

Barriers to Learning Faced by Adult Learners

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Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills programs have long served adult learners facing multiple barriers to learning. These barriers and vulnerabilities include poverty, education levels, disabilities, lack of social supports, limited access to information, employment status, poor health conditions and more.

Supporting adult learners facing multiple barriers has long been a top priority and keen focus of literacy educators. In response, Community Literacy of Ontario has researched and created five factsheets to create awareness and share strategies and resources to help support vulnerable learners in LBS programs.

CLO's Supporting LBS Learners Facing Multiple Barriers Factsheets cover the following topics:

1. **Effective Strategies**
2. **Barriers to Learning**
3. **Strengths of the LBS Program**
4. **Partnerships & Connections**
5. **Helpful Resources**



Introduction

Adult learners face many challenges and barriers to learning in Literacy and Basic Skills programs.

CLO conducted research and wrote a report released in March 2021 called Support LBS Learners Facing Multiple Barriers. Visit that report for more strategies and ideas on this important topic. www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/Promotion-on-Website.pdf

In CLO's survey, five main barriers were identified as strongly impacting the success of adult learners with multi-barriers.

Poverty

Overwhelmingly, the most prevalent barrier impacting adult learners is poverty. The relationship between literacy skill level and the likelihood of living in poverty is strong. In Canada, 46% of adults at literacy levels 1 and 2 live in low income households. Comparatively, only 8% of adults at literacy levels 4 and 5 live in low income households.

“A big barrier for many learners is the poverty and stress of providing for basic needs for their children. In other words, financial stress reduces a client’s ability to get involved in a program and to learn while in the program.”

Quote from an LBS Educator

Income

Many adult learners rely on income support programs such as OW or ODSP. Between April 2019 and March 2020, 31% of learners in Ontario relied on income support. Some learners are employed, but often in precarious work and lower paying entry-level positions.

Housing

Finding affordable housing is extremely difficult for many Canadians and the difficulty for low income individuals is even higher. Waiting lists for subsidized or affordable housing are typically very long, and if you are on Ontario Works or ODSP, often landlords do not want to rent to you. Literacy educators noted that finding and keeping affordable housing is a struggle and a major source of stress for many adult learners.

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is a reality of most low income Canadians. In 2019, over 60% of people who accessed food banks reported their primary source of income as EI, OW, ODSP or another social assistance or disability related support. Educators note that a lack of adequate food and nutrition has a very negative impact on learning.

Childcare and Transportation

Transportation and childcare costs are significant barriers. Transportation challenges impacted the ability of some learners to attend programming, but it also impacted their ability to find and maintain employment and to access community services.

Lack of Support

A lack of support comes in many forms: a lack of immediate family, lack of community, lack of role models, and a general lack of a support system. When combined with other circumstances such as being a single parent, living with a disability, and other circumstances that multi-barriered learners face – a lack of support is a very real issue.

Lack of Awareness of Community Supports

A lack of awareness and difficulty accessing community supports is a barrier reported by many of the survey respondents. Adult learners facing multiple barriers can often have a difficult time identifying and applying for services and supports that may be available to them. A lack of digital literacy skills compounds these issues, as many services and supports require learners to complete intake forms online, set up and utilize an email address, and other online requirements.

“Often learners do not know what resources are available to them or how to find them. They know they need to do something to improve their situation but do not have a clear path as to how or where to get what they need.”

Quote from an LBS Educator

Self-Esteem, Confidence and Motivation

LBS educators identified that for many LBS learners, a lack of self-esteem, confidence, and motivation. In CLO's report: Supporting LBS Learners Facing Multiple Barriers. this issue was noted by 67% of respondents.

Self-Esteem and Confidence

Low self-esteem and low confidence were barriers reported by many of the survey respondents. These issues manifested in the learner having limiting beliefs or a lack of confidence in their abilities. Often, learners had negative learning experiences in the past which made it difficult to approach new learning experiences optimistically. Limiting beliefs can also be related to a lack of familial support, trauma from abusive relationships, and a lack of community connection.

“Some clients come to us believing that they will not succeed (self-fulfilling prophecy). They come to us with prior negative experiences with learning.”

Quote from an LBS Educator

Motivation

Continued motivation can be difficult for all learners to cultivate, and learners facing multiple barriers are no exception. Many learners struggle to balance several high priorities such as parenting duties, employment, and other basic needs. When basic needs like income, food and housing are unstable, they require more time and effort to maintain. This makes it especially difficult for learners facing multiple barriers to maintain focus and motivation on their education goals.

