

# Fostering Partnership Development in Workplace Literacy:

A Case Study of the Canadian National  
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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe how a federal government initiative fostered partnership development with business, labour, education, and provincial and territorial government in adult work-related literacy. Using a qualitative research case study design, the National Literacy Secretariat Business and Labour Partnership Program was examined during three periods of program development and change using three data sources. The findings describe the accomplishments and impacts of the program, definitions of partnerships, factors of a successful and unsuccessful partnership, and lessons learned. The results are discussed through three models of partnership development and program planning in adult education.

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### Introduction

Partnership is becoming an ever more present idea as the best way to go about solving the social, cultural and economic issues of the day. Groups and associations in the public and private sectors, business and medicine, education and social services are all contributing to the dialogue about the importance of partnership. However, the actual fostering of partnerships is difficult, and infre-

quently discussed among people in various levels of government, the funding agencies whose mandates are to encourage partnership development, and the wider Canadian literacy community.

There is a tendency to use the term loosely, or to define it based on the needs at the moment. Partnership represents a significant step beyond cooperation and collaboration, but it is unclear how the partnership process happens and its impact on the community in its broadest sense. Moving away from a more legal and economic notion of partnership, the following work provided a useful frame of reference for this study. Poole (1995) defines partnership as:

an association between two or more persons, groups, or organizations who join together to achieve a common goal that neither one alone can accomplish. This association is characterized by joint membership rights, by democratic participation and by shared responsibility. Each member agrees to contribute to the partnership with the understanding that the possession or enjoyment of the benefits will be shared by all. Partners work hard to strengthen each other and to endure conflict and change, because they recognize that their shared goal extends beyond the reach of any one member. (p. 2)

What is interesting about this definition is that it begins to venture into the idea of social partnership. This is an increasingly popular form of collaborative action in which organizations from multiple sectors interact to achieve common goals. It carries the idea of collective strategies, problem-solving, and tools for action. The literature abounds with many studies about partnership that focus on governance, leadership, developmental stages, and tensions in the partnership relationship.

The purpose of this in-depth case study was to document a government initiative through the National Literacy Secretariat called the Business and Labour Partnership Program that has been in existence since 1988. The department and program are part of the large federal ministry called Human Resources and Social Development Canada. The overall intention was to understand the process of partnership development and the strategies that were used to engage business, labour, and provincial governments in adult work-related literacy at a time when no such program model existed. It was also interested in documenting the ideas and approaches that were used as well as the different types of partnerships that developed given that most Canadians did not believe that a literacy problem existed. This new information will help illustrate what a partnership program in real action looked like so that public servants and literacy practitioners could learn from the experience. From an historical point of view, the case study also recorded many of the major events and activities of the partnership program as described by the key informants. These people have contributed significantly to Canadian adult work-related literacy over the decades.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

In this research, case study was defined as an empirical inquiry that investigated a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context, especially as the boundaries between the phenomenon and context were not clearly evident. As a qualitative case study, attention was given to three specific features: particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. This case study was particularistic because it focused on a particular program that had longevity which allowed for important representations of the partnership phenomenon. It was also descriptive in that it used prose to describe, elicit images, and analyze the different influences of time on the program. This was done instead of reporting findings in numerical data. As well, the case study was heuristic in that, to some degree, previously unknown relationships and variables emerged which led to a re-thinking of the partnership phenomenon. As a result, there is a different understanding of what happened in the program's life (Merriam, 1998, pp. 27–34).

The overall intent of the case study was interpretive. In other words, the descriptive data were used to illustrate and support some of the key theoretical positions in the literature on partnership development and program planning in adult education. The model of analysis was deductive in that certain perspectives were chosen that helped explain partnership development and program planning from very different approaches.

## ***Sampling, Instrument Development, and Data Collection***

In conducting this case study research, the single case which was the NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program, was considered the most useful and purposeful. The primary instrumentation was semi-structured interview schedules. These interview questions and probes were developed for two groups of participants—business, labour and education interviewees and government participants. Questions for the interview schedules were drawn from a thorough literature review which focused on partnership development and program planning as well as a series of meetings with subject matter experts. The interview schedules were piloted and further revised.

