

## Barriers to Adult Learning: A Literature Review

Most Canadian adults believe they have quite sufficient learning skills to engage in further education courses if they wanted to do so, but many of those who would like to participate in further education face serious institutional or personal constraints on doing so. (Livingstone, 1999a, unpaginated)

*Note: There are two ways I have chosen to review this literature. One is by considering the various sorts of barriers and who has written about them. The other is looking at specific populations and which kinds of barriers they face.*

Magro (2008) identifies three major categories of barriers which she has adopted from Cross (1981): Hyland and Norman (2003) speak of these same three categories but attribute them to McGivney (1993). Gammage (1992) and Grace & Gouthro (2000) also refer to Cross' three categories. Gorard & Selwyn (1999) explore the barriers to lifelong learning through these same three groups as classified by Harrison (1993). In their 1995 article "A New Conceptualisation", Blair, McPake & Munn speak of these three and add a fourth, all of which they attribute to various scholars including Carp et al., 1974; Cross, 1986; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988; Jarvis, 1985; Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Keddie, 1980; McGivney, 1990. Sometimes the categories themselves are used differently by scholars i.e. what one scholar calls a sociocultural barrier, another might refer to as a dispositional barrier.

### **1. Dispositional or psychological barriers:**

Fear, low self-esteem, depression (Cross in Magro, 2008); individuals' negative views of self and education (Gammage, 1992); problems of attitude, negative perceptions of learning, expectations and motivations (Norman & Hyland, 2003); fear of tasks required in formal classroom settings and negative attitudes to classroom learning, often arising from negative experiences at school; personal knowledge and motivation (Harrison in Gorard & Selwyn, 1999). Horsman (in Magro, 2008) adds "difficulty in concentrating, in processing and remembering information, in taking risks, and in beginning and completing new tasks are among the barriers that adult learners may face" (25). Hyland & Norman (2003) cite Kennedy (1997) who includes "stress and anxiety" and "general

lack of confidence” of adults returning to learning. (264) Gammage (1992) also lists “embarrassment and low self-esteem” and suggests “surveys often underestimate importance of dispositional barriers. Respondents are more likely to say that the cost of education is a barrier rather than their own disinterest.” (54). Norman & Hyland (2003) state that “the ‘dispositional’ barriers faced by people from social backgrounds where learning is under-valued continue to discourage participation, and the age at which people leave school is still a crucial variable” (263).

## **2. Situational barriers:**

Lack of time, money, transportation and/ or adequate day care & domestic commitments (Blair, McPake & Munn, 1995; Gorard & Williams, 2001; Grace & Gouthro, 2000; Kilgour Anderson, 2004; Livingstone, 1999a; Magro, 2008; Selwyn, Gallacher & Crossan, 2002; Sussman, 2002).

## **3. Institutional barriers:**

Scheduling of courses or the location of the college or learning centre (Magro, 2008; Sussman, 2002); inaccessibility of the education system such as difficulty finding information, lack of facilities i.e. affordable on-site childcare, as well as the elitist image of some schools and programs (Blair, McPake & Munn, 1995; Hyland and Norman, 2003; Livingstone, 1999a). Hyland and Norman (2003) also include “a system unresponsive to the needs of adult learners in terms of teaching/learning strategies, timetabling and admissions to courses” and “a lack of publicity about learning opportunities” (262). Grace & Gouthro (2000) add safety for women.

## **4. Sociocultural barriers:**

Gallacher & Crossan (2002) declare “socio-cultural barriers should not be underestimated, particularly in respect of the non-participant groups.” (497). Magro (2008) includes the barriers of language difficulties, a lack of literacy in the individual's first language, and social disapproval, i.e. a social environment in which education is not perceived as important or useful (although she doesn't attribute them to this category, but adds them at the end of the other three categories and their contents. O'Shea (in Blair,

McPake & Munn, 1995) points out how for some adults, returning to education is a political decision which can result in “severe rejection by the student’s own cultural group”. (637)

### Specific barriers for specific populations:

The unemployed and others on low incomes, the unskilled and unqualified, ex-of fenders, part-time or temporary workers, those with learning difficulties or low levels of basic skills, and some ethnic groups as being the least likely to participate (Fryer 1997, Kennedy 1997, Gorard et al. 1997b, DfEE1998).... If extended initial education (apprenticeship, FE, HE etc.) is ignored then women and older people are much less likely to be adult participants in learning (Gorard et al. 1999b). (Gorard & Selwyn, 1999, 526)

### Rural Dwellers:

According to Roberson’s research on lifelong in rural areas (2005) , those who reside in non-metropolitan areas have a strong sense of community, self-reliance, and harmony with nature, all attributes that can positively influence learning as inhabitants depend on each other, learn by doing, and have time and quiet for reflection. However rural dwellers also face barriers to learning, from poverty (from lower wages and lower incomes), isolation & erosion of social structures, reduced resources, and illiteracy. There is less financial support for health and education and more distance to cover when looking for services. In addition, those who are older and have disabilities, lack of family support and/ or are from other cultural backgrounds may have less resources.

