

Executive Summary of the Seniors' Literacy Research Project

The concept for this project came about after reading local newspaper headlines with the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) results. The headlines quoted the IALS statistics that showed 80% of Canadian seniors (ages 65 and older) were at the lowest literacy categories (Level I and Level II combined). We also learned that most of these seniors felt that they had no problems coping with day-to-day literacy... a strong dichotomy in the qualitative and quantitative findings.

The goal of the research was to examine the historical context of literacy in the lives of seniors, to examine literacy coping skills used by seniors and to determine which social marketing techniques would attract interested seniors to literacy programs. The long term impact of this project will be an increase in the rate of literacy among Island seniors.

The objectives of the research were:

1. to conduct a literature review to explore the issues of seniors' literacy as previously examined through research and project work,
2. to conduct face-to-face interviews with seniors on PEI in order to understand the circumstances that lead to low literacy rates,
3. to conduct face-to-face interviews with seniors on PEI in order to understand coping skills and strategies employed by low literacy seniors, and
4. to conduct face-to-face interviews with seniors on PEI in order to investigate methods of attracting interested seniors to literacy programs through the use of social marketing techniques.

The first research step was to prepare the Literature Review. An Executive Summary of the Literature Review can be found on the following page. The literature review gives the reader an overview of some of the most pressing issues of seniors' literacy. It is not comprehensive as new research is being conducted daily which continues to inform this

issue. The literature review was undertaken with the purpose of reviewing past research in order to inform our face-to-face qualitative interview process.

A questioning route was created to look at literacy in an external way. We created questions that would examine literacy in relation to their past in the school system, at their work and community or volunteer activities. Then in the present, by talking about items they receive in the mail, and finally in the future by discussing what they or their friends may be interested in as learning opportunities. We interviewed 20 people - 10 men and 10 women.

The research showed that reading was not an issue or a problem for any of the seniors interviewed. All read for information and it was important to them to keep up with local, national and international happenings. They all watch television, particularly Compass - the local CBC supper hour news show. All read the newspaper, and some listen to the radio.

In many cases school was just something they did and the only materials they read were their readers. A small number said they loved school and it had been important to them. Likewise, a small number talked of abuse and punishment in schools. Most remembered having few reading materials at home, but everyone remembered newspapers. Only a few could remember particular books from childhood - the *Anne of Green Gables* books were mentioned.

Most of the people grew up without electricity, plumbing or running water. The absence of books or reading material did not seem to be a sad thing. In spite of hard work, both men and women related happy stories from their childhood.

They all said they have people to help them if they need it with official documents and papers. Only a few said they were interested in future learning opportunities. These were the younger seniors interested in genealogy and Island history. Older seniors commented, "not at this point in my life". This was a relaxed statement that seemed to reflect their personal sense of fulfillment. Most enjoyed talking about the past but seemed quite anxious

to get on with what they were doing now as an active senior.

It should be noted too, that many seniors interviewed were still learning, informally. They talked about gaining skills in carpentry, quilting, and computers. So maybe we are being challenged to think about our concept of learning outside the classroom. There was a strong sense of “a lack of education didn’t keep me down!” They are proud of what they have accomplished. This brings us back to the UNESCO definition of functional literacy which reinforces our finding by stating, “that people must be able to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of their group and community. They should have the ability to use reading, writing and calculation for their own and the community’s development. Literacy that is measured by the grade achieved is not accurate, therefore, functional literacy relates directly to tasks encountered in everyday living - and provides a more accurate assessment of a person’s ability.”