

Summary of the Plenary Sessions – Séminaire international sur l'alphabétisation

Vision, **I**nnovation, and **P**articipation

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

1.0 Summary of the Plenary Sessions

Vision

Innovation

Participation

2.0 Aspirations and Proposals

List of Participants

SUMMARY OF THE PLENARY SESSIONS

The objectives of the Seminar and its three components—**V**ision, **I**nnovation, and **P**articipation—were as follows:

- review the current definition of illiteracy, one that no longer reflects the reality of industrialized countries where schooling is compulsory until at least 16 years of age
- reorganize strategies for the expression of educational demand, in particular in view of the results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey
- study opportunities for complementarity between government policies on literacy and adult education and the various policies related to fields such as health, culture and the environment
- discuss ideas and experiences from the field of literacy as they relate to health and population aging, the family and community environment and the mobilization of competencies
- consider opportunities for collaboration among the countries in attendance in the actions taken following the Seminar
- reflect on how industrialized countries may help meet the objectives of United Nations Literacy Decade

To achieve these objectives, two main questions were addressed by the participants:

- How do we define illiteracy, functional illiteracy, literacy and literacy skills in our respective areas of intervention?
- How do these definitions influence the major literacy programs (problem statement, target populations, orientations, priority actions, etc.)?

These questions were considered in more detail during six work sessions with the following themes:

- definition of the various concepts associated with literacy training (illiteracy, functional illiteracy, literacy, literacy skills)
- expression of educational demand in adult basic education
- preventing illiteracy within a perspective of lifelong learning
- illiteracy, health and population aging
- mobilization of reading and writing competencies
- government policies, orientations and priority actions associated with literacy, adult education and continuing education and training

Obviously, many more themes could have been explored, but with good reason, we focused on employment and work, francization and second-language acquisition, as well as social and occupational integration or re-integration.

The vision and statements formulated by participants at the end of the sessions, as well as the innovations and trends they exemplify, will undoubtedly strengthen participation in the fight against illiteracy. As we had hoped, by sharing information and examining the issues together we were able to identify innovative, collaborative, dynamic and promising courses of action.

This summary of the work accomplished at the Seminar is broken down into two parts: the major statements formulated during discussions and debate at the first six plenary sessions; and the aspirations and proposals expressed during the seventh and final plenary session.

1.0 SUMMARY OF THE PLENARY SESSIONS

The statements formulated at the end of each plenary session are grouped under the three components of the Seminar, **V**ision, **I**nnovation and **P**articipation.

Vision

The statements pertaining to **V**ision deal with concepts, definitions and the ideas that they evoke.

Clearly, consensus-seeking was not on the program; rather, there seemed to be some hesitation regarding the relevance or necessity of defining literacy using one of several available terms. Some participants distinguished between functional illiteracy, illiteracy, learning a second language or learning in a context of francization, with all these concepts implying varying literacy skill levels. These participants felt that it is important to label a problem before finding a solution, especially since, in a context of limited resources, political and economic decision-makers tend to ignore the individuals concerned who, moreover, are not in the habit of speaking out or organizing collective action.

Other participants, more concerned about the target population, were wary of the negative connotation of some of the concepts in question. Using literacy skill levels, which avoids the usual concepts, does not resolve this issue because reference is made to low literacy skills and the minimum performance (Level 3) required for coping with the demands of everyday life in today's society; a distinction is therefore made between those who have these skills and those who do not.

During the seventh plenary session, one participant identified this wariness by pointing out that two types of discourse are used, depending on whether decision-makers or the individuals and populations concerned are being addressed. In the first case, in order to better sensitize and persuade, the focus is on the magnitude of problems of functional illiteracy and illiteracy. In the other case, these individuals are valued by emphasizing their various skills (not just in relation to writing), to promote and support any learning process that could contribute to improving their situations.

In this connection, and in accordance with the objectives of United Nations Literacy Decade, it could prove useful to review UNESCO's definition (1962) of literacy as referred to in the first plenary session:

Literacy is "the possession by an individual of the essential knowledge and skills which enable him or her to engage in all those activities required for effective functioning¹ in his or her group and community."

Finally, the following statements were retained:

- **Establish, with and for the various stakeholders, a clear definition of literacy in order to:**
 - **convince the public of the importance of training and the politicians of the need to invest in this training**
 - **develop a desire and the opportunities for learning**

It may not be possible to reach a consensus, but it is essential, if we are to work together in our literacy efforts, that we at least express a vision to guide our actions.

This vision must be positive, be based on all the target populations' competencies—not just those related to writing—and fall within a perspective of lifelong learning.

Politicians must be convinced to invest not only money, but also their own efforts, in literacy. Perhaps in this way, we will be able not only to maintain current levels of funding but to increase them.

- **Recognize that the definition of concepts is influenced** by society's expectations, including economic ones, by adults' needs and by various stakeholders (researchers, educators, managers, etc.).

The concerns of each group influence its viewpoint and attitude toward what is commonly referred to as "literacy."

- **Position literacy within a continuum of competency acquisition**, keeping in mind that those who are the least literate will probably not fully engage in this continuum.

