

Final Report of a Study of the Accessibility of Adult Literacy Programs  
for Individuals with Disabilities in Manitoba

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	5
1. INTRODUCTION .....	10
2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH .....	11
2.1 A Word on Words .....	11
2.2 What is Literacy? .....	11
2.2.1. Different Understandings of Literacy (Literacy Disciplines).....	12
2.2.2. Literacy in Canada.....	14
2.3 Different Understandings of Disability.....	19
2.4. The Interfacing of Disability and Literacy .....	21
2.4.1. Living with a Disability and Low/No Literacy Skills.....	21
2.4.2. Barriers to Literacy.....	22
2.4.3. Barriers to Employment and Economic Security.....	25
2.5. New Paradigms in Adult Learning and Knowledge Acquisition.....	28
2.5.1. Guiding Principles for Effective Programming.....	28
2.5.2. S.A.R.A.W.....	30
2.5.3 Multiple Intelligences: Re-thinking Perceptual Patterns .....	30
2.5.4 Integrative Community Approaches.....	31
2.6 Adaptations to Existing Literacy Programs .....	33
2.7 Assistive Technology .....	36
2.8 Internet Access.....	41
2.9 Access to Health Related Information .....	42
3. METHODOLOGY .....	44
3.1 Key Informants and Data Collection .....	44
4. FINDINGS.....	46
4.1 Introduction.....	46
4.2 Perceptions of Literacy .....	47
4.3 Accessibility of Program Promotion .....	48
4.4 Accessibility of Program Eligibility .....	50
4.5 Accessibility and Cost Factors .....	52
4.6 Referrals .....	53
4.7 Organizational Partnerships .....	54
4.8 Assessment Processes/the Impact of Previous Learning Experiences	55
4.9 The Value of the Last Grade Achieved.....	56
4.10 Disability, Literacy Needs and Social Stigmas.....	57
4.11 Materials Students Learn to Read .....	59

4.12	Accommodations & Adaptations.....	61
4.12.1	Consultations Made Regarding Accommodations and Adaptations .	66
4.12.2	The Participation of Support Workers in the Learning Process.....	67
4.12.3.	Other Supports .....	68
4.12.4.	Literacy Teaching Methods for Persons with Disabilities .....	68
4.12.5.	Marking Progress for Learners with Disabilities .....	70
4.12.6.	Evaluative Tools Which Accommodate Learning Barriers .....	72
5.	CONCLUSION.....	74
6.	RECOMMENDATIONS .....	76
7.	REFERENCES .....	78
8.	APPENDICES.....	86

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*Rhonda Wiebe*

Rhonda Wiebe has done an extraordinary job in undertaking this research and drafting this report. She has been unrelentingly diligent in encouraging literacy programs to participate and building trust to make them feel that their voices have been heard and their concerns would be respected. She has worked collegially with the two partner organizations and with the advisory committee. On behalf of CCDS, SMD and the project advisory committee, I would like to thank Rhonda publicly for her outstanding contributions to this project.

*Deborah Stienstra*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Overview

The findings of this Manitoba study examined the possibilities, challenges and barriers experienced by adults with disabilities who have literacy needs. Information pertaining to physical and learning accommodations, and the gaps in knowledge and supports currently present in adult literacy programs was collected.

The main findings of the study are based on information made available from representatives of twenty-eight adult literacy programs from a regional cross-section of rural, urban and remote centres across Manitoba. Participants completed a telephone interview or written survey. Additionally, a number of representatives of literacy programs for persons with disabilities no longer in existence were consulted. These organizations provided excellent cooperation in the gathering of information.

Previous research concerning the areas of literacy and disability, and past studies of the intersection of these two fields were reviewed to obtain background information.

## Key Findings

### *Reasons for Researching Disability and Literacy*

Previously, projects examining the relationship between poor literacy and disability were conducted by organizations such as the Society for Manitobans with Disabilities. The intent of these projects had been to offer literacy opportunities that met the distinct needs of particular individuals. Although these programs helped individuals gain literacy skills, no broader investigation of the inherent double barriers present in living with a disability and having low or no literacy skills had been undertaken.

This project is rooted in an understanding of disability as a social construct. This conceptualization of disability recognizes that many

of the obstacles persons face are due to social barriers. When disability is understood as a social construct, the concept of accessibility becomes a matter of addressing and dismantling systemic barriers. The understanding of literacy as a tool of empowerment, including developing the skills to self-express, self-advocate, comprehend and communicate through text, and the skills to better acquire and retain information are all recognized as keys to fuller participation in society. Providing a means to hear the voices of Canadians with disabilities is an initiative that leads to the enrichment of our society as a whole. Canada has prided itself as a nation that nurtures and embraces a multitude of distinct voices within its citizenry.

An examination of the intersection of disability and the need for literacy provides an opportunity to look at the lives of persons in not one, but two marginalized groups. Seeking solutions that bring about the full participation of members of both these groups is the challenge put forward by disability advocates and organizations striving to ensure that all adults have access to literacy learning. What appears consistent between each of these interests is the identification of the need for a social understanding that shifts from focussing on the limitations of an individual person to looking at the limitations of the environmental context in which we live.

### ***Exciting Innovations***

**The research identified new conceptions in adult learning and knowledge acquisition through the process of examining previous research and in the interviews with adult literacy providers across the province. Described within this report are examples of:**

- Innovations in learner-centred approaches;
- Active learning approaches that fully engage learners in hands-on, participatory activities;
- Accommodations for learning styles, differences and difficulties so all adults can learn and perform at their highest potential;

- Instances of community involvement that facilitate the concept of the classroom as part of the community. This is extended to also foster a sense of community built into the classroom; and,
- Cultural sensitivity and mutual respect in all learning situations.

Guiding principles for achieving effective literacy programming include:

- Active learning approaches that promote participatory activities;
- Group approaches that create communication skills within a learning environment;
- Learning material content that is contextually appropriate; and,
- Encouragement of teacher-learner interaction.

One exciting example of community participation occurred when an adult literacy organization began promoting the concept of large print. This not only accommodated students with visual disabilities, but also made reading easier for persons with low literacy skills. Publicizing the need and advantages of having large print created an impetus for the community to not only begin donating large print books to the literacy program, but to also begin using large print for advertising flyers, etc. that were distributed to the general public. This example demonstrates two exciting developments – the simplicity with which accommodations can be made, and the de-stigmatization of having low literacy and/or a disability through community cooperation.

An interesting finding was the discovery of who was teaching adult literacy. A very large percentage of adult literacy instructors in Manitoba consist of dedicated volunteers who run overcrowded programs with high demands and considerable financial restraints. It became clear “between the lines” of the interview questions that adult literacy programs are nourished by the commitment of many individuals who want to make sure that their students have the opportunity to learn literacy.

## ***Challenges in Having Literacy Needs and Living with a Disability***

Canadians who are unable to write and read, to understand what they read, or to count – are clearly disadvantaged. Citizens of contemporary western society are very much defined by, and connected to, a world based on texts. Literacy is clearly linked to well being. The higher a nation's literacy skills, the more likely its population is to have healthier habits and lifestyles. Literacy is also connected to economic success. Literacy levels determine the kinds of jobs people find, the salaries they make and their ability to upgrade their work skills. Literacy also contributes to society's overall economic and social performance.

Twenty-seven of 28 adult literacy programs reported they participated in partnerships with other organizations in their communities. These included government and nongovernmental service and educational agencies. *One literacy centre specifically targeted a government organization and brought adult literacy awareness information to the staff who serviced that department.* After initiating this approach, the adult literacy program found a significant increase in referrals from that government agency.

## ***Gaps in Knowledge and Services***

For many people with literacy needs who live with disabilities, the literature, services and personnel of adult learning programs can provide either a welcoming and accessible environment or an indifferent, insensitive and inaccessible one. Creating an environment that is conducive to both access and personal encouragement requires that the program leaders responsible for that learning environment look carefully for factors that might actually be intimidating obstacles that prevent access to participation for persons with disabilities.

According to Statistics Canada, 15% of Canadians live with a disability, and many of these women and men are identified as having lower educational attainment on average than those without



disabilities.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-two percent of the adult literacy organizations that responded to the survey in this project reported they had never been approached by a person with a disability interested in adult literacy training or didn't see the need to make accommodations in their programming because it was very rare to see a person with a disability residing in their community.

Findings regarding cultural-specific and disability-specific adult literacy approaches in Manitoba were difficult to obtain. Information concerning disability-specific adaptations and accommodations is dealt with in Section 4.12. However, it is important to avoid painting all persons with disabilities who have literacy needs with one brush. Literacy instructors, of whom the majority have little background in understanding disability as a social construct, provided more generalizations than distinctions regarding learning methods for persons who might require accommodations.

References are made to methods used with First Nations and ESL students in Sections 2 and 4. One of the largest cultural minority groups in Manitoba is made up of First Nations persons. According to Statistics Canada, of 1,100,295 Manitobans, 128,685 are of Aboriginal descent.<sup>2</sup> The Aboriginal People Survey reports that 31% of First Nations people live with a disability compared to a disability rate of 15% for mainstream Canadians.<sup>3</sup> Although 44% of adult literacy organizations surveyed served First Nations people and ESL students, only 11% of these stated they used culturally appropriate teaching materials.

Along with information provided, there were also silences. Many of the disability-related organization did not provide information regarding any literacy activity with which they might be involved. This lack of cooperation from those disability organizations who were contacted but did not provide information begs further exploration and questioning.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. 1995. A Portrait of People with Disabilities, Target Group Project, p.10

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. Population by Aboriginal Group, 1996 Census.

<sup>3</sup> Assembly of First Nations. First Perspective: An Approach to First Nations Disability Issues. 1999.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

This project explored the needs of adults with disabilities who also face literacy barriers. Previous literacy projects have been conducted by organizations such as the Society for Manitobans with Disabilities, with the intent to offer literacy opportunities that met the distinct needs of particular individuals. Although these programs were successful in helping these individuals gain literacy skills, a broader investigation of the double barriers present at a systemic societal level of living with a disability and with low or no literacy skills had not been previously undertaken.

The premise of this project is rooted in the understanding of disability as a social construct. This conceptualization of disability recognizes that obstacles women, men and children face are due as much or more to societal barriers as they are to the implications of given medical conditions. People with disabilities have historically been a marginalized group within Canadian society who have not always enjoyed the rights and privileges of full citizenship, including the right to education. Persons with disabilities have experienced institutionalization in the past, and education was not a priority in these settings. The denial of this right has led to dependency and the failure for persons with disabilities to reach their full potential. When disability is understood as a social construct, the concept of accessibility becomes a matter of addressing and dismantling systemic barriers. The locus for finding solutions shifts from a matter of addressing the particular needs of an individual with disabilities through traditional medical rehabilitative methodologies to a broader understanding of the obligation of Canadian society to guarantee access to its full rights and privileges for all citizens.

## **2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

The depth and scope of literature written on the issues concerning this project have involved a struggle to come to terms with two words - “literacy” and “disability.” The difficulty in researching and discussing these two words lies in their inability to be absolutely defined. What is it to be “literate?” What is it to be “disabled?” There are no uniform understandings of these words. Furthermore, historically it has been very difficult to comprehend the social effects of having either low or no literacy, or having a disability, let alone measuring the impact of the intersection of the two.

### **2.1 A Word on Words**

This review includes materials both contemporary and historical. The meanings of words change to reflect shifts in present day understandings Canadians have of each other, our rights and privileges, and the contributions people of varying backgrounds, abilities, and circumstances can bring to our communities. Some words acceptable even a decade ago are no longer appropriate because of past negative stigmas linked with them. It is for this reason that terms such as “illiterate” have been replaced by the phrase “persons with no or low literacy,” the term “handicapped” with “persons with disabilities,” the phrase “mentally retarded” with “persons with cognitive disabilities,” and the words “Indian” and “Indian reserves” have been replaced by “First Nations/Aboriginal persons” and “First Nations communities.” The only time the former terms are used is in direct quotation from historical documents.

### **2.2 What is Literacy?**

*“Literacy, properly understood, is not only an initiation in the three Rs but also an apprenticeship in coping with the modern world.”*

~ Colin Power, UNESCO Assistant Secretary General

### 2.2.1. Different Understandings of Literacy (Literacy Disciplines)

The concept and understanding of the term literacy has varied greatly, depending on time, place and the people who are using the term (Norris & Phillips, 1990). Social opinions uphold literacy as an important value. If people currently living in a modern urban centre can't read or write, we find this problematic. We wonder how can they get and keep jobs. Did they all drop out of school? We expect modern Canadians to know how to read and write. If they don't, we question their intelligence and other capacities. Using these same value judgements, individuals with high literacy skills are seen as being more cultured and civilized than those without them (Pattison, 1982). When we find ourselves being unable to write and read, to understand what we read, or to count in such a context – we are clearly disadvantaged in western society. We are very much defined by, and connected to, a world based on texts. In a society which has come into existence since the Middle Ages, one can avoid picking up a pen or a book, but one cannot avoid being described, identified, certified and handled – by text (Illich & Sanders, 1988).

Literacy is important as a general sort of notion, but that still leaves us with many different perceptions of what literacy actually means. The inconsistent ways in which the term has been used varies from describing the ability to “sound out” words and spell one's name, to being able to interpret an abstract written piece of poetry (Norris & Phillips, 1990). What is common to all forms of literacy is the ability to understand a text within a context of meaning (Blair, 1990).

