

Project Report

Identifying Barriers Between Language Levels and Adult Literacy Learning

prepared by

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For the



funded by

The Adult Literacy Funding Program - New Brunswick Innovation Foundation

May 2022

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Introduction and Project Rationale

In fall of 2021, the Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick received a grant from the Adult Literacy Funding Program - New Brunswick Innovation Foundation, to conduct a research study to identify barriers between language levels and adult literacy learning in New Brunswick. The results of the study which was carried out over the period of September 2021 to March 31, 2022, are presented in this report.

This project falls within the Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick's operating principles, including:

- To build knowledge and expertise and to broker tools, supports and best practices in literacy, lifelong learning, and essential skills, and
- To respect and support the work of all partners in New Brunswick working in the fields of literacy, lifelong learning and essential skills, and to celebrate their achievements.

Our project explored the following themes related to the objectives of the call for projects through the Adult Literacy Funding Program - New Brunswick Innovation Foundation:

- Timely awareness of and access to services and programs;
- The connection between literacy learning and language learning for newcomers, especially women;
- Cultural factors that impact the access and engagement of adult learners in NB; and
- Successes, gaps, and lessons learned to inform the provision of targeted, customized solutions for adult learning programs across the province.

Statistics Canada (2019) has predicted migratory increase could account for more than 80% of Canada's population growth by 2031. Between July 1, 2019, and June 30, 2020, there were 4,909 new immigrants to New Brunswick (Statista, 2021). Although the influx of newcomers to the province has slowed since March 2020 because of global travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, current world events suggest once national borders are open, individuals will once again seek a safer new life and work in our province.

Immigrants choose to settle permanently in another country, unlike refugees, who for the most part, have spent years in refugee camps before entering the new country (Government of Canada, n.d.). In 2019, Canada ranked first among 26 countries in accepting 30,082 refugees through the United Nations Refugee Agency's (2021) support and infrastructures alone; others make refugee claims once in Canada, others while still in the country of origin through Canadian Embassies, the Canadian High Commission, or from different entry ports. A newcomer's landed status impacts the types of services and training programs they are able to access.

Shifts in economics and the nature of work has resulted in the need for adults to increase their employability and essential skills. Yet, in New Brunswick, nearly half of the adult population lack the literacy and essential skills needed. In this province, nearly 50% of adults between the ages of 16–65 do not have the level of literacy and essential skills needed to function successfully in today’s society. One in five New Brunswickers have literacy levels that are below the Canadian average, and most individuals among this group do not have a high school diploma. The situation for newcomers is even more complex if they have low literacy levels in their first language and do not yet speak either of our official languages.

Acquiring functional language skills in their new province is one of a host of challenges these newcomers face. In terms of educational attainment, 48.9% of newcomers arriving between 2011 and 2016 had a university level certificate, diploma, or degree (Social Research and Demonstration Corporation [SRDC], 2021). Over half have high school equivalency or less.

The official language of business and learning in New Brunswick is both English and French. English and French second language learners need to acquire a sufficient written and spoken level of mastery of these additional languages in order to later be successful in gaining employment. According to the recent report from the New Brunswick Institute for Research, Data and Training, “from 2006–2015, as high as 27% spoke neither English nor French (Boco, 2021, p. 42). Moreover, paths to integration are individual and complex. For refugees placed in rural communities, the integration into the Canadian life, which is directly proportional to the level of language of the host country, takes even longer and is more difficult, compared to refugees located in larger cities (Lam, 2019).

Research data has indicated a gap in earning potential for newcomers to New Brunswick (Boca et al, 2021; SRDC, 2021a, 2021b)—one that is even higher for individuals with low literacy skills. As indicated in the call for proposals, “slightly over 50% of adults in New Brunswick are not achieving the standards of functional literacy.” The link between literacy and employability is strong: Increased literacy improves participation in the labour market and contributes to the overall economic and social prosperity of our province.

