

ADULT LEARNING KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

CENTRE DU SAVOIR SUR L'APPRENTISSAGE CHEZ LES ADULTES

COMMUNITY OUTREACH INITIATIVE

REPORT SUMMARIES

2008

SUMMARY

IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY OUTREACH REPORT

Immigrant reference groups came together in Halifax, Charlottetown, St. John's and Fredericton in February and March 2008 to engage in open and candid discussion forums about their experiences with adult learning since their immigration to Canada. In each city, a local immigrant-serving agency was identified as a host. The organizations are all members of the Atlantic Region Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (ARAISA):

- Halifax – Halifax Immigrant Learning Centre (HILC)
- Charlottetown – Prince Edward Island Association for Newcomers to Canada (PEI ANC)
- St. John's – Association for New Canadians (ANC)
- Fredericton – Multicultural Association of Fredericton (MCAF)

The following questions provided the framework for discussion:

- What do you want to learn about your community?
- What do you need to learn about working in Canada?
- What has been difficult for you since coming to Canada?
- What people and organizations have been helpful to you since coming to Canada?
- What opportunities for learning / education would you like to have?
- What stops you from participating in learning opportunities?
- What does your community need to know about immigrants?
- What should be done to help immigrants learn?

Although the issues presented at each meeting varied, the most common concerns were related to language, culture, community, and working.

LEARNING ABOUT LANGUAGE

All participants noted the importance of learning English, not only as a functional ability, but also from a social and cultural perspective. Generally English was seen as the lynchpin to gaining access to Canadian society, to the workplace and to their local communities.

The ways that we communicate are related to body language, tone, vocabulary, level of formality and assumptions about a person's previously held knowledge. These are as important as learning the language. Engaging in "small talk" was one of the most commonly identified barriers to making friends, participating in the workplace and engaging in social activities. Recommendations included more programs focused on conversational English, more free language training programs and more opportunities to learn workplace English, particularly for internationally educated professionals. Participants noted that learning these skills were crucial for immigrants to gain access to their fields of experience in Canada.

LEARNING ABOUT CULTURE

Participants noted difficulties with Canadian food, lifestyle, media and family relationships. A notable concern was the difficulty in learning to balance one's previous beliefs with adapting to Canadian values. Learning to adapt to life in a Canadian community is the most difficult and time-consuming learning process during settlement. Recommendations focused on what immigrants and the community need to learn. Immigrants should have the chance to teach other subjects relevant to their lives in the community. They and Canadians need to be patient. They recommended that there be more organizations to facilitate their inclusion in the community.

LEARNING ABOUT WORKING IN CANADA

Finding employment to match immigrants' educational backgrounds and experience can be a major hurdle. Obstacles included learning about wage systems, application and accreditation procedures, professional associations, computer skills and labour laws. Their primary concerns were about integrating into Canadian community, and by extension into the Canadian workplace. Recommendations included providing opportunities for Canadian employers to learn about immigrants' motivations for coming to Canada and the value of immigrant workers; providing programs to increase access to their fields of experience; and providing clear pathways and resources for immigrants seeking recognition for their work and educational credentials.

LEARNING ABOUT CANADIAN COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY

Adapting to life in the community is something that can be remedied with time, but participants agreed that immigrants must be open to change and willing to see mistakes as learning opportunities. They voiced concern about how native-born members of the community viewed them. Adult educators have the tools and the responsibility to help immigrants and native-born Canadians develop more cooperative and understanding communities. Recommendations included providing reading materials about Canadian law in multiple languages; increasing community involvement in programs for immigrants; and offering programs for immigrant parents at their children's schools to explain the local educational system.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

While adults mentioned that they were appreciative of the educational opportunities, especially for their children, they felt that many programs were inaccessible. Barriers to accessing educational opportunities include costs, lack of recognition of previous experience, lack of information, inconvenient times and discrimination in the school system. For those who have immigrated because of war, post-traumatic stress can make education difficult. If they come from countries where men and women are not equal, accessing education for women is an issue. Language is an obvious barrier, but many newcomers are also coping with work and family issues, or they may have come to Canada and left family members behind.

SUMMARY

AFRICAN-CANADIAN COMMUNITY OUTREACH REPORT

The African Canadian Knowledge Exchange gathered information at eight meetings in March and April 2008 in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland. (The Prince Edward Island community was too busy to meet the project's time constraints.) Each meeting was an open brainstorming session where the following questions were discussed:

- What would you identify as the learning needs of adults in the African Canadian (AC) population? (What are the learning gaps?)
- How would you propose to meet those needs?
- What obstacles or challenges need to be considered in order to meet the learning needs?
- How may these challenges and obstacles be dealt with?
- Who should be involved in the process and at what stage?

In response, most of the identified common themes are the same that were identified 14 years previously in the Black Learners Advisory Committee (BLAC) Report on Education: programming, leadership, finances and healing.

PROGRAMS

The African Canadian population indicated that there was a need for increased programming. The rural communities have limited educational opportunities with little free or affordable space in which to hold programs.

