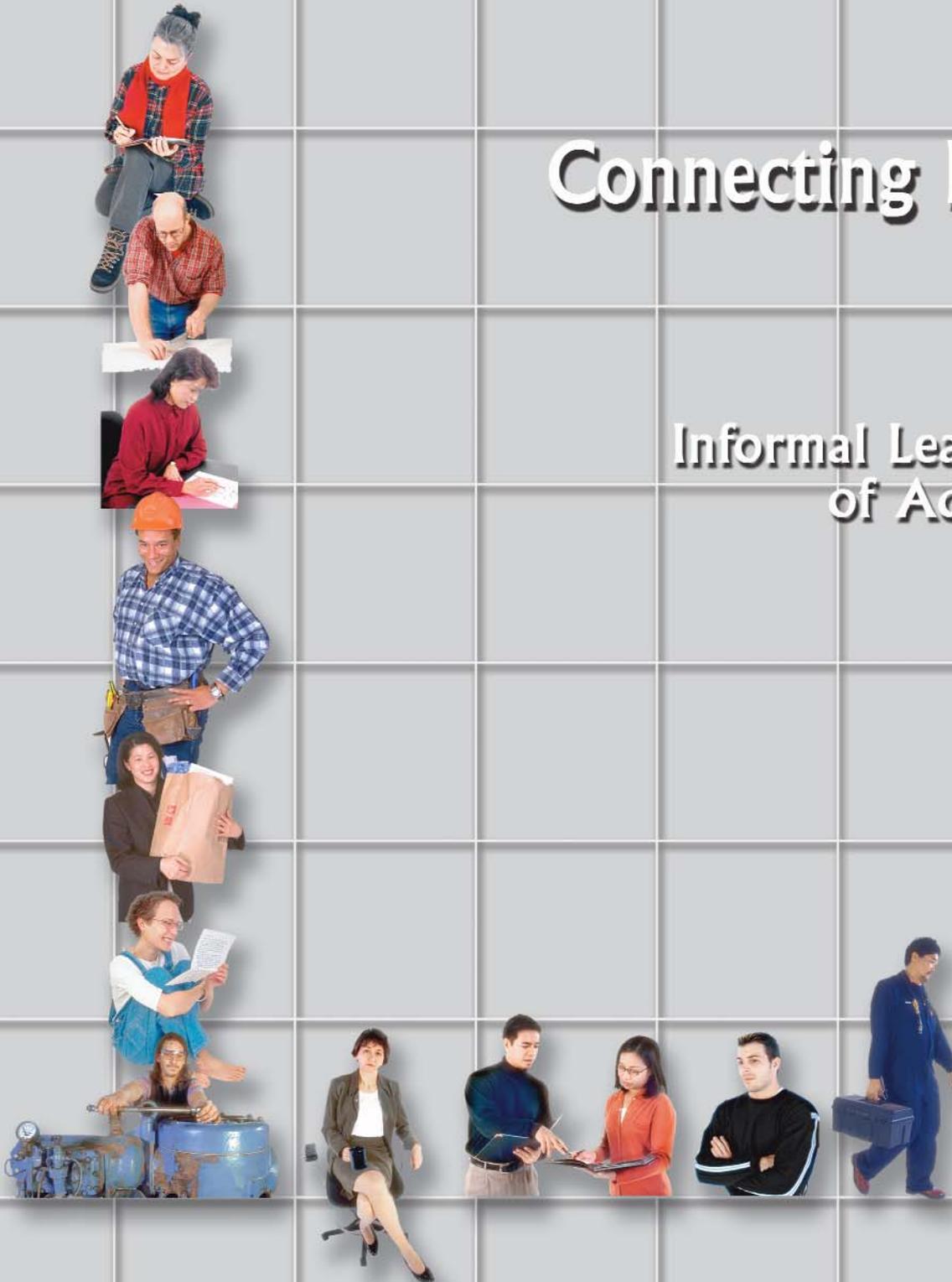# Connecting Research With Policy

Informal Learning and Media Perceptions of Adults With Low Literacy Skills

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Partnerships in Learning
Ottawa, Ontario Canada • December 2004

