

Strategy # 2: Literacy and the Young Single Male

Literacy Link South Central (LLSC)

The goal of this project was to leverage resources from two other contracts – **Providing Educational Interviews to Ontario Works Recipients** and **Developing Curriculum for Single Males on Ontario Works** – and combine them with local Employment Services to develop strategies to bring young males through literacy to employment.

Within this project, LLSC's objectives were to:

- a. Research outreach strategies that will bring young single males into literacy programs, as well as issues affecting young single males and their entrance into, and attachment to, employment.
- b. Identify system linkages and supports required to increase the number of young single males moving through literacy programs to employment.
- c. Evaluate this strategy, including, but not limited to, making note of best practices and client success rates.

Since 2007, statistics show an upward trend in the number of single males between 18 and 29 who are accessing Ontario Works (OW) in London, Ontario. At the time the proposal for this project was written, there were at least 2,000 single males on OW who have been on the caseload for longer than 12 months and/or who have less than a grade 12 education. They are often not

- engaged in their community
- equipped to move forward because they lack education and skills
- involved with Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs and other Employment Ontario (EO) agencies that could move them closer to employment

Trying to engage youth in learning and employment is not new to LLSC. We have a long history of developing materials and strategies with a goal to move youth towards employment by building their skills. Most recently, through a 9-month project, Literacy

Link South Central (LLSC) talked to young single males on Ontario Works (OW) to find out about their interests and activities, especially as they relate to technology. This informed the content of a set of 4 modules, with accompanying practitioner overviews that speak to the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF). These resources are now being used to provide innovative and integrated programming between some literacy, employment and OW programs.

That project also included a comprehensive Literature Review and several youth focus groups. This provided us with the beginnings of suggested ideas for engaging this hard-to-reach population. But as with any complex social issue, further exploration needed to be done. This, combined with the need we were seeing in our community, positioned us well to undertake this strategy.

The focus of this project was on young males that were, when possible, single. By young, we are referring to anyone who fell between 18 and 29 years of age. The focus was on males as this was the population identified as staying on OW longer than their female counterparts. By single, we mean they weren't married and didn't have children. There was no focus other than these criteria. We realize that you can break this target population down further into sub groups, for example, those who have mental health issues, addiction issues, or those who may be newly settled from another country. Although these elements were on our radar during this project, with limited time and resources we didn't address them directly.

This project was supported by an Advisory Committee that had representation from

- programs for youth, employment and literacy
- the local Workforce Planning and Development Board
- a consultant "of lived experiences" – meaning in his not-so-distant past he was one of our target population

The Advisory Committee met 6 times during the project in 2013 and individual members were called upon on an as-needed basis throughout the year.

We also engaged employment agencies in a survey to collect information on the perceived needs of the target population as it relates to this strategy. A local employment agency (ATN) and London's youth services and employment agency (YOU) were instrumental in organizing youth focus groups as this is a hard-to-reach population otherwise. The Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs in our 6-county service area also participated in surveys.

Activities

Early in the project the Advisory Committee was asked to make assumptions about why young/ single/ males were becoming "stuck" on Ontario Works (OW). These weren't necessarily statements they believed, just comments on why this trend may be occurring. These assumptions helped to focus the project and guide the research and conversations going forward.

The assumptions include:

- a. **Males leave home earlier than females.** Families may be more willing to cut loose a young male versus a young female, or maybe the male youth leave earlier than females in an urgency to experience independence.
- b. **Young men without children are less motivated to succeed** since they have no responsibility or anyone depending on them.
- c. **The target population is comfortable on OW.** The money they receive may be enough to live on, considering that a large group of young men can live together with very little means and "couch surf." We also talked about how there is risk in going off of OW. Once someone becomes comfortable with the rules and expectations of how to get OW financial support, it may seem to be intimidating

and even risky to try to get money through “employment.” The work world comes with a whole other set of rules and a different lifestyle.

- d. **The target population is affected by generational poverty.** Many of our target population come from families who receive OW assistance. An OW funded family situation may be all they know. Concepts from “**Bridges Out of Poverty**” would be largely at play here.

