

Literacy Survey of Disability Serving Agencies

2007

Bow Valley College
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One in four Canadians with disabilities has personally faced at least some discrimination in getting a good education.¹

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Abstract

The Literacy Survey of Disability Serving Agencies project (Literacy Survey) was an applied research project initiated by the Speech Assisted Reading and Writing (SARAW) adult literacy program at Bow Valley College, Calgary. Data for the survey was gathered from interviews with 33 staff members from 29 Calgary agencies that serve adults with disabilities. This shortened report explores two themes arising from the results of the Literacy Survey:

- what an ideal inclusive adult literacy program would look like and
- disability practitioners' ideas of what community inclusion is.

Input from the Literacy Survey has been used to create a new part time inclusive adult literacy program for adults with and without disabilities, reading at between grade 2 and 4 levels – the Adult Basic Literacy Education (ABLE) class at Bow Valley College.

For a copy of the full report, including the third theme (how people's understanding of inclusion affects their vision of an ideal inclusive adult literacy program), Literature Review, Methodology and more, please contact Belle Auld, phone (403) 410-1503.

Definitions

Definitions for the purposes of the Literacy Survey:

Disabilities

- A physical or mental impairment that prevents or restrict 'normal' achievement. For the purposes of this project we are including physical and developmental disabilities. We are not including learning disabilities.

Inclusion

- "Inclusion goes beyond mere physical presence to encompass meaningful participation." (Bailey & Wagar, 2005)

Literacy

- "The ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential" – International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), 1994
- Basic reading, writing, and math skills. According to Alberta Employment and Immigration, literacy education is grade levels 1 – 6.

¹ *Advancing the inclusion of people with disabilities: A Government of Canada report.* (Ottawa: 2004) 29.

Background

The primary purpose of the Literacy Survey research was to gather input from agencies that serve adults with disabilities about how Bow Valley College could improve literacy programming for adults with disabilities, particularly to be proactive so adults with disabilities could participate at the College in meaningful ways. In the Academic Accommodations policy, 2007 Bow Valley College stated that it is “committed to an inclusive, barrier-free learning environment in which all learners, including learners with disabilities, have access to education and where all learners feel included and valued.”

The Literacy Survey took place between June 2006 and May 2007. It involved 56 questions, conducted in 30 minute in person (or phone) interviews with 33 people representing 29 agencies: 18 managers, 6 support workers, 8 others and 1 volunteer. “Others” included: Advocate, Speech Language Pathologist, Educational Specialist, Teacher/facilitator, Employment Coordinator, Intake Coordinator, Program Facilitator, Plain Language Facilitator.

Based on the results of the survey, a small inclusive adult literacy classroom was piloted at Bow Valley College between September and December 2008. The Adult Basic Literacy Education (ABLE) class included seven students reading at grades 2 – 4 levels. In addition, 11 other suggestions for improvements within SARAW and/or Bow Valley College were pulled from Survey data.

Key Findings

1. Vision of an ideal inclusive adult literacy program:

The results of the survey indicate that disability-serving agencies would like to see an adult literacy program that:

- teaches reading, writing, math; possibly incorporating life-skills and social skills
- in a small group classroom (5 learners or slightly larger)
- in an educational institution
- for 3 – 8 hrs per week.

The class would use a combination of instructors, volunteers and support workers. The learners could attend indefinitely if desired.

2. Survey respondents’ definition of community inclusion:

100 % of the survey respondents agreed that community inclusion was a positive idea for people with disabilities. The key terms most often identified in how respondents described what community inclusion meant to them were:

- being part of and/or participating in the community in equal ways,
- community inclusion as a basic human right that the community needs to accommodate and provide access,
- friendships and natural supports,
- independence and choice.