Three categories or disciplines of literacy have been defined by the National Literacy Secretariat (2000)<sup>4</sup>, and are used as measuring tools in conducting national literacy surveys. These are:

1. PROSE LITERACY – the ability to understand and use information from texts such as news stories or fiction;

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<sup>4</sup> These definitions are found on the National Literacy Secretariat website, and were created for the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), a project involving Canada and 19 other countries. The Final Report for that project was released in June 2000 by Statistics Canada and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). [Http://www.nald.ca](http://www.nald.ca)

2. DOCUMENT LITERACY – the ability to find and use information from documents such as maps or tables; and,
3. QUANTITATIVE LITERACY – the ability to make calculations with numbers embedded in text, as in balancing a chequebook.

These three disciplines of literacy are each measured along a continuum of skills from 1 (lowest) to 4/5 (highest).

A term not included in the above discipline definitions but often used is “functional literacy” – a person’s ability to use printed and written information to function in society. This goes beyond the traditional understanding of literacy that involves just being able to sign a name or read a simple sentence (Southam Survey, 1991). The problem with this way of understanding literacy is that it can be too narrowly defined; even the supposedly simple task of reading something like a poem (a criterion often used to test functional literacy) can involve many complex reasoning abilities, breadths of experience, and imagination. Hence, the functional uses of literacy are also seen to have political, social, economic and educational overtones that expand the notion of literacy beyond simply the ability to read and write (Norris & Phillips, 1990). The idea of functional literacy is deemed flawed because it can misrepresent an individual’s competence to function and deal with a lot of day-to-day, “real life” problems. Persons with no or low literacy often develop complex ways of negotiating their daily challenges. Neither having literacy skills nor employing them is a guarantee that someone can effectively function in Canadian society (Heap, 1990). One of the problems identified with tests for functional literacy is that often persons end up inadvertently tested for their level of knowledge achieved in an academic setting rather than for functional literacy. Furthermore, literacy requires specific experience before it can be functional, so the literacy required to function in one set of tasks might be entirely different from that required in another (Olson, 1990).

There are other disciplines of literacy as well. These include the specialized functional literacy abilities required for specific technological tasks, such as “computer literacy,” “mathematical

literacy,” and “scientific literacy” (Heap, 1990). In addition, the National Council of Education and the Disciplines has identified such disciplines as “communicative literacy” (the capacity to read, write and interpret a wide variety of documents from diverse sources, including the media); “historical literacy” (understanding information from past contexts); and “information literacy” (the ability to access information from technological resources, using critical reflection to sort out the relevancy of that information, and having an understanding of the technical infrastructure and its information context and impact.)<sup>5</sup>

The organization and development of the use of an interdisciplinary approach to literacy instruction was formulated about 20 years ago (Helm, 2001). This approach is an educational model that incorporates the knowledge, skills, values and methods of whatever collaborating disciplines would seem most appropriate for a given teaching situation. These could include the disciplines of audiology, nutrition, nursing, psychiatry, neurology, rehabilitation, counselling and speech language pathology. The Interdisciplinary Approach also acknowledges the roles of family members and community providers in the learning process. Although assessment techniques are based on a more traditional rehabilitation paradigm, this approach has involved the participation of Independent Living Centres (a network of consumer based disability organizations), and does recognize the role of self-advocacy in literacy learning.

### **2.2.2. Literacy in Canada**

*“The greatest wonder of humankind is probably the development of language, and the second wonder, growing out of the first one, is learning to read; letting another man or woman who is maybe dead, or maybe ten thousand miles away, reach into one’s imagination and create a vivid, moving world.”*

*~ Morley Callaghan, Canadian Author*

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<sup>5</sup> Jeremy J. Shapiro & Shelley K. Hughes. *Information Literacy as a Liberal Art: Enlightenment Proposals for a New Curriculum*. *Educom Review*. (Volume 31, Number 2) March /April 1996. This located on the website <http://www.educause.edu/pub/er/review/reviewArticles/31231.html>.

There has been much discussion among researchers in Canada concerning issues around the linkage between literacy and privilege. These issues raise the questions, “*who* are taught to make meaning out of text?” and “*how* are they taught to accomplish that set of skills?” (de Castell, 1990). Historically, it has been demonstrated that one’s ethnicity, location, language and gender have been determinants in influencing one’s level of literacy. A national survey in 1987 found the following<sup>6</sup>:

- No or low literacy increases from west to east, rising from a low of 17% among adults in British Columbia to a high of 44% in Newfoundland;
- No or low literacy is higher among Francophone Canadians (29%) than Anglophone Canadians (23%);
- Nearly 50% of the 4.5 million persons identified as “functionally illiterate” are 55 years of age and older even though this group only accounts for 29% of the total population;
- 50% of the 4.5 million persons identified as “functionally illiterate” went to high school, one-third of these graduated from high school;
- One in twelve of the persons identified as “functionally illiterate” were university graduates;
- Poverty and education play major roles in deciding whether low or no literacy is transmitted from one generation to the next. The children of those without employment, those defined in the survey as “working class,” and the poorly educated are much more liable to have poor or no literacy skills; and,

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<sup>6</sup> The Southam Literacy Survey (1987), financed by Southam, Inc., identified 4.5 million Canadians as having failed to reach a minimum level of functional literacy suggested by a national panel representing a cross-section of Canadians. Southam’s researchers estimated they did not reach at least 500,000 other adults with no or low literacy among un-surveyed groups of prisoners, transients, persons with cognitive disabilities, Aboriginal persons living in First Nations communities, people living north of the 60<sup>th</sup> parallel, and immigrants unable to speak either of Canada’s official languages.

- No or low literacy is higher among men (53.5%) than women. (46.5%.)

A more recent study, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS, 2000), ranked literacy in Canada as well as in 19 other countries. Findings of this study indicated that trends remain the same as in previous surveys for Canadians. The Canadian profile is outlined as follows:

- There are still approximately the same significant numbers of adult Canadians who have low-level literacy skills that constrain their participation in society and in the economy. One hopeful element is that the results of this survey belie earlier predictions of a continuing erosion of literacy skills;
- About 22% of adult Canadians fall into the lowest level of literacy. They have serious difficulty reading printed materials;
- Another 26% of adult Canadians fall into the second lowest level. These people can deal only with material that is simple and clearly laid out, and material in which the tasks involved are not too complex. They read, but not well;
- 33% of Canadians were at Level 3, which means that they read well but may have problems with more complex tasks. This level is considered by many countries to be the minimum skill level for successful participation in society;
- 20% of Canadians were at Levels 4 and 5. These people have strong literacy skills, including a wide range of reading skills and many strategies for dealing with complex materials. These Canadians can reach most reading demands and can handle new reading challenges;
- There is still considerable regional variation in literacy skills. Larger percentages of adults with high skill levels live in the western provinces, and large numbers with low skill levels live in the East. This finding coincides with other characteristics associated with literacy (i.e. educational attainment). About



18% of adults in Atlantic Canada and 21% of those in Quebec have less than a Grade 8 education, but only 12% of Ontarians and 11% of those in the western provinces have the same level of education;

- Disparity between literacy levels continues between Anglophone and Francophone segments of the population. A larger proportion of French-speaking Canadians are at Levels 1 and 2, while a larger proportion of English-speaking Canadians are at Levels 3 and 4. This does not only occur in Quebec, but throughout Canada; and,
- There is a marked difference in literacy levels between those who were educated primarily after World War II and those whose education was completed before that period. This disparity can be explained by significant differences in educational attainment. Forty percent of Canadians over the age of 65 have not completed primary school compared with only 4% of Canadians aged 26 – 35 years. Similarly, 13% of Canadians aged 56 – 65 years have attended university, compared to 28% for those aged 36 – 45.

Other key findings of the International Adult Literacy Survey include:

- Literacy development is strongly influenced in the early years by a child's family environment and the educational background of parents;
- The higher a nation's literacy skills, the more likely its population is to have healthier habits and lifestyles. Persons with higher literacy skills tend to be more involved citizens who participate in their communities and in society;
- Literacy is linked to economic success. Literacy levels determine the kinds of jobs people find, the salaries they make and their ability to upgrade their work skills. Literacy also contributes to society's overall economic and social performance;

- Literacy is not fixed forever. It operates on a “use-it-or-lose-it” principle, in other words, if literacy is not practiced consistently, the skills diminish. Those who read, write and use numbers regularly have higher literacy levels;
- Education strongly influences literacy but is not the only factor. Some less educated people who practice their literacy skills regularly have higher literacy levels than well-educated people who do not practice their literacy skills; and,
- The number of seniors with weak literacy skills is still significant. There are more than 1.6 million people aged over 65 years who perform at level 1 literacy. This means a large portion of this population is restricted in daily activities and often dependent on others for help. Poor literacy skills may lower seniors’ quality of life and increase their health and safety risks, both of which have high human and social services costs.

Besides these various social factors, there are questions concerning the connections between literacy and privilege. It has long been assumed that literacy is a necessary part of socialization in industrial and post-industrial countries, and that it is an unqualified educational good for all. Literacy has both utilitarian and aesthetic values; being literate enables us to play socially useful roles and to make contact with other minds in distant places and times. Given these assumptions, researchers have given warning that it is also critical to explore the role of literacy in social development. This exploration requires a consciousness of the economic and cultural values that lie imbedded within our conceptions of literacy (de Castell, Luke & MacLennan, 1986).

Education systems have participated in propagating class differences. One need only look at the cultural atrocities committed against First Nations and Métis peoples through the travesties of the residential school systems to see how a marginalized group of Canadians within a larger society were forced to “un-learn” the language and traditions which had been essential to their own cultural heritage, and made to learn a new language, along with the imposition of new and conflicting cultural values (Solomon, 1994; Métis National Council, 2002).

Researchers have struggled with the notion of literacy as a form of cultural politics that transmits values that go way beyond the instruction of learning to read and write (Brown, 1990). The result is that literacy has been described as a route of knowledge embedded in social interaction; a part of an evolutionary force that validates and gives meaning to any context dependent on print (Aikenhead, 1990). Critics have flagged the haste with which current society validates that which is in print, and invalidates knowledge or understandings that are transmitted orally (de Castell, 1990). There is ample anthropological evidence to suggest that pre-literate and non-literate cultures had and have within them a wealth of intelligent and artistic accomplishments (de Castell, Havelock, 1990). Voices within the disability community have raised similar concerns about the predominance of text-based values, particularly in light of the usage of American Sign Language (ASL), which is understood as an interpretation of spoken and text-based language, but which has its own nuances, humour, and other linguistic characteristics that can't always be captured in a textual translation (Sacks, 1989).

## **2.3 Different Understandings of Disability**

Considerable variance in the understanding of “disability” has occurred in the last four decades. Predominant in the Independent Living Movement, and important in the Disability Studies approach is what is known as the “Social Model” – in other words, the concept of disability as a social construct rather than a medical or pathological problem (Schaff, 1993). This approach was pioneered by a group known as the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation and is now codified as the central tenet of the self-organized disability movement (Shakespeare & Watson, 1997). The Social Model is a complicated idea, and is best explained through comparison with more conventional notions of disability.

Traditionally, Canadian society has equated disability with dependency, helplessness, and confinement. It has seen the prospects of cure and recovery as the solutions to living with disabilities. People with disabilities are often regarded as patients

who are sick; who need the kind of care required by children; as being dependent, often in need of institutionalization; as needing to be controlled; and as burdens. There is failure both to consider the social context in which people experience disability and to understand ways in which the environment is causally linked to the experience of impairment (Shakespeare & Watson, 1997).

When disability is reframed into a social construct rather than a medical and rehabilitative problem, many of these assumptions need to change. Attitudes and perceptions about disability are seen as being formed not by a disease or impairment, but through the interactions between persons within a larger social environment. Rather than being a medical diagnosis, “disability” becomes self-declared, and persons make this declaration in order to access those services and knowledge bases that will appropriately enhance their lives. This distinction illustrates how “being disabled” shifts from wearing a label to acquiring the right to equal access of the privileges and responsibilities of non-disabled citizens. Hence, people with disabilities are not helpless, but are self-reliant whose autonomy isn’t adversely affected by their need for assistive devices or other supports (Denson, 1988). While some persons place their hopes in the prospects of recovery and cure, civic rights are seen as equal to or of even greater importance (Johnson, 1992). Persons with disabilities view themselves as being consumers (not patients), as adults (not perpetual children), capable of living independently with supports, contributing to society (not a burden), and being self-directed (not controlled by others). The Independent Living paradigm suggests that people with disabilities are in need of personal assistant services rather than care giving. This paradigm also assumes that learned helplessness is a result of the attitudes of society toward people with disabilities and that a change in attitudes is needed (Schaff, 1993).

Disability rights activists are continually re-defining the meaning of disability, but what is constant is that there needs to be a social shift from focussing on the limitations of an individual person to looking at the limitations of the environmental context in which persons with disabilities live. The assumption that disability is located solely in biology, which has for the most part been accepted uncritically by society, is challenged when disability is seen as the product of

inadequate physical and social accommodation. Hence, lack of employment, lack of education, and lack of independence may not so much be a result of biological limitations as human-made barriers (Fine & Asch, 1988).

One of the largest cultural minority groups in Manitoba is made up of First Nations persons. According to Statistics Canada, of 1,100,295 Manitobans, 128,685 are of Aboriginal descent.<sup>7</sup> The Aboriginal People Survey reports that 31% of First Nations people live with a disability compared to a disability rate of 15% for mainstream Canadians.<sup>8</sup>

## **2.4. The Interfacing of Disability and Literacy**

### **2.4.1. Living with a Disability and Low/No Literacy Skills**

According to Statistics Canada, 15% of Canadians live with a disability, and many of these women and men are identified as having lower educational attainment on average than those without disabilities.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, neither the Southam Survey (1991) nor the International Adult Literacy Surveys (IALS, 2000) identified “people with disabilities” as a specific category. Although there are persons with disabilities who consider their own literacy skills adequate, this does not give an accurate picture of the majority of this segment of the population. The schooling of people with disabilities has been, to a large extent, unproductive, and the consequent limited literacy is attributed to the lack of opportunities for education (Darville, 1992).

