

Research Bulletin

An Update on IL Canada's Literacy and Quality of Life Project

June 2010

Literacy Partnerships Working Together for Independent Living

By

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This is the second bulletin of the IL Canada national project *'Making a Connection: Literacy, Disability and Quality of Life'*. Now in its final year, the initiative is beginning to wind down. At our five pilot sites, the Literacy Coordinators are doing final interviews with consumers who took part in the project over the past two years. Nancy Hansen and Diane Driedger, the academic co-investigators, are working on compiling and analyzing the data from these consumer participants to find out about their literacy journeys. What have they learned and encountered along the way? Has literacy made a difference in their lives? This will be the subject of our last bulletin in fall 2010. We are also currently developing a Partnership Guide, and this second bulletin will focus on the partnerships that our five IL Centers have established with literacy providers in their communities. The five sites are as follows:

- Cowichan Independent Living, Duncan BC;
- Vernon Independent Living, BC;
- North Saskatchewan ILC, Saskatoon, SK;
- Independent Living Resource Centre Thunder Bay, ON; and
- Independent Living Nova Scotia Association, Halifax, NS

(To the right of the text is a graphic of a young man who is carrying a book and using a white cane.)



Each of the sites has established one or more partnerships with literacy providers in their local areas. Overall, the partnerships have been successful. Learning has gone both ways: the literacy providers have brought new insights and skills to teaching literacy to persons with

disabilities, and the IL Centres have taught the literacy providers about various kinds of disability accommodations and supports. The Participatory Action Research or PAR approach to this project enabled this learning exchange between IL Centres and their literacy partners.

In fact from the outset of the project, the literacy providers were included in project activities, a prime example being the Think Tank that took place in Ottawa in 2007. This meeting included IL literacy coordinators from each Centre site, the investigator, Diane Driedger, and a literacy provider representative from each of the five pilot site communities. This was the beginning of discussions between the IL Centres and literacy providers. First, the Think Tank laid out principles of Participatory Action Research. Then we decided on principles of literacy as more than reading and writing; for us literacy is about “meaning-making”. We discovered at the Think Tank that the literacy providers and the IL Centres were on the same page in this regard. Everyone understood literacy in this broader sense. This was the starting point for working together for the duration of the project.

Nancy and Diane talked with the literacy providers recently to see what they thought of their partnerships with the IL Centres. Providers reported, overall, that the working relationship with the IL Centre in their community has been beneficial.

Debbie Schiller, from Literacy Junction in Vernon, has learned from IL Vernon about persons with disabilities over the years, as she knew of their work in the community before a literacy partnership was consolidated. In turn, she has taught the IL staff about “plain language” usage. Plain language is writing at a level where everyone with a reading level of around Grade Six can understand. Diane was able to take the plain language workshop with the IL Centre staff while on her visit to Vernon in January 2010. Chandra McCann of the Okanagan College Volunteer Tutoring Programme has also worked with the Vernon IL Centre over the past few years, and subsequently became the IL Centre’s second literacy partner.

In Duncan, at the Cowichan Centre, some consumers have benefited from being involved in the Reading and Writing Centre’s literacy programmes. The Cowichan Centre has also continued to develop new literacy partnerships. They recently created a partnership with their Community Literacy Coordinator. As well two IL consumers with learning disabilities shared their experiences at a meeting attended by 24 other literacy providers in the Cowichan area.

The Thunder Bay Literacy Group has played a role in training staff to do in-house literacy tutoring in Thunder Bay. Most of the consumers there go to the IL Centre for in-house tutoring from IL staff, and have developed good relationships with those tutors over the past two years. On the other hand, the IL Centre in Saskatoon has an entirely different relationship with their literacy provider, Jean McKen at SCORE. All of the classes take place at SCORE for the IL Centre consumers. Further, many IL consumers in Saskatoon have graduated with their high school equivalency, the GED.

In Halifax, Access to Community Education and Employment (ACEE) has recently begun work with the IL Centre. Literacy project consumers have joined their young people's literacy programme, which is also preparing them for employability.

We believe that consumers have benefited from being integrated into existing literacy services in their communities. In Duncan, consumers can feel good about attending the Employability Skills Programme, held on the campus of the Vancouver Island University. Deb Provencher, the coordinator there, reported that they feel they are going to "college". In addition to reading and writing, they learn skills in independent living, somewhat similar to the support that the IL Centre in Duncan offers to persons with disabilities. Indeed, throughout this project, we have learned that the literacy providers and the IL Centres have been on the same philosophical page about literacy contributing to independent living.

(Below is a graphic of a young woman working at her computer. She uses a wheelchair.)



Our next and final bulletin will discuss the findings of the “*Making a Connection*” project. Did consumers improve their quality of life through literacy? Stay tuned.

The Making a Connection: Literacy, Disability and Quality of Life project is funded by HRSDC through the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, formerly the National Literacy Secretariat. For more information on the project please contact Susan Forster at 613-563-2581 x 14 or email her at membership@ilc-vac.ca



(Above is a graphic of a young person sitting on top of a globe showing North and South America. This individual is reading a book, and nearby is a backpack filled with many more books.)

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