teaching of adult students requires collaboration and facilitation and they need the freedom to do what works.



Based on these findings it is recommended that:

**V \*Literacy Instructors be supported in their initiatives to design course material that responds to the needs of the students in their communities.**

#### Electronic Communication

All of the participants spoke about how the electronic media has improved communication by diminishing remoteness between centres and campuses. It appears, however, that these technologies carry with them an expectation of a larger work output. When they do not function correctly, work becomes extremely stressful. The second cautionary note is that personal communication within centres should not be replaced with e-mail. Personal exchange is a vital aspect of quality communication.

### **Roles**

#### **Executive Directors**

The executive directors' strongest patterns are work overload. This occurred because of poorly defined job descriptions which demanded an inordinate number of responsibilities without the resources or time to complete them. Like the tutor coordinators many of these participants had to learn to define their boundaries regarding their roles (see Recommendation VI). This usually occurred when they had started to suffer the consequences of burnout. The second pattern to emerge that was also a consequence of ill-defined roles was the blurring of responsibility between the executive director and the board (see Recommendation XIII).

## **Tutor Coordinators**

The strongest pattern to emerge among the tutor coordinators was role overload. Work overload occurred for a variety of reasons: 1) They assumed other positions such as board work or managing the centres. This caused both role overload and role overlap (see Recommendation VI). 2) Role overload was aggravated because of lack of understanding on the part of the staff or board about the nature of their work (see Recommendation XI and XIII). 3) They were successful at their work; thus, the numbers of students increased but without a parallel increase in assistance or paid work time. 4) When their workload increased there were tendencies for the participants not to define their boundaries with the consequence of an imbalance in their work/leisure time: work dominated their lives (see Recommendation VI).

## **Instructors:**

The instructors described very well defined roles with little or no role conflict between colleagues. Like the other two groups they assumed more than one role and this led to role overlap, role overload and the need to set boundaries. The other underlying cause for role overload is the lack of understanding or appreciation on the part of agencies or the larger college about the real nature of the instructor's work (see Recommendation XI). Their strongest need is for their work to be recognized and appreciated so that they are given adequate time for marking and preparation and for working with students who are upgrading their skills at a basic level. The final cause of role overload is the nature of the work itself that requires teaching, social work and counseling skills.

## **Recommendations:**

Based on these findings it is recommended that:

**VI \* Executive Directors, tutor coordinators and instructors receive educational support on setting and defining work boundaries in order to avoid burnout and to maintain balanced, healthy lives.**

**VII \* Literacy Instructors receive a more equitable share of time for marking and preparing their class material.**

## **Job Satisfaction**

All of the participants expressed a very high degree of job satisfaction. Their satisfaction was derived from their love of the intrinsic nature of the work: facilitating in the acquisition of literacy skills, and in the development of self-confidence and self-esteem in their adult students. It was based on the realization that they are making the world a better place; they are working for a worthy cause. They also received intellectual satisfaction, self-growth and a sense of accomplishment. Their job satisfaction was not based on status, or monetary reward.

## **The Best of All Possible Worlds**

### **Recommendations:**

In this chapter the participants spoke about the changes in their working conditions or in the larger society that would improve the situation of literacy. Consequently, this chapter has many recommendations. Some of the recommendations that they made in this chapter have already been discussed and analyzed in previous chapters: they will not be repeated.

All of the executive directors, the tutor coordinators and two instructors thought that the community based centre is an effective way to reach adult learners. They believe

that the majority of students with whom they have worked would not have accessed an institutional setting.

Based on these results it is recommended that:

**VIII \*The concept and the existence of community centres be retained and fully supported.**

The majority of participants in these two groups believe that there should be a close working relationship with a college. This would provide the centre with a more stable and secure base, additional support systems, and a higher profile. The college on the other hand would be reaching a population who would not initially access a college.

Thus it is recommended that:

**IX \*A close working relationship between the community centre and college be encouraged and supported.**

Both the tutor coordinators and executive directors expressed the need for continued educational support and assured funding. Tutor coordinators because of the nature of their work spoke about the need for counseling support. Based on the expressed needs of the tutor coordinators and executive directors it is recommended that:

**X \*The executive directors and tutor coordinators receive educational and counseling support. There is also a strong need for assured funding**

Executive Directors, Tutor Coordinators and Instructors all spoke about the need for raising awareness of literacy. This was a very strong pattern that emerged for all of the participants. Based on these findings it is recommended that:

**XI \*There be a continued and concerted effort to raise awareness of Literacy at a community, provincial and federal level. At the community level it can take the form of an outreach workshops in which the relevant agencies participate.**

Two instructors and a tutor coordinator spoke about the need for communities to respond to the issue of Literacy in a collaborative rather than a competitive manner.

Rather than having isolated pockets working on Literacy there should be a collaborative effort. In this way duplication and gaps will be avoided. Thus it is recommended that:

**XII \* Further research on a paradigm for community collaboration in working with Literacy be undertaken.**

### **The Community Centre Board**

From a group of ten executive directors and tutor coordinators, seven participants said that the board lacked understanding of the employees' work and of their own roles. Four of six executive directors spoke about the need for the board to understand the goals and the philosophy of the organization and to have specific responsibilities. Based on these results it is recommended that:

**XIII\* Communities offer board education for not-for-profit societies. This will lay the foundation for board participants to work effectively and supportively within their own organization and to accept individual roles.**

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This research project was undertaken to give a broader and deeper understanding of the working lives Adult Literacy Practitioners. The participants described in detail the challenges and the positive aspects of their work. They spoke about the support systems which were effective and what conditions increased stress at work.

To make a comparison between organizations, a more extensive study that involves other provinces or even other countries would be valuable.

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