Kilgour Anderson (2004) writes about the multiple barriers to learning of rural Albertans, including lack of childcare services due to the unavailability of family members who traditionally provided these services, because both adults are employed. When the only daycare in her town closed its doors, many young families were left scrambling for private child care. Although geographic distance was more a barrier in the past due to today’s availability of online learning, the costs for computer equipment

prohibit some from participating. She also found that time, or lack of it, is a barrier as farmers first priority is to keep their farms running. For rural dwellers the flexibility of online courses is good, however the amount of time required for reading in such courses can be more than in classroom courses.

Purdie & Boulton-Lewis (2003) speak of the barriers due to aging of rural adult learners including physical issues such as reduced mobility, illness, degenerating sight and hearing, worries about safety, which relate to feelings of vulnerability, and limited opportunities due to their dependence on someone else to arrange matters (such as physical assistance) or provide transport.

### Women:

Barriers for women are multiple and complex. From situational barriers such as negotiation of family responsibilities, the struggle to attain financial and social/ moral support, the organisation of childcare, and the reorganisation of time and money to meet homeplace and learning-place demands to the dispositional barriers of low self-esteem, low self-confidence and fears around engaging in graduate studies. (Barg, 2004; Blair, McPake & Munn, 1995; Galacher & Crossan, 2002; Gorard & Selwyn, 1999; Grace & Gouthro, 2000)

One of the women respondents in Gallacher & Crossan's 2002 study had lived with a violent and unsupportive partner who resented her going to college:

It was jealousy as in I was out meeting a lot of folk. It was like 'who was I meeting, who was I talking to', all that kind of stuff. That was another issue. But I wasn't caring what he thought. It wasn't him who was doing it, it was me. At the end of the day I was out for me. I always used to try and go but eventually I couldn't keep going. (505-6)

Horsman (2000) also points out that students who attempt to escape violent relationships often find the violence escalates when they begin to attend school.

A scholar whose work focuses on the relationship between violence in women's lives and its impact on their ability to learn, Horsman's research builds on the study carried out by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (Lloyd, Ennis, & Atkinson, 1994) which identified violence as a major barrier to women's literacy learning. (8) Through her groundbreaking research, Horsman found that "learners who have experienced violence as adults may have difficulty concentrating on learning" and "even those who have tried to escape the violence in their lives and see learning as a means to move forward may find that the cycle of violence continues". (6) One of Horsman's respondents reflects, "Abuse does not make you abnormal. It creates barriers" (2000, 37).

British scholar Thompson (2007) suggests that economic, neo-liberal, privatization, and conservative agendas are all barriers to learning. Furthermore, she argues: "what gets learned is mediated through gender stereotypes that are unchallenged when feminist critique and intervention is left out of policy creation." (10) Thompson provides a chilling report on the economic status of women in the UK, who, she notes, are "the majority of students in adult learning" as well as "the tutors, volunteers and middle managers".

Full-time women workers still earn 18 per cent less per hour than men. This increases to 33 per cent less per hour for working mothers juggling jobs and child-care and 28 per cent less per hour for women returning to work after their children have left home. Part-time workers (three quarters of whom are women) still earn 40 per cent less per hour than full-time men - much as they did 30 years ago. Women graduates, five years into employment, earn 15 per cent less than men with the same qualifications. All in all, women receive an average of 54 pence for every pound of income received by men. This is the largest gender income gap in Europe in what is the World's fifth richest economy. And, of course, the repercussions continue into old age. One quarter of all women pensioners live in poverty and for every pound of retirement income received by men, women receive less than 32 pence. (Thompson, 2007, 9)

## Older Adults:

Participation rates in adult learning are lower for older adults (Gorard & Selwyn, 1999; Hyland & Norman, 2003; Selwyn, Gorard & Williams, 2001). Fewer individuals over the age of 55 return to school. (Blair, McPake & Munn, 1995). Selwyn & Gorard (2008) propose that this is because of

the circumstances often associated with being old - for example, lower income, impaired physicality, narrowing social circles as well as the politics, cultures and personal preferences of old age (27).

