

Briefing Paper:  
Literacy and the Canadian Workforce

Prepared for the Movement for Canadian Literacy

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## Acknowledgments

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# I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide 1) a synopsis of the major issues and trends with respect to the issue of literacy and the Canadian workforce, and 2) recommendations for government policy makers. The findings in this paper are based on three different sources of data:

- findings and recommendations from the National Summit on Literacy and Productivity held in October, 2000
- interviews with 10 leaders in the field of workplace literacy
- an extensive literature review on literacy and work

The Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) will use the perspectives and recommendations in this paper in national discussions on the development of social policy especially in light of the federal government's proposed skills initiative articulated in the Throne Speech on January 30, 2001.

For the purposes of this paper, literacy relates to both employed and unemployed adults. At the same time as we are focusing on the relation between literacy and employment, there is recognition that adults have multi-faceted goals with respect to literacy related to family, community and citizenship. The following definition of literacy serves as a starting point for thinking about literacy and the Canadian workforce:

*Literacy is the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community - to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential.* (1)

There is, however, the recognition that there are many literacies and ways of defining literacy.

## II. Research Methodology

This section describes the research methodology used to inform the findings and recommendations in this paper. The three sources of data that are described in this section inform the analysis in this paper. The voices of Summit working groups and interview participants appear alongside the summary of the findings in the form of anonymous quotes.

### A. National Summit on Literacy and Productivity

The National Summit on Literacy and Productivity Summit was organized by six national literacy organizations. These included ABC CANADA, Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français, Frontier College, Laubach Literacy of Canada, Movement for

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1 *Literacy, Economy and Society* (1996) p.14.

Canadian Literacy, the [National Adult Literacy Database](#), and La table des responsables de l'éducation des adultes et de la formation professionnelle des commissions scolaires du Québec. The Summit's purpose was to examine current literacy issues, and make recommendations for promoting a learning culture and a more literate Canada. Approximately 80 people from the adult literacy field, learner groups, labour, business, government, and the media attended from across Canada.

Summit participants worked in small groups to answer the question: "What must be done to develop an action plan to address productivity and adult literacy issues in Canada?" Eight working groups developed 3 to 5 strategic statements based on initial individual reflections and small group work within their working group.

The raw data from these working groups was analyzed for trends, issues and recommendations for this paper.

## B. Interviews with Stakeholders

Ten in-depth, confidential telephone interviews were conducted with key stakeholders from business, labour, education, government and learner advocates from across Canada.

People were chosen for their broad knowledge of adult literacy, in general, and workforce literacy in particular.

The design of the open-ended interview questions<sup>(2)</sup> was based broadly on the major trends that came out of the Summit working groups. Respondents received these interview questions ahead of time. The breakdown of the interview respondents was as follows:

- 3 government representatives
- 3 educators (2 workplace)
- 2 labour representatives
- 1 business representative
- 1 national learner advocate

## C. Literature Review

An extensive literature review<sup>(3)</sup> was conducted on workforce literacy. References for the literature review included resources from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.

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<sup>2</sup> Please see Appendix 1 for interview questions.

<sup>3</sup> Please see Appendix 2 for the literature review.

*Life long learning needs to be inclusive of everyone... especially those who have been left out and there have to be many ways to make it possible.*

**Interview respondent**

*In the opinion of the discussion group participants, the word "productivity" should be redefined and all language related to literacy rethought in more positive and appropriate terms before undertaking an action plan.*

**Summit Working Group**

*One of the things that is important is to reclaim citizenship rather than just workforce. The citizenship piece has been lost. I think the most important part is gaining skills to help us function as part of the world and maximizing our potential to effect change. Right now the emphasis is getting people off welfare and into the workforce.*

**Interview respondent**

*The issue of literacy has to be part of an overall framework for workforce development. This*

### III. Findings

The issue of literacy and work has received increased attention from policy makers over the last decade under the rubric of the changing workplace and globalization. Many workers will need to upgrade and retrain for new jobs or to get a job. Literacy development may be part of that learning. Workforce literacy refers to development opportunities for both employed and unemployed workers.

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) authored by Statistics Canada and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, has advanced the idea that literacy is a continuum rather than an all or nothing condition. According to the IALS, 48% of Canadians fall at the two lowest levels out of five. According to the IALS, people need to have Level 3 literacy skills to participate successfully in society. The IALS has greatly contributed to the increased attention and importance of literacy as an economic issue in a global society.