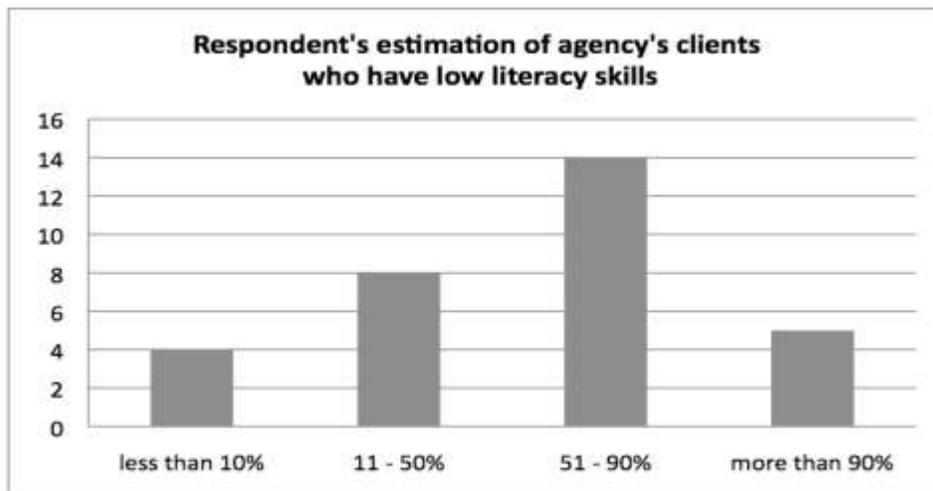
Findings and Discussion

Note – respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer and more than one key term could be identified from each response – therefore percentages often add up to more than 100%.

Background - Need for literacy skills upgrading

Staff working with people with disabilities, for the most part, realized there is a huge need for literacy skills upgrading in this population.

- 28/29 respondents (96.6%) said ‘yes’ their agency had clients who did not have good reading, writing and math skills
- 1 respondent was new to the field and didn’t know.
- 61.3% (19/31) estimated that more than 50% of their clients had low literacy skills (below grade 7 levels). (Represented on the chart by the last two categories – 51-90% and more than 90%.)
- A small percentage (12.9% - 4/31 respondents) believed there were fewer than 10% of their clients who had low literacy skills.



In fact “approximately 50% of Canadian adults with disabilities experience literacy barriers” and “people with disabilities make up a disproportionate amount of the 48% of Canadian adults who function at the two lowest literacy levels.” (Gardner, 2004). As one Survey respondent said “people with disabilities have enough barriers – [low] literacy is one more barrier ... enhancing people’s literacy skills helps break down one of many barriers they face.” Another talked about the how the “educational system [had] disabled” people with disabilities by not being able to provide them with the reading and writing skills they need.

Poor reading and writing skills impact people’s daily lives. For example, problems clients experience because of low literacy skills, as identified by survey respondents included:

- Filling out forms – 31/31 (100%)
- Figuring out how much money to pay when buying something – 29 (93.6%)
- Reading the bus schedule, reading menus, and writing phone messages – 28 (90.3%)
- Reading signs – 22 (71%)

One respondent gave a real life example of how low literacy could impact a person’s life: one client “would get bills and put them away because he couldn’t read them”.

1. Vision of an ideal inclusive adult literacy program

What an ideal inclusive adult literacy program would teach

100% of respondents said an inclusive adult literacy program would teach reading.

31/32 (96.9%) said it would teach writing

29/32 (90.5%) included math.

Lifeskills was mentioned by 13/32 (40.5%)

Social skills was mentioned by 11 respondents (34.4%).

One respondent warned about focusing too much or too long on lifeskills and ‘readiness’ training: “lifeskills and readiness training are often a default, instead of having people take part in the community”. Another suggested the “curriculum [be] developed by people with low literacy skills”.

Where it would operate

This question was open-ended.

- 65.2% of respondents (21/32) said it should operate at an educational institution
- 21.9% (7 respondents) thought it should operate at a rehabilitation agency.

In addition, 12 respondents (37.5%) identified accessibility as an issue in the comments section of this question.

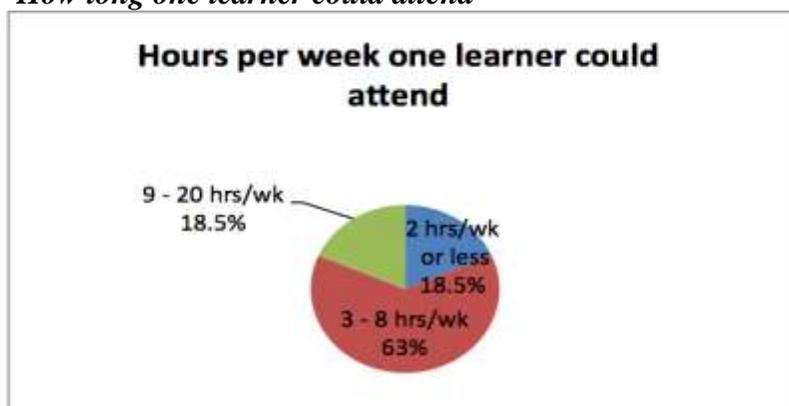
Suggestions around ‘where’ included: “make it practical and if possible, not always classroom based (eg trips to the zoo) –literacy in daily life” and “pod learning – broken up into learning teams”.

