

Study Circle Guide

Ontario Findings

**2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills
Survey**

Prepared by

Ontario Literacy Coalition
2006



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1/ Introduction

Welcome to the Ontario Literacy Coalition's presentation by Dr. Satya Brink on the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) in Toronto on April 10, 2006.

Dr. Satya Brink of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada's (HRSDC) Learning Policy Directorate will present the IALSS findings for Ontario. Dr. Brink will compare Ontario results with other Canadian provinces and territories. Particular attention will be given to adults who scored at IALSS levels 1 and 2: their employment, education and demographics as well as social and health related circumstances.

At the end of the presentation, participants will be invited to join a **study circle** to discuss adult literacy challenges in Ontario.

IALSS is the Canadian portion of the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL) Survey in which Canada, Bermuda, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, the United States, and the Mexican state of Nuevo Leon took part. The IALSS survey asked over 20,000 adults in Canada to answer questions about their reading and math abilities. The purpose of the study was to determine the level of prose and document literacy, as well as numeracy and problem solving skills of adults in Canada.

2/ Study Circle Guide

To facilitate the study circles, the Ontario Literacy Coalition has prepared this Study Circle Guide. It will provide quotes, questions, and comments about key Canadian and Ontario IALSS findings to help generate discussion amongst participants.

The Ontario Literacy Coalition warmly thanks Bernadette Walsh (M.Ed. OISE/UT and literacy practitioner with the Ottawa Carleton Catholic School Board) for writing this guide.

3/ For the Study Circle Facilitator

Thank you for agreeing to facilitate a study circle.

Your roles as facilitator

- Emphasize that all group members are asked to help set a cooperative and respectful climate in which any participant who wishes to contribute may do so
- Help steer the conversation back to its focus, as needed
- Keep time to ensure that the session does not extend longer than the agreed upon time limit (one hour following the presentations)

Use of the Study Circle Guide

- Make sure that all participants have the Study Circle Guide
- Encourage group members to take a few moments to read the Table of Contents and flip through the guide to familiarize themselves with the content
- Review with participants the purpose of a study circle in section 4 called “For Study Circle Participants.”

Getting Started

Follow “Getting Started” in the section 4 called “For Study Circle Participants.”

Closing and Evaluation

- Leave five minutes at the end of the circle.
- Ask participants to summarize their thoughts at the end of the study circle (see Section 10).
- Ask participants to complete the evaluation section (the last page). Please collect the evaluations and return to the Ontario Literacy Coalition.

4/ For Study Circle Participants

What is a Study Circle?

Welcome to the IALSS study circle. A study circle exists when people gather to share their experiences, find solutions to problems and/or plan for the future. Study circles usually involve five to twenty people who meet to discuss a topic of interest. A facilitator keeps time and ensures that the group stays on topic. Discussion and resource materials provide the content for learning.

Study circles rely on a spirit of cooperation, participation, and respect amongst participants. The format is democratic, allowing all participants, who wish to do so, the opportunity to speak and have their views considered by the group.

Study circles help participants identify social, political or environmental trends and understand root causes. They often lead members to respond in various ways, such as social or political action (Pincher Creek Community Adult Learning Council, n.d.).

The IALSS study circle is an opportunity for you to discuss and understand further the IALSS findings and adult literacy and numeracy in Ontario.

Getting Started

1. Take a few moments to introduce yourself to the other participants.
-  2. After listening to the presentation on IALSS, do you have any general concerns or comments to make about the Ontario results?
3. What main issues have emerged?
4. Do your concerns coincide with the topic areas outlined in the Table of Contents?
5. Together with the other participants, choose three to four questions to pursue and turn to those pages of the study circle guide. You may choose whichever you wish to discuss.

In each section there are quotes, graphs or diagrams and questions for discussion. The questions are indicated by 

Time is limited to one hour for this study circle, so it is important to stay on topic during the discussion.

5/ What Do the IALSS Levels Mean?

