



never give up on me

so I speak the truth  
poets from the free land



I am my life's work  
deep in the blue

My heart beats the fastest when your face flashes  
fake friends talk their ish

the age of independence

If you hustle infinite suns

among the sky I am the clouds

her font is everything that is on her mind

If you have passion for art

Hope  
I have trouble fitting in

people are the beat  
#trustnoone



intoxicating thoughts

**Youth at risk and the Writers in the Community Program:  
AN EXPLORATORY EVALUATION**



**The Centre for Literacy**

Le centre d'alphabétisation

## **Youth at risk and the Writers in the Community Program: An exploratory evaluation**

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Edited by: Staff of The Centre for Literacy

Publisher: The Centre for Literacy, February 2014

ISBN: 978-1-927634-06-6

*The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of The Centre for Literacy*

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## Acknowledgments

The study presented in this report aimed to evaluate a community-based literacy project in Montreal – the Writers in the Community (WIC) program. WIC, run in partnership by the Quebec Writers' Federation (QWF) and The Centre for Literacy, is designed to introduce marginalized teenagers and youth who have been left out of the artistic and social mainstreams to professional writers who present them with opportunities to engage in creative writing. This study involved participants in the Quebec youth protection agency Batshaw Youth and Family Centres. The study set out to document participants' perceptions of the impact of WIC six months or more after the program ended.

This report would not have been possible without the funding, support and hard work of many individuals and organizations. The publication was funded through donations from Friends of The Centre for Literacy and the Eric T. Webster Foundation.

## Thanks to

### **McGill Social Work**

**The Centre for Literacy**, a national centre of expertise that supports best practices and informed policy development in literacy and skills by creating bridges between research, policy and practice. The Centre collaborates with many organizations to design action research projects, such as Writers in the Community (WIC), related to literacy and essential skills in workplace and community settings, and to evaluate the outcomes.

**The Quebec Writers' Federation (QWF)** plays a prominent role in the life of the Quebec English-language literary community as an arts presenter and professional and community educator, as well as the representative of Quebec's English-language writers.

**Batshaw Youth and Family Centres (Batshaw Centres)** believes children and youth have a right to live and grow in safe and stable environments. To this end, Batshaw Youth and Family Centres provides psychological, rehabilitation, and social integration services primarily related to the Youth Protection Act, the Youth Criminal Justice Act and An Act Respecting Health Services and Social Services (R.S.Q. Chapter S-4.2).

**Sarah Haggard, Program Coordinator, Writers in the Community**

**The team at Mountainview High School**

**The Writer-Facilitators who gave their time**

**Leila Marshy, for selected photographs on the front page**

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# 1. Introduction

Strong literacy skills are a requirement for full engagement in Canadian society. More than just reading and writing, literacy encompasses a broad range of ways of engaging with information and communicating with others. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines literacy as:

the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society. (UNCEPA, 2006)

Given its central importance to modern life, literacy has long been seen as both a challenge and an opportunity for members of marginalized populations (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2001; Neuman, 2008), including youth at risk (Walker, Greenwood, Hart, & Carta, 1994; Willms, 1997). Such youth face many barriers to success at school and when they leave school with weak literacy skills, they face further challenges to employment and interaction with public institutions. On the other hand, helping youth at risk to develop stronger literacy skills – and, in the best case scenario, a love of reading and writing – may not only address practical challenges to future employment and public engagement (StatsCan, 2006) but can also make a significant contribution to positive self-esteem and positive relationships with their peers, teachers and parents (Chandler, 1999).

The study presented in this report aimed to evaluate a community-based literacy project in Montreal – the Writers in the Community (WIC) program. WIC, run in partnership by the Quebec Writers' Federation (QWF) and The Centre for Literacy, is designed to expose marginalized teenagers and youth who have been left out of the artistic and social mainstreams to professional writers who present them with opportunities to engage in creative writing. This study involved participants in the youth protection agency Batshaw Youth and Family Centres (hereafter called Batshaw Centres). The study intended to document participants' perceptions of the impact of WIC six months or more after the program ended.

As described in this report, the study encountered many hurdles. Researchers were able to gather staff and facilitator opinions more easily than those of the youth participants of whom only one was interviewed. Nevertheless, we have decided to present the story of the evolution of the study and to share the methods we developed to conduct the evaluation because we believe they can contribute to future work in this area. We also present some findings based on the limited number of interviews conducted. The input from the program sponsors and the writer-facilitators is very rich. Regarding participants, while it is impossible to generalize from the perceptions of one informant, his feelings about the impact of the program were positive and thoughtful. The tentative findings suggest that there is value in a longer-term outcomes evaluation. In the conclusion, therefore, we make suggestions on how to integrate such evaluations into the general operations of WIC and how to avoid the problems that impeded this study.

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## Writers in the Community and Youth at Risk

The Writers in the Community program, run in partnership by the Quebec Writers' Federation (QWF) and The Centre for Literacy, is designed to expose marginalized teenagers and youth who have been left out of the artistic and social mainstreams to writers who present them with opportunities to engage in creative writing. The objectives are to present activities that motivate and engage the participants in writing, extend their appreciation of literary expression, produce tangible products (a literary zine, for example), develop new skills, foster pride in their accomplishments, and connect them to the literary community. The program works to establish long-term relationships with host organizations in order to ensure continuity for the youth and build capacity within those organizations to carry on such programming.

The WIC program, begun as a pilot project in the late 1990s (Curran, 2009), has worked in partnership with a variety of hosts, including both schools and community organizations in the Montreal area. Mountainview High School, Dawson Alternative School, the Notre-Dame-de-Grace (NDG) Community Council, Jeunesse 2000 and the Tyndale St-Georges Community Centre are a few examples of these.