However, there is serious debate about what adults need and want literacy for. While business and government focus on literacy for labour force development and economic prosperity, program participants are interested in enhancing their personal well being and confidence, as well as their ability to deal with everyday practical considerations. There is also debate about the nature and meanings of literacy that underlie this growing interest.

In response to this growing importance over the past decade, workforce literacy programming has taken place across Canada in a variety of settings and ways. For example, it has been part of employment preparation, workplace education programs, community-based literacy programs, programs in the public education system, and union training programs. Research shows the

*hasn't happened yet. Employer commitment not there. There is a need for a policy and legislative framework for systems change.*

**Interview respondent**

benefits and impacts of workforce literacy development have been significant.

## A. Overall Trends and Issues: Fundamental Concerns

### 1. Literacy and Workforce Development is an Issue of Citizenship

*People have to see reasons for becoming more literate--economic, social and personal. There is a danger in just supporting workforce literacy. It's very incomplete and distorts what good literacy should be.*

**Interview respondent**

While literacy for workforce development is important, there is an overemphasis on literacy as an economic issue. Current government policy places too much emphasis on literacy as a labour force development issue. Approaches to workforce learning tend to be too limited. There is a need for balanced public policy that addresses the social and citizenship aspects of literacy development in addition to the economic aspects. Benchmarks and evaluation criteria must be developed in a social partnership and must measure the social aspects not just the economic ones.

### 2. Literacy and Workforce Development is a Complex Issue

*We have degraded the notion of citizenship. Literacy and education are part of what a civil society should be.*

**Interview respondent**

*There needs to be a less mechanistic definition of literacy. Moving from level A to level B is a school-based notion. Then this is the only thing that gets funded. What about learning in context and*

Current strategies to address literacy and the Canadian workforce are too simplistic. One size will *not* fit all. Neither will attempting to move people from one level to another by just offering literacy programs or evaluating success based on this framework. There needs to be a creative, multi-faceted, contextualized strategy to address literacy and the Canadian workforce that responds to local and regional needs. This strategy needs to have more to do with real needs of people than moving them from one level to another. There must be recognition that

*integrated literacy?*

**Interview  
respondent**

*IALS suggests that literacy is the cause of unemployment and low poverty when it is really a corollary of these issues.*

**Interview  
respondent**

*Workforce literacy affects everyone. Not just levels 1 and 2. Everyone has to develop skills and things keep changing. Everyone needs access and life long learning.*

**Interview  
respondent**

*There is uniqueness across regions but a need for a national strategy that could be tailored to suit regions.*

**Interview  
respondent**

there are multiple literacies. For example, reading a book for pleasure, understanding and using forms, writing a poem, or studying for an exam represent multiple literacies. In addition, there are multiple needs, and therefore, out of necessity, multiple solutions.

### **3. Literacy and Workforce Development is a Systemic Issue**

Currently there is too much emphasis on literacy as an individual problem. Strategies that address literacy and the Canadian workforce must also address other systemic variables that are at play such as race, gender, class, and region. They must also consider the nature of jobs in two ways.

First, workforce literacy development should lead to decent paying, quality jobs rather than perpetuate a cycle of poverty and low paid, precarious work. Second, Canadian workplaces should be encouraged to provide literacy-rich environments so people can use and develop their skills at work.

### **4. Literacy, Learning and Workforce Development is an Issue for Everyone**

There is a current labeling and stereotyping of people with low literacy skills who fall into Levels 1 or 2 on the IALs that is unproductive and undesirable. This creates an "us" and "them" mentality and is erroneous thinking in two ways. First, just because people do not read or write well does not mean they do not possess other valuable skills, abilities, and knowledge. Second, in today's fast-paced changing world, everyone will need to continually upgrade one's skills. An asset-based approach that builds on what people already know and do well provides the foundation for effective learning.

## B. Overall Trends and Issues: A Vision for the Future for Adult Literacy

*Create a holistic, national adult literacy and learning system which empowers individuals.*

### **Summit Working Group**

*The question can be central and be from a bigger place but answers and action have to be local.*

### **Interview respondent**

*Principles of accessibility and client centredness should be embedded in anything that government funds*

### **Interview respondent**

*Ensure access to, and quality of, learner services by requiring them to be voluntary, welcoming, safe, effective, and efficient; innovative; creative and flexible. Services should be a*

### **1. A Lifelong Learning Strategy and System**

The current adult learning system is piecemeal both in terms of its lack of connectedness and ongoing financial support. There is a need for a flexible adult learning strategy and system tailored to the diversity of regional and local needs across the country. It should be responsive to different demographics and diverse realities. The integration of systems and resources with respect to linking funding at all levels of government to a range of programming options is critical. A connected adult learning system should allow people to easily move from literacy development to the pursuit of other goals including further education, job search for employment, or training and credentials at work.

