



Success in  
English Literacy  
Programmes in  
Quebec School  
Boards

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**September 1998**

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Funding for this project  
was provided to the  
Quebec Literacy Working Group (QLWG) through the  
**Federal/Provincial Initiatives Programme (IFPCA)**

Education is a peculiar process. You aim at one thing and you hit another. You set out to look for ultimate truth and you don't find it: but incidentally you have acquired a cultivated mind. You pursue studies that you think will be of use in your business. They are not. But by the time you are done with them, you yourself are a better man for your business or for any other business.

Stephen Leacock.

## Foreword

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**The participants** This research project has benefited from the cooperation of a great many people throughout Quebec. It would not have been possible without the help of Quebec Literacy Working Group representatives in the participating school boards, and whose names follow this foreword. Besides acting as steering committee members, they organized the interviews with their administrators, teachers, tutors and literacy students, interviews on which this report is based. They did so with efficiency and competence, and we thank them for this.

We also thank the administrators, teachers and tutors who told us of their experience with literacy students, of their questions, their enthusiasms and their frustrations. They were open and generous in their comments, hoping that teaching and learning conditions, in literacy programmes would benefit from this research. We hope this report will help respond to their hopes.

The literacy students who took part in this research deserve our special thanks. Speaking about their experience in literacy programmes brought back some difficult memories, and it helped them realize the progress they have made. We thank them for their willingness to share their experience with us so that others may benefit from it. We were most impressed by their courage and determination, and also by this solidarity that was consistent throughout the province.

**Technical aspects** The project was piloted by Ann Gauvin of the (then) Eastern Quebec School Board. Her job was at times a difficult one and we thank her for her availability, her attention and interest. Our thanks to Diane Labbe, of the same school board, for taking care of administrative questions. Brenda Lee, of the South Shore School Board, did her best to transform the researcher's circumlocutions, faulty grammar and often weird vocabulary into – we hope – readable English. We appreciate her patience and painstaking effort. Our thanks also to Bert Waddington for the final correction. Any oddities remaining in the text are due solely to the researcher's own short-comings.

**A reading guide** In order to make the report as easy as possible to read, we have indicated in the margin the main idea for each paragraph or series of two or three paragraphs. Together with the Table of Contents, this allows the reader to get a quick overview of the report and to rapidly spot paragraphs of particular interest, after, as we hope, he/she will have read it in its entirety.

## QLWG Representatives

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Eastern Quebec Regional School Board - **Ann Gauvin**

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South Shore School Board - **Brenda Lee**

Western Quebec Regional School Board - **Lise Burnette**

## Executive Summary

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Success in literacy cannot be defined by the standard measurements used in general education programmes. The past experience of literacy students must be taken into account; so must the difficulties and disabilities they must cope with in their learning effort.

The students interviewed in the course of this research were a diverse population for whom going back to school was a fearful experience. They had a variety of backgrounds, different capacities, needs, and objectives. Classes were therefore very diversified. Students considered that they had succeeded when literacy had allowed them to regain their self-esteem and feel they were part of society. Those for whom work had been out of reach learned to set some goals and to allow themselves to have ambitions. Parents became good examples for their children and made them understand the importance of education which some of them saw as "the key to life".

Positive results in literacy depend on positive practices that reach the students and develop their capacity for learning. Students often enter a literacy programme thinking that they are unable to learn. Helping them build their self-esteem and trust in their capacity to learn is the first step towards their success. Teachers must be very patient, caring, trusting, and available. Students demand a great deal of them and look to them for guidance in aspects of their lives not related to the programme. Tutors are additional people to relate to: they listen to and encourage students.

Real andragogy practiced in literacy classes leads to success. The students' different rhythms of learning are respected, learning is demystified and students are made to realize that they have knowledge of their own. It is important that they experience success early on. Being in a class offers them structure, direction; it gives them a sense of belonging and helps them develop social skills. They are interested in content that is linked to their reality. Tests and exams generate anxiety, and recognition makes them feel proud, included. Being in a non-threatening environment is vital to their learning. They need support. A positive attitude on the part of the school personnel is important to them.

The competence and commitment of the teachers interviewed for this research were impressive; so was their reflection on their practice. The quality of literacy programmes would benefit from an organized, well thought-out programme of continuing professional development for teachers, with resources made available and with systematic exchanges between themselves as well as with experts in the field. Original, creative ways of systematizing the knowledge they already have, of adding to it and sharing it must be found to allow teachers to progress.

Although the quality of their contribution may vary, tutors provide an essential service and are important assets to literacy. They need better basic training on a continuing basis and a clearer definition of their roles. Other school staff need to be sensitized to the reality of illiteracy and need direction as to how to relate to these students. A professional development activity should be offered to the Centre Travail Quebec officers to sensitize them to the reality of literacy students and programmes.

Teaching and learning materials are insufficient and often hard to find. Many teachers create their own. Their efforts should be co-ordinated and an exchange of material and information must be encouraged. Professional counsellors are needed to help students, particularly those with learning disabilities, and the Ministry of Education should allocate funds to answer this need.

In order to make recruitment more effective, more flexible financing conditions are needed, even for smaller classes. More secure financing would encourage students to register. The Centre Travail Quebec offices are the main gateway to literacy programmes; a reversal of their policy on referrals is essential to make literacy truly accessible to potential students. Suggestions are offered as to schedules and duration of literacy programmes. Child care measures are called for. Facilities and equipment need improvement.

Building a bridge between literacy programmes and a "next step" is imperative to avoid the former becoming a dead end for those not wishing to go on to high school. Present training and insertion services offered by the Ministry of Education should be examined and steps taken to ensure that they are complements, rather than alternatives, to literacy. Conditions are spelled out for their success. Employers need to be educated about literacy and sensitized to the real capabilities literacy students may have and which could be of use to them.

Literacy programmes should be seen as part of a continuum in education. Programmes should be made available to students wishing to continue learning in the school setting after completing their literacy programme. Assessment of prior learning and official recognition of learning done in the literacy programmes are necessary measures. Further learning programmes tailored to the needs and interests of literacy students who have completed their programme and resources centres to access new knowledge are examples of what schools could provide in order to remain active educational agents for the newly-literate population.

Recommendations are presented on these subjects. The main priority is given to the professional development of teachers and of the Centre Travail Quebec welfare officers, with activities to this end recommended in the course of the present 1998-1999 school year.

The report demonstrates that success in literacy cannot be defined as simply the transition to high school or to paid employment. Success in these programmes must be identified in the progress students make, in the process that has begun. The parameters are different and have to do with background, motivations and objectives, personal context and constraints, learning context, and actual learning.

Research is still needed on success in literacy programmes, and on questions such as diversity in the classroom. Literacy students interviewed asked repeatedly and passionately: "Why did we not learn when we were kids?", and "Why is it the same with youth today?" Adult students are legitimate students. Adequate funding and policies are necessary to make their success possible.

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## Introduction

**The situation** Quebec school boards offering English literacy programmes across the province have no clear proof of their efficiency. Success is not easy to assess as it has no well defined indicators to measure it by. While professionals, teachers and students in literacy programmes feel that students achieve successful outcomes, the value of these programmes is often judged by the number of students going on to high school or to paid employment. These conventional criteria appear both unrealistic and unfair as they do not take into account the starting point of literacy students. the very special difficulties they encounter and very different needs each of them has.

**The research question** Members of QLWG needed to know and make known what is effective in their literacy courses and programmes, and what is not, as well as what their students themselves and their teachers perceive as success. The QLWG's aim with this research was to find the best possible ways and means to offer these courses and programmes so that their students would become literate upon completion.

**The purpose of the research** The purpose of the research was to identify what conditions and situations in their programmes actually contribute toward improving student literacy and what this means concretely, what positive results students experience, what practices produce these results, what needs to be developed and what should be improved.

**The definition of success** Success in literacy programmes is interpreted in different ways by different people and research has not yet come up with a single definition that can rally all parties. Although there is currently some reflection on the question in the Ministry of Education (Roy, 1997; Désilets & Roy, 1995) and by the CRIRES, the Centre de recherche et d'intervention sur la réussite scolaire. These authors propose definitions as paths to explore rather than definite statements.

The CRIRES (Moisan, Bourbeau et Payeur, no date: 31), defines literacy itself as:

a process by which an individual acquires competencies in reading, writing and mathematics, as well as the general competencies (functional, social and personal) needed to be autonomous in society, to play a variety of roles and increase his/her knowledge and potential. (Our translation)

While we would qualify the process as a "learning" one, the definition seems adequate and points to how its authors define success, taking into account the different competencies aimed at and their use. They conclude that, "a person is considered literate who masters the whole of the notional and general competencies aimed at pointing out the fact that the concept of success in literacy supposes in fact a multitude of successes, each

corresponding to the acquisition of one of the competencies." (p. 18)

A research report on literacy work with survivors of trauma (Horsman, 1997: 17) offers a useful insight as to the difficulty of focussing on "outcomes" and how this does not take into account the complexity of what many learners are dealing with, reinforcing what the CRIRES observed.

Where "outcomes" include only the ability to read and write better, both workers and learners are likely to be frustrated, wondering why there is not more progress, rather than noticing the layers of learning which ARE taking place.

**The definition in this research** Following the grounded theory method used in this research (Glazer and Strauss. 1967), the concept of success was first defined very loosely at the beginning of our work with a view to finding out how it was actually perceived in the field by the students themselves, the teachers, the tutors and the administrators. The report does not attempt to add its own conceptual definition to those in the works but rather offers the points of views of those directly concerned in the field, hoping that these will contribute to the theoretical effort.

**The method** The method chosen for the project was that of a qualitative action-research with sixteen school boards across the province, all QLWG members. Fourteen of them were visited on site and 45 group interviews were conducted with 162 individuals including past and present students considered as successful, teachers and tutors having positive results with their students and administrators.

The actual number of interviews conducted was some fifty percent higher than had been planned, most school boards wanting all three categories of interviewees to participate, thus demonstrating their interest in the research. Conducting interviews in distant school boards – on the Lower North Shore in the Gaspé and – was an asset as it provided the researcher with a perspective that cannot be developed without being confronted with their reality. Details of the methodology of the research can be found in Annex One; interview guides are reproduced in Annex Two.

**The results** As this report demonstrates, the literacy student population does not meet regular standards for education programmes and curriculum; in particular. criteria for success, rigidly defined as going on to high school or getting a job, are far too narrow to account for what happens in literacy programmes and the kinds of very genuine success students obtain,

These students have particular backgrounds, special needs, and personal objectives which require approaches that are different, and their successes can be measured only by different, more appropriate "measuring tapes". Practices especially geared to their reality produce results that bring these students to develop their capacities and abilities, that transform their lives and make them assets for a society which all too often excludes them, incorrectly seeing them as a burden.

**The present report** As we will see in this report, the quality and the diversity of positive results emerging from these programmes, as seen in the school boards taking part in this research, show that the actual gains of literacy programmes are considerably more complex and far reaching than the sole criteria of high school studies and a job can ever allow for. In this they confirm what researchers have found regarding success in literacy, particularly the fact that it has many layers, many aspects.

The first chapter of the report presents the back-grounds of this student population and offers examples of such positive results, while the second one deals with positive practices used in adult education centres to make them possible, with more examples of success presented. In the third chapter, suggestions are put forth for development and improvement that can bring about more adequate answers to literacy students' needs. The fourth chapter presents the recommendations drawn from the research in order to make these developments and improvements materialize. The conclusion will discuss how we feel success can and should be interpreted, drawing on the results of this research.

**Two caveats** Readers must take into account the fact that the purpose of this research was not to draw an objective profile of English literacy programmes in Quebec school boards, with their strengths and weaknesses, but rather to study success in these programmes. It therefore focuses on the positive aspects and the report should be read with this fact in mind. Both the Quebec Literacy Working Group and the researcher herself are quite aware of major shortcomings in these programmes. This research looks at success and positive practices in order to improve the present situation and should be read with this limitation in mind.

A second caveat seems necessary regarding the difficulties experienced by students and which we present here. They are not meant to make the reader pity the students but to make him/her understand the full scope of the effort they must make in order to succeed. In meeting with the students, with their teachers and tutors and with administrators, the researcher has personally come to quite the opposite conclusion: these students are not to be pitied but to be respected and admired for their strength and determination.

Chapter One

## Positive Results

## Chapter Summary

In order to understand success in literacy, one must first look at who the students are, the difficulties they have to cope with their different starting points and their objectives. Only by taking these into account can one understand the positive results of literacy programmes, which are seen here under four categories dealing with personal development, work, the family and a better grasp on life and the world.

## Part I - The Students In This Research

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**A diverse population** In the general public, functionally illiterate adults are often thought of as an unusual grouping of elderly people, of people who grew up in remote rural areas, or of immigrants from "backward" countries. A minority may, in their minds, be made up of intellectually or mentally disabled people, whom they presume to have little, if any, capacity to learn to read and write.

Contrary to this public image, the vast majority of students met in the course of this research were born in Canada and came either from urban areas or from rural ones in which they had had access to grade school. Their ages ranged from seventeen to fifty with a few exceptions in their late fifties and sixties.

This fits in with research and statistics in the field, showing that people with difficulties in reading and writing may be concentrated in certain categories of the population but are found in all of them, as illiteracy is a wide-spread phenomenon (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 1990).

All the students we met had gone to school for various lengths of time and in their youth had met difficulties in their schooling or personal hardship which had impeded their ability to learn to read and write proficiently enough to function in everyday life. These difficulties cover a wide range and today have serious effects on their learning in literacy classes. They are classified here into five categories.

### Difficulties In School

One student graduated from high school without having learned to read or write: he had been placed in Special Education and moved up according to his age group rather than his academic results. In high school, the short vocational programme he was placed in included only manual subjects.

Many students, some barely out of high school, told us

their teachers in school had made disparaging remarks to them when they had trouble learning. They called them "stupid", "dummy" in front of the whole class and told them they were not bright enough to ever learn anything. Although this hurt them deeply, these students integrated their teachers' assessment of their capacities and it made their learning all the more difficult.

### **Learning Difficulties**

Students suffering from dyslexia or attention deficit disorders were not diagnosed in their youth. Even in cases where they were, resources were too scarce or not available to help overcome them.

### **Intellectual Disabilities**

One student's parents had been told by the doctor that she was "retarded" and should be taken out of grade school because she was unable to learn. Her school did not offer special classes and, based on the doctor's recommendation, no step was taken to ask for one. The intellectual abilities this student did have were never evaluated or developed.

### **Psychological Difficulties**

Some students suffered severe psychological trauma in their youth (violence, sexual and psychological abuse, repressive foster homes, residential schools for Native Canadians) which made learning in school difficult or impossible.

### **Social Difficulties**

Some students never attended the same school long enough to adapt and learn to read and write. These were children whose fathers were in the military and changed postings often.

Parents with little schooling or attaching less importance to education withdrew their children when they started having trouble learning, rather than asking for help, and the children never learned to read and write. They wanted to spare their children the hardship they themselves may have experienced in their own schooling and often these children could be useful working at home.

**The fear of going back to school** With such backgrounds, to return to school as adults is not an easy decision to make. The image of school they hold and, above all, the enduring low self-image they have internalized is one of inferiority, exclusion and failure. They feel alone with their problem, believing everyone else can read

and write, even their children, which reinforces their feeling of shame.

Because of prior experience, some, mainly among the younger ones, see the teacher as the "enemy", there to humiliate them once more and definitely confirm their inability to learn, their so-called "stupidity". They see school in itself as a hostile environment, one of repeated failures, which adult education risks confirming yet again, particularly for those whose learning difficulties had not been diagnosed in childhood.