Concern was also expressed for adults who would like to further themselves but cannot afford to quit work to go back to school due to family commitments. Participants also found there was nothing in place for the under-employed who wanted to find a challenging job that would enable them to develop more skills. It was felt that if you were not on EI or Social Assistance there was no place for you to go to achieve your educational goals.

The present structures do not enable disabled adult learners to achieve their educational goals. There was also concern about the lack of programs to recognize prior experience and skills that people had acquired throughout their life—not just associated with academic learning.

LEADERSHIP

It was felt that there needed to be an umbrella organization that would take charge of adult learning needs and move the learning agenda forward. None of the recognized community organizations had taken on the role of advocating for the adult learner,

developing a clear and concise process for learning and doing whatever it takes to make it happen. The feeling was that a non-profit organization should take on this challenge, as there will always be questions of sustainability and funding.

HEALING

At every meeting there was some mention of healing. It was felt that negative attitudes have to be overcome for the communities to move forward. People's experiences as refugees or oppressed peoples need to be dealt with in a holistic manner.

The participants recommended that the AdLKC assist the African Canadian population develop a strategy to deal with some of the identified challenges. This would require bringing together the community organizations and community members to discuss the issues in this report and determine how we move on so that more African Canadians have a better chance of achieving their educational and economic goals/dreams.

The Black community is willing to create its own solutions but it needs the political and economic will of the Atlantic provinces to move beyond talk to action.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants came up with many recommendations including:

- Hold another meeting in the Atlantic provinces that will bring African Canadians together to discuss the learning challenges raised by the participants. This would include African Canadian organizations that are presently in place in the Atlantic provinces.
- The community should identify an organization in the African Canadian community to approach to determine if they would be willing to be responsible for advancing the adult learning agenda for African Canadians in the Atlantic provinces.
- Develop a mentorship program made up of committed and concerned individuals.
- Establish learning centres in each African Canadian community that will enable adults to have easy access to further learning opportunities.

African Canadians want to do more and to achieve more in their community. They want to live in an environment where they have the same opportunity to achieve their goals as the next person. An equal opportunity is desired to achieve their potential. African Canadians want innovative programs and/or institutions that will not open the door for some and close the door for others. They want an environment where everyone, regardless of the challenges they face, will be able to walk through the door and find a place where they can sit down, feel at home, and move forward.

SUMMARY

LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES OUTREACH REPORT

Revisiting Accessibility to Learning was researched and written in 2008 by the Independent Living Resource Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia. We contacted four sister groups to hold meetings of adult learners with disabilities in their local communities: Independent Living Resource Centres in St. John's, NL and in Miramichi and Shippagan, NB; and the Prince Edward Island Council of the Disabled.

They asked questions about people's experience with learning: why they picked a course or program; barriers they had faced; how they got past those barriers; and how to improve learning for adults. The questions are in Appendix A and Appendix B.

WHAT IS INDEPENDENT LIVING?

Independent Living (IL) is an international movement that started in the 1970s in the United States. IL puts persons with disabilities in the driver's seat. It helps them to get information they need to make choices about their own lives. It encourages persons with disabilities to be active citizens in their communities. The Independent Living Resource Centre in Halifax is one of 28 IL centres across Canada.

WHAT DID WE LEARN IN THIS RESEARCH?

About 250 people with disabilities took part in the four Atlantic provinces. They had different disabilities including physical, mental, intellectual and learning.

People had many reasons for wanting to learn as adults. Most wanted to improve their skills to get a job or to find a better job. Others wanted to gain life skills so that they could live independently. Some took courses for fun and leisure. We learned they had faced many barriers to learning.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

Physical accessibility

The biggest barrier is lack of accessibility. For some people, this meant they couldn't get into a building, classroom or job site. Many people said lack of accessible transportation is a major barrier. In Atlantic Canada, only major cities and towns have accessible public transit. Many people with disabilities have no way to travel to learning opportunities.

Financial issues

Many people with disabilities cannot afford to take courses or programs, even to improve chances of finding work. Student assistance programs have red tape and waiting lists.

Attitudes

Some people said they were afraid of going back for further education because of their bad memories of school. Others found their instructors insensitive and did not provide the disability-related accommodations they need, such as note-takers or more time for tests.

WHAT CAN WE DO BETTER?

Meeting participants made five recommendations:

- Secure funding so that persons with disabilities can be lifelong learners.
- Provide accessible transportation and accessible buildings.
- Provide alternative formats for learning and testing materials.
- Create peer support networks and services for adult learners with disabilities.
- Establish disability awareness training for educators.

With education and innovation, seemingly insurmountable physical and societal barriers have been knocked down, marking the history of disability issues. The data collected in this study tell a story of people who have an inherent desire for self-improvement and community integration. If continued lifelong learning is to be supported as a benchmark for a successful Canadian society, it must be advocated for all – regardless of ability.

