



Newcomers' Initiative

Final Report

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Background

The NWT Literacy Council describes literacy as a multi-faceted social and cultural practice. Literacy is situational in nature in that it takes different forms in the home, community, and workplace. The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) has a similar view. It explains literacy as a “pluralistic concept, which is linked to language, social context and cultural identity” (Education, Culture and Employment (ECE), 2008, p. 20). Literacy is a “continuum of skill development, ranging from learning to read to performing a complex set of skills” (p.3). These complex skills involve reading text, document use, writing, oral communications, numeracy, critical thinking, using technology, problem solving, and working with others.

While people may be literate in the home, they may not have the necessary literacy skills in Canada’s official languages to function in the community or workplace. The 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) found that almost half (48%) of all working age Canadians (aged 16-65 years) have low literacy skills (Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), June 2008, p. 7). Low literacy in English or French has debilitating effects for individuals, communities, and society as a whole. Low literacy can isolate and hinder individuals personally and professionally due to difficulty accessing and understanding the information necessary for well-being. It puts people at risk of poverty, poor health, and social insecurity.¹ Low literacy limits the ability of organizations and groups to draw on citizens’ skills to build and maintain a vibrant and healthy society. While many segments of Canadian society experience literacy issues, newcomers are particularly vulnerable.

¹ <http://www.newswire.ca/en/releases/archive/October2009/01/c2942.html>

The Newcomers' Initiative

The NWT Literacy Council launched the Newcomers' Initiative as a way to strengthen and expand networks by:

1. identifying the barriers that exist for newcomers related to literacy.
2. encouraging organizations providing services to new Canadians to work together to enhance literacy and English language skills among the immigrant population, and
3. improving access to, and use of the NWT Literacy Council's resources.

The Newcomers' Initiative involved:

- three (3) focus groups, two in Yellowknife, and one in Inuvik, with newcomers to Canada. One group involved eight (8) participants of a 'Ready to Work Program' offered through Aurora College's Immigration Settlement Adaptation Program. The second group involved eleven (11) women who meet weekly for the Collective Kitchen Project at the Centre for Northern Families (now at Sir John Franklin High School). The third group involved two (2) women who were enrolled in the English as a Second Language Program at Aurora College. Individuals involved in these focus sessions came from 12 countries although persons from Armenia and India made up the largest group.
- telephone and in-person interviews with 12 community-based adult educators, literacy workers, and administrators of newcomers programs in Yellowknife, Hay River, Inuvik, and Fort Simpson.
- a literature review (see references, p. 29).

It was anticipated that a stakeholder roundtable would be organized to provide direction for the development of an action plan and identify funding sources to implement the plan. It was not possible to organize a roundtable. Instead, the TD Bank Financial Group was invited to vet a draft report. The TD Bank Financial

Group is a well known champion of efforts to address literacy issues among immigrant populations.² The culturally diverse work force within the Yellowknife branch of the TD Bank and others within the organization familiar with literacy issues were asked to review a draft report and comment on:

1. its accuracy based on their knowledge and experiences, and
2. provide any additional thoughts or comments.

Input received from the TD Bank Financial Group is incorporated in this final report.

Newcomers to Canada

In the last decade, Canada's immigration patterns have changed. For the first time in Canadian history, Canada Census data in 2006 showed that more immigrants were from Asia and the Middle East (58%) than from Europe (16%).³ Compared to previous newcomers, people coming to Canada in recent years were less likely to have English or French as their mother tongue or to share Western traditions and values.

People come to Canada for many different reasons "from very personal motives to pressing economic needs and such severe social conditions as war, oppression, or political/racial upheavals. While personal and economic reasons predominate in people moving temporarily to work or study, severe social conditions create refugees... A prevalent perception among emigrants is that they have no future in their home countries. The reasons migrants often cite are to broaden their own options and ensure a better future for their children. Many also are fleeing the devastation of wars, invasions, and oppression. Most refugees fall into this group" (Fantino, 2006, p. 21).

Regardless of the reason people come to Canada, most immigrants settle permanently due to quality of life (32%), being close to family and friends (20%), future prospects for the family (18%), and the peaceful nature of the country

² <http://www.td.com/corporateresponsibility/index.jsp>

³ <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-557/p1-eng.cfm>

(9%).⁴ Four years after arriving in Canada most (84%) immigrants were positive about their decision to come here. According to the 2006 Canada Census, 85% of foreign-born individuals eligible for citizenship became citizens (Statistics Canada, 2008, p. 162).

The level of formal education of immigrants to Canada has increased in recent years. In fact, recent immigrants were likely to have higher educational attainment than native-born Canadians. Very recent immigrants were more than twice as likely to possess a university degree and four times more likely to have a graduate degree than native-born Canadians (CCL, October 2008, p. 2). While recent immigrants come with high levels of education and are satisfied with their decision to immigrate to Canada, they face barriers. The main difficulties encountered are finding an adequate job (46%) and learning English or French (26%) (Statistics Canada, 2008, p. 162). These barriers are complicated by:

- lack of familiarity with English or French writing, alphabetical, and/or phonological systems and processes (e.g. among Asian and some Middle Eastern immigrants).
- lack of Canadian work experience.
- problems getting education and/or work credentials from their country of origin/other countries recognized in Canada (CCL, October 2008, p. 4).