Furthermore, in 1991, Shelly Butler found, through interviews with participants in a literacy program, that many people with disabilities had significantly negative experiences in school – including segregation into special classes. She goes on to say that the labels

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<sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada. Population by Aboriginal Group, 1996 Census.

<sup>8</sup> Assembly of First Nations. *First Perspective: An Approach to First Nations Disability Issues*. 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Statistics Canada. 1995. A Portrait of People with Disabilities, Target Group Project, p.10

placed on people with disabilities can be “self-defining” and that as a labelled person, individuals begin to see themselves as incompetent or inferior and thus have a depreciated view of their own potential (Butler, 1991).

Lack of literacy skills has a significant impact on anyone’s life, but for persons with disabilities, low or no literacy becomes one of the major barriers in being able to lead a self-directed life. Without basic literacy skills, persons with disabilities are less able to advocate for any needed services or changes, and have greater difficulty fighting discrimination as effectively as those who know how to read and write. Making informed decisions will be more difficult, as will the capacity to participate fully in a community (Calvin & Duffy, 1994).

Parallel studies on disability and literacy in the United States indicate only 4% of adults enrolled in Adult Basic Education Programs (a federally funded program designed to be state-administered and community-based) identified themselves as persons with disabilities (American Rehabilitation Association, 1998). Modifications in service delivery have been undertaken in the hopes of addressing the under-representation of persons with disabilities in adult literacy programming. These modifications will be discussed later in section 2.6.

Furthermore, the National Adult Literacy Survey revealed that 46% of American adults have a limited ability to perform a variety of what is called “real world literacy tasks.” Three factors were identified as contributing to adult reading difficulties: lack of English literacy skills, learning disabilities, and under-education. In addition, many low literacy adults experienced childhood reading difficulties that were only partially addressed when they attended school (NCSALL, 2000).

#### **2.4.2. Barriers to Literacy**

*“Stupid’ may just be the cruellest word in the language. It consumes confidence, on which the ability to learn relies. Loss of hope for oneself is a descent into desolation without end. It causes men to rage and women to wound themselves. People who can’t read come readily to view themselves as worthless*

*junk, and many feel they must grab what they can out of life and run.”*

*~ June Callwood, Canadian Author*

There are many reasons why people with disabilities also have poor literacy skills. Often a person with disabilities is confronted with a combination of barriers that are very difficult to overcome as an individual. If Canadians want to address the literacy needs of persons with disabilities, it is incumbent upon disability advocacy groups, adult literacy programs, and communities at large to recognize and eliminate these barriers to full participation (Calvin & Duffy, 1994).

A national survey of accessibility of literacy programs was distributed to literacy groups across Canada to identify barriers and to determine whether people with physical disabilities were accessing literacy programs in 1998-99. Sixty-eight surveys were sent to community, school boards, and college based programs. Twenty-seven (40%) responses were received; these came from seven out of the twelve provinces. The results of the survey indicated at first blush that more programs than expected provided literacy services to persons with disabilities. However, this was interpreted with caution because of the twenty-two programs that included people with disabilities; only one program met the survey criteria for a truly accessible literacy program.<sup>10</sup> Other barriers identified in the survey included the lack of technical aids and assistive devices, the lack of financial resources, transportation, and the lack of appropriate resources such as curriculum (NLS, 1999).

For many people with literacy needs, the literature, services and personnel of community groups can provide either a welcoming and accessible environment or an indifferent, insensitive and inaccessible one. Creating an environment that is conducive to both access and personal encouragement requires that the program leaders responsible for that environment look carefully for factors that would be assumed as helpful for a literate world but what might actually be intimidating obstacles if one cannot read. Examples of possible

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<sup>10</sup> These criteria defined “accessible” as a program that was physically accessible, flexible, offered the use of computers and access to appropriate technical aids and assistive devices, and could provide at least some measure of support care in terms of attendants or scribes. It should also be noted that this survey included youth as well as adults.

obstacles are signs, postings, brochures, other promotional material, written instructions and application forms. These articles are supposed to inform, instruct and direct learners, however, they can easily fade into a blurry background along with all the other complex literature that exists in the world of a person with literacy needs (Calvin & Duffy, 1994).

There are physical barriers to learning that exist for people with disabilities. The most obvious of these are buildings that are inaccessible to entry. Additional considerations include wheelchair access washrooms, doorways, classrooms, workspaces, and adequate lighting.<sup>11</sup> Some people with disabilities require attendant care. This might mean the literacy program needs to include a non-learner in a classroom setting to assist with note-taking and page-turning, along with personal care. Transportation is often an issue for persons with disabilities, especially in areas with inadequate public transportation. Where transportation does exist, it can be expensive. Barriers to learning can also be based on community attitudes. This can include literacy teachers who might be fearful or hesitant to work with a person with a disability. This can create a two-fold stigmatization, in essence, a double barrier. Not only can a person not know how to read or write, already a societal expectation, but they are also dealing with the negative labelling associated with having a disability (Calvin & Duffy, 1994).

It is interesting to note that the concept of “accessibility” has grown in some circles to mean far more than making sure that people are included at a physical level. With reference to Métis persons with disabilities who have literacy needs, the definition of “accessible” is expanded to include these additional features: community-based culturally relevant, portable, and family-centred (Métis National Council, 2002).

Some people with disabilities require technological aids in order to fully participate in literacy programming. If large print and alternate format materials, TTY/TTD (telephone devices for hearing-impaired persons), ASL interpreters, tape-recording equipment, or accessible

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<sup>11</sup> An excellent source of information regarding accommodations to make physical locations more fully accessible &/or to implement the principles of universal design can be found at the “Concrete Changes” website. <http://concretechange.home.mindspring.com>



computers are not available, this prevents or impedes the progress of learners. There are sometimes additional literacy requirements for persons with disabilities, and these can increase the learning burdens for people in literacy programs who are also living with assistive technology. These include learning to read Blissymbols, Braille, symbols, numbers, signs, communication boards and countless other forms that assist in communication (Calvin & Duffy, 1994).

### **2.4.3. Barriers to Employment and Economic Security**

**“Today, many Canadian adults don’t have the literacy skills needed in the new economy. The government of Canada will invite the provinces and territories along with business and volunteer organizations to start a national plan. Its goal is to greatly increase the number of adults with these higher-level skills. Some Canadians face special challenges in upgrading their skills and education. The government will take steps to make it easier for them to access learning.”**

***~ The Speech from the Throne. Ottawa, June 2001.***

Research conducted over the past two decades found that persons with disabilities in Canada face considerable barriers to obtaining and keeping jobs, and have consistently lower employment and labour force participation rates than persons without disabilities (Fawcett, 2000).

Many people with disabilities are not employed and live in poverty because of a number of systemic societal barriers. Not being able to read or write at a functional level is one more barrier to employment (Calvin & Duffy, 1994).

Canadian author and literacy advocate June Callwood made an impassioned plea for Canada as a nation to seriously address its literacy problems in 1990. She described one woman who faced a myriad of barriers because of a learning disability. As a child, this woman had been labelled mentally retarded and confined to ‘opportunity classes’ where reading wasn’t taught. She grew up believing that she wasn’t intelligent enough to learn. She hadn’t even tried: no one whose life is made up of poverty and failed relationships

is ready to take on, voluntarily, the potential for another defeat, another kick in the self-esteem. “You can’t get a job,” this young woman revealed to Callwood, “You can’t open a bank account. You have to depend on other people. You feel you don’t belong. You can’t help your children. You can’t help yourself.” (Canadian Organization for Development through Education, 1990).

Callwood described the role of literacy in employment further, stating that the divide between those with and those without literacy skills has never been wider. North America has become a world of forms, documents, instructions, written warnings, posted rules, leaflets and vital information circulated in brochures. Two generations ago, not being literate was prevalent but not such a great disadvantage. Someone could not have literacy skills for an entire lifetime and still have a good job. Employment skills were acquired through watching someone else; apprenticeship was the accepted teacher, not two years in a community college. Today, the inability to read is a ticket to social segregation and economic oblivion. Having a disability such as that of the woman described above only creates a double barrier to employment and self-improvement (Canadian Organization for Development through Education, 1990).

This finding is further corroborated in the IALS Study on Literacy and Economic Security (2000). The past two decades have seen a massive and profound transformation and restructuring of economic activities in Canada. Furthermore, a new labour market polarization has emerged, featuring growth in both highly skilled, well-paid and secure jobs and low-skilled, poorly paid and unstable jobs. This polarization, as well as persistently high levels of unemployment and rising economic insecurity, are fundamental features of the new economy. These rapid, complex changes present individuals with unprecedented challenges. It is widely argued that success in the job market is increasingly based on people’s ability to acquire and develop new skills. Strong literacy skills are deemed fundamental for improving employment and income prospects and reducing the risk of becoming economically disadvantaged. The study concludes by stating that policy development around literacy concerns must occur within a broader social and economic context. The problem of poor literacy skills is not simply an issue of education, but also an indicator

of deeper social and economic inequalities (Scalla & Schellenberg, 1988; Roeher Institute, 1998).

It is helpful to look at the role no or low literacy has played with other marginalized social groups, particularly when it comes to economic security. The United Nations initiated a world movement to promote literacy and proclaimed 1990 as International Literacy Year. It was recognized that the impact of literacy on improving social status, family health, educational opportunities and possibilities for employment was critical. Economic development for marginalized groups requires a process of joint decision-making, consultation, cooperation and community participation in order to maintain the unique characteristics and strengths of that community. Literacy is integral to participating in this process (Ballara, 1992).

Although global in scope, the principles of the above statement can be applied to local situations where marginalization occurs. The Elizabeth Fry Society estimates that close to 90% of the women in Kingston's Prison for Women have no or low literacy.<sup>12</sup> Callwood addresses this issue as well. Because Canada has 5 million people who can't read, the political shape of the country and the priorities of governments are not influenced greatly by their needs. This, she writes, is an effective disenfranchisement. Political candidates rarely find it advantageous to uphold the causes that matter most to persons with low or no literacy such as an end to homelessness, the need for food banks, welfare payments that meet the poverty line, and better educational and job-training opportunities that truly meet the needs of the disenfranchised. Few votes, she says, follow any politician with such a crusade. The electorate that can't read won't be there to ruffle the complacent on Election Day. Their silence costs this country severely. Education is free in Canada because it was recognized that democracy isn't healthy unless all citizens understand current events and issues. Five million Canadians can't do that. Many of those who don't vote have low or no literacy, so by default they get a government that does not need to know they exist. The result is further alienation and discouragement for the unrepresented (Canadian Organization for Development through Education, 1990).

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<sup>12</sup> Canadian Organization for Development through Education, 1990.

One response to the Speech from The Throne of June, 2001 was the release by the Federal government of Canada of a discussion or “Green Paper” on skills and learning that suggests ways to reshape the way the federal government works independently and with the provinces and territories on defining, funding and setting policy for literacy in Canada.<sup>13</sup> The Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL)<sup>14</sup> made a submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance (November 1, 2001). This submission encouraged Ottawa to address the literacy barriers considered most important in dealing with pressing social issues, including child poverty, the strain on the health care system, strains on the economy, and the reduction of crime (MCL, 2001).

## **2.5. New Paradigms in Adult Learning and Knowledge Acquisition**

### **2.5.1. Guiding Principles for Effective Programming**

Literacy can be an empowerment tool that addresses social issues, but literacy skills must be obtained in order for that to occur. There has been considerable innovation in creating effective ways for adults to acquire and improve their literacy skills. A recognition of the need for cultural and contextual sensitivities, of learning disabilities, of the role in poverty and prejudice as barriers to literacy, and of other fundamentals of community development (Oakland Readers’ Series, 2001; Comings & Parrella, 2002; Koppenhaver & Pierce, 1994,

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<sup>13</sup> The Green Paper, along with 2 additional papers, *Knowledge Matters* and *Achieving Excellence: Investing in People Knowledge and Opportunity* were released February, 2002. Although literacy is not highlighted as a separate policy piece, it is recognized throughout both documents. However, literacy is viewed primarily as it related to the labour market. Summaries of all these documents can be found on the Government of Canada website <http://www.literacy.ca/govrel/submiss.htm>

<sup>14</sup> The Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) is a national non-profit organization representing literacy coalitions, organizations and individuals from every province and territory. Their mandate consists of informing the federal government and the general public about issues relating to adult literacy in Canada; providing a national forum for provincial/territorial literacy organizations to work together ensuring that every Canadian has access to quality literacy education; strengthening the adult student/learner voice in Canada; and. Supporting the development of a strong movement of people and organizations involved with adult literacy education.

Pattison, 1982; de Castell & Luke, 1986) have brimmed over into the field of teaching literacy to adults with disabilities. Guiding principles for effective programming (Centre for Literacy Studies, 2002) are described as:

- **Learner-centred approaches** that begin with learners' goals and their full involvement in the learning process;
- **Active learning approaches** that fully engage learners in hands-on, participatory activities;
- **Group approaches** that create a fertile learning environment for developing communication skills;
- **Contextualization of content** that creates a framework for learning that can be applied at work and in communities;
- **Critical thinking and problem solving** as approaches to learning basic skills by building on prior knowledge;
- **Interdisciplinary approaches and thematic learning** that encourage teacher-learner interactions that integrate learning skills into real life contexts;
- **Accommodations for learning styles, differences and difficulties** so all can learn and perform at their highest potential;
- **Community involvement** so the classroom is part of the community and a sense of community is built in the classroom; and,
- **Cultural sensitivity and mutual respect** in all learning situations.