Methodology and Methods

Building on SRDC’s (2021 a, b) research of skilled newcomers, our focus was on unskilled newcomers with low literacy in their first language and in English and/or French—who often join literacy programs alongside native New Brunswickers. We focused on the reported

experiences of human beings in all their complexities, their continued social interactions, and their struggles in increasing language literacy. A qualitative approach allowed for the use of observations (past and present) in social contexts, and made space for those words, thoughts, and images to reveal details that cannot be captured using numbers, statistics, and variables.

We explored the barriers to adult literacy training that adults experience in terms of access and engagement, program relevance, and delivery methods. We started with an environmental scan of the programs and resources available to adult literacy learners within the province of New Brunswick with the goal of identifying the opportunities and barriers to access of programming.

Data Collection Methods

We surveyed staff of literacy organizations and immigrant services agencies (ISAs) to gather their frontline perspective on literacy services provided, including the most in-demand services, the most effective interventions, the challenges learners face along with their strengths, the challenges staff face in designing and/or delivering the services, and potential areas for improvement. We also held focus groups with key informants including adult learners. In order to ensure a representative sample, in addition to email requests, we called a number of organizations to encourage their participation in the study.

Questionnaires. Once research ethics approval from Yorkville University was granted, we recruited survey participants using convenience sampling techniques from existing contact lists available in the public domain of the individuals involved leading or working in literacy organizations or related service providers within New Brunswick. The email was sent to over 113 individuals working or volunteering for approximately 25 associations and organizations. Additionally, directors were asked to share the front-line questionnaire with their staff. In total, 33 individuals (29.2%) responded to the surveys (See Appendix B for breakdown).

Focus Groups. Recruitment to participate in the focus groups for administrators and front-line workers was done via the online questionnaire and telephone conversations. We also asked administrators and/or front-line workers to share the learner focus group information with their newcomer adult learners. Everyone expressing interest was invited to attend a focus group. In total, 6 directors/staff and 27 learners participated in focus groups (See Appendix B for breakdown). In two focus group sessions with newcomer adult learners, the instructor participated as an immigrant to the province and also served as interpreter. The Invitation to the focus group contained details on the project and details on consent for the research. Because of the varied language and literacy levels of learner participants, at the beginning of

each focus group session, the project was described, and the consent form was read aloud. Participant content was sent via Zoom chat or captured in the audio recording. Each focus group lasted no more than 60 minutes (See Appendix C for focus group questions).

Incentives for Participation. One respondent from the questionnaire for administrators was randomly awarded \$500 for literacy program expenses; this prize was funded by the Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick as part of their Literacy Week activities. One respondent from the questionnaire for front line workers was awarded a \$25 grocery card. Each adult learner focus group participant received a \$25 grocery card.

Data Security

The research assistant was required to sign a confidentiality agreement. To align with data retention policies for financial information, we will retain documents for 7 years, after which they will be shredded or deleted from electronic storage.

Questionnaire. Questionnaire data was collected via Qualtrics, which uses Transport Layer Security (TLS) encryption (also known as HTTPS) for all transmitted data. A unique participant identifier was assigned to respondents and the only connection to their identifying information is on a master list that is stored separately from response data.

Focus Groups and Interviews. Zoom session links were password protected. Zoom recordings were stored on an encrypted drive and deleted from the Zoom cloud once downloaded. Any downloaded recordings were deleted from OneDrive once the sessions were transcribed. Transcripts of recordings of focus groups and interviews have participant names replaced with a coded random number. The list of participants and codes are kept in a separate location from the transcripts.

Summary of Findings

A number of key themes emerged from an analysis of the data. The following summary has been compiled from responses to two questionnaires (1 to administrations and 1 to front line workers) and six focus group sessions (1 with administrators/instructors and 5 with adult learners). See Appendix B for a breakdown of response rates across data collection tools and Appendix C for focus group questions. Appendix D is a breakdown of themes based on the Adult Literacy Funding (ALF) framework.