Official language and literacy skills are central to the success and equality of all persons living in Canada including newcomers. The 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) identified people with Levels 1 and 2 literacy as lacking the desired or optimal skills to function in Canadian society. In 2003, IALSS found that “in all four domains (measures of literacy), a higher percentage of both recent and established immigrants performed at Levels 1 and 2 than did the Canadian-born population. Sixty percent of recent and established immigrants, compared to 37 percent of the Canadian-born population, were at Levels 1 and 2 in prose literacy.”⁵ IALSS reported that the largest gaps in literacy skills between immigrants educated abroad and Canadian-born men and women

⁴ <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/070430/dq070430b-eng.htm>

⁵ <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-004-x/2005005/9112-eng.htm>

were in prose literacy and problem solving skills. The smallest gaps were in numeracy, which are less dependent on the language of the test.⁶

IALSS showed that most (60.2%) recent and established immigrants (59.8%) have poor prose literacy levels (e.g. Levels 1 and 2) (ECE, 2008, p. 90). These data are disturbing since there is virtually no difference in the literacy levels of established immigrants who have spent more than 10 years in Canada and recent immigrants who have less than 10 years in the country. Commenting on this, the TD Bank Financial Group's 2007 report on immigrants and literacy noted that: "strangely, duration of residence had no impact on average (literacy) performance of immigrants. This odd result may be partly a statistical aberration, but it still adds to the strong evidence that Canada is not integrating new arrivals into the economy and society as well as it needs to (p. 9).

Much of the research on newcomers to Canada shows that lack of language and literacy in English or French are main reasons that immigrants are unable to transfer the skills and knowledge acquired in their country of origin to Canadian society. Lack of English or French linguistic/language and cognitive skills accounts for half or more of the gap in earnings between immigrant and Canadian-born workers (Picot and Hou, p. 30). The extent of economic disparities between immigrants and Canadian-born workers was reported by the Canadian Council on Learning (October 2008). In 2006, recent male immigrants to Canada earned 63 cents and women earned 56 cents for every dollar earned by their Canadian born counterparts (p. 2).

The economic conditions of newcomers were summarized by the TD Bank Financial Group (2009).

- The economic well-being of immigrants in Canada has declined over the past 25 years. Over one-third (35%) of immigrant families lived in poverty in 2000 compared to one-quarter (25%) in 1980.

⁶ <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-004-x/2008005/article/10798-eng.htm>

- Immigrants who arrived between 2001 and 2005 had an unemployment rate of 11.5%. The costs of unemployment may be in the billions of dollars in lost opportunities.
- Six in 10 newcomers to Canada have less than the desired level of literacy to succeed in a modern knowledge-based economy.

The plight of adults with low literacy can be exacerbated by a belief common among persons with low literacy that their skills are 'adequate' for their work and poor attitudes about computers (CCL, June 2008, p. 5).

Lack of literacy in an official language impacts social conditions and quality of life as well as economic circumstances. There is a strong association between poor official language proficiency among immigrants and poor self-reported health status (Pottie, et al., 2008, p. 505). Immigrant women with low official language proficiency are more vulnerable to poor health than immigrant men with low language and literacy skills. Lack of literacy in an official language can negatively impact on sense of place, security, identity, social connectedness, and other social conditions. The extent to which literacy impacts on social conditions among immigrants needs to be better documented as does the relationship of literacy to gender and discrimination (Fantino, 2006) (Pottie et al., 2008) (Jardine, Boyd, and Furgal, 2009) (Rootman and Ronson, 2005).

Low official language and literacy skills contribute to 'cultural clustering'. This pattern is evident among more recent immigrants to larger cities such as Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver (Bernard, 2008, p. 5). The main reason for 'cultural clustering' is the desire to join social support networks of family and friends (Statistics Canada, 2008, p. 160). "The concentration of immigrants in selected urban centres also raises a question about economic and social integration. There is nothing wrong with cultural clusters, which are quite consistent with Canada's philosophy of multiculturalism. However, it is important to ensure that this trend is not reflecting self-imposed segregation. It is natural for newcomers to want to settle near others with a common background, but we need to ensure that the decision is not being taken because the individual cannot operate or be

successful outside of the cultural cluster because of language skills or other factors” (TD Bank Financial Group, 2009, p. 8).

Immigrants to smaller Canadian communities initially face more challenges than those settling in larger cities due to less linguistic and cultural diversity or enclaves of similar populations (Bernard, 2008). Still, among immigrants to smaller centres, economic gaps between Canadian-born and immigrant populations are smaller and economic integration is faster than in larger centres. This seems to be the case for both immigrants with and without official language abilities, and lower and higher levels of education. Immigrants to smaller centres are also more likely than their counterparts in larger cities to be able to transfer their work and education credentials into the local labour market. These are hopeful signs for newcomers who come to the NWT.

Newcomers in the NWT

Newcomers to Canada may be:

1. temporary residents such as visitors, persons on a study visa or work permit including live-in caregivers, or refugees/persons needing protection due to their race, religion, political opinion, nationality, or group membership.
2. permanent residents or persons in the process of becoming a Canadian citizen.
3. new Canadian citizens.

In recent years, newcomers to the NWT have often been temporary rather than permanent residents. Labour demand by diamond mines, secondary diamond processing industries, and service and retail sectors have been the main reason for the increase in temporary workers. As of December 1st in each of 2007 and 2008,⁷ there were slightly more than 300 foreign workers present in the NWT.