Assessment resources for adult literacy teachers that foster these principles include the informal assessment process developed for adult education in Newfoundland (Woodrow & Ennis, n/d), and the

Creative Student Assessment developed by Adult Literacy and Continuing Education in Winnipeg (Manitoba Education & Training).

### **2.5.2. S.A.R.A.W.**

The S.A.R.A.W. (Speech Assisted Reading and Writing) method involves a talking computer designed to teach basic reading and writing skills to adults (Moar, 1997). Although the S.A.R.A.W. program was originally designed for adults whose reading levels were assessed as being between grades 2 – 6, it has proved beneficial to learners who start at a very beginning level. Effective use of S.A.R.A.W. is not so much an issue of identifying formal learner “levels” as it is a matter of designing a program that fits the needs and interests of each individual learner. This requires a solid assessment stage and the development of a comprehensive individualized learning plan.

### **2.5.3 Multiple Intelligences: Re-thinking Perceptual Patterns**

The 1990’s showed an emergence in research concerning the re-framing of formerly held views of learning disabilities. If a learner could not grasp a concept one way, there was often evidence of a self-adapting mechanism that gave the learner an opportunity to perceive the concept in a different way. The idea of “Multiple Intelligences” articulated the notion that every learner has stronger and weaker aptitudinal areas, and capitalizing on a learner’s strengths is a way of promoting literacy skills and other forms of knowledge acquisition (Kallenback & Viens, 2001; West, 1998). Currently, eight forms of Multiple Intelligences have been recognized: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial-visual, bodily-kinaesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic. With the advent of the concept of Multiple Intelligences has come the recognition that certain conditions formerly considered disabilities give persons a learning advantage. This new concept was articulated in a *Wall Street Journal*<sup>15</sup> article that described a man as having a brain for the 21st century because, while other bank managers struggled to think “outside of the box,” this individual had no other way of thinking – in 5

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<sup>15</sup> Petzinger, Thomas, “A Banc One Executive Credits His success to Mastering Dyslexia.” *Wall Street Journal*, April 24, 1998.

years he raised the assets of his company by \$26 million. He attributed this change to his dyslexia and the value of “quirky thinking in a chaotic business world.” The teaching methods behind the Multiple Intelligences approach consist in assessing the learner’s thinking patterns, but rather than looking for obvious weaknesses, seeing the differences of these patterns as hidden talents. This often requires a difficult search; particularly if the learners have experienced ridicule and social exclusion because of the ways they have perceived their surroundings. The British educator Richard Branson put it: “The dumber the question – the more people laugh at you – the more likely it will lead to a breakthrough” (West, 1998).

#### **2.5.4 Integrative Community Approaches**

Communities have participated in addressing both the need for adult literacy skill-building and the need to de-stigmatize having low or no literacy levels. Examples of this have occurred in both non-profit and corporate settings.

Boeing Canada is offering deaf and hearing-impaired employees a literacy program in Winnipeg, Manitoba.<sup>16</sup> This is made available for employees who struggle with math and literacy skills. Learning is aided with videos, instructors and informal classes that take place on “company time.” Boeing was awarded the *Canada Post Literacy Award 2001* for this endeavour.

The North Frontenac Literacy Program in Ontario developed the “Trails to Literacy” project (2002).<sup>17</sup> Its premise was to work with another community development, the new Trans Canada Trail. Community enthusiasm about the trail led to a literacy program based on trail imagery. A trail became a pathway to skills attainment, promoting literacy learning, history and healing. Key concepts to the project included:

- Creating a more hands-on program to provide basic literacy skills training in a real-life context;

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<sup>16</sup> Katynski, Liz. “Company welcomes hearing-impaired workers.” *Winnipeg Free Press*, February 20, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> An account of this project is featured in the article “Trails to Literacy” found in the NALD newsletter *Networks*, Volume 7, no. 1, Winter/2002.

- Decreasing the stigma attached to low literacy/numeracy. It was anticipated that persons might hesitate to be in a more traditional literacy program. However, the involvement of other tasks on the Trans Canada trail de-stigmatized this approach;
- Increasing links between literacy upgrading and the larger community by fostering greater social understanding of some of the issues persons with low literacy skills face.

The implementation of these key concepts occurred literally “on the trail.” The lack of amenities (shelters, benches, signage, information plaques, maps and trail guides) turned into an opportunity for learning and employment. The learning products included research, writing, administration skills, and building. Community placement roles included tutoring, newsletter writing and editing, clerical duties, mentoring and supervising. The project also included a computer-training component with a community placement.

The program was very publicly visible. The participants in the literacy program improved the community’s physical and economic well-being. Therefore, “Trails to Literacy” became popular and marketable to the general population, to businesses, to government and to other agencies. The Provincial Minister of Community and Social Services, who used a consumer anecdote in a statement to the Ontario legislature, profiled the project. There was significant press coverage of the project, and phone referrals to the literacy program increased by 200%. Local community groups regularly provided donations, information and volunteers to the program. The success of the “Trails to Literacy” program is attributed to two principles:

1. The education was participatory. Learners had control, which raised the learning grid by providing a platform for attaining important “soft skills.”
2. There was community involvement. Group decision-making was critical, therefore the program was much more responsive to both learners and broader community needs.



Further guiding principles can be found in the “Literacy Bill of Rights” (see Appendix 4).

## **2.6 Adaptations to Existing Literacy Programs**

An adaptation, also referred to as a modification or accommodation, is based on both the needs of the learner and the learning context. Adaptations may involve changes in the classroom environment &/or given tasks in order for students with disabilities to participate in the learning process and benefit from the same classroom participation as students without disabilities (Polson & White, 2000).

Accommodation is understood as an individually determined adjustment to a functional need. Accommodation has also been defined as a legally mandated change that creates an equitable opportunity for task completion or environmental access.

(Horton & Hall, 1998; Polson & White, 2000).

For many adults with disabilities, accommodations are needed to achieve full participation in order for them to gain or improve literacy skills. Some adult literacy and basic education providers are identifying ways to accommodate adults with disabilities. However, many programs, by their own admission, report a lack of accessibility. The National Institute for Literacy in the United States (Polson & White, 2000) reported that while many adult literacy programs recognized the need for accommodations, they frequently lacked a systematic approach to identify and select appropriate adaptations. Issues that impeded modifications for these adult literacy programs included:

- Making buildings accessible, particularly in rural settings where there were fewer options available for services and in older urban centres where facilities did not meet current accessibility standards;
- Difficulties in discerning the best approaches for providing literacy training to persons with disabilities;
- Availability of other community resources;

- Availability of services that could provide technical assistance; and,
- Lack of understanding on the part of service providers regarding what was meant by “reasonable accommodations.” (E.g.: Very few persons with disabilities were provided with accommodations when taking the GED Test.<sup>18</sup>)  
(NIFL, 1998).

The creation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)<sup>19</sup> has made it incumbent upon the Adult Basic Education Programs funded by the U.S. Federal Department of Education to make accommodations for persons with disabilities. Modifications have concentrated on the needs of persons who are categorized as: blind and partially sight impaired, deaf and hard of hearing, emotionally or mentally ill, learning disabled, developmentally disabled, and physically disabled. Modifications include the use of large print materials, deaf interpreters, audiocassette tapes, assistive technology, multi-sensory curricula, telecommunications, and computers (American Rehabilitation Association, 1998).

The Commission on Adult Basic Education and the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education studied obstacles to existing literacy programs for adults with disabilities in 2000. Barriers were categorized according to the impact they had on access to effective participation in literacy programs and the relation these barriers had to the program’s environment, focus or sponsor. The study included nine states diverse in population, location and economic status. Of 1,098 Adult Basic Education providers surveyed, 75% indicated that the most prevalent barriers were financially related, 56% were due to limited staff availability, 42% indicated lack of training for staff, and 36% attributed ineffective assessment tools and lack of formal assessment opportunities as barriers to existing programs. Also reported were the lack of appropriate instructional materials and the use of group rather than

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<sup>18</sup> GED is the General Educational Development Test. It will be referred to as GED for the remainder of this report.

<sup>19</sup> There is no Canadian equivalent to the Americans with Disabilities Act.

individually based instruction as barriers to accommodation (Polson & White, 2000).

In spite of these barriers, many U.S. programs are continuing to make modifications to accommodate adults with disabilities through the strengthening of such initiatives as: improved staff disability awareness training; increased state-level collaborations, vocational rehabilitation programs, community-based disability programs and an increase in the number of screening mechanisms available to identify learning difficulties.

Canadian universities are also making accommodations for people with disabilities. One example of such an accommodation is the Virtual Centre for Learning Disability Integration Program at Trent University. This program includes an assessment and ability profile, and opportunities for students to work with learning strategists to develop an ability profile that provides recommendations for individual accommodation based on learning style (Trent University, 2002).

Identifying students' learning styles is often an important step towards making modifications. One method of developing modifications is through process-oriented instruction. The goal of process-oriented instruction is to help students recognize their own learning processes by raising their awareness of their own abilities and learning preferences. Process aware learners analyze their individual learning patterns by asking themselves such questions as: "Is this problem like another I've experienced?", "Why do I have trouble with this type of problem?," "How is my excitement (or anxiety) affecting how I learn?" and, "What did I just do?" Each of these questions brings to the fore a consciousness of underlying thought processes. This awareness eventually becomes a regular part of the thinking-learning process, and develops into an important adaptation skill (Gay, 2000).

Making accommodations to existing literacy programs can be a challenging process. The following list of "suggestions and dreams for the future" was created from the findings of a national focus group conducted by the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL, 1998):

- Programs and services should be inclusive, fully incorporating the needs of persons with disabilities into general service

models. Programs delivering services should be comprehensive and individualized;

- Comprehensive training on meeting the needs of all persons, including persons with disabilities, should be provided to all adult literacy staff;
- There should be a real, open commitment from leadership to make programs accessible to all persons with disabilities;
- A major public awareness campaign should be developed that would focus on the relationship between literacy and disability and the connection between literacy and self-sufficiency;
- State and local public, non-profit, and private systems should work together in a comprehensive and coordinated way toward meeting the need of persons with disabilities;
- Services to identify disabilities should be readily available, and payment/costs should not be a barrier to gaining diagnostics;
- The focus should not be just on “teaching” but on using “accommodations” as a means of helping people become fully functional;
- Literacy and adult education should be recognized as basic human rights; and,
- Services for persons with disabilities should start at birth and continue throughout a lifetime.<sup>20</sup>

## **2.7 Assistive Technology**

The 1980’s saw the advent of the first reading machines, and by the 1990’s the first computer/scanner systems were widely available.

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<sup>20</sup> If one were to apply the social construct model of disability to this point, it would read, “Services by, for and with people with disabilities...”

Both of these technologies have given persons with visual difficulties access to materials not available in other formats. Costs and convenience have become much less prohibitive for these technologies. Twenty years ago, a reading machine cost \$35,000; today, the cost is under \$1000. Furthermore, a decade ago, it took more than 2 minutes to scan and read a page; now it takes approximately 15 seconds for a page to be scanned (May, 2002).

Persons with disabilities can have access to gaining or improving literacy skills through the use of these and other examples of assistive technology. Assistive technology, also referred to as adaptive or access technology, includes a realm of high and low technological devices designed to increase independence by providing alternate means to access resources. Consequently, further benefits to assistive technology include fuller participation in daily activities, and enhanced self-confidence (Riviere, 1996).

Assistive technologies not only help individuals with disabilities gain access to primary information, they also help people strengthen their organizational skills, thereby making work and learning assignments more manageable. Many assistive technologies are low cost and easy to obtain and use. Some examples include:

- Index cards;
- Colour-coding;
- Graph paper;
- Beepers/buzzers;
- Digital clocks, digital watches, talking watches;
- Tape recorders and mini pocket recorders; and,
- Voice-activated day planners that operate with voice-input technology;

Examples of assistive technologies that make **auditory tasks** easier include:

- Pressure-sensitive (carbonless) paper that allows the user to tear off copies of classroom lecture notes to share with a fellow student who cannot hear the teacher;
- Variable speech control tape-recorders (VSC's) allows the user to play back audio taped material at slower/faster rates than initially recorded without the loss of intelligibility/voice quality; and,
- CART (Computer-Aided Realtime Translation) used in group settings, displays information on a computer monitor or projects it onto a large wall screen as a reporter simultaneously types onto a machine connected to a computer.

Assistive technology for individuals who experience difficulty completing **visual tasks** includes:

- Software program options that enable the user to change backgrounds, text colours and font sizes;
- Adjustable task lighting;
- Large print written materials;
- Talking large print browsers that provide users with access to the Internet;
- Magnification hardware (special monitor screens) or software (program applications) that enlarges/enhances text and graphics, and alters colours, font, print and cursor size; and,
- Books on disc with text that can be enlarged and read back to the user with voice output.

Computer software has been developed for learners who experience difficulties with directionality (i.e. understanding maps and street

signs). In addition, software has also been created to encourage critical and creative thinking skills and problem solving.

Despite the numerous examples of specific task-related assistive technologies, perhaps the most common reference to assistive technology is the computer itself. Using a computer to accomplish a writing-related task can often reduce difficulties experienced by individuals with disabilities during the traditional writing process. There are many problems people experience when using pen and paper as a medium for transcribing ideas and information. A learner's handwriting may not be fast or clear enough, and the transfer of ideas may not have adequate fidelity during the initial transcription process. This can create difficulties because once recorded, it is harder to change information (Wanderman, 2002).