In its current format, WIC pays a writer-facilitator to go into alternative schools and youth-based community organizations to facilitate writing groups for eight sessions and selects several locations a year, in the fall and spring. Each group normally consists of 5-15 participants whose ages generally range from 12 –17 years, although these numbers can vary depending on the group. The areas of Montreal where this program has taken place include neighbourhoods such as NDG and Little Burgundy. Many of these neighbourhoods are targets for teen gang activity (Batshaw Centres, n.d. as cited in Youth at Risk and Gangs in Montreal, n.d.), and are also known for high rates of immigration and poverty (Comité d'Éducation aux Adultes de la Petite-Bourgone et St-Henri, n.d.).

Between one to two-thirds of all WIC youth participants come to the program through their involvement with Batshaw Centres. The youth may have risk factors such as difficulty with the law, behavioural challenges, living in out of home placements. Batshaw Centres have been engaged with the WIC program since the 1990s.

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## Current Knowledge about Youth Literacy Programs and Evaluation

This study began with a literature review. Those who conduct literacy programs with at-risk youth point out that “learning and literacy difficulties are often masked by disengagement or disruptive behaviours, which can lead to school failure and drop out” (Ackerman, 2012; also Howard 2008; Ogbu and Davis, 2003). Anti-social behaviour such as youth delinquency and teen pregnancy can also be associated with poor literacy skills (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2001; Willms, 1997).

Efforts have been made to reverse weak literacy among youth. Research suggests that youth-based extracurricular activities in general, including creative writing programs, promote positive youth development (Schinke, Cole, & Poulin, 2000), not only in terms of improved academic performance (Hall, Yohalem, Tolman, & Wilson, 2003) but also in regards to enhanced self-esteem and self-sufficiency (Chandler, 1999), better interpersonal skills, reduced drop out rates, and less time spent in unhealthy activities (McLaughlin, 2000; Huang, Gribbons, Kim, Lee, & Baker, 2000). But unfortunately, programs for difficult to handle at-risk youth tend to focus more on behaviour modification than emphasizing social and emotional growth or improvement of basic literacy skills (Ackerman, 2012; Youth Literacy Canada, 2006).

Two studies (Chandler, 1999; Schinke et al., 2000) conducted among at-risk youth – one done immediately after the sessions and one done after a 30-month interval – point to creative writing activities as effective in helping this sub-section of the youth population achieve better self-esteem and school performance. At about the same time, some researchers (Schinke et al., 2000; Roth, Brooks-Gun, Murray, & Foster, 1998) lamented both the lack of evaluative studies of the impact of such youth-based programs and the lack of detail – for example, about research design or subjects (Roth et al., 1998) - in such evaluative studies. More than a decade later in 2012, the National Endowment for the Arts (US) published a research report on “the academic and civic behaviour outcomes of teenagers and young adults who have engaged deeply with the arts in or out of school” (Catterall et al., 2012). It is a first to track students and comparison groups over time, using databases from four large-scale longitudinal studies. Three of the four studies used standardized indicators of SES – family income, parent education, and parental job status. The term “at-risk” was applied to students in the bottom quarter of SES levels. Overall, those with strong arts involvement had better grades, and higher rates of post-secondary enrolment. They also volunteered and voted more than non-participants. While this analysis looked at the arts very broadly, it offers strong grounding to consider a more focused look at specific types of arts engagement such as creative writing, especially outside specified curriculums.

Several cross-disciplinary theoretical frameworks underpin research on out-of-school literacy (Schultz and Hull, 2008). These include ethnography of communication in which anthropologists and linguists have used a sociolinguistic approach to examine literacy in homes and community as a way to understand the difficulties faced in school by children from low-income families (Hymes, 1964; Heath (1983, 1998). The second derives from psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who continues to influence studies on writing as a meditational tool and the power of written language for thinking, and from Scribner and Cole who introduced the notion of “practice” into literacy studies. Scribner and Cole proposed that literacy “is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific

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purposes in specific contexts of use (cited in Schultz and Hull, 2008, p.20). Finally, the New Literacy Studies integrates all these disciplines with “discourse” methodology and looks at literacy through a lens of power relations in social and cultural contexts. Linguist James Gee defines discourse as “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or “types of people”) by specific groups of people...” (Gee , 1996, p. vii). Literacy practices are closely associated with identity and belonging.

A program such as Writers in the Community offers an opportunity to examine how youth who have been removed from mainstream schools and other social settings for various reasons, from challenging behaviour to family situations beyond their control, may be re-engaged or re-directed using a non-traditional approach to literacy through a hybrid in-school, out-of school creative writing program. These youth have generally performed poorly in school settings, yet often display flashes of brilliance in their WIC writing.

A brief review of related work in the Montreal area revealed that very few organizations have carried out formal studies and published empirical evaluative results of such programs. It would appear that, similar to the QWF and The Centre for Literacy, a small number of local arts-based and literacy youth programs have conducted such evaluations informally and produced internal documents (ex. Ackerman, 2012).

The WIC program has developed a set of evaluation protocols that includes setting out objectives and expectations of the key stakeholders – teachers, writer-facilitators, Batshaw Youth and Family Centres’ staff and the youth themselves – and the coordinator conducts an evaluation shortly after the end of program to capture outcomes related to the objectives. These evaluations indicate very favourable outcomes for the youth involved. For example, an evaluation conducted at the end of a WIC program in the fall of 2010 pointed to positive outcomes in the following areas: the youth experienced a sense of connection with the community, other youth and with the writer-facilitator; they showed motivation, engagement, and sustained interest as well as an openness to unfamiliar ways of looking at things and a sense of pride in their accomplishments; and they acquired new sets of skills that included writing, publishing, editing and layout skills. A further important outcome indicated that the youth had become conscious of the fact that words can create alternate paths to conflict resolution.