Learners may have a changing shift work schedule that needs to be accommodated each week, and may be balancing more than one job. Combined with a lack of familial support, community support and mentors, it can be very difficult to maintain the motivation to continue with their learning goals. In addition to this, COVID-19 has created multiple changes that have been difficult for learners to cope with, including: learning from home, increased use of technology, and having to manage their own learning schedule at home rather than with an instructor.

“Despite their best efforts, some of our learners start out extremely motivated and then start to lose their motivation/discipline in our program because of home or work-based demands.

While this has been an ongoing barrier to learning, it is particularly true of families with pre-school and school-aged children during this time of COVID-19. “

Quote from an LBS Educator

Lack of Education, Skills and Employment Experience

Education

Adult learners facing multiple barriers have often faced challenges in their education, including interrupted learning, negative learning experiences, learning difficulties, language barriers, and more. These experiences often impacted the learner's ability to complete their grade 12 high school diploma, and develop their essential skills.

“With the current social climate (COVID) the biggest barrier for learners is mental health. Many are finding it difficult whether it’s fear of going out in public or not being able to see their families as much as previous years, mentally they cannot focus on their learning at this time.”

Quote from an LBS Educator

Learning Disabilities

Learning Disabilities impact many adult learners, and when a learner is facing multiple barriers, a learning disability can become a substantial barrier to learning. In fact, 33% of Canadian adults with a learning disability did not complete high school.

Skills

Low or no basic skills, job skills, and other soft skills is a barrier reported by many of the survey respondents. Many learners facing multiple barriers may have a lack of skills, or obsolete job skills that need to be upgraded before they can begin job searching. In addition to this, the need for low-skilled workers is declining while the demand for high-skilled workers has gone up.

Employment Experience

A lack of employment experience is a barrier reported by many of the survey respondents. Learners may have little or no work experience history or no references, which limits their chances of being interviewed or selected for a job. With high unemployment rates, even entry-level jobs are highly competitive.

Technology

Limited Access to Technology and WIFI

Home computers, tablets, laptops, Smart phones and access to WIFI are often financially out of reach of many adult learners. In normal circumstances, they can access this equipment via their Literacy and Basic Skills program. However, with the restrictions of COVID, learning was often occurring at home.

Also, for learners accessing e-learning or blended learning, or who are trying to supplement their learning at home, lack of access to technology negatively impacts their learning experience. Both of these barriers make holding ZOOM sessions, Google classroom activities, Video chats, blended learning, etc. hard to access.

Low Digital Literacy Skills

A second barrier is that many adult learners have low digital literacy skills. Literacy and Basic Skills programs seek to help learners improve these skills, in conjunction with other learning. This is a profound barrier that impacts confidence and the ability of learners to access information on important issues of relevance to them, such as income support programs, COVID safety, and accessing vaccines. This is an issue of critical importance, and is especially problematic during COVID, where many of the programs and services that provide in person support to learners are closed.

Health and Mental Health

Physical Health and Disabilities

Literacy educators noted that many learners face physical health challenges and disabilities that impact their learning experience. The impact of low literacy levels on health is a serious issue. Canadians with the lowest levels of literacy are more than twice as likely to be in poor health compared to Canadians with higher literacy skills.

“Many learners have experienced generations of ongoing poverty, trauma, unmanaged mental health issues, food and housing insecurity, and other issues. As covered in Literacy Why It Matters, it is clear that these life outcomes are closely related to low literacy, especially generational low literacy.”

With multi-barriered learners, it is important to recognize the deeply ingrained beliefs that they may have about themselves, their worth, and their potential.”

Quote from an LBS Educator

“It is important to recognize and provide information and referrals that will aid in stabilizing other areas of the learner’s life: food, housing, childcare, mental health, etc.”

Quote from an LBS Educator

Conclusion

The Supporting LBS Learners Facing Multiple Barriers Factsheets were researched and written by Community Literacy of Ontario. CLO is a provincial network of community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agencies. We are located in Barrie, Ontario. You can learn more about our organization by visiting our website and by following us on Facebook and Twitter.

CLO hopes that our factsheets capture the effective strategies, unique strengths, innovative partnerships and helpful resources developed by Ontario’s Literacy and Basic Skills programs to support the courageous adult learners who engage in learning despite the many barriers they face.

To learn more, read our full report: [Supporting LBS Learners Facing Multiple Barriers](#).

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Mental Health

Literacy educators noted that mental health issues are a barrier and this can make it difficult for learners to focus on their learning. This could include depression, anxiety, trauma, experiencing abuse and more. Poverty makes accessing counselling and other supports extremely difficult, and typically, publicly funded mental health services have long waiting lists.





Our factsheets can be freely downloaded from CLO’s website at: <https://www.communityliteracyofontario.ca>.