Chapter 1

Adult Illiteracy in Canada
Towards an Understanding of the Issue

Chapter Summary

This chapter establishes the theoretical framework for the presentation and analysis of the findings from the National Study of Access to Adult Basic Education Programs and Services in Canada. It discusses the official (and popularly accepted) definitions and measures of literacy which currently prevail in this country and assesses the relationship between these definitions and measures, and educational attainment data. It also examines critically the ways in which our understanding of adult illiteracy (as an individual and social issue) has been shaped by literacy campaigning activities over the past decade and, in particular, by media involvement in the campaign. The central argument of the chapter is that the solutions which we adopt to address a problem are a reflection of what we understand to be the nature of the problem; only by critically examining current perceptions of the nature of adult illiteracy can we assess existing public strategies to address the issue and begin to envision alternatives.

Introduction

It is now a decade since literacy was declared a national priority in the Parliament of Canada (Speech from the Throne, October 1, 1986). There can be little doubt that, in the intervening period, the average Canadian has become more aware of the issue of adult illiteracy than perhaps at any other time in this country’s history. Responding to a national opinion survey conducted in 1990, International Literacy Year, 84 percent of those polled identified illiteracy as a “very” serious or “somewhat” serious problem (ABC Canada, undated: 3-4). Three major, highly publicized nationwide surveys of adult literacy performance have been conducted since the 1986 declaration, theoretically adding a depth of understanding to popular perceptions of illiteracy (Southam, Inc., 1987; Statistics Canada, 1991; Statistics Canada, Human Resources Development Canada, and National Literacy Secretariat, 1996).

This chapter examines current perceptions of illiteracy and, in particular, the ways in which our understanding of illiteracy has been shaped over the past decade—as evidenced in the manner in which it is presented in the public arena (media, educators, policy makers) and in the policy and programming trends which have been developed in response to new awareness about the issue. The solutions which we adopt to deal with a problem are a direct expression of how we define that problem. For this reason, as a first step in assessing
literacy strategies or proposing alternate ones, it is essential that
we begin to reflect on whether the ways in which we have defined
(and redefined) illiteracy over the past decade have helped or hin-
dered us in finding solutions which substantially and meaningfully
address the issue.

**Literacy and Educational Attainment**

At the time of the 1986 declaration of literacy’s importance and
priority status in the Canadian Parliament, the only measure of
adult illiteracy available was the proxy measure of educational
attainment. The most recent Census data on educational attainment
available at that time, from the 1981 Census, showed just under
21 percent of out-of-school Canadians over the age of 15 with
less than grade 9 (Statistics Canada, Cat. No. 93-328).

It was recognized that educational attainment did not absolutely
correlate with the development of literacy skills. A certain propor-
tion of those with only elementary level education might be
expected to have acquired and retained basic literacy skills, for
example; of those, some would likely have developed relatively
advanced reading and writing abilities without the benefit of
further education. Conversely, among those with higher levels of
educational attainment, a certain proportion might have relatively
low levels of literacy skill development.

By and large, however, the correlation between educational
attainment and literacy skill development was recognized to be
distinctly positive. This was evidenced in the adoption of the proxy
measure by organizations such as the Canadian Association for
Adult Education, which considered at least an eighth grade educa-
tional attainment necessary for functional literacy and UNESCO,
which recommended educational attainment data to member states
as reliable indicators of literacy levels and also endorsed the eighth
grade: functional literacy equation (Thomas, 1983).

What was recognized as at least equally critical in the discussion
of adult illiteracy up to the early 1980s was the importance of
educational attainment—irrespective of literacy skill develop-
ment—as a condition of access to an increasing proportion of both
skills training programs and skilled jobs. From at least the mid-
1960s, the less educated sections of the Canadian adult population
had found itself barred from most avenues to a reasonable standard
of living, as what has been described as ‘credential inflation’ began
to penetrate all sectors of training and an increasing proportion of
employment (Berg, 1977; Finn, 1987). Canadians with less than
secondary school education and, increasingly, those with some
secondary level education but less than high school graduation—
many of whom would have had access to trades training and
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relatively skilled work in previous decades—found themselves excluded from both, as entry level requirements began a process of escalation which has continued unabated.