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## 2. The Research Project: An Exploratory Evaluation

This study had one main and three secondary objectives. The main objective was to evaluate the impact of the Writers in the Community Program (WIC) on youth who have participated in the program through Batshaw Youth and Family Centres, six to eight months after they have completed the program. The evaluation sought to uncover the attitudes of the youth towards themselves, their friends and families, their school, and the community. It also sought to identify their perceptions about school attendance and performance and community participation and of their future, as well as perceptions about their skill levels in writing/literacy and in the specific skills learned in the WIC program – editing, layout skills, meeting deadlines, literary critiquing, working collaboratively. It also wanted to evaluate the longer-term impact of the connection between the writer-facilitator and the students.

A second objective was to assess whether the program objectives of WIC were still being met after six to eight months. WIC's objectives include the following: to encourage youth participants to use their own words to express themselves and their views of the world, to help the youth create alternate paths for themselves (ex. using words rather than violence), to encourage youth to sustain an interest in the literary arts and to obtain information about literary- and illiteracy-based organizations, such as the Quebec Writers' Federation and The Centre for Literacy, and to encourage them to promote and publicize their work through various means, such as, for example, having their work on the Quebec Writers' Federation's website.

A third objective was to help the Quebec Writers' Federation and The Centre for Literacy go beyond internal evaluations through engaging in a more formal research procedure to see if the positive outcomes suggested by the internal evaluations are sustained over time and to identify any similarities and differences between immediate and longer-term outcomes.

The final objective was to assess whether any follow-up support from Batshaw Youth and Family Centres or the Quebec Writers' Federation/The Centre for Literacy could help sustain the positive youth development indicated in the short-term evaluations.

All outcomes from the evaluation study were analyzed with the goal to reflect upon and improve the Writers in the Community program.

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## Research Questions

To meet the objectives of this study, several research questions were explored. The primary one was:

- What is the impact of the Writers in the Community (WIC) Program on its youth participants after they have finished the program (over a period of six to eight months) in terms of how they perceive their situation (i.e. academic, personal and social situations)?

Secondary research questions included:

- How can the WIC program be improved to further promote youth development?
- Are there particularities of the Batshaw Youth and Family Centre context that influence the outcomes of the WIC program?
- What kind of follow-up support might help build the capacity of the WIC program to promote positive youth development within the context of Batshaw Centres administered schools?

## Methodology

The study was initially designed to be an exploratory qualitative evaluation of the Writers in the Community Program from the perspective of the youth who have participated in the program. A qualitative methodology was proposed due to the small number of participants in the WIC program at the Batshaw Youth and Family Centres (N=16 in Fall 2011); therefore the number of potential respondents was very small. The small population size, as well as the nature of the research questions, made a qualitative methodology more appropriate than a quantitative study in this case. The study consisted of semi-structured interviews with youth participants and key informants (writers-facilitators and QWF/The Centre for Literacy staff). Even though the results of such a small study cannot be generalized, as an exploratory and first attempt at understanding longer term impacts, the research team and its partners believed that the results would be meaningful nevertheless.

## Sample Population

The researchers intended to recruit study respondents from among the youth who participated in the WIC program in the fall of 2011 at two Batshaw Centres-affiliated high schools. These youth represented a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, including visible minorities, such as Caribbean or First Nations youth. Some had been in trouble for drug use, violent behaviour, or soliciting for prostitution. Some had encountered family difficulties. The age of the sample population ranged from 12 to 17. It was hoped that of the 16 youth who participated in these schools, all of them would be able to act as research participants. As explained in the recruitment section below [See p. ], the reality was markedly different.

Key informants were also interviewed. These included three from the Writers in the Community Program (two writer-facilitators and the WIC program coordinator) and the Executive Directors of both the Quebec Writers' Federation and The Centre for Literacy. They were asked to comment on their perceptions of the youths' development to triangulate with the information received from the youth.

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## Recruitment

Recruitment of study participants was seriously hampered by the longer than expected process of obtaining both scientific evaluation and ethical approval from the Centres de jeunesse de Montréal. While the research team had anticipated a start date of March 2012, final approval was received in July 2012. The team was only then able to begin collaboration with Batshaw Centres youth workers in September 2012, already several months later than we had hoped. In September, the Batshaw Centres youth worker who had agreed to work as the study contact person obtained the list of Fall 2011 WIC participants from the Quebec Writers' Federation and began the 3-step process of recruiting the youth study participants:

1. Contact the youths' social workers to determine whether the youth were currently stable enough to participate in the study. If the social workers agreed, then the research team would...
2. Contact the youths' parents to obtain their consent for their children to participate in the study. If the parents agreed, then the research team would...
3. Contact the youths themselves to get their agreement to participate in the study.

In the 8-12 months after the end of the WIC program, the 16 youth participants had gone through many changes. By January 2013,

- 5 youth could not be contacted as their social workers reported that they were either in crisis or were away without permission
- 3 youths' parents refused to have their son/daughter participate in the study
- 1 youth over age 18 never responded to our communications
- 1 parent never responded to our communications
- 5 parents agreed verbally but never submitted the signed consent form necessary before the team can contact the youth and stopped responding to communications

At that point, 1 parent had signed the consent form and the youth then agreed to the interview, the only one to ultimately participate in the study.