Staffing

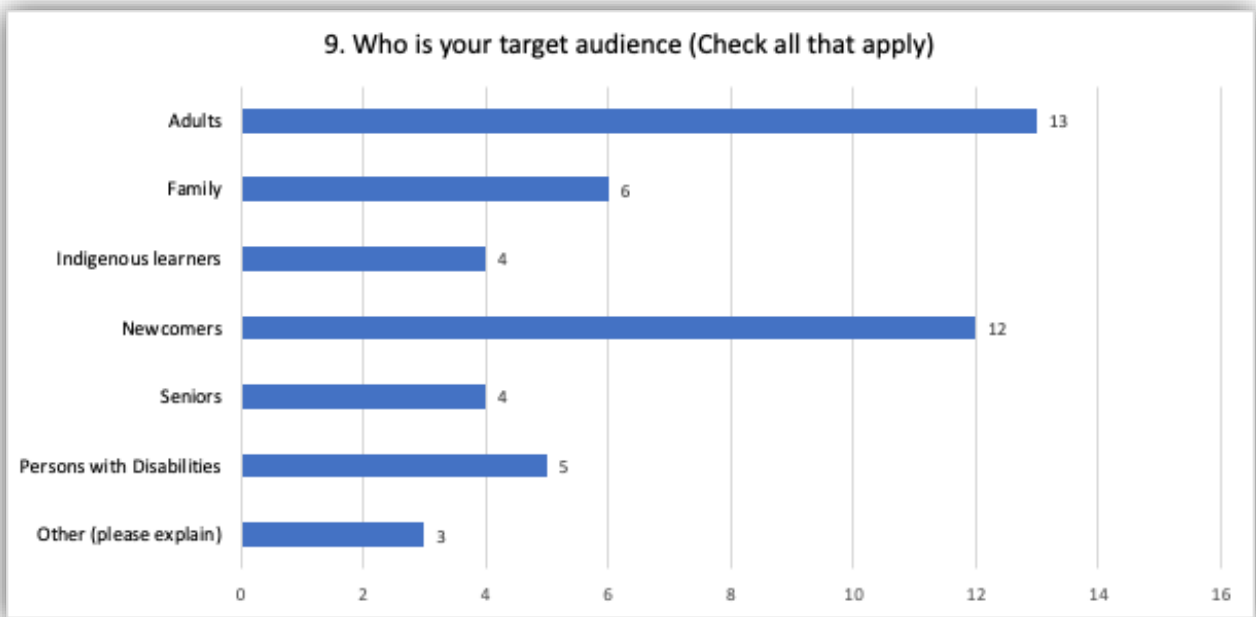
Administrators reported a wide range of staffing levels, ranging from 1 full-time staff member to many who fulfilled multiple roles within the organization (see Table 1). Based on the responses, there is a heavy reliance on volunteers, which, as one focus group participant said, “*makes it hard to plan programs and have continuity*”. Volunteers were appreciated supports, though, especially as conversational English / French language partners. The high rate of volunteerism also speaks to the engagement of community members in supporting newcomers’ transitions to the province and to adult learning and literacy.

Table 1
Number of Staff per Organization

FT Staff	PT Staff	Volunteers
1	3	40 to 50 working with newcomers
0	1	1-200
4	N/A	N/A
1	1	5
35	20	30
14	3	4
50	10	around 10
24	3	15 (board members)
23	N/A	N/A
28	6	10
6	1	5
30	4	N/A
4	4	30
N/A	N/A	9
1	N/A	N/A
1	0.5	50