Considerable attention was given to the selection of the key informants. A matrix was constructed with categories and included stakeholder groups from business, labour, education and government; regional and organizational affiliations such as national, provincial and territorial; program time periods of 1988–1995, 1996–2000, 2001–2006 and gender. Representation across the matrix categories resulted in the selection of 26 participants. A consent form for the interviewees was also developed. Input and feedback on all major decisions concerning the project instrumentation and selection of the interviewees were provided by a National Advisory Committee represented by the stakeholder groups. Data collection was extensive and drew on multiple sources of information—interviews, field notes, archival records and documents which were both print and electronic. Face-to-face interviews were conducted over a three-month period throughout Canada. Documents were also collected during the interview process.

## ***Data Preparation and Data Analysis***

Recorded interviews and field notes were developed into narratives for each key informant. The narratives were then subjected to a data coding process, followed by four forms of data analysis in order to make a detailed description of the case and its setting. Categorical aggregation was the first technique used which produced a collection of instances and relevant meanings based on the coding scheme and program period of time. The next procedure was the establishment of patterns and the correspondence between and among categories. For those single instances that did not fit into the patterns or did not help explain the relationship between categories, direct interpretation was used. As a final technique generalizations from analyzing the data were developed into an implications section life (Merriam, 1998, pp. 155–166). At the preliminary analysis phase, the National Advisory Committee met to provide additional insights and meaning to the data. Finally, through the process of triangulation the different document data sources were used to corroborate the main findings and shed light on the themes that emerged. A total of 60 documents were used in this process. These documents were sorted into archival records, project reports and project deliverables and then further categorized into the three program periods.

## ***Presentation of the Findings***

This section of the article describes an abridged version of the eight major themes that emerged from the various data sources. It begins with a profile of the accomplishments of the Business and Labour Partnership Program and then moves into the impact of these accomplishments on the prac-



tice of four partner and interest groups. The third theme outlines the definitions and qualities of partnership development. It is followed by a continuation of the topic by summarizing the factors of a successful partnership with the NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program, the dynamics of the NLS Partnership Program, and proposal and project support experiences. The next theme sketches the factors that contribute to an unsuccessful partnership and is drawn from the interview data and the key stakeholder experiences with partnership development in general and with the NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program. The last theme is called lessons and program changes.

To help contextualize the section, the findings are woven into the three periods of time which cover the life span of the Business and Labour Partnership Program. The first period is referred to as the foundation building of the program and includes the years from 1988 to 1995. The second period is called development and demonstration and covers the years from 1996 to 2000. The third time frame is called period of program change and spans the years from 2001 to 2006.

### ***Major Accomplishments in the NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program***

Between 1988 and 2006, the partnership projects supported by the Program were able to develop assessment and evaluation tools, create innovative models for delivering workplace literacy, support training and consultations, and compile best practices for workplace literacy. Many projects developed tools for workplace instructors, such as the Organizational Needs Assessment and Literacy Task Analysis. As well, a multi-year project by Bow Valley College and Skillplan, the BC

Construction Industry Skills Improvement Council, developed the groundbreaking Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES). Also, support for provincial initiatives laid the foundation for business, labour, and government to work together to create innovative models for delivery. One example is the Workplace Education Manitoba Steering Committee (WEMSC), which has changed the perception of workplace literacy in the province. The model from Manitoba has been adopted in other jurisdictions. In addition, WWestnet organized a number of conferences that became key training events for western Canada. Further, a large number of projects compiled best practices for the field. These publications and reports were widely used in Research-in-Practice workshops, practitioner conferences, and clear language trainings.

At the root of the program accomplishments was a strategic position held by the NLS premised on a set of core beliefs about the need for capacity building and community development. From this position, key business and labour needs were identified first and the workplace was viewed as an innovative venue for advancing literacy. As the Program moved into the development and demonstration years, it enabled and supported new ideas that sprung up from the field and the stakeholders. Another core belief held by the NLS was related to the idea that new knowledge could be created from the accumulation of field practices. During the first and second periods of the Program, there was also a focus on exploring new models for the delivery of workplace literacy and essential skills training.

