



Independent Living Resource Centre



ADULT LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES

A discussion of the challenges facing Adult Learners with disabilities.

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Adult Learners with Disabilities: Overcoming Barriers

A report of the findings following a series of consumer focus group discussions across Newfoundland and Labrador regarding the challenges facing Adult Learners with disabilities.

ILRC Focus Groups Adult Learners with Disabilities-2008



The **Independent Living Resource Centre (ILRC)** is a resource centre designed by and for people with disabilities.

We are...

- Located in St. John's, Newfoundland & Labrador, Canada
- A not-for-profit community based organization
- Managed by a consumer controlled volunteer board of directors
- Open to people who have any type(s) of disability
- A member of Independent Living Canada (IL Canada)

As well, we offer a wide range of disability related information, services and resources. Our goal is to support people in making informed decisions about their lives.

Independent Living is about:

- Having choices
- Making informed decisions
- Finding solutions that work for you
- Choosing where and how you want to live
- Taking risks
- Taking responsibility
- Managing your resources
- Controlling your own supports
- Learning from each other

A **consumer** is a person with a disability. Instead of being "patients" or "clients" we see ourselves as active and informed consumers of products, programs and services.

The following entails a narrative summation of a series of discussions facilitated by the Independent Living resource Centre in St. John's Newfoundland and Labrador (hereafter ILRC), in partnership with our colleagues at the Halifax ILRC. We are part of the Independent Living movement in Canada and are among the 28 Independent Living Centres under the umbrella organization Independent Living Canada.

The Halifax ILRC created a survey of questions designed to elicit discussion among consumers/ adult learners with disabilities. The ILRC in St. John's, facilitated a series of "**TOWN HALL**" meetings that took place across Newfoundland and Labrador during May-June 2008. In addition to these meetings the ILRC St. John's held a public meeting on June 11, 2008 in St. John's, specific to the barriers faced by Adult Learners. All meetings were open to anyone with any type(s) of disability. Individuals identified as having physical, sensory, intellectual, psychological and invisible barriers.

Our discussions took us to:

<i>Location</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Number Attending</i>
St. John's	May 20, 2008, June 11, 2008	63 + 14 = 77
Clareville	May 21, 2008	4
Carbonear	May 22, 2008	11
Stephenville	May 26, 2008	17
Grand Falls/ Windsor	May 28, 2008	27
Corner Brook	May 27, 2008	21
Goose Bay	June 19, 2008	12
Email Responses		7
	TOTAL	176



Findings

1. The perceptions and attitudes of educational professionals towards Adult Learners with Disabilities often prevent appropriate accommodations.

Once a person is labeled, professionals tend to see the label and not the person.

It became quickly evident throughout our focus group discussions that it was difficult to discuss Adult Learner barriers

"Combin' my hair... that's the first thing on my list of skills in life!" said one consumer. "I thought life skills was how to survive not how to groom vourself."

without first paying homage to their experiences within the school system. From K-12, “special” educational streams were established for people labeled “delayed.” These “streams or units” were described by consumers as devaluing and demeaning; “teaching things like life skills” – or as one consumer put it “how to comb your hair.” The perception at some level as one individual said was to “...protect the student from failure...”, which in the professionals’ eyes’, “...seemed inevitable.” With these sort of preconceived notions regarding a learners’ ability or lack of ability, there was little likelihood of success for the individual. The educator had already given up on the learner and ostensibly made the decision that the potential contribution of the individual was negligible.

One learner discussed her experience after receiving a label of “Mental Retardation.” Prior to receiving the label she was treated “...like everyone else,” however upon acquiring the label, all opportunities seemed to be removed. She described discussing her educational goals with teachers and administration who, simply dismissed her and denied her the opportunity as she put it “...even to fail.”

Instructors sometimes see accommodations as “special treatment” that gives Adult Learners with disabilities an unfair advantage.

Instructors have also suggested that they cannot properly test Adult Learners with disabilities if they are required to make certain accommodations. In one situation, an instructor denied a note taker to his student who identified as hard of hearing. The instructor maintained that he was testing the ability of his students to interpret a presentation through the notes he took. The instructor refused to discuss any other possible accommodation for the student, but rather insisted the individual take his own notes, a task the student had indicated they could not do on their own. This type of experience was common to many consumers.