SUMMARY

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY OUTREACH REPORT

The Aboriginal Community Outreach Initiative's objectives are to discuss Aboriginal adult learning needs and related issues within Atlantic Canada. Han Martin Associates, a private Aboriginal majority-owned consulting firm was awarded the contract to organize a series of five community-based knowledge exchange meetings to discuss adult learning needs and issues of Aboriginal people in Atlantic Canada.

Although adult learning applies to all sectors such as citizenship, arts, culture, and natural resource management, the primary focus for these sessions was on literacy, post-secondary education and employment.

The Aboriginal Reference Group has identified a number of challenges and issues relating to adult learning. The overall and unifying theme underlying most of these issues is the importance of Aboriginal language and culture as it impacts adult learning for Aboriginal people and communities.

The major issues identified by the participants are as follows:

- Participants in all sessions noted that funding is an ongoing and critical issue. There were several major areas of concern expressed.
 - Funding levels for many programs have either been frozen for over a decade or they have been steadily decreasing since 2000.
 - Funding programs tend to focus on employment and economic development and not on adult learning issues.
 - Funding criteria are restrictive and do not allow for any accommodation in learning styles or programs.
 - There is a need to clarify criteria for INAC's Post-Secondary Education program as it is unclear which types of education and training programs would be supported.
 - Existing criteria made it easier for Aboriginal people on EI to receive financial support and services for adult learning than those on social assistance who may require this help more for transportation, tuition and child care.
- There is a trend to shift funding away from front-line service provision.
- The increase in student loans is a concern, especially in light of inadequate funding to communities who then cannot support their post-secondary education efforts.
- Literacy initiatives are not common within Aboriginal communities where the focus has been more on individuals receiving their GED.

- Although younger Aboriginal adults have more access to the outside world than previous generations, their motivation to learn is not as strong as older Aboriginal adults. Instilling the desire to learn among younger Aboriginal adult learners is a challenge and there is a need to find out why this lack of motivation exists. The leadership in First Nations communities or agencies should recognize that they are often doing youth a disservice by making the process of being accepted into adult learning programs too easy, as well as by providing financial rewards just to attend.
- Many Aboriginal students graduating from high school find they are behind their non-Aboriginal counterparts. They are graduating with a weakness in math and science, making it difficult to participate and succeed in regular college or university programs, especially to pursue studies in health, the sciences or technology. Poor self-esteem and identity affect their ability to participate effectively in learning.
- In a majority of the sessions participants identified lack of transportation as a major impediment for adult learners to access or continue training. In order to access services, individuals are forced to move away from their communities. The result is the loss of language and culture as individuals become assimilated into mainstream (mostly English Canadian) society.
- Access to child-care services is an issue for many Aboriginal adult learners. Day cares on reserve do not suit the schedules of Aboriginal adult learners going to training programs in or outside the community.
- Peer and family support is very important and the adult learner experiences a tremendous sense of isolation when that is lost.

SUMMARY

FRANCOPHONE COMMUNITY OUTREACH REPORT

The Assistant Coordinator of the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre (AdLKC) wrote the report *Partage et actions* after a series of in-person meetings and teleconferences with official language minority groups in the four Atlantic provinces. The objective was to build awareness of the AdLKC, identify the main challenges faced by stakeholders in the field of adult learning and propose concrete measures going forward.

This study allowed us to position the AdLKC in the adult learning field in Francophone communities. The AdLKC is now considered to be a partner and an important place to obtain information on adult learning. It is invited to sit on steering committees or, even better, join the boards of directors of national groups. Outreach is only beginning, and several projects are now being planned.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT THE CHALLENGES

Despite recognition of official language minorities in the Constitution and in various provincial acts, the application and enforcement of fundamental rights require constant efforts and great vigilance on the part of Francophone communities. Enforcement sometimes comes at the price of long and exhausting court cases, but the results are meaningful and the community is optimistic about its development.

Many obstacles hinder adult learning. Obstacles to participation are many and complex, but a targeted awareness campaign would be a first step to encourage the public to start learning. To help learners, the notion of the evaluation and recognition of prior learning needs to be better known. Essential workplace skills come up more and more often, but what is the real situation for workers and for learners hoping to enter the job market? The public needs to be made aware of the realities facing the handicapped, who have to deal with physical obstacles and transportation problems that prevent them from taking better advantage of learning opportunities. Public will cause changes that help the handicapped to take their rightful place and be full participants. Several participants felt that it is time to look at the progress already made, exchange information on best practices, evaluate activities and plan the future.

WHAT THE AdLKC CAN DO

The recommendations are meant to be precise and attainable within the ALKC's first mandate, that is, in the next ten months. They are aimed at helping Francophone groups with the following:

- Planning and coordinating meetings, forums and events in the adult learning sectors;
- Support in liaising and meeting with government, post-secondary institutions and other relevant stakeholders to provide input on increasing the accessibility of services; and
- Provide opportunities to share expertise, experience and knowledge with others, through the Speakers, Program, or other means;

Partage et actions presents six recommendations. Their implementation will depend on the time and budget allocated to achieving them. Life-long learning contributes to economic productivity, social equity and civic involvement. Let us continue our action and outreach in order to establish a culture of life-long learning in Canada.