Target Audience

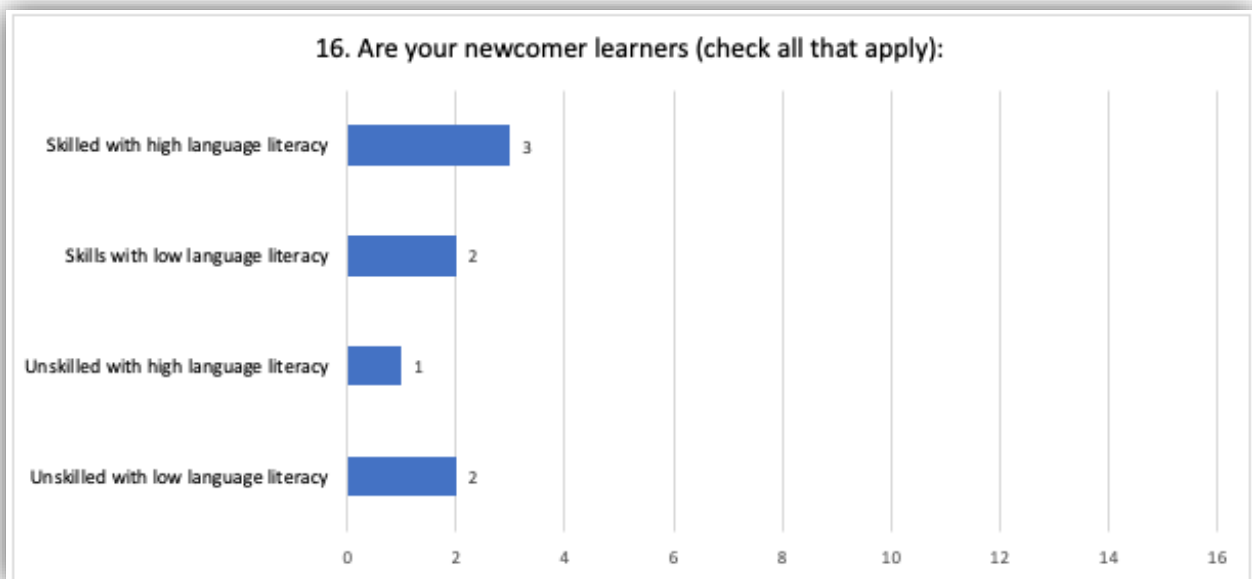
To better understand the demographics of individuals served by literacy and newcomer language programs, we asked respondents to share the composition of their target audience. Responses to Question 9 (see below) reveal a focus on adults and newcomers, but also sheds light on the intersectionality of their client demographic. For example, for a number of organizations, their funding is specific for adults aged 18 years or older. Additionally, the “Other” category responses revealed that three of the sixteen organizations reported an additional focus on youth and young adults.



Newcomers' Points of Origin

Newcomers participating in programming offered by respondents' organizations come from all over the globe, but the majority came from Syria, Afghanistan, South America (Columbia, Brazil), Southeast Asia, China, and Ukraine.

Question 16's responses reveal the broad range of skillset and language abilities of newcomers who attend literacy programs in New Brunswick. They noted that some newcomers had to have a higher Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) score to enter the country under skilled immigration policies, but that the spouses and children often have much lower language literacy—"like, pre-pre-beginner" said one participant, and are also in need of not only language learning, but literacy learning for longer durations.