The federal government should play a key role in facilitating and financing this strategy and system but it must be developed from the ground up. Inclusive partnerships at federal, regional and local levels should drive the strategy.

### **2. Principles and Best Practices**

Common principles centre on a vision for literacy that includes a balanced focus on the whole person in their multiple roles as citizens and as members of families, communities, the workforce, unions, and that literacy is for *all* Canadians. Learners must be a central stakeholder in decision-making around their own learning. There is a need for inclusive, accessible, equitable, quality programming that is holistic, contextual and learner-centred, based on sound principles of adult education. Programs should also be voluntary, empowering, confidential, flexible, effective and available. Programming needs to be especially available to those who have been left out of learning in the

*bridge to other recognized learning;; adequately resourced; and learner- centred and holistic.*

### **Summit Working Group**

*Public awareness is really important. The public is not cognizant of the issues. It would be important to have a proper spin...positive and upbeat...that literacy has a positive impact on healthy communities, families and economy. I am so tired of the deficit model.*

### **Interview respondent**

*It would be good to get debate going among the players as to how a strategy could evolve. This hasn't really happened. The provinces need to be more fully engaged. All key players need to be at the table to develop a vision. What is government's role? What are the possibilities?*

past. Programming needs stable funding and adequate resource commitments. These resource commitments must include funding for the training and support of literacy practitioners and peer trainers. There should be more research on the benefits of literacy development for all stakeholders. Accountability and outcomes are important. These must be framed in a way that considers and respects all stakeholders. The principle of free access to Grade 12 as a right for all Canadians regardless of age, and opportunities for those least likely to have access to learning in the past should be entrenched.

### **3. Public Awareness**

Public awareness is an important part of the strategy in establishing the need for and value of literacy development and life long learning. Researching and articulating the results of such development and ensuring a resource commitment to a comprehensive strategy or system for literacy are also important. It is also important to develop a network of champions for literacy, and to illustrate and tailor the benefits and impacts of literacy to all Canadians, government, businesses, labour, education, the media, etc. Public awareness should focus on positive, respectful, success-based stories and results that are real to engage people at an emotional level.

Effective public awareness can dispel myths and prejudices that tend to view literacy as the flip side of illiteracy and its associations with skills deficits and shame. It must avoid using a deficit approach and oversimplifying a complex issue.

Literacy should be positioned as a key component of life long learning or workforce development where everyone has to adjust and keep on learning. Literacy needs to be positioned as a right rather than a problem to keep it on the agenda. Of course, public awareness can raise expectations so there must be an infrastructure and system to respond to what is marketed

**Interview respondent**

*Strengthen resource commitment to improve literacy. Reinvest in the public school system to support literacy; provide provincial and federal dollars; corporate support and increase labour advocacy for funding.*

**Summit Working Group**

*Who pays is a toughie. Don't know for sure. Employers have a lot to gain and governments too. Workforce literacy leads to an equal and just society.*

**Interview respondent**

*There is a tendency to want to measure how many people are back in the workforce or what the movement is from one level to another because it is 'nice and easy.' This kind of measurement is measuring just one aspect of literacy and does not account for other important*

through it.

#### **4. Partnerships**

There must be the involvement of an inclusive, complete range of stakeholders at national, provincial, regional, local and an organizational level. It is important to get buy-in from those stakeholders in a position to "move the agenda" or influence policy makers at any of these levels. Partners should include but not be not limited to all levels of government, business, labour, education, community groups, learners, volunteers, social services and the media. Themes around partnerships include accountability and the financial commitment of all partners, and coordination among all levels of government. There must be inter-ministerial partnerships at the level of the federal government. In addition, partnerships are important for sharing information, successes, resources, and developing collective efforts and systems.

#### **5. Resource Commitments**

There is a need to allocate and recognize resource commitments (financial, human and in-kind) both at the level of the individual involved in learning and at the level of the organizations (community, business, labour) offering the programs and services. Government needs to be the major force in putting up the dollars for a long-term strategy.

In order to develop a successful learning system, there must be a consistent and long-term source of increased funding from all levels of government, and more funding to the public school system to support literacy for both children and adults. Government can also contribute support and expertise. Financial supports like free daycare are ways to increase participation in learning programs.

impacts of learning.

**Interview Participant**

*What is the job they are getting? How will they be successful? What if they are flipping hamburgers or pumping gas and still struggling?"*

Tax incentives for individuals, unions, and communities will encourage participation in literacy development and learning. Collective bargaining is another way to ensure resource commitments.