Connecting Research With Policy
Informal Learning and Media Perceptions of Adults With Low Literacy Skills

Introduction

It has been well established that far too many adults in this country have difficulty with basic literacy tasks and that this has serious negative impacts on not only our economy but our entire social fabric. Governments in Canada realized that investing in literacy education was needed, but despite all the investment, research and development, the problems of low literacy levels remain relatively persistent. This is not to say that literacy and basic education programs

International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) results

□ Levels 1 & 2   ▨ Level 3   ■ Levels 4 & 5

Note: Levels 1 & 2 are the lowest proficiency levels; 4 & 5 are the highest.

Source: OECD & HRDC, *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society*, 1997

are not helping people, they most certainly are. The problem is that many of the people with low literacy problems never make it into a literacy program.

Research has shown various patterns of non-participation in current models of basic education programming. These patterns are often related to program design and policy factors that unwittingly represent barriers to participation. It could be argued that these models are valid and effective in what they contain and account for, but it is what they don't contain and account for that gives rise to problems. These models often neglect to account for the socio-economic, cultural, cognitive, and emotive factors that adult literacy learners are facing, thereby creating barriers to participation.

Any good model or policy requires and permits revisions as new information comes to light. Recent research shows that it is now possible to view literacy learning through the lens of social and cultural relationships, especially in a way that recognizes how adults with low literacy engage in informal learning practices in their homes, communities, and workplaces. This may be key to increasing patterns of participation for those who have not been able to access literacy programming as well as for speeding the progress for those who are enrolled.

This document provides a summary of a National Literacy Secretariat funded research project entitled, "Informal Learning and Media Perceptions of Adults With Low Literacy Skills". This project investigated adult literacy learning from two perspectives: an insider view of the informal learning practices of adult literacy learners; and the point of view from the mainstream media.

This summary of the research findings will forego many of the usual academic conventions in order to provide its readers with an easy-to-read digest of the work. As such, it will outline the key findings of the research accompanied by a possible range of policy implications at the local, provincial, and federal level.
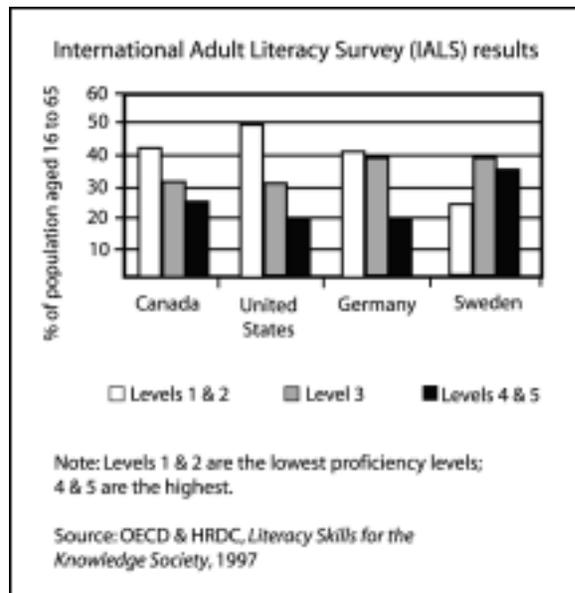
Informal Learning

Infomal learning is defined as any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge, or skills which occurs without the presence of an externally imposed curriculum of formal and non-formal institutional programs. It is possible to view informal learning in three main areas: self-directed, incidental and tacit learning.