How it would operate

84.4% (27/32 respondents) indicated that the inclusive class should use a combination of instructors, volunteers and support workers. Additional suggestions included:

- “mentoring – 1 on 1 – doesn’t need to be teacher. Teacher [can] provide procedural methods of teaching. Once the format is established, mentoring is a good way to go – either peer or volunteer.”
- “classroom 4 hrs/wk; tutors 4 hrs/wk”
- “counselor available in program – comes into class occasionally”.

How long one learner could attend



- 63% (17/27) of respondents chose 3 – 8 hrs per week
- 5 (18.5%) chose 9 – 20 hrs per wk
- 5 chose less than 2 hrs per week.

Several (3) commented that it depended on the individual.

14/26 respondents (53.9%) said one learner should be allowed to attend indefinitely; 7/26 (27%) said one six-month semester; 3 (11.5%) said one full year; 2 (7.7%) said two to five years. One respondent worded many people’s concern that we all have “different speeds of learning”. One person cautioned that “it is not good that some people [do] the same program for a very long time”. Another suggested that the program “set [a time] limit – eg. [learner] can go one year then take one year off before going back”.

How many learners the program would accommodate

- 51.5% of respondents (17/31) said the class should be between 2 – 5 learners
- 38.8% (12/31) said more than six
- 3 respondents (9%) chose one (the one-on-one model rather than a classroom setting).

Note – one respondent gave more than one answer.

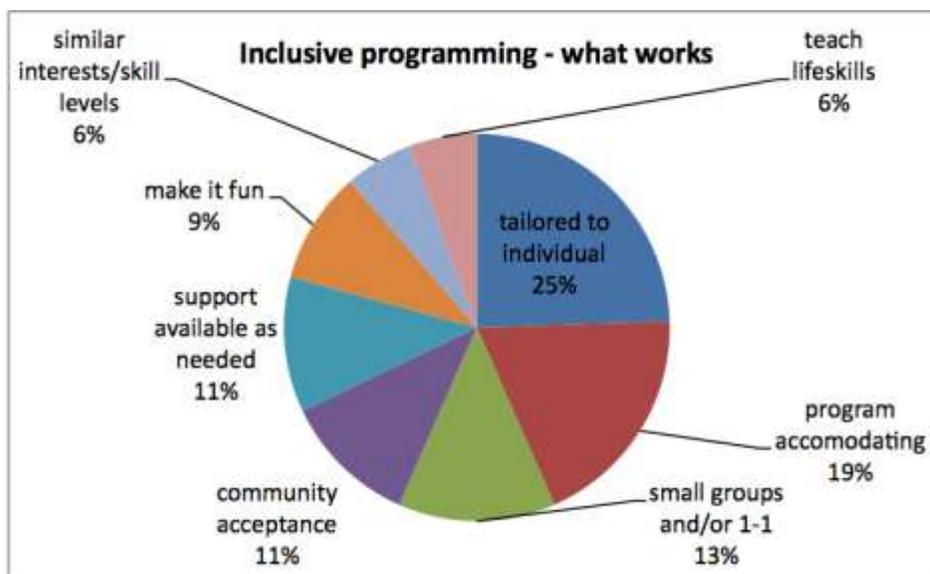
Several respondents talked about the importance of ratio of people with disabilities to those without – that there be fewer people with disabilities. One suggested the “global ratio of 1 to 6”.²

Inclusive programming - what works

Several Survey questions explored what contributed to an inclusive environment. One question asked:

When you think about programs you have run, or have seen run, that were successful in creating meaningful participation of adults with disabilities in the community - **what worked?**

Here are the results:



² Statistics Canada, Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2006. www.statscan.gc.ca. Retrieved Feb 20, 2009.