Deciding to go back to school means surmounting such negative feelings and, above all, admitting openly to the school personnel and fellow students a reality they are ashamed of and which they had previously succeeded in hiding. Such a decision is most difficult and many postpone it for months, even years. It took one student five years to finally muster up enough courage to register. Many could not have taken the decision had their families and friends not supported them.

**Helpless  
people?**

Because they cannot read or write or can do so only with great difficulty, functionally illiterate people are often seen as helpless, not having the necessary knowledge to take care of themselves. Here, as in other areas, stereotypes are misleading and the knowledge some people bring with them to the course is often far from negligible.

Some of the students interviewed had, for several years, held well paid jobs, but were limited by their difficulty in reading and writing, which they hid from their employers and fellow employees.

A Latin-American born machinist with 18 years' experience in the same factory was laid off when it was re-structured. Unable to get an similar job because of his reading and writing difficulties, he worked in a shop at a low-paying job that he hated. When he got frustrated with his school work his wife would reinforce his motivation by telling him. "It's either school or the shop!"

Another student, in his forties, had had no trouble in his job as a car mechanic until computers came in. Up until then he had been able to rely on graphics to understand the manuals. But computer literacy was beyond his capacities.

Many students held steady jobs they liked but had to turn down promotions that would have obliged them to fill out forms or write reports.

One student actually worked in an office for years before the company closed down. She saw this as the signal she was waiting for to return to school.

Another went through a twenty-three year military career working as a clerk before retiring without the army ever discovering he was functionally illiterate. He had managed to hide it because of his exceptional memory.

Despite their resources and the relative success they have achieved in their jobs, these students share with their literacy classmates feelings of shame, failure and exclusion.

**Personalized objectives** While all these adults go back to school to learn to read and write, they all have their own motivations to do so and their own objectives. These are just as different as are the students' own particular difficulties and their own prior knowledge. Adult literacy students can leave the programme when they are satisfied with having achieved their specific objectives, while others will stay on to achieve their own objectives.

Some dream, realistically or not, of post-secondary studies. They want to be nurses, lawyers, English teachers. Once they realize that they can learn, they want to go as far as they can: the sky is the limit.

A former literacy student who earned her Secondary 5 Diploma told of her triumphant satisfaction every time she could check "yes" on forms to a question asking if she had this diploma.

Some students aim at vocational programmes. Some previous literacy students we met in a school board were about to complete their auto mechanics programme in the same school where they had taken literacy.

Some want to learn in order to do limited tasks, for example reading stories to grandchildren, writing cheques by themselves, writing letters instead of phoning families in their home country.

For many, the objective is more vague: the personal satisfaction of learning what they were deprived of in the past is a strong motivation. "I want to know what I missed out on when I was young", said more than one student: "I want to improve my life", said another; "if I die today, it will be with my education."

**All that is  
involved  
in literacy**

Teaching to read and write therefore involves more than teaching the technical capacity to do so. Programmes must take into account the difficulties and the disabilities of students, their fears and apprehensions towards learning and school and the variety of their interests, needs, aims, objectives. They must do so without forgetting that these are adults, a so-called "non-captive population", who can decide to drop out of the programme if they feel it does not answer their needs or help them attain their objectives.

**Any talk about success in literacy programmes must necessarily take into account, over and above the technical objective, the variety of starting points, the complexity of capacities and needs of students, the difficulties they have to cope with, and the nature of the personal objectives they pursue.**

**The objective of reading and writing is in itself theoretical and makes sense only if it translates into the reality of literacy students.** What reading and writing means to one student is not necessarily the same as it means to another. In other words, one's whole identity is involved in the learning process. Literacy students are not abstract students working at acquiring an abstract technical skill. In order to learn they have to cope with all the factors mentioned, which can be major roadblocks to their learning.

Seen in this perspective, it becomes obvious that high school studies and a job cannot be the overall criteria for success for all literacy students, nor the sole justification for literacy programmes. And, conversely, that adults aiming at completing high school or getting a job cannot be the only students to whom literacy programmes cater. The needs and aims vary as widely as do the students. These are legitimate, and an education system that claims to be equitable and inclusive must address them.

## Part II - Positive Results

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Motivations for registering in literacy courses vary widely and in this research we encountered four major categories of such motivations for the successful students we interviewed. These can help us identify positive results obtained in literacy programmes. They cannot and will not be considered in isolation; they are part and parcel of a wider range of elements to assess in considering success. However, they do offer a basis on which to analyze the range of successes literacy students obtain in these programmes.

The adult students we interviewed had registered in literacy for personal development, for work, for the family, for a better grasp on life and the world in general. These motivations are not mutually exclusive: students can have

one or more at the outset, and also change them or add to them along the way. We shall look at how they felt before coming to literacy programmes, and the positive effects the programmes have had on them.

## 1. For Personal Development

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**Feeling "less than human"** Not being able to read and write represented for the adult students we interviewed a daily shame and they worked hard at hiding their illiteracy using all kinds of ploys. One said he felt stupid, incapable of learning, "sub-human", excluded and having no access "to what the rest of the world knows". For many, registration had been excruciating because it forced them to unveil their shameful secret, to be again confronted by their limits and, particularly, in front of school personnel. Many had not previously dared to venture out of their immediate environment. They used words like "pain", "hurt", "non-existence", "not being part of the world".

**Regaining their self-esteem** Literacy courses brought these students to realize they were capable of learning; they could set themselves some goals and attain them, look at a question, a problem, analyze it, break it into smaller pieces, and succeed in answering or solving it. Shame and embarrassment were conquered and students regained their self-esteem. They felt they had been deprived of what a teacher called "the tool to decode reality" and now, having found it, they opened to the world of knowledge a door they felt had always been closed to them.

Students who had always been withdrawn and fearful of social exchanges now publish booklets of their writings, poems. When asked why it was so important for them to actually publish their writing, they answered, "Because these can help potential students who are in the situation we were in before coming to literacy."

The student mentioned previously who had been diagnosed as "retarded" and had been taken out of grade school was timid, isolated, overprotected. While she had never left her village, once into the literacy programme she blossomed. She went by herself to Montreal where she spoke in front of groups of 20 to 100 students. She became the Quebec representative to the Movement for Canadian Literacy.

Another student, who was so shy she never took part in conversations, travelled to Saskatoon to attend a conference for International Literacy Year.

A group of previously withdrawn literacy students went around town talking with various help groups, social

agencies and lawyers in a project to learn about sexual abuse.

In answer to a question asking what the programme had changed in themselves, a young women blurted out, with amazing fire, "I can at last walk with my head up!" Before the programme, she said, she had always "been crawling".

**Belonging  
to society**

These adults have come to realize that they were not alone in the world unable to read and write, and that they were not, as they put it, "empty of all knowledge".

Seeing others like them actually learning made them realize that they too could do so. They no longer feared being in groups, they even succeeded in striking up conversations themselves. Isolation and exclusion have not been totally overcome – literacy is only one factor – but some headway has been made. Literacy has developed their confidence in their capacities for learning, and has given them a feeling of belonging to society, to a world they had felt rejected and excluded them.

Some students told us they had never felt so stimulated in their whole lives. They talked of their passion to learn, to discover new things, and of their motivation to continue learning further.

For one student, learning to read and write was like winning the lottery.

Another marvelled at being able to pronounce words she could understand and organize, at being able. she said, "to learn her own language".

**Attaining  
citizenship**

Through literacy these students have blossomed as persons. They can undertake activities and take on responsibilities like everyone around them but from

which they had been cut off. It allows them to become autonomous and creative adults, participating more fully in society and contributing to it. In fact, it allows them to attain citizenship in a society claiming to be inclusive but which in fact excludes those who cannot read or write.

## 2. For Work

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**Work is  
out of reach**

Objective difficulties and illiteracy as well as the shame and isolation that come with it, in other words, both objective and subjective problems, limit access to work for these adults or limit their ascent in the professional ladder. Almost all job offers require a secondary level diploma and many students told us they did not dare go to interviews for fear of having to reveal that they could not read or write.

Work was out of reach. Some, because they so lacked self-esteem, could not imagine they could be useful or valuable to an employer. Others had little possibility of keeping a job because they had never learned the habit of sustained effort, discipline and continuity. As functionally illiterate adults, the vast majority of them were excluded from the world of work.

Others, who currently have a job or had held one in the past registered in literacy because they wanted to improve their work situation and, in this way, economic conditions for themselves and families. Many worked during the day and studied at night, going to classes at the end of long shifts.

**Having goals and ambitions** Successful students say that at last they can read job ads in the paper and no longer fear job interviews. Many who had come to literacy without a clear objective, or even any hope of learning, now have study or work objectives they would never have dreamed were possible for them.

Having improved their self-esteem and discovered themselves capable of learning not only makes them able to set goals, but legitimizes, in their own eyes, their right to have ambitions. They discover they can have ambitions like everyone else; it gives them a sense of purpose. This represents an empowerment and an opening to the future that had been previously inaccessible to them and that literacy has made possible.

A student taking part in a professional insertion programme is receiving on-site training in a factory; he loves the experience and is quite surprised that his employer values his work and wishes to keep him on at the end of the internship.

Another student, survivor of violence and painful foster home experiences, completed his literacy programme and set up a small business.

A young adult who had no ambitions before coming to literacy classes, decided she wanted to become a lawyer and started working seriously: "I realized I can't become a lawyer sitting down", she said.

Another young adult, working forty hours per week as a barman while learning to read and write, wants to go on to vocational training in order to have more than one specialty and thus, he said, never be out of work.

The feeling of exclusion fades away when these adults realize they can develop a capacity for work through education. Taking part in a literacy programme makes them develop habits of sustained effort of discipline and continuity, which many of them had never before had the opportunity of experiencing.

### 3. For The Family

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**Their role as parent** Being unable to read and write can present serious problems in family life. If some of these problems appear minor, at first sight, such as the difficulty of reading stories to children, others are clearly major: being unable to read notes sent from school to parents, helping children with their homework. Others still can even be life threatening: being unable to read the medication for their children or elderly parents in their care.

Functionally illiterate adults are limited, and painfully feel so, in their fundamental role as parents. Worse, many feel unworthy of being parents at all, because they cannot help their children in their school work and often, also, because their children, through school have basic knowledge they themselves do not share and cannot access.

A recently divorced literacy student voluntarily let her children go and live with their father because he was literate and could help them with their school work.

These parents feel inadequate and believe, often mistakenly, that they are poor examples for their children. These feelings of inadequacy increase their problems of lack of self-esteem.

**Becoming a good example for children** Many students told us that their participation in a literacy programme played a very important role in improving family relations. Learning to read and write improved their contact with their children's school. Being able to read stories to children and grandchildren gives parents the satisfaction of understanding what, up to that moment, they had read with so much difficulty that their children would lose interest; students told us this had considerably increased the quality of affective relations with their children, which is no minor improvement for family life.

Also, seeing their parents return to school brought many of their children to study better, and for older ones, to register in literacy or adult education courses.

A grandmother decided to come back to school for her own satisfaction. She went through literacy and completed high school, obtaining the diploma she had always wanted. Her eldest daughter followed suit and now her youngest one is in literacy, in the same school board.

In another school board, a mother was followed in adult education by her two sons; her daughter, who was

experiencing difficulties in high school and wanted to drop out, plans on registering in adult education as soon they will let her in.

Many adults interviewed told us their children were most impressed both by the effort their parents were making, and by the importance they gave to their studies; their children's marks have clearly improved since the parents are back in school and as one parent said, "my daughter doesn't slack off any more."

By being a good example and stressing with their children the importance of education, parents want to break the welfare cycle and see their children later have an interesting and valuable job. They want to save them, they said, from "being hard labourers all their lives". They want them to have jobs in which "they can use their head".

#### 4. For A Better Grasp On Life, The World

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**A feeling  
of sadness**

Often, when asked what had made them think of going back to school, students talked about their feeling of sadness, their feeling that "something was not right".

There was "too much out there" they could not access, they felt "not in tune with the rest of the world". This feeling of exclusion was painful, hurtful: they were "not part of the world", said one student.

**Education,  
the key to life**

They registered in a literacy programme because they saw education as "the key to life", as one put it. Many talked of their satisfaction of being able to read newspapers and to know what is happening in the world. Radio and television present the news too fast for them to understand. Their poor self-esteem and the difficulty they had in distinguishing facts from opinions had prevented them from forming opinions at all.

**Literacy as empowerment**

On the whole, students who participated in the research felt that they had taken a giant leap on many levels. **Literacy for them has meant much**

**more than mastering the technical operations of reading and writing.**

It breaks their exclusion, gives them a goal, a sense of purpose and a framework to understand life and the world. It opens the way to learning and quenches a thirst for knowledge that surprised this researcher throughout the interviews by its incredible strength and depth. It gives them, over their own lives, a power they had always longed for and turned them into assets for a society that had always seen them as a burden.

Because of this, **these students present unequivocal examples of success in literacy programmes even though they do not all go on to high school or find a job.** All do not have the intellectual capacities, or the need to complete high school and some will never be able to get a job, partly because of their limitations, partly because of those of the job market.

Intellectually disabled persons who pursue their learning to the limit of their capacities, or elderly retired people who realize their goal of learning for their own pleasure are genuine successes. They are as legitimate students in an education system that has not fulfilled its obligations towards them earlier in their lives as those who go on to the high school diploma or a job.

"Literacy always brings about a certain change in those who take part in it. It is therefore a matter of personal identity, of knowledge and of power, rather than one of functional aptitudes" (Street. 1990). The transformation brought about by their literacy programmes in the adult students we met definitely confirm this view.

Chapter Two

## Positive Practices

## Chapter Summary

Positive results in literacy depend on positive practices that reach the students and develop their capacity for learning. Positive practices take into account the needs of the students to build up their self-esteem. Teachers must display a wide range of qualities and practice real andragogy in and out of class. The environment can be a factor in helping students succeed.

What works with adult students, that is, what positive practices bring students to succeed in their literacy programmes, is directly related to that which had made it so difficult for them to learn in their early years. It is also linked to why going back to school was such a difficult decision to make for the vast majority of those we interviewed.

**Taking the background into account** Literacy programmes have to take into account the low self-esteem, the shame, and the experiences of failure in school. Andragogy must be adapted to these and, in addition, make provision for slow learners, intellectually or mentally disabled students, learning disabilities, poor learning and working habits, etc. Added to this, the students' cultural background is often very limited, offering few opportunities to pursue their learning or even maintain it. Some or all of these difficulties can usually be found together in one single class at the same time.

From our interviews with students, with teachers and tutors, and with administrators, **positive practices** to cope with these difficulties can be grouped into five large categories: building self-esteem, the teaching staff, andragogy, and the environment and learning conditions.

### 1. Building self-esteem

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**Feeling/being unable to learn** Students coming into a programme believing they are not intelligent enough to learn will indeed be unable to do so. They feel ashamed, they do not want to expose themselves by asking or answering questions, or even by talking with other students; if they actually can write, they do not dare do so because their spelling and penmanship are poor and they believe that the teacher will react negatively. The background is such a mine field that they imagine the worst and their fears prevent them from opening up and taking the risk of new learning experiences.

Obviously, no learning will take place before the barrier of the students' apprehensions is crossed, before students' fears are dealt with and appeased so that they can focus on their learning. Challenging them openly would simply lead to students dropping out: their wound is so raw and so deep they

cannot cope with yet another challenge. The first step is rather, as one teacher put it, to "go through the back door and first deal with emotions."