A recognition of educational attainment as the basis for entry to training and skilled work was clearly evident in the Canadian Parliament’s 1967 Adult Occupational Training Act, legislation which saw the federal government expand its training role to include educational upgrading programs to prepare undereducated adults to participate in vocational and technical training. For several years following the passage of the Act, the federally sponsored educational upgrading program, Basic Training for Skill Development (BTSD), as well as other programs directed at the undereducated, expanded in all areas of the country. In 1972-73, for example, more than 55,000 adults were enrolled in federally sponsored programmes for the undereducated (Thomas, 1983). A 1974-75 government review showed that between one-quarter and one-third of all Canada Manpower Training Programme annual funding was being spent on BTSD alone (ibid).

Although federal spending on BTSD and related programs began a steady decline from the mid-1970s, the issue of under-education did not go away. For example, the National Advisory Panel on Skill Development Leave, which reported to the Minister of Employment and Immigration in 1984, recommended an increased emphasis on basic and generic skills "since the National Training Act has caused too great a focus on job-specific skills, preventing many Canadians from obtaining vitally needed general upgrading” (1984:7). The report contained specific recommendations for a Ten Year Program to Combat Illiteracy in Canada—among them, new funding from general revenues to support Employment and Immigration Canada upgrading programs such as BTSD and a national Paid Education Leave programme which would provide time off for workers taking “literacy leave” (ibid:14-15).

From Southam to IALS: Redefining Literacy

In 1987, Southam, Inc. sponsored the first Canadian survey of adult literacy, using a literacy ‘test’ administered to a sample of adults from across the country in face-to-face interviews. The Southam survey—adapted from a 1985 U.S. survey of young adults, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—tested respondents' ability to perform reading tasks considered by the test designers to be essential to functioning in everyday life. The survey results were touted as the first “real statistics” on the state of literacy in Canada (Southam, Inc., undated:4).

Yet, though the popular report on the Southam survey, Broken Words, made much of the fact that the survey respondents’ literacy
ability and educational attainment frequently did not correlate, the results overall confirmed a direct statistical association between low educational attainment and what the report had defined as ‘functional illiteracy’. Nearly three-quarters of those with grade four attainment or less were assessed as functionally illiterate; also classified as functionally illiterate were just over half of respondents whose attainment fell between grades 5 and 8 and a quarter of those who had some secondary education but had not finished high school. In fact, the aggregate national figure of 24 percent functional illiteracy corresponded quite closely to the proxy measure of 21 percent functional illiteracy extrapolated from the 1981 Census school attainment data.

Since the Southam survey, Statistics Canada has conducted two general literacy surveys of the adult population—the first in 1989 and the second, as part of a series of international literacy surveys, in 1994. Like the Southam survey, Statistics Canada’s 1989 Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities (LSUDA) was modeled on the 1985 U.S. survey of young adults, NAEP. But, unlike the Southam survey which had established cutoff scores at which an individual could be considered either literate or (functionally) illiterate, the LSUDA more closely followed its U.S. prototype, designating points along what was termed a ‘literacy continuum’. Respondents were deemed to be at literacy level 1, 2, 3, or 4 based on their test scores, with 1 being the lowest level of literacy skill and 4 the highest. The popular interpretation of the LSUDA results did not differ markedly from interpretations of the Southam survey, however. LSUDA level 1 came to be identified with Southam’s ‘basic illiteracy’ category and level 2 with its ‘functional illiteracy’ category. Sixteen percent of the respondents tested at levels 1 and 2 combined, 8 percent less than Southam’s national average. However, in some interpretations, LSUDA level 3 scorers were also included in the estimates of functional illiteracy, adding an additional 22 percent for a total national average of 38 percent.