Many programs require work-term placements from their students; however, there is no attempt to ensure that the agencies, organizations or businesses that offer a placement are accessible.

Universities and their individual departments claim that they have no control over accommodations and accessibility in the community during work-term placements. Consumers said, "We expect our universities to lead the way and set an example for our communities, or should we expect a student who uses a wheelchair to work in a building with two steps at the front door?" Another consumer noted, "Imagine having...(for example) a department of social work that forces its students into situations....(that as Social Workers) we try to take our clients out of?"

2. Educational program accommodations need organizational infrastructure if Adult Learners' with disabilities are to have full access to the education of their choice.

Adult Learners with disabilities do not always have an established support system within the educational institution of their choice. In these instances the students feel overwhelmed and alone.

Adult Learners described the challenge of advocating for their own accommodations. They **alone** ensure that the accommodations are provided; in short, they are the only quality control system in place. If new accommodations are needed, (as in the case of a progressive disability) or if instructors change, the individual is solely responsible for discussing accommodations with instructors and often defending their right to receive them. One student was enrolled in a course where there was a guest lecturer **every** class. It was left up to her to identify the required accommodations before each class. She said, "I felt like I was ambushing my instructors. This is not a system that is accommodating the needs of the student." Unfortunately, many consumers felt that they were the people accommodating a complex, poorly designed system.

"There is one accessible room but the RA/ Proctor has it..." said one individual, " I know it should be mine and if it was for someone else I'd be all over it" [getting accommodations in place] "but if it's for me...I'll just deal with it."

Workload accommodations are needed.

Adult Learners with disabilities feel that our society puts an unreasonable amount of emphasis on the time in which someone can complete a task. Educational programs are usually inflexible

“The campus is pretty accessible but attitude is a barrier. There is resistance to creating modified programs for people with disabilities.”

with respect to both course load and the time it takes to complete assignments within a course. This issue came up in every discussion held throughout the province. Many

consumers described this as a barrier for Adult Learners with disabilities that may require more time to complete assignments and tests. This should not be equated with an inability to perform the task required. Often the increased time needed is related to the inaccessibility of an assigned task. These rigidly structured programs need to acknowledge the diversity of Adult Learners with disabilities or run the risk of excluding a segment of the population that has a valuable contribution to make.

Investment must be made in instructional settings other than the classroom.

“My Son has ADD and I am struggling to have him stay in school - He needs supports but is falling through the cracks.”

Consumers felt that “the classroom is not the world”, and learning styles of Adult Learners with disabilities are as different as the learning styles of everyone in society. One person

indicated “...that the confines of the classroom, is itself a disability related barrier.” Cooperative approaches to education and a renewed sense of the value of apprenticeships/internships increase the choices available and the potential flexibility of Adult Learning situations.

- 3. Accessibility is needed in housing, campus buildings, information, (including the provision of alternate formats) and in transportation if students are to be accommodated.**

Housing arrangements must be accessible if Adult Learners with disabilities are to have a fair and equal chance at post-secondary education.

There is insufficient accessible on-campus housing. There are regular delays in receiving necessary housing modifications, “... I was waiting over one month for an accessible desk in my dorm.... They finally cut a piece out of the one that was there so that I could get my chair in...”. There is inconsistent availability of accessible housing from one year to the next, and the general fragmented and inconsistent housing conditions, which is not limited to just one institution, leads to difficulties for Adult Learners with disabilities. It should be noted that incomplete accessibility is not accessibility.

“Accessibility on campus is not as good as you may think” said one consumer. Adult learners using wheelchairs have indicated that they have had to travel far and wide to find an accessible

bathroom, that instructor's offices are not always accessible and that elevators are often out of order. Even the ***graduation ceremonies*** at some institutions are inaccessible to the adult learners who use wheelchairs. Another consumer described a "Bomb-Scare" while attending a class on the 4th floor of a building and no access to an elevator (due to bomb threat). The individual said " I was carried by four of my buddies down over 4 flights of stairs and me in a 300lb chair."