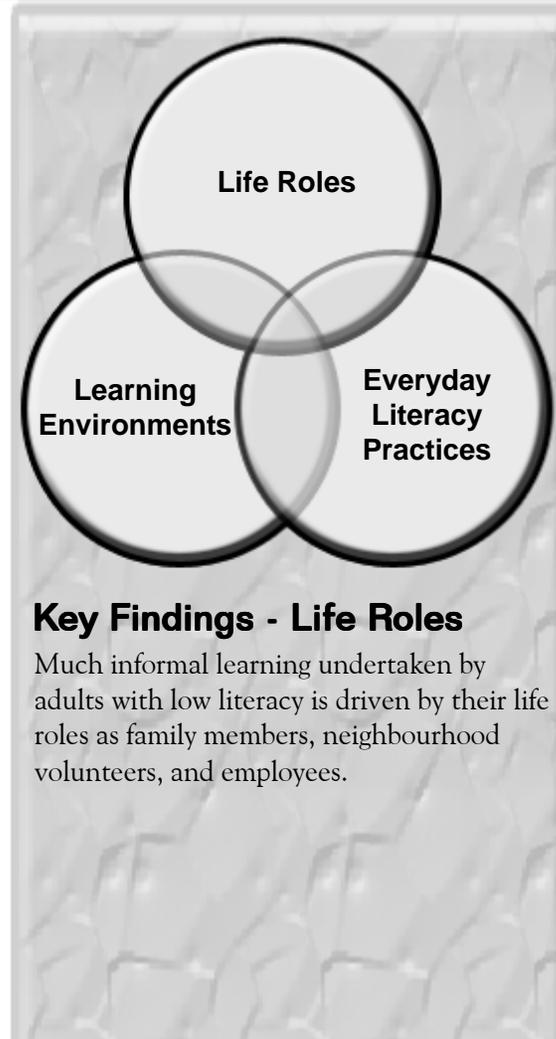# The Learning Lives of Adult with Low Literacy Skills

Summary

This part of the project took a path of investigation to better understand the learning lives of adults who often do not enroll in basic education programs. This summary reports on research involving 10 Canadian people who have been categorized as Level 1 and Level 2 according to the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). It talks about the types of informal learning that goes on in their lives and how they practice their literacy skills.

Three major themes emerged from the data which will be represented in the key findings:
1) *the learners' life role;*
2) *the situated learning environment;*
3) *everyday literacy practices across different milieus.*

Through these key findings, it is hoped that an understanding of the informal literacy practices of adults can be developed so that the learning content, program design, and accountability models can be better adapted to the needs of students in formal literacy provisions. This knowledge about the everyday learning acitivities of adults can aid in the design of more flexible programs and relevant content, thereby increasing opportunities for participation and progress.

Life Roles

Learning Environments

Everyday Literacy Practices

Key Findings - Life Roles

Much informal learning undertaken by adults with low literacy is driven by their life roles as family members, neighbourhood volunteers, and employees.

Policy Implications

Local: (Literacy Programs)
Literacy learning aimed at strengthening the quality of family life and improving neighbourhood living is just as important as preparing for employment.

Provincial: (Ministry of Community Development)
Learning and contributing through community service provides various opportunities for tacit and incidental types of learning that increases personal well-being for adults with little formal education.

Federal: (Social Development Canada)
Informal learning through volunteer roles provides adults with a strong sense of citizenship and civic engagement.

The Learning Lives of Adult with Low Literacy Skills

Key Findings -
Situated Learning Environments

Self-directed learning projects and shorter learning events occur frequently in the home, in the local neighbourhood, and in the organization structures at work.

Policy Implications

Local: (Literacy Programs)
Programs could involve literacy students in teaching or demonstrating to others the lessons that they have learned from their own informal learning acitivities.

Provincial: (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities)
Models for literacy provision ought to be designed in ways that better allow the informal learning practices, prior learning, and learning styles of adult literacy learners to be incorporated.

Federal: (Human Resources and Skills Development)
Build on the Prior Learning Assessment and Recongnition (PLAR) system for adult education that incorporates and recognizes informal types of adult literacy learning.

Key Findings -
Everyday Practice of
Literacy Skills

Adults with low literacy are highly motivated and engaged with information when working on self-directed learning projects. They will use a variety of skills and practices to gather the information they need to achieve their project goals.

Policy Implications

Local: (Literacy Programs)
Learning plans could include self-directed projects that employ a range of literacy skills including problem-solving, critical thinking, and computer use.

Provincial: (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities)
Support research and development that favours contextualized learning for adults with low literacy skills.