The most recent Statistics Canada literacy survey, the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), represents a further refinement of the original test design, its immediate U.S. model being the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey. It utilizes greater scoring complexity and incorporates a wider range of demographic profiling than the LSUDA survey did. It also incorporates a significant writing component for the first time. And, although the IALS uses the same ‘literacy continuum’ framework for scoring as the LSUDA used, it has adopted a new score grouping system. LSUDA’s levels 1 and 2 are combined in IALS level 1, for example; LSUDA level 3 is represented in the IALS as level 2; and LSUDA level 4 is represented as IALS levels 3, 4 and 5. Twenty-two percent of respondents nationally scored at the new IALS level 1 (LSUDA’s levels 1 and 2).
Both the LSUDA and the IALS reports have reiterated the "strong and positive relationship" between level of reading proficiency and level of schooling (Statistics Canada, 1991:9). The report on the LSUDA, for example, noted that only 12 percent of adult Canadians with less than secondary level education "have reading skills necessary to meet daily demands" and only 48 percent of those with some secondary education do (ibid). “Secondary school completion”, the report observes, “plays a key role in literacy skill development. Only 8% of Canadians who reported their highest level of schooling as high school completion have limited reading abilities (levels 1 and 2) ...” (ibid:22). The IALS report echoes the conclusion that “literacy is closely associated with educational attainment” (Statistics Canada, Human Resources Development Canada, and the National Literacy Secretariat, 1996:23). Approximately 90 percent of those with less than Grade 8 scored at IALS level 1 and approximately one-quarter of those with some secondary schooling scored at this level. The remaining three-quarters of that cohort, with a very few exceptions, scored at level 2 (ibid:24-25).

The international comparisons of the IALS data support the educational attainment/literacy proficiency correlation still further. In terms of prose literacy, for example, the correlation between educational attainment and literacy ability for respondents with less than secondary level schooling is virtually identical for Canada, Germany and the United States. In all three countries, 68-69 percent of those with less than secondary level schooling scored at level 1 (ibid:27). Sweden, the most ‘literate’ on all three literacy measures of the seven nations surveyed, also exhibits the highest levels of educational attainment.

**Educational Attainment: Assessing Canada’s Gains**

On the basis of school attainment alone, Canada has made significant progress over the past four decades. Improvements in access to schooling, particularly over the second half of the century, have resulted in an increasing proportion of each generation attaining secondary level education and high school graduation. Census data on school attainment reflect this increasing participation; but it should also be noted that Census data reflect the passing with each decade of a proportion of the generations which grew up before universally accessible schooling and the rate of change can, thus, be expected to slow with each Census. Over the period from 1951 to 1991, for example, the proportion of Canadian out-of-school adults over the age of 15 with less than grade 9 education fell from 51.9 percent to 14.3 percent (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 93-328:11). The rate of progress is remarkable and should not be underestimated; it is an achievement of which, as a nation, we can feel justly proud.
However, it must be borne in mind that the actual achievement of a grade 9 education is of considerably less value to the individual in 1991 than it was in 1951, or even 1971. There are two principal reasons for this. The first is the general rise in educational levels itself and the related phenomenon of ‘credential inflation’, discussed above. When more than half of the adult population had less than grade 9, the achievement of this level obviously ‘bought’ the individual more in terms of employment opportunities, wage bargaining power, and social status. When more than 85 percent of the population have achieved secondary education or higher, it is clear that the achievement of grade 9 is worth very much less.

It would appear that ‘credential inflation’ is unlikely to slow down in this country, certainly not while unemployment remains high and those with higher levels of education continue to add to their ‘educational capital’. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the trend has intensified since the mid-1980s as, on the one hand, the Canadian labour market has become tighter and, on the other hand, restricted public spending on education and training has resulted in shrinking capacity in the non-compulsory education and training sector.

The second factor which tempers the progress we have made in education since 1951 relates to the concurrent growth in the 1951-91 period of what might be termed ‘literate practices’. As a greater proportion of the population has attained higher levels of education and, with it, higher literacy skills, the collective use of such skills has increased. More and more of the processes of government bureaucracies, as well as business and social organizations, have come to rely on print for their communications. Not only must people read more in order to understand these communications; they must also frequently engage in writing/printing if they are to participate in many of the processes of everyday life as citizens, consumers, parents and workers. It is perhaps in this respect that the recent literacy surveys have made their most important contribution.