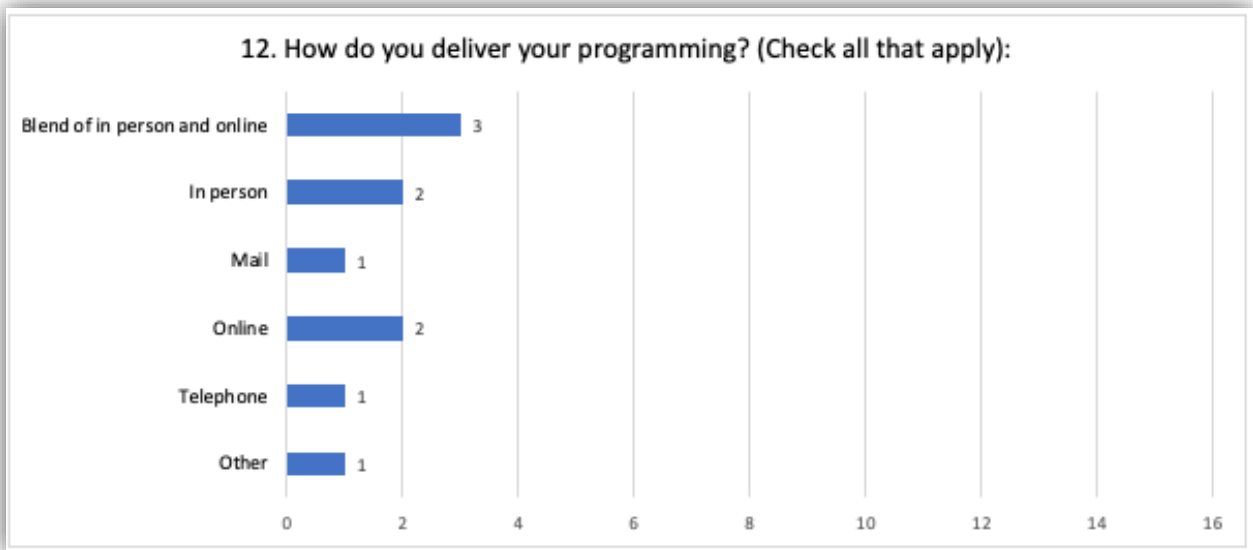
Scheduling

All respondents reported offering both morning and afternoon programming, with 13 of 16 offering evening options. Weekend programming was offered by 7 of the 16 respondent organizations. In a few organizations, classes were held Monday to Thursday, and learners appreciated having the Friday to run errands and deal with doctor’s appointments. When asked, an instructor said they did not notice a decline in productivity; in fact, attendance was improved because their students tried to schedule everything on Fridays.

Programming Format

Responses to the question of how programming is delivered reflect the flexibility needed in adult learning contexts. Learners expressed their appreciation for being *“free to take the subject you want to study or learn like you take enough time to finish the subject you want.”* They liked not feeling rushed. They appreciated that it *“wasn’t like regular school.”*

Perhaps reflecting the impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns, the majority of respondents reported they offered a blend of in-person and online programming (See Question 12 Figure below). One organization did not offer structured literacy programming; instead, they hosted signature multicultural programming and events (as funding permitted) that are delivered remotely across their region.



One respondent noted that online learning is helpful, but *“newcomers are still working on accessing and using tech, and the lower sense of connection and ability to read total body language compounds their social isolation and hampers their learning.”* In focus groups with adult learners, participants reported their preference for in-person learning, citing the opportunity to have real-time conversations without the barrier of technology glitches and poor sound quality. They felt *“more connected”* when in person. Others noted their appreciation for being able to continue their learning online during the pandemic and to learning online when weather and childcare impacted in-person classroom attendance.

In the Director’s focus group, one participant noted how *“pre-COVID, the government monitored our students and how they learned pretty heavily. And there was a requirement for every student to be physically in a classroom for their learning hours to count to be registered. And sometimes that’s administratively simple, but it really doesn’t meet the needs of a lot of students. So I feel like it’s a bit of a mixed blessing that COVID has allowed us ... like everybody else ...to kind of pivot and be able to help people who weren’t in the classroom.”*

Additionally, for one literacy organization, moving to online tutoring has helped expand reach: *“We...have a few areas where we had tutors who were interested in teaching online, but we didn’t have learners in that area. But we were able to partner them up with learners from another area.”*

Another reported the use of Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada’s (IRCC) funded programme called Avenue (<https://avenue.ca/>) for higher level digital literacy and real-world

task learning and expressed the hope to have the program evolve to be useful for lower language literature learners.