In order to understand, ever so little, how these adults feel, as they enter a literacy programme, the reader is invited to do the following simulation exercise. It can be done alone, or in a group allowing for discussion. You, the reader, are the actor in this situation.

Reading and writing have lost their importance: they are no longer useful tools. They have been superseded in every day life, in work, in society as a whole, by an ability for which you, the reader, have no talent, none whatsoever. (*Select an ability for which this applies in your life.*)

Your repeated attempts over the years to acquire it have failed miserably: you are simply, completely and hopelessly inept. This ability can, for example, be drawing, sewing, carpentry, etc. You cannot draw to save your soul, hit a single nail on the head, or are unbelievably clumsy with a needle.

Now, these operations have become the ones most valued in this society; without them there is no job, no meaningful social relation. no understanding of your children's schooling. of public affairs, no consideration, etc. Your incompetence has often been ridiculed, as everyone around you, even your children, take for granted that these activities are a cinch for you as for them. Your children cannot begin to understand how you can be so stupid and they get very impatient with you.

You decide to take a course in this activity, drawing, let us say, knowing full well that you are doomed because you have NO talent. Many teachers have tried to make you learn but in the end all got fed up with you, believing you were lazy and making no effort. Yet you were trying, desperately! And now your job, your station in life, your family all depends on your acquiring this ability.

Try and imagine yourself in this situation. How would you feel? What limits you would see in yourself and in your life? How you would see yourself in relation to everyone around you? What hopes could you hold for succeeding in learning this ability? What future do you see?

This simulation exercise will give you but a very faint idea of the feelings students experience when they register for literacy programmes.

**Treating them as human beings** Both students and teachers told us repeatedly how important it was that the student be made to feel like a person and be treated as an adult, with the human dignity of an adult. This may seem natural, yet many students expressed how important it was by comparing how they were treated in literacy programmes with how they had been treated in school. They appreciate being addressed by name right from the start, and being respected is of the utmost importance. An accepting, respectful inter-personal relationship from the very first day soothes the pain of admitting publicly (to a whole class and to a teacher, by simply being there) a shortcoming they find shameful, and makes them more receptive to further learning experiments with both the teacher and their classmates.

In high-school, "we were nobody", "the teacher did not even know my name". In literacy, we are "never talked down to". These remarks were made repeatedly by students we interviewed.

One student decided to come to class and give it a test for one month: he felt encouraged. "The hurt and the pain lifted. This is my home", he said, and stayed on.

Another came to class very defensively the first day, more prepared to leave than to stay. "At first, I felt shame", he said, "but the teacher didn't laugh".

Students appreciate being allowed to express themselves. They are not being brushed off. They are listened to and taken seriously. Teachers are not judgmental and mistakes are permitted without incurring the risk of humiliation, as in their past school experience. No one is shouting at them, or speaking in harsh tones to them. "They don't scream at you or put you down." "Their soothing tone of voice helps. For many, this represents a new life experience. Class can be "a moment of sanity, a haven of peace in a difficult world", said one teacher.

These remarks may be surprising to those not familiar with literacy classes: part of being an adult is precisely being capable of dealing with unpleasant behaviour and harsh tones. Not so for adults who have been seriously wounded in their souls by psychological violence, or were made to feel "less than human", as noted in the previous chapter. Their sensitivity is exacerbated. Any reinforcement of this feeling closes the door more tightly on learning. To open that door, one must first prove the feeling wrong. That "the teacher didn't laugh" makes the student stay on.

**A supportive atmosphere** The students' lack of self-esteem makes them sensitive to the atmosphere of the class. They need to feel welcome, to be in a relaxed and supportive group. When they realize they are not the only people in the world who cannot read and write or have difficulty doing so, that they will not be pressured into doing things, achieving results, meeting deadlines, that they will not be ridiculed, then the negative emotions can be overcome and the mind becomes receptive.

"I realized that the others were the same: I was not the only one" said a student. It gave him confidence.

That other students in the class looked so bright and yet couldn't read was a relief for one student. He no longer had to hide, he said.

Some students with learning disabilities received a major boost in their confidence when the teacher read them stories about famous people with similar problems. Along with Winston Churchill and Albert Einstein, among others, they felt in good company. "If they have done it, then I can too", was their feeling.

"When I don't understand something, I panic. In my mind, I'm back in residential school and I'm afraid the nuns will beat me as they did then and I freeze and can't learn anything", says a Native woman. When this happens, the teacher either has a quiet cup of tea with her and they talk about something else, or she lets her go home and rest and they get back to the difficulty some other day.

A 17 -year-old student had been given permission to drop out of high-school only if she registered right away in literacy. With her blue, spiked hair, rings in her nose and leather jacket, she was defiant and ready for war, but found no enemy. No remark was made about her attitude or her presentation and everyone behaved kindly towards her, treating her as a responsible adult student. Her attitude changed progressively and she started behaving like an adult. She recently asked to read Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, taught herself to write on the computer, and now wants to learn handwriting. In the interview she said what helped her most to succeed was that the programme made her feel good about herself.

**"The cop comes home alive"** Success in literacy classes, therefore, requires starting by allowing students to put their fears to rest and feel support and hope. Although it may seem foolish "hand holding" to some, it is a vital step in bringing students to give themselves a chance to learn, in getting them to at least keep on trying without feeling shame or fearing disaster. The fact that they do not drop out represents in itself a success. As one teacher put it, "The cop comes home alive, the student comes back the next day. That's already success. It's that basic."

The reader is invited to go back to his/her drawing (or other) course, in the simulation exercise.

Your first class assignment is to make a portrait of a live model, using conté. You have ten minutes to do it, after which drawings will be exhibited to the class for a critique

and marks attributed, determining whether you stay in class or are rejected.

You have no idea what "conté" is. You have never been able to draw anything, let alone a portrait. Other students seem to know quite well what is expected of them and are working feverishly, some smiling a bit ironically at your obvious feeling of failure. The teacher stands at the head of the class, keeping an eye on her watch.

How do you feel in this situation? What are your hopes of learning?

Now, imagine an opposite situation.

You walk into class. The teacher greets you warmly, asks you about your experience with drawing, and when you tell her of your difficulties she replies that you should not worry. All others here are like you. There is a starting point to everything. She doubts very much that you are as "dumb" as you say you are. You were probably badly taught to begin with, and this is where the problem lies. Many have come to this programme having even more trouble than you and are now doing very good work which they thoroughly enjoy. She starts working with you on your drawing.

Are your feelings different from those in the first situation? How do you feel towards learning now?

## 2. The Teaching Staff

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**Their qualities** Research reports on literacy are unanimous in finding that teachers are seen very positively by their students. Our research confirms this emphatically. The list of qualities students attribute to their teachers are excellent guides as to the positive practices that make them succeed.

### A list of teachers' qualities

are there for you	available	caring
committed	compassionate	dedicated
don't let you down	encouraging	enthusias tic
fair (no favourites)	good listeners	honest
patient	respectful	trustful
understanding	want you to learn	warm

Being patient and caring, "being there for you" are valued immensely by students. At last, they have a teacher who takes the necessary time with them, who explains carefully, repeats, etc. A trusting relationship is established with the teacher because he/she cares and wants the students to learn. Being allowed to disagree with the teacher is a major step. Although

contradicting the teacher was "scary" for one student, the argument he had with her helped him improve his marks because she believed he could do better, which raised his confidence. More importantly, being able to say to the teacher that he/she is wrong empowers students who then see themselves as capable of voicing an opinion and defending it against the authority figure of the teacher. One must remember these are students who, before coming to literacy, never dared even to have an opinion or to take part in a conversation.

Students appreciate the interest shown in them by their teachers, as well as the understanding and encouragement, their confidence in the students. These are all qualities normally required of teachers in any class. That these students identify and value them so highly shows both how new these attitudes are to them and how great the students' need is to be treated in this way, as well as their importance as positive practices towards success.

"They want you to learn. They want to teach you."

"They make you want to learn. A dog could learn with them! "

"They don't make you feel ashamed. They help." "She was perfect when I walked in. She made me feel comfortable, confident."

"Clone them!"

**The teachers' point of view** Teachers themselves say that showing care, being positive, encouraging and patient is absolutely vital in their relationship with the students. The students have been hurt so many times that their self-confidence is very fragile and teachers must tread carefully not to destroy it but rather help them build it up. Personality characteristics are important: teachers feel they must be caring, attractive personalities, relaxed, trusting, "people persons". They also find teaching literacy rewarding. Students want so badly to learn. They want to "unlock the mystery, decode what the rest of the world knows". In literacy classes, some teachers say they are learning the "importance of compassion" in teaching.

"Our enthusiasm for their learning is so important!"

"Nobody knows how positive the atmosphere is; I love adult education although conditions are terrible. Students are wonderful. They pick me up. They give you as much as they get."

**One teacher only** Students insisted on the importance of having only one teacher, rather than four or five like they used to have in school. They have to adapt to only one personality and that is enough. Once they have developed trust in this person, it would be asking too much to make them take the risk of trusting three or four

more. They would not stay on. Furthermore, one teacher is better for continuity in teaching practices. Teachers, however, must be careful not to create a dependency. The relationship can become so cozy that students will hesitate to leave. Said one student, "I didn't want to leave this secure nest to go to high-school. The teacher helped me build my confidence to make the move."

In the far North, where teacher turnover is high, students want the same teacher throughout their programme. "If you don't come back, we won't. We want to start and finish with you." Teachers and students are closer in isolated environments and the emotional investment is high. If teachers leave, students fear they will be hurt again and don't want that to happen.

**More than one role**

The teacher is someone in authority to whom students look for guidance both in their studies and in other aspects of their lives unrelated to school. "You can even talk about personal problems and trust him", said some students. "We are counsellors for everything", said one teacher. They must be qualified as teachers, but also in life skills. They must know the community. The lack of counsellors available expands their own task, but some teachers complain they do not have adequate knowledge or training. In large cities in particular they do not know the outside resources they can refer students to. They are asked to give advice as marriage counsellors, psychologists, etc. for which they do not feel they have the necessary competence.

**Tutors help too** Many of the qualities noted above apply to both the teacher and the tutor. The latter's contribution on the personal level is appreciated. He/ she is another person to relate to, one who can help, listen to ideas, encourage, and this raises students' confidence. With a tutor, there is no interference: the student has undivided attention.

For some students the one-on-one relationship avoids the pressure they fear they would get from other students. This was the case in a tiny, very close-knit community where interviews had to be conducted individually because students were afraid of being put down by others.

In another small community students preferred having a tutor because a class would have let the whole community know of their illiteracy. They would not have come to a class.

In one school board, younger students appreciated the respectful as well as relaxed relationship with the tutors who treated them as adults.

Working with a tutor first encouraged others to later register and be in a class. The ice had been broken and their confidence was strong enough so that they could face a group.

### 3. Andragogy

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Literacy teachers and tutors use a wide and rich variety of andragogical methods and techniques to help students learn. What we shall see in this section is not so much an inventory of their practices as the reasoning behind methods and techniques used, with a series of examples, and some of the positive results to which they lead.

**Practicing real andragogy** That teachers do not have a defined programme for literacy is both a difficulty and an asset. It is a difficulty because they struggle on their own to create the programme as they go, adapting it to the particular students they have in class each semester. The teachers we interviewed succeeded despite this difficulty, but this can present serious problems to some of their less experienced or less creative colleagues.

It is also an asset, because, said one teacher, what they do is real andragogy. They begin with their students' needs and gear their teaching to their students, tailoring it to their needs and objectives and choosing methods and techniques according to their learning capacities. They "try everything, all approaches, whatever works", said one. They are facilitators and accept not being in control but rather sharing control with their students. Administrators mentioned flexibility as a necessary quality teacher must have.

True to andragogical philosophy, teachers of successful students also respect the learning rhythm of students, who appreciate being able to work at their own pace according to their learning capacities. Students said repeatedly that it helps them to concentrate and focus on what they are learning. Having three-hour classes instead of 50-minute ones as in high school also lets them learn better; they can go through a whole problem, a whole text instead of having three different subject matters to tackle, which they found quite distracting.

Students like being free from the hassles they say they felt in high school. If they are tired they can get up and get a cup of coffee, go out of the class without getting written permission, etc. They are treated as adults. Teachers adapt their lessons to take into account their physical capacities - some students work during the day and study at night. All this makes for an atmosphere free from pressure and more conducive to learning.

**Demystifying learning** Coming to class feeling ignorant and unable to learn, students must first be made to realize that they can learn, and have done so in the past. They need to demystify learning and realize that they can keep on learning. To do this, teachers have students talk about their interests and centre learning activities around them throughout the course.

First Nation students presented a play in Cree and explained it in English to the teacher and to fellow students.

A quiet student felt he had no practical skills, did not even answer the phone for fear of having to write down a message. A passionate gardener, he opened up when the teacher discovered he knew even the Latin names of a great many flowers, and had him talk about them.

Another silent student was, like many, a fan of the Discovery Channel. The teacher reached him by asking him questions on the surprisingly broad knowledge he had acquired by watching it.

One student was technically able to write, punctuate and comprehend, yet she was held back by fear. She was shy and retiring. On the first Friday, the school held a musical afternoon. The teacher found that this student was an opera buff and she accepted sharing with the class a knowledge that turned out to be at the university level. This made her overcome her fears; she became motivated, self-confident.

Realizing that they have knowledge of their own gives them the necessary confidence to open up and become active in class, as was the case with these students. Sharing this knowledge, explaining to teachers and fellow students what they know or have understood boosts their confidence considerably. Other students may take longer if their interests are not as clearly defined and as specialized, but when teachers find and use them, "the student can catch fire and go fast", according to one teacher. One such student went through the literacy programme and up to his vocational diploma (D.E.P.) in a year and a half.

**Experiencing  
success**

Students are often surprised, elated even, when they discover they actually can learn. This happens when they experience even a small success. They start believing in themselves and believing they can progress in the programme. Some teachers start them at a lower level to make them experience that small success as early as possible. Often, success must not only be acknowledged, but be pointed out. Students tend to under-value their achievements and do not recognize success when it comes.

"I'm bad at math" said a student. "What are you good at?" asked the teacher.

"Hey. I wrote that?" exclaimed another, thrilled at hearing his teacher read what he had just written.

In the first month of his programme, a literacy student wrote in class a letter to the editor of the Gazette who, to his amazement, published it. Through this, he discovered that words have meaning and it "made him click".

Students referred by social welfare agencies develop a motivation to stay and learn if they experience success early, said teachers.

**Offering structure, direction** Structure in many ways helps students succeed, mainly because it alleviates their fear of the unknown and provides a frame to organize at least that part of their lives. For many, knowing what they are going to do each day, even each hour for some, is reassuring. They feel in control and if they do not like a particular task or subject, they know it will soon be over. The immediate future is predictable and therefore non threatening.

Teachers, administrators and many students have told us how important strict attendance and punctuality requirements are to induce students to get up in the morning and come to school on time. It helps them organize their lives and gives them a sense of purpose. Successful students are annoyed by those who come in late and disrupt class. Older students in particular will point this out to younger ones who often react well to the reprimand.

Being clear about roles is important. The teacher may be considered a friend and be very relaxed with his/her students, nevertheless being strict about attendance and refusing to let them slack off, insisting they do the work they are capable of doing and being firm without being pushy. All this helps students progress and keep on with their work.

A young student started hanging out with a bad group who often missed classes and cared little about their schooling. When some of his buddies got expelled, it gave him a shock: he did not want to get the same treatment. He decided he "didn't need them" and started being serious about his studies.

