SUPPORTING EDUCATIONAL LEARNING AND TRAINING FOR LOW LITERACY IMMIGRANT WOMEN: A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH BETWEEN THE CALGARY IMMIGRANT WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION AND BOW VALLEY COLLEGE

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Immigrant and refugee women with limited or interrupted education face a range of challenges to full participation and integration into Canadian society, including longer times to learn Canada's official languages and barriers to employment. This necessitates a broad array of immigrant bridging programs that immigrant and refugee women can avail and that are customized and tailored to their specific needs. The Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA) in partnership with the Bow Valley College (BVC) developed one such program to assist low literacy women transition to the Canadian workplace as Child Development Assistants in the child care field. This article presents the model upon which this program is based and outlines key aspects that led to average employability rate of 93% among its clients.

Les femmes immigrantes et réfugiées ayant une éducation limitée ou interrompue font face à une série de défis pour participer et s'intégrer pleinement à la société canadienne, incluant des périodes plus longues pour apprendre les langues officielles du Canada ainsi que des obstacles à l'emploi. Cela nécessite un large éventail de programmes de transition pour les immigrants accessibles aux femmes immigrantes et réfugiées et personnalisés et adaptés à leurs besoins particuliers. La Calgary Immigrant Women's Association *(CIWA), en partenariat avec le Bow Valley College (BVC), a mis au point un programme visant à aider les femmes peu alphabétisées à faire leur entrée sur le marché du travail en tant qu'assistantes au développement des enfants. Cet article présente le modèle sur lequel repose ce programme et décrit les principaux aspects qui ont mené à un taux moyen d'employabilité de 93 % parmi ses clients.*

CONTEXT AND DEMOGRAPHICS

CALGARY

For several years now, service providers in Calgary have been committed to creating and supporting programs and services that help immigrant and refugee women attain equitable employment and full participation in Canadian society. The labour market participation rate of women was 8 percent lower than for men, while the labour market participation rate of immigrant women was 7 percent lower than for the rest of the female population. Women with a low level of literacy in their first language and up to seven to eight years of education from their home countries also face more difficulties in the labour market than other immigrants. Among the female immigrant population, recent arrivals were the least likely to be employed when compared with women who had been landed immigrants for a longer period (Chui, 2015).

According to the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, the economic situation of recent immigrants has worsened over the past decade; in addition, difficulties integrating into the labour market can cause depression, family tensions and other mental stresses on the family (Wilson & Murtza, 2010). This necessitates a broad array of immigrant bridging programs that immigrant and refugee women can avail and that are customized and tailored to their needs.

CALGARY IMMIGRANT WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA) was established in 1982 as a non-profit organization to address the needs and concerns of immigrant and refugee women, youth, children and families in Calgary. CIWA takes a holistic approach in the delivery of 50 programs and services in the areas of settlement and integration, literacy and language training, employment support and bridging programs, family violence, parenting, individual counselling, in-home support, civic engagement, health, housing and community development. This is reflected in the mission of the agency to engage and integrate all immigrant women and their families in the community and CIWA's five values: integrity, equity, inclusiveness, innovation and leadership.

During its 35 year history, CIWA has developed innovative programs, entered into partnerships and has become an organization that is truly responsive to the unique and diverse needs of its constituency. Over the years, CIWA has made the transition to Canada a more comfortable, pleasant and successful one for more than 90,000 immigrant women and their families. In the past four years alone, CIWA has served over 1,300 low literacy women through employment programs geared towards women with interrupted education.

In the past fiscal year, CIWA worked in partnership with 157 employer partners to provide mentorship, work experience placements, and networking opportunities for our clientele. Of these employers, 101 provided work experience placements for CIWA's low literacy immigrant and refugee clientele. These employers range from daycare centres in both non-profit and private sectors to the food service industry, hotel and caretaking industry as well as the retail sector.

BOW VALLEY COLLEGE

Bow Valley College (BVC) has a long and strong history of working alongside community; its mission states: "Where people live and work, Bow Valley College will contribute to the vitality of communities and the strength of the economy through innovative adult education programs and services that equip people for successful living, lifelong learning, and work in a global, knowledge-based economy" (Bow Valley College, p.4, 2015). The partnership approach utilized in the collaboration between CIWA and BVC is an example of the college's vision in practice.