The high degree of instability and changes in circumstances among the youth were serious impediments to the study yet at the same time an indication of some of the challenges in delivering the WIC program within the Batshaw Centres context. Given the relatively light nature of the study (i.e. not delving at all into the reasons that the youth might have been involved with Batshaw Centres), the research team was surprised at the difficulty in securing participation.

Recruitment of the four key informants from the sponsor agencies was straightforward. They were identified by the Quebec Writers Federation and The Centre for Literacy and contacted directly by the research team. All four agreed to be interviewed.

<sup>1</sup>As mentioned above, we originally aimed to interview participants 6-8 months after the completion of the program, but a combination of unexpected hurdles made that impossible.

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## Data Collection

The research instrument was a semi-structured interview created by the research team specifically for this project, drawing on questionnaires used in other studies among at-risk youth who have participated in youth development programs. They began with a list of interview themes as detailed in the research objectives, but remained open to unexpected themes raised by participants.

The team used digital recorders to record the interviews, then transcribed and coded them by theme. The analysis sought to reveal how the key informants and the youth participant perceived the attitudes of the youth towards themselves, their friends and families, their school and the community 15 months after they had completed the program<sup>1</sup>. The analysis also explored their perceptions on school attendance and performance, community participation, and their future as well as about their skill levels in writing/literacy and in the specific skills learned in the WIC program – editing, layout skills, meeting deadlines, literary critiquing, working collaboratively.

## Ethical Considerations

The interviews were conducted according to the ethical guidelines of both the Centres de jeunesse de Montréal and McGill University. All interview participants gave their fully informed consent, involving a conversation in which the nature of the study and the interview procedures were described. They then signed a consent form. For the youth participants, consent from a parent was required before the research team could contact them. Youth participants were offered a \$15 gift card for their involvement and the interview was conducted at a location of their choice. Key informants were interviewed either at their office or, in the case of the writer-facilitators, at their homes. Interview recordings were saved without a name on them as were transcriptions. No identifying information from the youth was revealed.

## Institutional Process

As this study required access to youth involved with Batshaw Youth and Family Centres, it was also necessary to follow Batshaw Centres' research procedures. Any studies undertaken with Batshaw Centres must be approved by both Batshaw Centres and, subsequently, the Centre jeunesse de Montréal - Institut universitaire. In order to gain access to any of the young people involved in the project we had to fill out several forms, submit a request of approval to the Batshaw Centres research committee, then apply to the Centre jeunesse de Montréal - Institut universitaire for approval, and finally apply to McGill's Research Ethics Board for McGill ethics certification. (For a step-by-step description of the process please see the appendix on page 23.)

This entire process took six months, several months longer than anticipated.

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### 3. Findings – Interviews

The findings of this study are tentative due to the limited success in recruiting youth participants. However, the research team had a rich interview with one youth and very instructive interviews with two program coordinators and two writer-facilitators. Interview participants shared reflections on WIC's success in meeting the program objectives, challenges in implementing the program as well as some ideas about how WIC could be improved. We begin with the perspectives of The Centre for Literacy and Quebec Writers' Federation staff involved with WIC before relating the experience of the youth who was interviewed.

#### Perspectives of Those Implementing the Writers in the Community Program

The WIC partners affirmed that they sent accomplished writers into the Batshaw Centres schools to facilitate the programs. They sought out writers who also had experience with kids, acknowledging the extra challenge of working with youth at risk. Batshaw Centres WIC participants all have some sort of family difficulties, are often living in group homes, may have been in trouble with the law, may struggle with addictions or have learning disabilities. The impact on their education can be serious, as expressed by this writer-facilitator:

*A lot of the kids in this project are kids who have not done well in school for a variety of reasons. Many of them have serious literacy problems – they're years behind where they should be in reading and writing skills. The work we try to do is help build literacy and essential skills but in non-traditional ways.*

The program is marked by strong collaborations. Writer-facilitators would facilitate a group of 6-10 youth over the course of eight weeks, doing exercises in poetry writing and spoken word, and also developing curriculum in line with the students' needs. The writer-facilitators worked in partnership with a teacher whose collaboration was appreciated: "The teacher was good at helping focus the assignments so they were more concrete, while still letting some freedom for others." The collaboration between The Centre for Literacy and Batshaw Centres has existed since the 1990s, pre-dating WIC, was seen as strong. Referring to the two Batshaw Centres-related schools, a WIC staff person commented, "I think we have a good team of people there with an enormous amount of commitment from teachers and administrators."

For one of the programs, there was a poet intern who was a graduate of the program. "One kid who really shined, now comes back as a paid intern in the program for 2 sessions. Now he's 18. Kids look up to him..." The involvement of this intern was seen as a real success: "I think it allowed him a sense of leadership.[...] All those life experiences came forward. For him, language was a tool to understanding himself and his problems. He had an awakening in a leadership sense."