Planning is something most literacy students have never learned and helping them develop this ability gives them power over their learning. Teachers help them set goals for themselves and this helps them visualize results. They define what they want to learn or change in themselves over a given period, and write it down. If their goals are unrealistic, teachers discuss with them their strengths and weaknesses, the educational requirements for such goals, and help students redirect their energies, being careful to avoid rushing them or putting them down. This is an ongoing process in many classes.

In some cases students make a portfolio and refer to it periodically, or in moments of self doubt. It reminds them of their goals and helps them be more objective about their progress.

Less successful students usually have more difficulty identifying their goals. They don't know what they want to be. They are too busy "Just getting through the day", said a teacher.

**Being  
in a class**

Being expected to come to a class makes students accountable and gives them a sense of belonging. Most students and teachers say they prefer a class to individual tutoring because they appreciate the company, they find more stimulation and exchange. Students encourage and are resource persons for each other. Some like to measure themselves against others, finding the competition challenging. Classes are also positive because they help students learn to deal calmly and maturely with criticism, and to develop tolerance. Frustration can be high and a class gives students an opportunity to exchange and to learn to cope with such criticism and frustration in constructive ways.

Small classes are much preferred over larger ones, because students feel they get more attention and work better. In large classes, the noise level and discipline problems are disturbing and students feel their needs are not being met. Said one administrator, "We think about the needs of students who are failing, but much less about those of students who are succeeding". Tutors can help in such classes. Also teachers pair off students and find this helpful to themselves as well as the students, as students do not direct all questions at them. "I would go crazy without this", said a teacher.

One student was bored working alone with a tutor. He needed people to work with, he said, to give him more stimulation. Another one likes to sit with someone smarter, to learn more.

Another likes the competition. With two or three students at the same level in his class, he works at home to beat them, he said.

Older students help younger ones be more serious and stay in the programme. One who had been in a literacy programme and was now finishing his auto mechanics course at the same school followed closely two younger students, encouraging them and boosting them when they felt like dropping out. He was a role model for the two students, who appreciated both his care for them and his encouragement.

One student working with a tutor said he could not imagine himself in a class with many people. The interview was his first opportunity to meet with other literacy students, although they knew each other outside the programme. He was surprised at how good it felt to be together and talk about their experience.

**Linking content  
to their reality**

Successful students we interviewed wanted to learn about real life. They wanted to talk about subjects that make sense in their environment, discuss issues that are important in the society around them and which they do not understand. Most teachers find their themes for discussion and study by talking with students, which implies that they be flexible and ready to adapt to the

students' needs and interests. At first, students do not know what is expected of them, but once they have experienced discussing some themes, they come up with their own ideas.

As mentioned before, students prefer facts to fiction or opinions. They are interested in everyday subjects like paying their bills, buying furniture, using public signs for spelling. Some use newspapers in class as a starting point. Discussing the news first makes it easier to read the papers, with their complicated vocabulary and presentation of issues. Many teachers told us students love philosophical discussions on topics such as discrimination, racism or the norms of this society and those of foreign ones. These discussions help them to form opinions and better understand the world around them. It enlarges their limited experience, said one teacher.

Some students did not like reading Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. They asked their tutor to give them "stories about life".

Most do not read the texts we give them, said a tutor, and instead come back to us with forms they want to fill out.

Students in one class wondered where the looney came from and were interested in learning about the loon, where the word comes from, what a loon is, etc. They felt everyone in Canada but they knew what it was.

In a multi-ethnic class students started talking about embroidery. It led them to themes related to culture, to religion and to community.

Talking about other cultures and countries interests students greatly, said one teacher, and it helps them realize there is more out there than their small village.

Projects are an excellent pedagogical tool to make students take on responsibilities, learn to plan and to carry out their plan from beginning to end. The topic must be chosen by the students themselves, and imposed topics usually fall flat. The project can involve the whole community and be socially significant.

A student identified as "retarded" in childhood and taken out of school successfully organized a trip to Ottawa, with a sleep-over for ten people. She felt that having done that, she knows she can go further.

Students wrote booklets and wanted them published. Carrying out the project made them realize all the detailed work involved in this, which they had not expected. They feel they learned how to organize and how to cope "in the real world".

In a distant region the school board set up an oral history project, in which literacy students were actively participating. The elders, some of them in literacy programmes themselves, were asked about the history of the region and this was being recorded. Everyone was amazed at the amount of knowledge people had and the project created a momentum. History and geography have become the most popular subjects with children in school and in high-school, and all the villages have linked up to take part in the project.

**Homework, evaluation** Neither the student nor the teacher groups we interviewed were unanimous on the question of homework. Not all students can or want to have homework: some have a job and are too tired at night for homework. Women with children find it difficult making time for yet more work. Some younger students were adamant about separating home and school, saying they work hard at school and need to do something different at home. Those who do homework on their own progress faster, said some teachers. They are willing to take the risk of learning on their own.

Evaluation and tests generate anxiety and stress. They revive students' fear of failure. They are intimidating and particularly difficult when they use different words, different scenes from those used for learning. One student left her previous school because she would have had to talk in front of her whole class for a test.

Teachers respond to this by making students understand that tests are not the most important thing in the world. They are "no big deal". Constant reviews, pre-tests and ongoing tests that show students their weak areas so that they may concentrate on them are helpful. Students can take tests when they are ready. They can choose to do so orally or not. What is asked of students is made very clear. Tests are also presented as a way of evaluating their teacher's work. He/she needs to know if what he/she is doing is working. They are also a way of knowing whether the student can go ahead and what gaps there are in their learning so that this subject matter can be reviewed and reinforced.

Students like to have marks on their tests: "It gives us something."

One teacher encourages her students by telling them their 40% mark on a test means they already know 40% of the subject-matter and need to learn only 20% more to pass. Without limiting them to the passing mark, she makes the task ahead seem less insurmountable.

**Positive reinforcement** Tests are also used for positive reinforcement. Often, it is not enough for literacy students to realize they are able to read: someone else must also feel they can. One teacher said that her students crave recognition: free pencils, book marks, little gifts. Seeing their story printed and up on the board for all to read is a

boost. Almost all like gold stars, stickers and stamps. Everyone had these when they were children, except them. They are "doing the student thing", said one teacher, making up for what they missed out on in their youth. Recognition makes them feel proud, included.

Some school boards have unofficial certification and a formal ceremony at the end of a session. These do not recognize academic achievement but progress in other fields in which students had experienced difficulty: co-operative spirit, attendance and such. One board has a graduation ceremony for those going on to high-school. Some younger students are skeptical because the non-academic certificate has no value. Most appreciate it because it shows the level they have reached. They are very proud, seeing this as a testimony to the value their school attaches to their learning and their achievements.

**Support** Most students we interviewed got support from family and friends. Parents help, a mother pushes her son out of bed in the morning, older children encourage, and so do younger ones, who are most impressed by their parents' progress, gold stars and such. Spouses and girl or boy friends raise their motivation and often prevent students from dropping out. Peers and older class-mates make a huge difference. They support, help out.

In cases where the feedback is negative on the part of the family or friends, successful students either keep quiet and don't tell them or see this as a challenge. It makes them stronger and they want to prove to their friends and family that they can learn. Several said they had told no one they were taking literacy. They said they were being tutored on their writing, taking a communications or a computer course etc. None liked saying that they were in a literacy programme.

#### 4. Environment and conditions

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**Being in a non-threatening environment** Being in a place where they feel comfortable learning, a non-threatening environment is vital to literacy students. Threatening ones are, for example, classrooms identified and labeled "literacy class", where young, regular students can see them from the hall and sneer at "the dummies". Literacy students feel comfortable in a space of their own, among adults, where they are not confronted with the young, and sometimes their own children.

One school had a "literacy" sign on the classroom door, and it was painful to the students who asked that it be removed. The room was next to a computer class with windows between the two: literacy students said they hid

behind posts: they called the room the "aquarium". They requested and got a more private one where they could leave books on the tables and their work on the walls, something they never did in the other class because they could be seen by regular students. The room was awkward in size but it was their own: they also had a kitchen, and they felt they could "space out" in it when they needed to.

Both students and teachers in one school board appreciate having a space of their own for literacy, with students taking care of coffee and organizing trips or social activities with the benefits of the coffee sales. It is also a place to talk at breaks. "Literacy is not only reading and writing, say the teachers: it is also learning social skills", and for some, the need is considerable.

In another school board, the literacy class is small, dark and very hot, but it is secluded and students prefer this room to a larger, more convenient space because it is their own and they are isolated from younger students.

One student who was reluctant to register in literacy because classes took place in a school no longer objects as he feels he now has a better impression of what goes on in a school.

It was interesting that in a rural school board where literacy students were intellectually disabled having a separate space would have been a negative, rather than a positive factor. In this remote area, these students were quite integrated in their society and their school. Other adult students came to fetch them at the end of class, had them participate in activities, and treated them as they normally did anyone else. According to the teacher, other students do see them as different, but this difference is not demeaning. Her literacy students do not lack self-esteem, and our interview with them confirmed this. There is no doubt that the poor self-esteem of students elsewhere has to do, at least in part, with their fear of being too obvious in their school, of being different in a negative way, of standing out like "sore thumbs", as one put it.

Some disagree with the preferential treatment students get having a space of their own, seeing it as overprotection. They feel this "mini-community" does not motivate them to continue on to high-school, and that they should, instead, be part of the school, rather than a world within a world. They are students and should be with other students. From our interviews with both students and teachers it is clear that a space of their own does help literacy students feel more secure and, because of this, they learn better and feel like, continuing to learn.

Overprotection is nevertheless a real danger, and several teachers mentioned it. In some cases, they worked at avoiding it by having more advanced literacy students progressively put in situations where they could mingle to a certain extent with other adult students, for example in computer

classes. Counsellors, when they were available, also helped students make the transition from literacy to high school.

**Peace and quiet** Efficient pleasant surroundings give students a sense of the importance given to their education by the authorities. They take studying very seriously and expect their environment to be as serious as they are. They need some space where they can work in peace and quiet without being disturbed by younger students playing dominoes or fooling around.

Of course, everyone would like to have a peaceful and quiet space in which to work; with literacy students, however, this is not a mere preference but a need made more acute by the fact that they have to concentrate more on their learning than the average student. There is precariousness in their ability to concentrate that makes this need more imperative than for other students.

"At times, it's harder than work. You use your brain all the time.!"

We can compare this need to that of someone learning a foreign language and speaking it very little. For him/her to understand the spoken language every word must be articulated very clearly and louder than normal. Any noise covering even a single syllable has a disturbing effect and the student cannot understand what is said.

It would be similar in the drawing course of our simulation exercise: the reader can try and imagine learning to draw because his/her whole life depends on it and working painstakingly at it while other students around him are walking between him/her and the model, talking loudly, playing games, or worse, coming over to look at his/her work and making fun of it.

**Neat surroundings** Some students did not pay much attention to their surroundings while others reacted strongly when questioned about them. Some buildings can, in fact, be quite depressing and some students see this as a lack of respect towards them. Others don't seem to mind poor facilities until they find themselves in neater, more pleasant ones. Some to whom this happened changed their attitude towards their classroom when they moved into a new, more pleasant one, putting up beautiful posters, decorating it and keeping it neat, all of which they had never done in the other room. "It all has to do with self-esteem and gives them a sense of belonging", said their teacher. It adds to their self-respect and dignity.

In a distant region, one centre is crammed with students, although it is nothing more than a shack, while another village has the best facilities in the region, with excellent equipment. According to a non-teaching professional,

people see it as a proof of the importance of being educated.

**The personnel** How literacy students are treated by the school personnel sends them a strong message to which most are very sensitive. Students are in contact with secretarial staff at registration and when they take the placement test. These are moments of enormous stress and can make or break their decision to stay on. Students find discretion and kindness soothing. Directors who intervene with students to help and encourage them are greatly appreciated. The message students perceive is one of care and of the importance of their studies.

In one board, the secretaries are the ones to call 16 to 18 year-old students missing classes. The contact is warm and friendly and students appreciate this. They feel they belong to the school and it encourages them to come back.

One successful student said that when he was about to drop out the Centre' Director invited him in for a talk. At the end of their meeting, the director gave the student a dictionary to help him with his school work. This attention on the part of the director impressed the student and boosted his morale. He stayed on.

Chapter Three

## Development and Improvement

## Chapter Summary

Present situations are described and actions suggested concerning teachers' professional development, tutors' basic training and role, and the sensitization of school staff and CTQ officers. Teaching and learning materials need improvement and counselling services should be provided. Recruitment, time constraints, facilities and equipment are also examined. The chapter closes with a look at what is available to students after literacy.

The practices described in the preceding chapter are those that contribute the most to students' success in their literacy programmes. Other factors influence this success less directly. Some can be more problematic. If they were developed or improved they could become positive factors that help in leading them to success.

We shall deal here first with the question of professional development. In the second part, with the context: teaching and learning materials, organization, facilities and equipment; and in the third part with the next step for literacy students.

## Part I - Professional Development

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### 1. Teachers

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#### a) The Situation

**A wealth of competence** Teachers we met in the course of this research impressed us greatly with the quality of their input and their commitment to their students. The vast majority of them have years of experience in literacy and had obviously done more than the day-to-day work in their classrooms. There was no doubt that their dedication led them to go far beyond the call of duty, as noted by many of their students. They not only teach, they search high and low to find all kinds of ways to improve their teaching, to be attentive to their students' needs and to be creative so that they can find ever better ways to help students succeed.

But above all, many of these teachers reflect on their practice, which is the key to improvement in education. Although professional development is non-existent for the vast majority, they have developed a wealth of competence, precisely through this reflection and their search to improve their teaching. Students have been teachers to them, some say, which is the basis of what Paulo Freire (1972), the great Brazilian educator and literacy teacher, calls

"dialogical education". They are capable of learning as well as teaching, which is not as common as it would seem. They need to be very open and secure in order to accept not being in control all the time.

**Professional development at present** Teachers told us they had taken part in the past in workshops or had gone to conferences on literacy. Some administrators said they were receptive to requests from teachers to take part in such activities; others, that they had professional development only when the union forced them to.

Teachers attended seminars and workshops usually organized by volunteer organizations in the literacy field or they had taken courses at Concordia University. Other teachers told us they did not attend them any more because they could not afford them. It was too pricey, said one, to go to activities in the city. Yet they needed training on so many subjects, learning disabilities being one of them. Some had had workshops on andragogy and would like to know more, for instance on problems students meet with, on teaching and learning methods. Finally, some non formal training had been done by one Centre Director.

The problem with present professional development is that, just as in adult education in general, it is haphazard, out of the control of those involved, and is done on themes that are not chosen by them. Teachers must rely on outside volunteer organizations who, although generous in their intentions and as attentive as possible to the needs they perceive, may have priorities of their own as well as pedagogical orientations that may be quite different from those of teachers. The school system itself lacks a coherent, cohesive professional development programme for its literacy teachers.

## b) Suggestions For Action

**A programme of continuing development** The quality of literacy programmes would benefit substantially from an organized, well thought-out **programme of continuing professional development for teachers.** Indeed, like anywhere else in society, and perhaps even more so in education, without the maintenance and development of competencies, workers, educators, professionals will not progress and the quality of their output will not keep up with increasingly higher standards. In literacy as in other professional fields, one either progresses or regresses. Teachers themselves must be willing to invest time and energy to upgrade themselves professionally.

To make teachers progress, this professional development should be organized around needs that are well identified by teachers themselves and by school boards. Content and organization should be well planned over a certain period and **resources made available** so that teachers can access the activities during working hours, as it is the case with teachers in the regular sector. This should be a decentralized province-wide programme and volunteer groups working in the field could be invited to participate.