Purdie & Boulton-Lewis (2003) identify the barriers to learning for older adults as consisting of “physical problems, cognitive factors, self matters, and social factors,” most of these barriers having to do with aging. The physical problems included reduced mobility, illness, degenerating sight and hearing, concerns about safety (which related to feelings of vulnerability), and limited opportunities because of their diminished mobility and need to depend on someone else to arrange transport or other things. (136) Many older adults demonstrated limiting attitudes, evident through “statements about learning not being necessary (“don’t need to know,” “it’s too late,” “not worth the effort”), not being in the mood, and laziness”. (136-7)

Githens (2007) found that older adults:

generally learn more slowly (Chaffin & Harlow, 2005), are afraid of displaying memory loss (Hale, 1990), demonstrate declines in reading comprehension among older adults (which are related to vision problems rather than cognitive decline, and decline in working memory (e.g., memorizing a to-do list and remembering which items are still left on the list while completing the items). VanBiervliet (2004). They also can experience frustration due to the inappropriate sequencing of courses and undesirable course features. (335)

When considering e-learning, Githens (2007) suggests that “one of the most damaging stereotypes of older adults is that they are rigid and do not want to learn.” He asserts that

this stereotype leads employers and other education providers to discount the abilities of older adults. (330)

Purdie & Boulton-Lewis (2003) found that elder adults with unsuccessful attempts at previous learning found they had a limited skills and knowledge base from which to continue learning. They also noted that older adults find a lack of training opportunities in workplace settings, based on a 1991 study that found that 80% of those over 50 years of age had not participated in an educational activity. “Twenty-four percent of those individuals reported that they had not participated in an educational activity because their employers had not encouraged them to do so.” (333-334)

### Less Educated:

Adults with less education and those who work in blue collar jobs are less likely to participate in adult education programs (Swindell & Thompson in Githens, 2007, 333-334).

According to Livingstone (1999a), most adults with “at least a high school diploma are now enrolling in some kind of further education course or workshop annually, but less than a quarter of those without a diploma are enrolling. He also found that “the number of school dropouts who indicated they would enrol if their prior informal learning were recognized is almost double that of the number who already plan to enroll”. (unpaginated). Therefore a particular barrier for adults with less education is not having their prior learning more fully recognized by educational institutions. (Livingstone, 1999a)

Another barrier is the continuing impact of earlier experiences on adult learners’ perception of self. One man with a history of schooling for people with special educational needs... When asked if he would be interested in doing further study, he replied: ‘well, we will see’. He continued:

The thing is I feel I have got a lot of baggage to get rid of in what happened in my past. I know adult education is different from that . . . No as I said I had problems with my level of self esteem connected with my past educational experience . . . The discouraging thing is really inside me. It is this internal stuff that always comes back and beats me up.  
(Galacher & Crossan, 2002, 505-6)

Veeman (2000) and Blair, McPake & Munn (1995) also cite low self-esteem as a result of negative school experience as a barrier. (354)

### Poor/ Working Class:

Poverty has been identified as a key barrier to adult learning by researchers in Canada, USA, and Britain. (Blair, McPake & Munn, 1995; Gallacher & Crossan, 2002; Gorard & Sewyn, 1999; Grace & Gouthro, 2000; Kilgour Anderson, 2004; Livingstone, 1999a; Magro, 2008; Norman & Hyland, 2003; Selwyn, Gorard & Williams, 2001; Shilling, 2002; Sussman, 2002). Indeed, Livingstone (2000) suggests that “the hidden injuries of class in capitalist schools run very deep and strongly inhibit engagement in further education for many working people,”(136) recognizing that “one of the most striking features of working class knowledge in capitalist societies is the multiple barriers to its recognition and legitimate use in dominant institutional settings.” (140)

Galacher & Crossan (2002) report that, because of their respondents’ reliance on benefits, the level of financial support that could be provided by colleges was inadequate. (506-7)

### ESL:

Adult learners with low levels of dominant language literacy suffer without enhanced dominant language skills. They are also likely to be increasingly excluded from equitable participation in an increasingly symbolic information-dominated society. (Livingstone, 1999a, unpaginated)



## Canadians from War-Affected Countries:

Magro (2008) identifies the barriers for Canadian adult learners from war-affected countries as:

difficulty in developing English language proficiency (as well as the time required); loss of close family members and difficulty reuniting with remaining family members; poverty and financial burdens; a loss of professional standing; problems balancing parenting, work, and academic responsibilities; not enough time to complete their studies; and anxiety about the future. (27-8)

Other barriers which she recognizes through her research include:

shortcomings in the educational system; poverty, a lack of literacy support and counseling, a shortage of good housing in safe and pleasant neighborhoods, the bureaucracy involved in immigration and in refugees' sponsoring other relatives who wish to resettle in North America, and the long time it will take to complete education and training (28).