...the ability to read may lie somewhere in Level 1, but the ability to understand and use what has been read comes in gradations of complexity from Level 1 to Level 5. (HRSDC, 2005)

Each of IALSS's five proficiency levels represents a set of tasks of increasing complexity.

IALSS levels are different from Ontario's **Literacy and Basic Skills** (LBS) and **Ontario Basic Skills** (OBS) levels. Roughly speaking, the following comparison may be made between LBS and OBS and IALSS Levels.

IALSS Scores given to respondents after assessment	IALSS Levels	LBS/OBS Levels
0 to 225 points	Level 1	LBS Levels 1, 2 and 3
226 to 275 points	Level 2	LBS Levels 4 and 5; OBS
276 to 325 points	Level 3	n/a
326 to 500 points	Level 4/5	n/a

6/ Life Long Learning and Education

Adult Learning

All Canadians have the right to develop the literacy and essential skills they need in order to participate fully in our social, cultural, economic and political life.

Every person must have an equal opportunity to acquire, develop, maintain and enhance their literacy skills regardless of their circumstances.

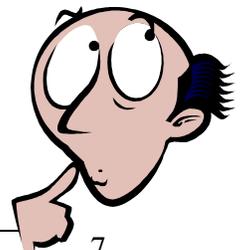
Literacy is at the heart of learning. A commitment to learning throughout life leads to a society characterized by literate, healthy and productive individuals, families, communities and workplaces. (November 20, 2005)

The above quote from the report by the Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills, to the Minister of State for Human Resource Development is supportive of adult literacy. Yet, the following two points demonstrate the gap that exists in Ontario:

- Among working age Ontarians, **1.3 million** (16.2%) struggle with very serious literacy challenges. They have difficulty with even the most basic written materials. Another 2.1 million (26%) can work with print information but not well.
- **1.8 million** (21.3%) working age Ontarians struggle with very serious numeracy challenges. They have difficulty with even the most basic math tasks. Another 2.4 million (29.1%) can work with numeracy but not well (MCL & OLC, November 11, 2005).



1. Who is responsible for adult learning?
2. Does the responsibility rely solely on the shoulders of the adult learner?
3. What responsibility do governments, workplaces, schools and health care (or other places) have towards adults who have literacy challenges?
4. What responsibility do adults have to improve their skills?



How large are those numbers?

Location	Population*
Northern Ontario	800,000
Kitchener/Waterloo	520,000
Sub Total	1,320,000
Eastern Ontario	1,400,000
St. Catharines/Niagara	390,000
Total	1,790,000

*Approximate Populations

The number of Ontario adults reading at IALSS Level 1 is about equal to the populations of Northern Ontario and Kitchener/Waterloo combined.

The number of Ontarian adults working at Level 1 numeracy is about equal to the combined populations of Eastern Ontario and St. Catharines/Niagara.

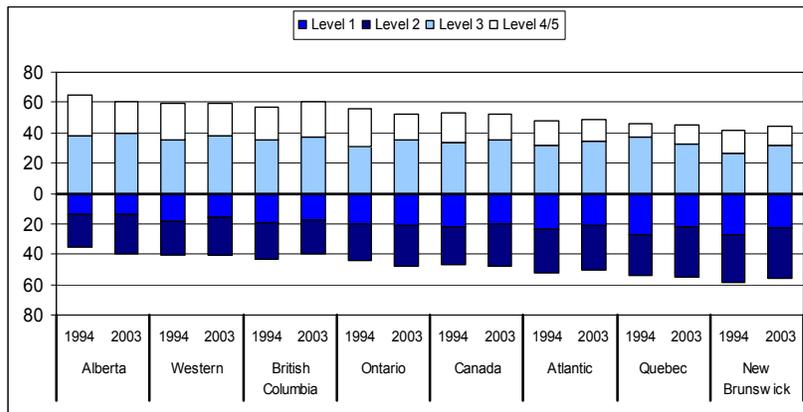


1. How does Ontario address an issue that affects so many?
2. Why do so many people seem to have difficulty with literacy and numeracy in Ontario?
3. In absolute numbers, more adults were assessed at Level 1 and Level 2 in 2003 than in 1994. Based on the graph below, how has Ontario fared compared to other provinces?