**Exchanges** Professional development does not have to take the form of conferences and workshops alone. Alternate

forms of training should be explored and made available. Allowing teachers time to **exchange systematically between themselves** in their school boards, and between school boards, could constitute a first step in this direction. Teachers who were reluctant to come to one of our interviews because they "had nothing to say" came out of it very energized. They realized they did indeed have much to say but had had little opportunity before of exchanging systematically with each other about their practices. This had a morale boosting effect that both they and their administrators appreciated.

A further step would be to organize such exchanges with the contribution of **educational experts** who can help teachers in their reflection on their practices and stimulate them to go further by making them aware of advances in their fields elsewhere. They could involve teachers from several school boards and retired teachers who are tutors. They could offer opportunities to discuss ideas with community literacy groups, with teachers from the French sector and from other provinces, as well as with international guests here for other purposes.

**Small scale research** Another non traditional professional development activity could take the form of **small scale research projects** to be done by teachers alone or with the help of outside experts. An example could be a reading workshop wherein a theme is chosen by a group of teachers in one or several school boards: books or articles are found on this theme and shared among the teachers. This could provide them with, or improve their access to literacy thinking and practice here and abroad. Teachers could meet at regular intervals to present a synthesis of the material they have studied and hold discussions about the ideas they offer. Larger meetings for discussions on the themes could also be organized.

**Production** These projects do not have to be major undertakings. They can be done on a limited basis in one- or two-day sessions, with a small number of participants. One of the conditions of organization and participation could be that teachers supply a substantial **written report or other product**, a videotape for instance, to share with those who could not attend so that the beneficial effects may extend more widely. These would make the gist of the reflection accessible to more than those teachers fortunate enough to participate.

These could be distributed to colleagues not only in participating school boards but elsewhere as well. We believe it would be particularly appreciated in distant, isolated regions. The Internet could be made accessible to teachers to this end. A **discussion group** could be organized, adding yet more possibilities of exchange. Someone, teacher, school board administrator or other, would have to take on the leadership of such a group, however, to avoid it going off in all directions.

These are original, **creative ways of systematizing the knowledge** teachers already have, adding to it and sharing it. They are small measures that can require a minimum of time and resources, once the momentum is created, and would provide a considerable benefit in terms of progress in teaching and learning. They would also be a great encouragement to

teachers whose isolation represents both a burden, and worse, a danger of stagnation which, at least for most of those we interviewed, has up to now been generally avoided. But these teachers had been selected precisely because they were successful with their students. Less successful teachers could possibly benefit even more.

## 2. Tutors

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### a) The Situation

#### **An uneven contribution**

Tutors are appreciated by the vast majority of their students for the personal attention they offer and for their availability. They give the additional help some students need. They represent another person to relate to, someone who listens to ideas, encourages, gives confidence. Some students have one tutor or more while attending classes. Others learn with the tutor alone. Tutors can assist teachers in the classroom by sharing the burden of a huge class, a multi-level class, or one with mixed abilities.

Some tutors, however, generated frustration for students who complained that they had "good intentions, but no skills", did not understand learning disabilities and were not patient enough with students who had such disabilities. Teachers also complained that their training was not up to par, that they needed to be told what to do and did not want to make decisions. Co-ordination between teacher and tutor can be difficult. In our research interviews, only a few tutors were able to contribute, most of them remaining spectators. Administrators complained that they come and go. Some do not have the necessary skills and good ones are hard to find.

#### **An essential service**

In small communities, studying with a tutor is often the only alternative for students who would not go to classes for fear of being identified as illiterate. Some students continue learning with tutors once they have left the course. It can be the only way for some to maintain their reading skills.

Most of all, tutors are essential to regions where the population is spread so thinly and over so vast a geographical area that the required numbers to establish classes cannot be reached. No literacy would be available at all were it not for these tutors. These regions are not necessarily very distant ones. In general, the English-speaking population outside of Montreal in general have this problem in common.

### b) Suggestions For Action

#### **Vital basic training**

First and foremost, better **basic training** of tutors is vital to ensure the quality of their contribution. This training should be done on a **continuing basis** so that skills and knowledge do not become outdated. At present, it is generally done by community groups rather than school boards themselves, and its quality is variable. School boards must evaluate whether they want this responsibility

to be left entirely to volunteers, or whether they too want to be involved in defining what this training should be, its objectives and its content, for tutors working with them.

**Better defined roles** Tutors' **roles must also be better defined** so that they may know what is expected of them, and teachers and students know what they can ask of these tutors. These roles can evolve according to changing needs. Training should include not only how to work with individual students, but also how to perform a variety of tasks in the classroom so that they can be more useful resources. Teachers, particularly those who work with tutors in their classes, can be asked to contribute their input on this question and some can also learn themselves how to better co-ordinate their work with a tutor.

Tutors are an important asset to literacy. Better training could be valuable in making their work more satisfactory to both students and teachers, but also to themselves. Their situation is not always an easy one, and their dedication should definitely be commended.

### 3. Others

**Other school staff** Non-teaching school staffs, secretaries in particular, play a more important role than one might assume in literacy programmes, as we saw earlier in this report. They usually are the first in contact with potential students who phone or come to enquire about programmes. The way secretaries will answer these potential students' queries can have a decisive effect on whether or not they register. The same applies to other moments as well, particularly when they take their placement tests.

Some students felt sheer anguish handing in their placement tests to a secretary. One said he was so stressed that if he drank, he would have gotten drunk.

Another was embarrassed when literacy students were told to go to one room. There were many people and it was like being told, "All students with AIDS to the left!"

This staff needs to be **sensitized** to the reality of illiteracy and given **direction** as to how to cope with these students at different moments, to make them feel accepted and respected. Their good sense and good will are not in question here. They simply should be supplemented with sensitization and knowledge.

Some school boards, as well as students, have found ways to go around the students' reservations about the name of the course. They call it anything from "communications" to "improving their English", etc. This is the kind of measure that costs nothing and goes a long way to making the students feel more at ease with their programme.

**Sensitization for CTQ officers** The attitude of social welfare officers was, for its part, severely criticized by a great many students and by teachers and administrators as well. The questions they ask students about their studies show gross ignorance of what literacy is all about. The demands they make of welfare recipients, particularly in terms of the duration of programmes, are unrealistic and not only add to the stress they endure, but they can go as far as interrupting these students' programmes.

While much of the problem has to do with CTQ policies, for which its officers are not responsible, the application of these policies concerning individual recipients is their domain. School boards would do themselves and their students a service by offering these officers, for example, an annual half-day or a day of **professional development** to **sensitize** them to the reality these students face and to individual literacy programmes as such. We believe this would be appreciated by these officers while helping them in their work with literacy students and candidates.

## Part II - The Context

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### 1. Teaching and Learning Material

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#### a) The Situation

**Teaching material** When asked what material they used in their classes, literacy teachers showed great flexibility. They use whatever is available, what "works best". Many have written and developed their own. They also use materials they have gathered over the years. Dictionaries are a major tool. Some teachers leave several different ones on a table and students are invited to use them. Rulers and measuring tapes are also used, as well as other every day objects that can help students learn. Newspapers provide material for many, if not most, teachers.

One teacher uses the *Readers' Digest* once a month in her class to read a condensed book. Her students like it because they can talk about the story with their friends and let them think they read the whole book, while they are not yet able to do so.

Some teachers use the Ministry of Education's Guide (Ministère de l'Éducation, 1996), but not systematically. They use parts of it, thematic texts, and some adapt it to their needs. They feel it can be of help for newer teachers or tutors, but the fact that it has not yet been fully translated is a barrier. Challenger and Laubach material is used, but without enthusiasm by most. Teachers use it to placate students who insist on having workbooks to use, but many say they disagree with that kind of pedagogical approach.

**Learning material**

Some school boards do not have sufficient learning material to go around and students complain that books are written in and have to be shared. One teacher photocopies excerpts, but her intellectually disabled students feel that their learning is not taken seriously because they cannot have books like other adult students. Elsewhere, some are eager to work at home and feel that they would progress much more quickly if they could keep books overnight, which they cannot because they are shared by daytime and evening students.

Reading material geared to adult literacy students and to slow learners in particular is, according to almost all teachers, hard to find. Some resort to grade school material, but students find it juvenile. They feel they are treated like children and take offense. Teachers told us that their school libraries had old books, others that they used American outdated ones. They told us that Literacy Council books look unprofessional and often have mistakes and poor grammar. Finally, teachers from distant regions are limited by small budgets for books, and by delivery delays for material ordered by catalog.

One teacher says she just loves books with mistakes. She uses them in class to help with spelling. This makes spelling mistakes less shameful. Even books make them! What is important is to correct them.

Another works with the grade school teacher of some of her student's small children and uses the same reading books. Parents appreciate learning what their children are learning and being able to relate to their school work as well as being able to read to their children.

In some cases students are introduced to the public library and encouraged to use it. Some said they did. But many teachers told us their public libraries cannot cater to their students' needs.

A few libraries have set aside special sections for new readers, or have some discreet identification of suitable books, such as a sticker in the regular stacks. The response has been enthusiastic.

## **b) Suggestions For Action**

**Coordinate efforts**

A first step aimed at correcting the dearth of both teaching and learning materials is to encourage a **co-ordination of efforts** of teachers who create their own material and an **exchange of material and information** on it among both literacy teachers and school boards.

The Literacy Centre maintains a clearinghouse of all literacy materials produced in English in Quebec as well as a travelling trunk of resources. Some teachers told us

this trunk had been useful to them, but newer teachers, particularly in distant regions, had not heard about it. They were most interested in having access to it as they are pretty much isolated and left on their own.

Teachers may at first be reluctant to make their own material available as they have worked on it on their own and for their own purposes, not for others. The interviews held with them among the sixteen participating school boards demonstrated a quality of their reflection on their practices that lead us to believe that their material can also be highly valuable.

Encouragement could come in the form of time freed from teaching to bring their material up to the calibre they want, and also in the form of publication by their school boards and/ or the MEQ. Funds could be requested to this end of the Federal/Provincial Initiatives Programme which already allows monies for this kind of material. This could be minimal, as a few teachers at a time could be freed for short periods to pursue this work.

They could also exchange information on the other material they use, and explore other possible sources, such as those in other provinces or countries, and in international organizations. This material could be either used as such or adapted or, if not directly relevant, serve to inspire new material. Internet possibilities could be useful for this. External co-operation could also be put to use: literacy councils, specialists in the field willing to give advice, etc.

What is important here is to set in motion an on-going, limited **project** to encourage teachers to make their material known to their colleagues so that quality material may be available to all teachers, starting with what exists already, that could be exchanged. Producing teaching and learning material would help replace and/or complete the existing inadequate ones, and the Ministry of Education could have it reproduced in large enough quantities to make it available to all literacy classes without cost to the students.

## 2. Counselling Services

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### a) The Situation

**Counsellors, coordinators** School boards had counsellors, coordinators, social workers before budget cuts. Some still have part time animators or consultants and all but one school board feel that these professionals played an important role in helping students succeed. Counsellors did academic counselling and, with social workers, psycho-social counselling as well. They were very helpful in the transition to high-school, a major one for literacy students. Coordinators followed-up absentee students and served as a link between students and administrators.

Part time personnel are in some cases still retained. A career counsellor does guidance work and helps in psychology, when necessary. In many school

boards time is sharply reduced, for example from five days a week to two, for a counsellor. This is very difficult, as today's needs are much greater. One board has counsellors helping with placement tests, while a guidance counsellor helps with psychology and orientation. These professionals do not serve literacy students only.

**Impediments to learning** Some teachers felt that some of their students would have gone farther in their studies had they benefited from counselling services. The same applies to students with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia or attention deficit disorders (A.D.D.). These require specialized services for their diagnosis. Such services are expensive and therefore not easily accessible. One student did complain of having such a disability, but could not afford to pay for the services of a private counsellor to help her. These impediments to learning usually prevented literacy students from learning at a younger age. Due to lack of accessible services, they remain barriers for students as adults although knowledge about, and remedies for these disabilities have developed considerably.

Some teachers, particularly those with a special education background, can detect these disabilities. Analyzing them and applying the proper remedial action is, however, a different matter. We were told that, contrary to the youth sector, there are no teacher aides for adult students with disabilities. In fact, there are, but teachers must apply for one and this was either not known or was not available in all school boards.

**Substituting for counsellors** Teachers make up as well as they can for the lack of counsellors, but often do not know what to do, which services to refer students to or how to reference the information. One school board invites representatives from the community and legal aid social rights defence organizations to speak to students. The coordinator used to make food available when welfare cheques ran out. This service was taken over by the CLSC. Another school board organizes field trips, using a resources map based on student needs analysis. In this way, students have an opportunity to learn about community resources.

## **b) Suggestions For Action**

**Need for improvement** School boards do their best to make up for the lack of professional services. Save for administrators in one school board, all others we interviewed felt that, such services contributed to students' success when they were available, and that professionalism cannot be replaced by good will alone. Literacy students have particular, important needs for academic, social and psychological assistance and until **the MEQ allocates funds** to answer them, the success of many of these students will remain in jeopardy.

### 3. Recruitment

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#### a) The Situation

**Methods used** All kinds of methods are used by school boards to recruit literacy students: conventional methods such as printed and broadcast publicity such as brochures, flyers, ads in papers, radio and television announcements, as well as more informal approaches such as word of mouth, personal contact. Some boards try to reach potential students by sending faxes to community organizations advertising their classes. In a widely spread area where distances pose a serious problem and there is no infrastructure to help, the school board depends upon the literacy council to sensitize the population. Some boards recruit through their high school academic programmes. One board has a co-ordinator visit schools, another works through counsellors to identify students with literacy problems and these services are appreciated.

**Student/teacher ratios** The teacher in one board calls her students individually each year. She admits putting a bit of pressure on them by warning them that the course could be in danger of being cancelled if not enough students register. This danger is very real, particularly in suburban or nonurban areas, where the English-speaking population is small (5%) and spread out in several villages, and/or transportation facilities are poor.

In these areas, even the adjusted Ministry of Education's student/ teacher ratios are unrealistic. Students have to be integrated with academic students. This bogs down students in both programmes and is not conducive to success in either areas. Some boards have had to cancel their literacy courses. Students must then rely for their learning on tutors of variable availability and competence. Students told us that continuity in a programme helps them feel secure in it and maintain their commitment.

Some told us they had dropped out when their programme had been replaced by tutors. Others said that the first time they came to register they had to wait up to two years before being able to get into a class.

Others told us they would not come back later if the programme was suspended. Once they made up their minds and organized their lives around their studies, they had to go through with them in one single stretch.

In other areas we were told there were up to twenty-five, even twenty-eight students to a class, which is unrealistically high for literacy. Individual attention is too important and cannot be offered in such large classes. Teachers pair off students. Some have tutors to help them, but these are only stopgap measures, not conducive to success.

**What works** All these recruitment methods work more or less, in their own way. In addition, students say they learned

about the programme through word of mouth, personal contacts, current literacy students they knew, friends who had tutors. Some got the information from pamphlets at the welfare office while others heard an adult education advertisement on the radio. One student saw an ad on television. The old man and lady looked so happy, he said, that he finally decided to try it too.

**Social welfare referrals** Some boards have no provision for publicity due to funding cuts, and rely instead on the social services system for recruitment. The Centre Travail Québec offices, however, have drastically reduced their referrals. One board had, at one time, 50% of 200 students referred to them by CTQ, and now have only a dozen or so. According to some administrators, CTQ do not want to give the additional 120\$ social welfare recipients get for going to school. If they did, twice as many students would register. They see the cuts in day-care as another proof of this policy.