## C. Specific Trends and Issues: Workforce Literacy

**Interview Participant**

*Policymakers need to work with business and labour to encourage them to support upgrading including literacy.*

**Interview respondent**

*I think in our experience the real success comes because it was a cooperative effort of labour and management. Any kind of workplace literacy program has to have this in place to take the threat away.*

### 1. Literacy Development for the Unemployed

Policy for employment-related literacy programming must ensure time and resources for participants to adequately develop their skills so they have more opportunity to get a well paid, quality jobs. Income support needs to be provided for people while they are on training. Programs should focus on broad-based portable skills and encourage self-directedness. Systemic issues like racism, classism, sexism and homophobia are intertwined with literacy issues and impact on people's employment opportunities. These other systemic barriers must be addressed through policy and program initiatives alongside literacy development.

### 2. More Employer Commitment to Workplace Literacy Needed

There needs to be more employer involvement and resource commitment to workforce development including literacy. A tax incentive for employers similar to the 1% training tax in Quebec could be implemented with modifications. The 1% law requires employers to spend 1% of payroll on their employees' training or contribute an equivalent amount to a province-wide training fund. A significant portion of the money that is funneled back to companies through grants needs to target basic education and be based on the principles of

equity and joint decision making. Criteria for receiving money needs to reflect these principles.

Recognition needs to be given to employers for who demonstrate exemplary practice their contributions.

### **3. Joint-Decision Making is Necessary**

Business and labour have different interests in workforce education. Joint labour-management decision making at the national, regional, local and organizational levels is essential.

Successful strategies and programming are developed on worker-centred principles and joint labour/worker and management decision making. Strategies must be tailored to the needs and interests of workers and management in each context.

## **IV. Recommendations**

These recommendations are based on the common thinking that came out of the Summit recommendations and interviews with key stakeholders.

### **A. An Adult Learning Vision and Strategy for Canada**

#### **1. The Opportunity:**

There is support for dialogue among stakeholders to develop a framework and a vision for an articulated and connected adult learning system of which literacy is an integral component. This framework and vision can then be used in decision-making at local and regional levels to address diverse needs.

#### **2. The Challenges:**

The challenges are varied. The first one is that a learning strategy will mean different things to people depending on their stakeholder group, their region of Canada, their experience, and a host of other variables. Another challenge is that a framework for a strategy must not demand a uniform application, but be useful at diverse local and regional levels of Canada. Furthermore, getting the right groups to the table, being inclusive and at the same time being effective is not an easy task. The vision needs to include a more balanced perspective of literacy as a citizenship, not just a labour force issue. It needs to view the issue of literacy and learning as a systemic social issue not an individual, deficit-based problem. Currently, there is an overemphasis on literacy as a labour force development issue and an individual problem.

### **3. Recommended Actions:**

The [National Literacy Secretariat](#) should take the lead in encouraging a process for dialogue to develop a vision and framework for an overall adult learning strategy that can help communities, regions, and provinces articulate their own strategies and action plans.

Other implicated federal government stakeholders must be at the table. The dialogue must 1) position literacy as part of a larger framework for workforce development and 2) emphasize literacy as an issue of citizenship. Papers like this one where some stakeholders have already been consulted can provide a basis for an initial conversation. Look internationally to see what has worked in other countries.

## **B. Principles and Good Practice**

### **1. The opportunity:**

People see principles and values as an important underpinning to a learning strategy or system. There are common principles and values across stakeholder groups in thinking about an adult learning strategy. These principles include a focus on access, a holistic approach, equity, respect, multiple solutions, complexity, inclusiveness, and accountability.

### **2. The Challenges:**

The same words have diverse meanings for people so it may be difficult to get agreement on what the principles mean. Moreover, it is often difficult to put articulated principles into practice. Depending on context, certain principles may take on greater or lesser importance.

### **3. Recommendation:**

The [National Literacy Secretariat](#) should take the lead on facilitating a conversation about principles and good practice as part of the development of an adult learning strategy or system. The principles and values (access, equity, complexity, a holistic approach, multiple solutions, inclusiveness and accountability) identified in this paper should be considered as a starting point in developing principled underpinnings to a vision for an adult learning strategy or system.

## **C. Public Awareness**

### **1. The Opportunity**

There is a consensus that public awareness is important and that it must be developed in a way that portrays adult and workforce learning in a positive way--something that everyone should be involved in and concerned about. It must be respectful, real, and touch people at an emotional level.