Literacy performance over time

Slight shifts in the prose distribution of proficiency between 1994 and 2003

Proportion of 16 and over performing at levels 1, 2, 3 and 4/5 in prose, Canada and regions, 1994 and 2003



Learning Policy Directorate, HRSDC

Source: IALSS, 2003

Lifelong Learning

Over 60% of Ontarian adults participate in active learning. (Brinks, November 30, 2005)



The European Commission (2001) found:

In the second half of the 1990s, a broad consultation process on lifelong learning was launched by the European Union (EU) at both national and Union levels, involving all partners and civil society organizations and members. The outcome of this consultation process was a major EU policy initiative focusing on Lifelong Learning: *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (November 2000.)

The policy rejects the view that the knowledge, skills and understanding that we learn as children and as young people in the family, at school, during training and at college or university will last a lifetime. It sees all learning as a seamless continuum ‘from cradle to grave’, and aims to integrate learning firmly into adult life.



1. What are the connections between involvement in life long learning and literacy?
2. How do Ontario policies on adult literacy and adult education compare with the above statement on lifelong learning?
3. What are the prospects for similar lifelong learning policy initiatives in Ontario or Canada?

Learning Differently

“According to the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), 77% of people with learning disabilities and 48% or those with physical disabilities had document literacy scores below level 3, compared with 36% of people with no disability” (The Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, 2003).

Moreover, the 1996 Canadian census showed that only 50% of persons with disabilities have completed high school compared with 70% of those who do not have disabilities.



1. Do **all** adults need to learn to read and write better?
2. Could governments, workplaces, health care and educational institutions accommodate adults who learn differently?
3. What would this look like?
4. Would providing assistive technologies help?

7/ Labour Market, the Economy and Society

The Employed and the Unemployed

There is clearly a relationship between literacy proficiency and employability. Over half of unemployed Canadians have document literacy scores below level 3.

Despite literacy challenges, over 60% of Ontarian adults assessed at level 1 and over 70% of Ontarian adults assessed at level 2 are employed (Brink, November 30, 2005).

Many adults with low literacy skills have done general labour jobs such as digging ditches, tilling soil, planting seeds or yard work, housekeeping, cleaning, washing dishes, sewing, sawing, and stacking things, general maintenance and fixing things.



These jobs help keep the economy going, but they are often not permanent for the individuals doing them.

In a *Focus on Basics* article, workplace literacy practitioners Tracy Defoe and Sue Folinsbee (2004) state the following:

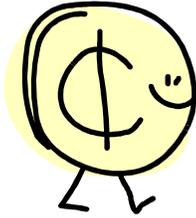
The idea that workers' "basic skill deficits" were to blame for the "ills" of today's workplace did not match our experience as workplace educators, nor did the view of literacy as a discrete set of skills to be mastered by individuals coincide with our opinions. Literacy at work is more than just reading and writing: it is also social in nature. Literacy is an integral part of the work place that must be examined in the context of the overall workplace environment. Considered in this way, literacy takes on broader meanings.



1. How are the literacy needs of employed adults who have low literacy skills being met? What about unemployed adults?
2. Can we do more to meet their needs?
3. Do improved literacy levels change working conditions?
4. Do improved literacy levels help adults cope with difficulties at work?
5. What is our social responsibility towards those who do not have the necessary skills to take part in a knowledge-based economy?

Literacy and Economic Growth

New research from Statistics Canada also shows that investment in education is three times as important to economic growth over the long run as investment in physical capital such as machinery and equipment (Pound, 2006).