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## Meeting Program Objectives

The overall aim of WIC is to strengthen the youth's literacy skills but a strong emphasis was placed on helping the youth find a means to express themselves: "kids were encouraged to use their words." As one writer-facilitator put it, "I'm not looking for them to become pros in poetry. It's more thinking about language, use of language; because I think it makes people more thoughtful." Writer-facilitators tried to introduce the idea of reading and writing as something that went beyond English class to be a form of creative expression, to nurture in the youth a new use for and respect for language. As described by one of the staff,

*I think the benefit of this program is not only being able to express oneself and being able to think about yourself in words but also being sensitive to language in general, in any sort of context, whether it's in dialogue or conversation. And [these kids] have a taste of how language can be hurtful.*

Staff recognized that it would be difficult to have a measurable impact on literacy in an 8-week program, but saw their role primarily to engage the youth in writing as a personal outlet and as a way of sparking a general interest in the world:

*I think any form of writing is important for thinking, for understanding one's self. And so even if it's not creative writing, even if they're not writing a Haiku or something... Even journal writing is something I try to get them to do.*

This positive engagement with writing – a **confidence** related to writing and self-expression – was felt to be very important for lifelong literacy. But such confidence was not always present among the participants, something the writer-facilitators tried to overcome:

*When there's a new face [new participant – because some youth follow the program more than once] whether it's for creative writing or any other subject they always put up a bit of a front. But then usually it fades within the first two workshops because I think they realize that I'm not there to correct their grammar or anything hyper-educational, it's more just for expression and using language in whatever way they want.*

To build confidence, the writer-facilitators sought to create a safe space for the youth, where they do not have to share if they don't want to, and do not have to show their work if they don't want to. Importantly, however, a safe space did not necessarily always have to be a completely comfortable space. According to one writer-facilitator, the challenge was creating space for dialogue that could shock the youth out of their usual positions, **challenge stereotypes** and allow them to show a part of themselves,

*...that is not what's typically expected. It's about how to understand beyond this little notion of self. They are so self aware in terms of their life experiences. [...] So it's about how to turn that wheel in another way. How to get these youth to realize that they are bigger than these stereotypes they are faced with.*

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Another objective of the program is to leave the youth with something of which they can be proud. The **promotion of the youths' work** is accomplished primarily through the production of a 'zine with a public launch that can include other students and administrators from the school, teachers, board members from the sponsoring organizations and workers, board members and managers from Batshaw Centres. One writer-facilitator described the process:

*At the end of every workshop I produce a 'zine so I talk about it very early on so they know our work is geared toward producing this book of their work. Near the end of the session we have editing workshops and revisions and the last workshop I have the books bound. They're very simple but they evoke a very positive reaction from the participants when they actually see their work in print and selected and edited with 100 copies going out to them and QWF. And so the launch takes place the very last day where we have a reading where I create a stage space and have chairs for the audience...*

At the launch, the youth are encouraged to read out their written pieces in front of the audiences. While many are enthusiastic about this opportunity to **present** or even perform – expressing real pride in their work – others are not comfortable and decline. A second round in WIC can sometimes change this, as noted by one of the writer-facilitators:

*One of the best things is there's always someone who won't read themselves at the launch. When they come back the second time and they DO read themselves, that's a huge accomplishment of confidence for the youth. Because they don't get a lot of positive reinforcement in their lives.*

The launch is seen as very important by all the staff. One staff person summed it up:

*And I think [the launch] gave them a different way to channel, and it gave them a public audience. Maybe to feel less alone, see that there are people who share similar experiences or can at least empathize... We want them to see there are people who care – and we've talked about giving voice, right? So I would say if someone felt the opportunity to be heard, or that if they have something to say in the future they'll feel more comfortable saying it, I'd be pretty happy with that.*

If it seems appropriate, the writer-facilitators will also refer the youth to other potential places to publish or perform their work. At least one former participant has had writing published and others have become involved in spoken word open mic events. Given the relatively small number of hours the youth participate in the program, the staff was proud that WIC inspired some of its participants to pursue their writing outside of the program.

While the staff was very positive about the WIC program in general, they found it hard to evaluate the achievement of program objectives in concrete terms. Unfortunately, the low participation of youth in this study means that further study will be necessary before concrete conclusions can be drawn. Nevertheless, staff pointed to a number of indicators that WIC is having a positive impact on youth participants, albeit with caution given the limited information from which to judge:

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*I think they met the objectives for the most part. (long pause and nervous laugh)*

*I've seen older participants and they obviously remember me and they told me they were still writing, which was really amazing. But that's only four months after, so I don't know if I could really say.*

*I don't know, I think the benefits are small. I don't think we're doing anything crazy or life changing. I don't want to come off sounding really pessimistic, though.*

*I know one in particular said she liked the workshop because it kept her off the streets so that was pretty positive.*

*I think [you can see the impact] just from the quality of what you see at the launches, and the sense of pride you see in what they've done.*

*I think their writing outside of my time with them is a good indication that they're somewhat enjoying it.*

Despite their lack of absolute certainty about the impacts, the staff remained committed to the overall goals of WIC. One writer-facilitator described her hope for the program:

*That they are taking an interest in writing, are less intimidated. That they feel a sense of accomplishment... I want them to just know that they are worthy of accomplishment... If there's one takeaway, it's just that they are capable of greatness.*

## Challenges in Implementing WIC

The WIC staff raised a number of challenges to implementing the program important to consider for future sessions. Some, such as the particular characteristics of the youth who are followed by Batshaw Centres or the initial shyness of youth in participating, have been raised above, but here we expand the topic of challenges.

A significant issue at one site was how to handle the situation when youth write about topics considered by some to be inappropriate, especially in a school setting: violence, sex, disrespect. This was seen as a dilemma by the staff, who found it challenging to reconcile their encouragement of the youth to express themselves with the constraints involved in a school setting. There was a reluctance to censor the work but also a concern that the youth not expose themselves to harsh judgement nor hurt others with their writing. Sometimes, there was disagreement between the writer-facilitator and the teacher about what was appropriate, a difficult situation given the need for collaboration between the two. One writer-facilitator, however, seems to have found a balance between youth's expression and school rules:

*I guess that's part of my teaching philosophy in teaching, especially with creative writing. My goal is to create a safe space for them where nothing leaves the room, and like I said they don't have to share if they don't want to. I allow swearing, I allow all types of inappropriate subject matter... I make it clear when it comes to the zine, though, that because it's being read by, maybe, people who are*



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*younger, I have to be more careful with what goes out. And they're fairly understanding. I don't think I've encountered any major troubles where they rebelled. I think because I gave them the opportunity for the session to be open that when I put on more restraint they're alright.*

Several staff also raised the importance of recognizing that writing about **inappropriate topics** does not automatically indicate the youth's interest or experience in participating in such activities. "It's also about writing beyond the gruesome horrible things. Not just writing about them." It might simply be an exploration or a way to open a dialogue about these difficult topics. One person felt that the youth were often just mirroring what they observe in popular culture.