- e. **Many have criminal records that block their ability to work.** Due to this, the youth have no incentive to move forward with any employment goals.

- f. **Media is creating youth apathy.** During this project, it seemed that almost daily reports were coming out about the high youth unemployment rate, with much focus on how youth with university and college educations can’t find work. Those reports would hardly provide motivation for our target population to want to go back to school or use employment agency services. These reports might also cause male youth to experience apathy because they feel an inability to gain employment. For example, when the media states that there are no jobs, that even people with a post-secondary degree can’t get a job, how could a 20-year-old with low skill levels get one?

- g. **Technology is causing lack of socialization** so youth are less likely to participate in community services. Low social skills may also cause them to be less successful in job search and employment.

Technology takes away opportunities to socialize or create an in-person support network, or interact face-to-face and learn from each other’s successes and challenges. Technology can also be a distraction, preventing students from focusing on learning, on school work, and on a positive path forward.

- h. **The target population self-sabotages.** To what extent is fear of rejection guiding the youth in our target group? Deteriorating self-esteem and confidence cause youth to not set employment and learning goals as they don't foresee experiencing success under any circumstances. One OW caseworker noted that being on OW "sucks the life out of clients" – regardless of why they went on OW in the first place.
- i. **The target population lacks identity.** When you strip work identity away, people have reduced confidence and self-esteem. Also, some of these youth (on the OW system now) have not yet established a work identity.
- j. **The target population, especially those with less than a grade 12, are not interested in education.**
- k. **Employers might be reluctant to hire youth.**
- l. **Females are hired more often than males.** In the recent LLSC youth project, focus group youth said that it's easier for females to get a job. They thought employers hire females first, especially for retail sales and customer service jobs.
- m. **The target population** doesn't want to go to school. Males are less likely to return to school.

Our next step was to use these assumptions to guide the research phase of this project.

To gather feedback and to challenge the assumptions we

- conducted a resource review
- attended topical community meetings (e.g., employment and criminal records)
- surveyed LBS programs
- surveyed employment programs

- conducted youth focus groups and one-to-one interviews (youth engaged in Employment Ontario (EO) programs)
- spoke to youth who were not engaged in EO programs - “at street level”

Challenges

Our first challenge in this project soon became clear. What piece of this social trend should we focus on?

Youth unemployment is currently a global issue. A global economy, technology and countries struggling financially are just some of the contributing factors. Most of these factors are out of Literacy Link South Central’s (LLSC) area of influence. Some other factors that are discussed within the context of youth unemployment include the public education system, government policies and Ontario Works requirements. These are also factors that we can’t affect.

With limited time and resources, we needed to define what we could realistically explore and influence. Considering our involvement in the EO system, we saw that we could focus on youth engagement in employment agencies and literacy programs, and the transition between the two systems.

Another challenge was trying to engage the target population for the purposes of focus groups. This population (and hence the need for this project) is not easy to engage. We relied on our employment agency partners to gather youth in their programs for the purposes of this project.

Lessons Learned

Resource Review

For the purposes of this report we are highlighting findings as they relate to the assumptions highlighted previously.

A comprehensive overview of articles that were reviewed is provided with this report.

Please see Appendix [_____](#).

A. Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants (Marc Prensky, 2001)

Prensky explored the impact of technology on youth who were raised with it. He states that youth don't have to learn technology; it's an inherent part of their culture. Students now absorb and process information differently than those that have gone before them. He called on teachers to recognize the factors that are different between themselves (Digital Immigrants) and their students (Digital Natives). In fact, he goes further to say, "Our students have changed radically. Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach."

B. Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants: Do They Really Think Differently? (Marc Prensky, 2001)

In this follow up report, Prensky explored how the brain's processes change and adjust according to the stimulation it receives. He related this to the impact of technology on youth brain functions. This article claims that youth today have short attention spans, but only for old ways of thinking.

Through this article he creates a compelling case for the need to make changes to the education system to better fit the learning needs of generations raised with technology.