Skills Sets Needed to Teach and Learn

The changing nature of learning is impacting the required skill sets of language and literacy program staff and volunteers. As one director noted, *“Finding the right skill set is essential. And people want to make that dedication and time and build into it and whether it’s volunteered or paid. But at New Brunswick ...it’s taken time. I have a hard time in Moncton finding people with that skill set. But once you find them wow, watch it blow up because it’s awesome. It really does work well then.”*

In the words of one director in the focus group, *“there’s not an insignificant portion [of learners] who also can manage [online] and they can do a lot of the work on the weekends or in the evenings or so but I feel like it’s added a lot of complexity, and it changes the skill set that the teachers need to have to actually teach to now.”* This has implications for organizations that rely heavily on volunteer staff, who, typically, are older adults who may not have the skills necessary to provide tutoring online

Based on survey results and comments from directors in the focus group, there is an expressed need for ongoing training, not only to address how to use evolving technological tools and resources, but also for trauma-informed teaching, cultural diversity, and mindfulness. Compassion fatigue was mentioned as a concern when working with learners with a myriad of personal challenges related to cycles of abuse, intergenerational trauma, addictions, and physical and mental challenges.

What is Working Well

Passionate Staff and Volunteers

Organizations unanimously cited the passion of their employees and volunteers as a significant reason for the success of their programming. As one director said, *“they’re so passionate about what they do. ...Without our volunteers, we would be nothing.”* Directors had high praise for their instructors, noting their dedication and resourcefulness in making limited and shrinking budgets stretch. In focus groups with learners, they often cited their appreciation of their instructors. Learners also spoke highly of their instructors, saying they were *“kind”* and *“patient”* and that they *“cared about us and wanted us to succeed.”* Learners also cited a

number of examples where their instructors were instrumental in helping them navigate the challenge of accessing program and funding opportunities, where language and literacy was often a barrier to understanding forms and processes.

Navigating Systems

Most directors were pleased with the level of support they had when working with government agencies and with other community organizations. They felt they knew who to contact when an issue emerged with a learner. Some also felt that if they had suggestions for programming that they could bring forward with a proposal that would be considered.

Flexibility

Flexibility in programming and ways of learning was reported in all focus groups. One director mentioned the success of partnering with the local high school for a community cooking class, which was an informal way to not only share cultural understandings, but to have conversations in “real-life” situations. Additionally, newcomers reported they liked the PBLA program¹ because the content can be applied to their own life and situations.

Challenges Impacting Success

Addressing Diverse Needs

Directors and front line workers noted the diverse demographic characteristics, including *“financial, learning disabilities, trauma, language proficiency, low literacy skills in their native language, cultural familiarity”* makes providing needed programming and supports difficult at times. Language barriers and a lack of foreign credential recognition or an absence of documentation (especially for newcomers fleeing war-torn countries) hindered newcomers’ transitions to work.

Length of Program Eligibility

Time was also a challenge. Participants felt one year of program eligibility was not enough to become functional in either English or French so that they could get a job. Directors

¹ Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) is a teaching and assessment model designed to enhance nationwide consistency and standards of quality in English as a Second Language (ESL) training for adult newcomers to Canada. PBLA is grounded in recognized best practices in language instruction and assessment for adults. See <https://www.language.ca/resources/expertise/on-pbla/>

commented that program length sometimes did not take into account the trauma and cultural barriers to learning that many newcomer learners face when fleeing to safety in Canada. Speaking through a translator, one newcomer explained that they have been in Canada for three years, and still is not comfortable speaking and understanding English. They have skills but cannot get a job because of their language ability.

