



Western Quebec Literacy Project
November 1998

LifeLong Learning
in Western
Quebec -
Success Stories

From Literacy and
Beyond

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INTENTION OF SURVEY

The purpose of this study was to interview former Adult Education students who received English Literacy training in Western Quebec (specifically, the Lower Gatineau area) as to the influences, direct and indirect, the Literacy programs in which they were enrolled had on their lives.

Specifically, respondents were asked to comment on why they enrolled in Literacy, to describe their learning experiences, to identify any skills they used to further themselves, and to assess the affect the Literacy program had on their lives as a whole, whether it be for education, employment or personal satisfaction and growth.

Lifelong Learning in Western Quebec Some Success Stories

Literacy means more than the basic skills of reading and writing. It "now also reflects a person's ability to understand and use information, a key function in a world where daily living requires higher communication and information processing skills"

In 1994, an International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was conducted to measure and compare adult literacy skills in seven industrialized countries: Canada, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States. The report detailed results on three scales (*prose* – information in text; *document* – schedules, tables, maps, etc.; and *quantitative* – balancing a chequebook, completing order forms) along a continuum of skills from 1 (lowest) to 4/5 (highest). 5,600 Canadians aged 16 and over participated from amongst the following populations: over 65 years; in and out of school youth; social assistance, and UI recipients. Canada placed roughly in the "middle of the pack" on the three scales with more individuals at either extreme and less in the middle (in contrast to European countries where more individuals placed in the middle).

The Canadian Report of the IALS, entitled "Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada", confirmed and expanded the findings from . Statistic Canada's 1989 Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities (LSUDA) ; specifically, that about 22 % of adult Canadians fall in the lowest level of literacy (serious difficulty in dealing with printed materials) and that another 24-26% fall in the second lowest level (they read, but not well and can deal only with simple and clearly laid out material and with tasks that are not too complex). (Reading the Future . Highlights 2).

Another finding was that there are larger number of adults with high skill levels In the western provinces and large numbers with low skills In the east. These regional differences In levels of literacy skills across Canada were, as might be expected, associated with educational attainment. For example, 18% of those In the Atlantic regions and 21 % of those in Quebec have less than Grade 8 education, but only 12% of Ontarians and 11 % of those in the Western provinces have the same level of education. (Reading the Future . Highlights 4).

In all three scales, more individuals in Quebec than those in the rest of Canada fell into Levels 1 and 2 as opposed to Levels 3 or 4/5:

		1	2	3	4/5
		%			
Prose	Canada	22	26	33	20
	Quebec	28	26	39	8
Document	Canada	23	24	30	22
	Quebec	31	27	29	13
Quantitative	Canada	22	26	32	20
	Quebec	28	32	30	10

** Quebec results were not broken down by language group because the English sample was statistically too small to measure. Literacy, Economy and Society, 1995)*

The IALS findings indicate that differences in literacy skills vary significantly not only by education and region, but by occupations and industries. An unemployed person is about three times as likely to be at

Level 1 compared to someone who is employed. Furthermore, industries that have experienced growth are the ones whose employees have relatively high levels of skills; those industries in decline are characterized by workers with lower skills. Canadian workers in future will require high literacy rates. "Literacy must be viewed as a cause and a consequence of employment success. . . Thus, an inability to find regular employment may result in the decline of a person's skill level." (Reading the Future. Highlights 8).

It is interesting to note that the IALS results indicate that programs targeted at school leavers which focus on numeracy skills may help to protect their economic future. For example, of those respondents with low education, a higher proportion of Canadians than Germans performed at Level 1 on the document and quantitative scales. This difference may be due to Germany's system of secondary vocational education which emphasizes work experience. "If this were the case, young Canadian adults may be less well prepared for work than their German counterparts . . . lending support to policies aimed at increasing Canadian secondary students' work experience through co-op programs, apprenticeships and other school-to-work arrangements." (Reading the Future - Highlights 5).

Literacy is "the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community - to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential". Society rewards individuals who are literate and penalizes those who are not. Unfortunately, only a minority of those persons with weak literacy skills recognize a need to improve their levels. Public awareness of the need to improve is necessary if our country is to have a viable economic future.