### ***Impacts on Workplace Literacy Practices***

During the foundation building years (1988–1995) and the beginning of the development and demon-

stration period, impacts on workplace literacy were widespread. Many projects focused on customizing a curriculum for a specific worker audience or workplace setting. As well, union training events helped to open up viewpoints and increased awareness about the importance of workplace change. During the demonstration and development period (1996–2000), the NLS-sponsored think tanks encouraged divergent points of view and helped consolidate an emerging field of workplace practice. These think tanks were national forums for all key stakeholders in literacy. Toward the end of this phase and in the beginning of the next period, practitioner institutes increased. During the period of program change, pockets of best practices were spreading to regions where workplace literacy development had now just started up. Cutting across all three periods was the impact of the National Adult Literacy Database as a clearinghouse for current information on workplace education and the impact of both the International Adult Literacy Survey and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey.

### ***Definitions of Partnership***

There are various types and levels of partnership. There are partnerships with an uppercase “P” and partnerships with a lowercase “p”. These types can be symbolic or based solely on funding. Partnerships have common qualities. Members of a successful partnership are trustworthy, persistent in obtaining goals and work in an atmosphere of openness. There is a genuine respect for each member and an acknowledgement of weaknesses. Members are all committed to making the partnership work. In most cases, some type of trigger event, either positive or negative prompted the formation of a partnership. This event acted as a

catalyst for some type of action and led to the careful search for individual partners from business and labour.

### ***Factors of a Successful Partnership with the NLS Business and Labour Program***

The importance of visioning the full range of possibilities with the field was considered a factor in building a successful partnership. The approach used to understand the complexities of workplace literacy was through a social development lens. The search for champions to carry forward this vision which grew to include essential skills was also a strategy used. Full commitment of all partners including the NLS was a second factor. Commitment of the member partners was evidenced by a respect for stakeholder values, differing points of view and open and frank discussions. At the individual project partnership level, there was also an equal sharing of the workload and lack of hidden agendas. Flow of information among partners is another success factor. Knowing the “big picture” which could influence proposal and project development was important. The role of the NLS was more of an information facilitator than a regulation administrator. The receptivity of the NLS as a funder to foster business, labour and education partnerships was also a success factor. This receptivity was characterized by an atmosphere of experimentation and risk taking around projects and an awareness that this was the way to move forward. The role of the NLS personnel with partner members was another factor. They provided assistance in proposal development, acted as a resource of information, and interpreted policy guidelines for the partners. A final success factor was the actual structure of the individual projects developed by the partners. Small projects that

focused on local needs were important. Business, labour and education partners were actual drivers of how a project was conducted.

### ***Dynamics of the Business and Labour Partnership Program***

At the forefront of these dynamics was the leadership taken by the NLS during the foundation building and development and demonstration years. They advocated for business and labour projects that came from the “ground”. This leadership helped move the program from a vision to a solid starting point. Strong alliances were formed with provincial governments and connections among new partners were cemented. Partners felt comfortable in risk taking and experimenting with cutting-edge project ideas related to diverse local needs. Also during these periods, there was a complete openness and trust when negotiating among partners. During the third period, government policy changed and this influenced the dynamics in terms of leadership, risk taking, and negotiation styles.

### ***Proposal and Project Support Experiences within the Partnership Program***

During the foundation building and development and demonstration years, creativity and innovation in proposals and projects were encouraged. In general, there was open dialogue and a regular pattern of reconsideration for project ideas. This strengthened partnership development which was considered a cornerstone of the programs. During the period of program change, support and advice for proposal ideas were slow coming with top-down communication being more bureaucratic and less responsive to the project goals. Added to

this were the new peer-review committees for proposals.

### ***Factors of an Unsuccessful Partnership: Key Stakeholder Voices***

Conflicting objectives and hidden agendas during the initial development of a partnership can lead to a failed effort. These characteristics can also surface halfway through the process. Overall, when project objectives are primarily tied to accountability, there is little room to advance the social development approach to workplace literacy and essential skills. Another factor affecting success is the working relationship among partners. Characteristics which can dampen a partnership and its work are broken trust, a lack of honesty and an unclear flow of information among partners. Power struggles are another factor. They can damage partnerships, especially when members do not have an understanding of each other’s organizational cultures. A fourth factor that can contribute to an unsuccessful partnership is program structural barriers. When a partner organization chooses a champion from inside the organization to increase visibility of a workplace literacy issue and that individual leaves the organization, it can have a negative effect on the project work. Rigid reporting requirements and micro attention to project financial accountability can take partners away from the “real” work and this affects project results and impacts.

