



**RESEARCH INTO PROVIDING
LITERACY/UPGRADING PROGRAMS
FOR YOUTH WHO HAVE DROPPED OUT OF SCHOOL**

BY

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Abstract

Strong literacy skills are a predictor of success in school and in the workplace. Many Canadian youth (aged 16-24) who have dropped out of school have low literacy skills. Even if they wish to return to school, they have to overcome a number of barriers which contribute to their low-literacy skills in the first place. The purpose of this research was to identify those elements which would contribute to creating effective and successful programs for youth who have dropped-out of school. Two groups of youth, one from Toronto, Ontario, and the other from Saint John's, Newfoundland, were interviewed using focus groups to collect "oral testimony". This report discusses what the youth said and looks at the implications of the data collected. Based on this discussion, it make recommendations regarding program design and policy.

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“There is a scripture that talks about without a vision a people perish...if you don’t know what you’re working for or why you are working, eventually you’re gonna become unmotivated and just fade away.” (Participant’s testimony)

Introduction

Recent studies about literacy and youth have confirmed that those youth with strong literacy skills are more likely to be successful in school, in securing employment and in participating successfully in community life. Conversely, youth with poor literacy skills are more likely to drop out of school, to experience unemployment for long periods of time and to have difficulty participating in community life. In Canada, low literacy levels among youth, especially youth living in poverty, continue to be an social concern and a challenge to society. Almost half of the youth who drop out before finishing high-school, have low literacy skills. In addition, it seems that youth who do need literacy support, often do not or cannot attend the programs available to them. (Jessup, 1997; Willms, 1997).

This research study explores some of the reasons why youth who live in poverty often drop out of school. It considers some of the implications that dropping out has had on the youth. In addition, it suggests some of the factors necessary in programs to help young people return to school. The information contained in this research paper was gathered from two groups of people, all of whom are young high-school drop-outs living in poverty. The information was gathered through “oral testimony” based on focus-group interviews with the participants.

The participants in this research study were youth 18 - 24 years of age. The first group was comprised of five young men who lived in a densely-populated social-housing neighbourhood in Toronto, Ontario. These youth had been out of school for periods between two and five years. All of them were Canadians, with origins in the Caribbean. The other group was made up of seven participants, two males and five females, who live in a social-housing neighbourhood in Saint. John's, Newfoundland. They had been out of school from between one and eight years. All were from families living for generations in Newfoundland.

This paper attempts to capture:

- the reasons these youth dropped out
- their experiences of school
- their daily reading and writing activities
- their perceptions of the consequences of dropping out
- their suggestions for program design and content

This paper is divided into four sections. These are: 1) A brief review of the literature dealing with literacy and youth in Canada, focusing specifically on “barriers to participation” - those factors which impede youth from returning to school; 2) the rationale and the methodology used in the research ; 3) the highlights of the research findings, and 4) recommendations for program design to attract youth drop-outs who are living in poverty.

Review of the Literature

Literacy has been clearly identified as a social issue in Canada. Calamai (1998) notes that the low literacy rates in this country have caused policy makers to pay close attention, because they feel that literacy is the key to participation in a variety of personal and social activities. Furthermore, policy-makers feel that Canada's participation in the global marketplace depends on having a highly literate workforce capable of applying the new information technologies in the workplace. This has been the predominant outlook regarding the importance of literacy in Canada, although this has been challenged by some. For example, Marquardt (1998) points out that in Canada, high-tech jobs, which pay well, are relatively few in number as compared to the availability of low-paying, service sector jobs which offer few prospects for advancement. He also notes that 21% of the employed workforce in Canada have jobs which do not utilize their literacy skills and that for women and youth, the percentage is higher. Furthermore, only 5% of those who are working now need to upgrade their literacy skills. Marquardt's claims challenge the view held by many that literacy is the key to an individual's economic success in Canada and that it also contributes to Canada's competitive edge in the global economy. However, it does not reduce the importance of literacy as an important personal, social and cultural attribute, both for individuals and for Canadian society.

Calamai (1998) observes that low literacy skills of Canadians have been seen as a social issue in Canada for at least the last two decades, and that there has been significant progress in raising awareness about the literacy needs of Canadians. However, he observes that despite increased funding support from government and private sources for literacy programming,

and despite the development of innovative ways of reaching potential learners **less than 5% of those adults needing literacy support are being helped in Canada.**

Jessup (1997) observes that the research on literacy has mainly looked at the “typical illiterate” who is described as an adult male who is working, and who’s unaware that he is illiterate. She argues that such a narrow focus turns attention away from other groups in society who have literacy needs, such as youth. She also she points out the widely-held misconception that youth as a whole must surely be literate since they have recently spent a lot of time at school.