Federal: (Human Resources and Skills Development)
Recognize that there is an important interplay between literacy skills and essential skills through informal literacy practices.

# Media Analysis Report of Adult Literacy

Summary

The second theme of the project was intended to shed some light on the question – how does the media portray adult literacy learning? To do this, a media monitoring firm was used to gather news clips from national English dailies and community papers over a four month period. In addition, radio and television broadcast summaries were also collected and analyzed for the same period of time. In total, 133 news clips and 62 radio and TV broadcast summaries were collected, logged, and analyzed.

On one hand, the project had documented the rich learning lives of adults with low literacy skills and their creative ways of managing everyday life at home, in the community, and at work. The question was then raised as to whether this reality was actually reflected in the perceptions of the public. Overall it was not. However, as much as there was a disconnect between the reality and public perception, some departure points were evident. Three are highlighted here, with a possible range of policy implications:
1) *types of literacy providers;*
2) *literacy skills and jobs by service provider;*
3) *sources of adult literacy funding.*

Key Findings - Types of Literacy Providers

Volunteer-based programs are being seen as the main service provider.

Types of Literacy Providers

Bar chart "Types of Literacy Providers":
- Volunteer-Based: 59.6%
- Community College: 18.4%
- School Board: 14.7%
- Combinations: 7.3%
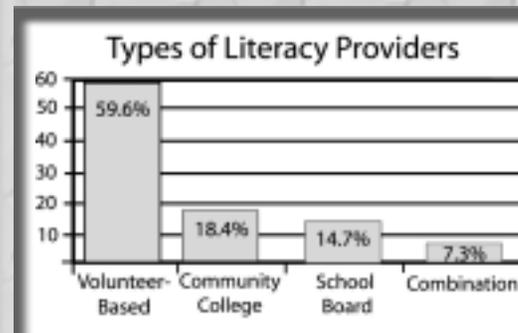
Policy Implications

Local: (Literacy Programs)
Volunteer roles provide adults with a sense of civic engagement. Train successful learners to become literacy tutors and other types of volunteers in the community.

Provincial: (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities)
Better equip the volunteer sector to take on their role in literacy provision.

Federal: (Social Development Canada)
Public perceptions that literacy solutions are mainly situated in the volunteer sector does not support the idea of many partners and many approaches.

Media Analysis Report of Adult Literacy

Key Findings -
Literacy Skills and
Jobs by Service Provider

Literacy skills are most often associated with the job-related skills needed for adults who want to enter or improve their position in the workforce. Volunteer-based programs are seen as the main service provider in this area.

Literacy as a job-related skill, by Service Provider
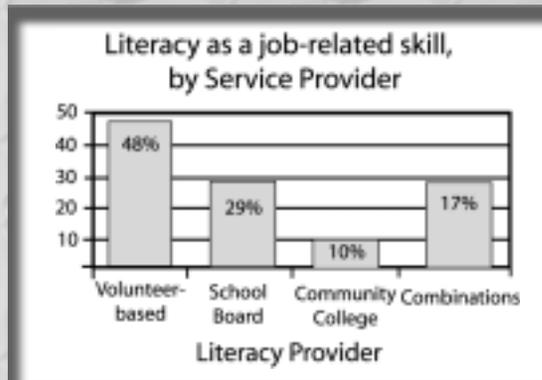
Policy Implications

Local: (Literacy Programs)
Even when job-related goals are identified, programs need the ability to accommodate learners' life roles, learning environments, and everyday literacy practices in order to ensure participation.

Provincial: (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities)
Informal learning practices, prior learning, and learning styles of adult literacy learners ought to be incorporated into workforce and workplace literacy initiatives.

Federal: (Human Resources and Skills Development/ Social Development Canada)
Social cultural views of literacy represent an encompassing way of capturing all the key skills necessary for people to function in life, including work-related learning.

Media Analysis Report of Adult Literacy

Key Findings - Sources of Literacy Funding

Literacy funding is perceived as coming from a variety and combination of sources.