In providing some measure of the literacy skills actually required for full participation in Canadian society, surveys such as Southam’s and Statistics Canada’s LSUDA and IALS have contributed significantly to a rethinking of the education:functional literacy equation. If their assessment of the literacy requirements of modern-day Canada is in any measure correct, then it is clear that the attainment of anything less than secondary school completion, or its equivalent, correlates very highly with a diminished ability to cope with the literacy demands of life and work in our society. For, as has been noted, the International Adult Literacy Survey (1994) found that one quarter of those with some secondary level education (but less than completion) scored at the survey’s lowest level of proficiency. The remaining three-quarters scored at the second lowest
level of proficiency. According to the 1991 Census data, there are just over eight million Canadian adults—30 percent of the adult population—who have not completed secondary schooling or gained an equivalent qualification. Recent innovations in the documentation of literacy levels suggest that this 30 percent is the statistic we could legitimately compare with the 50 percent figure from 1951.

The Eclipsing of Undereducation as a Public Issue

For much of the last decade Canadians have been exposed to an unprecedented level of campaigning around the issue of illiteracy. ABC Canada’s national survey of public attitudes towards the issue demonstrated clear evidence of the success of that campaigning (ABC Canada, 1990). That more than four-fifths of those polled in 1990 thought illiteracy to be a serious issue, in spite of the continuing improvements in educational attainment over several decades, can undoubtedly be attributed to literacy campaigning activities, and particularly to the involvement of all branches of the popular media in the campaign.

However, although ABC’s 1990 survey revealed that an overwhelming majority of Canadians identified illiteracy as a problem, it also revealed a low level of understanding of the issue. Most of those polled identified illiteracy as a “personal or individual problem” rather than a “societal or economic issue”. And, while a combined total of 52 percent identified the chief problems arising from illiteracy as those relating to personal self-esteem and citizenship issues, only 28 percent identified training, employment and income issues as the most important impacts of illiteracy. About half of respondents identified illiterate individuals themselves as being chiefly “at fault” for their condition and a further 25 percent identified their parents as the group most at fault; a combined 69 percent identified the persons themselves and their parents as being most responsible for dealing with the problem.

Public opinion is, to a large extent, a product of the information which is made available and the manner in which that information is presented. A review of media accounts of the issue of illiteracy in the two to three year period immediately preceding ABC’s survey goes some way towards explaining the opinions expressed in that survey. For media presentations of illiteracy in that period focussed almost exclusively on the individual ‘illiterate’—isolated, fearful and ashamed.

The stereotypical ‘illiterate’ in many such presentations was not a person looking for an opportunity to upgrade his or her education—not even one who would avail of such an opportunity if it were presented; in many instances, the whole 16 or 24 or 37 percent (depending on which source was cited) were portrayed as needing, first and foremost, moral and emotional support to
boost their fragile self-esteem. Not only were educational programs not necessarily the answer; most illiterates, it was either implied or explicitly stated, were too ashamed of their ‘handicap’ to openly admit to it and join a program. For many of those not hindered by such shame, bad memories of their initial schooling were assumed to have made them forever averse to formal education.

It is not disputed that there is an element of truth in such presentations; in an overwhelmingly literate society, illiteracy is stigmatized—as, indeed, is undereducation, regardless of literacy ability. The problem, however, is that these presentations are stereotypes—that is, from a limited number of cases and examples, generalizations are made about an entire demographic category. And generalizations which suggest that undereducated or low literate adults are too ashamed to do anything about it, for example, are simply not borne out by the evidence of literacy campaigns themselves.