Other, less dramatic, challenges included the overall attitude of the youth – at least on the surface – and the logistical constraints of WIC. In terms of attitude, several staff noted that many Batshaw Centres youth participants are **reserved in their expression** of enjoyment or excitement, making it hard to judge how a session is going. Sometimes, the reserved behaviour arose from a fear of being judged by their peers...

*My workshop wasn't just writing but was voice work and beat boxing, etc. For some of them that went really well, others there was fear of being judged by their peers, and there was an overall self-consciousness or intimidation.*

...or because their basic literacy skills are so weak:

*For example, what would work in other schools wouldn't work in this school. The opportunity of free write can be intimidating because of their spelling; because of blocks they have to their own expression.*

One writer-facilitator, however, described how it is rewarding to scratch past the surface:

*I'm used to this forward, direct expression of excitement, because I spend time with a lot of artists and poets. When we brought the books [zines] in, it was a challenge to get the students to express [their excitement]. One girl who was kind of tough, she kind of smiled a little smile and asked if she could have a book for her mom... It's about knowing how to measure success. Even if they aren't like "I'm so proud of what I've done" it still is a reaction, it's something for them. I got better at measuring those successes.*

This discomfort with some of the youth's outward expression was echoed by the other writer-facilitator, who added: "It was a challenge not to get jaded by their apathy. Or to get them to stay on task."

**Attention and focus** was often a challenge within the weekly sessions, but a challenge the writer-facilitators seemed able to handle.

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The **limited time** allocated to WIC – 8 weeks of 1-hour sessions – was noted, especially when twinned with Batshaw Centres youth’s high **rates of absence** for a variety of reasons:

*Quite often the students are transient. It’s one of the big challenges – sometimes they’re not even there for the duration on one program. You can’t assume they’ll be around long here...*

## Ways to Improve WIC

Those responsible for implementing WIC had a number of ideas for improving the program, from increasing the length of the program to better support for writer-facilitators. For example, several staff felt a **full semester** would do the program more justice:

*If it ran the whole semester it could be really, really interesting. You could get to know participants better; they’d be more comfortable with you. Maybe you’d be able to work on longer pieces. Right now, because it’s an hour each week for eight weeks, I have a very limited time so I can’t work on a 500-word short story or anything like that. Just small, small pieces. So it could be longer to get more lasting effects.*

The writer-facilitators expressed an interest in more sharing among themselves and with the QCL and QWF partners, perhaps through an exchange of facilitation tips, especially in working with youth of this profile:

*Having curriculum planning meetings with other WIC writers would help, everyone bringing to the table different assignments they do in class... You’re alone. If the project doesn’t take, then what? So having those tricks up your sleeve, prompts, things to tap into... Is there a way to do more multimedia, to connect it with hip hop so that it’s more cool?*

There is also a desire to sharpen their skills in reacting to some of the tough behaviours or topics that sometimes come up during the sessions:

*I was thinking I would love to have some training to know the processes and procedures for how to react when there are certain behaviours in the class. A lot of stuff came out through the writing, and I wanted to know the skills of how to react, what resources existed, what I could do in response. And at what point is it the teacher’s role?*

The writer-facilitators also expressed that sometimes when very challenging issues arise, they would appreciate having a social worker as a resource person to whom they could turn when they had doubts about how to handle the situation.

Staff’s qualified enthusiasm for the program underscores the interest of following up this initial study with further evaluations that are able to recruit more youth participants as respondents to the study. While several staff, especially the writer-facilitators, said that they would like to keep in touch with the youth after the end of the program, they are discouraged from doing so because the participants are minors. It was also raised by the writer-facilitators that it might be worthwhile for the youth to develop a sense of membership or belonging with the partner organizations, either The Centre for Literacy or the Quebec Writers’ Federation. This is not happening under the current structure of WIC.

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## Perspectives from one WIC Participant

As noted above, the research team engaged only one WIC participant as a respondent. This section relates his experience, using his own words as much as possible. To protect his identity, we have assigned the initials YP for “youth participant”.

YP participated in WIC twice, in two consecutive years, and was very positive about his experience. He described his feelings when he first joined WIC:

*At first I was a little unsure about it [WIC]. I was a little shy to write down my stuff, and then basically after I got through it, I got used to it because it gave me a chance to do something different. When I was doing it, I actually enjoyed it because I was writing down stuff that I never thought I could do, right? The woman she made me comfortable... She just told me, 'It doesn't matter what it is you write, just feel comfortable doing it. Everybody just write whatever you want.' You know? 'Enjoy it, it's supposed to be fun.' So I was doing it. I really liked it. It was a new experience for me.*

It was the first time he had tried any creative writing.