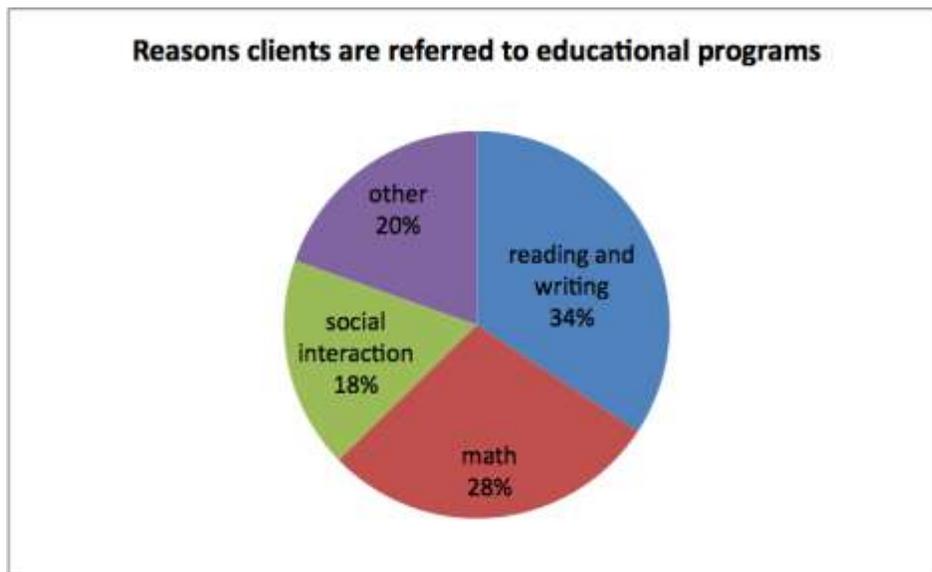
The overwhelming response was the need to tailor the program to the individual and that the program itself needed to accommodate for individuals (a total of 43.5% of respondents identified these). Another 13.2% said the program needed to be delivered in either a small group or a one-on-one setting.

Literacy programming and community inclusion

Data from the Survey indicates that social interaction is one of the reasons people are referred to adult literacy and/or other educational programs. One Survey respondent talked about her experience working with two people with developmental disabilities in her class – one student “came just for the social things. [This] student’s writing hasn’t improved, but [his] social interaction skills have improved. There is value in that.”

Total numbers referred to/for:

- 34.3% reading & writing
- 28.4% math
- 19.6% other*
- 17.7% social interaction.



*Other included: employment training and job placement, recreational (such as dance and drama), computer skills and volunteering.

Although the need for literacy skills upgrading is great, the push to have people with disabilities integrated into the community is just as great. At least one respondent indicated that it was more important to their agency that their client be included, than whether the literacy program helped that individual improve reading and writing skills – that the value was “the pride the person experiences in going to college”. One talked about college being “a valued setting”. Another respondent commented on the fact that there was sometimes no choice except a segregated one “if they don’t want the segregated choice, there is no choice”. These two comments indicate dilemmas that staff face.

Firstly, staff at rehabilitation agencies face the dilemma of whether or not to send their clients to an adult literacy program that is not inclusive. Do they send clients anyways, knowing it is a segregated, non-inclusive environment - in order to help them improve their reading and writing skills with the goal that increased skills will help them be more included in today's world? Or do staff stick to the principle of not sending clients to a segregated environment when there is no other choice, knowing that their clients need literacy skills upgrading? When they do send clients to educational programs, is the primary goal social interaction or education? Is it fair to an individual to send her/him to a program when that individual may not be interested in the content of the program (ie. they are there for social interaction only)?

Educational institutions also face dilemmas. Firstly, is it fair to a class to have students who are not interested in the course content (ie. who are there for social interaction only)? Secondly, if programs modify their entrance requirements to allow individuals with disabilities entrance into a program, when those individuals are not working at the minimum levels required for entry into that program – is that program still considered a “valued” program? Or does that program then risk being perceived as a place where adults with disabilities congregate and therefore no longer an ideal environment for inclusion?

On the Literacy Survey, there seemed to be no agreement as to whether there would be value in lowering entrance standards and/or modifying programs so that people with disabilities could be included in classrooms where they would not normally attend. In response to a question about auditing Bow Valley College courses 4 respondents (17.4%) suggested modifying programs to accommodate individuals. From another point of view, one respondent said: “for some individuals (especially elderly who have not been integrated when young), the comfort level ... might be more with their peers, or they feel overwhelmed or not comfortable”.

