

Continuing Education and Employment for Individuals with an Intellectual Disability or Autism: Emerging, Innovative and Promising Practices in Quebec

A case study of four
organizations in the
province

Plain-language research summary

Samuel Ragot, PhD Candidate, School of
Social Work, McGill University

Lucyna Lach, Associate Professor, School of
Social Work, McGill University



McGill

Legal Deposit

Legal deposit, March 2024

Bibliothèque et archives nationales du Québec

Library and Archives Canada

ISBN : 978-2-921037-55-6

Research Teams

- Principal investigator: Samuel Ragot, PhD Candidate, School of Social Work, McGill University
- Co-investigator: Lucyna Lach, Associate Professor, School of Social Work, McGill University
- Research assistant: Jaimi Plater, student, McGill University

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by the Ready, Willing and Able program at Inclusion Canada, through the Quebec Intellectual Disability Society. We thank these organizations for their collaboration and support throughout the research.

We also wish to thank participating organizations for welcoming us, entrusting us with their wisdom and lived experience, and giving us access to their program participants. We are grateful to program participants and the family member who shared their insights and gave us an intimate glimpse into their lives in the programs they were part of.

Context

In Canada, persons with intellectual disabilities have less access to employment and live more in poverty than the rest of the population. This makes them more dependent on social assistance and their families.

However, in the last few years, individuals with intellectual disabilities have tried to enter the workforce more and more. Some people have found work in agriculture, in stores, in warehouses and in other places. This happened because governments, employers, advocacy groups and self-advocates have pushed for what is called “inclusive employment”.

Even if some people with intellectual disabilities have found a job, we do not know much about the overall situation in the province of Quebec. This is important because we know that there are still a lot of people in sheltered work programs that work without being paid and that advocacy organizations want to change this.

What the Research Team Wanted to Understand

The research team wanted to understand how community organizations help people with intellectual disabilities be included in employment. We wanted to understand if some organizations are doing things differently, and what are the “secret ingredients” of what they do.

We asked ourselves two questions for this research:

- are there any interesting new training programs that exist to help people with intellectual disabilities acquire work skills and help them join the workforce?
- how do these programs work? What helps them survive and what are the problems they can have?

These two questions can help understand the things that make it easier, or more difficult, for organizations to have inclusive employment programs.

Terms used in this document

Inclusive employment

There are many definitions of inclusive employment. In our study inclusive employment...

- refers to individuals with disabilities working alongside their peers without disabilities in the competitive labour market (with access to the same benefits and career opportunities)
- ensures that no one is segregated or excluded from quality employment opportunities because of their disability
- ensures that individuals with disabilities have access to the same work, accommodations, and benefits as their non-disabled peers, with the tools they need to succeed

Pre-Employability

This refers to all of the services and activities aimed at training and enabling persons to become more qualified before they enter the job market. This may include internships, social and interpersonal skills development activities, and on-the-job training programs.

How the Research Team Found the Information

We used several ways to answer the two questions.

First, we sent a survey to the members of the Quebec Intellectual Disability Society to understand their employment programs. Then, we talked to a few organizations that were interested in participating in the research.

Four organizations agreed to participate in our research. The organizations were in different parts of Quebec and had all different services and programs.

The research team visited each organization, observed their programs, questioned their staff, and talked to individuals who were in the programs. This was a good way to understand how their programs worked, what opinion participants had about employment and the programs, and what was needed to improve the situation.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed so we could analyze them later. Based on the analysis, we were able to understand better some of the important things that can help inclusive employment programs thrive.

Who the Research Team Talked to and Visited

The research team visited four different organizations: the Association de Granby pour la déficience intellectuelle et l'autisme in Granby, Compagnons de Montréal in Montréal, Pleins Rayons in Cowansville, and Association Renaissance des Appalaches in Thetford Mines.

Association de Granby pour la déficience intellectuelle et l'autisme (AGDIA)

Granby

The Association de Granby pour la déficience intellectuelle et l'autisme (AGDIA) is located in Granby, Québec. It is a relatively big city for the province, and is located about an hour away from Montréal.

AGDIA's mission is to promote the inclusion of individuals with autism and/or intellectual disabilities. Members are offered several activities and services so they can participate in the community and develop new skills and autonomy. Services are also available for parents and friends of members. Its team is composed of 19 individuals, primarily special educators.

At AGDIA, the research team observed the day activities program, the in-house employment training service (including a store and classes), an external sheltered work program, and the organization's kitchen activities.