Problems with attaining accessible housing, inaccessibility on campus and inflexible programs, have required some Adult Learners with disabilities to attend multiple institutions in an effort to; find a more accessible environment; to accommodate the changing nature of their disability; or simply to find some way of achieving their academic goals.

This has had the undesired affect of "fragmenting" some student's academic records. This presents a major challenge with the policy that most post secondary institutions have which require that the student complete the majority of their studies at one institution. This has prevented some students from receiving their diploma/degree although they had completed more than enough courses. One Adult Learner talked about having received some 60 credits from 2 different universities. Because neither university could accommodate the individuals' disability, the individual could not meet the criteria outlined by the institutions to be awarded their Diploma.

Transportation provided by schools and in communities is generally inaccessible.

A bus may be provided for field trips and other outings but it is most often, physically inaccessible. Inaccessibility within the transit system, in most cities, and failures within a poorly funded, para-transit system, affect the choices available to Adult Learners with disabilities. Some Adult Learners will choose to pursue on-line or at-home courses because transportation is so difficult to arrange, recognizing it may not be their desired course of study. Other consumers discussed the barriers encountered related to accessible technology when they have chosen online learning opportunities. "...we only have dial-up in our part of the province."

Consumers that live outside St. John's have difficulty getting any accessible transportation for educational pursuits, as there is no public transportation and transportation in general is more expensive. "I live just outside the city limits. It is very costly....the last quote I received from them was \$45.00 return trip."

- 4. Adult Learners with disabilities experience multiple financial barriers related to accessing learning opportunities.**

Many Adult Learners with disabilities do not have an income that adequately supports their learning goals.

Adult Learners with disabilities have indicated that the cost of pursuing education is a significant barrier. One individual said, "I am 40 years old and I have a learning disability... I need money to go back to school. It costs \$1500 to get an assessment in order to prove I need supports... where do I get \$1500 when I'm not working?" Individuals also discussed their feelings when they have been told their only option is to access an Income Support program to get funding for school. One individual said, "My family has been paying for my (supports) all my life but now because I want to go to school I have to go on Social Services. I can't afford to pay for my own (supports) and pay for school as well."

"... I have encouraged people to go on income support just so that they can access a service, such as funding to go back to school!" said one professional.

The issues related to financial barriers of Adult Learners with disabilities are inequitable.

- There is little funding for the necessary tutors required by Adult Learners with learning disabilities. Many Adult Learners who identified as having learning disabilities discussed the types of disability related supports necessary for success with their learning goals. Tutors are clearly a support that Adult Learners identified as being essential. However, there is little or no funding available for this support. It was suggested by one consumer that the Educational Institution create a ***student tutor program*** whereby the

tutors could receive credit on transcripts for their volunteer work and those requiring extra support could receive it free of charge.

- Student loans are not an option for many people with disabilities. As one person said, "I went to school to make something of myself. Social Services wouldn't pay so I got a student loan. Then I had to find a job, pay for my rent and stuff like everyone else and I had to pay off the loan and also pay for all my disability related supports and my attendant. I ended up back on social services." Repayment is more difficult for many consumers because they must also pay for their disability related supports.
- There are long waits for the funding necessary to register for adult education. Individuals discussed many issues related to wait times for educational programs. Consumers reported wait times of 2-3 years for access to specific adult education programs.
- Consumers felt there is poor coordination between registration of adult education programs and the approval of provincial funding programs such as LMAPD. Consumers reported that they may be approved for one with a lengthy waitlist for the other.
- Eligibility requirements for funding programs can be prohibitively strict. Take, for example, LMAPD. If an Adult Learner with a disability has worked in the past three years, they are required to wait until they are no longer EI eligible.

"I'm tired of getting the run around. Just talk to me straight. Give ME the information and I can make the choice for myself."

- Consumers are not informed of funding options for their education. Consumers reported being unaware of many options that they could avail of. They feel there should be a place where they could go to get information.



The Black Spruce, which proudly we display as our logo, is an emblem of strength, which thrives even when the odds weigh heavily against it. Like the Black Spruce the ILRC gains strength with each new consumer and each new barrier that is removed. We know that each time we share our voice and our experience; each time we speak up and challenge inequity; each time we make our own choice, we grow in strength because we are living the Independent Living Philosophy.