The Centre TraVail-Québec requires the student to be registered for a minimum of twenty-five hours per week. This is too long for a majority of the literacy students who may have trouble concentrating for such long periods or may have family responsibilities.

## b) Suggestions For Action

**More flexible financing conditions** Funding literacy classes on the basis of set student/teacher ratios presents serious difficulties, particularly in areas where the potential student population is too widely dispersed. This is the case even with adjusted ratios in distant regions such as the Gaspé or the Lower North Shore. where school boards cover several villages spread out over huge territories.

Only with **more flexible financing conditions** will most school boards be able to offer potential students literacy programmes as well as a commitment that they will be able to complete their programme without it being interrupted for lack of funds. A **more secure financing** as well would encourage students to register and it would also take the pressure off administrators and, even more so, teachers who not only bear the brunt of the insecurity created by the present funding formula but also often spend much precious time recruiting students to make sure those already registered do get their classes.

As well, the Ministry of Education would need to accept financing **smaller classes**, not only so that they may be viable, but also for students to get the quality, individual attention they need in order to succeed.

**CTQ main access gate** There is no doubt that the Centre Travail Quebec offices are the main gates through which potential students access literacy programmes. If these remain closed as tightly as they are now, numbers of students will continue declining and more classes will have to be closed. This is certainly no recipe for success in literacy.

A reversal of the Centre Travail Québec's policy on literacy referrals of social welfare recipients and coverage of day-care costs is essential if literacy is to be made truly accessible to potential adult students. The different centres should work in cooperation with school boards to help identify these students in the population and encourage them to register.

This measure would go a long way in implementing one of the Ministerial Commitments, as presented in its Working Document, Toward a Policy on Lifelong Learning (Ministry of Education, 1998) It reads as follows:

(To) Double, by the year 2002, the number of individuals enrolled in educational activities, in other words 4% of the potential clientele of low-literacy adults, or 38 000 persons.

## 4. Time

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### a) The Situation

**Schedules and sessions** There was no consensus among the successful students we interviewed about the preferred time for classes, nor about breaks between sessions. The information gathered brings nothing new to what is already known as far as daytime or evening classes are concerned or the need for child care. Some teachers pointed out that evening students do not have access to the same services as daytime students and yet need them just as much, or more. We were surprised to hear teachers, students and a non-teaching professional complain that the MEQ 2000-hours rule should be abolished. They feel they are "shoving students out the door". This rule has, in fact, been rescinded for some years now. Some school boards may have maintained it on their own without explanations to their teachers.

Most students found both summer and Christmas breaks too long. They say they forgot what they learned, particularly where they had pronounced weaknesses. If the opportunity were there, some would continue classes during the summer so as to save time and keep the rhythm of learning alive. Others say they needed this time to work and make enough income to pay for the rest of the year. For some, "kids have breaks, we should too". It is part of "doing the student thing".

**Absenteeism** Various school boards have rules concerning absenteeism and some apply them more strictly than others. Students missing four or five consecutive classes in a term are required to be reported to MEQ as having dropped out and are considered as such. Some school boards exclude these students for a month, then require them to reregister. Some teachers found this unrealistic. Students are committed to their literacy programme over a one- or two-year period, not just for a six to eight-week session, so that this calculation is felt to be too strict.

In one school board, the result is positive. When they see that their school is serious about attendance, students organize their time better and phone in to explain absences. If they are late, they realize they are responsible and that the school board does not treat them unfairly by imposing a punishment. One student said he would drop out if he were excluded for one month.

**Duration** While some students want to advance quickly and are anxious to move up to high school, others have remained in literacy classes for several years. They are not necessarily failures. We saw, earlier in this report, the difficulties many face in learning and in life. Moreover, intellectually disabled students and those with learning disabilities can take much longer to learn than average students.

Students with impaired memory, for instance, need to repeat over and over again in order to learn. One teacher uses the same texts a second time around, the following year, and students do not remember having heard them the first time.

Others with physical limitations are in the same situation. This was the case with a student born deaf. The programme being based on sound, said his teacher, the student needs much more time to learn. Another student has had a cataract removed and reads with a magnifying glass.

## b) Suggestions For Action

**A variety of schedules** In an ideal world, students could choose between a wide **variety of schedules** for their classes. In real life, school boards cannot offer this variety. However, considering the different levels of availability and eagerness of the successful students we interviewed, it could be helpful to survey present and prospective students to find out their preferences and see whether or not changes could be made to class schedules in order to accommodate them. Lateral thinking is called for to try and break out of the present mold and find original ways to respond to students' needs, within the confines of limited funds and resources.

In cities and larger towns, for example, adult education centres could agree to experiment holding a **summer session**, as suggested by some students. It could be held in one of the centres that has air conditioning and students from different centres could attend. Some already travel long distances to attend night school. Facilities are less busy during this period and such summer schools could become particularly attractive. The students attending would probably be those planning on going to high school and wanting to do so as fast as they could. Also attending could be students who would work particularly hard and progress rapidly. Several of the successful students we interviewed said they would be candidates for such an experiment, which could be repeated if it proved conclusive.

**Adjusted time limits** Lateral thinking is also called for on the question of programme **duration**. Instead of thinking in terms of standardized time limits for learning for all, both MEQ and Ministry of Employment and Solidarity authorities must consider the different needs and abilities of adult literacy students and adjust their rules so as to make provision for them. For students with disabilities and others living in culturally deprived areas, literacy classes may be their only way of maintaining the learning they have acquired. They may not otherwise have access to books or to material at a level they can read, and their reading ability would decline rapidly without the programme.

These are just as legitimate as students as those who plan on going to high school. They too need to read and understand the world, exercise their rights, be good parents, full-fledged citizens, and literacy may be their only entrance gate, their sole inclusion point.

**Child care measures** Finally, some parents, especially single mothers, have a hard time combining family responsibilities with their schooling, and even, for some, with employment as well. **Child care** services are vital if they are to have a genuine chance to succeed. So are flexible measures, by school boards, to accommodate those whose children finish school a few minutes ahead of their mothers, as some already do. This simply eases the tension they experience if they are not allowed to do so, and the understanding they get can only increase their motivation to succeed.

## 5. Facilities and Equipment

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### a) The Situation

**Poor facilities** While most buildings in which students attend literacy classes are quite acceptable and comfortable, some are most depressing, with run down hallways and classrooms, filthy washrooms and such. One of our interviews was interrupted momentarily because the noise from the street became too loud. One classroom was without windows or ventilation, and can be suffocatingly hot in even mild weather. Another was in a building where firearm ammunitions were actually stocked on the second floor, yet students came anyway, so strong was their desire to learn. Both teachers and students complained of the noise level and the difficulty of concentrating in very large classes.

**Minimal equipment** Equipment is often minimal and, in one school board, students felt they had to raise their own money to buy a radio-cassette they could use to hear themselves read. The Centre Director provided them with one when he heard of this, but the fact that there was none to begin with shows how scarce the equipment can be.

Computers are scarce also, and where they are available, many students appreciate them as tools both to help correct their spelling and to produce

perfect copy of their writing. Some students figure spell checks have improved their spelling by more than 50%. Looking at the keys also helps. One student said computers help if the teacher puts in as much effort as he does.

Some teachers say their students love computers because they are non threatening, and their self-pacing, hands-on features are helpful. They have a liberating effect. "I can use a computer like everyone else!" Here again, feelings of inclusion are positive factors. All these advantages are important, as difficulties with spelling are major sources of embarrassment and shame. Improving their spelling was mentioned by many as a most important goal. Learning from computers boosts student confidence.

## b) Suggestions For Action

**Improve facilities** We have talked, earlier in this report, about how students' learning can be influenced by facilities. A suggestion for improving this aspect would have to be quite fundamental: facilities should be made safe, clean, more attractive, and efficient.

Most school boards are seriously pressed for space and have very limited budgets. Additions to existing facilities or even, in some cases, fresh paint are out of the question. However, making present facilities **more appealing** does not necessarily cost money, as we saw in some boards where decorations made by students themselves on themes such as multiculturalism created a very congenial atmosphere. Making them **more efficient** can, where possible, call for some reorganization, such as reserving a room for quiet studies, one that would separate those working alone from those working with the teacher or tutor, or in teams; or ensuring that rooms have windows and proper ventilation, while at the same time, offering students the privacy - not isolation - they need to feel secure enough to pursue their studies.

But above all, what needs to be done is to give facilities **attention and care** so as to make them conducive to learning, rather than dismiss or forget them because of constraints. Asking the students for their contribution can reinforce their feeling of belonging and of being listened to.

**Provide the necessary equipment** As far as equipment is concerned, not all teachers are familiar enough with **computers** to be able to use them in their teaching, among those who are, not all want to use them. Several students said they would like to learn how to use them because they are the tools of the future. Some saw them as a necessity in getting a job. Whether computer literacy should be taken on as an objective in literacy programmes is a matter for discussion.

On the whole, an evaluation of present experiences with computers in literacy could be made and be presented to teachers so that they may make an informed decision as to whether they, themselves, want to use them and if they do, ask that computers be made available together with adequate training for teachers. The **Quebec Government's policy on computers in**

**the classroom** should extend to adult literacy students.

As for other **equipment**, such as cassette players and such, we found some teachers to be a bit timid in their requests from their school boards. These seem to be open to suggestions for either new equipment, if they can afford to buy it, or to have arrangements made with other services to borrow it. We suspect that some teachers' uncertain working conditions may be at the source of this diffidence.

## Part III - After Literacy

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### 1. The Next Step

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#### a) The Situation

**Learning after literacy** Literacy students going on to high school or a job can see a future for themselves. But not all those students who succeed in their programme, who learn to read and write, who acquire the abilities and capacities needed to become full-fledged, contributing citizens, not all these students will go on to high school. Some do not have the intellectual capacities to do so, while others who do may not want to because they feel there is no point at their age in undertaking such a project.

For others still, who succeed in their literacy programmes and have capacities to learn more, high school might not offer the learning or the skills they are looking for, or would want to acquire if they were so offered. They are not interested in the academic stream, in marks and structure, and the individual programmes they would need or that would appeal to them are not available.

Teachers remarked that there is no music literacy programme, for instance, while literacy is not only a matter of symbolic problems.

One student is an excellent gardener, others have artistic abilities, a woman runs her own successful business. High-school programmes do not answer these students' post-literacy learning needs.

Teachers complained that after many years in a literacy programme some students realized their potential in it, but still wanted to learn for their personal satisfaction. Administrators feel they are holding up places that could be given to new students needing literacy. They should be offered the possibility of being in the system, of "finding spots where they can learn" in it.

One student from a region came to Montreal to take a car wash course and is working in this field. An

intellectually disabled woman learned housecleaning.

A school board hired a successful literacy student to work in its office, but for others, there is nothing.

One student has learned safety in the workplace and how to use the Internet. He now works in a factory, but wants more.

Some students dream of starting a co-operative with women making quilts.

**Building a bridge** Once they have become literate. "What have we done to prepare our students for the future", some teachers asked. Building a bridge between literacy programmes and a "next step" is imperative in order to avoid their becoming part of an illiteracy cycle or a social agency for these students. These programmes must not be allowed to become dead ends for students not going on to high school or directly to a job. Care must be taken to provide an opening into the world of work, whether it be the labour market or volunteer work.

**TFSIS - SIS** Training For Social Integration Service (TFSIS) and Socio-Professional Integration Service (SIS) have been set up by the Ministry of Education in order to cater to the needs of people who will not go into the academic stream. These programmes have extremely interesting potential, precisely because they offer students the possibility of learning useful skills.

## **b) Suggestions For Action**

**Questions to be asked** Serious questions should be asked, however, concerning literacy, questions that are all the more important in view of the fear many have that potential literacy students are being channelled into these programmes without having first learned to read and write. Although SIS has official requirements about reading levels, we were told that social welfare agents by-pass literacy classes in order to get as many students as possible in this programme instead of the longer literacy ones.

Questions should also be asked of TFSIS as well to make sure it does not become another Special Education programme for students considered "retarded", as it concentrates on life-skills alone and does not appear to be concerned about leading to employment. This could only offer a repetition of what many students experienced in grade school, where they learned nothing of use to them concerning work or even everyday life, for which they express deep bitterness and frustration.

Many students with limited intellectual capacities or mild disabilities could be trained to do jobs requiring low-level abilities. With programmes paced at a speed they can handle and adequate support and reinforcement, they could

be trained to help care-givers or house workers, for instance, and have part-time jobs or do volunteer work in some agency. This would provide them with both a gratifying, worthwhile occupation and a social milieu to which they could belong.

**Complements vs. alternatives** Programmes such as TFSIS and SIS could be ideal complements to literacy, but should not be treated as alternatives to it. This danger is all the more real as, contrary to literacy programmes, they are short and have a clearly defined exit point. Graduation rates can be included in statistics showing their success. This is a political advantage over literacy programmes, although the latter clearly have a much greater overall, positive and lasting effect on students.

The Ministry's Working Document (Ministry of Education, 1998) presents a similar view:

Integration into the workforce and the literacy process must not work in opposition; rather, mixed formulas must be found to make them two complementary aspects of a single approach. Literacy, which is often a prerequisite for all other forms of education, must become an indispensable component in all durable, successful integration processes, and in all local and regional economic development projects.

**Conditions for their success** **Literacy should be required** before going on to such programmes, and literacy programmes could be coupled with them, as is currently the case in some school boards. As they are learning programmes, not "workfare", students should be **free to participate** and their selection should be based on **pedagogical criteria**. Teachers, rather than social welfare agents without training in this field, have the competence to set these criteria and apply them. The same applies to internship modules (stages), which should have clear, serious training and learning components, and not simply offer employers cheap labour over a short period. This component should be developed together with school boards.

Services such as these, like any other, can only be useful if **funds as well as trained counsellors and personnel** are provided. At present, administrators told us these were quite insufficient. Support will also be necessary once students have completed the programmes. **Transitional measures** should be offered rather than cutting off resources all at once simply because they are no longer students in the education system. Some continuity should be provided to help them adapt to this major change in their situation.

**Educate employers** As we saw earlier in this report, some literacy students work during the day and study at night. Some who were not working had been competent employees for several years without their employers ever detecting their difficulty with reading and writing. School boards can **educate employers about literacy** so as to counter the stereotypes about literacy students being unable to work and let

them understand how valuable they can be as employees. Employers should also be **sensitized to the real capabilities literacy students may have** to be of use to them as employees so that they do not judge these students by their reading and writing difficulties. but on their full potential. The progress they make from the moment they registered in literacy reflects this potential.

## 2. Lifelong Education

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### a) The Situation

**Part of a continuum in education** We have stated a number of times in this report that some literacy students had meaningful jobs before joining literacy programmes, or were employed even as they studied. Although the same can be said of other adult students, this fact needs to be emphasized about these students. They have valuable, marketable prior knowledge and skills that did not go away when they registered. If they were studying at a higher level, they could ask that this prior knowledge be assessed and recognized officially by the school.

**Learning after literacy** Successful literacy students wishing to acquire specific skills or abilities but not wanting to enter a full high school programme can aspire to continual learning in a school setting. By staying in school they can increase their learning and/or maintain their reading and writing skills, which they could not do, or would run the danger of losing otherwise. They can get, at school, the intellectual stimulation they require and that is not available elsewhere. Other cultural services, where they exist at all, are not usually geared to their level of knowledge or to their interests.

The end of a literacy programme should not signal to adult students the end of their relationship with the school as a learning institution. Just as college graduates can go back to their alma mater to pursue their learning at this institution without being sent to a university because they have already graduated from college, so too should literacy students be offered the possibility of going back to their own school and finding resources and programmes to continue their learning.