⁷ <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2008/index.asp>

Approximately 7% of NWT residents were born outside the country and slightly more than one-fifth (21.4%) had arrived in Canada between 2001- 2006.⁸ Almost 6% of the territory's population are members of a visible minority.⁹ Visible minorities as a segment of the NWT population are growing. Between 1996 and 2006, the Filipino population in the NWT increased by 108%, persons identifying themselves as 'Black' increased by 108%, and the Southeast Asian population increased by 82%.¹⁰ Almost two-thirds (62%) of immigrants to the NWT were between the ages of 35-64 years of age. It is estimated that each year about 100 individuals in the NWT obtain Canadian citizenship (ECE, 2008, p. 89).

Similar to trends across the country, immigrants to the NWT are most likely to come to a larger centre. Most (76% of the 2,815 or 2,140) immigrants to the NWT came to Yellowknife and about 18% came to Inuvik, Hay River, or Fort Smith.¹¹ In 2006, almost 12% of Yellowknife's population were immigrants. Most were from non-European countries. Between 2001-2006, 36% of recent immigrants to Yellowknife came from the Philippines, 18% from Ghana, 9% from Vietnam, 7% from the United States, and 5% from China. Individuals from the Philippines comprise the largest segment (3%) of Yellowknife's immigrant population. In 2006, almost two-thirds (64%) of recent immigrants to Yellowknife were women.

The Government of the NWT (GNWT) recognizes that "a central factor in the successful settlement and retention of newcomers is the attainment of language proficiency in one of the official languages" (ECE, 2008, p. 89). It also acknowledges the important role that immigration plays in the NWT's economy. Immigration represents over \$47 million in additional transfer payments from the federal government.¹² Despite the importance of immigration to the NWT, data profiling these populations are limited and few studies have been

⁸ GNWT Bureau of Statistics, newstat. Visible Minorities and Ethnic Origin, April 2, 2008.

⁹ The term 'visible minority' is defined in the federal *Employment Equity Act* as "persons other than Aboriginal peoples who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour."

¹⁰ GNWT Bureau of Statistics, newstat. Visible Minorities and Ethnic Origin, April 2, 2008.

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² <http://www.iti.gov.nt.ca/Publications/2008/BusinessEconomicDevelopment/Volume15IEANewsletter.pdf>

completed documenting the circumstances of newcomers in the north. One of the few studies available was commissioned by the Centre for Northern Families in Yellowknife sometime in 2005-2006 (Heron-Herbert, n.d.).

The Centre for Northern Families' study involved interviews with 37 newcomers.¹³ Almost all adults interviewed had some postsecondary education including certification in nursing, business administration, community development, or teaching, or a baccalaureate degree. Despite high education levels, most newcomers had difficulty finding jobs and were extremely frustrated by the lack of recognition of their skills and experiences (pp. 13-16). A report from the United Nations Association's visit to Yellowknife in 2007 had similar findings.¹⁴ The Association found that newcomers to the NWT are challenged by lack of official language skills, lack of recognition of skills and education, and little public appreciation of cultural diversity.

Programs and Services for Newcomers in the NWT

"Immigrants and refugees are people in transition, enabled by past experiences and facing many opportunities and challenges in the new society. The experiences in their background, however, occurred in a different context. They must translate 'linguistically and culturally' in order to transfer skills and talents, adjust socially, and maximize opportunities for integration. They need personal support to alleviate the stresses of migration and help them articulate their past and present social and psychological needs" (Fantino, p.29).

Few programs and services in the NWT specifically target newcomers although permanent residents tend to have similar access to programs and services as Canadian citizens. Programs and services for newcomers described in

¹³ Interviewees were described as: skilled workers (6), Quebec selected immigrants (2), family class (17), refugees (3), students (2), work visa (4), and visitors (3).

¹⁴ The Association promotes cross-cultural understanding and collective action to foster equal participation in Canadian society. <http://www.unac.org/sb/en/Files/REPORT-YELLOWKNIFE.pdf>

Government of Canada and GNWT publications and websites were updated through interviews and focus groups conducted for this report.

Language, Education, and Literacy Support Services

Aurora College is the main source of English language, literacy, and education programs and services for newcomers (ECE, 2008, pp. 90-93). Information on the College's services for newcomers is not broadly promoted or listed on its website.

In 1992, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) initiated the Integration, Settlement and Adaptation Program (ISAP) for Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) and settlement supports. For the last two years, ISAP has funded a settlement officer at the Yellowknife Campus of Aurora College. The settlement officer provides bridge-to-work supports that include life skills, counselling, and a weekly Ready to Work Program to help individuals work on computers, prepare a resume, and learn how to approach employers. It is estimated that ISAP funding touches more than 200 individuals including the many immigrant students attending Aurora College. The Federation Franco TeNoise (FFT) in Yellowknife is also funded by ISAP to provide settlement supports for French speaking newcomers. FFT's settlement officer works closely with schools in the city to provide workshops and information to promote cultural diversity and address discrimination and racism. FFT expects to offer French language courses in 2011/12 and is currently doing research to assess the needs of northern francophones.¹⁵ The settlement officers at FFT and Aurora College collaborate as much as possible.

ISAP funds an English LINC instructor at the Yellowknife Campus of Aurora College who also assesses language skills in accordance with Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB). CLB is the national standard for assessing newcomers' official language proficiency. The CLB has eight levels, where levels one to five represent basic skills. LINC at the Yellowknife Campus is free. Basic

¹⁵ Personal communications Doris Pinet, FFT, June 11, 2010.

language instruction up to CLB level five skills is offered. In 2009/10, LINC basic language instruction at the Yellowknife Campus also included writing classes.