### ***Lessons and Program Change***

The most important lesson that can be gleaned from the data sources is that partnership development and sustainability is possible when a funding agency understands the work of the stakeholder organiz-

ations and becomes an equal partner in the process. When project work that stems from a partnership is supported, a capacity for networking is established and this can spread across the country. Over the three periods of time, changes have occurred in the program. Toward the end of the development and demonstration years (1996–2000), there was an integration of literacy for an essential skills agenda. In the period of program change (2001–2006), and the introduction of the tier system for project submissions, innovation was defined more rigidly. There was also a heightened concern about the flow of information surrounding policy changes.

### Discussion

The discussion section of the article is organized around three main arguments relating the findings to various models of partnership development and program planning. The first argument looks at the results through the lens of a partnership development continuum. This viewpoint is based on the idea that the optimal relationship in any partnership process is one that recognizes that members have needs and local realities at a particular stage and time in their organizational development. The discussion then moves into the understanding the results through a framework which captures the generic aspects of the partnership process. As a means of including the program planning literature, the third argument discusses the findings at a micro level, through the roles and behaviours of partners.

#### *The Partnership Development Continuum*

This model is based on the idea that the optimal relationship in any partnership process is one that

recognizes that members have needs and local realities at a particular stage and time in their organizational development.

It also recognizes that if coordinated efforts and goals are to be attained, there needs to be a strategic movement along a partnership continuum. This three-phase continuum includes: pre-partnership, partnership and Partnership.

Nine dimensions or indicators of partnership relations that vary across the continuum were also identified. They include: focus of interaction, activities, time and orientation, benefit, trust, organizational structures, and agreement (Mullinix, 2001, pp. 1–6). These dimensions map across the partnership continuum and form a fluid matrix that may help explain the fostering of partnerships within the NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program.

#### *The First Phase – pre-partnership*

During this stage on the continuum, the focus of interaction was to bring business and labour organizations together for the first time. This was a feature characterized throughout the foundation building years (1988–1995). An example of such a partnership type was the one formed between the United Food and Commercial Workers and Algonquin College to develop a workplace tool called Literacy Task Analysis. These initial interactions were mostly facilitated through the NLS personnel involved in the Business and Labour Partnership Program. The project activities were based on local needs and specifically defined relationships among members, so they could become acquainted with each other's organizations. To start with, the length and time of these associations were more of a pilot stage nature but project objectives



were specific enough to start the knowledge-building process. The benefits were the important network exchanges that took place among these newly formed partnerships and the recognition of the skills and knowledge each member organization could bring to a specific workplace literacy challenge.

During the pre-partnership phase there was a focus on building trust and earning respect for a different organizational approach to the same issue or problem. Even though member organizational structures remained autonomous, different strategies from each partner were brought to the table to complete the projects or activities. This new information was shared among member organizations, and the different partners began to recognize how project results influenced their own interests as well as each other's.

Written agreements were made between the funding agency and the partners after project proposals were approved. Working principles as to how the partnership would function were often verbally stated. When a successful pilot project was completed during these foundation building years, many of these same stakeholders strategically moved into the next phase of the continuum.

As well, some partnerships did not progress beyond a pilot phase yet still considered their work to be successful. As awareness of the NLS program grew among business and labour organizations over the years, new groupings began the pre-partnership phase in the development and demonstration years and to some extent in the period of program change.