Compagnons de Montréal

Montréal

Compagnons de Montréal is located at the centre of the Rosemont borough of Montréal, Quebec. Compagnons de Montréal was founded in 1960 and has been active in promoting the inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities in the community ever since.

Compagnons currently has a day program, a residential program, catering services, as well as pre-employment and training programs, including a store open to the public.

The research team visited the Compagnons de Montréal building, observed the day activities services, the employment training programs in the kitchen and food serving areas, the greenhouse and gardening areas, and other activities.

We also visited the "L'Annexe", a store where participants learn how to serve clients and manage store inventory by sorting, tagging, and categorically displaying various types of merchandise.

Pleins Rayons

Cowansville

Pleins Rayons is located in Cowansville, a small town located an hour and a half southeast of Montréal, close to the southern border of Québec.

Pleins Rayons was founded in 2015 and has offered employment services ever since. Its goal is to "help young adults living with an intellectual disability and/or autism spectrum disorder to feel a part of their community".

At Pleins Rayons, the research team observed activities in the main warehouse, including woodworking, sewing, bike repair, and indoor gardening. The team also observed a fundraising event in which participants oversaw sales, client service and orientation.

Association Renaissance des Appalaches

Thetford Mines

Association Renaissance des Appalaches is in medium-sized city in the Chaudière-Appalaches region, approximately two and a half hours northeast of Montréal. Renaissance des Appalaches was founded in 1982 and has only recently started its employment program. Its mission is to defend and promote the interests of individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism.

The research team went to a cafe in downtown Thetford Mines to observe the activities of the employment program organized by Renaissance des Appalaches. The cafe is a place for members to learn how to serve clients, prepare food and manage a cafe, whilst working in collaboration with others.

What the Research Team Found

Survey Results

The results of the survey showed that not many organizations have employment programs and services. Only a few of the members said they have inclusive employment programs. Several members said they have sheltered work programs.

Observation Results

We analyzed the notes we took during the visits and listened to the interviews we taped. This allowed us to identify several important things that organizations do to help individuals with intellectual disabilities get training and enter the workforce.

Creating a Sense of Belonging

Members of the training programs told us they are happy and like what they do. They also said they feel they are part of something bigger: a community or a group. This was important for them.

This sense of being part of a group was created by the community organizations and their staff in different ways. As an example, organizations encouraged members to interact with external clients, or to work closely with a supervisor or trainer. In other places, sense of belonging was created by encouraging members to help each other out. Some would meet up with the friends that they made in the community organization after hours.

Many participants told us they felt they were part of a big “family” in their programs and that it was really something important for them.

It is clear that the organization and their staff put a lot of effort into creating this sense of belonging and inclusion and wanted members to succeed, to feel good about what they did well, and to keep this positive feeling what they found a job one day.

The Importance of Leadership Inside the Organization

We were impressed by how hard the organizations' leaders and staff worked, even if they had a lot of pressure on their shoulders.

The staff often had to find money to run their programs and worked with different partners to make sure the programs could really help their members.

Programs Must Have Clear Goals

During our visits to organizations, we noted that all programs had clear goals for their members and that they tracked their progress. This is something that was really important as it helped to make sure members progressed and were on the right track to find a job one day. All of the organizations tracked progress differently and had slightly different goals.

We also noted that some organizations told members that their participation was limited in time and had a clear list of skills they wanted their members to develop. Some other organizations did not do this and said that members could come back any time.

What mattered the most was that these goals were created so that they made sense to members. It helped them to be clear on what they were learning and working toward. All organizations said they adapted their programs to the individual's needs.

Welfare Programs are an Obstacle to Employment

All organizations told us that the way welfare programs work is a problem.

These programs make it impossible for people to find jobs and keep their benefits. Everybody told us that this needs to change.

Work With Families

Members told us their families are important to them. Family members often support members to find employment, or to participate in training programs. It is important to include and work with family members.

Other Things Impacting Programs

We had several other observations that do not easily fit into a single category. These include the following:

1

Relationships with local schools are not always that well established. This is important and needs to change.

2

Access to adapted transportation to participate in local community-based organizations and pre-employment or inclusive employment programs is limited.

3

Funding is a big issue for local organizations. They need more funding to run their programs.

4

Organizations must deal with other questions, such as deciding if they should rent or buy their workplace.

5

Not all organizations have elaborate business plans.

6

Not all organizations work with other organizations in their day-to-day activities.