In the 2014-15 academic year, BVC served 15,000 students. Of those students, 76 percent are female and the average age is 27. The college student body is a diverse community of learners with over 98 languages represented (Bow Valley College, 2014). BVC's Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) programming is housed within the School of Community Studies under the auspice of the Centre for Early Development and Applied Research (CEDAR). CEDAR, through the lens of cultural diversity, supports the social-emotional well-being and mental health of children, youth, family, and community through exemplary programming and applied research. The ELCC program supports approximately 400 students per semester with an annual intake of 200 learners. The program consists of (1) a certificate based on eight courses (45 hours and three credits each) along with two required practicums, and (2) a diploma involving16 courses (45 hours and three credits each) with an additional four required practicums. The program is heavily over-subscribed, with a waitlist of one year. The English language proficiency requirements if your first language is not English are: IELTS – Academic 6 with minimum band score of 5.5; TOEFL – 83; Academic English 2 (BVC course) B-; CLB 8 in each strand; or transcripts demonstrating successful completion of 3 years full time secondary education in English or transcripts demonstrating successful completion of 1 year full time post-secondary education in English. As noted by CIWA staff, these admission requirements are beyond the current English language abilities of the clients they serve in this program.

The Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement (CEIIA) at Bow Valley College provides programming and services in: English language learning, career

advancement, intercultural awareness, and global citizenship. CEIIA is involved in a project titled "Enhancing Well-being and Civic Engagement of Immigrant Women Retirees." This two-year SSHRC-funded Community and College Social Fund project has BVC and the CIWA partnered to investigate the critical barriers and available supports for retired immigrant women.

CHALLENGES

According to UNESCO, of the world's 774 million illiterate adults, 60 percent are women, a statistic that has not changed in 20 years (UNESCO, 2014). Immigrant and refugee women with limited or interrupted education face a range of barriers to full participation and integration into Canadian society. English language learners who lack literacy in their first language require significantly longer time to learn as they are working on both language and literacy simultaneously (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2016); among literacy learners, some have never held a pencil or a pen before. Further, they are learning English and literacy in the context of a new country, culture, and community. Many literacy learners have unique techniques to interact with the literate world and often develop stronger oral skills to compensate for their inability to read and write; others are dependent on children, spouses and other family members to help them navigate their communities and interactions. The barriers to employment faced by immigrant and refugee women with limited or interrupted education are many and go beyond English language and basic literacy. Some of the barriers include:

- Lack of work experience in their home country; many women were not allowed to work and stayed at home to care for their children and family.

- Lack of understanding of workplace expectations and Canadian business culture. Canadian business culture comes with spoken and unspoken demands of behaviour and attitude, which may be very different from other cultures.

- Limited soft skills or differing perceptions regarding hours of work, timeliness, following and understanding rules, and interacting with coworkers and supervisors.

- Lack of a supportive community and isolation; many are single parents, which increases the challenges they face. They struggle with:

  - Regular and ongoing stress related to limited or lack of income and the inability to pay bills and provide for their families.

  - Juggling inflexible or demanding work schedules with daycare, after school care and family needs; making childcare arrangements can be very complex without a thorough understanding of how to find childcare and/or before or after school care.

  - Not having the resources to pay for daycare at the commencement of employment.

- Being restricted from employment due to hiring processes. Interviews over the phone or in person are intimidating for most; employers who are not familiar with cross cultural communication and do not understand the language barriers faced by these women will often overlook them as a viable labour source. Many employers invest in psychometric assessments, pre-employment testing or questionnaires that are dependent on cultural understanding and/or higher levels of literacy and English than are required for the job.

- Employment environments that do not take into consideration these women's specific language and literacy needs in hiring, training and ongoing communication. Some employers assume prior knowledge and understanding of a job or task.

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR THIS DEMOGRAPHIC

CIWA began its journey supporting low literacy immigrant and refugee women in 1999 with the Pebbles in the Sand program,a pre-Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program which equips participants with basic literacy, English language and learning skills required to excel in English language learning classrooms. CIWA watched Pebbles graduates work tirelessly; however, many graduates lacked sufficient opportunities to join the workforce, and those who did transition to employment often struggled to maintain their job or excel in their positions. Thus, in 2007, CIWA launched the Childcare Training Program for Low Literacy Immigrant Women with funding from the government of Alberta. Since then, with support from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), CIWA has expanded its programming to include a variety of learning, employment training and bridging services for low literacy clientele including the following:

- Low literacy ESL programming through language classes, home visitation (HIPPY) as well as focused support for struggling language learners.

- Counselling and job search support for those with limited proficiency in English.

- Retail Training by learning customer service, retail vocabulary, using documents, WHMIS and food safety, working with money, cashier training and

phone skills.