Settlement supports and LINC instruction are available to permanent residents/ landed immigrants, persons whose application for permanent residency is being processed, and convention refugees.¹⁶ Canadian citizens, non-convention refugees, and temporary residents are ineligible. Settlement supports and LINC services are available through the Yellowknife Campus in all months except July and August and year-round through FFT. Recently, the Yellowknife Campus signed a three-year funding agreement to continue settlement supports and LINC services.¹⁷ This agreement will ensure that English language settlement and LINC services are available to newcomers at least until 2012/13.

In 2003/04, the federal government launched the Enhanced Language Training (ELT) program as a way to offer higher level language training (e.g. CLB levels six to eight) and provide bridge-to-work supports to help immigrants acquire and retain jobs corresponding to their experience and skills. ELT programming can include mentoring, job placements, cultural orientation, and help preparing for tests and exams. ELT programming mainly targets skilled workers who are permanent residents, convention refugees, and individuals with temporary resident permits. Higher level language training is available through Aurora College through Adult Literacy and Basic Education (ALBE) programs (ECE, 2008, p. 93). The settlement officer provides bridge-to-work supports.

The GNWT Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) funds Aurora College to deliver English as a Second Language (ESL) training for all adult newcomers regardless of their residency status. "During the 2007-2008 academic year four classes were offered in Yellowknife at different times during the week to

¹⁶ *Convention Refugee*: A person who, by reason of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion is outside each of his/her countries of nationality and unable or, because of that fear, unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of each of those countries or outside the country of nationality or of former habitual residence and unable, or by reason of that fear, unwilling to return to that country. Other classes of refugees are government-assisted refugees, privately sponsored refugees, refugee protection claimants.

¹⁷ Personal communications Lin Maus, Yellowknife Campus, Aurora College, June 8, 2010

accommodate varied language levels. There were approximately 32 students accessing these courses” (ECE, 2008, p. 91). The Yellowknife Campus received funding late in the 2009/10 fiscal year to offer low literacy level English and Math and ESL programming. Unfortunately late funding impacted on promotional efforts and response to low level literacy courses. However, the demand for the ESL course was high. The ESL course ran for three hours, once a week between February-June 2010. The course was open to all and was well attended. The three-hour class was split in half to focus first on basic literacy skills then address more advanced literacy skills. In this way, the ESL course complemented LINC programming. While the demand for ESL programming is high, the Yellowknife Campus has no long term funding commitment for ESL. This negatively impacts the Campus’ ability to secure appropriately trained instructors and promote courses.¹⁸ Private education and training agencies in the city such as the Academy of Learning, do not offer ESL courses.

In Yellowknife, the Literacy Outreach Centre which is a partnership between Aurora College and the Yellowknife Association for Community Living offers low level English literacy services. Although the partners target persons with intellectual or learning disabilities, this free service is open to the public if space is available. Literacy outreach services are provided to clients of community agencies such as the Salvation Army, Bailey House, Yellowknife Seniors’ Society, and Centre for Northern Families. Services range from weekly or bi-weekly book clubs, family literacy programming, literacy workshops, and low level Math and English (e.g. ALBE 110 and 120). Drop-in services and tutoring are also available at the College during regular hours. Family literacy outreach services provided at the Centre for Northern Families offer the greatest potential to serve newcomers due to the cultural diversity of clients using the Centre. Recently, the Yellowknife Campus entered into a three-year funding agreement to expand low level English literacy outreach services in the community.¹⁹

¹⁸ Personal communications, Karen Horne, Yellowknife Campus, June 10, 2010.

¹⁹ Personal communications Lin Maus, Yellowknife Campus, Aurora College, June 8, 2010

From time to time, language, literacy, or other education services targeting immigrant populations are available through community organizations or schools in Yellowknife. In 2008, ESL classes involving about 30 students were offered by the Centre for Northern Families and ESL programming was available at the Weledeh Catholic School (ECE, 2008, p. 92). At the time of writing this report, programming had ceased at the Centre for Northern Families due to lack of funding. No ESL courses are currently available in elementary or secondary schools in Yellowknife although one-on-one student supports are provided to students needing additional language and literacy supports.

Individuals participating in this research say that outside Yellowknife language, literacy, and education programs and services for newcomers are ad hoc or irregular, if they exist at all. Most often the infrequency of programming is due to the lack of instructors/personnel or resources rather than demand for services. In recent years, the library in Hay River has initiated ESL courses and local volunteers have worked one-on-one to offer literacy and language training. These efforts have endeavoured to respond to the main needs among newcomers in Hay River to learn basic English, form sentences, and improve pronunciation so as to “sound like an English speaker.” Similar to other immigrants to the NWT, newcomers to Hay River tend to be well educated, high functioning, and generally able to “figure out how things work.” Still, navigating the Canadian system is daunting when English language skills are limited. Women tend to need ESL support more than men because they may not be working outside the home.