### b) Suggestions For Action

**Recognizing learning** If literacy is to be recognized as part and parcel of a continuum in education rather than as a remedial programme outside that continuum, care should be taken to have assessment of prior learning be made available not only to higher level students, but also to those in literacy. As well, some form of official recognition of the teaming done in the literacy programme itself should be devised so that students have some proof of the level of knowledge acquired as well as of the progress made. The unit system to be implemented this fall should make this possible.

By doing so, the education system would not only give back these students a sense of pride, but more importantly, would offer them the possibility of presenting this assessment as credentials to potential employers. In particular, the machinist, car mechanic, office worker, manager and retired serviceman, among others whom we met in our interviews, would no longer feel looked upon as ignorant people. They would see their dignity restored with the education system acknowledging and recognizing officially their very real knowledge and skills.

**Access to school for the newly literates** Schools should be made accessible and welcoming. They should offer these students **learning programmes tailored to their needs and interests**, as well as **resource centres** where they could find the tools to access new knowledge they want in order to pursue further goals. Libraries offering suitable reading material, computers and access to the Internet, teachers or tutors available to help them in their learning project: these are a few examples of how schools can remain **active educational agents for the newly literate student population**.

Chapter Four

## Recommendations

## Chapter summary

Considering 1) the positive results obtained by literacy students in school boards. 2) the practices that lead students to succeed in these programmes, and 3) the need for development and improvement, recommendations are presented with a view to improving present and future students' chances of success.

## I - Professional Development

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### Recommendation 1

**a) Teachers** We recommend that a programme of **continuing professional development** be created for literacy teachers. This programme should take the form of both traditional and non traditional activities including, among others, exchanges and small scale research projects as well as other creative ways of acquiring and systematizing knowledge. Teachers should be active participants in defining and planning this programme that would aim at meeting their very needs.

**b) Tutors** We recommend that additional **quality training** be offered to tutors working in classroom environments in school boards. This would allow them to better help individual students and be useful resources in classes performing different tasks within the framework of more clearly defined roles under the direction of the teachers.

**c) Others** We recommend that **sensitization** sessions be held with **non-teaching school staff** so that they be made conscious of the tactfulness needed in their contacts with literacy students, and that some professional development, in the form of workshops or special meetings, be offered to **social welfare officers** to sensitize them to the reality literacy students are faced with.

## II - The Context

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### Recommendation 2

**Teaching and learning material** We recommend that ongoing, limited projects be developed to encourage and coordinate efforts by teachers to create adequate teaching and learning material, to exchange existing material as well as information on it and to have it published by school boards and/or the Ministry of Education. These projects should be sustained by adequate funding and resources, both human and material.

### Recommendation 3

**Counselling services** We recommend that **funds be allocated** by the MEQ so that school boards may offer their literacy students the academic, social and psychological assistance they need through the services of qualified and competent professional counsellors.

### Recommendation 4

**a) Financing conditions** We recommend that the Ministry of Education make its **financing conditions more flexible** so that literacy programmes be made genuinely accessible to the entire population of the province, in whatever region they may be. We recommend also that student/teacher ratios be revised so that they may allow for the individual attention literacy students need in order to succeed.

**b) CTQ referrals** We recommend that the Ministry of Employment and Solidarity reverse the **policy of the Centre Travail Quebec on literacy referrals** of social welfare recipients and that they cover day-care costs. We further recommend that the Centre Travail Quebec officers work in cooperation with school boards to help detect potential literacy students and encourage them to register.

### Recommendation 5

**a) Schedules** We recommend that school boards explore various formulas concerning course schedules, including the possibility of a summer session, to better answer the variety of needs and availability of adult literacy students.

**b) Duration** We recommend that the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Employment and Solidarity ensure that their rules concerning the duration of the literacy programmes be flexible enough to allow for the different needs, abilities and constraints of literacy students.

**c) Child care** We recommend that child care services be offered to literacy students in general, and that regulations be applied with some flexibility for those with family responsibilities.

### Recommendation 6

**a) Facilities** We recommend that school boards be attentive to making facilities appealing, efficient, clean and safe so that they may conducive to learning.

**b) Equipment** We recommend that an evaluation be made of present experiences with computers in literacy and presented to teachers for them to decide whether they wish to use them as teaching tools. We further recommend that computer training be offered to teachers

who wish to take it and that basic other equipment, such as cassette players, be made available to literacy classes.

### III - After Literacy

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#### Recommendation 7

- a) The next step** We recommend that the Ministry of Education harmonize literacy programmes with its present and future social and professional integration services so that the latter may be complements to literacy and that functional literacy be a requirement to complete the programmes in these services. We further recommend that funds and well trained personnel be available to provide the support needed by the students registered in these programmes.
- b) Educating employers** We recommend that school boards hold meetings with employers to educate them about literacy so that they become aware of the abilities literacy students have and realize how valuable they could be as employees.

#### Recommendation 8

- a) Recognizing learning** We recommend that literacy be recognized as part and parcel of the education continuum. To this end, a process should be established to recognize the literacy students' prior learning, and to acknowledge officially the learning they acquire in the literacy programmes themselves.
- b) Servicing the newly literate** We recommend that schools be made accessible to the newly literate population, with programmes and resources aimed at meeting their specific needs in order to pursue their learning goals.

### The Main Priority

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#### Recommendation 9

- Professional development** We recommend that the professional development of teachers and of the Centre Travail Quebec welfare officers be considered the main priority and that activities to this end be set up in the course of the present 1998-1999 school year.

Conclusion

Avenues for change

## 1. The research

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**The purpose of the research** The purpose of this research was to determine the conditions and situations that lead students to succeed in their literacy programmes. The preceding chapters described positive results and practices, identified factors that warrant development or improvement and presented recommendations to this end.

**Results** At the outset, it is important to recognize that the adult population in literacy has different starting points, capacities, difficulties, and that their special needs and personalized objectives must be met so that they might learn. Their motivations are just as personal, and successful students reach their goals by first building up their self-esteem. Only then can they take the risk of learning. They develop capacities for work and improve their roles as parents. Literacy empowers them to become full fledged citizens. capable of taking charge of their life and becoming assets in society.

**Practices** Practices leading to success in literacy programmes respond to the needs and motivations of students because they are adapted to the personal situation of each student, to their reality as adults. This is so for andragogical practices and, in particular, for teachers' and tutors' relationships with the students. Non-threatening and congenial environment and conditions are also important factors in making learning possible.

**Development improvement** Innovative actions in a programme of continuing professional development for literacy teachers, better training for tutors and improving learning and teaching material are put forth as recommendations for improvement, as well as a change in CTQ policy concerning student recruitment and literacy programmes in general. Provisions should be made to allow for continued learning after literacy and measures taken to insure a lifelong education perspective to literacy students and programmes.

## 2. Parameters to define success

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**Success has many facets** These chapters demonstrate that success in literacy cannot be interpreted in the same way as in other programmes. Applying a standard measurement for success to literacy students would, once more, as in their first experience with schooling, make them square pegs unable to fit into round holes.

Defining success by a single point of arrival – the transition to work or high school – presupposes that opportunities are equal for everyone. Yet opportunities are notoriously and shamefully unequal for adults with backgrounds like those of literacy students. Any talk about success must

take into consideration more than the point of arrival alone.

It would be like saying that success is arriving in Montreal at three o'clock. Some leave at two and travel by car from the suburbs while others leave at 10 in the morning and have to cycle from Sherbrooke; others leave at twelve and have to walk from Gaspé.

Considering the terminal point alone to define success not only programmes students for failure, but ignores the surrounding reality that puts the whole burden solely on the shoulders of the students, which is as unrealistic as it is unfair.

**Success as progress** To have a more realistic view of success in literacy, one must look for it in the process. In this field of learning, success is progress and happens as the students go along and develop their abilities as far as they can. When students go from a total conviction that they are "dummies" and cannot learn, success is attained when they:

- can read stories to their children and grandchildren
- ask to read Shakespeare and teach themselves to type on the computer after having wanted to drop out of school
- attend an international conference or speak before 100 people
- have their own children do better in school
- can write their names and have an identity
- read books, newspapers, write cheques and letters, go to the bank
- are able to read the divorce papers their lawyer wants them to sign in haste, thinking they still cannot read, and discover that he has lied to them and gotten them a raw deal
- become Quebec delegate to a national organization
- set up their own small business
- pull an adventure novel out of their school bag during the interview with the researcher and say casually "Oh yeah, of course I read, I read a lot!"... and it is absolutely true

- take part in the collective writing of the history of a whole region
- simply show up in class, stay on when they feel like dropping out: "The cop comes home alive"
- discover the meaning of words and marvel at learning their own language so well
- etc.

Rather than the single exit point, one must consider the road these students have travelled, the conditions in which they have done so, and how far the literacy programme has taken them in developing their abilities.

**Success as process** As many teachers and administrators pointed out during the interviews, success in literacy is not a static outcome. It is more of an "ignition", as it were, a spark that brings the student to realize that there is a reason for what is happening, that there is a meaning to life and to the world to which they now feel they belong. In the teachers' words, success for literacy students is:

- beginning to think by themselves, where thinking had always been done for them.
- understanding that words have meaning
- unveiling the darkness in their life - having conquered the unknown and no longer being afraid of newness
- having developed a willingness to participate, to break their isolation
- having developed the strength to tackle new situations with confidence and hard work
- having gained enough confidence to prepare for another challenge
- being richer enough in their personal life to go on to new experiences

**Different parameters** Going on to high school or a job are valid criteria to measure success by, but we can see now that they cannot be the only ones or even the most important. The perceptions of success of both students and teachers are very much in

tune with the definition of literacy presented by the CRIRES and quoted in our Introduction to this report (p. 4.) They touch upon competencies in reading, writing and mathematics. They also deal with the general competencies needed to play a variety of roles and increase the students' knowledge and potential. And they take into account the variety of layers of learning mentioned by Horsman (1997).

Success in literacy cannot be measured by external parameters alone, nor by a mathematical model of some kind which would make evaluation simple and easy. Any effort to evaluate success must first start by asking these questions:

- What is the **background** of the students, their **starting point**, their **abilities** and the **difficulties** they must cope with?
- What are their **motivations**, their **objectives**, their **goals**?
- What is the **personal context** of each student, his/ her economic, social and professional **constraints**?
- What is the **learning context**, how is literacy **taught**, to what **services** do the students have access for assistance?
- What **progress** is achieved, what has the student **learned**, and how does success **manifest** itself in the case of each student?

### 3. The right to learn

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<b>Questions remaining</b>	This research was very short. Sixty, or even seventy, days are very little to cover such a wide subject as success in literacy programmes in Quebec school boards. Our interview guides offered more questions than those we were able to present here. The fact that some of these questions did not get answers sufficiently significant to be presented in the report points to the need for more research in this field. For example, the question of diversity in literacy classes is still unresolved. Classes are not always, perhaps even not often, accessible to persons with a handicap. Our questions on multiethnicity in the classroom did not meet with many answers, although we have shown elsewhere that it influences teaching and learning in adult students (Ouellette, 1991). These are instances where success is affected either by limiting accessibility or, from an andragogical point of view, by not catering to the needs of a growing part of the population.
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**Legitimate students**

One question asked repeatedly and intensely by students at the end of their interviews was: "Why did we not learn when we were kids?" To which some added: "And why is it the same with youth today"? These students had, in fact, been deprived of their basic right to education at an early period in their lives. That they should, today, for reasons of their own, be able to make up for this unfair treatment is only simple justice. Their personal development is just as legitimate a reason to take up literacy as are work objectives. Besides the fact that there is not work for everyone, inclusion in this society should not be determined on the basis of economics or work alone.

**Making it possible**

Adult literacy centres, and teachers in particular, are making these successes happen on a day-to-day basis. But only with adequate funding and policies that take into consideration the very nature of literacy, that recognize literacy as a fundamental right for everyone, that allow for personal development as much as professional objectives, that make provision for the particular needs of these students is success possible.

When policies will be based on need, rather than on statistics concerning graduation rates, success in literacy will be made possible on a wide scale. Those who find literacy too costly should be reminded of the (slightly altered) slogan: If you think education is costly, try illiteracy!

**Responsible citizens**

One of the measures of success in literacy can be considered to be the kind of citizens students become, how they play their role as citizens. Some of those participating in this research were embarrassed to accept a small stipend for their participation although they may have needed it badly. They felt the money should go instead to others who needed it to attend literacy classes. Acting as such responsible and sensitive citizens is definitely a proof of success in their literacy programme. These students pass with flying colours.

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Annex One

## Methodology

**The research objective** The Quebec Literacy Working Group wanted, with this research, to identify and understand the conditions and situations which lead students to succeed in their literacy programmes, to illustrate some positive results of literacy in their school boards, and to find out what could be developed or improved.

**The aim of the research** With the research results QLWG wants to sensitize decision makers to the reality of literacy problems and successes, identify needs for professional development and offer avenues for improvement and change in order to reach and serve potential students in the best ways possible.

**The research method** The means chosen to reach these results was an action-research to be done jointly by members of QLWG and the researcher selected by them, and based on the grounded theory method (Glazer and Strauss, 1967.) With this method, a research does not aim at validating a given hypothesis, but is rather a search to understand reality through, in this case, a series of interviews. The research was a qualitative one aimed at observing, in the field, the reality of success in literacy and analyzing it.

**QLWG participation** QLWG was involved in each step of the research, both as actors in the field and through a steering committee. The latter supervised the research. Its members told the researcher of their needs and expectations concerning data and the final report. They organized interviews in their respective school boards, reacted to documents developed by the researcher, and validated her research method, data analysis and report. The researcher conducted the operations of the research itself and reported to the steering committee of which she was a member. She is the author of the research report and is responsible for its content.

Neighbouring school boards about to be combined under the new law on linguistic school boards were asked to organize one series of interviews instead of two. This did not happen as each board felt it important to maintain their identity for this research. As well, all boards were invited to prioritize the categories of people they wanted to have interviewed, with the understanding that not all three would be interviewed in each. This did happen in some boards, but in fewer than hoped. A total number of thirty (30) to thirty five (35) interviews were expected. Forty-five (45) took place, thus producing far more data than was first expected.

**Interviews** Table I presents data on participation in the interviews, by school board and by category of interviewees. Table II shows the composition of participants in the interviews. They are presented here for information purposes only. As this research is not a quantitative one the tables are not analyzed as such in the report, except to say that the sample appears both wide and diversified enough to offer a realistic picture of the situation under study, that is, success in English literacy in Quebec school board programmes.

Interviews with the eighty-five (85) students lasted an hour and a half each, with a few shorter exceptions; those with the forty-two (42) teachers and

twenty (20) tutors lasted two hours. Finally, interviews with the fifteen (15) administrators lasted from a few minutes to close to two hours, according to their availability.

The three non-teaching professionals interviewed chose to be placed in the categories of administrators or of teachers – some had taught – and their numbers were included in the category with which they identified. We also interviewed, and included in this data, a teacher responsible for a Socio-professional Insertion Programme, whom we were requested to meet by her school board.

<b>Table I - Interviewees by gender and by occupation</b>						
<b>Categories</b>	<b>Total</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Men</b>	
	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
Students	85	52,5	52	61,2	33	38,8
Teachers	42	25,9	37	88,1	5	11,9
Tutors	20	12,3	16	80,0	4	20,0
Administrators	15	9,3	6	40,0	9	60,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>68,5</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>31,5</b>

Forty-five (45) interviews, lasting a total of slightly over sixty-five (65) hours, were thus held with, in all, one-hundred-and-sixty-two (162) people, between March 16 and May 11, 1998, including interviews in and outside Montreal, in the Monteregion region, the Laurentians, Quebec City, the Eastern Townships, the Western Quebec region, the Gaspé and the Lower North Shore. A few interviews with teachers were recorded on tape, but this was abandoned as this made some feel uncomfortable.