2. Survey respondents' definition of community inclusion:

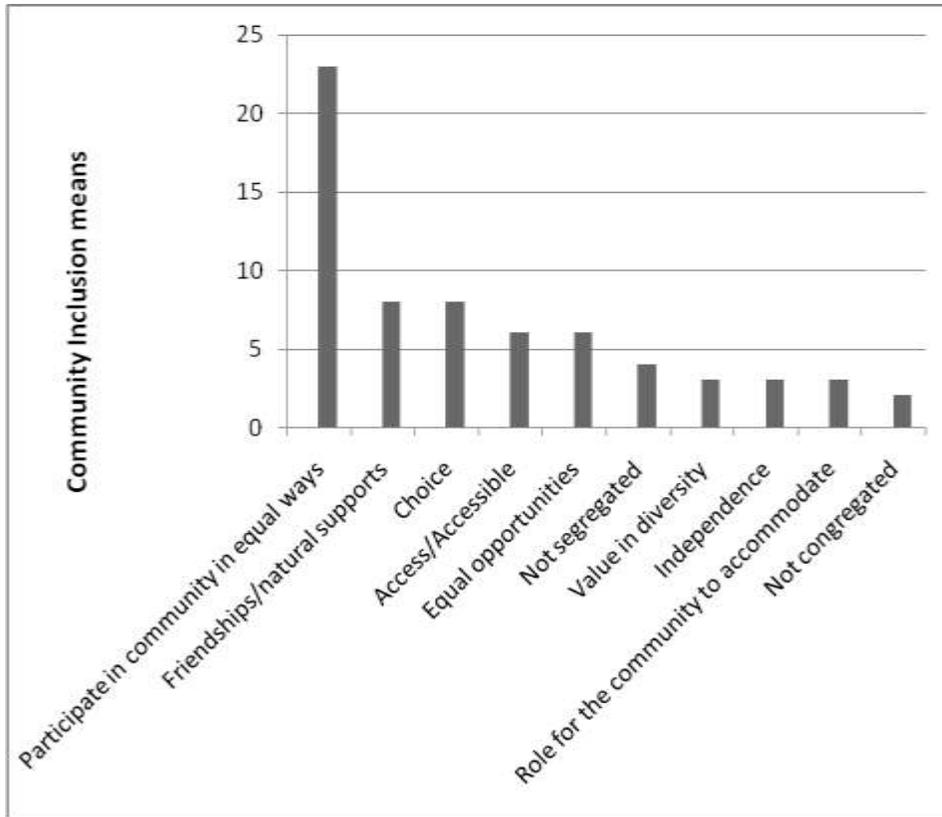
For the purposes of this project, survey participants were provided with a definition of community inclusion (“going beyond mere physical presence to incorporate meaningful participation”). However, participants were also asked what community inclusion meant to them. Participants' own definitions varied.

What community inclusion is:

Key terms identified in Survey responses for the definition of community inclusion:

- 26 out of 33 respondents (86.7%) defined community inclusion as being part of and/or participating in the community in equal ways;
- 10 of 33 respondents (33.4%) believe community inclusion is a basic human right and that the community needs to accommodate and provide access.
- 6 responses (11.1%) included the importance of friendships and natural supports as part of community inclusion.
- Another 11.1% (6 responses) identified the importance of independence and choice in the definition of community inclusion.

Note – percentages total more than 100 as each respondent identified several aspects of community inclusion in their definition.

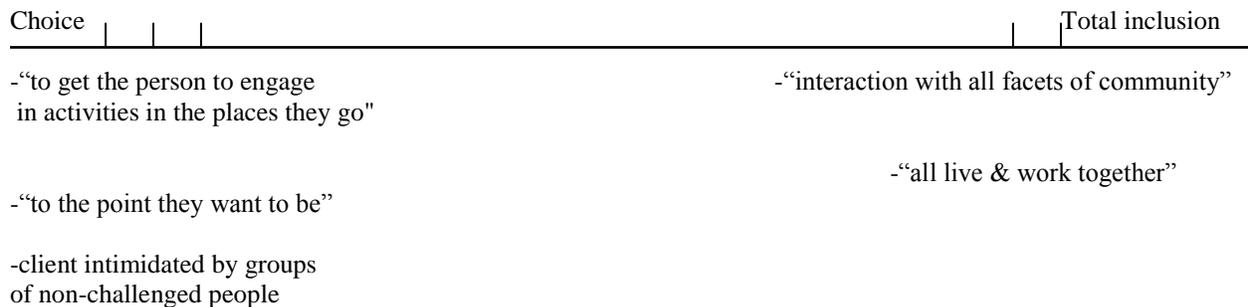


Some of the ways respondents talked about community inclusion included:

- “treat as you would treat anyone – is the bottom line”
- “We [all] need to belong”
- “interaction with all facets of community”
- “integrated”
- “not segregated”
- not congregated in groups – “they blend in & don’t stand out”.