C. What if? Technology in the 21st Century Classroom (Ontario Public School Board, 2009)

An article written by the Ontario Public School Board asks “How can schools continue to be connected and relevant in the world of the 21st century?”

This article challenges the education system, especially educators, to examine how they use current technologies in the learning environment. It warns us that the integration of technology in schools is not matching the pace of multi-media technology use in the world beyond schools. In a technology-based world we receive constant stimulation from a variety of sources. Youth may feel real learning happens when they are free to access technology on an as-needed basis and then process information in the way they’ve become accustomed to. The article states, “Many students feel, however, that when they come into school they have to “power down” to fit into an environment that offers fewer options for learning than are available in the life they live outside of the school. This can erode students’ perceptions of the relevance of education as they experience it in many schools today.”

D. Good Video Games and Good Learning (James Paul Gee, 2007)

In this article, Gee proposes that classrooms that incorporate the foundational elements of video games may see increased success in learning.

The author states, “Lots of young people pay lots of money to engage in an activity that is hard, long, and complex. As an educator, I realized that this was just the problem our schools face – how do you get someone to learn something long, hard, and complex, and yet still enjoy it? “

He also argues that gaming elements are valuable in the workplace. Gee explains how risk taking and failure are the basis for successful problem solving, and that games often build teamwork and communication.

E. High School Dropouts Returning to School (Melanie Raymond for Statistics Canada, 2008)

High School Dropouts Returning to School explores the role of gender as it relates to leaving and re-engaging in the school system. This report reveals evidence based ideas as to why males (vs. female) drop out of the school system. “Young men cited wanting to work as a reason to leave school more often than young women.”

This research shows that young men with children will more likely work instead of return to their education, so they can earn a living for the sake of their children. This article shows us the importance of making a clear and strong contention between education and work. It also speaks to the value in designing a co-op style program where learning and earning can happen simultaneously.

F. Clearer Sightlines to Employment: What Works for Job-Seekers with Low Educational Attainment (Essential Skills Ontario (ESO) 2012)

This idea of a blended work and education approach was further discussed in a paper put out by ESO in 2012. The author stated “An ‘education-first’ approach is often far too removed from employment for the vast majority of adults for whom high school was not the ‘right fit’ in the first place.”

This could also apply to youth. As our project progressed, it became clear that youth felt that returning to any education seemed like an overwhelming commitment and not part of a clear path to employment.

G. “Canadian youth facing unprecedented challenges finding quality employment” (CIBC, 2013)

CIBC stated that “...one in five youth aged 15-24 not working today has never held a job” and therefore “statistics show that youth who gain work experience and receive on the job training while studying are much more likely to find suitable and sustainable employment.”

Again, this makes a strong case for the value of integrated learning and earning opportunities.

H. Our Voice: Literacy + OW: Best Practices for Serving Ontario Works (OW) Clients (Community Literacy Ontario (CLO), 2013)

Recently, CLO provided a series of tips based on suggested practices by literacy providers, on how to engage, motivate and maintain OW and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) clients. These tips will be good to carry forward, when designing programs to meet the needs of that population.

Suggestions include making sure you offer positive reinforcement and structured learning opportunities where clients feel a sense of accomplishment. The concept of “Gamification,” which is a program design model, can address these suggestions.

Employment Services Survey

(Employment survey questions are included in this report. **Please see Appendix [_____](#).**)

Twenty-two employment service providers from London, Ontario and the surrounding area responded to our survey. The questions were designed to address the assumptions that were described earlier, created by the Advisory Committee.

Through the survey, respondents generally agreed on the following:

- a. There is a disconnect between the jobs that youth want and the skills and knowledge that they have.
- b. Having children didn't seem to influence youth participation in programs.
- c. Very few youth at the employment agencies have been involved in literacy programs.
- d. Several of the male youth in their programs had criminal records. One employment service provider added, "The more desperate the circumstances the less likely "right and wrong" will enter into the equation."
- e. Youth need mentors. It was interesting that in separate responses, this word was continually used.
- f. Financially backed learning opportunities would be beneficial to youth.
- g. Youth were easily discouraged when the road to education and employment seemed long.