In Fort Simpson, newcomers are mainly women. They are well educated in their country of origin. They use Aurora College’s Community Learning Centre to get help to perfect English skills and find their way through the systems and “nuances of living in Canada.” In the past, University/College Access Program (UCAP) resources were available to staff the Community Learning Centre in the evenings to facilitate access by newcomers and others. This funding is no longer available. Aurora College personnel in Fort Simpson recommend several resources to newcomers, including the *Northern Edge*, an online newspaper

produced by the NWT Literacy Council. *Northern Edge* is helpful because it has pictures, useful information, glimpses of northern life, and “people can hear how English should be spoken.” Other resources that are useful to newcomers are *101 American English Proverbs* and *101 American Riddles* both by Harry Collins.²⁰

In Inuvik, Caribou Outreach has been running free, once weekly ESL for several years. ESL programming is open to everyone. Caribou Outreach works out of Aurora College and is funded by the College and a variety of literacy sources and regional/local land claim organizations. Caribou Outreach uses levels 110-130 English and Math ALBE materials in its work with newcomers.

Employment Programs

Two GNWT departments - Education, Culture and Employment and Industry, Tourism and Investment - offer the Northwest Territories Nominee Program (NTNP) through an agreement with Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). NTNP is a two-pronged, immigration program targeting immigrant workers and investors. The Skilled Worker and Critical Impact Worker Categories of the NTNP are designed to assist NWT employees to nominate qualified immigrants to positions that cannot be filled by the territorial or national labour market. The Entrepreneur and Self-Employed Business Categories of the NTNP are designed to attract foreign business expertise and investment capital to the NWT.

Under the two worker categories of NTNP, individuals nominated by the GNWT receive priority/have their application fast-tracked for permanent residency through CIC. Final authority to recognize permanent resident status rests solely with CIC. Until nominees are issued permanent resident cards, nominees are temporary workers and ineligible for programming that targets permanent residents (e.g. LINC). Literacy needs are assessed during the nomination process. This is done mainly by employers identifying proficiency requirements and the nominee completing a self-assessment. When the NTNP was launched in the fall of 2009, it was expected that 75 individuals would be nominated over the year.

²⁰ <http://redbirdstudio.com/AWOL/voicebooks.html>

As of December 2009, five (5) skilled workers had been nominated.²¹ Four of the five nominees were already living in Canada at the time of nomination. The number of individuals approved for permanent residency is confidential. The low response to the NTNP is linked to a slowdown in the economy and labour demand, as well as limited promotional efforts.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) administers the Foreign Worker Program. Like the NTNP, the Foreign Worker Program is employer based and decisions are largely dictated by labour market activity. In order to apply for temporary foreign workers, employers must demonstrate that they have searched for a permanent resident or citizen to meet labour needs and can rationalize the feasibility of hiring a foreign worker. Employers also determine language and literacy skills requirements. CIC determines if a temporary work permit will be issued and the duration of stay. Unlike the NTNP, the Foreign Worker Program does not result in permanent residency. The federal government continues to express its commitment to monitoring the Foreign Worker Program to ensure that employers respect the law and do not misuse their power as employers.²²

The Foreign Credential Recognition Program (FCR) established in 2003 is intended to remove barriers while ensuring that education and work experience meet Canadian standards (CCL, October 2008, pp. 5-6). There is no documentation indicating how the FCR Program has impacted newcomers to the NWT.

²¹ Personal communications, Karen Willy, ECE, June 16, 2010.

²² Personal communications, Linda Louie, HRSD, September 22, 2009.

Newcomer Literacy Issues and Concerns

The documentation about the literacy experiences, issues, and concerns of immigrants in the NWT is mainly within studies on broader social and demographic issues. Existing information together with views gathered in personal interviews and focus groups show similar literacy issues and concerns among newcomers to the NWT as elsewhere in Canada.

In general, newcomers believe that the NWT is a safe place to live where it is possible to make a living. Like newcomers elsewhere in Canada, newcomers to the NWT tend to be satisfied with their life despite the issues and challenges they face. Newcomers in the north mainly face six interrelated issues:

1. official language and literacy skills.
2. access to official language and literacy services.
3. access to information.
4. program and service inequities.
5. exclusion and discrimination.
6. labour force supports.

1. Official Language and Literacy Skills

Newcomers without strong English or French language skills say that it is difficult if not impossible to function in society. Literacy is the key that opens doors. “If I don’t know English and know how to function in a Canadian community, I am going to have a very difficult time.” Many immigrants rely heavily on family and friends to help them understand or “show them what to do.” The views of people contributing to this report are mirrored by the UN Association (2007). The Association’s report noted that among immigrants in the NWT “family members especially younger family members often act as translators which becomes problematic as cultural difficulties and consent issues arise. Sometimes the interpreters do not understand the language well enough

themselves” (p. 2). Newcomers say that official language and literacy skills are needed at all levels – basic, intermediate, and advanced levels.

Newcomers and program personnel participating in focus groups and interviews for this report say that many immigrants who come north have professional backgrounds. Few are unskilled or poorly educated. This observation was also made by the UN Association in 2007. Speaking about Inuvik, the Association described the community’s “fairly significant Middle Eastern population” as mainly “engaging in business, engineering, healthcare, etc.” and people who “tend not to move there unless they have English language skills” (p. 2). Participants in this research agree that this is also the case in Yellowknife and in other NWT communities. They say that language and literacy needs among these immigrants are mainly related to pronunciation and vocabulary development “because most are educated and know the technical and grammatical elements of the language.” Language and literacy needs are often based on the need to facilitate entry into familiar workplaces (e.g. similar workplaces as in their country of origin). These needs would be typically described in terms of Canadian Literacy Benchmarks (CLB) as levels six to eight or advanced levels.