### *The Second Phase – partnership*

The second phase on the continuum is “partnership.” Although this type of partnerships has probably occurred over the three periods of time, it may be more typical during the developmental and demonstration years. An example of such a partnership type was the one formed between Bow Valley College and Skillplan (BC Construction Industry Skills Improvement Council) to develop and launch TOWES. For these types of partnerships, more attention and time was allocated to achieve mutually-valued objectives. In some instances, the early work in a pre-partnership or a pilot project allowed members to further access information about the national workplace literacy picture and to integrate new project objectives into changes occurring in each partner organization. Partners recognized that this was an opportunity to work together because it was convenient arrangement and the project goals aligned with the changes occurring in their own organizations. These projects were often more specified with longer term objectives. More resource time was usually given by each member of the partnership and the result was increased capacity to meet the goals of the project.

Together the partner organizations were able to do more. Mutual trust and respect moved beyond the individual partners and spread to other staff in the business, labour and education organizations. Sometimes, activities and tasks around the shared objectives provided opportunities to participate in each other's organizational functions, such as seminars and symposiums. Information flow among members was more co-ordinated and strategies to accomplish the project work became blended. The exchange of information increased and added to building capacity to work at a problem. There was

also a look outward for other people and organizations who could use the project information. Specific roles of each partner and their organization tended to be more focused on the implementation of the project results. Agreements or partner contracts were sometimes written.

### ***The Third Phase – Partnership***

The third phase on the continuum is “Partnership.” An example of such a partnership type was the one formed between the Ontario Federation of Labour and the provincial government to operate BEST. The focus of interaction was more on developing and implementing the project together. The project activities grew directly out of a common set of interests and skills. There was more of a mission orientation and goals were more open-ended. Benefits of this type of partnership were increased status because of field recognition. Member organizations were able to become more than what they would be alone. The mutual trust and respect permeated through parts of each other’s organizations and sometimes an invitation to sit on each other’s committees or boards, or to provide advice on different types of organizational work. Strategies to complete and implement the work were developed together as well as marketing the product or project results. Partner organizations acknowledged each other’s expertise and ability to build capacity to address and solve the critical issue or problem at the workplace. Agreements tended to focus on a broader area of mutual interest and a commitment to work together.

### ***Partnership Working***

There is also a growing body of literature that describes attempts to foster collaboration in the planning and delivery of public services and seeks to identify generic aspects of the process. One such approach has been documented by Asthana, Richardson and Halliday (2002, pp. 780–784) that looks at a framework which captures the key ingredients of partnership working. This framework will be used here to discuss some of the main themes that have emerged from this case study.

***The Context of Partnership Working.*** The geographical context played an important role in how and when partnerships were developed and sustained. Certain regions and localities across the country were more able to take advantage of the Business and Labour Partnership Program than others. Awareness of literacy issues in the workplace by business and labour happened at different times and regions of Canada. As well, when local communities had a long history of community development and a well-established network that had already been fostered by previous types of partnerships, this positively affected the readiness to become involved in the Business and Labour Partnership Program.

The political context also had a bearing on how and when partner members were able to co-ordinate action. During the foundation building and development and demonstration years, local energies were harnessed and innovation and risk taking were promoted. These early wins acted as a springboard for further development of different partnership arrangements among the stakeholders. As an emphasis on national and provincial priorities shifted throughout the duration of the program, so did the focus of the partnership working. More

recently the top-down political agenda on accountability was at odds with the building of sustainable partnerships from the bottom up. This change affected the trust of partner organizations.

***Inputs to Partnership Working.*** A key input was the recognition and acceptance of a need for partnership among members. Identifying real needs at the changing workplace was the motivation for partner organizations to come together. Exchanging relevant information about the workplace changes from different stakeholder viewpoints helped to develop alliances and raised awareness. This input provided a catalyst for real commitment on the ground.

Another input was the provision of resources. This tangible support was provided by the Business and Labour Partnership Program in terms of partnership project funding, a staff dedicated to the process of partnership building and, later, more formal committee structures intended to reflect a political imperative of accountability. During the foundation building and development and demonstration years, there was strategic support for local partnerships and this helped to build the reputation of the Business and Labour Partnership Program. Other resources in their own right were the knowledge and skills that accumulated as partnerships began to work.

Active leadership was also a critical input in determining the extent and pace of partnership development. Leadership occurred both at the NLS level and at the partner organization level. Individual personalities were a dimension of this good leadership. Related to this was the autonomy around decision making which happened as partnerships continued to spread. Establishing linkages with other organizations and deepening an understand-

ing of the issues connected to workplace literacy were also viewed as leadership strategies.