Self-Employment

Respondents agreed that they aren't seeing an increase in youth who want to start their own business. This was seen as a good thing since they perceive youth as not having the drive, coordination and overall abilities to be successful in this area. Also, this doesn't fit the goal for youth that want to earn fast money.

One respondent added, “Many tell me they would like to get into skilled trades, but cannot get an opportunity.”

Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Survey

(LBS survey questions are included in this report. **Please see Appendix [_____](#).**)

Nine LBS practitioners from London, Ontario and the surrounding area responded to our survey. The survey questions were, once again, designed to challenge the assumptions set out previously in the project.

Through the survey, respondents generally agreed on the following:

- a. Youth often attend their programs because they have to, usually as a requirement of Ontario Works (OW). Predictably, the youth leave the program when they feel they have met OW requirements. Other reasons for leaving the program are that youth lack motivation and are not able to delay gratification.
- b. This age group is less successful in their program than older age groups. One said that, “...young males tend to be unfocused. This client group appears to be disinterested compared to other client groups. Young males have been disengaged from the regular school system for a number of years.”
- c. Youth are unable to see literacy as part of their employment journey.
- d. Participation doesn't seem to be influenced by having children or not.
(However, research states that having children might be a barrier to participation in education as the youth parent might feel a need to work instead, to provide for the child.)
- e. Youth lack the ability to communicate for the purposes of job searching. One respondent said, “Many youth have not been taught how to use the phone to contact an employer or how to present themselves in person. They are used to

making all their connections through text, Facebook, and Twitter. There is almost a lack of confidence in being able to do anything else.” Employment counsellors often agreed that this is a trend they’re seeing as well.

Other Recommendations

- a. One suggestion was for the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) field to provide monthly information sessions to Ontario Works (OW) clients.
- b. Several respondents suggested that there’s a need for programming where youth on OW can gain work experience and learn at the same time.

Youth Focus Groups

(Youth focus group questions, used to guide focus group conversations, are included in this report. **Please see Appendix [___](#).**)

Thirteen youth from the target population participated in (informal) focus groups.

Youth were asked, “Who can you count on?” as a way to find out more about their support systems. As one would predict, this population have very few supports. One youth replied, “Just my Dad, and my shadow.” A few youth responded that they have family and friends to help them. Interestingly one said his OW caseworker, “because emails are answered promptly.”

Participants generally agreed that being on Ontario Works is depressing. They are embarrassed and often try to hide the fact that they are receiving assistance. They feel that others look down on them.

The reasons many participants left school included, “it was dull,” and “just stopped due to lack of interest.”

We asked youth what they would need to know before returning to school. Not surprisingly, they need to know how more education would be useful to them. One focus group participant noted that returning to high school takes too long. Another

group participant stated he might return to his education in a in a couple of years, if he's not getting anywhere.

Youth expressed a need for (labour market) research to build a case for going back to school. One youth said he wasn't sure how to find a "real answer" about career opportunities and the corresponding training he should take. One youth stated, "The expectation is that you go to post-secondary for some kind of guarantee of employment at the end, and people are realizing that's not always the case."

They often spoke of "cost" as a barrier to further education. Even though most hadn't completed high school, they only thought of post-secondary as an educational option. Therefore, it's not surprising that money was seen as a barrier to returning to school. One youth noted that he would like to go back to school once he earns the money to do so, and is considering apprenticeship, "since they pay you to do it." Another youth said that he doesn't want to go back to school until he knows what he wants to do, because he doesn't want to waste the money. It's interesting to note that **non-Ontario Works (OW)** focus groups participants had a high school diploma whereas the majority of young men without high school diplomas were on OW.

What this feedback suggests is that these youth need to see a stronger connection between education and employment, for 2 reasons:

- 1) To choose a realistic career based on their skills and knowledge.
- 2) To maintain motivation while in education.