She shares how one college teacher wrote:

poverty affects every aspect of our students' lives. They have a hard time paying for classes, getting aid, or they can't afford to live in a decent apartment in a nice area. Many of our students live on the margins. We make the mistake in thinking that society is democratic and that everyone has equal access to cultural and educational venues. The reality is that these venues are class structured and so many of our students do not inhabit this milieu. (2008, 30)

Magro suggests that gaining an understanding into how adult refugees develop resilience in order to face new challenges could have implications for working with other groups of adult learners who are marginalized.

## Aboriginal Learners:

In *Too Scared to Learn*, Horsman (2000) speaks about the barriers that First Nations students face due to the legacy of residential schooling, carried with them into their learning, whether or not they experienced it directly. (6)

The impact of colonization has created destructive chaos among Indigenous peoples, and the spirit is still deep within the communities today. This environment poses extreme challenges for adult learning because of the constant pressures that distract and dampen the desire to learn. (Shilling, 2002, 154)

Working with First Nations communities in North America, Shilling observed that "the constant energy of poverty, death, assaults, accidents, suicide, chronic illnesses, unemployment, and intergenerational trauma" can paralyze individuals so that crisis is more likely to occur than progress. (154)

Shilling suggests that negative experiences can be redirected into positive experiences and transformative learning through healing and educational initiatives that tap into individual and collective strengths and creativity. Like Magro, Shilling suggests researchers could further examine the factors that contribute to some adults being more psychologically resilient than others. She advocates for educational institutions at all levels to promote cultural appreciation, a culture of nonviolence, and transformative learning.

Historical trauma response has been identified and is delineated as a constellation of features in reaction to multigenerational, collective, historical and cumulative psychic wounding over time, both over the life span and across generations. (Duran, Duran, *Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Yellow Horse* –Davis, 1998:342) (Shilling, 2002, 153)

Shilling recognizes alcohol and substance abuse as a significant social issue for Aboriginal learners. "Indigenous people often call on the spirit of alcohol to replace the pain and discomfort of colonization." Fisher Brillinger & Cattrell (in Shilling) acknowledge suspicions that "a high percentage of Aboriginal learners are affected to some degree with fetal alcohol syndrome, which can result in behavioural problems,

physical abnormalities, poor health and judgement, and memory impairment.” (Shilling, 2002, 154-155)

Many things to think about:

I end this review with a poem, written by an adult learner and published in the book "Something to think about - Please think about this": A Report on a National Study of Access to Adult Basic Education Programs and Services in Canada (Hoddinott, 1998)

**something to think about - please think about this**

For whatever reason  
(be it poverty or ignorance)  
people were held back from going to, continuing in, or finishing school.  
Here are a few examples and/or reasons:  
A parent dies or becomes very sick;  
the child has to go to work or stay home to look after or support the family.  
It's not their fault; it still happens.  
Negative messages from mother or father or anyone -  
thinks work is better for the child,  
don't need an education, won't get far anyway.  
Still happens.  
Get and/or got family keeps wife/girlfriend down,  
out of school, stuck.  
Still happens.  
Drugs, alcohol, bad decisions.  
Still happens.  
Violence in the home,  
isolation, being denied information about people, places, things.  
Still happens.  
My point is, sometimes there are circumstances beyond our control,  
and opportunities haven't always been there,  
and or all of the above,  
it only makes sense that bad decisions are made.  
Even today many teenagers leave home, get kicked out,  
or have to go to work, leaving school behind.  
And sometimes they just think they don't need to finish school  
to get a job  
only to find out that that's not true.

Hoddinott, Susan. 1998. *Something to Think About - Please Think About This: A Report on National Study of Access to Adult Basic Education Programs and Services in Canada*. Ottawa. Ottawa Board of Education. Retrieved on June 23, 2008 from [http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel\\_schugurensky/faqs/qa15.html](http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_schugurensky/faqs/qa15.html)

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