***Processes of Partnership Working.*** Knowledge and information sharing were of central importance to the building of partnerships. This was horizontal across all partners in the form of dialogue and consultation. Networking both formally and informally strengthened the partnerships. “Big” decisions, such as the allocation of funds were made inside the partnership meetings.

Differences of opinions were valued in the decision-making process with very little conflict and more of a consensus-building approach. In most cases, partnership cultures developed that were different than their individual organizational cultures. Individual project accountability for decisions and activities were entrusted to all partners. As well, reporting requirements to the funder were clear during the foundation building and development and demonstration years. In the period of program change, demonstrating accountability became more complex and this variation confused partners.

***Partnership Principles.*** The inclusion principle was a cornerstone for fostering partnerships. This principle allowed equal representation from the relevant stakeholder groups, resulting in partnerships that were more manageable in decision making and project management. As the tier system came into place, however, during the period of program change, principles of access and representation were called into question. Small community groups and representatives with local needs were distanced as priorities shifted to the call for large-scale projects from national organizations and consortia.

*Outcomes.* One key outcome has been the sharing of principles, knowledge and understanding about workplace literacy and essential skills training. Partners agreed that each member organization learned about the aims and philosophies of the other member organizations and now better appreciate their organizational ethos. Another outcome was the cumulative dialogue with partners around workplace change and literacy and how this moved into a wider training agenda. In addition, partners established criteria that focused on how the project work was progressing and what was proving difficult. This was empowering to the partnership members. Being able to take action in an autonomous way and to build on successes helped to further the development of the Business and Labour Partnership Program.

*Impacts.* As mentioned in the previous section, five groups were impacted by the work of the program: business organizations and employers; labour organizations and their local constituents; educational practitioners and experts; and program participants and the community at large. One of the impacts of the program was that there was greater synergy among stakeholder organizations. There was also more choice for organizations in terms of how to take action when the issue of literacy at work surfaced. Innovative tools, procedures and learning materials were all products from different partnerships. As well, there was a sense of coordination in the field which effected the development of literacy as a profession in itself.

### ***Negotiation Model of Program Planning***

Cervero and Wilson (1998, pp. 5–11) believe that program planning in adult education is a social activity where people construct programs by nego-

tiating interests in contexts marked by socially structured power relations. In their work, power is not viewed as a static resource in position but rather as a dynamic process in which agents and social structures interact. They also suggest that planners are operating on two levels as negotiators in the planning process. Substantial negotiations are around important features of the program while meta-negotiations are about the political relationships of who is included and excluded. There are three dimensions to their work: planning actions, power relations and relationship interests. When confronted with issues of power, planners use different behavioural patterns associated with negotiating organizational political processes. As the authors suggest, there are a number of ways that power is used to influence what happens in the planning process.

Drawing from the data there are both positive and negative influences of power as partnerships among the stakeholders developed. During the foundation building and development and demonstration years, power was used as a positive influence in shaping the felt needs of the partner organizations. Attention was given to ensure that all voices that needed to be heard were included in the initial formation of the partnership. Related to this was the importance of bringing alternative and divergent opinions to the planning table and having equal input into setting the agendas. Power was used as a positive influence in determining which local needs and which local populations were going to be served through the workplace project. Another example of positive influence was the manner in which partners set the norms for decisions that ensured a democratic process.

The period of program change saw a number of instances where the use of power had a negative

influence on partnership development. For example, differences of opinion between the partners and the funder around project directions were suppressed or not heard. A political agenda which was at odds with stakeholder interests and a government ethos of accountability were also seen as negative influences of power on the development and sustainability of partnerships. Pressure was also felt by partner organizations to accept a new way of seeking funding from the NLS Business and Labour Program. These were often viewed as out of step with the needs of the partners.

On another dimension, individual member negotiation skills were evident in most of the partnerships that were developed. On a meta-negotiation level, considerable time was spent by all partners creating a planning committee to represent various stakeholder interests. Coupled with this was the negotiation that took place to develop an overall purpose and goals statement or mission for the joint project which reflected each partner organization. At the substantive negotiation level, partners negotiated around project action plans, budgets and promotional strategies for the final deliverables.