One solution to problems associated with writing information out by hand is a type of software known as voice recognition technology. This computer application allows users to control a computer by speaking to it through a microphone. The computer can be instructed to perform such tasks as opening documents and moving cursors without touching any keys. Users can also use voice recognition to operate a word processing program (NCIP, 2002).

The benefits of using voice recognition technology have yet to be fully realized. However, one study at California State University at Northridge examined the performance of students with learning disabilities who used voice recognition technology to complete the university's written proficiency exam. With this technology, students with learning disabilities achieved the same distribution of scores on the exam as their non-disabled peers. It should be noted that with a human transcriber's assistance or with no assistance at all, the score distribution of the students with learning disabilities fell significantly below that of their non-disabled peers (NCIP, 2002).

Despite these innovations in adaptive technology, some problems of access still remain, particularly on the Internet. Accessible web sites for people with physical and intellectual disabilities are not always readily available. Websites with information for people with intellectual disabilities are often written in complex formats too difficult

for easy access (Stockfeld, Wright, Williamson, Schauder, Don & Neill, 2002). In light of these findings, Stockfeld et al. & Neill developed a project funded by the AccessAbility Program of the Australian Commonwealth Department of Communications Information Technology & the Arts. The project's aim was to create a website that would appeal to adult learners with both physical and intellectual disabilities and to develop websites to help teachers and students worldwide. Key objectives of the project included the designing of suitable content, interfaces and models of best practice in order to facilitate traditional and visual/graphic literacy. This project has provided ongoing access to the World Wide Web for people with physical and intellectual disabilities. One valuable contribution to literacy by this project has been the development of *WordCue* (Seiler, 2001; Stockfel et al.& Neill, 2002). This program assists in reading words and phrases by providing a range of clues such as pictures, syllabification, definitions, examples of the word in a sentence, and auditory clues.

However, not all assistive technologies are product-based. *Lexability* is an example of a non product-based assistive technology. It connects multiple accessibility products to a technology strategy for addressing literacy struggles using a multi-modal computer-based approach that combines auditory (listening) and/or spoken language with textual reading, writing and generation processes. This approach increases the probability of accurate reception and understanding of information by the learner. The concept of *Lexability* separates the solutions for overcoming literacy difficulties into five specific stages:

- Emergent - Practices for developing pre-literacy skills required for listening, speaking, reading and writing;
- Content - Curriculum content that emphasizes the bimodal approach to learning with speech and text;
- Skills - Exercises for developing basic literacy skills, such as grammar and spelling;
- Discourse - Activities that facilitate the formulation of ideas and expression of those ideas via technology; and,



- Assistive - Increasing interaction with the computer.

These five stages typically reflect different ages/grade levels. Most often, emergent practices are used during the early years of education. However, they can continue throughout formal education along with content, skills and discourse activities. Assistive technology, which is often used to improve skills, can begin before formal school and frequently continues through to adulthood (Brosnahan, Mahafey & Raskind, 1998).

Choosing the right assistive technology that best suits a learner's needs is often a difficult decision. Before the kinds of assistive technology that will be appropriate for someone can be determined, the functional abilities and limitations of that person need to be identified. This discernment process is assisted when such questions as: "What tasks are expected to be performed?" and "What are the specific areas of difficulty?" are asked. The answers to these questions aid in finding the appropriate technology that allows learners to enhance their abilities, decide which types of assistive technology to use, and develop a knowledge of their own unique profile of strengths, weaknesses, interests and experiences (Riviere, 1996).

## **2.8 Internet Access**

### Web-Based Technology, Resources and Instruction

The University of Toronto's Adaptive Technology Resource Centre (ATRC) has created an online learning disabilities community dedicated to bringing research, teaching techniques and alternate learning strategies into classrooms and homes nationwide (Etheridge, 2001). Its primary objective is to ensure that current research and new information pertaining to learning disorders is accessible to the learning disabilities community at large. All available articles are subject to a peer review and an editorial board made up of learning disability experts across Canada. It is a free service offered to researchers, educators, students and individuals with learning

disabilities (as well as their families). The website can be found at [www.lrdc.ca](http://www.lrdc.ca).

The creation of groups such as the “World Wide Web Consortium’s Web Accessibility Initiative,” and “Untangling the Web,” has provided online resources for persons with disabilities covering an extensive range of subject areas. Assistive technologies, such as screen readers and customized web browsers, has opened up opportunities for worldwide sharing for persons with disabilities on an “anywhere, anytime and for anyone” basis (Hinn, 1998). (This comment is based on the assumption that “anyone” has access to an internet-capable computer.) However, there are still questions about the most effective way to make use of these technological innovations, and the answers seem to change as rapidly as the technology itself. An evaluation for information technologies is available in a full text at [http://lrs.ed.uiuc.edu/access/IVLA/ivla\\_paper.htm](http://lrs.ed.uiuc.edu/access/IVLA/ivla_paper.htm)

Further internet resources are listed in the bibliography.

## 2.9 Access to Health Related Information

*“Carole Boudrais shudders when she remembers the time she almost swallowed Drano because she thought it was Bromo. Even more painful to recall is the time she mistook adult painkillers for the child size dose and made her feverish child much sicker. ‘When you can’t read,’ she explains, ‘it’s like being in prison. You can’t travel very far from where you live because you can’t read street signs. You have to shop for food but you don’t know what’s in most of the packages. You stick to the ones in the glass jar or with a picture on the label. You can’t look for bargains because you can’t understand a sign that says REDUCED. I would ask the clerk where something is and the clerk would say, ‘Aisle 5,’ only I couldn’t read ‘Aisle 5.’ I’d pretend that I was confused so they’d lead me right to the shelf.”<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>21</sup> This account is found in June Callwood’s chapter “Why Canada Has to Beat Its Literacy Problem,” a compilation of essays found in the Canadian Organization for Development Through Education publication *More Than Words Can Say: Personal Perspectives on Literacy*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart. P33.

Literacy is a major variable in influencing the health of Canadians. The most extensive Canadian research study exploring the connection between health and literacy found that low literacy levels are one the major influences on health (OPHA, 1989). Further research indicated the areas of Canada that had the lowest literacy rates also had the poorest health status (Statistics Canada, 1996).

Listed in the bibliography are resources relating to health and literacy.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Key Informants and Data Collection

An important component of the “Literacy and Disability” project involved the collection of information regarding adult literacy program practices and principles. This was accomplished by interviewing adult literacy programs throughout the province of Manitoba (see Appendices 1 and 2). Thirty-five organizations were identified and approached for survey purposes; of these 28 participated in the project by granting the investigator an interview based on survey questions previewed by the interviewees (see Appendix 3). Efforts were made to obtain regional representation and a balance of information from urban, rural and remote areas of Manitoba. Representatives of the various programs interviewed were asked to self-identify themselves within the above categories. Adult education/literacy programs that classified themselves as “urban” were located in the cities of Brandon, Thompson, Portage la Prairie, and Winnipeg. These representatives included program administrators and literacy educators.

Respondents were not asked for numbers of persons with disabilities participating in the adult literacy programs interviewed. The decision to refrain from asking about the identification of numbers of participants in literacy programs was based on recognition of the following:

- The mandate of this research project is framed within the understanding of disability as a social construct. Within this framework, disability is understood to not only be self-declared, but also as much the result of external barriers as physical or mental impairments;
- Disabilities are not always visible; and,
- Some programming &/or changes to programming may occur as a result of a learner-stated preference rather than as an accessibility accommodation or adaptation required because of a self-identified disability.

- The term “literacy” was defined in accordance with the guidelines established by the National Literacy Secretariat. The National Literacy Secretariat works to promote literacy as an essential component of a learning society and to make Canada’s social, economic, and political life more accessible to people with weak literacy skills.<sup>22</sup> However, some variance to this definition occurred during information collection that involved obtaining data from the community. Representatives of literacy organizations throughout Manitoba were asked for their own definitions of this term.

One recurring problem throughout the interview process was the lack of knowledge on the part of respondents as to what constituted an accommodation &/or an adaptation for persons with disabilities.<sup>23</sup> Examples were given by the interviewer to help clarify these meanings.

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<sup>22</sup> National Literacy Secretariat website at [www.nald.ca/nls/aboutnls/aboutus.htm](http://www.nald.ca/nls/aboutnls/aboutus.htm)

<sup>23</sup> Participants reported they were not really aware of how to make accommodations, but would be flexible to meet people’s needs. Often repeated was the statement that it was important to treat people fairly.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1 Introduction

Participants were asked to describe the populations they served. Many programs served more than one target population. These included:

- First Nations (44%);
- Persons seeking employment or employment-related training (32%);
- Persons for whom English is a second language (44%);
- Gender Specific 24% (men only 16%, women only 8%);
- Seniors (12%);
- Persons Incarcerated (25%); and,
- Programs designed exclusively for persons with disabilities (12%).

Participants were asked when their adult literacy programming was available. Further into the survey, some programs stressed the importance of time flexibility as a key component to successful adult literacy education. Previous research also indicated that schedule flexibility provides greater accessibility to persons who have inconsistent energy, pain management issues, or fluctuating concentration levels (NIFL, 1998). A little more than a third of the programs surveyed held literacy training sessions throughout the year; the majority of these did not have specific start and end times to their sessions, but ran the training on a continual basis.

Approximately one third of programs interviewed held seasonal sessions. The remainder of the programs declared their plans for seasonal schedules were unknown – sometimes due to unstable funding, while others did not have answers available.

The length of time literacy programs had existed in their communities varied from less than one year (3 out of 28) to more than 30 years (4 out of 28). The majority of adult literacy programs canvassed had been present between 10 - 20 years.

Approximately 75% of adult literacy centres offered day programs, 60% taught in the evenings, and less than 10% ran programming on weekends.

Many representatives from adult literacy centres stressed the tenuousness of offering literacy programming within their communities because of financial restraints, limited space, scarcity of teaching resources, and the time commitment it takes on the part of instructors to deliver this service. High ratios of volunteers were committed to teaching adult literacy classes. For example, 5% of programs were administered by volunteers, and 80% were run by 1-2 staff and a bank of volunteers. These volunteers included retired teachers and other professionals, peers who learned to read as adults themselves, and others interested in serving their communities. Many volunteers reported that they did not have previous training or direct experience in working with persons with disabilities, and stressed the need for resources in that area.

## 4.2 Perceptions of Literacy

The term “literacy” describes a capacity, the capacity to access printed information. Using the framework of the social model of disability, it was interesting to explore how a term about capacity was related to a group of persons who, traditionally, have been identified by their incapacities, namely, their disabilities. There was a wide range of responses defining “literacy.”

Approximately 20% of those involved in teaching literacy to adults used the word “normal” (i.e. “being able to function ‘normally’”), to describe their definition of literacy. This term is problematic for those within the disability community who promote diversity and the celebration of differences, particularly when the term is associated with the capacity to participate within society. A few of those surveyed used the term “relative ability,” while others stated that literacy involved the assisting of someone to develop skills they required from *their own point of view* so they could be as functional as they wanted to be.

The acquisition of literacy was also defined in a variety of ways. Close to 10% of respondents saw literacy as moving from very basic upgrading to reaching high school levels of performance. One organizational representative stated that the definition of literacy used

was based on the core principles of psychosocial rehabilitation that was further explained as the capacity that all people have to learn and grow. Another considered literacy to be acquired on a continuum rather than as a “have” or “have not” skill.

Literacy was defined by approximately 30% of those interviewed as being a life skill, and, in some cases, an empowerment tool. One interviewee described a literacy program that included such components as parenting skills and role modelling within the learning process. Two respondents stated that literacy should directly improve the quality of people’s lives by giving them the capacity to access information directly. One organization’s literacy programming included such employment readiness skills as showing up on time and completing assignments.

One adult literacy organization chose not to use the term “literacy” because their client base shied away from that word. The board of directors of that agency decided to simply call literacy learning “adult education.”

### **4.3 Accessibility of Program Promotion**

An analysis of program accessibility is key research based on the understanding of disability as a social construct. The impact of accessibility (or the lack thereof) is felt at first contact. In the case of this study, this occurs when a potential learner first receives information about an adult literacy program. Consequently, adult literacy program representatives were asked how people found out about their organizations.

The majority (approximately 65%) of participants stated that word of mouth was a very effective promotional tool. Of these, 20% stated that the program has been in the community for a long time, and was well known.

Referrals also played an important role in providing information regarding adult literacy programs in communities. Twenty-five percent of the participants reported linkage with various government offices was one way of publicizing adult literacy programs. Referrals were



made to them from government offices (Income Security 20%, Employment programs 10%, Case Manager 10%, and one referral was reported from each of the following offices - Probations, Workers' Compensation, and HRDC). Sometimes, making government offices aware that an adult literacy program is available in the community increased enrolment of persons who wanted to acquire literacy skills. *It is interesting to note that one organization first approached the Employment and Income Assistance office in their community, made a presentation to their staff, and then started receiving referrals to their literacy program.*

Additional ways in which potential learners were made aware of literacy training in their communities included referrals from other literacy programs (5/28), and referrals from English as a Second Language (ESL) programs (3/28).

Some communities promoted literacy through various civic offices. These included First Nations/Band Office organizations, local Social Planning Councils and town administration, local school divisions, and public libraries.

Organizations that dealt with specific target populations were also involved in adult literacy promotion. These include:

- Seniors' organizations (1/28);
- Immigrant organizations (3/28);
- Other organizations (5/28);
- Social work department at local hospital (1/28);
- Disability organizations, the majority of which were mental health organizations (4/28);
- Local counselling service (2/28); and,
- Determinations made during institutional intake processes (5/28).