The facts show that this idea about youth literacy is indeed a misconception. For example, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) concludes that youth literacy levels in Canada are not any higher than that of the general population. The IALS also reveals that 37% of Canadian youth between the ages of 16 and 25 read at Levels 1 or 2, the lowest levels out of 5 levels used to measure literacy skills in the survey (Statistics Canada, 1996). Jessup (1997) suggests that based on the IALS statistics, almost 50% of Canadian youth who have dropped out of school have a significant lack of literacy skills. She further notes that a significant number of youth with low literacy skills are not taking advantage of educational opportunities. She suggests that this lack of participation may be the result of a variety of complex factors which become “barriers to participation.”

Youth face a number of barriers which impede their participation in literacy programs or any other upgrading programs which would enable them to continue their formal education. The literature on “barriers to participation” is largely based on adult learner populations. However, youth between 16 and 20 years of age are often included as adults. Furthermore, in undertaking this research project we found that the barriers which were identified by the youth who were involved in our study were similar to those cited in the literature for adult learners.

Selman and Dampier (1991) note that there are three specific types of barriers to participation: situational, dispositional, and institutional. Situational barriers include personal factors which prevent the learner from participating in a program - such as lack of money, transportation, child-care and so on. Dispositional barriers refer to the psychological obstacles which are a function of a learner’s personality and which prevent that learner from participating in a program. These include fear of returning to a classroom setting, lack of self-esteem, and negative attitudes towards school and teachers. Finally, institutional barriers refer to factors such as prohibitive entrance requirements, inflexible class times and class locations, or traditional teaching methods which cannot meet the needs of students who exhibit a wide range of learning styles. While these barriers are not deliberate attempts to keep learners from participating in programs, the net result is that some learners are excluded. In addition, it is worth noting that schools are middle-class institutions which value middle-class language, power-relationships and values - factors which present almost unsurmountable institutional barriers to those living in poverty or learners from the working class (Lamont and Lareau, 1988).

Merriam and Caffarella (1991) point out that most studies which examine adult participation in learning programs take only a psychological approach. This focuses a great deal of attention on the individual and much less attention on the social factors which influence a learner's life. Instead, Merriam and Caferella suggest that a sociological approach would be more appropriate because participation in adult learning activities is often a function of class, race and gender. The National Anti-Poverty Organization (1992) supports examining participation in literacy programs from a sociological framework. In its report "Literacy and Poverty", this organization make the case that it is poverty and social inequality which are the main barriers which prevent many Canadians from attaining a good education.

Beder and Quigley (1992) offer another view of why youth do not participate in upgrading programs. They use the term "resisters" to describe people who are aware that there are programs available for them but choose not to participate in these programs. "Resisters" make this choice because they perceive that the values of the school system are alien to their own values. Beder and Quigley point out that when these "resisters" are in school or in formal upgrading programs, they resist the dominant values imposed on them by teachers, principals and other students through behaviour which ranges from silence to "troublemaking". The view put forward by Beder and Quigley may be seen as the consequence of the middle-class ideological framework of schools as suggested by Lamont and Lareau cited earlier, and may help to explain why programs organized for youth drop-outs sometimes report lack of enthusiasm on the part of students, high levels of absenteeism, or other problems.

In summary, there are many reasons why a large number of youth who could potentially benefit from participation in a literacy or an upgrading program do not take part. Programs intended to attract youth drop-outs as learners need to seriously consider these reasons so that their recruitment strategies, program planning and goals are realistic and attainable.

Research Sites and Selection of Participants

The selection of participants was governed by one of the guiding principles of Frontier College - “we are committed to working with people who have been rejected or not given adequate learning opportunities elsewhere.” For this reason, participants were drawn from socially and geographically marginalized communities.

Research Sites

Two sites were chosen for this research: the Jane-Woolner neighbourhood in Toronto, Ontario and the Froude Avenue community in Saint John’s, Newfoundland. Disparate geographic sites were chosen deliberately to enable us to compare and contrast the experiences of the youth in both locations.

Jane-Woolner Neighbourhood (Toronto)

The Jane-Woolner neighbourhood includes about 37,000 people of whom about 17% are between 16 and 20 years of age. The neighbourhood is culturally and ethnically diverse, and is classified as “low income” by social service agencies serving the community.