## **2. The Challenge:**

In the past, public awareness has often tended to use a simplistic, deficit-based approach to promoting adult literacy that isolated certain people as "disadvantaged" and illiterate. It is difficult to display the full complexity of the issue through public awareness. Moreover, people don't yet see it as a sacred value.

## **3. Recommendation:**

We need to develop a vision and guidelines for public awareness based on common principles and values as well as previous successes. The vision should debunk present myths and prejudices. How public awareness is carried out would form part of an overall vision for an adult learning strategy. The Movement for Canadian Literacy and the Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français may be well-positioned to facilitate the development of guidelines and the campaign itself through the direction of a multi-stakeholder group (business, labour, education, government, learner advocates). It would need to have adequate financial resources from the [National Literacy Secretariat](#).

## **D. Partnership**

### **1. The Opportunity:**

Increasingly the various stakeholders within literacy are learning to understand and value partnerships. They understand the complexity of making them work successfully.

There are many examples of effective partnerships involving multiple stakeholders at national, regional, provincial, local and organizational levels.

### **2. The Challenge:**

The idea of key stakeholders coming together to develop a vision for adult literacy is fraught with challenges. One challenge is that people do not share a common language for talking about the issue. Another is that the playing field is often not equal with some players able to exercise more power than others. There are questions about appropriate roles and responsibilities. There are concerns about the inclusiveness of partnerships-- are the right players at the table? Are there too many players? How do you get reluctant players to the table?

### **3. Recommendation:**

The idea of partnership should be seen as a process and open ended rather than static and monolithic. In thinking about partnership in this way, there can be opportunities for collaboration and partnership at many levels to create a vision for a learning strategy and to put it into action. There is not just one group or partnership, but many partnerships working together and intersecting in the interest of collaboration.

## E. Financial and Resource Commitments

### 1. The Opportunity

There are points of agreement around the idea that everyone contributes and everyone gains. There is also agreement around the need for consistent and long term government funding to make an adult learning strategy viable.

### 2. The Challenge:

The challenge is around lack of agreement on how much government should contribute - full or partial funding and for what?

What about tax dollars for incumbent workers? Another challenge is the lack of coordination among funded programs. Finally, what will encourage the private sector to invest in learning opportunities for its workforce?

### 3. Recommendation:

The determination of resource commitments for the recommendations in this section should be a part of the dialogue on an adult learning strategy facilitated by the [National Literacy Secretariat](#). Adequate resource commitments should be provided for the recommendations in this report. Part of the discussion should be focused on creative ways to encourage employer commitment to workforce development, i.e. a training tax.

## Appendix 1: Interview Questions

1. What must be done to develop an action plan to address adult literacy issues and the workforce in Canada? (to address the needs of the employed and unemployed)
2. What kind of system or strategy would you recommend? Why?
3. What are the values and principles behind your recommendations? Why are these important?
4. What best practice guidelines would you recommend in terms of adult literacy issues and the Canadian workforce?
5. What kind of partnerships figure into what you recommend?
6. How does the notion of public awareness fit into developing an action plan to address literacy issues and the Canadian workforce?

What are the resources commitments, financial and other, needed to make your vision a reality?  
Who is responsible?

## Appendix 2: Literature Review

# Trends in Literacy and the Workforce: An Examination of the Literature

## A. Literacy and the workforce: contested terrain

Although definitions of workforce literacy vary, the literature (e.g., Holland, Frank, & Cooke, 1998; Hull, 1997; Imel, 1999) illustrates that the conventional definition has expanded beyond the traditional three R's to include critical thinking, communication, teamwork, problem solving, and learning to learn. Furthermore, this interest and expanded definition are closely linked to worker productivity and global competitiveness in industrialized countries.

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) authored by Statistics Canada and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has advanced the idea that literacy is a continuum rather than an all or nothing condition. According to the IALS, 48% of Canadians fall at the two lowest levels out of five. According to the IALS, people need to have Level 3 literacy skills to participate successfully in society.

Few would deny the growing importance of literacy and work and its increased attention from policymakers over the last decade under the rubric of the changing workplace and globalization. Nor would they deny that many workers will need to upgrade or even retrain for new jobs and that literacy development may be part of that learning. Changing technology, more emphasis on paperwork due to workplace quality and safety programs, and an increased emphasis on teamwork reflect current realities that make ongoing learning necessary for *everyone*.