7

The way the training space is organized is important. Having a presence in the community is important to show the public what people with intellectual disabilities can do.

8

It is sometimes difficult for organizations to keep their staff.

9

The relationships with specialized employment agencies are not always easy.

10

It is not clear if it easier to build partnerships in smaller communities.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss some ideas further and suggest solutions to some of the problems that we noted in the results section.

We also present some other possibilities and reflections that could help develop and maintain better inclusive employment programs.

Programs Studied Are More About Pre-Employment Than Employment

When we started the research, we thought most organizations were helping individuals find jobs and enter the workplace.

However, what we discovered was that organizations are focusing on pre-employment skills instead. This means the organizations we studied were working with individuals to help them to develop social skills and work skills that they needed to enter the workforce later. Organizations did not necessarily help those individuals find a job.

We were surprised because there has been a lot of discussion about the importance of employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism. This was also surprising because pre-employment programs have historically taken place in the government-funded health and social services network. This suggests that something has changed, and that local community organizations have had no choice but to take on the role of providing pre-employment training.

So, if government-funded health and social services agencies are not providing this kind of support for persons with intellectual disabilities, and if community organizations are having a hard time getting the funding to run these programs, then this could become a problem. We think that community organizations are good at doing what they do and that they can do it well because they are smaller and more flexible. This trend is something that we are going to need to pay attention to in the future.

Different Approaches to Creating a Sense of Belonging

All organizations studied use different ways to create a sense of belonging. We have seen organizations that prioritized creating a sense of belonging to the organization itself, while others prioritized a sense of belonging with other members, or to the community at large.

A sense of belonging was created through the activities that members did, the type of staff they had and how they interacted with the members, and the way the organization defined inclusion.

In all organizations studied, members told us they felt a sense of belonging to the organization and felt they were part of the community. This meant that there were several ways to create a sense of belonging and that it was important to work on it, on purpose.

The Sophistication of Training Programs Alone Is Not Enough

All the organizations we visited had training plans for their members. However, other things are necessary to really help members learn new things and skills.

Here is a list of other things that organizations must also have:

- a strong leadership from the organization's head and board of directors
- a clear vision of what inclusion is and what the goals for inclusion look like
- a good community connection—organizations must create awareness in the community of the potential for employing individuals with disabilities
- family support: families must support the goal and philosophy of inclusive employment
- stable financial and human resources and support from the government
- patience: creating a training program takes time and can be difficult

All the organizations studied had one or all of these things, or were working on these.

Viewing a Way Forward - The Inclusion Paradox¹

Sense of belonging was very important for all members of the organizations we studied. We heard that organizations feel like a “big family” and that people like what they do. They enjoyed being part of something and working with other people.

In some cases, members even told us they did not want to leave the program or the organization once their training was finished. This was something that was surprising as pre-employment programs are designed to train people so they can find a job later.

In fact, people told us they are not sure they want to find regular employment because they do not think they will find an inclusive workplace. In other words, programs are **so good at creating a sense of self-worth and belonging that it seems that going into competitive employment would only be a drawback for participants**. This is what we called the “inclusion paradox”.

This paradox is a clear sign that efforts must continue to make inclusive employment a success. This can be done by making workplaces more inclusive, training other employees, implementing coaching programs and supports, having peer mentors in employment, and using different strategies so that a sense of belonging can also be created in inclusive workspaces.

Improving Social Assistance Programs Is Needed to Allow Individuals to Work

During our interviews, we heard that a large proportion of the members in employment programs are using/were using the Social Solidarity Program (SSP) to satisfy their basic needs. Unfortunately, this social assistance program limits the possibilities for employment (recipients can only earn \$200 per month).

Because of this, many people do not try to enter the regular workforce, as they would risk their financial security and might lose other benefits.

¹ A paradox is something that doesn't seem logical, or that associates two facts or ideas in opposition to each other.

The Basic Income Program, which started in 2023, changed the situation for its recipients. They can now earn about \$15,000 per year. Several people told us they are now thinking about getting a job, as they will be able to keep their benefits.

However, not all preemployment program members are recipients of the Basic Income Program. This means that there are still some barriers to employment for others. To solve this problem, the government should update the rules for other social assistance programs and allow people to work.

Transition From School to Employment Is Lacking

We were surprised to see there is a limited collaboration between schools and local organizations. This is a problem because employment training usually starts in schools. To succeed in inclusive employment, individuals must be supported by both their school, the health and social services network, but also their local organizations. Everyone must work together, which is not always the case right now.