In this neighbourhood, potential participants for this project were identified through word of- mouth. This task was undertaken by staff from the Syme-Woolner Neighbourhood Centre, an agency which provides family support services, especially through education and recreation to the residents in the neighbourhood. The youth worker at Syme-Woolner was very helpful in selecting the youth participants. He talked to some of the youth about this study and distributed a small poster throughout the community to recruit participants.

Froude Avenue Community (Saint John's)

The Froude Avenue community is set within the city of Saint John's. It is mainly a social-housing community. There are about 800 people living in the Froude Street social housing neighbourhood, about 15% of whom are between 16 and 20 years of age. This site was identified as suitable for the purpose of this study by the Frontier College staff-person in Newfoundland. She was able to enlist the help and co-operation of the Manager of the Froude Avenue Community Centre in identifying suitable participants for this project. He used word-of-mouth to recruit the participants.

The Froude Avenue Community Centre provides social and recreational programming to the people in the neighbourhood. One of the main features of the programs there is a youth drop- in centre. The families living in Froude Avenue experience high levels of unemployment and poverty. Few of the young people in the neighbourhood have finished high-school and they find themselves caught in the web of cyclical poverty.

The participation of young women in this focus group made it a different experience from the Jane-Woolner focus group. The young women were eager to share their experiences and it was relatively easy to establish a rapport with them. The two young men who participated were more reticent, like the young men from the Jane-Woolner group.

The participants on both sites, were paid \$15.00 an hour for their time and expertise/knowledge. In addition, a hot lunch was provided for the participants on each site. According to the staff who helped to find the participants, the money and food were a big attraction to the participants. Not only was payment an incentive, it also acknowledged the fact that the youth had valuable information to share. In addition, the participants were told that they would be receiving a copy of the final report of this study for their professional portfolios.

Method

Slim and Thompson (1995) argue that one of the main drawbacks of conventional social science research is that it is often institutionally focused. In other words, the research is usually driven by an agenda which comes from outside the community. The people of the community are “studied” but usually have little opportunity to contribute to the design or the purpose of the research. They also argue that such research is narrowly focused and that the community members seldom derive any benefit from the research. In our case, we consulted with the partner agencies in the two communities about what we were planning to do, and solicited their opinions as to how best to proceed.

In addition, we sought their opinions as to how to find the participants, and as previously noted, enlisted their active support in finding these participants. We plan to give each partner agency a copy of this report for their use.

One of the obstacles to conducting research into issues about youth with low literacy skills is that these youth are often socially isolated. McLeod (1991) notes that youth with low literacy skills tend to avoid situations which may expose their inabilities to read and write. Instead they tend to give and receive information mainly by word-of-mouth, and are therefore most comfortable in a type of oral-subculture. For this reason, we decided to conduct this research through “oral testimony” which has been used quite extensively in community-development work in other parts of the world, especially Africa and Asia.

Slim and Thompson (1995) state:

“The spoken word cuts across barriers of wealth, class and race. It is as much the prerogative of ordinary people as of those in positions of power and authority. It requires neither formal education, nor the ability to read and write, nor fluency in any national or official language. Most importantly, it gives voice to the experience of those people whose views are often overlooked or discounted.” (p.1).

They assert that “oral testimony” focus groups, which are one to two hours long, have proven successful in collecting reliable and representative information, and require relatively small numbers (5-12) of participants. The questions that were used to guide the focus group discussion appear as Appendix A.

Highlights of the Research Findings

Wherever possible, we have quoted the youth verbatim in this report. We have organized the findings under various headings. To follow chronological order, we are presenting the findings from Toronto followed by the findings in St. Johns.

Jane-Woolner

On their daily lives:

The youth said that they spent their time socializing, playing games like basketball, watching television and trying to find work. But the main activity was “hanging out”. One of the youth said, *“I just watch T.V. and hang out with my friends. We bother the girls.”*

On their experience of work:

Three of the five youth had some work experience. Two had worked for social service agencies in the community after being hired on various types of grants. One youth said *“I have a job in a factory now, but the factory is going to close down.”* Another had never had a job. While work was very important to the participants, they had limited experience finding work. The main source of work were “agencies”. Another youth said *“I have been giving out some resumes”*. The youth in this group seemed to be taking a rather traditional approach to finding work i.e. sending out resumes and hoping for the best. This is a minimal effort in the extremely competitive Toronto job-market.