In Western Quebec, the percentage of people over 25 years old with little or no high school is alarmingly high in several municipal areas compared to provincial and national averages:

Municipality	Total Populaton over 15 years old	Total Population without high school	Percentage of population over 25 years old with less than Grade 9 education
Aylmer	26,110	7,245	7.7%
Buckingham	8,810	3,320	15.2%
Chelsea	4,500	815	6.2%
Gatineau	77,180	25,825	11.9%
Hull	51,145	16,380	14.8%
Kazabazua	630	235	21.4%
LaPêche	4,790	1,925	19.2%
Low	620	235	16.9%
Luskville	3,625	1,435	15.9%
Shawville	1,280	585	19.5%
Quebec	5,673,470	2,013,810	17%
Canada	22,628,925	7,868,005	11.5%

While these figures do not indicate Literacy rates, they are indicative of the need for remediation and revitalization of the educational services in our rural areas.

In Western Quebec, there are currently two Adult English Literacy Programs: The Western Quebec Literacy Council, which is a community-based organization relying primarily on volunteer tutors who work on a one-to-one basis with students using the Laubach Reading Program; and the Western Quebec School Board's Literacy program, which is taught in-class to small groups of students who have been assessed by Literacy teachers and then provided with individualized learning profiles. Depending on their

specific needs, students might follow either the remedial learning objectives as set out in the M.E.Q's (Ministere d'Education de Quebec) Life Skills curricula or the academic upgrading objectives of the Pre-Secondary curricula, and in some cases, both.

Since its inception in 19 , the Western Quebec Literacy Council has worked with clients; and since 1992, the Western Quebec School Board area has registered 194 students to its Literacy programs. Unfortunately, enrollment in the W.Q.S.B.'s Literacy program has drastically declined in the last six years.

Alpha (Literacy) Registration in W.Q.S.B.: 1992-1998	
School year	Number of students registered full-time
1992-93	50
1993-94	35
1994-95	38
1995-96	31
1996-97	20
1997-98	12
1998-99	8

(Yagminas, Adult Education, W.Q.S.B.)

Government cutbacks and a decline in the number of student referrals from Emploi Quebec and other social agencies may attribute to the decrease in the number of Literacy students registering in W.Q.S.B. Certainly, public awareness about the need for literacy education must be heightened.

For many Literacy students, personal complications impede their ability to achieve the educational goals they initially set with their instructors. For others, however, the Literacy program is the first if not most important step on their road to success - success measured by such criteria as further education or job training, employment, independence and inherent in all of these, self-confidence.

The number of Literacy students who "succeed" on the educational ladder are few. For this study, 24 former Literacy students were initially contacted; however, only 10 agreed to participate in the survey and then 2 dropped out. But while the numbers are not encouraging, the individual stories of those students who participated are.

This study profiled eight former Literacy students who worked their way up from Literacy to Secondary IV or V Academic and Vocational Training. Some attended Literacy for only a few months; others for one to two years. Of those students interviewed, two were placed in the MEQ's Life Skills program, five were placed in Pre-Secondary, and one followed the Laubach Reading program through the West Que Literacy Council. These people all share two common traits: the willingness to work consistently on clear, realistic objectives broken down into manageable stages and the mental fortitude to push through to the end.

It was my pleasure to have interviewed these Individuals. May they serve as an inspiration to anyone who thinks it's impossible to scale a mountain in the dark.

Mary Anna Joseph

Mary Anna sought help from the Western Quebec Literacy Council in the summer of 1994, and she remained in the program for about two years. Mary Anna realized that without an education, she would not be able to find work, let alone understand the forms that she had to fill.

At home with her tutor, Mary Anna worked on improving her reading and writing skills. She found particularly helpful the Challenger Reading series and the one-to-one instruction from her tutor.

At that time, Mary Anna's goal was to get her high school diploma. She attributes her positive experience in the Literacy program for giving her the courage to go for her high school diploma.