It is the entry level workers who receive the least amount of training even though current discussion around life long learning, learning organizations and learning cultures would suggest otherwise. The National Training Survey (Canadian Labour Market & Productivity Centre, 1991) indicated that only 2% of training Canadian companies provided was for literacy. Moreover, the 1994 Adult Education and Training Survey by Statistics Canada (Lowe, 2000) shows that workplace training structures and policies favour those already in good jobs.

The Survey found that only 27% of the working population had participated in job-related training. While only two in ten earning \$15,000 had job training, 5 in ten of those earning \$75,000 or more had access. Clearly those concentrated in occupations with the highest knowledge and skill requirements were the ones getting and taking training.

Long (2001) notes that there is serious debate about why adults need literacy skills. She says that while business and government focus on literacy for labour force development and economic prosperity, program participants are interested in enhancing their personal well being and confidence, as well their ability to deal with everyday practical considerations.

Over the past decade, workforce literacy programming has taken place across Canada in a variety of settings and ways to respond to this growing importance. For example, it has been part of employment preparation, labour adjustment, welfare to work, workplace education programs,

community-based literacy programs, programs in the public education system, and at union training centres. Despite its so-called importance in the public conversation, the statistics show that training for entry level workers in general, and workplace literacy, specifically, has been a hard sell to the private sector.

The debate or contested terrain is not so much whether literacy is fundamental to our social and economic well being. It is more about the models and concepts of literacy that underlie this interest. Making the underpinnings of these literacy concepts explicit is important in both understanding how they drive present policy and practice, but also in considering how one might challenge current policy directions and influence future ones.

## B. Two competing perspectives on literacy and work

### i. An individual skills perspective

The current discussion around literacy and work across industrialized countries (Castleton, 1999; Holland et al., 1998; Hull, 1997) paints a picture of workers as unable to keep up with the requirements of the changing workplace in the age of information and work reorganization. In this picture, workers are seen as responsible for economic losses and the inability to compete in a global marketplace. This picture of literacy and work squarely puts the onus for economic prosperity of nations and companies on workers' literacy skills.

Holland et al (1998) find that "there is now a widespread body of literature from industrialized nations to support the view that significant basic skills deficits exist in these countries, and that training and education will increase economic productivity" (p. 31). However, there are critics who refute this view in which workers are unfairly blamed for these economic woes and question education that meets the economic interests of a few. Blunt (2001) describes this perspective as one that "regards literacy as a component of human capital" (p.90).

Smith (1999) talks about the complexity of linking the issue of literacy and unemployment. She says that although literacy is one factor in determining a person's employability, it is not the only factor. She asserts that the jobs available to those with less education tend to be low paying, without benefits that keep people below the poverty line. She identifies issues of racism and discrimination as barriers to employment. She also sees that with recent welfare-to-work legislation, there is a push to move participants in literacy programs into entry-level employment as quickly as possible. Similarly, Imel (1998) talks about the increasing emphasis on workforce development in the U.S. where welfare reform has meant a push for quick job placement rather than an investment in literacy development. She illustrates how 20-hour per week work requirements and reductions in funding are having a negative impact on adult learners. Evidence demonstrates that this approach "merely expands the low-wage labour supply without attention to raising living standards" (p. 2).

Dassinger (1997) notes that adjustment services for displaced workers are also too narrowly prescribed. She finds that instead of being geared to services and programs that will help those laid off find meaningful work, adjustment services are in the interest of the company--what is cheapest for the company. She also shows that even in the labour adjustment situation the focus

is on the individual unit for, not only being responsible for the job loss, but also for finding the next job.

Within a skills framework, the solution is often skills-based; a functional, task-based approach, often referred to as functional context. This approach focuses on what workers need to be more competent at their present jobs or the skills they need to get a job. Policy decisions directing programs and services using this perspective address increasing workers' literacy skills by focusing on job or employment-related skills and tasks. However, critics see this solution as too simple. For example, Connon Unda and Clifford (1997) assert that, "Short term job-specific literacy programs do not develop the broader potential of workers to acquire portable skills and become self-directed learners. Such approaches not only cheat workers and fail to meet the needs of the changing workplace, they also cheat a society where public funding is involved" (p. 160).

In addition, writers like Castleton, Holland, and Hull join a growing number of others who are concerned that this view of literacy and work with its resulting policy decisions and practice applications has gone unchallenged and needs more critical review. This concern is reflected by Hull (1997) when she states, "I will argue that the popular discourse of workplace literacy tends to underestimate and devalue human potential and mis-characterize literacy as a curative for problems that literacy alone cannot solve" (p. 11). This point was echoed in a paper by Jurmo et al. (1994) in a brief submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. Jurmo and 26 colleagues argue that change at work comes not only from a focus on worker skills but by also introducing changes to work processes, equipment, compensation and other practices and supports.