The youth looked for work in cycles. For example one youth said,

“Yeah, for me it’s kind of like a cycle thing. Sometimes you go hard sometimes you kind of ease off and go hard again.” He also said, *“It is more of a cycle, cause I’ve been, like, I’ve been taking some computer programs so at the same time, I am working on my resume...I’ve been dealing with the agencies right now.”*

On literacy

The youth in this group were not readers, although at least one was an excellent reader. One youth said, *“I don’t like reading. I like watching TV”* Other comments:

“I read the newspaper sometimes. I don’t write letters or nothin”

“I cannot read or write well. Just never learned properly.”

“I can read quite well. But I don’t read much these days.”

“Me I am reading all the time, books and stuff.”

On dropping out from /dropping into school

The youth had dropped out of school for periods ranging from six months to five years. One of the youth said:

“Well, I’ve been out of school for five years. In the meantime I was going to adult day school but I haven’t been making it a constant thing, so I’m going to have to penetrate on that.” Another said, *“It was last year. I did one year at Carter but I didn’t finish the program.”*

Many reasons were given for leaving school:

“I just got caught up at a early age with what was going on in the area with few of my friends and stuff. Eventually I got back on course but it’s like an in and out thing for me. So what I gotta do now is concentrate on constantly going to school and other things. Back in those days I was caught up in a lot of other things, bad things, but I overcame those things so now I can concentrate on going to school.”

“I didn’t learn properly and I was not getting anything from the schools.”

“The reason why I left was because just to focus myself on the outside Yeah, like for example, to like get a job and then at the same time I spoke to my school about like, you know, something like that I was gonna do but...that if I stayed in school and get my credits then I could do it. It was like I couldn’t do two things at once.”

“Well, you know because like growing up in this neighbourhood you watch other people that you know doing things like making money a faster way, so you wanna try too, not that you’re gonna continuously do that, but you end up getting in that phase and realizing that is not the type of lifestyle you want.”

“You know what though, like for me personally, self-discipline has a lot to do with it. Cause I mean I’ve had my problems with school. For a very long time it was deeply rooted. I never really had the insight, the foresight to see how important school is as far as living in society what your income is gonna be like. I don’t think it was really brought to me like how important school is you know, the effect that your school has on you when you finish school. Cause really now I know how effective education is. Being out there now like trying to find a job now and not having the adequate education, I’m seeing that really and truly it’s hard. It’s hard to get your foot in the door.”

While most of the youth reported some positive experiences in school and trying to hold onto their goals, the negative experiences at school outweighed the positive ones. Some of the comments were:

“Certain teachers they never wanted to recommend you as a good student, so I was like it was a teacher/student thing. Teachers always want to have the upper hand with the students; not give the students a chance to reason or have their ideas of how they feel ...Its like having a negative feeling towards you.”

“I’ve had negative experiences when I was in school for a great amount of time...I had an attitude problem...”

“If you look around the room we are all what you call visible minorities. So I think that there’s a prevailing stereotype that goes along with that...the fact that we are all visible minorities and then it’s all the ideas that are brought across about visible minorities, I think that if anything else, that has the greatest effect.”

“Well, I feel that in that way it’s true because, well, I grew up in this area for years. This is my hometown, so I found when I used to go to school, like teachers would say, okay, yeah he’s from around that neighbourhood, you know, a black community. Young black youths, they just say you know, okay, we don’t really want to get into a learning process”.

In hindsight, all the youth in the group felt that dropping out of school was a bad

decision. As one person said:

“Well, I think like dropping out is a more like of a negative thing because the reason why it’s negative is it’s gonna reflect back to you in your life you know...like nowadays (employees) are looking...to see what motivation, what skills you learned, and...when you drop out of school how you’re gonna come forward to what you are going to do, what you want? So, that’s why I feel that it’s negative to drop out of school.”

Since dropping out, four of the youth had taken some courses. There seemed to be a lot of interest in taking computer courses because the youth felt that these courses were very important in terms of employability. One youth had some success taking a computer course; another had tried taking computer classes at night, but was unable to keep it up. The others were thinking of returning to school, but were conscious of some of the obstacles they faced. Some of the comments were:

“The attitude of the school, night class, that kind of stuff; your track record, so you have to think carefully of whether you want to expose yourself to that again, exactly. I’m not gonna wait too long to the point where I won’t have any ability to do anything.”