One respondent summed up community inclusion: “being able to participate to the best of their ability, with support as needed”. Another put it simply as “working myself out of a job”.

Definitions from the five support workers who answered this question seemed to range along a continuum: two at one end stressing the importance of choice; the other three talking about the ideal of total inclusion:



What community inclusion is not

In addition to what respondents said community inclusion was, there were as many qualifiers - as many descriptions of what community inclusion was not. One manager stated “it is not community inclusion to support a person to be part of a group if they don’t want to be there. [It is] not a shove out the door and say ‘here’s inclusion’”. A support worker talked about the importance of choosing situations that are appropriate to the person, of trying “to get the person to engage in activities in the places they go [instead of just being in] situations they may not even comprehend”. Another support worker commented that inclusion also “depends on worker & ability to include the person; depends on client and ability to include themselves”.

On one hand - one manager stated that in an inclusive world we “wouldn’t see people congregated with people such as themselves” and another said that people would “not [be] congregated in large groups”. On the other hand - a support worker said “like any other sector of people – wherever you go you’re going to feel more comfortable with people that are like minded”. One support worker gave the example that her client was intimidated by groups of non-challenged adults. Another respondent talked about the importance of “facilitation to make sure person has casual supportive relationships with peers”.

Inclusion and choice

All five support workers who answered this question, and several managers, qualified their definition of community inclusion by adding the importance of choice. For example, one person said “they have the right to choose to go to a segregated activity if they wish”. Another said “segregated is ok if they choose. [It is] important to maintain relationships between people with disabilities”. (This was identified in 5/6 comments to the question about the importance of inclusion). Another support worker qualified her definition of community inclusion: “as long as the worker is not just using it as an activity, the individual has to be interested, it has to be valuable to them”. “Just sitting there doesn’t mean participation,” said another support worker. Another support worker indicated that there is “a lot of wasted time... not quality time [and that sometimes people are taken to] certain activities... that, if you asked the people, they didn’t really care to go and didn’t enjoy it”.

Some respondents questioned the things done in the name of community inclusion and the assumptions made about the value of inclusion:

The assumption is that the only kind of interaction that’s valuable to a person with a disability, is that with a non-disabled person. If a person chooses to be with a group of people with disabilities, this is not a valued relationship and labelled segregated. ... the values we are teaching – ‘you have to be more like the people who think you are not valuable’ – we’re teaching people shame.

The value of community inclusion

In question 30, which asked why community inclusion is good, responses included:

- part of/contribute to community (51.5%)
- makes a positive difference in lives (45.5%)

Other responses included the fact that it is a basic human right (36.4%) and that we all have, or will have, disabilities (18.2%).

Inclusion - benefit to individual

Comments included:

- “People thrive in community with each other and languish when they’re not”.
- “When you’re included, you’re valued.”
- “an opportunity to develop ... to fullest potential”
- “sense of self worth”
- “people feel productive and valued”
- “like any person they get fulfillment from being an included person in their community”.

Several people talked about the fact there is more opportunity for abuse when people with disabilities are isolated – that people are safer when included.

Inclusion - benefit to community

People with disabilities have “lots to contribute” according to one manager. Another manager talked about

Skill shortages in Calgary that could be helped if people took the time to train people with disabilities. . . .So many talented people with disabilities... so much to offer. [The community is] missing by not including [these people].

Community inclusion – what doesn’t work

When asked why some programs that try to be inclusive fail, the following key terms emerged:

- Programs/activities not appropriate and/or at too high a level – 13/31 (41.9%)
- Programs not client driven – 10/31 (32.3%)
- Programs try to force integration – 7/31 (22.6%).

One manager commented that “workers who aren’t grounded in the framework of inclusion, paying lip service without understanding” contribute to attempts at community inclusion not being successful. Another manager thought that there was “too much individual work” – that working in groups was better. One respondent suggested that

Community inclusion can sometimes go too far. . . .Relationships between people with disabilities [are] important.... in eagerness to pursue integration [we sometimes] cut those off. [We all need the] opportunity to connect with others with similar life experiences.

