



British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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Views of adult educators on poverty-related barriers that make it difficult for adult students to complete adult education courses

A discussion paper

Prepared by BCTF Research in collaboration with the
BCTF Adult Education Advisory Committee

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Abstract

Research shows that adult education programs can make a significant contribution to improving graduation rates in BC and Canada, with many students graduating by 24 years of age who did not complete high-school in the conventional K to 12 education system. But young adults who live in rural areas, or are Aboriginal, or belong to some immigrant groups are much less likely to graduate by age 24, making them more vulnerable to poverty. This paper presents a summary of a group discussion with the Adult Education Advisory Committee on barriers encountered by adult students, many of which are related to poverty, that make it difficult for students to attend and complete adult education courses. Of particular concern is the reduction or elimination of self-paced programs that offer the flexibility to adults to overcome multiple barriers to attending adult education courses.

Part 1: Adult education programs as a poverty reduction strategy

Young adults without a high-school certificate are at higher risk for poverty

Supporting young adults to complete a high-school certificate is an essential element of a poverty-reduction strategy. Why? Because not completing high-school is a risk factor for poverty for young adults and families with children.

Young adults who do not complete high-school are especially vulnerable to unemployment, and when they are employed, they work longer hours for less pay than high-school graduates, according to a recent Statistics Canada report¹. In 2009–10, the unemployment rate for young adults aged 20 to 24 years without a high-school certificate (23.2%) is double the rate of high-school graduates (11.9%) in the same age group. Young adults without a high-school certificate working full-time worked 0.7 hours more per week and earned \$70 less per week, on average, than high-school graduates in the same age group. The gap in median weekly earnings for 20- to 24-year-old full-time workers is even wider, with non-graduates earning \$97 less per week than high-school graduates.

Completing a high-school education can also buffer families with children against poverty. The *Growing Up in North America* report (2008) shows that the child poverty rate in 2000 was five times higher for the children of parents with less than a secondary education (27.6%) compared to those of parents who completed a university or college education (5.4%), and twice as high as for families where a parent completed secondary/vocational or some post-secondary education². A 2008 Statistics Canada study³ found that higher levels of education of a parent protected families from persistent poverty, suggesting that pursuing further education can help families to move out of poverty.

Adult education programs improve chances of graduating significantly

Adult education programs can make a significant contribution to improving high-school completion rates, removing a significant barrier to overcoming poverty. This is borne out by recent Statistics Canada data which shows that many students who do not complete high-school by 19 years do so by the age of 24 years.⁴ In British Columbia, 80.5% of youth aged 18–19 years graduated from high school in 2009–10. But this measure does not take into account the young adults who successfully complete high-school requirements by age 24. For this reason, Statistics Canada calculates “the share of 20- to 24-year-olds who are not attending school and who have not graduated from high school”. Using this measure, in 2009–10 British Columbia has the lowest non-completion rate (6.3%) and the highest graduation rate (92.7%) in Canada. This data suggests that many young adults are taking advantage of the adult education programs and free tuition available to non-graduated adults in British Columbia, and are successfully completing high-school requirements.

¹ Gilmore, J. (2010, November). *Trends in drop-out rates and the labour market outcomes for young drop-outs*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 81-004-X.

² Canadian Council on Social Development, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, & Red Por Los Derechos de la Infancia en Mexico. (2008). *Growing Up in North America: The Economic Well-Being of Children in Canada, the United States, and Mexico*. Baltimore, Maryland: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

³ Fleury, D. (2008, May). Low-income children. *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, 9(5). Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-001-XIE.

⁴ McMullen, K., and Gilmore, J. Statistics Canada (2010). A note on high school graduation and school attendance, by age and province, 2009/2010 <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-004-x/2010004/article/11360-eng.htm>

But Statistics Canada data also tell us that some young adults are at much higher risk of not completing high-school by age 24 than others, especially those who live in rural areas, who are First Nations or Métis⁵, and members of some immigrant groups⁶. These are students who for many different reasons were unable to complete high-school within the conventional K to 12 education system and continue to face barriers as young adults.

Part 2: Views of adult educators on poverty-related barriers encountered by students in adult education programs

The BCTF Adult Education Advisory Committee comprised of teacher representatives from adult education programs participated in a group discussion on poverty and education issues specific to adult students in public school adult education programs. Margaret White, research analyst, BCTF Research, facilitated the group discussion and prepared the summary, in consultation with the Adult Education Advisory Committee.

In the discussion, adult education teachers identified multiple barriers that can prevent low-income adults from registering in adult education courses, or if registered, make it difficult to complete courses. The remainder of this report presents the views expressed by the BCTF Adult Education Advisory Committee about poverty-related barriers that make it difficult for adult students to attend and complete adult education courses.

Logistical barriers—Balancing childcare, paid work, and school

Some of these barriers are logistical, as adult students often must balance childcare responsibilities, work demands, and attending school, with limited options for transportation. In rural and semi-rural areas, there may be no reliable way for adult students to get to school as public transit services are very limited. Low-income students cannot always afford the cost of transit when it is available.

Lack of affordable childcare can pose significant barriers to adult students who are returning to school. Childcare services are non-existent in some areas of the North. In areas where childcare is available, the hours of operation do not always fit with the parent's school schedule or the service is not located at or near the learning centre.

Balancing the demands of paid employment with school schedules can also pose barriers for adult students. Adult students often depend on employment income for survival and have little control over their work schedule when it conflicts with the needs of their school-work. As work schedules are changeable, students cannot always predict when they will work.