In other words, acquiring competencies throughout one's life should not be constrained by writing skills and by the linear course of regular education. While a majority of individuals and groups can commit to lifelong learning, progressing from elementary school to university, or going from Level 1 to subsequent skill levels, others develop skills orally and horizontally through "life-wide learning."

1. The underlining is ours. This element seems to clearly define that the field of literacy far from covers all human activities and the skills required to carry them out.

- **Transition from a culture of poverty to one of continuing education and training.**

Although concise, this statement may lead to confusion. It came up repeatedly during the Seminar that the fight against illiteracy will be won by first combating poverty, which is a factor of exclusion. This link is not automatic, and some attempts at literacy and continuing education and training may serve to increase exclusion. Thus, numerous participants emphasized the need to focus on the culture and experience of the most weakened populations, on the recognition of their practices and skills, whatever they may be, on their needs, and on the activities that are important to them.

- **Support the transition from oral cultures to written cultures by facilitating access.**

Once again, concision may lead to confusion. If the transition from oral to written culture may be inevitable for a number of reasons (work, migration, participation in universal culture), the emphasis placed on the transition must not result in the devaluation of oral culture. The cultures mentioned, such as Gypsy culture in the southern Mediterranean, Creole culture (for example, in Haiti), and Aboriginal culture in the Northwest Territories, constitute the core of an identity and sense of belonging that no exogenous promise of progress can replace. However, recognizing and valuing these cultures must not result in the creation of ghettos.

The challenge therefore seems to lie between fully recognizing oral cultures and the competencies they promote (ability to see, listen, use what one sees, etc.) and using these competencies to access a written culture, without rift and with pride in sharing one's knowledge.

- **Give meaning to training by recognizing individuals' competencies and focusing on their interests, challenges and needs.**

This statement is a confirmation of the two preceding statements; however, it addresses all the populations targeted by literacy, who often do not feel concerned by calls to acquire training or by the type of training on offer.

- **Make the prevention of illiteracy a development project based on existing competencies.**

This statement encompasses the desire expressed by participants throughout the Seminar to adopt and transmit a positive vision of literacy and illiteracy prevention. Thus, it was reiterated that we must focus on existing competencies, especially those of parents and the various community players able to encourage and support young people in a variety of projects that, among other things, promote lifelong learning.

- **Establish a connection between literacy and health in literacy policies and programs.**

A close link has been observed between low literacy and poverty, social exclusion and, in particular, health. If we believe that individuals must take charge of their health, then in a context of an aging population, it is essential that literacy initiatives pay specific and sustained attention to health matters, which predominate this population's concerns.

As part of an over-arching approach, health policies, programs and practices should also include a literacy component to maximize their effect.

- **Recognize the importance of structured forums for discussion, consensus and coordination.**

It is recognized that the fight against illiteracy or, in a more positive light, the widespread adoption of habits and practices related to lifelong learning, requires the mobilization of all sectors and players in society. This mobilization never occurs spontaneously, but rather, it comes about through structured forums for discussion, consensus and coordination, through which visions can be shared and jointly-decided intervention programs can be implemented.

These forums must be recognized and supported.

- **Use the think tanks of international organizations.**

International organizations are also forums for discussion, consensus and coordination. We must use them optimally and on occasion, defend their presence and support their initiatives.

- **Ensure coherent financing in a context of limited resources.**

From the start, it was emphasized that it is not enough to simply ask that current levels of funding be maintained; more funding must be obtained, given the extent of the needs and the strategic importance of continuing education and training, including literacy, in the development of individuals and societies.

However, choices must be made. For these choices to be as effective as possible, they must be coherent, and coherence begins with a clear vision of the reality, problems, challenges and issues at hand.

- **Ensure coherence and continuity in policies**

The vision or visions that should normally form the foundation for the coherence of policies should also guide how such policies are applied over time. Thus, by ensuring the sustainability and continuity of policies, we may be able to increase funding.

Innovation

The statements falling under **Innovation** concern literacy intervention strategies and practices. These statements do not cover all the proposals for innovation advanced during the Seminar, as we could have also included statements from the following chapter that deal with developing participation.

- **Put in place the means to elicit, promote and support the expression of educational demand** given that, as mentioned previously, the target population does not generally feel concerned by the training on offer.

The need to go beyond the usual training services in order to target the living environments, situations and concerns of the population was specifically emphasized. It was also noted that this type of operation is rarely funded because, among other reasons, it falls into an intervention “grey area.”

The significance of dispositional barriers to participation, which are essentially related to the learner’s basic attitude toward training, was also highlighted. These barriers are important because attitude is what allows a learner to overcome the material and organizational obstacles that are in some cases a determining factor.

- **Match actions to target populations** (the elderly, young adults, immigrants, etc.) **and the various environments** (family, work, community settings, etc.).

Since literacy initiatives should be based on individuals and their environments, situations, concerns, interests, experience and learning, then literacy services and activities should target specific populations.

- **Integrate and support a range of intervention approaches and settings.**

Because the target populations and their relationships to literacy and training are so varied, a range of intervention approaches and sites should be adopted.