## **ii. A socio-cultural perspective**

Current ethnographic research on literacy and work (Darrah, 1997; Gowen, 1992; and Hull, 1997) complicates notions of literacy and work that cites the worker as the problem unit. Ethnographic research examines perspectives on work and literacy through careful observation and in-depth analysis. It shows the need to deepen understandings of workforce literacy by looking beyond isolated skills and tasks. In a socio-cultural perspective, literacy is embedded in, not separate from its social and political context. This perspective examines communities of practice--social relations and power dynamics in order to understand local meanings of multiple literacies used and required at work.

Writers who favour this approach advocate for a more critical, participatory, worker/learner-centred approach to literacy and work. Blunt (2001) describes this approach to literacy as one of social development and effective citizenry; one that focuses on outcomes that relate to people as members of communities and families, not just workers or people seeking employment.

Through their ethnographic research, both Darrah (1997), and Hull (1997) illustrate the fallacy of viewing skills as a portable toolbox that can be taken across a backdrop (which remains constant) of workplaces. Darrah's research shows that although management blamed the failure of the team concept on poor worker skills, it was clear that lack of supervisor support and management inconsistency on the terms and rules for teams contributed to their downfall. The author makes a compelling argument for looking at how people accomplish work and use literacy as a community. Although workers at this site might have benefited from educational programs, it is

clear that no amount of worker "skills" would have made the team concept successful in this workplace.

### **iii. The effect of these perspectives on policy and practice**

Blunt (2000) and others argue against an either/ or situation with respect to skills and social practice. Blunt using Susan Lytle's four conceptual categories of literacy: skills, tasks, practices, and critical reflection, argues that these are not discrete categories and that a person's literate practices will draw from all of these applications in daily life.

Blunt (2001) makes several important points about these two perspectives with respect to policy and practice. First, he notes that although the skills perspective deals in quantifiable numbers and literacy levels, little can be gained from them because they don't tell us about local meanings. On the other hand, statistics are essential to making a case in the public policy domain where the social and human capital perspectives are competing for scarce resources. The socio-cultural perspective, which has its tradition in qualitative research, may be seen as informative by those who plan for and instruct in programs, but not by policy analysts and program evaluators who like numbers.

Most current adult literacy public policies are founded on the human capital perspective. However, both Blunt (2001), and Imel (1998) see the outcomes of this approach as short-term. They advocate for a broader, more holistic approach where people engage in multiple roles. They see this holistic view bringing long-term benefits to society.

They advocate for policy that does not favour one practice of literacy but acknowledges all legitimate practices. This point is echoed by Jurmo (1994) and colleagues in their recommendations to the U.S. Department of Education. For example, they advocate for workplace literacy programming that provides transferable skills and knowledge within a system of learning opportunities to meet diverse needs. Frank (1999) has developed a framework for thinking about "the workplace literacy student as a whole person". In her model, there are many reasons for workers to upgrade beyond their present job including get and do their next job, access training and education, cope with periods of unemployment and official bureaucracy, as well as take part in family, community, political and leisure activities.

Holland et al (1998) show in their international literature review the need not only for an alternative to a narrow, competency-based approach, but the need for participatory approaches that involve workers in all aspects of planning and designing programs.

## **C. Perspectives from the Field**

### **i. Different interests**

In order to understand principles of good practice in developing and delivering programs addressing literacy and the workforce, it is first important to understand the different interests of involved stakeholders.

Blunt (2001) describes these different interests where employers have productivity and customer service goals and labour's goals are for broader participation and enhanced workplace democracy. Wiebe (2001) notes that a business interest in workplace education is concerned with the bottom line and how training as part of continuous improvement contributes to that bottom line. On the other hand, in a labour view (Thorn, 2001) literacy is seen a social issue that considers all facets of a person's life in a democratic society. Issues of social justice and equity as pivotal to this view, and the development of a more highly skilled workforce is one of many positive outcomes of workplace literacy education.

In practice, experience shows (Folinsbee, 1995) that different interests can co-exist to develop initiatives that meet the needs of different stakeholders. Others (Dassinger, 1997; Despina, Maruca & Turner) show that successful programming can be developed when the different interests of stakeholders are respected and met in equal partnerships. Dassinger in her work with sector councils states that finding intersections where the interests of labour and management can lead to action is a process of continuous learning. In welfare to work programs (Imel, 1998; Smith, 1999) the government's interest is in getting people into any kind of job as quickly as possible. Smith finds that this system is viewed as punitive by program participants and presents hardships for them.