Literacy investments are sound. There is growing evidence that adult literacy and basic skills are instrumental to economic growth. Several recent studies have taken on the task of disentangling the impact of adult literacy on economic growth from that of formal education. Using IALS data, these studies concluded that differences in levels of adult literacy skills among OECD countries explained fully 55% of the differences in economic growth over 1960-1994. (UNESCO, 2006)

Investments in raising adult literacy skills levels can yield large economic returns. Indeed, an OECD study showed that a 1% increase in adult literacy levels generates a 1.5% permanent increase in GDP per capita (Coulombe, Tremblay and Marchand, 2004).



1. Does increased spending on adult literacy mean a better quality of life for adults with literacy needs?
2. Considering the above quotes, why isn't there increased funding for adult literacy programs?
3. How does productivity link with literacy?

Literacy and Public Investment

Currently, most discussion focuses on the role of post-secondary education in providing highly skilled workers for the knowledge economy as a means of ensuring international competitiveness.

In 2005-2006, Ontario's universities (excluding other post-secondary institutions) got \$2.6 billion in funding. (This does not include new money promised by the current government to be delivered sometime in 2006 when performance accountability agreements with universities are finalized.)



However, recent research (Coulombe, Tremblay and Marchand, 2004) reminds us that there are potentially large pay-offs from investment in ‘less-glamorous’ sectors delivering Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programming to adults with the lowest levels (levels 1 and 2) of literacy skills. The pay-offs come in the form of increased economic growth, which benefits society as a whole.

In 2005-06, Ontario’s funding for adult literacy programs (LBS and Ontario Basic Skills programs) was approximately \$66 million. The federal government through NLS committed \$30 million, plus approximately \$6 million each year for a comprehensive literacy strategy.



1. Are both levels of government investing enough on raising the competencies of Ontarians at the bottom of the skills spectrum?

Literacy and Labour Market Policy

Between 1994 and 2003, the working age population in Ontario increased by 1.4 million people. In absolute numbers, the number of people of working age who scored below level 3, increased by 600,000, from 2.8 million in 1994 to 3.4 million in 2003. In Ontario, most of the overall population increase —1 million people — scored at level 3 or above. (Brink, November 9, 2005)



There is a wide range of policy instruments to promote workplace literacy training that are being used in OECD countries, and may be worth considering in Ontario:

- The effective cost of training can be simply lowered through corporate tax deductions for training expenditures.
- The governments can simply mandate a minimum level of training by adopting laws requiring companies to spend a percentage of their payroll on training.
- Pay-back clauses may be used to circumvent the under-investment problem that results from labour turnover. Pay-back clauses force employees who leave their employer to reimburse part of the cost of the training they received.



1. What are the types of policy instruments that would be most appropriate for Ontario’s labour market?
2. What kind of a policy strategy could best motivate companies to

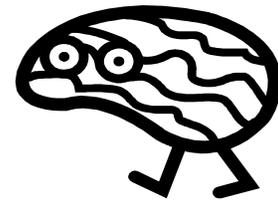
substantially increase their role and investment in workplace training?

3. Should Ontario's workplace training policy strategy target low-skilled workers, who tend to receive little employer support for training?

Social Inclusion

Literacy is a complex issue. It affects and is affected by employment, health, poverty, crime and violence, and children's education. (Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2003)

In a recent research paper, Meyer Burnstein (2005) identified that lone-parent families, persons with work limitations (such as learning or physical disabilities), immigrants and visible minorities, Aboriginal people living off reserves, and many single adults face poverty and social exclusion. The report concludes that rather than new initiatives, cooperation between existing bodies would help disadvantaged groups.



The report, *Towards a Fully Literate Canada* (2005), identified a bias towards a providing training for the highly literate population, in a number of government initiatives. The report recommends that these programs consider adults with literacy challenges.

Benefits from adult literacy training are related to factors such as improved self-esteem, empowerment, creativity and critical reflection. These are intrinsically valuable, and may also be instrumental in realizing other social policy objectives such as formation of social capital, reducing social exclusion, poverty, and crime, and increased political and civic participation.