“(If) I go to school now my motivation is to finish my course so I can get my diploma.” “

“My situation is totally different, like I said. But I’m not going to get into it. So they would have to be mentally and spiritually ready for me to go back to school before I go back.” A third youth said *“ I would like to go back to school but I would have to go to night school cause I need to work during the day.”*

On designing an appropriate literacy/upgrading program

Several suggestions were made about what an appropriate program would include:

“Hook up computers, and show people that they will really be learning something , cause people won’t just want to come and sit down and talk, you know”

“It really and truly comes down to the individual and yeah, you can do your part to make the program as appealing as it can be. Computers are good, computers are important cause nowadays in the workplace, the bottom line is people need to see outcomes. Computers is the means to get the outcome.”

“There should be some job-placement to get work experience in the real world.”

“The instructors must be patient not like those we had in school. They should have an awareness of what the students would like to do. What their goals are.”

“The program should be here, in the community.”

“There should be support for reading and writing because many people here do not read and write very well.”

“Peer involvement would be good in the program. People from the community who have been successful should be invited to come back and speak about their experience.”

“If you know what you are working towards, then you can make a decision...and of course sacrifice is going to be involved, but you know what you’re doing, you know why you’re doing it. If you don’t know what you’re working for, why you are working, eventually you’re gonna become unmotivated and just fade away...”

“So a program, there should not just the upgrading or literacy or what have you with the reading and writing, there also has to be this connection with the real world. That you get information and you would get outright what is expected, what particularly employers are expecting - that sort of thing.”

“One-to-one support with reading and writing, and with computers. It would be good to have tutors who can give one-to-one support.”

“You need...like familiar examples Like you can’t necessarily have someone from the Beaches [An upper middle-class neighbourhood in Toronto] come down here and talk about motivation or what you need to do. Cause you’re not gonna get people’s attention. We need people who have been successful from this community to give pep talks on motivation.”

“If you’re gonna bring someone say in business, to give a motivational speech, I’m going to speak out against that. If I was in charge of a program like this, I would bring someone from say, whatever industry, to let people know what the requirements are and what is expected (in the job market). What to look for...not to give a motivational speech. The main focus would be to let people know what is required of them.”

“There is a scripture that talks about without a vision a people perish...if you don’t know what you’re working for or why you are working, eventually you’re gonna become unmotivated and just fade away..”

Summary

In summary, there were a number of issues that the Jane-Woolner participants brought out in the course of the focus-group. They identified a number of situational, dispositional and institutional barriers they encountered in pursuing their high-school education, and which eventually led to their dropping-out of school. Since leaving school, the participants had come to realize, through their own life experience, that they had to increase their level of education and skills. Hence, their regret over dropping-out. They were acutely aware that their current levels of education were not sufficient to enable them to find and keep work, thus their emphasis on linking any upgrading program with job experience. They also suggested that programs designed for them and others like them should be flexible, goal-oriented and work-related, thus the emphasis on computer literacy, job-search and work experience. Finally, these program should be staffed by flexible, open-minded, culturally-sensitive, and patient instructors who could assist them to set realistic, achievable goals. The involvement of tutors, to provide one-to-one support was thought to be a good idea.

Froude Avenue

On their daily lives

When asked what they did every day, some of the comments were:

“Stay at home and watch T.V.”

“Hanging out with my friends” (two individuals)

“I have children myself. So I have children to take care of.”

“Stay at home and listen to music”.

On work experience

Four of the youth had worked before. The others had not.

“I was just asked if I wanted to work [at the pizza parlor]. I applied, right. The same day, I bring my application in, the owner called me at four o’clock and asked me if I wanted to work at twelve mid-night. Actually, I worked there three times. I quit and went back, quit and went back. They always took me back because I caught on fast. I learned how to do everything in a week. After a while it became slave work. I was paid \$5.35, that was minimum wage.”

“I worked at Dairy Queen when I was sixteen. It came to the point when transportation was taking up more than half my pay cheque. Then I was babysitting for a couple of professors from the university. I babysat for them until their child was old enough to go to daycare. I really liked that. Then I had my own children and tried to get back to school.”

“I worked as a general counselor at the St. John’s Boys and Girls Club last summer. I stopped working at the end of August. I really liked it.”

On literacy

Three of the five women enjoyed reading. The other participants did not.

“I love to read. When I was in school I read all the time.”

“I read when I get the chance. Magazines mostly.”

“I had trouble reading and writing in school. I still can’t write.”

“I don’t like to read or write.”

On dropping out from/dropping-in to school

The youth had been out of school from between one and eight years. They gave many reasons for dropping out. Again, all of the youth said that they regretted their decision to drop out, although in at least two cases, it was not by choice. One person said:

“I never had a problem with my teachers or my work. I was always a good student until I got pregnant. But when I got pregnant it was more peer pressure than teachers that made me leave.”