• Food Service Training for the quick service industry by learning customer relations, occupational vocabulary, numeracy, weights and measures, food safety, sanitation, equipment training and handling.

• Modular Employment Training to work in cleaning, hotel housekeeping or kitchen help by learning housekeeping and kitchen vocabulary, WHMIS, health and safety, working with others, room attendant skills, kitchen help skills, schedule & phone skills and customer service.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICES IN SUPPORTING LOW-LITERACY WOMEN

At the forefront of effective practices in supporting low literacy immigrant women is the customization and tailoring of service delivery to meet the labour market integration needs of vulnerable populations. For example, the FCSS Research Brief Three cites a recent policy paper, in which Alboim and McIsaac (2007) delineate promising practices for programs to improve immigrants' employment, comprising bridging and work experience programs, job mentoring in the field and language training as essential components (FCSS, 2014); all of which are incorporated into our bridging programs. Such customization includes the entire spectrum of program and service delivery starting with client intake and needs assessment, continuing on to skills training that incorporates the latest innovations in program design and skill acquisition, utilizing resources and technology grounded in research, availing opportunities that mirror workplaces in form of mentored job placements and finally, evaluating and measuring results to ensure that the program abides by the outcome measurement frameworks.

Programs designed with low-literacy populations in mind must take an asset based approach, utilizing the skills that learners bring to the program and tapping into their prior learning experiences either via concrete skills or lived experience. Integration of life skills into programs designed for those with limited education is crucial to ensure that the gap between prior experience (education and work) and Canadian experiences is bridged. This bridging can further be supported by a mentored job placement where program participants are exposed to the Canadian workplace environment and labour market. Such work experience is typically provided by business partners from the not-for-profit and private sectors and are in line with labour market needs and the participant's interests, skills and abilities as concluded in the career planning activities.

THE MODEL:CHILDCARE TRAINING FOR LOW LITERACY IMMIGRANT WOMEN

CIWA AND BVC EDUCATION COLLABORATION

The current BVC and CIWA's childcare training collaboration began in 2011. The program assists women with seven years of education or less in their home country transition to the Canadian workplace as Child Development Assistants in the child care field. BVC supports the program through the provision of the Orientation course from the Ministry of Children's Services Child Care Certification division within a fee for service arrangement.

The program's educational model addresses the unique barriers that these women face by providing them with specialized occupational training and Essential Skills development with particular attention to their individual learning styles. The curriculum takes cognizance of conceptualizing/contextualizing new learning and is tailored to meet the unique needs of individual learning styles by incorporating various instructional methodologies and instructional theories such as: Literacy Development, Hands-on Learning, Conceptual Learning, Whole Language Instruction, Participatory Instruction, and Observational Learning.

The English language learning and Child Care Orientation course is provided onsite at CIWA's main location downtown and is delivered jointly by a CIWA staff member and a BVC Early Learning and Child Care instructor. The program consists of delivery of the Child Care Orientation course materials provided by the Ministry of Children's Services by the BVC instructor and English language instruction and support provided by the CIWA instructor.

Work experience placements consist of eight weeks of full time mentored work experience at a host company that assigns a staff member to mentor the participant and thus to ensure that the work experience opportunity is one of learning and growth. The supervisor/mentor can be the direct supervisor or a co-worker. There were over 25 on-site observation-support visits per intake, and over 30 meetings with clients and supervisors to discuss issues, gain and provide feedback, and numerous telephone support sessions conducted with supervisors and clients.

LOOKING FORWARD

After eight years of a successful partnership, BVC and CIWA are preparing to launch the next phase of programming for low literacy immigrant and refugee women, Child Development Worker Certification, funded by IRCC. The program will provide mid-literacy clients with the support needed to successfully enter and complete the Life Experience Equivalency Process (LEEP). Alberta Children's Services developed LEEP to allow employed Child Development Assistants to

demonstrate that they have the competencies to advance to child development worker certification without taking a college certificate program. CIWA and BVC will ensure that the necessary supports are in place and are accessible to clients so that they are successful in attaining certification in Early Learning and Child Care and Child Development Worker. This new initiative will help graduates of the Childcare Training Program as well as other eligible, mid-level literacy women grow their careers in the early childhood development sector. Partnerships such as the one between CIWA and BVC are of great benefit for all. They provide higher social return on investment, averaging a 93 percent employability rate over the past five years in this case, and they ensure a higher value added benefit for clients overall.

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