Some promotional methods rely on written methods to convey information. Although this is a convenient way to transmit details about programming to a broader public, including service providers, it does create a barrier to the accessibility of information

for those who cannot read. Promotional methods that might require the learner to have a minimal level of literacy skill included:

- Print and broadcast media, including public service announcements (12/28);<sup>24</sup>
- Flyers/posters/signage/pamphlets (6/28);
- Websites (2/28); and
- The local telephone directory (1/28).

The stigmatization of having low or no literacy skills is well known. One method of addressing that stigmatization within the community and bringing into focus an awareness of the importance of adult literacy education was accomplished through the conducting of specific publicity campaigns. Endeavours of this nature described by project participants included:

- Special Promotional Events put on by adult literacy programs;
- Presentations/displays at other events to promote community awareness; and,
- Adult literacy programs contacting employers in the community to raise awareness of the availability of literacy training.<sup>25</sup>

#### **4.4 Accessibility of Program Eligibility**

Once potential learners have been made aware of an adult literacy program, there is a question regarding their eligibility. Data from this research project indicated most adult literacy programs surveyed were open to any Manitoba adult over the age of 19 or over the age of 18 and out of school for more than a year. This is consistent with the guidelines established by Manitoba Education & Training.

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<sup>24</sup> One organization used the local school newsletter to promote adult literacy.

<sup>25</sup> One participant reported that volunteers and students visited local industries experiencing shutdowns/slowdowns to tell workers about the literacy program.

Some programs, however, maintained certain eligibility requirements for learners. Such stipulations included:

- Learners testing at a grade 2 reading level average or more;
- Limiting the numbers of high need learners to one per class<sup>26</sup>
- Requiring learners to be on Employment Insurance, Income Assistance, Workers' Compensation, or in Vocational Rehabilitation;
- Making an employment goal mandatory for eligibility requirements;
- Requiring a stay of 3 months or more in order for learners in institutions to participate in a literacy program; and,
- Requiring learners to undergo a formal process in order to identify specific disabilities before they could participate in a literacy program<sup>27</sup>.

All of these criteria presented potential barriers, particularly for learners with disabilities who have not been able to participate in school or employment opportunities, who do not qualify for certain government programs, who have not gone through a formal diagnostic process, or who stay in institutional facilities on a short term basis.

Other requirements that did not present the same barriers were:

- Adults with a reading level of Grade 9 or under were eligible (2/28); and,

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<sup>26</sup>One organization reported that they required a support worker accompany persons with limited learning and social skills at all times. This was described as being very frustrating because it meant limiting enrolment of these students, thereby making it difficult to meet this community need. However, the program stated it was a literacy skills organization, not a lifeskills one, and the demand for teaching lifeskills absorbed space and energy needed for literacy learners.

<sup>27</sup>In each instance, 1/28 organizations interviewed reported that they required these stipulations.

- Learners' scores on a CAAT (Canadian Adult Assessment Test) had to be under a Grade 12 level (9/28).

An additional criterion was related to age. Students in a seniors' program had to be age 55 & older and Canadian citizens or landed immigrants in order to participate in literacy learning.

## **4.5 Accessibility and Cost Factors**

Accessibility to literacy training can be dependent upon whether or not there are costs associated with that program, and what those costs might be. The numbers of Canadians with disabilities who also live with below-average incomes are considerably higher than the population at large.

More than 50% of literacy programs surveyed reported they had costs involved. These included book costs, GED exam costs<sup>28</sup>, an hourly tuition fee, assessment fees, and photocopy charges. In one corrections institution, costs were involved until an inmate had received a sentence. Another reported that inmates were paid to go to school, similar to those going to a job site.

Nine out of twenty eight adult literacy organizations interviewed reported there were no costs involved in their literacy programming. Three stated that in their communities, the average literacy level was under Grade 9 and income levels were also low, so any costs would be a barrier. One participant reported that such related costs as childcare and travel expenses also contributed to the hardship of adult learners.

The remainder of organizations interviewed stated information concerning learner costs was not available.

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<sup>28</sup> Some organizations required a \$20 deposit for the GED textbook, which was refunded when the book was returned.

## 4.6 Referrals

Adult literacy organizations that had restricted entrance requirements were asked if there were other literacy programs in their communities where learners would be eligible to attend. Approximately 30% stated these other programs were available in the community, 33% reported they knew of no other literacy programs, and 37% did not provide an answer to this question. These percentages corresponded with similar questions regarding referrals made by programs with restricted eligibility to other literacy opportunities in their communities.

The majority of all literacy organizations surveyed reported some referral activity, which included referring learners who qualified to enter the initial organization's program, but who might be better served through another organization that met specific needs. These included program(s) that:

- Were gender specific;
- Were conducted without requiring learners to go through a formal assessment process;
- Offered GED courses;
- Provided Francophone/ESL;
- Were designed for high level learners;
- Was for persons in an institution who had been quarantined to a medical ward for health reasons. *Further follow-up revealed that this medical ward did not have a literacy program after all;*
- Was external to an institution;
- Were designed specifically for learners who were cognitively disabled and who required supervision; and
- Was located within an adult friendship centre that had a stronger social integration component.

## 4.7 Organizational Partnerships

The term “literacy” was defined by one adult literacy organization as needing to be holistic in the way it addressed all the issues going on in a learner’s life. Many of those interviewed discussed the complex worlds in which their students lived. The implications of multiple disadvantages for learners with disabilities who have low or no literacy is also discussed extensively in the literature review of this report. It is for this reason that the survey included questions about informal or formal partnerships between adult literacy programs and other non-literacy organizations/support services within Manitoba communities. Responses were categorized as follows:

- Only 1/28 organizations interviewed stated that they had no organizational partnerships;
- Over 80% had partnerships with other educational programs<sup>29</sup>;
- 77% had partnerships with training/employment programs, and approximately 20% had worksite support liaisons<sup>30</sup>;

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<sup>29</sup>These included the Frontier Program, Adult Learning Centres, other GED programs, Red River College, Continuing Education, universities, Manitoba Education & Training, Horizons, Literacy Partners of Manitoba, Adult Independent Learning Centres, other literacy projects, and local school divisions

<sup>30</sup> Some programs did not network with worksite programs but did help people learn to read truckers’ license materials, work manuals, farming equipment materials, & cattle care information. It should also be noted that some literacy programs helped arrange work experience for learners.

- 80% reported they had referral relationships with programs related to addiction, abuse, financial, family, mental health, and other health matters<sup>31</sup>; and,
- Approximately 45% reported partnerships with other organizations.<sup>32</sup>

## 4.8 Assessment Processes and the Impact of Previous Learning Experiences

*“All assessments must be done in a very non-threatening manner. People can feel very vulnerable and fragile about not having literacy skills. We must be careful.”*

*~ Project Participant*

This statement encapsulated the concerns of approximately 40% of those interviewed about the assessment processes their organizations had undertaken to determine the abilities of students. Repeatedly stressed was the importance of making students feel comfortable during intake interviews, throughout testing processes, and when marking assignments.<sup>33</sup> Approximately 32% of those interviewed spoke specifically about the use of a “soft assessment” process that included such components as:

- Looking at the “big picture” of learners’ needs;

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<sup>31</sup> These included the Healthy Child Initiative program, Family Resource Centres, Regional Health Authorities, Child & Family Services, Manitoba Mental Health, Community Rehabilitation Services, Mental Health Support Centres, Self Help groups (Association for Depression and Manic Depression, Mood Disorders Association, Manitoba Schizophrenic Society), safe houses, Corrections Canada, Change Skills & Victim Awareness program, anger management programs, CPR/First Aid training, Addictions Foundation of Manitoba, Winnipeg Social Planning Council, Society for Manitobans with Disabilities, hospital social work departments, Adult Psychiatry, a neighbourhood community resource centre with a toy/book lending library, childcare registries, parenting programs, babysitting courses, computer/internet access centres, computer classes and a community phone, Income Security, Elder Abuse Resource Centre, Friendly Visitor Programs, Crisis Centre, public health nurse, and a dental hygienist.

<sup>32</sup> These included Vocational Rehabilitation Services, the Learning Disabilities Association, Winnipeg Harvest, Manitoba Housing, local Child & Parent Development organizations, and a local “Teen Stop” project which had an adult program component.

<sup>33</sup> One participant stated that adult literacy teachers assessed reading skills by asking questions which started from the “bottom up,” in other words, using examples of easy reading situations and then proceeding with more difficult reading challenges. The example questions given to describe this process were: “What can you read? Signs? Menus? Newspapers?” Formal assessments, it was stressed, were never used until the teacher and the learner had gone through a lengthy informal acquaintance process.

- Asking how learners assessed their own skills; and,
- Recognizing that assessment is a lengthy process that couldn't be done in one day.<sup>34</sup>

Thirteen percent indicated that assessments were based on learner preferences, including interest inventories, and a further nine percent stated assessment was rooted in learner goals and priorities.

Approximately 25% of those interviewed stated that an inventory of learner history, including personal data, physical problems, goals, academic background, schools attended, learning style, and previous learning barriers was what they needed to assess a student. Some participants also acknowledged the stigmas clearly compounded with the additional societal attitudes about living with a disability.

Fewer participants used more formal and traditional models of assessment. These included the use of applications or intake forms, oral testing, math/numeracy testing, CAAT (Canadian Adult Assessment Test), CARE (Canadian Adult Reading Evaluation), the Red River College Literacy Assessment Tool, the Laubach Assessment Tool, the Manitoba Education & Training Literacy Assessment Tool, the Independent Study Options Reading Assessment Tool, writing samples, student observation, and ongoing teacher directed assessment within the classroom.

## **4.9 The Value of the Last Grade Achieved**

Asking participants the question, "What value do you place on the last grade achieved when you are assessing someone's reading level?" brought about a more animated response than any other question included in the survey. It also brought about a definitive and almost unanimous answer. Ninety percent of adult literacy instructors interviewed stated that the last grade level achieved had little or no bearing on the evaluation of a student's literacy skills.

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<sup>34</sup> One interviewee emphasized that learners are nervous, and one day they can give a particularly poor performance. It is important to get a sense of how they're doing after they've been in the program for a while.



Furthermore, respondents reported that learners, particularly learners with disabilities, were “passed” despite the fact that they couldn’t read or write. Learners expressed anger as adults because they didn’t really “get” Grade 12. Some learners with disabilities were placed in special classes where learning expectations were considerably lower than mainstream classes.<sup>35</sup> Students with alleged behaviour problems were also placed in these classes because they couldn’t be ‘handled’ anywhere else.

#### **4.10 Disability, Literacy Needs and Social Stigmas**

*“We don’t look at non literacy as a deficit but as a difference of opportunity.”*

*~Project Participant*

As discussed in the literature review, many adults with disabilities who have low or no literacy skills face a double barrier of social stigmas. Respondents were asked if they encouraged persons reluctant to admit they had low/no literacy to become involved in their programs. Approximately 25% of those surveyed stated they did not actively address these social stigmas, while close to 70% encouraged learners reluctant to admit they had low or no literacy to join a program. Methods used for overcoming these social barriers included:

- Learners creating and distributing a newspaper that encouraged people to be a little more open about needing to learn to read and write;
- Publicity materials (radio spots, etc.) with stories of students overcoming barriers by learning to read and write;
- Teachers emphasizing that the literacy program was not like learners’ previous experiences in public school;

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<sup>35</sup> One learner described this experience to an adult literacy provider as “12 years of macaroni craft.”

- Program staff emphasizing that learning one thing a day was progress – this was particularly effective in addressing the impatience of younger learners or others who wanted instant gratification through learning results;
- Program addressing the links between low self-esteem, unemployment or underemployment, disability and social isolation by reducing the social isolation. Students were informed of the surprising numbers of people in similar situations to their own;
- Confronting the discriminatory behaviour of others. This included addressing the stigmas attached to persons with low or no literacy at a community level. Learners were assured they had the program's support and that the learning experience would be different from previous ones at school because now the learners were in control;
- Dismantling the barriers that grew out of the pre-conceptions students had of each other;
- Expecting teaching staff/volunteers to be role models for practicing acceptance. Having the capacity to adopt this attitude was made a priority in the learning centre's hiring practices;
- Focusing on practicality, including assessing skills learners had, what they needed, and what they'd done already, thereby avoiding discussion about grade levels;
- Acknowledging that sometimes circumstances or systems failed people with a stress on the importance of students externalizing their feelings of blame. This helped the students recognize that stigmas weren't about who they were, but about what had happened to them; and,
- Emphasizing student ownership of the program. This was especially effective for learners who had been

institutionalized earlier in their lives and therefore had very little choice in what was going to happen to them. Making it their program encouraged the development of decision-making skills among learners.

## 4.11 Materials Students Learn to Read

Respondents were asked what kinds of materials were used in their adult literacy programs. The barriers that adults with low or no literacy and disabilities face are confronted well before they even enter a literacy program. But further disincentives can discourage students when they try to engage with learning materials presented to them that are designed for children instead of adults, or depict economic, social, or cultural scenarios unfamiliar or intimidating to the reader.

Almost 25% of those interviewed stated it was very hard to find age-appropriate and culturally appropriate material.<sup>36</sup> Concerns were voiced that adults found reading children's stories demeaning, and that depictions of pre-dominantly Caucasian, middle-class, able-bodied, or two parent families were causes for further alienation. Some programs had volunteers who adapted existing materials for specific learners. However, 8/28 of those surveyed stated they still used this age-inappropriate, culturally inappropriate material. One way to address this problem was to encourage readers themselves to be very selective about what they wanted to use in order to achieve literacy skills. This idea was grounded in the concept of empowerment.<sup>37</sup>

Approximately 45% of those surveyed reported they used non-fiction materials such as newspapers, information brochures, instruction manuals,<sup>38</sup> recipes, directions for hobbies, government information material, maps, charts, graphs, schedules, application forms, drivers' manuals, etc. These were seen as tools to help students with day-to-

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<sup>36</sup> I.e. only adults featured on the book cover

<sup>37</sup> We tell them "don't read what others tell you to read, read what you're interested in!"