Street Level Conversations

Up to this point in the project, we captured feedback from youth involved in programming (EO services) but we hadn't heard from youth in our community that don't access services that are available to them. To this end, our Advisory Group Consultant (of lived experiences) met with an estimated 80 young men in our target group throughout the city of London. Over the course of a week, he held impromptu conversations at the

- Food Bank
- Daily Meals program (provided by a church)
- Labour Ready (temporary agency) parking lot during the early morning registration period
- Men's Mission (men's shelter)
- London's Central Public Library - outside

(A summary report that captures details of his conversations is included. **Please see Appendix [_____](#)**)

The Consultant engaged in casual conversations with the youth in hopes of hearing responses to the survey questions we had around learning and employment.

He reported that many youth had a similar background story. They left home at 17 because their mothers would lose the financial benefits for them once they turn 18. With the lack of income for this child, the family's money would be getting tighter. The youth were pushed to drop out of school for work, or sometimes they left school in hopes of picking up more hours at their part time job. Criminal activity (and charges) were **so** common that when Jamie asked them if they had a job, their response was commonly "like, a **real** job?"

Based on his findings, we identified 5 challenges and offered corresponding suggestions.

Challenge

Youth are unaware of the literacy and employment services that are available to them. The youth thought employment services were temporary agencies and they often had preconceived ideas of what they were allowed to access.

Suggested next steps include

- consider promoting programs to people who work with youth such as probation and parole officers or Children's Aid Society
- consider putting information booths outside the probation office
- have more of a visual presence
- remember that word of mouth is effective way to promote services with youth

Challenge

They only do things that their friends will do.

Jamie noticed that the youth only talked or engaged with him when a friend came along. The more friends that were drawn to the conversation, the chattier the group was. The more comfortable they were, the more they would talk.

Suggested next steps include

- use a buddy system in programming
- offer an incentive for youth to bring someone else (this also helps to increase their social interactions)

Challenge

They lost interest in school but are interested in learning through a hands-on approach.

Commonly, they didn't like school and are not interested in returning to learn. When our Consultant asked the youth what they would think of learning something in a workbook using a woodworking table as a desk (for example) and then turning around and applying what they just learned on some tool, right in class - many youth would excitedly reply, "There's a place like that? Where?"

Suggested next steps include

- develop a program where youth can learn, work with a hands-on approach and earn money at the same time

Challenge

The youth are not easily approachable and are not very trusting of people they don't know.

This is something that many of us might already know but it's a good thing to keep in mind. Many youth in our target population stated that they only rely on themselves.

Suggested next steps include

- have steps in the intake and program design that helps to build a trusting environment
- review current practices to ensure procedures won't potentially turn youth away (e.g., asking several personal questions and asking about source of funding when first meeting the youth)

It didn't take much for the youth to decide to walk away from these conversations. For instance, when the youth saw that our Consultant was carrying a pen and paper to record conversations, the youth would back off from the conversation saying,

“You’re just one of **them!**” The Consultant also remarked that as much as we might have stereotypes about youth, they also look at us with stereotypes.

Challenge

These youth have low self-esteem and feel like “just a number” especially since they might belong to several “systems.”

Suggested next steps include

- build self-esteem, confidence and a sense of self into programming and content

Knowledge Transfer

The findings from this project were profiled during a province-wide webinar. The webinar included participants from the literacy field, the employment field and a cross-over of both fields.

Evaluation results of the webinar were very positive. Respondents felt it was a worthwhile webinar where they learned new information and usable strategies.

Achieving Employment Ontario (EO) Mission and Vision

MTCU Vision: "Ontario will have the most educated people and highly skilled workforce in the world to build the province's competitive advantage and quality of life."

According to Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) Annual

Report (2011-2012), at-risk youth are under-represented in the labour market. As we have heard through this project, many male youth leave school early. They don't have the knowledge and skills they need to be productive in today's labour force. They often don't make use of the provincial literacy and employment agencies at their disposal. Yet it's these Employment Ontario (EO) services that could help move low-skilled youth along their path to employment.