Devaluing Literacy for Personal Growth

In one focus group with newcomers, the conversation turned to motivations for learning a language. For some newcomers, they were solely interested in language ability to communicate in social settings, to speak with their children's teachers, or their doctors. Because of their cultural beliefs, they did not intend to work outside the house. Therefore, the current emphasis on language and literacy learning for work was a challenge for them. Directors also noted the growing focus on government funding that requires a workforce attachment as a successful outcome and were concerned that literacy funding for personal growth was being devalued. This concern is especially poignant in light of learners' reasons for attending literacy programming. Although many saw increased literacy as a pathway to economic stability and work, they also said their motivations for learning to read and write were rooted in desires to understand their children's homework, to read to their grandchildren, and to have independence in dealing with doctors and in filling out forms. As one adult learner said, I wanted *"to prove to myself that I'm capable of accomplishing a thing that I never thought that I would be able to accomplish."* Another said they were learning because they *"quit school at 17. And now my grandkids are asking me like, why I didn't finish school. And I said, Well, okay, I'll look into it. And plus, I'll be the last one of the eight to get some sort of a diploma. My grandkids have been asking me, why don't you finish school, Nanny? Okay, I can't disappoint them."*

Classroom Composition

In terms of program structure, both instructors and newcomers cited their dissatisfaction with having Levels 3 and 4 language learners together in one classroom. *"Some people pick up really fast. And some people struggle. And it happened today in our lesson, it was a little bit difficult for them. They don't like the mixing together. This sometimes even delays the lesson, you know, when you have to instead of finish it in one or two days, it will take the whole week. Some people feel boring about that. Like they're already there. They already understood and then you're trying to make the rest, you know, get there and yeah, be at the same page."* Learners agreed, seeing it a *"big problem for the student and for teacher."*

Program Availability

As well, the differences in program availability was seen as a challenge for success. One participant noted that other provinces have full-time language programmes but they were limited to part time: *“three hours a day ...and sometimes it is less.”* They noted that in Nova Scotia, the day was five hours and they did not understand how it could be so different because it was all funded by governments. This speaks to the issue of trying to attract newcomers to a region where programs and services are less than in neighbouring provinces. This is a factor when deciding *where* in Canada to immigrate.

Access to Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic served to highlight the disparities between urban and rural populations in terms of access to programs and services. Transportation to classrooms located in other communities and access to adequate bandwidth and a laptop or other device prevents learners from attending to the fullest extent desired. Travel allowances did not reflect rising costs of gas. Directors and front-line workers reported challenges with a lack of resources, space, and adequate technology with which to deliver programming.

Challenges with Online Learning

When asked if they were able to learn online, learner responses were mixed. Many of the newcomers said, *“no, very bad,”* explaining that it was hard to be motivated and to set aside time at home with everyone around. Internet connection and access to devices were significant issues impacting success when engaging in online programming.

Lack of Resources

A few Arabic speakers mentioned the challenge of learning a whole new alphabet and pronunciation. For them, it was a steep learning curve, and they noted the need to have more resources that reflected their age and life-stage, *“Not something like ...cartoons or something that kids will watch, you know?”*

Directors, front-line workers, and learners also felt that although classroom-based resources were available, there was not enough that learners could take home and work on. They also felt newcomers would learn faster if there was more audio resources for the classroom and to use at home. Instructors were also challenged with a lack of teaching equipment. In one extreme example, a language instructor said *“I have only the whiteboard. And I just got it last week. I*

had a really itty bitty one that I used to use. And with one sentence, it will be full. And then I have to erase it and then write again. They had no other technology to use with students. In fact, one urban literacy organization was located in a space without Internet access, which meant they were limited in their choices for delivery options and accessing online resources for learners.

Recommendations Based on Findings

Based on our analysis of research results, we present the following recommendations to reduce barriers between language levels and adult literacy learning:

- a. Offer comparable programs for language learners to match other provinces' offerings
- b. Improve organizations' access to Internet and current technologies for teaching and learning
- c. Improve access to stable and affordable Internet connections in rural communities
- d. Address gaps in program access in rural communities
- e. Provide ongoing opportunities for professional development for staff and volunteers, based on identified needs
- f. Establish and support a mechanism for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and resource-sharing across program providers
- g. Create more flexibility in program length for learners who need more time to achieve language learning goals
- h. Offer a broader menu of language learning programs for a wider range of language ability levels
- i. Value learning for personal growth and as an important vehicle for citizen engagement and integration into society.