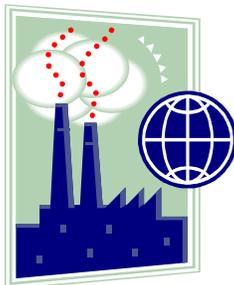
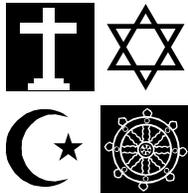
1. If we increase investment in literacy programming for adults and their families, what specific benefits might there be to our social systems?
2. Are there other ways of addressing Ontario's literacy challenges other than through programming?
3. What can government, labour groups, businesses and other sectors do to facilitate inclusion?

Societal Direction

Economic globalization, advances in information and communications technology and the move towards knowledge-based societies present new opportunities for some, but unfortunately exclude others, even in our own society. (The Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills, November 20, 2005)



1. Is the knowledge-based society leading to inclusion or exclusion of adults with low literacy skills?
2. Was the situation different in other times and societies?



8/ Adult Literacy Demographics

Youth

Between 1994 and 2003, there were some changes in prose literacy scores among youth from particular educational backgrounds. The highest score achieved by the lowest 25% of youth whose parents had not completed high school is about 75 points higher in 2003 than in 1994 — a significant improvement (Brink, November 9, 2005).

The youth scores include young adults between the ages of 16 and 25.



1. How have literacy programs contributed towards this upward trend?
2. Despite the good news, youth still participate in adult literacy programs. What can we do to continue to support youth?

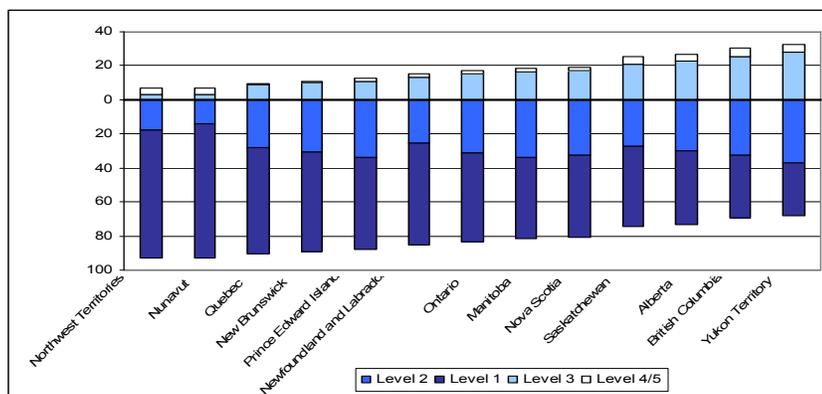
The Elderly

Eighty percent of seniors' prose literacy scores were at Level 1 and Level 2. IALSS interviewed adults older than 65 (Brink, November 9, 2005). See graph below.

Subgroups - Elderly

The majority of seniors have relatively low literacy skills

Distribution of proficiency level on the prose literacy scale for those older than 65 years, provinces and territories, 2003



Source: IALSS, 2003

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1. Do seniors want learning opportunities?
2. What might these initiatives look like?

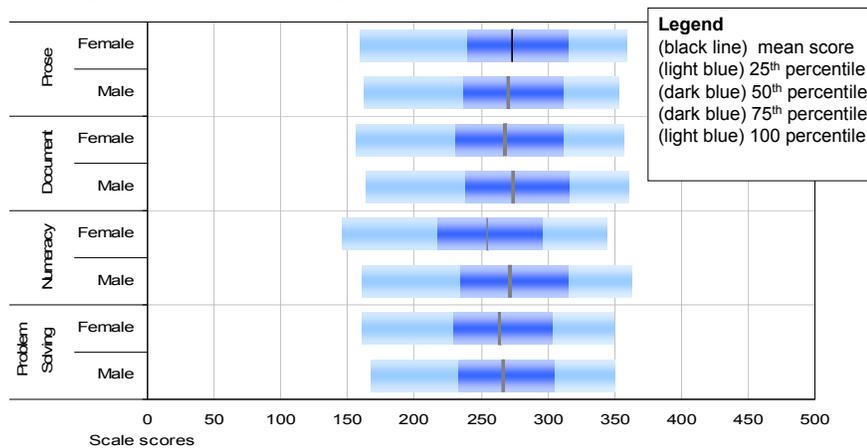
Gender Differences

“Significant gender differences in average scores are evident for document literacy and numeracy. Gender differences are most pronounced for the **numeracy domain**. Males outperform females by approximately 18 points on average” (Brink, November 9, 2005). See graph below.