The views of newcomers and others in the NWT regarding the need for official language and literacy skills are corroborated by the Canadian Council on Learning (October 2008). The CCL suggested that two kinds of language education are needed by immigrants to Canada: 1) basic official language literacy skills, and 2) technical language or workplace-related language skills (p. 5).

2. Access to Official Language and Literacy Services

“The lack of advanced English language training makes it difficult for newcomers to gain choice employment or qualify for further training” (ECE, 2008, p. 91). Newcomers in Yellowknife agree. They say that the Yellowknife Campus of Aurora College and other services in the city lack the breadth and depth of language and literacy supports that are needed. ESL instruction is irregular; ALBE courses are unavailable at all levels (e.g. basic 110 and 120 and more advanced 130-160 levels); and community organizations lack resources to

provide any regular literacy or language programming. Newcomers to Yellowknife say that there are inadequate evening and day-time programs. “Three hours a week, twice a week is insufficient to meet the varied needs of newcomers.” There is also a lack of year-round programming. During the summer months, “students end up losing ground on the English they have learned.”

Newcomers say that there is little priority and few resources both within and outside government to respond to official language and literacy needs. They identify few opportunities to:

1. learn and practice English or to get feedback on their English language skills from native speakers,
2. gain insights into Canadian culture from native English speakers,
3. find out about, and/or access a continuum of official language and literacy supports, or
4. access computer courses for people with limited English language skills.

At the College level, lack of resources and priority to newcomer language and literacy needs are evidenced in challenges recruiting and retaining skilled instructors who are able to teach low level English literacy and have the skills and knowledge to work with immigrants with diverse language and literacy needs.

In regional centres, program personnel say that the small number of newcomers means that it is possible to form one-to-one supportive relationships among newcomers and Canadian-born volunteers, Aurora College staff, or community organizations. Through these relationships, it is possible to tailor supports to the needs of individuals and their families.

3. Access to Information

Lack of easy, clear information about what to do upon arrival and “how to live in a Canadian community” hampers integration and undermines the safety and

security of newcomers. People participating in this research say it is difficult to get easily understandable information on how to apply for/access health care, schools, housing, banking, and other essential services. It is also difficult to get clear information on rights and responsibilities related to living in Canada. Language and literacy skills to effectively access information and communicate electronically are necessary for newcomers to navigate through daily life in a new country and function in the work place. They say that computer literacy in an official language is necessary “because Canada is really computer dependent.”

There is no central repository of information pertinent to newcomers. Booklets and web-based information available through Service Canada are not always helpful or easy to read. Rather than written or web-based information, newcomers prefer to have access to knowledgeable individuals. The Centre for Northern Families’ research also raised access to information as a significant concern, particularly clear information on residency status (e.g. extensions to visas, information on work permits, how to apply for permanent residency or citizenship) (Heron-Herbert, p. 8).

Since the Centre for Northern Families completed its research, the Yellowknife Campus and the Federation Franco TeNoise have established settlement offices to provide information and facilitate integration. These services are in demand and greatly appreciated. Speaking of the settlement officer at the Yellowknife Campus of Aurora College, some newcomers agree that without her “it is impossible to find out what the College offers.” Others say that it is possible for settlement services to be expanded to better meet needs of immigrants throughout the community. These views come in large part from an awareness that not all newcomers are eligible for settlement supports, know about them, or feel comfortable accessing them through the College. Some newcomers particularly those outside of Yellowknife, have found that in the absence of settlement offices, the Member of Parliament for the Western Arctic “has been very helpful to people, helping them navigate through the system, get passports, and address refugee issues.”

4. Program and Service Inequities

A large number of newcomers in the NWT are temporary residents (e.g. workers on work permits and their families). Others are permanent residents, refugees, or recent citizens. Newcomers say that there are “so many boxes” and “too many divisions between and among services to newcomers.” “It is confusing and creates have and have not people.” Temporary workers feel the greatest inequities in programs and services due to their lack of access to virtually all newcomer services. This was corroborated in the Centre for Northern Families’ research. “Refugees and landed immigrants have access to health care when they arrive, under the Interim Federal Health Program, but people on work permits, their families, and family members of landed immigrants or Canadians are not eligible” (p. 13). In some cases, this causes “undue hardships” (p. 13).

Canadian citizens and family members who lack the language, literacy, and educational skills to function in society do not have access to free settlement, language, and literacy supports. Newcomers and program personnel agree that individuals who have become Canadian citizens without adequate official language skills “face a life of discrimination because there are no supports for them.” As an example, one individual mentioned a man from Viet Nam who has lived in Canada for over 30 years, become a citizen but still can’t speak English. During his time in Canada, he mainly lived and worked with other Viet Nameese but now he is losing these supports and is lost because he has no official language skills. Examples such as this are reasons that some newcomers prefer to remain permanent residents rather than become citizens (e.g. so they have access to supports if they need them). This situation indicates a significant policy gap which is exacerbated by confusion about jurisdiction. Newcomers say they are often frustrated by the lack of clear information about who is responsible for responding to their needs.