In June 1997, Mary Anna successfully completed the Secondary V Academic program at the Hull Continuing Education Centre. She has just recently completed Secretarial Program and Office Automation courses in the summer of 1998 at the Outaouais Technological Centre in Aylmer. She is currently looking for employment and is volunteering her time every Wednesday at the Senate on Parliament Hill. She plans to continue her education, to improve her French and to finish level 5 Math.

Mary Anna writes, "I would like people to be more aware of this wonderful opportunity to learn to read and write." Her advice to someone thinking of returning to school is to "learn as much as you can and to complete your education because without it, you are nothing".

Mary Anna admits that getting an education has not been easy, and there were times when she wanted to quit. But her motto "Never give up" has held fast for her and most certainly will result in Mary Anna finding a job in the field for which she has been trained.

Glenn Whipple

Glenn was placed in the Literacy Program at the Hull Adult Education Centre in the Fall of 1994. He had transferred from the youth sector at Philemon Wright H.S. where he had been in the CoOp program for five years. In Literacy, Glenn worked on pre-Secondary learning objectives for a year and a half which included activities in morphographic spelling, phonics, reading comprehension, and writing as well as Secondary I math. Reluctant to read and write, Glenn gained more confidence as he worked on an individual basis most of the time with "a lot of one-on-one help and guidance from the teacher", Glenn enjoyed being with other classmates because "we all stuck together and pulled each other through the rough times."

Glenn writes that when he first started the Literacy program he felt as if he "were finally going to get somewhere."

And somewhere, he got! Glenn knew from the beginning that he wanted to take the Automotive program at Hull Centre in order to obtain his Mechanic's License. In January 1996, Glenn was upgraded to the Academic program and by June, 1997 successfully passed the requirements of the Equivalency test he needed to enter the Automotive Program.

Glenn credits the Literacy program for not only setting him on the right course academically, but in helping him "to deal with others, to do the best I can and to always give it my best shot".

Glenn graduated from the Automotive Program in June, 1998 and has since found a job working in the Small Engines department of Rona Hardware in Perkins. He plans on taking a millwright course with the

intention of obtaining work at Bullwater in Gatineau. Glen's advice to those thinking of dropping out of school or returning is to "continue your education so you can fulfill your lifelong dreams and goals. If I can do it, anybody can; I struggled, but I succeeded!"

Elizabeth Storing

Liz joined the Literacy class at the Aylmer Centre (now Outaouais Technological Centre) in 1993. She was in the Pre-Secondary program for one year. A young single mom, Liz decided to return to school to regain the confidence she needed to get her high school diploma. She writes that when she first started the program, she "felt small and stupid for not finishing when she had the chance the first time." But she continues, "one week after enrolling, I no longer had the demoralizing feeling I had at the beginning". She liked how the teacher focused on her strengths in order to build up the confidence she needed to handle her weaknesses. Stronger in math than in English skills, Liz' remediation was centered around morphographic, phonologic, grammar and reading comprehension skills.

Liz' strengths also lay in her abilities to break a task into small manageable steps, to organize and to follow through quickly. In January 1995, a confident Liz was upgraded to the Academic program at Hull Centre and in June, 1996, she received her Secondary V High School Diploma.

Liz found work in the maintenance section of the Department of National Revenue, but a back injury has since laid her up. She is currently working full-time at Zellers in Aylmer.

Liz recommends that "NO ONE DROP OUT OF SCHOOL; however, because many do, to please continue with the Literacy program because there are lots of people who need it".

Julia Wiseman

Julia was placed in the Literacy program at Hull Centre in the Fall of 1995. She required minimal remediation in the Pre-Secondary stream having stronger language skills than math; consequently, she spent only three months in Literacy before being upgraded to the Academic program in January, 1996.

Julia had stopped going to high school at 15 at which point she had been in the (Individual Paths to Learning) IPL program. She credits her parents for giving her the support and help she needed to realize she "needed a better education to achieve [her] goal".

Julia's experience in Literacy, although brief, was positive and rewarding. She writes that her class was "like one big happy family with everyone helping one another" and that her teacher "sat down with me one-on-one and helped me with all my weak points. . . helping me put my words together more clearly and understandably, increasing my vocabulary and putting periods and commas in the right places."