Other reasons included:

“I just wasn’t interested.”

“I just couldn’t get along with the teachers at all, so I quit.”

“The teachers. They didn’t have the right stuff.”

“The curriculum was a challenge. I was a little slower than the other students and my teachers would not give me the support I needed.”

“I was pregnant when I was fifteen. I tried to stay in school but it was too much pressure from peers and I just couldn’t deal with it. It was really hard. I dropped out and the following year, I went back. I was pregnant but I went back. I figured I could make a go of it. And I really tried. Like for three, four months, I was really putting my go into it. I was getting up every morning with morning sickness and all. But I’d go. But the it was just so much pressure from the other teens because I was pregnant and there was name calling and stuff like that. And there was no help at our school. I mean, even the principal at our school said to me, “Like you know, it is going to be tough if you come back.” Instead of encouraging me, more or less, he warned me. That is why I quit.”

“I would just sit in class. I couldn’t sit there for more than an hour. I used to get in trouble. I used to get sent home. I got suspended every day. I just gave up after a while.”

“They [the teachers] used to ignore me. Like I was nobody. I think when teachers know you are from Froude, they think that you are going to be a problem”

Most of the youth tried to return to school with mixed success. The availability of the federal government’s TAGS (The Atlantic Groundfish Strategy) funding created many training/upgrading programs, not all of them satisfactory. At least two youth reported that they had been attracted to two such programs which had advertised computer-training skills. However, they did not get what they paid for. In fact, they were “taken in” by the advertising campaign of these programs. After taking out student loans to attend these courses, a number of these programs closed down, and the students ended-up owing large amounts of money to the banks.

“I went to Career Academy and they closed. They were open for four months and it cost me four thousand dollars. There were instructors, but mostly you were by yourself with a tape and a book and a computer and you go at it. You basically learn on your own, right.”

Other comments included:

“I got terminated at Career Academy. Me and my boyfriend, we were going at the same time. He was giving me a hard time.. I was getting in so much trouble.. I was getting a student loan and I couldn’t pay for it.”

“I went to another post-secondary school. It wasn’t difficult - it was boring. You were on the computer all day long, with headphones on, listening and it just gets to you.”

“My course at the Business academy was 35 weeks for \$12,000. Then you had to pay for books. That was separate. I tried it for three months. That was enough for me. I didn’t finish my course and I already owed like \$11,000.”

On designing a literacy/upgrading program

Some of the comments included:

“It has to be affordable. Something that wouldn’t cost you a fortune, ‘cause everything does now. Because I mean, even to do a course like say in college, you are talking ten, twenty thousand dollars. You have to get a loan you are paying right back for the rest of your life.”

“The courses I have been to, they just takes your money and leaves you there, you know. They don’t help you with jobs; it says they have a job-search program there, but they don’t.”

“They should help you get in. A lot of these courses also often have like a GED requirement to get in. What happens if you don’t?”

“It would be good to have the program in the neighbourhood. Like there is going to be a GED program here Otherwise transportation costs are too much. If it is going to be far away, transportation, like a bus pass, should be provided.”

“Those with children, we need daycare. Daycare should be provided.”

“What is taught should be useful to us. I never understood the subject of social studies or geography. I can see math and English and literature and stuff like that, but not social studies. Why do we need it? And religion, I never understood why we needed it either. And gym, what is gym going to do for ya? And like music, what’s that gonna do for ya? If I was the organizer of the program, I would have some basic courses like mechanics, something practical.”

“It would have computer courses. Computers are taking over everything, so it would be useless to have a school without computers. But I couldn’t get into it. Computers, oh my. That World Wide Web thing, that’s wild, eh? Couldn’t get into that al all.”

“People should be able to work at their own pace ‘cause some people are not as caught up as other people. It really puts pressure on people.”

“I don’t know if people know or not, but when you go to apply for a job, the first thing they ask you about is your work experience. You can’t get a job if you don’t have experience. They say to you, “You got no experience, so you’re no good to us.” So it’d be better if the program had some kind of job experience while we were there.”

“There are lots of young people out there with criminal records and can’t get a job. The program should give people a second chance. Like my old school said that I have violence on my record. So that’s why they won’t take me back.”

“I think one-to-one support would be good. It would be good to have tutors to give us individual attention. There should be small classes so that we can work in small groups.”

