
East Elgin Literacy Assessment Project

Adult literacy programs in East Elgin County do not specifically exclude women. Nor, however, are they structured to facilitate their participation. Therefore, although local women recognize the urgency of their need to become literate, they encounter many barriers that actively discourage them from pursuing their desire to upgrade.

During the last decade, Elgin County, located in southwest Ontario, has experienced a tremendous influx of German-speaking Mennonites, who have migrated from segregated, closely-knit colonies in Mexico. Recent economic upheavals, spiralling inflation and pressures to join the Military contributed to the immigration of these groups to Canada.

In Canada, winter causes them the most hardship because cultural, language and educational barriers limit their job opportunities during this season. During the summer, mothers and children pick cucumbers from dawn to dusk in preparation for the long, tough winter ahead.

Mennonite society is largely patriarchal. Women specifically are socially isolated and confined to caring for large families. It is not rare for families to have ten, twelve, or more children. Mothers are full-time caregivers and occupied with household duties, and as a result rarely participate in the life of their new communities.

The Adult Education Concerns Committee, consisting of representatives from the Board of Education, Fanshawe College, the Mennonite Central Committee, the YWCA of St. Thomas-Elgin, the Public Health Unit and concerned public citizens, through

volunteer efforts with this community, recognized the need to provide culturally sensitive, accessible literacy programs for Mennonite women. The ability to read, write, and communicate effectively would bridge the gap of social isolation, low self-esteem and confinement to the home.

The AECC asked the YWCA to conduct a needs assessment in which respondents would have an opportunity to voice their needs for an appropriately accessible literacy program. As an organization working towards social change and improving the status of women, the YWCA responded to this community need. A grant for a Community Literacy Project was obtained from the Ministry of Skills Development. A Project Coordinator of Mennonite background was hired to do a survey of seven rural East Elgin communities.

The survey sampling procedure was random, yet it was designed and conducted with sensitivity to the cultural barriers of the Mennonite population, who make up about 16% of the district. The Project Coordinator conducted all the interviews, in English for the most part, and in German for the Mennonite respondents.

At the outset of the study, there were some uncertainties regarding how the respondents would react to a literacy assessment. These fears, however, soon dissipated. The objective was to provide people with an opportunity to express their needs, so that the ensuing program would meet them. The receptiveness was overwhelming. Women, in particular, took advantage of this rare opportunity to voice their concerns and desires. On several

BY ANNE DYCK & LYDA FULLER

occasions, women heartily expressed their desperation and their hopes that the program would come to pass.

The survey results clearly substantiated the urgent need for basic upgrading courses in all seven rural locations. Of the total sample surveyed, 20.3% admitted a personal need to upgrade their English reading, writing and communication skills. Of the total percentage who felt this need, 60.5% were female.

Particularly distressing was that 78.9% of the participants who wanted upgrading had completed grade eight schooling or less. Two-thirds of that group were Mennonites and over half of the Mennonite group had completed their education in Mexico. Mennonite schooling standards in Mexico are not at all comparable to Canadian standards. Survey respondents and members of the Mennonite Central Committee verified that unqualified instructors, minimal teaching supplies and short interrupted periods of schooling resulted in very inadequate levels of schooling. Families, farms, and households were of higher priority than school. Instruction occurred for about six months during the winter when the farm chores were less demanding. The average child graduated at age 12 or 13 after six winters of schooling, or 3.6 school years by Canadian standards.

There was a genuine sense of trust between the interviewees and the interviewer. Respondents commonly felt free to give accounts of what their daily lives were without literacy entailed for them.

In one vivid account, a young Mennonite mother expressed her desperately felt need to upgrade and her doubts whether it would ever be possible to do so. She said, "If at least I could read labels and recipes I could try new things for supper, but I can't so I make the same old thing over and over." She disclosed to me that she had not been out of the house since December, and when we spoke it was March. If a program was available, lack of transportation, lack of childcare, and very low self-esteem were barriers to her coming that she herself acknowledged. This particular woman felt that, at least initially, she would need in-home one-to-one instruction, until she felt more confident with her abilities. She repeated several times that she was a slow learner and didn't think it was possible for her to learn any more. Many other Mennonite women

said the same about themselves.

On another occasion, a teary-eyed mother expressed her embarrassment at not being able to read a story to her child when the child approached. Her greatest fear was that soon her children would begin school and learn to read. Then they would discover her handicap and would be embarrassed to have an illiterate mother.

One Mennonite woman was eager to participate in the survey but asked that I call on her again when she would be home alone — she did not want her husband to know about the visit. Another date was scheduled, at which time she told me her story. Having moved from Mexico to Canada 17 years ago, she decided it was now time for her to learn to drive. Her children were grown and out of the house, and her husband, a trucker, was not around much either. She felt that this was a necessary endeavour.

Her daughter read the entire Drivers' Manual on to a tape so that her mother could memorize what she had to know, and after several attempts, she succeeded first in obtaining her learner's licence, and eventually, her driver's license. She felt good about this, but then went on to explain her predicament. She could drive only in those areas familiar to her as she could not read any street or highway signs and warnings. Her dream was to be able to go into a grocery store and know what all the delicious looking foods were and what they were used for. Also, as she had a lot of spare time, she wanted just to be able to read for pleasure and as a result, to learn about the many wonderful things around and perhaps to get a part-time job.

Even if a program were available, a frequent problem for many women was lack of transportation. Of all the respondents needing transportation, 94% were female. One lady in a rural area who was very eager and concerned about the possibility of learning to read and write said, "Unless it's in walking distance I would never be able to come; my husband isn't interested in things like that and would not take me." Yet when asked what the most convenient location would be, women frequently expressed their need to "get out of the house." The majority felt it would be more helpful to receive instruction away from the noise of children and in a group situation with other women with similar circumstances.

Survey results indicated a gradual transition in the beliefs of Mennonites. As mentioned earlier, education was not seen as a fundamental component of life. Yet 93% of the total number of Mennonites in the overall acknowledged their desire to upgrade their educational levels. This discovery accentuates the importance of responding to this community's needs by developing and implementing culturally sensitive, individually suitable upgrading programs. Only if motivation and eagerness to learn are fostered and accommodated will the programs succeed.

The YWCA currently is developing programs in several of the rural areas surveyed. These programs will build upon Mennonite cultural traditions by using the women's present skills and incorporating literacy/numeracy instruction. One area of cultural expertise of the women is quilting. They also are fabulous bakers and are known for their delicious home-made bread. These skills can be used to teach new ones.

Childcare and transportation will be provided to enhance accessibility. Our overall goal is to provide client-centered instruction in an informal, non-threatening environment for residents of East Elgin County.

Illiteracy at a community, national and international level is an urgent, and growing problem that must continue to be aggressively addressed. Becoming literate will empower women and will open doors, allowing them to take advantage of many resources. Being able to read and write will equip women to better direct their own lives and to become more active in their communities. This benefits us all.

Lyda Fuller received her B.A. from the University of Midland and her Master's of Liberal Arts from John Hopkins University. She has been the Program Director at the St. Thomas-Elgin YWCA for the past three years.

Anne Dyck received her diploma of Social Work from Sheridan College. Her involvement in Literacy began when she worked as a counsellor for handicapped adults in a group home in Brampton. She was then hired by the YWCA to do a literacy needs assessment for East Elgin County. Anne is currently the Literacy Program Coordinator at the YWCA.