**Data analysis** Data gathered was first codified before being categorized to identify the most important themes coming out of research questions themselves and of answers by interviewees. These categories were then related to answer the questions of the research itself, namely what are positive results, what practices lead students to succeed and what should be developed or improved in the literacy programmes. The analysis also take into account the brief, literature survey done at the beginning of the research on success in literacy.

**Table II - Interviews and Interviewees  
by Numbers, Occupation, and School Board**

<b>School Boards</b>	<b># Int.</b>	<b>St.</b>	<b>Teach.</b>	<b>Tut.</b>	<b>Adm. &amp; NTP</b>	<b>Total</b>
Bedford Regional	3	3	2	1	1	7
CECM	3	6	4	-	1	11
Châteauguay	2	8	4	-	-	12
Eastern Québec	3	3	5	2	2	12
Eastern Townships	4	6	3	-	2	11
Gaspesia	9	9	5	-	1	15
Jérôme-Le Royer	3	7	1	-	1	9
Kativik	1	-	5	-	1	6
Lakeshore	3	5	3	-	1	12
Laurentian	2	5	-	3	-	11
Laurenval	2	6	2	6	1	13
Littoral	2	9	-	4	1	14
PSBGM	3	6	4	4	2	12
Sault-Saint-Louis	1	1	-	-	-	1
South Shore	1	7	-	-	-	7
Western Québec	3	5	3	-	1	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>162</b>

NTP = Non-teaching professionals

The research being a qualitative, rather than a quantitative one, data was analyzed on the basis of the significance of themes expressed in the interviews concerning the research question, rather than on the number of times facts were mentioned or ideas expressed.

**The report** The report presents the answers to the research questions. The research submitted a first draft outline to the steering committee for comment. The committee also reacted to a draft of the report and accepted its final version. It will be produced in both English and French. A copy is to be sent to all teachers and administrators interviewed.

**Duration** The project was to last sixty days, between February and the end of June, including four days of travel. Because of the increased number of interviews and the abundant data they produced, ten days had to be added.

**Evaluation** The steering committee will make an evaluation of the research at a meeting following the final report. The report itself will be presented, in the Fall, to members of PROCEDE, the Provincial Organization of Continuing Education Directors, English.

Annex Two

## Interview Guides

## Interview Guide: Students

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### Subjective aspects

#### 1. Before the programme

- 1.1 What did you think about going back to school before ever thinking of registering for literacy? What did you think about the idea of participating in a programme?
- 1.2 What could you not do that you wanted to do when you first thought of taking a literacy/basic skills class? How did you think it might help you to achieve this?
- 1.3 'Being able to read and write': what did this mean to you before coming to the programme? What did you want to learn? For what purpose? Was this important to you? Why?
- 1.4 How did you see the programme when it was presented to you: easy? difficult? out of reach? not/just for you? well suited to your needs? etc.
- 1.5 What did you expect when you first registered? How long did you think it would take you to reach your goal?

#### 2. During the programme

- 2.1 Did you feel you were learning what you had set out to learn? Were you satisfied with what you were learning?
- 2.2 What did you find pleasant in the programme. and what did you see as a chore? How did you deal with the unpleasant part?
- 2.3 Did personal problems have an impact on your attendance or concentration? How did you overcome this?
- 2.4 Did the programme, at times, appear too long for too few results? Did you ever feel you were wasting your time? How did you overcome this?
- 2.5 Did you ever think of dropping out? What made you stay on or come back?

### Institutional aspects

#### 3. Information and registration

- 3.1 How did you first learn about the programme? How did you get more information on it? What was useful? What or who made you think of inquiring about coming here to learn to read and write? How long did it take? Did you try something else?
- 3.2 Did you feel comfortable about coming here? Was it hard to make up your mind? Did it take you long to take that step?
- 3.3 How did you feel when you first registered? Did the way you were greeted make you feel good about your decision to register? Did you meet someone from the school, a counsellor, a teacher? How did the meeting go? Did it help you? How?

- 3.4 Were you offered choices? Would you have wanted some? Were you capable of choosing at that time? If you were offered choices, did they appear interesting? Did they meet your needs and expectations?
- 3.5 Were you tested to determine your level? How did you feel about the test? How did the results make you feel?
- 3.6 Were there rules and regulations of the programme (e.g. CTQ's minimum 25h./week attendance)? What did you think of them? How do you see them now? Did they help?
- 3.7 Were there costs involved in your going to classes? What helped and what did not, financially?
- 3.8 Did someone from school get in touch with you, during the programme, to see how you were doing? To find out how you felt about the programme? Did this help, or would it have helped?

#### **4. Facilities**

- 4.1 How did you feel about the school building, when you first arrived? If the feelings were negative, how did you overcome them? What would help? Was it close enough to your home? Was transportation provided? Did that have some influence?
- 4.2 Did you find the physical setting of classes adequate? What was difficult/ helpful about it?
- 4.3 Was day-care or home-care offered or financed?
- 4.4 Did you have access to reading material from the school library? From other libraries in the vicinity?

#### **5. Time**

- 5.1 Did the schedule suit your needs? What was most helpful?
- 5.2 What was the best time for you to attend classes: day or evening? What trimester? How many hours per week? Was the summer break a good idea?
- 5.3 Is studying full-time better for you? Or is it part-time? Why?
- 5.4 Was the programme too long, too short, just right for you? Could it have been different?
- 5.5 Was time a problem: organizing your schedule, being available for the classes, making time for homework? How did you deal with it?

#### **Environment**

- 6.1 Did you let people around you know about your studies: family, friends, fellow workers, employer...? How did they react? Did they show support? Did it affect you?
- 6.2 If you were employed while in the programme, how did you succeed in reconciling work and study: finding time for everything, including homework?
- 6.3 Did your going back to school have an effect on your family: your children/ grand-children, your spouse, your parents?

- 6.4 Since going back to school, do you read or write more at home to deal with domestic matters or to relate to your children? Has it had an impact on your children's school work?
- 6.5 Did the programme help you to understand the world around you: social, political and physical aspects? Are you reading more about it?
- 6.6 Did the programme have an effect on your work? Does being able to read help you in your work? In activities with other workers? In the relationship with your employer?

## **Pedagogy/andragogy**

### **7. Student group**

- 7.1 Were students in your class at the same learning level? Were they more or less of the same age group? How did this feel?
- 7.2 Was language a problem? If some needed to learn English, did this affect you?
- 7.3 Was the class spirit helpful? Did people help each other? Were all students motivated and did this help you?
- 7.4 Was the group disciplined: did classes start on time? Were all students interested in their work or did some slow you down? Did some miss classes often? Were you distracted by this? If so, how did you deal with it?

### **8. The teachers**

- 8.1 Did you have the same teacher over long periods or did you change often? How did you feel about this?
- 8.2 What was the teacher like: was he/she attentive to your difficulties? Did he/she encourage you? Did he/she offer clear explanations? Was he/she available to answer your questions in and out of class?
- 8.3 Was the teacher at ease with the group of students? Did he/she make you feel comfortable in the programme?
- 8.4 Did the teacher's way of teaching suit your needs? What did you like best in his/ her way of teaching?
- 8.5 Did the teacher expect a lot of you (was nice or not, was pushy?) Did this help?

### **9. Learning**

- 9.1 What helped you the most in the content of the programme? What would you have wanted more of? Less of? Why? Did you learn to use computers?
- 9.2 What was the most difficult for you to learn? Why? How did you deal with it? Was the programme too difficult? Not enough? Just right? Too fast? Too slow?
- 9.3 What kind of teaching helped you most: lectures? Working alone or with another or other students? One teacher just for you? Work on your own with the teacher as helper?
- 9.4 Did you find tests helpful? How? Were they regular? difficult? easy? Did

homework help? Did you do it alone, or could you get some help when you needed it?

- 9.5 Was there reading material available? Could you bring it home? Did you work with it at home? Have you had access to helpful learning material since you left class and if so, have you used it? When? What for?

## **Results**

- 10.1 Do you feel you reached the goal(s) you had set for yourself when you first registered? On a scale of 1-10 (1 being the weakest), how would you rate your success? What makes you see it that way?
- 10.2 Are you satisfied with the time it took you to achieve your goal(s)?
- 10.3 Has the programme made you learn something about yourself, your environment, your work?
- 10.4 Has the programme changed you, your personal, social, professional, life? How? Has it had positive, negative effects (helpful or harmful)?
- 10.5 What have you learned since you left, because of the programme? Are you continuing your efforts to read and write? In what setting? By what means?
- 10.6 What have you done - work, school, family life, etc. - since you left the programme that you could not have done without it? What did the programme help you change that makes you able to achieve this?
- 10.7 All in all, what did succeeding in this programme mean to you when you first started? What does it mean to you now? Do you feel you have succeeded? What helped you the most? Why?

## **Interview Guide: Teachers**

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### **Students**

#### **1. Subjective aspects**

- 1.1 What motivates students who succeed in their literacy/basic skills programmes?
- 1.2 Do successful students set themselves more realistic goals for their programme than those who fail? Are their further learning goals realistic?
- 1.3 Are their expectations of the programme different from those of students who fail?
- 1.4 What do students see as success in their literacy/basic skills programme? Does their vision of success affect their learning or their results?
- 1.5 Does their life situation - psychological, social, economical conditions -

impact on students' learning? To what extent? What conditions are more conducive to success?

## **2. Objective aspects**

- 2.1 Does the kind of information offered and recruitment done impact on students' chances of success?
- 2.2 Are counselling and/or other professional services available? Are they determinant in their success?
- 2.3 What role does the assessment of the students' level, upon registration, play in their chances of success? How important is the level in which students are placed at the beginning of their programme?
- 2.4 Does the physical setting of classes play a role in helping students succeed? Is the physical environment important for you? Is it for the students? What message does it send them?
- 2.5 Does time play an important role in their success: schedule, number of hours per week, duration, moment, etc.?
- 2.6 Does the work of those in employment affect their learning? How? Do you link their learning to their job situation? With what results?
- 2.7 Are resource centres - library, computers, other resources - available? Do they play an important role in helping students succeed? Do successful students use them more than others?

## **Andragogy - Pedagogy**

### **3. Student group**

- 3.1 Does the number of students in your class affect their success rate? How do you explain this?
- 3.2 Does the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the class make a difference? Is one better than the other? Why?
- 3.3 Is discipline a problem? Is it more of a problem in some cases, with some students? Is it seen as a problem or a challenge by more successful students?
- 3.4 Are some of your classes multi-ethnic? What does this reality mean for you as a teacher? Do you see a difference in success rates?
- 3.5 Do all students share the same goals? The same motivation? Does success mean the same thing to all?

### **4. Teaching**

- 4.1 How is content chosen? By whom? Do your students respond better to some content? How is it more useful?
- 4.2 Do you integrate student goals and objectives into the programme? How? Does this help students to succeed?
- 4.3 Do successful students respond better to a higher level of difficulty, or to one that is closer to their present level? Do you see a general preference for slower-paced learning, or for a more challenging one?

- 4.4 Do you have access to adequate teaching materials? To adequate learning materials for your students? How important is this kind of material?
- 4.5 Have you tried different teaching methods? Have you done special projects or experiments, such as outside excursions? Which ones work best? How do you explain this? What types of transfer of learning do students do in these settings?
- 4.6 Is there a difference in the way successful and non-successful students respond to evaluation, both formative and summative?
- 4.7 Have you had an opportunity to do some team-teaching, either with another teacher, or with a tutor? What was your students' reaction? Did you find it helpful?

## **5. Programme**

- 5.1 Do you find the literacy/basic skills programme well suited to your students? Are its objectives realistic? Do successful students respond better than others? Why?
- 5.2 Do you know about, and do you use the *Guide* in your teaching? Is it a useful tool? Do you use it extensively as a manual, or just as a reference book?
- 5.3 What criteria do you use to judge your students' success in their programme?
- 5.4 Do school rules and regulations (schedule, outings, permissions, food in the classroom, etc.) help or limit successful students in their programme?
- 5.5 Have you followed up on your students, outside the classroom? Do you think this contributed to their success?

## **Professional Development**

- 6.1 Did you have any experience in adult education before teaching literacy? Was it helpful? Did it impact on the success of your students?
- 6.2 Have you had formal training in andragogy? Did this include training in teaching literacy? Did it include 'animation'? Was it helpful?
- 6.3 Have you received professional development in literacy/basic skills teaching? On what aspects? Was it relevant to your teaching? Did it help you with your students?
- 6.4 Have you received training concerning the multicultural reality of your students (where applicable)? Has it helped you with your students coming from minority cultures? Do more minority students succeed since you had this training?
- 6.5 Do you have opportunities to share ideas with your colleagues from the same school, or from other schools, on experiences of success in your literacy work?
- 6.6 Have you had training on the MEQ Guide? Has this been useful with helping your students succeed?
- 6.7 Have you had help from non-teaching professionals from your school

or your board? Has it been useful?

## **Results**

- 7.1 What do you see as success in students' reading and writing abilities?
- 7.2 Do you see positive effects of literacy/basic skills on the personal development - level of autonomy, self-confidence, etc. - of students who have succeeded?
- 7.3 Do you see progress in them in terms of social and professional integration?
- 7.4 Do these students, more than others, keep on developing their literacy skills once they leave the programme?
- 7.5 Overall, what do you think helps literacy students succeed? What more could be done to help them succeed?

## **Interview Guide: Administrators**

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### **1. Measures**

- 1.1 How does your board recruit students for its literacy/basic skills programme?
- 1.2 How and by whom are students greeted when they first come to inquire about the programme? How long does it take after this to have them begin classes?
- 1.3 Do students receive support from counsellors while in the programme?
- 1.4 Does someone do follow-up with students who have left the programme, either by dropping out or after completion? Has this helped? Have students themselves called?
- 1.5 Are there measures to support students: psychological, pedagogical, other? Does your board provide help for students in need: single parent mothers with sick children, incest victims, suicidal students, etc.?
- 1.6 Do you feel the rules and regulations - CTQ's min. 25 h./week attendance, schedules, outings - help students succeed? How?
- 1.7 Is a certificate given to students at the end of the year? of the programme? To what does it attest?
- 1.8 Is transportation provided for those who need it? Are there costs involved?

### **2. Andragogy/Pedagogy**

- 2.1 Are non traditional teaching/learning activities - excursions, experiments, etc. - allowed? Are they encouraged? Have these been useful in helping students to succeed?
- 2.2 Do teachers and students have access to pedagogical materials for the literacy /basic skills programme? Do they have access to such

materials in your library/resource centre? Is it sufficient? Is it used? Is it helpful?

- 2.3 Do students have access to computers in your literacy/ basic skills programme? Have they had an effect?
- 2.4 Is the rate of success in the programme the same for certified teachers and non certified tutors?
- 2.5 Are literacy/basic skills teachers offered professional development in your school board? On what topics? Is it useful to help students succeed?

### **3. Success**

- 3.1 Has your board had a long experience with the literacy/basic skills programme?
- 3.2 What do you consider 'success' to be, in a literacy/basic skills programme? How do you measure students' success? Do you find the success rate to be satisfactory?
- 3.2 Do you consider the literacy/basic skills programme as an asset or as a load that your school board has to carry? Why? What would you do to improve this?