<sup>38</sup> Drivers' license training materials – one class used the Manitoba Public Insurance website's interactive driver quiz as a literacy training tool.

day living, and as opportunities for learners to reap some immediate benefits through an increase in information acquisition.

Close to 80% of those surveyed stated that the reading curriculum was established by learner interest.<sup>39</sup> This included:

- Stories about the history of the community;
- Programs addressing reader issues - domestic violence, addiction, anger management, counselling, parenting, childbirth, and information on readers' disabilities/illnesses/medication;
- Seniors' program materials – line dancing instructions, exercise instructions; and,
- 25% of respondents used readers' personal stories<sup>40</sup>.

Another innovation to encourage students' literacy skills was the development and use of class created materials. Examples of these were:

- Canadian history writing about the Batoche and Riel Rebellions;
- Researching and writing about worm composting and waste management;
- Using a National Literacy Secretariat grant to write storybooks that described the cultural milieu of the community;
- The writing of poems and short stories by aboriginal authors; and,

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<sup>39</sup> In the case of persons' incarcerated who were not allowed to have access to reading materials while in jail, the instructor ordered in requests for reading material so they could be used in class.

<sup>40</sup> English as a Second Language (ESL) methodology was incorporated into adult literacy teaching. The main focus of this approach was having students' read and write about situations that represented their own realities.

- Stories written by those institutionalized for their peers.<sup>41</sup>

Approximately 25% of respondents used employment related materials as literacy tools. These included:

- Workplace reading materials;
- Job search materials;<sup>42</sup> and,
- The Internet.

More traditional functional skill building included curricula based on:

- Mathematics Skills, including budgeting skills (used by 6/28); and,
- Writing skills (4/28).

Existing adult literacy curricula used included the “Reading for Today” Series (low level literacy with depictions of people who are low income, single parent, people who have problems with the law, clipping coupons, advocating situations); the “Story Starter Approach” (done in cooperation with other adult literacy groups); Laubach materials, the Stages Literacy Program (with a focus on the acquisition of such practical skills as reading brochures, filling out job applications, parent-teacher reports, safety, etc.), ESL literacy material and other adult literacy programs.

Five out of twenty-eight organizations surveyed reported their literacy instructors prepared materials themselves for the learners.

## **4.12 Accommodations & Adaptations**

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<sup>41</sup> These included workbooks on overcoming cocaine addiction, aboriginal cultural awareness, and healthy relationships.

<sup>42</sup> A 3<sup>rd</sup> group reported they used to have literacy with an employment focus but funding shifts eliminated this option.

*“I don’t have the qualifications to assess what the disability is, I just have a sense there is one.”*

*~ Project Participant*

The presence of persons with disabilities who are vital and visible members of the community is still not apparent in some areas of Manitoba. Two adult literacy programs reported they didn’t need to make accommodations because it was very rare to have persons with disabilities reside in their area. Additionally, 4/28 organizations reported they had never been approached by anyone with a physical disability who required literacy education. It was beyond the scope of this study to determine whether this was the case because people with disabilities did not have opportunities to integrate into mainstream community life, or if persons with disabilities did not, in fact, reside in these areas.

Respondents were asked what accommodations/adaptations, if any, were made for persons with disabilities:

**Physical Accommodations & Adaptations Made:**

<b>Number of Organizations</b>	<b>Type of Accommodation</b>
4/28	None
7/28	Wheelchair accessible main floor entrance
7/28	Wheelchair accessible main floor washrooms
9/28	Completely wheelchair accessible site
5/28	Moved literacy class location to an accessible site (i.e. school, nursing home)
2/28	Added an elevator
2/28	Added wheelchair accessible washrooms
3/28	Added a ramp
17/28	Made changes in order to remove barriers

**Sight modifications** included:<sup>43</sup>

<b>Number of Organizations</b>	<b>Type of Accommodation</b>
2/28	Voice recognition software
20/28	Large print materials
4/28	Magnifying glasses, tinted overlay for sheet reading, vision enhanced computer screens
3/28	Audiotapes, other alternate visual formats

**Hard of hearing modifications** included:

<b>Number of Organizations</b>	<b>Type of Accommodation</b>
2/28	American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters
4/28	Used a keyboard for communication
1/28	Installed a TTY phone line
1/28	They talked louder for hard of hearing students

One out of twenty-eight organizations provided one of each of the following **other physical modifications**:

- Elimination of overhead fluorescent lights;
- Elimination of the use of latex materials for sensitive learners;
- The providing of note-takers for students with fine motor problems;
- Providing assistive devices (rubber holders for pens, graspers for rulers to make lines);
- Tele-conferencing so those who couldn't make it to class could still participate;
- Tutors that went to learners' homes;

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<sup>43</sup> One problem reported was that Provincial Corrections no longer pays for prescription eyeglasses for the Aboriginal population, so learners there with visual impairments have "their papers plastered up against their faces"

- Security escorts for institutionalized students so they could either come to class or the instructor could go to students placed in isolation;

Two out of 28 programs reported literacy materials were sent in and then picked up in cases where institutionalized learners were segregated from the rest of the population.

***Other more generalized accommodations*** included such practices as flexibility within the program for individualized learning, one-to-one tutor/learner ratios, using volunteers who had previous experience working with persons with disabilities, and making whatever accommodations needed to be done in order for anyone to benefit from the literacy program. Generalized accommodations listed for 3/28 programs included providing childcare for parents and grandparents who were learners.<sup>44</sup>

The experiences of living with mental health issues are not only varying and as wide ranging in scope as physical disabilities, but often greatly misunderstood, highly alienating, stigmatizing, and fraught with emotional impacts that can be as debilitating as the most profound physical limitations. Inaccurate and often mistrustful perceptions of persons with mental health issues often prevent communities from allowing such persons access to full participation within their society.

Respondents presented a wide variety of answers regarding accommodations made for persons with mental health issues who wanted to participate in adult literacy programs. These ranged from statements reporting the only mental health concern which ever presented itself was someone having simple depression or being a little tired, to organizations declaring that mental health issues was the most prominent disability concern in the community.

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<sup>44</sup> The concept of childcare as an accommodation was never suggested in the survey questions, but came up as an issue for 3/28 of respondents.



**Accommodations made for mental health consumers included:**

<b>Number of Organizations</b>	<b>Type of Accommodation</b>
4/28	Sensitivity awareness training re: mental health issues available for teachers *
2/28	Mental health workers can come to class
5/28	Changed classroom schedule pacing (breaks and make-up sessions)
1/28	The institution had a psychiatric unit with its own literacy program
1/28	Used anger management techniques
4/28	Individualized programming
1/28	Used literacy as an awareness tool to help students manage illness

\*This included awareness of the adverse effects of medication and ways to make appropriate accommodations for these difficulties

Manitoba has at least 4 organizations that are designed specifically to provide education, including literacy training, to adults with learning &/or cognitive disabilities. Of these, 3 responded to the survey. Several other learning centres interviewed also regularly included persons with learning &/or cognitive disabilities in their general student body.

**Adaptations made for persons with learning/cognitive disabilities:**

<b>Number of Organizations</b>	<b>Type of Adaptation</b>
1/28	Individualized programming for memory loss
3/28	Individualized programming for persons with attention issues/other learning disabilities
2/28	Adapted learning material for students with abstraction difficulties
1/28	S.A.R.A.W. computer

Other accommodations/adaptations made for persons with learning difficulties included:

- Changing the levels of literacy learning intensity to accommodate fluctuations in medication;
- Using less paper and cutting the amount of “head down” work for persons suffering from side effects of medications that produce a lot of saliva; and.
- Working with “memory booster” tools for persons suffering from memory loss &/or disorientation.

#### **4.12.1 Consultations Made Regarding Accommodations and Adaptations**

Respondents were asked if they had made consultations with other agencies or individuals in order to gain further information regarding the accommodations or adaptations needed for persons with disabilities. Historically, adults with disabilities who have literacy needs have not been highly visible in adult education programs. Disability awareness is often not a training component for those not working specifically with that target population.

<b>Number of Organizations</b>	<b>Type of Accommodation/Adaptation</b>
10/28	No consultations made
1/28	Consulted students with disability themselves
4/28	Attended workshops
2/28	Consulted with 1 or more disability organizations *
1/28	Consulted with professional resources
2/28	Consulted with government organizations

\* These included the Canadian Paraplegic Association, Association for Community Living, Learning Disabilities Association, Society for Manitobans with Disabilities, and the Deaf Centre of Manitoba

#### **4.12.2 The Participation of Support Workers in the Learning Process**

Survey participants were asked the question, “Can learners’ support workers/attendants come to class? Persons with disabilities sometimes require assistance with daily living activities. Having a support worker perform given duties relating to physical care can sometimes make the difference between living independently in the community or becoming institutionalized. Persons with mental health issues sometimes require support systems that provide assistance in the process of reintegration into community life. Persons with cognitive disabilities have support workers, including proctors, which help build skills for independent living and self-reliance.

Responses were as follows:

- 16/28 reported support workers could come to class. Of these, 2/28 reported support workers for persons with mental health issues could come to class;
- 5/28 reported support workers could not come to class. Of these, 1/28 stated that the concept of having support workers come to class was not relevant to their program; and,
- 5/28 stated that a situation involving a support worker had never presented itself.

Some concerns expressed by adult literacy program representatives regarding the attendance of support workers in adult literacy classes included:

- The participation of support workers would create too high a ratio of non-students to students. This was particularly the case in instances where tutors already worked on a one-to-one basis with students, therefore support workers/attendants were encouraged to bring students to class but to leave once the students were at class;

- Securing the confidentiality/safety of students' lives<sup>45</sup>;
- Making sure the students, and not the support workers, did the literacy work. It was stressed that support workers shouldn't speak up on behalf of the students themselves;
- Institutional security – if students needed support, this would be done by staff; and,
- Space constraints.

One organization also reported that they had tried to get funding for extra support workers for learners who need emotional support, another had an expectation that support workers would always be in attendance, and yet one organization made arrangements with another student to help a peer who was having difficulties.

#### **4.12.3. Other Supports**

Other supports offered to students in adult literacy programs included on-site counselling (6/28), assistive technology (6/28), attendant care (3/28), transportation (12/28)<sup>46</sup>, food,<sup>47</sup> and employment related materials.<sup>48</sup>

#### **4.12.4. Literacy Teaching Methods for Persons with Disabilities**

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<sup>45</sup> One organization required an oath of confidentiality to be taken by support workers.

<sup>46</sup> This included bus tickets (including tickets for the children of learners) and arrangements for wheelchair access vans, and use of school division buses.

<sup>47</sup> Participants included in this category provided information about a support not suggested in the survey regarding the distribution of food. This was seen as a critical learning support by 2 literacy organizations.

<sup>48</sup> One organization reported they'd run a "skills for success" partnership with the local adult learner centre. This included training on how to be a good employee, time management, resume writing, interviewing skills, etc.

The question, “How do you decide what methods to use when you teach adults with disabilities?” was, for well over 75% of those who participated, met by some variation of the response, “It isn’t the disability that determines the teaching method, but the student’s needs and goals.” However, 35% of those surveyed also stated that it was sometimes difficult to ascertain what it was the students wanted to learn because some students just went along with whatever was suggested. It was opined that often when persons are controlled by others and marginalized due to social barriers, they are reticent to take charge of their own learning, and rely on others to make those decisions for them.

Approximately 15% of those surveyed reported that teaching methodologies were determined by learner assessments, including entrance assessments, ongoing teacher assessments, and trial and error. These ways of teaching demand program flexibility.

Several respondents emphasized the importance of literacy instructors not getting “stuck” on any one method, particularly if that method adversely affected learners. Importance was also placed on sensitivity to a learner’s background and previous learning experiences, and the critical role of regaining self-esteem. One respondent declared that their program would do whatever it took for a learner to feel successful. Furthermore, one key to successful literacy learning was reducing the feeling of isolation and being ostracized, therefore an integrative approach to literacy methodology was needed.

Two out of 28 participants reported that methodologies were dependent on the learner’s disability, or that no distinction was made between learners with and learners without disabilities.

Methods used even less frequently (1/28) included assessments based on students’ abilities, formal diagnostic processes, and external expertise. One respondent declared that no one in their program was qualified to make methodology assessments, one

respondent reported that they simply did not meet extra needs, and one other stated they did not teach people with disabilities.<sup>49</sup>

#### **4.12.5. Marking Progress for Learners with Disabilities**

*“Progress can sometimes be getting the numbers 1 through 5 in the right order. Getting the alphabet is a big deal!”*

*~ Project Participant*

The matter of marking progress is a subjective one. Whenever an evaluation of progress occurs, it begs the questions, “Progress according to whom? Progress based on what values?” Progress for adults with disabilities in literacy programs can have as many meanings, and be determined by as many factors, as there are learners themselves.

Being evaluated can be intimidating to anyone, but if one’s past learning history has been marred by unfair judgement, social humiliation, personal shame, disappointment, and significant loss of self-esteem, the process of evaluation itself can be a deterrent to learning and an almost impossible barrier to overcome.

When asked how their literacy instructors marked progress for learners with disabilities, approximately 10% of respondents stated they either hadn’t had learners with disabilities come to the centres, weren’t qualified to decide which method to use, or didn’t have an answer available to the question.

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<sup>49</sup> This statement was made within a context of having no funding to meet extra needs; people with disabilities went elsewhere.