- **Make health care personnel aware of the challenge of low literacy.**

As mentioned earlier, it is not enough to introduce health as a specific theme in literacy programs. To mobilize all the players in the health field, we must sensitize and train all health personnel who regularly deal with adults whose low literacy skills may cause them significant difficulties in managing their health.

- **Make information accessible**, identify target populations, work continuously with service recipients, adjust the language level, make the messages positive, experiment with tools and evaluate them before making them available, and diversify the methods of communication.

This statement was formulated during the session on the mobilization of reading and writing competencies. It was pointed out that a large amount of written information, especially on public services, could provide educational settings and situations suitable for the participation of persons with low literacy skills.

- **Promote the importance of intervention involving writing.**

Many mediators or liaisons exist who can help adults understand written messages. Through sensitization and support, these “caregivers” can become invaluable assets in developing literacy.

- **Increase and improve the professional development of educators with respect to the mobilization of competencies.**

Just as for the mediators, educators should be sensitized and equipped to use and create environments and situations suitable for carrying out everyday practices related to writing and reading.

Participation

The statements under **Participation** concern the organization of literacy, especially in terms of partnerships.

- **Come together to act more effectively:** bring together decision-makers, intervention environments, researchers, businesses, unions, etc. **Act as a network** rather than with a silo approach for resource savings and greater effectiveness.

It was repeated on numerous occasions during the Seminar that literacy in all its forms cannot be achieved without help from all the agents for change in various sectors of society, who must not only support initiatives, but also take an active part in providing services.

- **Coordinate and publicize the available resources.**

Before contemplating and organizing partnerships, it is of critical importance that available resources be coordinated, and that all means be taken to make them fully accessible.

- **Bring together the conditions for partnership.**

To be effective, an association of partners to design and implement literacy services and activities must, as a minimum:

- share information
- adopt a transparent approach
- listen to needs
- acknowledge diversity
- accept dissent
- recognize and respect the mission of others
- share resources

- **Take into account the realities expressed by learners when designing policies, programs and practices.**

This statement relates directly to how the expression of educational demand impacts the orientation of policies, programs and practices. It is not enough to simply assess demand when adjusting an offer of service. Those expressing the demand must be approached to ascertain their point of view, help them formulate their demand and, where applicable, support their

decision to receive training. The creation or adjustment of an adequate response will follow as part of a process that was educational right from the start.

- **Promote a local approach that respects the specific characteristics and dynamics of the various environments by relying on political leadership.**

Initiatives targeted at specific populations and based on their respective situations and contexts have a greater chance of success. Once again, these initiatives must stem from a determined political will that is able to recognize and support such initiatives.

- **Support, especially through professional development, the role of educators in relation to local reflection and action.**

Not only must professional development be promoted in terms of the local expertise that is developed through action/reflection, but the conditions required to put in place a partnership of practice, including time for discussion, must also be created.

- **Bring together health care personnel as well as personnel from all partner sectors in literacy to work on researching and implementing local solutions.**

The professional development referred to in the preceding statement could be part of a shared and ongoing research/action process focusing on the most effective means of promoting and supporting the most weakened individuals and populations in their own development.

- **Pursue and intensify research on the costs of illiteracy and on the benefits of literacy, especially in relation to health, to support the decisions made by the relevant authorities.**

2.0 ASPIRATIONS AND PROPOSALS

When participants were asked to suggest follow-ups to the Seminar, they formulated these aspirations and proposals:

- It is hoped that the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) will encourage universities to offer training and research programs in adult education. There were once a number of adult education departments in Québec, but they have disappeared, and with them, the expertise that will take time to rebuild again.
- It is requested that a meeting soon be held in Québec as a follow-up to the Seminar and in order to update the *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* and its action plan. In particular, we need to examine the possibility of developing a more extensive, promising partnership that is characterized by a culture of lifelong learning at all levels of society. We must think outside our "silo" mentality, and, in addition to provincial associations, must establish regional associations.
- It is requested that the MELS take the lead in bringing together other ministries and various stakeholders in adult education and continuing education and training in Québec. A detailed organizational chart should be established of "who does what" in the field so that an organic,

functional partnership may be set up. We could use France's experience as inspiration. The federal government should be invited to communicate its position on matters related to continuing education and training.

- It is strongly suggested that, from now on, learners be invited to participate in this type of meeting so that they can better understand the issues at hand. They should be considered the leading experts.
- It is requested that Québec participants and the rest of Canada take part in protest activities against the federal government cuts that directly impact the populations most in need of support and the organizations working with these populations locally. Members of parliament and senators must be made aware of and equipped to defend the cause of literacy and the fight against poverty and its many repercussions. The media and journalists should also be contacted and engaged in the cause.
- It is suggested that such discussions be pursued in Canada and that they be positioned within an international perspective.
- It is proposed that an international work group be created on the prevention of family illiteracy, and that its objectives include sharing and further exploration of initiatives and experiences in this area.
- It is proposed that a work group also be created to focus on the follow-ups required in terms of the Seminar's themes and lifelong learning. This work group could also involve other countries, and could be part of the preparatory work for CONFINTEA VI, to be held in 2009.