Summary

In summary, the participants in the Froude Street community, like their peers in Jane-Woolner, also identified a number of situational, institutional and dispositional barriers which influenced their decision to leave school. Almost all the participants had taken courses since dropping out of school, but in all cases had not completed their chosen course. The participants were well aware of their lack of education and most were keen to have another chance. Their life experiences had confirmed that they needed to upgrade their educations and their skills if they were to have any chance at finding employment and a better life. They had many suggestions to make regarding the type of program which would successfully attract them - student-centred instruction, small-group work, computer instruction and curriculum which is tied to the real world. They also felt that small-group and individualized instruction were the keys to successful programs.

Conclusions of the Research Findings

Our research findings suggests that generally speaking, high-school drop-outs living in poverty, are likely to share many common issues and challenges in their quest for an

education. Many face barriers which are often a consequence of the society in which we live. For example, it has been noted earlier in this paper that schools in general tend to embody and uphold the ideology of the privileged classes in society. Thus, the discourse which takes place in a classroom of a school is may alienate students who live in poverty, and who cannot identify with the dominant ideology. Therefore they “resist.” It does not help that they are labelled as coming from such-and-such neighbourhood, either. In fact, it makes things worse.

Nonetheless, despite the obstacles they face every day, almost all the youth who took part in this research were keen to resume their education. In addition, they were well aware of the “real-world” and were aware of a number of issues and considerations which impinged upon their education:

- 1) They were aware that the lack of strong literacy skills posed difficulties for a number of the participants, particularly the males, to continue their studies. They understood that strong literacy skills were a key to success in school.
- 2) They identified a variety of barriers: dislike of teachers (dispositional), lack of transportation (situational) and poor teaching methods (institutional), among others, which contributed to their dropping out of school. The participants knew that they had to overcome these barriers if they were to succeed in school, work and life.
- 3) They perceived that learning must not only contribute to their general knowledge of the world, it must prepare them for the “real world” i.e employment. They felt that they

presently lacked the skills necessary to enable them to find suitable employment, except in low-paying, dead-end jobs such as working in a pizza parlour.

- 4) They seemed highly motivated to continue their formal schooling, particularly in programs which were organized to suit their individual needs and goals. This motivation is fueled in most cases by their various life experiences after they left school, when they realized that their current circumstances provided no short-term or long-term prospects for them
- 5) They judged that a number of youth school re-entry programs were not suitable to their individual needs. They were emphatic that if programs that were designed to encourage them to return to school were to be successful, such programs must not just be a replication of their past school experiences.
- 6) They emphasized the need for additional supports - mentorship, tutorial support, financial assistance and stipends, transportation subsidies, day-care for those with children and last but not least, workplace on-the-job experience. These would not only enhance the design of return-to-school programs, but help to guarantee their success.

Recommendations Regarding Program Design

Based on the “oral-testimony” and the literature review, several recommendations can be made. When designing a program to bring youth drop-outs back into the educational system, the following factors must be considered:

- Programs have to be accessible and flexible. Ideally, these programs should be situated in the communities where the youth live.
- Programs have to be free or heavily subsidized. This is particularly important for programs designed to attract the increasing numbers of youth living in poverty.
- Programs should be relatively small. This will ensure quality and will allow one-to-one tutoring and small group support.
- Programs should combine literacy/upgrading instruction with computer instruction, workplace skills development and job-placement.
- Programs should involve tutors and mentors to provide one-to-one instruction and career-related support. In addition, counselling support should be available around a number of youth-related issues for those who want it.
- Programs should be organized around each participant’s individual needs and goals. Instructors should work with each student to develop an individualized learning plan which incorporates each student’s needs and learning goals. These programs should be

result-orientated to ensure a high degree of interest, motivation, and success.

- Programs should ensure that costs such as food, transportation, supplies such as texts and day-care are covered. This will allow participants to focus on the task at hand: furthering their education.
- Programs should solicit and incorporate the ideas of the participants about program design structure and content whenever and wherever possible.
- Program materials should be chosen appropriately to reflect the academic levels and the cultural backgrounds of the participants
- Most importantly, those instructors selected to work with programs designed to help youth who are returning to school to complete their education, should be well trained to the specific needs of this group of citizens.

These recommendations mirror, to a considerable degree, the experience and conclusions drawn by many program staff working with youth in a number of literacy programs in Ontario and elsewhere. (Oldfield, 1998).

Implications of the Conclusions Drawn

The results of this research study indicate a number of issues which need to be addressed. These issues can be broadly categorized in two areas - program design and social context. Program design elements have already been discussed. It would be useful to frame the discussion about program design within the social context of Canadian society. In this way, the conclusions of this study are not up in the air, but grounded in the reality of the social environment today.