Sources of Literacy Funding
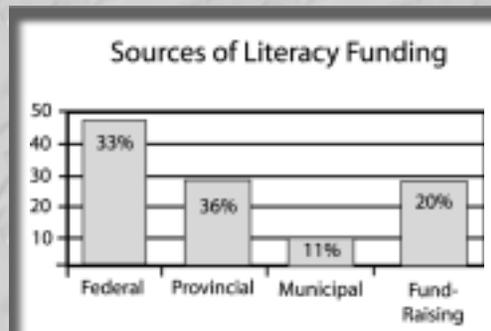
Policy Implications

Local: (Literacy Programs)
All types of literacy programs need stable, ongoing funding in order to focus on front-line delivery.

Provincial: (Ministry of Community Development/Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities)
Establish an interministerial agency for adult education that secures resources and makes them accessible to adult literacy providers and stakeholders.

Federal: (Human Resources and Skills Development/Social Development Canada)
Develop inter and intra governmental partnerships that support dealing with adult literacy issues across a range of policy areas including health, social welfare, crime prevention, and labour. This will encourage fundraising across citizen groups.

New Directions

With so many Canadians having difficulty understanding the information required to function effectively in our knowledge-based society, and so few participating in the programs that have been traditionally designed to meet this need, new approaches and policy revisions have never been more obvious. It is now evident that the adults who are not maintaining and improving the literacy skills they acquired through formal schooling are the very ones for which learning opportunities are the fewest. It is well documented that those with the highest levels of educational attainment have the most abundant opportunities for learning. It is also evident that those who lack even the most basic education and skills have the least access to the lifelong learning endeavours that so clearly enrich the lives of individuals, families, and communities. As the bar of achievement for most adult learners continues to rise, the prospects for those who are not served by traditional approaches continues to sink.

Literacy programs have been made available for adults with low literacy skills, but not always in a way that encourages them to participate. This research has contributed to an understanding of the lives of adult literacy learners that uncovers reasons as to why this is

the case. By aligning literacy programs with the life needs of the adults they are meant to serve, the opportunities for participation and progress increase significantly.

This research project has also identified how these adults are learning and the kinds of literacy practice that they engage with in their homes, their communities, and their workplaces. Although they may not rely on tradi-
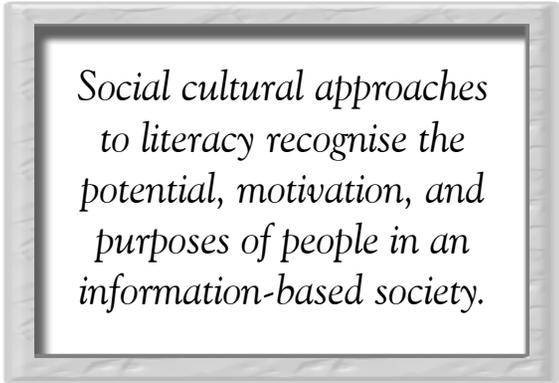
> *Social cultural approaches to literacy recognise the potential, motivation, and purposes of people in an information-based society.*

tional literacy methods in their life roles, they are engaged in everyday learning practices that need to be recognized and integrated into models for provision. Like most people, they are involved in self-directed learning projects such as domestic carpentry, family budgeting, and

affordable housing. When adult literacy policies align themselves with the life roles and already existent learning practices of potential students, a gateway to participation is created. Social cultural approaches to literacy recognise the potential, motivation, and purposes of people in an information based society.

Toward that adjustment, the second phase of the project provided insights into public views of literacy learning by analyzing how the media perceives adult literacy learning. This analysis underlines a certain disharmony between the public discource on adult literacy issues and front-line realities. The three key findings showed us that: volunteer-based providers are seen as the main service provider; literacy is most often seen as a job-related skill necessary for the workforce; and that literacy funding is seen as coming from a variety of sources.

There is an element of truth to these perceptions, but media portrayals often fail to account for, or gloss over, important distinctions of a complex issue like literacy. Perhaps by adjusting policies across three levels, we can bring both the perceptions and the realities into harmony about the learning lives of adults with low literacy skills.

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