Subgroups - Gender

Significant gender differences in average scores are evident for document literacy and for numeracy

Average Proficiency by domain and gender, population 16 and over, Canada, 2003



Source: IALSS, 2003

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Learning Policy Directorate, HRSDC



1. What is missing?
2. What supports need to be put in place for document and numeracy education for girls and women?

Immigrants

“Overall, immigrants have greater literacy challenges than the Canadian-born population. About 60% rank below level 3. This compares with 37% of the Canadian-born population” (Brink, November 30, 2005). See table below.

Literacy performance- Employment

The average literacy scores of immigrants present in the labour force was below level 3

Mean of PROSE by immigrant status and labour force status, age 16-65

Immigrant status	Labour force status	Mean	s.e.
Canadian born	Not in labour force	275	1.9
Canadian born	Unemployed	272	4.1
Canadian born	Employed	293	0.9
Established immigrant	Not in labour force	236	6.0
Established immigrant	Unemployed	246	6.7
Established immigrant	Employed	257	3.0
Recent immigrant	Not in labour force	244	5.4
Recent immigrant	Unemployed	248	13.7
Recent immigrant	Employed	256	3.5
Immigrant (combined)	Not in labour force	239	4.0
Immigrant (combined)	Unemployed	247	6.4
Immigrant (combined)	Employed	257	2.4

Recent immigrant: 10 years or less since immigration

Source: IALSS, 2003

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 Learning Policy Directorate, HRSDC



1. Many ESL related programs exist in Ontario. Do they meet the needs?
2. Are there enough programming options for Ontarian immigrants?
3. What are the implications for measuring both ESL and literacy issues in 2003 IALSS?
4. Should one issue get more attention than the other?

Francophone Population

In Ontario, 64% of Francophones took the IALSS assessment in English. These adults have higher average prose literacy than Francophones who were assessed in French. Yet, 53% of Francophones living outside of Quebec who took the test in English scored below level 3 in prose literacy compared with 61% of those who took the test in French (Brink, November 9, 2005).



1. What do these findings say?
2. As the IALSS results indicate, many Francophone adults in Ontario feel comfortable in both of Canada's official languages. How are programs serving this special population?
3. What challenges do Franco Ontarians face?
4. How can these challenges be met?

Aboriginal People Living in Cities

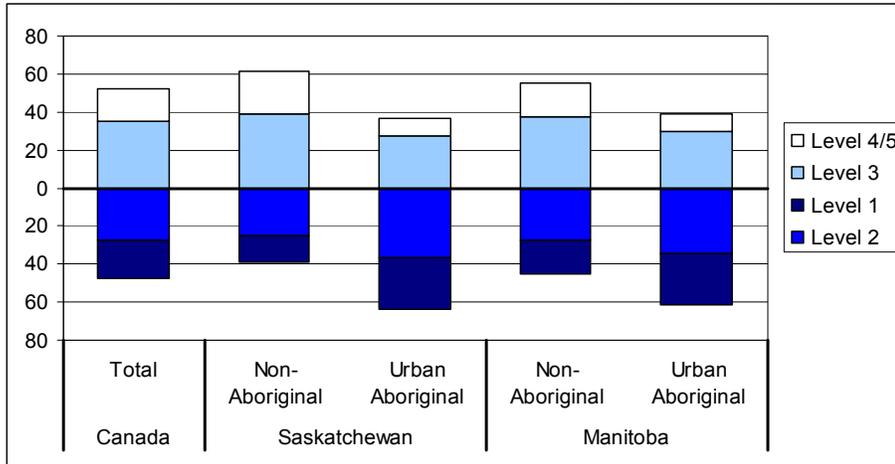
Due to the high cost of delivering this survey, First Nations adults on reserves were not part of the IALSS survey; however, Aboriginal people living in cities were.