⁵ Gilmore, J. (2010, November). *Trends in drop-out rates and the labour market outcomes for young drop-outs*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 81-004-X.

⁶ Richard's (2011) report on high school non-completion rates in 2006–07 states, "Those from East and South Asia have rates considerably below the national average, while Haitians, Portuguese, and Jamaicans have rates above the average." See Richards, J. (2011). *School Dropouts: Who are they and what can be done?* C.D. Howe Institute, January 6, 2011, p. 4.

Economic barriers—Living on a poverty-level income

Adult education teachers observed that many adult students are living on a limited income that does not cover the necessities of life, including access to nutritious food. They described situations where parents feed their children first, when there is not enough food to go around. Poverty is also an issue for young persons who are newly living on their own, with limited government support. These students receive just enough to pay the rent but not enough money to provide adequate food or nutrition. There are no subsidized meal programs for adult students such as those offered to school-aged students.

Barriers related to the cost of resources to support learning

Low-income students cannot always afford school-related costs such as the Cost of Book Deposit (up to \$100 per course) or registration fees. A concern was expressed that there is increasing pressure by administration to enforce collection of book deposits, etc. from adult students. Another barrier identified was that low-income students may have less access to technology, which can affect the quality and presentation of assignments (spell-check, typed vs. hand-written) compared to other students. Some public libraries provide computers for student use. Access varies depending on how close students live to a library, the hours of operation, and the availability of computers. An example was provided of a rural area where the public library service is well-integrated with the adult education program.

Institutional barriers—Erosion of adult education programs and services

Concerns were also expressed about how budget cuts and restructuring of adult education programs are making it harder for low-income students to attend and complete adult education courses. These included a loss of provincial ABE funds to assist with school fees, textbooks, and transportation; loss or reduction of self-paced programs; loss of counselling services; and inadequate support for students with special needs when moved into adult programs.

Loss of self-paced programs

A key concern that emerged in the discussion was about how the restructuring of adult education programs has reduced support for adult education students who face multiple barriers. Self-paced programs provided more flexibility for adult students but are no longer available in some districts. Fewer self-paced learning programs means less flexibility to adapt learning to the needs of adult students (e.g., childcare, inflexible work schedules) and to adjust learning to a pace comfortable for the student. The loss of self-paced learning programs has the greatest impact on low-income adults who need the flexibility of a self-paced program to overcome the barriers that make it difficult for them to complete their education.

Loss of counselling services for adult students facing multiple barriers

The discussion revealed an erosion of programs and services to support adult students to overcome barriers to education. These included a loss of counselling services in Adult Learning Centres to assist vulnerable adult students with emotional counselling; finding childcare and affordable housing; financial assistance to cover costs associated with attending school; and access to other services. Some young adults need access to addiction counselling as part of a strategy to support their return to school so they can complete high-school requirements.

Lack of assessment and learning support for adult students with special needs

Another concern was the lack of assessment and support for students who have learning disabilities, or who are in need of learning support to successfully complete courses. An example was given of where a program geared to special needs students closed, with some of these

students moving to an adult education program with none of the supports available in the special needs program.

Lack of awareness of the unique needs of adult students

The adult educators emphasized the need for flexible programs for adult students to help them balance the many demands they have on them in addition to attending school. They noted that many administrators are from K-12 schools, work primarily with school-aged students, and are not necessarily aware of the issues/barriers faced by adult students.

Change in the focus of adult education to high-achieving students

Adult education teachers observed that the composition of adult education students was changing, with a shift in the focus and support away from high-needs adult students to high-achieving adult students. For example, night-school programs that are more geared to students who are likely to do well. They attributed the growing income disparity between adult students to changes in ministry policy and the loss of services to support low-income students facing multiple barriers to completing an education.

Part 3: Conclusion and implications

Statistics Canada data show that young adults who complete high-school graduation requirements have significantly lower unemployment rates and higher earnings than those who do not. The data also show us that adult education programs can make a significant contribution to improving the graduation rate in British Columbia, but some students groups are at higher risk of not graduating.

The group discussion with adult education teachers revealed multiple barriers for adult students, many of which are related to poverty. Adult educators emphasized the need for self-paced learning programs to provide adult students with the flexibility needed to overcome poverty-related barriers to completing their education. They also stressed the importance of self-paced learning programs for students with multiple risk-factors who have experienced little success in the regular K to 12 school system who need support to ease into adult education with time to build confidence in their ability to succeed at school-work. Much concern was expressed that the restructuring of adult education programs is increasing the barriers faced by low-income adult students, through reduced services to address these barriers, the loss of financial assistance for adult learners, and the elimination or reduction of self-paced programs⁷.

Offering adult education programs for non-graduated adults that are flexible and responsive to their needs so they can complete high-school and pursue further education can remove a significant barrier to moving out of poverty. Further work is needed to evaluate how the restructuring of district adult education programs is affecting the ability of low-income adult students to complete high school requirements and/or secondary courses required to pursue a post-secondary education.

⁷ In April 2012, the Vancouver School Board (VSB) 2012–13 budget proposals included a plan to increase the student-teacher ratio and reduce hours of operation for adult education self-paced programs. The preliminary 2012–13 VSB Budget shows a reduction of 4.5 FTE teachers in the Adult Education Self-Paced program. See http://vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/2012-2013%20Preliminary%20Operating%20Budget%20Book_0.pdf