The MTCU report states, "Ontario's competitive advantage is its people. The province is at its best when people have opportunities and tools to reach their full potential." The strategy represented here, through this Labour Market Partnership project, addresses the learning needs of disengaged young males and identifies gaps in our community where EO service providers can provide resolutions. Only through exploring the issues can we create the necessary opportunities and tools to help these youth reach their full potential.

Through targeted marketing, young males will be in a better position to take advantage of EO services. These services would build the skills and knowledge that these youth need to become employable and then successful in finding work. In return, the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs and employment agency programs will have a better understanding of how marketing, program content and design can increase their chances of success with this population.

Ontario would benefit from increasing the skills of this untapped workforce. EO's LBS and ES are in a position to provide undereducated and unemployed youth with services

that will decrease the need for youth to be unemployed and ultimately, on social assistance.

The approach used through this project supports Employment Ontario's (EO) efforts to integrate services between literacy and employment. During this project many partnerships were developed and they will be built upon during the next phase. Overall, both employment and literacy providers coordinated efforts to respond to the identified needs of this community-based issue. By building a case for a strong connection between literacy and employment, we not only make youth aware of the connection, but EO service providers as well.

Conclusion

Based on what we read and what we heard, Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) will attempt to engage this population by focussing efforts on **marketing** and **program design**.

Marketing

Youth are often unaware of our services and how they can benefit from them. We hope to design messages that can be marketed to the target population to show them a strong connection between literacy and employment. We also want to let them know that there's a system of services in their community that can help move them closer to employment.

We will explore options for strategic placement of marketing messages. Where are youth most likely to come across our promotional messages or where would they most likely go in search of services? In a report, **Electronic Youth: Creating the Current** (Elgin, Middlesex, Oxford Workforce Planning and Development Board, 2011), youth stated that they seek services through Kijiji. A search of London's Kijiji site resulted in no mention of literacy or employment agency programs (search words included,

“literacy,” “education,” “employment services,” and “job search”). We’d like to develop engaging messages suitable for a Kijiji posting.

In a search of local literacy websites and local employment service websites it was interesting to note that the two systems rarely, if at all, cross-post. This could be a good thing to consider, especially for youth who use one service and have need of another.

Several common provincial and federal websites that support youth in their search for employment do not address literacy. When education options were profiled, the websites listed choices for after high school. There are no options for youth that left their schooling early or for youth that feel they need to upgrade their skill before moving on in education or employment.

We hope to develop videos to make youth service providers aware of our services so they can confidently speak about them to their youth clients. This takes our key messages to the places where youth go. We’d also like to create videos for youth and, if possible, use peers in those videos.

Program Design

Combined feedback and research generated three ideas for program development that fit the identified needs.

1. Gamification

Gamification means using the fundamental elements of gaming and applying them in program design. Some of the concepts that apply are

- collaboration
- competition
- ranks
- levels

Gamification is

- becoming a big part of our daily life
- being used to motivate employees and consumers alike
- playing a major role in training

How can gamification program design be used in our programs to engage, maintain and motivate youth? We hope to explore this further.

2. Real Voices

The City of London recently ran a program called Real Voices. This was a youth-lead initiative where older youth helped younger youth create videos. When speaking about this program, the presenter spoke of the leadership skills and confidence developed by the older youth participants. This program sounds like it might be a good fit for the second phase of this strategy so we'd like to explore this possibility further.

3. Learn and Earn (co-op style program)

As we heard from several sources, we need a program where learning and working for a wage happens simultaneously. We hope to explore what this could look like with the help of our EO partners, some of who are also employers in this community.

Program Delivery

No matter how engaging the content of a program might be, it would be a huge oversight to not consider other factors such as the

- learning environment
- process we use

- expectations we have of the participants
- way we facilitate

There's little use putting effort into marketing and program content if we turn off the youth after their first visit to the program. For instance, how many programs ask about source of funding during intake? How would this feel to a young man who's at a program for the first time and who's embarrassed about being on Ontario Works (OW)? Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) will explore suggestions for best practices around program delivery for male youth. This will result in a well-rounded approach to youth engagement.

Appendices

Resource review

Employment survey questions

Literacy survey questions

Focus group questions

Word on the Street Report