Moreover, Literacy helped Julia realize that "I could do it, that I wasn't stupid or slow. I now have a lot of respect for myself and I don't put myself down anymore or give up so easily."

Julia is currently finishing Secondary V English and History at Hull Centre. With only four months left to graduation, Julia has wisely set her sights on college training as a social assistant in the Geriatrics field.

To those people who want to drop out of school, Julia would like to tell them, "you're making a big mistake; without an education, you are ruining your lives". To those who are returning to school, "This is the best decision you will ever make. Never give up!"

Rosa Pereira-Melos

When Rosa was placed into the Hull Centre's Literacy Program in 1994, it was as an English Second Language Literacy candidate. She had left school in her own country when she was 12 before entering high school. She would not resume her education for another six years as Rosa and her family emigrated to the United States and remained there for three years before they moved to Canada. Already fluent in Portuguese, her mother tongue, and in French and Spanish, Rosa quickly acquired the English language skills necessary to enter the Academic program.

In June 1996, Rosa graduated from Secondary V with Honours in English (mother tongue), Geography and French (second language). She received as well a Perseverance Award for hardwork, positive attitude and dedication. In September of 1996, Rosa enrolled in the Travel Agency program at the Outaouais Technological Centre. She found the program very helpful but unfortunately had to withdraw after four months to look after her mother who had become ill. Meanwhile, Rosa had applied to Air Canada. In 1998, she was offered employment with them because she was able to speak four languages, but she would have had to re-locate to Vancouver. Unfortunately, the timing was bad; Rosa was planning her wedding and could not move immediately. Now a young newlywed, Rosa works with her sister in a cleaning business. Their contract with the Department of Justice however has just ended, so Rosa is in between jobs.

Rosa credits the Adult Education program for giving her the educational tools she needed to make a new life in Canada; and the Literacy program for making her feel comfortable returning to school.

Daniel Brazeau

In the Fall of 1995, Dan was placed first in Life Skills and then in the Pre-Secondary stream of the Literacy program at Hull Centre. Reading disabled and weak in basic math, he was given remediation in phonological decoding, morphographic spelling, reading comprehension, grammar and sentence structure as well as numeracy and life skills math.

Dan had not been to school for over 25 years having left in Grade 6 to help his father. Conscientious and hardworking, Dan had an aptitude for anything mechanical and had been employed at Speedy Muffler for several years until he was laid off because he did not have his Mechanics license. With the goals of getting his license and of one day opening up his own garage, Dan plugged his way through Literacy and in January, 1997 upgraded to the Academic Program where he completed Secondary III and successfully passed the Equivalency test requirements in order to enter the Automotive Program.

In June, 1998 Dan graduated from the Automotive Program and earned his Mechanic's License. He says he "felt proud" to have accomplished what he had set out to do two years earlier. This achievement was not an easy one for Dan; however, through determination and a single-minded desire to work in his chosen vocation, Dan was able to deal with the learning disabilities that had always set him back.

Dan now has full time employment at Midas Muffler on Bronson Avenue in Ottawa. As well, he does odd jobs after work. His plan is to save enough money to start his own garage in a year.

To those who are thinking about quitting school, Dan has this to say: "It's not worth quitting. Stay in school and get smartened up so you can get a good job."

Terry Lynn Storing

In September 1990, Terry Lynn was placed into the Literacy Life Skills stream at Hull Centre. She said she felt nervous attending, but she liked being with the other students because they were helpful. As Terry Lynn became more comfortable and self-confident, she opened up and she in turn, began helping other students. Terry Lynn's main difficulties were cognitive-based; although she could read and spell, she had difficulty understanding and processing complex written information. She was stronger in numeracy skills. Terry Lynn remained in Literacy until April 5, 1992 when the hours allotted to her by the MEQ unfortunately expired. She was disappointed because her goal of getting her high school diploma had been cut short.

Terry Lynn's strengths lie in her ability to complete tasks thoroughly and quickly, to accept challenges and to take instructions well. She would make an ideal candidate for work experience in jobs requiring Level 1-2 literacy skills. Indeed, after she left school, she baby sat and worked at a greenhouse part-time. In September 1998, Terry Lynn was accepted back to the Literacy Program at Hull Centre with the intention of getting the education she needs to work with young children. In November, 1998 Terry Lynn was upgraded to Secondary II Academic English and is once again with Suzanne Cogswell, her former Literacy teacher from 1992. Terry Lynn did not have to describe how she felt about her latest move up; her smile said it all.