*I was a shy person and I never knew that I had really a creativity side. So when she made me feel comfortable about doing it, I just started doing it and I felt good, loved doing it, just writing stuff that came to my mind, stuff that I've been through, stuff that I love.*

When asked his favourite thing about the program, YP replied,

*I overcame my fear of shyness, you know? That was one of my ways to overcome my shyness. Because I used to keep to myself a lot. I wasn't really the one to speak out in class. And then they made me feel so comfortable, I was speaking during most of the class. There was a microphone that we could do beats and do our poetry. At first, I would never do it. Then she made me feel so comfortable that I would be the first one on the mic, just saying my poetry, you know? And everybody was listening to me, it made me feel comfortable.*

It is clear from his comments that the writer-facilitator’s encouragement played a key role in his experience. But his observation of his peers was also important:

*There was this other guy writing poetry and when I saw how he was writing it, I was like, 'This guy has a deep side.' And I thought, 'Maybe I can start something like that.' That's when I started to enjoy it, because poetry, it makes you put down what you feel, your thoughts, and what life's about. That's the song that I actually liked when he did it. It made me want to do the same thing.*

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YP was also very inspired by the role of the young intern in the WIC program.

*This kid who was in class with me – we used to do poetry together – he actually got a job working for the writers' place. And then, basically, when he came in, I felt more determined to actually write poetry because he actually made it. He started going to clubs to say his poetry and I was like, 'This guy actually did it'. This guy wrote poetry like I never heard from any other person. When he said it, the guy actually meant it. The words of what he actually said, it was like crazy.*

YP wished the program could have been longer – even lasting a whole year – because he felt it created a space where the youth interacted in a really positive way:

*No, there should have been more. It actually brought people closer together. We were all in the program, like, we were not making fun of anybody. If somebody goes to speak up at the mic, we show them respect, you know, because if you show them respect[...], everybody showed each other respect, and that's what gave them the confidence to do it. That's what I liked, nobody made fun of me... If you want to be respected, show respect.*

YP also enjoyed the fact that students who were not in WIC began to show an interest in what they were doing and came into their class sometimes to hear their poetry or even share some of their own. He liked the small group size, though, because he felt it encouraged more participation and comfort in sharing and speaking up. He explained that, before WIC, he didn't know the other participants very well:

*We never really knew what the person was thinking and that. When we put our stuff on paper, they were like, 'Man, this guy is deep!' They were listening to us. There was this one guy I was speaking to, but I didn't know what type of person he was. But when he started doing the poetry and that, I was, 'Oh man!' And he told me this is what he lived through. It was deep stuff. It made me say, like, 'Don't judge a book by its cover' because you never know what a person's going through.*

YP talked about how, sometimes, when someone was sharing a new poem, the others would join in with ideas and go along with the beat. He loved the sense of collaboration. When asked what role the music had in creating this good group dynamic, he explained,

*When you hear music it actually soothes you, you know? It makes you feel calm, so you just feel good around it. Even if someone is loud a little, you don't really care. You just focus on the music and then you just focus on that and just start speaking... [If there was no music], it's an awkward sound. It'd feel weird for me, no music and all eyes on me. It'd feel weird.*

He went on to say, though, that as he became more confident in his writing, he felt less and less need for music in order to share with the other participants. Writing eventually became a way that he could sometimes manage his emotions:

*When I was writing, I felt good. When I was having a bad day and I went to class, I just wrote down what I feel. It's like my anger is right there, in the paper.*

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YP perceived no censorship in WIC. He felt he could write about whatever he wanted. He enjoyed the writing so much that he still continues to write more than a year after the program:

*Sometimes, I'd be thinking about writing a story, but I don't have enough pages to make a book, you know? I'd actually enjoy that, showing people what I've been through, what I've seen, how I feel... Whenever I get angry or something or I don't feel like, you know, just trying, I just write and it makes me feel better. It makes me think about old days, about sad times, good times I had, it just pushes me to go, to never stop, never give up. And then, when I write, it actually sounds pretty good when I write. Because there's something I wrote not long ago, in my room here, and basically it had something to do with my cousin, right? And it sounded pretty good. I was just writing off the top of my head, about what I felt inside, and after when I looked at it, I said 'Whoa! This is what I wrote!' And I felt good about it.*

YP feels that writing has become a hobby for him. He shares his writing with some of his friends and he dreams of one day recording some of his work. WIC has even influenced his enjoyment of reading:

*When I read... it sounds so funny, but when I read it, it actually goes together like a rap or so, you know? And I kind of enjoy it because I look back when I read it and that's like oh man! that's how I was feeling that day?*

Before joining WIC, YP had read some poetry but WIC really encouraged his interest:

*They [WIC] tried to open doors for me, like to go to these places where they did slam poetry. I enjoyed that. We went to a place in Westmount where I got to say some poetry in front of everybody, a big library in Westmount, and I really enjoyed that... [And the writer-facilitator], she invited me to this coffee shop to do the stand up poetry, on the outside of our classes [but before the program finished]... I really enjoyed that because I got to see a different side of her; not just the school side of her, it made me feel good, and actually we became kind of friends.*

This connection to the writer-facilitator, even though they have had no contact since the end of the program, seemed very important to YP. He also feels that the program improved his connection to his teachers. He always liked school but,

*Now, my teachers, I'm more with them now, because they see that I have potential, they want me to try harder; that's what makes me want to try harder... Because the program taught me to be more open. I wasn't really an open person back then. Then when I went to the program, it made me more open to life.*

He did not feel that WIC improved his family or community relationships because he felt that these relationships were already quite strong. The writing was, however, something he could share with his parents.