Program and service inequities, particularly involving persons with temporary residency, is a contentious issue for newcomers in Yellowknife. They say that

with the scaling back of the diamond industry and the closure of the secondary diamond industries, “governments need to be paying attention to workers that were brought in and not treat them like disposable workers.” Compared to the provinces and the Yukon, newcomers say that the NWT has “done nothing for immigrants” or “given no priority to immigrants” even though the territory has benefited greatly from these individuals. These concerns were also articulated in the Centre for Northern Families’ research. Lack of services and supports for family members, particularly spouses, of persons on work permits was a particular concern. Families of temporary workers are especially vulnerable and “even more isolated because they cannot work and have no access to language classes” (Heron-Herbert, p. 11). The same research spoke of women who are isolated and in abusive relationships, without any place to turn because of language and/or information barriers.

5. Exclusion and Discrimination

The flow of immigrants to the NWT particularly to Yellowknife means that the territory’s capital has an ethnically diverse population. This diversity was reported in the 2007 annual report of the Yellowknife Women’s Society and Centre for Northern Families that estimated 160 cultural groups in the city. The City of Yellowknife’s social plan reported that “members of visible minorities often cite exclusion as a main concern, particularly with respect to decisions about, and access to the programs and services that they rely on” (Lutra and Social Planning and Research Council, 2009, p.10). Newcomers particularly those with limited English language skills, have difficulty feeling comfortable about participating in the community and “see few opportunities to develop a sense of place and belonging in the city. For example, there is no adequate meeting place and few social events designed to help new Canadians meet and interact with other residents to practice English skills, and learn about Yellowknife and community life” (p. 27). Currently some Yellowknife churches/religious organizations and schools provide opportunities for newcomers and the community to gather. Newcomers in Yellowknife say that a neutral environment

is needed to enable immigrant to have personal contact with resource people and develop relationships with others (e.g. “a newcomers Welcome Centre”).

There is little doubt that the life of newcomers is challenging and at times, very frustrating. For many it is difficult to fit in, feel comfortable, mix and get to know others. One frustrated newcomer rhetorically asked: “what is wrong with this country” that it can’t accept immigrants. Some newcomers contributing to this report felt that they or others are/have been treated poorly. Some say that often immigrants know more about Canada than many Canadians – “Canadians are ignorant about their own country.” In frustration, others claim that “Canadians are lazy.” Others reason that Canadians lack a sense of culture or identity so they don’t understand people who do. They suggest that lack of culture or identity is a reason that some Canadians are intolerant and discriminate.

Several newcomers including those from central Europe bemoan the lack of familiarity about Canadian society. They say that there is nothing familiar in Canada even though it has a European history. The ‘foreignness’ of Canada is a main challenge for many newcomers – how everything works (e.g. bank machines, computers, renting an apartment, buying a car) and how to deal with Canadian values/perspectives that are rife with subtle differences. As an example, one newcomer talked about children playing soccer. In Canada children are taught to share and play as a team but in Armenia, it is competitive and individualistic. This is confusing for young people and the parents who want to support their children’s successes.

Unlike Yellowknife, Inuvik is perceived as inclusive of immigrants. Persons interviewed for this report say that many newcomers to Inuvik are well-established business people, taxi owners, domestics or other care givers (at the hospital) in the community. They have “a place in the community and seem to be received well and people are comfortable... Inuvik is lucky to be so welcoming to immigrants.” While issues of inclusion may be less apparent in Inuvik, “there is always a need to promote understanding of other cultures ... there is likely a need for cultural literacy, knowing about each other’s culture.” In 2007, the UN

Association also identified the need for public education to promote understanding of the reasons that immigrants come to northern communities and how immigrants benefit the community. The Association also noted that Aboriginal and ethnocultural groups share commonalities with respect to issues of belonging, alienation, marginalization, and cultural identity. A similar observation was made in the Centre for Northern Families' research.

The Centre for Northern Families reported that most of the 37 newcomers interviewed had encountered racism. Many felt that the racism they encountered was based on their English language skills or the perception that they were taking jobs away from Canadians even though the "jobs are menial" (Heron-Hebert, p. 12). Individuals contributing to this report agree that language skills are often a basis for discrimination. They also feel that they face discrimination due to their physical appearance. Lack of recognition of education, skills, and experience by Canadian employers, who won't "even give them a chance to prove their skills," is also seen as discriminatory. "Canadians will hire a grade 12 Canadian grad from high school before hiring a more educated immigrant." Employers tell them that "if you don't have Canadian education and experience you don't have anything."

6. Labour Force Supports

Persons interviewed for this report say that immigrants need opportunities for job shadowing and mentoring in the workplace in order to become familiar with Canadian workplaces, standards, and expectations. The Centre for Northern Families' research noted the somewhat fragile nature of temporary residents who come to the NWT for work. It found that an independent organization is needed to "provide assistance to people who have problems with employers" (Heron-Hebert, p. 10).

Taking Action on Newcomer Literacy Issues

Northern newcomers and program personnel with responsibilities for literacy issues among immigrants point to the need for action to ensure that all immigrants are safe, secure, and able to participate in Canadian society. Whether newcomers are in Canada to stay or in the country temporarily, all people have the right to be included and be treated fairly. Literacy in an official language is the key to these outcomes. Persons contributing to this report say that some fundamental actions need to be taken to be inclusive to all newcomers and ensure equality. They recommend:

- an immigrant welcome centre in Yellowknife that also could outreach to other NWT communities. The centre would be a repository for information, offer advice and referrals, and provide an environment with activities that welcome newcomers and make connections within the community. It could be a home for the Collective Kitchen, the very successful but homeless, event that brings immigrant women together to share food.
- a mentorship program (like the Shadow program²³) to enable immigrants to gain access to Canadian workplaces. The current Canada/NWT Labour Market Agreement administered by GNWT Education, Culture and Employment may be a source of funding for mentorships and workplace literacy supports for newcomers.²⁴
- ongoing basic, advanced, and technical English language courses especially in Yellowknife, so immigrants have adequate language skills to participate in the community and pursue careers. Some program personnel say that these courses should also engage Aboriginal northerners who face English literacy challenges. One program manager

²³ http://www.saskfilm.com/docs/assets16/Microsoft_Word_-_ShadowMentor_GUIDE_May08.pdf

²⁴ http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/employment/partnerships/lma/northwest_territories/nwt_lma_2009.shtml#tphp

says that: “Aboriginal people and new Canadians do well in the same class because often new Canadians have the technical skills while Aboriginal people have the verbal skills.” Program personnel and newcomers agree that someone needs to advocate and monitor language and literacy courses to ensure that they meet the needs of all newcomers (e.g. “accommodate mothers and people working”).

- phonetic materials so newcomers can perfect verbal skills in English; more resources such as booklists including “a booklist of children’s books for newcomers so visible minorities can see themselves”; and more resources that complement and expand on existing language and literacy materials. People contributing to this report who are aware of the NWT Literacy Council, say it “does a great job and is always very supportive.” The Council could work with Literacy Outreach, Caribou Outreach, settlement officers, and others to develop and disseminate resources. The Council could also be a resource to program personnel addressing immigrant literacy issues.²⁵

The recommendations of the Centre for Northern Families’ research (2007) were similar to those of persons contributing to this report. They included:

- more locally based personnel who can provide information on rights, responsibilities, programs and services including confidential services for women.
- language classes for anyone regardless of their residency status.
- orientation materials and personal mentors/supports for newcomers.
- greater efforts to promote understanding of cultural diversity and reduce racism (Heron-Herbert, p. 20).

²⁵Some of the many resources available to help address immigrant literacy are listed in the NWT Literacy Council’s weekly electronic newsletter. They include: lesson plans for ESL instructors using the Centre for Canadian Benchmarks at <http://library.nald.ca/learning/browse/recent> recipes celebrating diversity at <http://library.nald.ca/learning/item/8651> citizenship and immigration games and resources at http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/games/index.asp?utm_source=directly&utm_medium&utm_campaign=learn

The recommendations of groups considering immigrant literacy issues at a national level are also relevant to addressing concerns of newcomers to the NWT. The Canadian Council on Learning (June 2008) identified the need for public policy change and financial investment to address literacy issues and stimulate individual and societal commitment to literacy (pp. 72-74). The CCL recommended greater involvement and promotion of literacy by unions and other collectives. The TD Bank Financial Group (2009) also stressed the need to foster greater awareness of the important role that strong official language and literacy skills play in immigrants being able to realize their full potential. Awareness is needed among immigrants as well as within Canadian society. The TD Bank contends that businesses as well as governments have major roles to play to foster awareness and encourage literacy development.

The Canadian Council on Learning (June 2008) recommended (pp. 47-51):

- Promotion/marketing and locating programs in places that adults with low literacy frequent because these individuals often don't recognize their literacy deficits, making it difficult to recruit them into literacy programs.
- Literacy programs that are located close to homes and workplaces to reduce commuting distances.
- A two-step literacy program intake interview followed by a cognitive needs assessment to ensure appropriate placement.
- Access to supports to facilitate retention in literacy programs including financial support, childcare, counselling, a resource library, and digital technology.
- Programs tailored to the individual and one-on-one support, if required.
- Professional development for literacy program practitioners to ensure the skills to work with adults with low literacy. In the CCL's 2009 report, teaching English literacy skills to immigrant students was identified as more effective by the use of collaborative reading, systematic phonetics and guided reading, multimedia assisted reading, and writing strategies.

The TD Bank Financial Group (2009) identified the need to evaluate existing language and literacy programs and to harmonize measures of language proficiency (such as the CLB and IALSS levels) (p. 16).

For immigrant women facing language barriers and cultural alienation that combine to impact on health status, “language proficiency may make more sense within a health literacy framework, where it includes patient empowerment and education rather than just access to health services (Pottie et al., p. 509).

What Can the NWT Literacy Council Do?

The NWT Literacy Council is a non-government organization. It supports literacy development in all the official languages of the NWT through research, training, the development of resources, and advocating for improved literacy services for people in the NWT. Family literacy is a big part of the Council’s work.

The NWT Literacy Council can play a role in helping to address literacy issues among newcomers in the NWT and program personnel who work to address the literacy needs of immigrants. The Council could:

- expand and promote its resources including family literacy funding and materials to groups serving newcomers.
- advocate for equitable access and more extensive ESL programming and low and advanced language and literacy programming.
- advocate for more mentorships and workplace literacy supports for newcomers.
- promote the use of plain language among government and businesses to make information more accessible to people with low levels of English literacy.
- collaborate with newcomers to engage government and business in efforts to promote literacy as key to successes and integration into Canadian

society. For example, the Council might work with the TD Bank Financial Group to follow up on issues raised in this report.²⁶

²⁶ TD Financial Literacy Grant Fund provides grants ranging from \$25,000 to \$100,000 to qualified community groups for financial education. The first of its kind in Canada, the \$11 million fund will bring financial literacy skills to low-income and disadvantaged individuals across Canada. www.sedi.org/grantfund.

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