Long and Middleton (2001) note that of people participating in literacy programs, just 35% indicate job-related factors as motivators for participation. Instead people are more interested in general education, every day skill development and personal well being.

## **ii. Principles of good practice**

How can successful workforce literacy programs be developed that meet the needs of all stakeholders while respecting the confidentiality of participant results, their dignity, their knowledge and abilities, and personal goals? Over the last decade, principles and effective ways of planning and delivering programs have been explored and developed. Belfiore (1995) surveyed 35 documents related to principles of good practice in Canada and the U.S. Common threads through out the documents were a focus on partnership among workers, management and educators, confidentiality and a positive model of education.

Learner-centredness in which content is relevant to program participants' goals and learning styles was also cited as a key principle. Findings from a think tank on principles of good practice (MacLeod, 1995) were consistent with Belfiore's findings. Steel, Johnston, Folinsbee, and Belfiore (1997) identify three major principles based on their many years of experience as workplace educators.

These principles include using an asset-based approach that respects the knowledge and skills of those involved, attention to the whole person, and a participatory and inclusive process involving all interest groups. They outline several ways that these principles can be put into practice. The first is to use a planning process where workers are central to that process and where different interests are respected.

They advocate clear planning based on the agreement of all interest groups. This includes a workplace needs assessment that focuses on the broad needs for program planning to determine the issues; which can be addressed through program planning and which cannot. This analysis maps out a preliminary understanding of the culture of the workplace.

Worker-centred learning in context, delivery models appropriate to the situation, and program evaluation that considers the interests of all partners are other ways they suggest that these principles can be put into practice. Smith (1999) also emphasizes principles like collaborative decision making and learner-centredness in literacy programming for welfare to work programs.

### **iii. Impacts of workforce education**

The literature shows that literacy development can have solid impacts for all interest groups. Long (1997) conducted telephone interviews with 86 individuals (employee representatives and company representatives) in 53 workplaces across Canada. All but three of the 53 workplaces had programs that had been running at least a year. The study included all ten provinces and one territory reflecting a variety of industries. All respondents provided information that showed that workplace literacy programs are having a positive impact on Canadian workplaces. The findings show positive impacts for individuals in programs as well as employers.

In fact the study shows that " basic skills programs are having a dramatically positive impact on workplaces in Canada" (p. 2). The Conference Board of Canada (1997) shows similar findings. Cannon Unda and Clifford (1997) state that a solid foundation in literacy development has an impact not only a person's particular workplace but also in the economy in general. They sum it up with their assertion that there are pay offs for all interests groups in an approach that is broad, rather than narrow.

Smith (1999) refers to the vast amount of research has proved that education is crucial to employment. She says "The higher the education level, the better the chances at employment, and the higher the income level. Literacy programming is an important stepping stone to employment. It enhances both academic and personal growth, which in turn increases students' employability and reduces their dependency on welfare or other forms of social assistance."

## **D. Summary**

The literature highlights both the tensions and the contradictions with respect to literacy and the workforce as well as gaps between policy and practice. On one hand the dominant discussion in industrialized countries shows there is an attempt to simplify the issue of literacy and work by putting the onus on the individual worker for economic prosperity in the broadest sense.

On the other hand there are a growing number of critics who contest this view and its simplicity. They call for a more complex understanding of how literacy is embedded within a complex array of variables affecting work and prosperity, literacy being just one. Hand in hand with the former view is the notion that the "problem" can be fixed through narrow, short-term, skills and task-based programs that focus on getting an individual back to work or improving the individual's performance at work. On the other hand, critics of this approach argue for a broader, more

complex, more holistic approach to literacy development that will benefit all aspects of society in the longer term.

Despite the contested terrain of literacy and work, the literature also shows that there is a number of practitioners (from all stakeholder groups) working in the field who understand and follow principles of good practice and adult education that focus on the true meaning of partnership, understanding different interests, and learner-centred approaches that address the longer-term needs of the whole person in a democratic society. Furthermore, trends in the literature show the importance of education that incorporates these principles, and the benefits that can be gained for all interest groups of educational efforts that focus on literacy and work.

In conclusion, it is clear that policy is driving practice around literacy and work. Policy makers would benefit from a more integrated process for policy making that incorporates the more complex perspectives seen in the literature and the grounded experience of those who are involved in the work. A more integrated and complex understanding of literacy and work through discussions with policymakers, researchers and those working in the field would surely reflect the true meaning of praxis.

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