Some literacy programs marked progress by looking at actual demonstrated tasks and work completed. This included:

<b>Number of Organizations</b>	<b>Method for marking progress</b>
5/28	Observing and pointing out “breakthroughs”
1/28	Worksheets with scores/grade level equivalencies
4/28	Standardized assessments
1/28	Students graduate from level after completing tasks
6/28	Student portfolios
6/28	Performance baselines
3/28	Progress charts
2/28	Certificates
6/28	Tests written by instructor
2/28	CAAT* and CARE*

\*CAAT (Canadian Adult Assessment Test)

\*CARE (Canadian Adult Reading Evaluation)

Some participants reported that any assessment done was negotiated very carefully with the learner as a way to demonstrate sensitivity to past experiences. Four out of twenty-eight organizations reported that the marking of progress occurred during something as non-threatening as having conversations with students about what they didn’t know before and what they knew now. Emphasis was placed on looking for the subtle changes in both the learner’s knowledge base and sense of self-confidence. Three organizations reported that all progress was evaluated according to goals established by the learner, and one used such learner-centred components as attendance patterns in combination with interest levels to mark progress.

Other organizations had staff determine the progress of students. This was done in one institution through discussion at treatment team meetings; another organization had daily logs kept by tutors, and one other marked progress according to goals established by the teacher.

Some programs built flexibility into their evaluation processes as a way of accommodating disabilities. Three adult literacy centres reported that they did not have a beginning or an end to their programs in order to allow for periodic absences and different paces of learning within the classroom. Three organizations also reported that they took into consideration learning barriers whenever they did an evaluative process.

#### **4.12.6. Evaluative Tools Which Accommodate Learning Barriers**

*“You have to develop a trust relationship in order to give someone a helpful evaluation.”*

*~ Project Participant*

Respondents were asked if their literacy organizations used evaluative tools that accommodated learning barriers. Forty percent stated they used such tools. Some respondents commented that not only had they never known a person with a disability to come into their program, but also they had never considered evaluation tools as barriers.

Task-oriented evaluative tools that accommodated persons with disabilities included using reading inventories to place students with a particular resource, and using the CAAT manuals as a reference for making accommodations. One out of twenty-eight adult literacy programs used each of these methods. Nine organizations used oral rather than written testing to evaluate students, and two remarked it was important to take into account such practical considerations as making sure all evaluative materials were accessible.

Learner-centred evaluative tools included involving learners in the process (5/28). This often took place within an informal conversation where learners reported such changes in their lives as now being



able to order from a catalogue or look up road conditions on the television. Four of twenty-eight programs used such evaluative techniques as encouraging students by noting the efforts they've made, and stressing that diligence is in itself progress. Twenty-five percent reported it was critical to evaluate individualized learner progress, and not compare students with each other.

Two organizations worked very carefully and regularly with students to help them discover their own life goals. These were then used as a measurement for evaluation. One adult literacy instructor stressed the importance of teaching students not only how to cope with learning obstacles, but also how to circumvent barriers to participation. The successes achieved in these endeavours were used to evaluate the learning process.

Other methods of accommodating persons with disabilities in the evaluation process included the suggestion that diligence and commitment to the process of removing barriers, and keeping these forefront throughout the learning process created a markedly more positive experience for the student. *Further suggestions included recognition on the part of instructors that not all students might be ready for evaluation, and that it was critically important for program implementers to evaluate themselves to see if they've met needs so students can keep learning.*

## 5. CONCLUSION

The assumption that disability is located solely in biology, which has for the most part been accepted uncritically by society, is challenged when disability is seen as the product of inadequate physical and social accommodation. Hence, lack of employment, lack of education, and lack of independence may not so much be a result of biological limitations as human-made barriers based in a prejudicial social construct.

The presence of persons with disabilities who are vital and visible members of the community is still not apparent in some adult literacy organizations in Manitoba. Twenty-two percent of the adult literacy organizations who responded to the survey in this project reported they had either never been approached by a person with a disability interested in adult literacy training or didn't see the need to make accommodations in their programming because it was very rare to see a person with a disability residing in their community. Furthermore, some respondents commented that they had never considered evaluation tools, program costs, lack of physical access, or rigid scheduling as barriers to accessibility.

Inaccessibility is an issue because of physical barriers, teaching methodologies, costs, lack of basic amenities such as food, childcare and transportation, and entrance requirements. The lack of disability awareness training for literacy instructors also creates attitudinal barriers. Ten out of twenty-eight adult literacy instructors interviewed stated they had not consulted with anyone regarding accommodations or adaptations to their programs. **Only 1 out of 28 organizations interviewed stated they consulted persons with disabilities themselves in this process!**

The question, "What value do you place on the last grade achieved when you are assessing someone's reading level?" brought about a more animated response than any other question included in the survey. It also brought about a definitive and almost unanimous answer. Ninety percent of adult literacy instructors interviewed stated that the last grade level achieved had little or no bearing on the evaluation of a student's literacy skills.

Adults with disabilities are scarred by previous school experiences. Not only do these persons have to deal with emotional trauma, but many were taught inadequate learning methods. This makes going back into a learning situation very intimidating for adults with disabilities.

Recommendations for the government, community literacy programs, disability advocacy groups, and the National Literacy Secretariat are made to address the major findings of this study.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. This study involved in-depth consultation with adult literacy providers. The next step is hearing the perspectives of persons with disabilities who have literacy needs themselves. Researching these direct experiences provides a comprehensive complement to work already completed, and lays the foundation for developing methods of adult literacy instruction that are fully inclusive. **The National Literacy Secretariat should provide funding for research that would document the direct experiences and ideas of adults with disabilities who have been or want to become involved in adult literacy programming.** This study should be carried out by, with and for people with disabilities. Information from the grassroots level provides an excellent addition to this study, and is instrumental in developing adult literacy programming that meets the needs of this diverse population.
2. Disability organizations and adult literacy organizations need to develop stronger partnerships in order to combine their expertise to serve adults with disabilities with literacy needs. Past literacy projects have been short-term and based on the needs of individual learners rather than looking at ways to integrate these learners into existing programs within their communities. **Government and other funding should be put in place to develop partnerships that support disability organizations to establish stronger priorities for the promotion of literacy, and provide disability awareness training for adult literacy instructors.** This partnership promotes long-term, uninterrupted commitments to literacy programming for adults with disabilities.
3. **Manitoba Education, Training and Youth should increase funding for adult literacy programs so that student cost factors, inadequate staff resources, lack of accessible locations, lack of appropriate teaching materials, lack of classroom equipment including assistive technology, and inadequate time schedules can be addressed.**

4. **Disability advocacy groups should address the needs of adults with disabilities who want to acquire literacy skills.** The “Full Citizenship: A Manitoba Provincial Strategy on Disability” White Paper released by the Government of Manitoba and the “Knowledge Matters” Paper published by the Federal Government are two points of reference for advocating the right of Canadians with disabilities to have access to education.
5. **Adult literacy organizations in Manitoba should examine their teaching facilities, methodologies, materials, entrance requirements, and promotional materials in order to make them as universally accessible as possible.** One example is using an optional method, not printed text, when promoting literacy programs for persons with low or no literacy skills. It is further recommended that overall program plans be based on the guiding principles listed in Section 2.5.1.
6. **The National Literacy Secretariat should fund the undertaking of a project similar to the Study of the Accessibility of Adult Literacy Programs for Individuals with Disabilities in Manitoba that would be directed at examining accessibility for persons with disabilities in family literacy programs and literacy programs for youth with disabilities in Manitoba and/or across Canada.**

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Woodrow, Helen & Ennis, Frances. N/d. *Learning Differently*. St John's: Educational Planning and Design Associates.

World Education HEAL Project introduces health curricula and material focused on early detection of breast and cervical cancer into Adult Basic Literacy Education and English as a Second Language programs.

[www.worlded.org/project/HEAL/HEALHOME.HTM](http://www.worlded.org/project/HEAL/HEALHOME.HTM)

## **8. APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1**

LITERACY AND DISABILITY RESEARCH PROJECT  
Survey of Adult Literacy Programs in Manitoba

**Location**

**Hours of Operation**

**Who runs your programming (volunteers, staff, etc.?)**

**How long have you been in existence?**

Learner Eligibility

1. How do people find out about your program? Who is eligible to be a participant in your program?
2. Are there any costs involved for learners? If so, what are they?
3. If persons aren't currently eligible, are there other programs in your community that can accommodate them? Do you refer persons to these programs?

Organizational Partnerships

4. Do you work together, either informally or formally, with other non-literacy programs in your community? If so, do these include:
  - Other educational programs?
  - Training &/or employment programs?
  - Worksite support?
  - Programs related to problems learners may be experiencing such as addiction, abuse, financial difficulties, family crises, mental health, other health matters, etc.?
  - Other programs in the community?

## Defining “Literacy”

5. How does your organization define “literacy?”
6. How does your program assess someone’s level of literacy? How much does the last grade level achieved weigh into your assessment of persons wanting to enter into your program?
7. Do you encourage persons reluctant to admit they have low or no literacy to become involved in your program? If so, how do you do this?
8. What kinds of materials do students learn to read?

## **Accommodating Persons with Disabilities**

9. Has your organization made physical accommodations and adaptations for persons with disabilities? What have these been?
10. Who, if anyone, have you consulted in order to make these accommodations/adaptations?
11. Can learners’ support workers/attendants come to the class? What, if any, concerns would your organization have if support workers were present?
12. Do you provide the following supports:
  - Time flexibility (day & evening classes, make-up sessions?)
  - Counselling?
  - Assistive technology?
  - Attendant care?
  - Transportation?
  - Employment related materials?

13. What methods do you use to teach literacy to persons with disabilities? How do you decide which methods to use?
14. How do you mark progress for learners with disabilities? Do you make accommodations for disabilities in your evaluation process?



## Appendix 2

### CONSENT FORM

The information gathered through this interview will be used to examine adult literacy programs in Manitoba regarding accommodations currently available for persons with disabilities and will identify gaps in accessibility in such programs that prevent persons with disabilities from full participation. This project will identify training needs for literacy instructors working with persons with disabilities. The National Literacy Secretariat is funding this study. No direct quotations from the interview will be used without your prior written permission. Any concerns regarding ethical considerations of this project can be referred to the:

Ethics Committee of the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies,  
56 The Promenade,  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3B 3H9,  
telephone (204) 287-8411,  
fax (204) 284-5343,  
TTY (204) 475-6222,  
email [ccds@disabilitystudies.ca](mailto:ccds@disabilitystudies.ca).

If you agree with the above, please reply to this email or in written format indicating that you consent to be interviewed.

## Appendix 3

### Participants Surveyed/Consulted\*

Age & Opportunity English for Seniors Program (Winnipeg)  
Association of Parents and Professionals for Literacy Education (Virden)  
BookMates, Inc. (Winnipeg)  
Brandon Friendship Centre  
Brandon Literacy Council  
Bridgeway Academy (Brandon)  
Canadian National Institute for the Blind (Winnipeg)  
Headingley Correctional Centre Education Program  
Interlake Adult Learning Association, Inc. (Arnes)  
Interlake Adult Learning Association, (Eriksdale)  
John Howard Society of Manitoba (Province wide)  
Lifelong Education for Adults: Reading & Numeracy Program (Russell,  
Rosburn, Roblin, St. Lazare, Birtle)  
Literacy Partners of Manitoba  
LiteracyWorks (Winnipeg)  
Manitoba Development Centre (Portage la Prairie)  
Milner Ridge Correctional Centre  
Norway House Education & Training  
Okno Women's Reading Class  
Pembina Valley Learning Centre (Winkler & surrounding area)  
Programs Using Lifelong Skills in Education, Inc. (Minnedosa)  
Samaritan House Training Centre (Brandon)  
Selkirk Mental Health Centre Rehabilitation Education Program  
Stony Mountain Education Centre  
Swan River Adult Education Program  
Victor Mager Adult Literacy Program (Winnipeg)  
West Elmwood Residents' Association (Winnipeg)

2 organizations requested not to be listed or identified in any way

## Appendix 4

### A LITERACY BILL OF RIGHTS

All persons, regardless of the extent or severity of their disabilities, have a basic right to use print. Beyond this general right, there are certain literacy rights that should be assured for all persons. These basic rights are:

The right to an **opportunity to learn** to read and write. **Opportunity** involves engagement in active participation in tasks performed with high success.

The right to **accessible**, clear, meaningful, culturally and linguistically appropriate **texts** at all times. **Texts**, broadly defined, range from picture books to newspapers to novels, cereal boxes and electronic documents.

The right to **interact** with others while reading, writing or listening to a text. **Interaction** involves questions, comments, discussions, and other communications about or related to the text.

The right to **life choices** made available through reading and writing competencies. **Life choices** include, but are not limited to, employment and employment changes, independence, community participation, and self-advocacy.

The right to **lifelong educational opportunities** incorporating literacy instruction and use. Literacy **educational opportunities**, regardless of when they are provided, have potential to provide power that cannot be taken away.

The right to have **teachers and other service providers who are knowledgeable** about literacy instruction methods and principles. **Methods** include but are not limited to instruction, assessment, and the technologies required to make literacy accessible to individuals with disabilities. **Principles** include, but are not limited to, the beliefs that literacy is learned across places and time, and no person is too disabled to benefit from literacy learning opportunities.

The right to live and learn in **environments** that provide **varied models of print use**. **Models** are demonstrations of purposeful print use such as reading a recipe, paying bills, sharing a joke, or writing a letter.

The right to live and learn in environments that maintain the expectations and **attitudes that all individuals are literacy learners**.

Yoder, D.E., Erickson, K.A., & Koppenhaver, D.A. (1996). **Centre for Literacy and Disability Studies**.