At the present time, governments at all levels across Canada are cutting funds to social programs including education. This makes it even more challenging for those youth who have dropped out of school to return to school. In this social context, the obstacles they face, some of which are discussed in this paper, have become more formidable. They are compelled to fend for themselves once they have dropped-out of school. So they do what they can. They work when they can, take a course or two whenever the opportunity to do so arises, but mostly they “hang out”. They know that their prospects are not good and that their needs are great.

Despite the extent of the need, there are relatively few community-based literacy/upgrading programs which serve youth, especially those living in poverty. Many more such programs are needed. They must be accessible, flexible, outcomes-based and individualized. This is the only way to attract the type of youth this research project sought to engage.

In their “oral testimony” the youth in this study spoke eloquently about their place in contemporary Canada - in the margins. They provided glimpses into their everyday

preoccupations. Their experiences of school had mostly been ones which led them finally to drop out, and led to their unsuccessful attempts to continue their education. This raises questions about our school system's ability to work effectively with students who are poor and who may bring with them other problems such as negative behaviour, problems which are often seen as individual, but more often than not are the result of living in poverty and facing the pressures of daily life under difficult circumstances.

Similarly, it raises questions about the school system's capacity to respond to and accommodate the learning needs of students who come from different cultures or who do not respond well to orthodox teaching methods. What is the school-system doing to assist such students?

What is to be done? Based on the evidence before us, four suggestions can be made:

- 1) Governments at all levels must invest more money in education so that more effort can go into preventing youth from dropping out. Investment in education is a

social investment in Canada's future. It cannot be left to chance.

Increased investments in education mean more pre-school programs so that young children get the preparation they need to be successful in school through early exposure to books and reading. It also means more schools, more teachers and more individualized support at an earlier age, especially for those students "at risk". "Prevention is better than cure."

- 2) Governments must take leadership to forge more partnerships with community-based youth-serving agencies, schools, literacy organizations, libraries and the private sector, so as to find new and dynamic ways of reaching those youth who are currently out of school. This focus must result in the design and implementation of community-based programs conceived by the partner organizations in collaboration with marginalized youth living in various communities to serve the latter's learning needs and goals. These programs need to reflect the spirit and substance of what the youth in this study suggested regarding program design. Each youth returning to education should have an individualized learning plan which charts the route he or she must take in order to achieve his or her learning goals.

- 3) Governments must take steps to ensure that more money is put into the economy than is being taken out as a result of debt servicing and investing outside Canada. Only in this way will new well paying jobs be created in this country. In the

absence of creating real opportunities for youth to secure a livelihood, what future could even those who are currently in school look forward to? In the absence of a viable future, it would be almost impossible to attract those youth most in need of literacy upgrading, training and education. The result will be that those the necessary skills and education will be competing for fewer and fewer jobs, while those who lose out will be left to fend for themselves.

- 4) Governments must ensure that the right to education is guaranteed by law so that no person is denied this fundamental human right. It is significant that education is not a guaranteed right in our Constitution at the present, and in the absence of enabling legislation, well-meaning policy objectives about youth who drop out, or yet another study about this issue, will not accomplish much.

If these measures are taken, real progress will be made to integrate youth who have dropped out of school back into school and integration into society. In the absence of a bold vision and strategy, where will these you go? What will become of them? Our prisons are full of people with similar backgrounds.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Questions for Youth Literacy Research Project

I am going to ask 12 questions one after the other. Please feel free to give your opinions. There are no right or wrong answers.

General Questions:

- 1) How long have you lived in this community?
- 2) What do you usually do during the day and evening to spend your time?
- 3) What type of reading and writing do you do everyday?

Specific Questions

- 4) How long has it been since you left school?
- 5) What were your reasons for leaving school?
- 6) What positive experiences did you have when you were at school?
- 7) In looking back at your decision to leave school, was this a good idea or not?
If so, why; if not, why?
- 8) Have any of you done any upgrading? Why did you go to upgrading and if so what was it like?
What did you enjoy about upgrading?
- 9) Have you thought about going back to finish school or to do upgrading? Explain
- 10) What would motivate you to go back to school or to take upgrading?
- 11) In your opinion, what should be included in an upgrading program to make it attractive for you to attend? Do you think a one-to-one tutoring program to help you with your reading and writing skills would be a good alternative to school or upgrading classes?
- 12) What other thoughts or ideas you would like to add to the discussion?