Final Thoughts

The results of our inquiry deepened understanding of the contexts in which organizations and service providers design and deliver adult literacy programming and provided insight from learners who access those programs. Additionally, a positive unintended outcome was the informal network and community connection that was built between the organizations participating in the research. They shared resource links, contact information, and suggestions for programming. This engagement highlights the need for a community of practice across the

province for organizations with similar mandates. The data collected serves as an important piece of information about the barriers and successes to literacy learning. Findings from this project will inform future directions for expanding our efforts in Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills Training in New Brunswick and beyond. It will also be shared with relevant stakeholders and community literacy partners to inform their work.

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Appendix A: Project Timeline

Phase I (September–October, 2021): Groundwork

- Sector Scan
- Hire research assistant and consultant
- Ethics approval

Phase II (November 2021–February, 2022): Data Collection

- Prepared and conducted survey
- Analyzed data

Phase III (February–March, 2022): Analysis and Reporting

- Hosted focus groups
- Analyzed data
- Finalized report for submission

Appendix B: Response Rates

Questionnaire for Directors and Administrators:	16 responses
Questionnaire for Frontline Workers:	17 responses
Focus Group for Directors and Administrators	6 participants
Focus Group with Adult Learners:	27 participants
FG1 1 Newcomer + 5 Domestic Learners	6 participants
FG2 1 Newcomer + 2 Domestic Learners	3 participants
FG3 4 Newcomers + 4 Domestic Learners	8 participants
FG4 7 Newcomers (including interpreter)	7 participants
FG5 3 Newcomers (including interpreter)	3 participants

Appendix C: Focus Group Questions

Questions for Directors

1. Describe the kinds of programming you offer and your target group.
2. What is working well?
3. What are the main challenges?
4. What are some of the barriers to participation for adult learners (especially newcomers)?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Questions for Newcomer Adult Learners

1. What motivated you to attend the learning program?
2. What do you like about it?
3. What is going well?
4. What is difficult for you?
5. What would make it better?

Appendix D: Themes Based on the Adult Literacy Funding (ALF) Framework

	Personal	Community	Cultural	Governance
Participants	Benefits of language development from experiences	Challenge of accessing program (answers vary widely re ease of finding program)	Variety of tutor/teacher needs to support programs effectively	Valuing of supportive learning environment/teachers Need for ongoing learner support: "There's no quick fix for literacy"
	Incentives to participate in program			
	Intrinsic motivation			
	Concern with speed of progress			
	Funding to participate in program			
	Repercussions of inadequate funding			
	Personal development			
	Learners with learning disabilities			
	Challenge of keeping up with learning independently			
	Response to program			

	Personal	Community	Cultural	Governance
Providers	<p>Mental health</p> <p>Addressing learning anxieties or learning challenges/ diagnosing disabilities/ responding to learner traumas</p> <p>Need for centralized place of connection</p>	<p>Challenges/opportunities found during pandemic</p> <p>Need for flexibility in learning delivery</p> <p>Challenges of addressing impediments to access</p> <p>Barriers/lack of supports for learners</p>	<p>ESL support</p>	<p>Challenges of addressing impediments to access</p> <p>Identifying elements that are working well.</p>
Programs (space/time/location)	<p>Need for adequate access to space/tools/tech for learning</p>	<p>Online accessibility/technology challenge of working at home with family/distractions accessibility of devices/internet reliability</p> <p>In-person classes – inadequate space (small/ice rink/church room), lack of technology/computers, lack of access to internet</p>	<p>ESL Support</p> <p>Academic language development</p>	<p>Need for (government) recognition that learners develop at different speeds</p> <p>Need for ongoing/flexible funding</p> <p>Challenges/opportunities: Materials</p>

	Personal	Community	Cultural	Governance
Pedagogy	Supporting online learning	Language development Academic language development Ongoing learning	ESL Support Academic language development	