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*I always showed my mom the poetry that I did and she loved it. I'd show my father it and my father, I don't know, like, he gave me different ideas of what I could do. Because my father is a fanatic for football. He loves football, and hockey too, but he's more of a football guy. And me, because I used to play football a lot for teams and stuff, and he has always taken me. When I got into that, my father always backed me up. My mother is a person that always encouraged me, my father always backed me up for anything I had, and I always enjoyed that.*

When asked what he learned from the program, YP put the emphasis on social skills but also talked about how writing helped him explore new issues:

*For me, it was like, don't make fun of people, don't judge, because you don't really know what the person is going through. Because, me, I didn't know how most of these people really feel until I heard their poetry and I saw a different side... Before I was writing about the basics, but then when I started writing poetry and that, it made me think about different stuff... I hadn't really written about how I feel, or talked about how I feel, but then when I started doing poetry, there'd be some beat we'd put on, and it just made me, come on, just write!*

In an effort to improve his writing, he started using the dictionary more:

*I was looking for words to put in, instead of using the basic words. I'd go look in the dictionary to look for upper words. It actually sounded pretty cool because I'd mix it in, blend it in. It sounded pretty good.*

YP also felt he learned something about how to make a book:

*Publishing, I know to make a book and that you got to make it stand out. Because if you make it stand out, if you want people to actually notice it, you can't just write like anything else that everybody has been doing. You got to make it your own style of writing. People will notice if it's your own style of writing, and the way you present yourself, then they're gonna like it.*

WIC made him start to think about his future:

*I thought life was going to be so easy for me, then. I thought it was going to go by so easy. And then after that it was some real stuff, you know, like you see in the movies. Because it made me start thinking more about what I could be, what I could do. Before that, I wasn't really thinking who I was, you know? Who I was as a person. I would just go by. Whatever came at me, I would just do. Then I started thinking more... Because me, I want to open my construction job, a construction business with one of my brothers. And basically I just want to travel, see different places. That's my main thing.*

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YP had one suggestion about how the WIC program could be improved. He was very interested in visits to new places:

*They could have taken us to different places. Instead of staying in one room, you know? It kind of stayed the same, we kind of had the same thoughts. If we could have gone outside, to the park or to the mall or something, it would have been different, a different atmosphere. We would have thought differently.*

If another student were to ask him whether they should join WIC,

*I would say join it because you never know what you can learn. You could meet new people that you'd never thought you'd meet, you could know a different side of people you know. Basically, you see a new side to yourself that you probably didn't even know, you find a new side of yourself that you did not know. Because me, I didn't know that after a few weeks that I wouldn't be shy any longer, you know? I didn't know I was open enough to speak in front of everybody, and then after I was doing it, I started to get more comfortable and more comfortable, and then just started writing, and I started speaking in front of everybody, my fear was gone.*

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## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The interviews with the staff responsible for the implementation of the Writers in the Community program, as well as the personal story of the youth participant, point to a program that is much appreciated. All respondents felt that WIC had a positive impact on its youth participants and can offer many moving examples. Unfortunately, the lack of a sufficient number of youth participants in the study makes it impossible to draw any firm conclusions.

What we gain through this pilot, however, is a good indication of themes worth exploring in further evaluations and a much better idea of how to go about such a study in the future. The most important suggestion for improving results of future evaluations is to alter the process at the start of each session and include in the initial consent to participate in WIC a consent to be contacted after the end of the program for a longer-term follow-up evaluation. This would eliminate the need to go through the long parental consent process and allow the researchers to contact the youth directly for the follow-up interview.

The current interview design seems to give a fair indication of the youths' perception of the program, of its impact on their literacy skills and practices, and of any changes they have experienced in their relationships with others (including school). These are, however, still perceptions, and it would be interesting to add other more objective indicators of WIC's impact such as participants' grades or their results on more standardized literacy measures over time.

What is clear from the people who shared their thoughts in this study is that those involved are very committed to a program they believe is worthwhile. Nothing in the results suggests otherwise. Having the opportunity to study the impacts of WIC in more depth, therefore, would contribute to the evidence base for the advancement of community-based literacy programs for this target group.



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## ***Appendix A: Institutional Process***

This appendix is step-by-step description (summarized on page 8) of the process that researchers must go through to gain access to the young people involved in the project.

The steps were as follows:

- Contact Batshaw Centres' research department to introduce the project and enquire about the current approval procedures.
- Fill out the following forms<sup>2</sup>:
  - Fiche de presentation d'un projet de recherche au the Centre jeunesse de Montréal - Institut universitaire (with annexes of consent forms and research tools)
  - Protocole de recherche
  - Formulaire d'engagement à la confidentialité
  - Formulaire d'engagement à la tenue d'une liste des sujets de recherché
  - Short CV of Principal Investigator
  - Letters of support from QCL/QWF as collaborators in this research
- Submit all forms with a cover letter to the Batshaw Centres research committee to request Batshaw Centres approval. The committee will probably ask for a meeting to discuss the project concept and logistics.
- When Batshaw Centres has approved the project, must apply to the Centre jeunesse de Montréal- Institut universitaire for approval, sending eleven (11) copies of all documents. There are two steps in this part of the process:
  - Approval by the Scientific Evaluation Committee. (This step can be skipped if you can submit a peer evaluation of the project, particularly if it has received external funding).
  - Approval by the Institut universitaire's Ethics Committee. Researchers must submit a letter from Batshaw Centres approving the project, proof of scientific evaluation and all the documents listed above.
- Once Insitut universitaire's ethics approval has been received, the ethics package and proof of the Institut's approval must be submitted to McGill's Research Ethics Board for McGill ethics certification.

<sup>2</sup>Another form that was not necessary for this project but may be necessary for other research designs was the "Formulaire de demande d'accès aux dossiers et aux banques de données".



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