The graph below compares the results for Urban Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Around 60% of Urban Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan and Manitoba scored at IALSS levels 1 and 2, and 40% of the non-Aboriginal population of these two provinces scored at level 1 and level 2. Based on these results, and results from the territories, researchers concluded that the prose literacy performance of Aboriginal populations surveyed is lower than that of the Canadian population (Brink, November 9, 2005).

Subgroups – Aboriginal people

The prose literacy performance of the urban Aboriginal populations, 16 and over, is lower than that of non-aboriginals in Saskatchewan and Manitoba

Comparative distributions of prose literacy proficiency by level, per cent of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, aged 16 and over, 2003



Source: IALSS, 2003

1. What inferences may be made for literacy challenges of urban Aboriginal adults in Ontario?



2. What supports could be implemented for Aboriginal adult learners?
3. What are effective literacy programs that exist in Ontario cities for Aboriginal adult learners?

9/ Literacy and Quality of Life

Health

“Generally in most jurisdictions, 16 to 25 year-olds in poor health have the lowest average document scores” (Brink, November 9, 2005).



“People living with limited literacy and chronic illness face unique challenges interacting with the health care system. Health care professionals need to understand the experiences of these patients” (King, Fall 2004).



1. Is it possible to set up learning programs for adults in poor health? If yes, what might appropriate learning programs look like?
2. What challenges do youth in poor health face when approaching literacy programs?
3. What supports do low literate adults with chronic illness need (whether physical, mental or emotional)?

Participation in the community

“The higher the prose literacy levels, the more likely a respondent is to engage in various forms of civic and social activities” (Brink, November 9, 2005).



1. What are the relationships between civic participation and literacy?
2. Would literacy skills improve for adults who participate in community activities such as health promotion or lifelong learning, even though they are not overtly promoted as improving literacy?

Learning Environments

There are many types of learning environments.

Formal learning is done in elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities.

Non-formal learning can be defined as any organized educational activity outside the established formal system, intended to serve identifiable learning objectives. The non-formal learning environment is often relaxed, encourages discussion and explores themes that can boost self-confidence. This kind of learning often happens in community centres and non-government organizations.

Informal learning describes a lifelong process whereby individuals acquire attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience and the educative influences and resources in his or her environment, from family and neighbours, from work and play, from the market place, the library and the mass media.



1. Many adults who have literacy challenges do not attend literacy programs. Should alternative delivery formats for adult literacy be part of the solution?
2. Would more literacy programs provided in collaboration with public libraries, community health or resource centres or community legal clinics be helpful?
3. Who should support such alternative programming?

10/ Closing and Next Steps

Take a moment to check in with the group:



1. What will you take away from this session?
2. What can you/ programs/ governments do to help adults with literacy challenges gain fuller lives by improving literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills?

You may wish to continue to meet, or create your own study circle. If you do, the OLC would like to know what you think.

On the last page is the Feedback and Evaluation Section.

- If you have time, please take a few moments to discuss the questions in the study circle, otherwise, fill in the evaluation.
- If you have any comments to pass along to the Ontario Literacy Coalition, please fill out the bottom of the next page and give it to your study circle facilitator. If you wish, you may send your comments directly to OLC. The contact information is provided.

Thank you for participating!

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Feedback and Evaluation

Section A.

1. What did you find helpful about the IALSS presentation and the Study Circle Guide?
2. What would you like to see in future study circle sessions?
3. What would you like left out or changed for future study circles?

Section B.

Throughout your discussion, you may have discussed themes that can be addressed at a provincial level.

1. Is there anything you wish the Ontario Literacy Coalition to be aware of or to address?

Please give your answers to your Study Circle Facilitator, directly to the OLC or mail to:

Ontario Literacy Coalition
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