### ***Implications for Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills: Research, Policy, and Practice***

In this final section of the article, the implications of the case study are highlighted. It begins with a look at how researchers could build on the empirical findings. This is followed by a discussion of implications for policy analysts, and finally how practitioners at the field level could view the results.

**Research.** Findings from this study have provided a rich descriptive perspective of the partnership process. It has also yielded some insights of the factors that could affect the success of partnerships in this area and also some of the potential problems that could arise and mitigate this success. For example, how important is trust and honesty in the process compared to other factors such as balance of power, building consensus on goals and visioning of the partnership? Another important implication for research is the question of common goals and shared vision of the partnership. How significant is this to successful partnerships in general? The research questions raised by the findings of this study are important as they address the relationships among these factors identified as important in affecting the success or potential failure of such partnerships. Secondly the findings have an overlay of an unfolding process. That is, partnerships evolve over time with unique consequences, actions and outcomes that could affect the overall success of the outcome. But how are these two research issues or questions related?

One fruitful conceptual approach to linking these factors to an unfolding process is to take a life-cycle perspective. Previous research and conceptual thinking in the organizational life-cycle management literature can be a useful way to frame the discussion on research implications from the findings of this study. The notion that organizations move through a process of growth and change over time is useful to frame the unfolding process of the partnership process as it moves from initial funding to project goals to implementation to final outcomes as described in this study.

This life-cycle perspective also indicates that each phase has its own crisis potential and needed resolution in order for the growth or change to



continue. This perspective supports the factors identified in the study as potentially contributing to the success of a partnership, or threatening its survival. The life-cycle perspective of the partnership process can therefore capture both the unfolding of the partnership in phases and also the key factors that could critically impinge on the further progress of the partnership in each phase such as trust, information sharing, goal consensus, power struggles and conflict. This life-cycle perspective can address all three phases, their salient factors, and initiates a theoretical understanding of why these factors are important in the partnership process.

**Policy.** This case study points to the strategic importance of multi-sector partnerships, for example with business, non-governmental organizations and labour unions in the design and implementation of government policy. Federal involvement in the NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program was based on a commitment to enhancing literacy to improve economic performance and employability. Capacity building, skills development in the workplace and commitment to the creation of new knowledge from the shop floor were the tactics used by the multi-sector partnerships to achieve the federal policy objectives.

The study also reveals that to realize program objectives, the government must explain its “big picture” policy interests. Success in the foundation building and development and demonstration years of the program was due, in part, to the fact that government took time to both research the implications of literacy for the economy and to invest in the dissemination of those results to the partners in order to increase knowledge and spur developments.

A third implication is the importance of policy steadfastness in long-term and slowly evolving fields like literacy and essential skills. This means that once policies are established they must be systematically adhered to in order to succeed. The evidence suggests this objective was accomplished in the foundation building and development and demonstration years and that over time this steadfastness built a productive coalition of partners committed to working in concert to advance the clearly stated literacy policy agenda of the government. During the period of program change the policy objective of achieving literacy gains in the workplace became secondary to the preoccupation with accountability.

**Practice.** In the absence of a Pan-Canadian literacy strategy and, consequently, of anything resembling a system for adult education, the NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program has been a “system enabler.” The NLS approach to partnership development has provided a much needed framework for the development and delivery of literacy programs in the workplace. This framework is at risk as the focus of the program shifts further and further away from social development objectives.

Perhaps one of the lead contributions of the NLS as a system enabler has been the focus on literacy practitioner training and development. Unlike colleagues in other fields of education such as school teachers, college instructors and university professors, literacy practitioners did not generally enjoy recognition as professionals. Aside from lending credibility to workplace-based programs, practitioner training helps to position literacy learning as a legitimate education goal for adults. While there is still room for volunteers, such as peer tutors, they too take part in a training program.

In essence, the NLS approach to partnership has enabled the development of the field of workplace literacy such as we know it today. And this development is comprehensive; it involves promotion and awareness, coordination and information sharing, professional development, research, sharing of best practice models and in turn the development of more partnerships.

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