In the open-ended question #56 “other comments”, 3/22 people (13.64%) commented that inclusivity was not always possible or appropriate. One respondent said simply “not every activity can be met in an inclusive way”. When talking specifically about literacy programming, one person said “we have to keep in mind we are not equal academically. Even though we would like to be inclusive, we have to be realistic about what is appropriate”.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Results from the Literacy Survey indicated that community inclusion is an important consideration for agency staff when looking for literacy programming for adults with disabilities. Indeed, sometimes staff will not refer a client who does not read and write well, to a literacy program if that program was not inclusive in nature. The Survey also discovered that staff sometimes referred clients to programs for community inclusion/social interaction purposes, as opposed to sending them strictly to improve their reading and writing skills. (18% of respondents indicated that they referred clients to educational programs for social interaction.)

Survey results also indicated that managers and support workers alike had concerns about the discrepancy between the ideal of community inclusion and how it was played out in the daily lives of adults with disabilities. While the majority of agency staff described community inclusion as being part of and/or participating in the community in equal ways, what constitutes participation – what it meant in practical terms – was often interpreted quite differently. There were also varying opinions around the issue of personal choice. Many Survey respondents qualified their definitions of inclusion by talking about the importance of choice; in particular, whether people with disabilities socializing with others with disabilities should be considered congregation and segregation, and therefore not a good thing, or whether it was important to maintain relationships between people with disabilities as supportive relationships among peers. Some respondents were concerned that the ideal of community inclusion was not always appropriate or possible, and even that inclusion could be taken too far. That we may even be teaching people shame by encouraging them to be part of a community that does not value them. One comment by a Survey respondent perhaps summed up the dilemma: that there is a problem with “workers who are not grounded in the framework of inclusion, paying lip service without understanding”.

Although the Literacy Survey identified a number of themes and questions around inclusive adult literacy programming, it was not designed to do an in-depth analysis. The Survey did identify parameters for an ideal inclusive adult literacy program, and as a result, Bow Valley College has created the part time, non-credit, Adult Basic Literacy Education (ABLE) program.

A number of key terms were identified in respondents’ definitions of community inclusion: most specifically “being part of and/or participating in the community in equal ways”. However, a number of questions were raised by the survey results. Ultimately this survey perhaps raised more questions than it answered. For example, dichotomies emerged – on two sides of a continuum:

- between, on one end - maintaining relationships between/among people with disabilities; and on the other end - congregation and segregation
- between, on one end - people being ‘included’ for inclusion’s sake (and maybe pushing them past their normal comfort level); and on the other end - people doing what they want and are comfortable with
- between, on one end - people attending literacy programs to improve reading and writing skills; and on the other end - people attending programs for the sake of social interaction.

There is certainly opportunity for further exploration.

Based on the findings from the Survey, the following recommendations to strengthen the efforts for inclusive education models in adult literacy programming include:

- Those who work in the disabilities field are encouraged to explore how the ideology of inclusion is being played out in daily life in the actions of community resource workers/support workers and the adults with disabilities they serve. To look at any possible discrepancy between the theory of inclusion and the practice of inclusion.
- That no ideology be placed above an individual's wishes, desires, happiness, and comfort level. Specific to literacy, that an individual's preferences and choices of literacy programs not be superseded by rigid ideology.
- Those who work in the adult literacy field are encouraged to examine the experience of providing literacy programming to adults with disabilities. If they do not currently provide services to adults with disabilities – why not? Programs are encouraged to put hard facts and statistics and actual experiences to the possible myths surrounding providing service to adults with disabilities, compared to providing services to adults with no diagnosed disabilities. If literacy programs have been directed by funders that their mandate does not include providing services to adults with disabilities – literacy coordinators are encouraged to ask why not.
- It should go without saying, but deserves to be put into words anyways, that we are all encouraged to look not at our differences, but our similarities. Specifically within the two fields – adult literacy and disabilities – so much of the underlying principles are the same. The reality is that most adults with low literacy skills are disadvantaged in some way and have learning difficulties, whether they have a diagnosed disability or not. If the ABLE pilot is representative, a small adult literacy classroom (where participants are working at approximately the same levels) is an ideal inclusive environment – where participants are, for the most part, unaware that some of them have disabilities.
- There is perhaps the opportunity for further study on inclusive college campuses that would look at different educational programs and student supports (eg. Assistive Technology Labs, academic accommodations etc.) as well as college wide services such as cafeterias and registrars.

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