The relationship between local organizations and the health and social services network were also not always great. In some cases, relationships were influenced by the funding the health and social services network gave organizations. This is something that needs to be researched in the future.

Funding and Organization of Employment Services

Organizations we studied told us they often have difficulties with funding. They usually do not receive enough money from the government, and it makes it difficult to keep employees and run programs.

All organizations we visited said they organize fundraising events, send funding applications to private foundations, sign service agreements with local health and social services networks, or even demand direct contributions from members in the training programs to raise money.

No Specific Funding Programs

This is because there isn't any specific government program to fund inclusive employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism.

Because employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism is a shared responsibility between the Ministry of Health and Social Services and the Ministry of Employment, these two ministries often tell organizations to ask the other one.

In other words, there need to be changes done to the way organizations are funded.

Québec is Actively Funding Sheltered Work Programs

The lack of funding for inclusive employment does not mean that the government does nothing about employment. We know that the Ministry of Health and Social Services still funds sheltered work and internship programs in which individuals do not receive adequate pay despite their work.

Over nine years, between 2013-2014 and 2021-2022, this ministry spent \$168 812 226 for its employment services for persons with intellectual disabilities or autism. Out of this budget, only \$2 830 292 was dedicated to inclusive employment preparedness services. The rest was injected into sheltered work programs and internships.

This is a problem because even if the ministry says these programs are for individuals who are not ready for employment, the organization we visited told us that many individuals who could be part of pre-employment programs are in sheltered work programs or internships. This situation was also documented by other researchers in the past.

SQDI has already asked that the funding for sheltered work and internships be instead sent to inclusive employment programs. This was something we heard from some organizations. We think that while this is probably a good idea, it must be done slowly and with caution. Organizations, individuals and families must be given time to adjust and be supported.

Lack of Clear Policy Direction Is a Problem

Finally, it seems clear that there is no overall plan for the employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism in this province. This is a problem.

We think there should be clearer directions, and that the government could adopt an “employment first” strategy, like other provinces have. As an example, in New Brunswick, the transition between school and employment/adult life starts early, focusing on the development of work and social skills early on, preparing individuals for employment in the competitive market. The Quebec government should do something similar.

There is a Need for Alternative Employment Placement Services for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities and/or Autism

In Quebec, employment services for persons with disabilities are given by specialized agencies that are paid by the provincial government.

The organizations we visited told us about the importance of these employment agencies. Some have a good collaboration with them, some have no collaboration, and others have a conflictual relationship with them.

One of the criticisms that organizations had was that these agencies do not really give the support that individuals need to be included in the workplace and keep their job. Some organizations told us that they had to do the agencies’ job on occasions.

Based on the discussions we had, it is clear that the collaboration with employment agencies is not always easy. We think the government should give more responsibility to local organizations and recognize that they have a role to play. This should come with funding.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the research, we have created a list of recommendations to help develop inclusive employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism.

For local organizations, the success of programs depends on:

- 1** Creating an organizational culture that generates a sense of belonging
- 2** Building participants skills
- 3** Creating an individualized plan for each program participant
- 4** Building a structured program for skill development
- 5** Building collaboration with family caregivers and seeing them as partners in the employment journey
- 6** Creating and installing strong leadership in the organizations, including with the Board of Directors
- 7** Making a business plan for sustainability
- 8** Creating and sustaining strong community connections with the education network, the health and social service network, local businesses, and employment agencies
- 9** Creating a physical space that offers program participants a place to socialize as well as to build specific skills, highlighting what individuals can do for their community and how the community is enhanced by their contribution
- 10** Helping program participants appreciate how pre-employment programs are a step in a longer trajectory toward inclusive employment

For its part, the Quebec Intellectual Disability Society could support inclusive employment by asking the government to:

11

Fund pre-employment and inclusive employment programs delivered by community organizations

12

Fund programs aimed at maintaining individuals in employment, notably through direct on-site support, as well as the creation of initiatives aimed at making workplaces more inclusive

13

Implement an "employment first" strategy from the very beginning of TEVA planning

14

Ensure that publicly-funded pre-employment programs have a limited participation period and are aimed at providing training for participation in the regular job market

15

Recognize the role of community organizations in the training and inclusive employment ecosystem for individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism, alongside existing specialized employability programs

16

Update social assistance programs to enable recipients to work without being penalized