Edna Williams

Edna had a mission when she first enrolled in Adult Education in 1990 which was to get her mechanic's license and open up her own business. She was able to upgrade and receive her high school equivalency papers for Secondary IV English and Math and Secondary V French in one year. Edna says that the program was A.I. Everyone treated her well, and she appreciated the individualized attention she received from the teachers to help her fulfill her academic requirements.

Against three odds: " her age, her sex and her blind eye", Edna entered the Automotive program in 1991. Edna soon showed her mechanical proficiency when she became "Best Overall " in brakes, clocking in the time it took her to change brakes at five minutes less "than all the boys".

Edna is proud of the two diplomas for High School Equivalency and Automotive which now grace her wall, particularly the commendation "Equal to your peers".

Edna did not find a job in the Mechanics field because she says, "the odds were just too stacked against me; being an older woman and all." However, she is satisfied that she accomplished something that she had wanted to do all her life, proving that it is never too late to get an education.

CONCLUSION

It is unfortunate that I was unable to interview more students about their experiences in Literacy; many were reluctant to discuss this aspect of their lives as it was, according to one candidate, "nothing to brag about".

Returning to school as an adult often has attached to it a negative stigma: "I was kind of embarrassed to be put into Literacy class", one student told me.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because" she replied, "Everybody thinks it's a class for dummies."

For those who found the courage to ignore the nay-sayers and to try again, learning has been both painful and rewarding.

Learning has meant facing weaknesses in reading, in spelling, in writing, in understanding, in adding or multiplying and then dealing with the frustrations inherent in starting from scratch.

Learning has also meant exorcising the shameful ghosts of past failures and focusing in on what is positive now so they can be productive and successful in the future.

The experiences of these eight individuals epitomize the difficult yet liberating processes of life-long learning.

As one student said, "Learning for me wasn't easy. Sometimes it drove me crazy. But I knew that without an education, I would end up on the system forever. I wanted to be my own person. And now I am!"

" NEVER GIVE UP!"

LITERACY SURVEY

NAME: _____

1. In what year did you enroll in a Literacy Program?

2. How long did you stay in Literacy?

3. Where did you attend Literacy?

4. Why did you decide to go back to school? _____

5. Explain how you felt when you first started in the program

6. Describe some of the activities/lessons your instructor/teacher did with you during the time you were in Literacy:

7. Which of the activities or lessons you described above did you find *most* helpful and why?

8. What aspects of the program did you not find helpful and why?

9. If you were in a classroom with other students, did you enjoy being with them? Why or why not? If you were tutored privately, please explain what you liked or did not like about it.

LITERACY SURVEY

NAME: _____

10. What did you expect you would accomplish in Literacy when you first started the program?

11. Did your expectations change as you went through the Program? If yes, how did they change?

12. Why did you leave the Literacy program?

- I completed the learning objectives and skills I needed to pursue further studies
- I learned enough skills & confidence to find a job
- My hours were up
- Other. Please Explain

13. After attending Literacy, what did you do?

14. If you found employment, what skills did you acquire from the Literacy program that helped you in your job?

15. Overall, was your experience in Literacy a positive or negative one? Please explain:

LITERACY SURVEY

NAME: _____

16. What aspects of the Literacy Program would you have liked to have seen changed?

17. Based on your own experiences, what advice would you give a young person thinking of dropping out of school or someone thinking of returning to school?

18. Please indicate below whether you would be interested in giving a personal interview with Mona Nesbitt:

- Yes. I can be contacted at: (telephone) _____
- No.

19.

20. If you are employed, would your employer give a brief interview with Mona Nesbitt with your consent.

- Yes, my employer will give an interview. He/she can be contacted at: (tel) _____
- No.

Please return this survey as soon as possible in the pre-stamped envelope
or
fax it to Mona Nesbitt at 819-459-3296

Thanks for your input!

- END -