It has been demonstrated many times over the past two decades that, when the public is given to believe that educational assistance will be made available—whether through literacy and upgrading programs or individual tutoring—the response is overwhelming. The most famous examples include the experience of the British literacy campaign (1975-1977) where more than 45,000 adults sought help through a national telephone referral service. In the first two years of the campaign, well over 100,000 adults had sought help nationally and locally (Jones and Charnley, undated). Prior to the campaign, only around 5,000 adults had been receiving any kind of basic education provision (Haviland, 1973). A more recent highly publicized example is that of Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS), a literacy campaign effort launched by the American broadcasters PBS and ABC in 1986. During the first two weeks alone of the PLUS campaign, the national telephone literacy referral service took 35,000 calls. Response to the campaign overwhelmed local providers and, in both New York and Chicago, for example, programs had to close their doors to new students and tutors less than a month into the two-year campaign (Business Council for Effective Literacy, October 1986).

Many regions of Canada have experienced similar responses to public awareness campaigning around literacy. In the light of such experiences, it is remarkable that, in recent literacy campaigns, the issue of access to programs for undereducated adults has been relatively marginal. All three Canadian literacy surveys have shown that low adult literacy skills (in French or English) are primarily associated with first language status or low educational attainment, particularly as a function of access to education. Southam’s 1987 survey revealed, for example, that the considerable regional differentials in literacy skill reflected regional differences in the development of universal access to education; that illiteracy
was highest in rural areas where access to schooling (or to well supported schooling) was most limited; and that urban areas with high levels of immigration exhibited higher levels of low literacy skill than would otherwise be expected (Southam, Inc., 1987). These conclusions have been confirmed in the results of both Statistics Canada’s literacy surveys. In fact, if immigrants and those who had not completed secondary education, or its equivalent, were removed from the samples, adult “illiteracy” in Canada, as measured by the surveys, would virtually disappear. This is confirmed again by the results of the most recent of these surveys, IALS (1994), which found that fewer than 10 percent of high school graduates scored at Level I, while over 90 percent of those with less than grade 8 scored at that level. In fact, most secondary school graduates were found to be at IALS Level 3 which would have put them at the highest LSUDA literacy level, Level 4.

In spite of the clear demonstration of the education:literacy link, much of the media response to those surveys has focused on the 8 or 10 percent of high school graduates with low literacy skills (or, according to Southam, 17 percent), or Southam’s 8 percent of university graduates with literacy problems. The public debate has, in fact, frequently disregarded the greater portion of adults with low literacy skills. The general condition of literacy in Canada has become the issue; the issue of educational disparity and lack of access to adult education (the central issues in the 1970s) have all but disappeared. The problem is presented as a social problem, arising out of poor reading habits and irresponsible recreational practices—personal, family and community. Respondents in ABC Canada’s 1990 survey on attitudes towards illiteracy, for example, identified television as a chief cause of literacy problems.

The solution to the problem of illiteracy, in line with this analysis of the problem, has focused largely on the personal, family and community cultivation of better reading habits and practices. In this respect, recent literacy campaigns have resembled campaigns to encourage healthy eating or physical fitness such as, for example, the Participaction campaign. Southam’s Broken Words concluded with “Fifteen tips to increase literacy” or, in the words of the report, to “widen the magic circle of readers” (1987:81). Only two of the fifteen tips referred to adult literacy programs. None spoke to the need to ensure that adults have access to programs, although the report itself acknowledged that lack of funding for programs was a major problem. And, while it is not intended to diminish the value of a campaign which encourages parents to read to children, children to visit the library, or schools to become more attentive to the development of literacy skills, such solutions make little sense for the hundreds of thousands of adults whose low literacy skills make a self-help approach to improving literacy entirely unrealistic.
Addressing Adult Illiteracy: Future Directions

The results of the three Canadian literacy surveys suggest that, since literacy skill development is evidently the product of time spent (successfully) in educational programs, it is unlikely that any 'short cuts' for adults whose literacy skills are low will have significant or lasting results. While television or video, computers, volunteer tutoring, and informal literacy programs and activities may all have a role to play in a well developed adult literacy service, the core of that service must be a sound, well supported program—available to all adults who may need or desire it, and of sufficient breadth and duration to establish a solid foundation of critical literacy skills.

It also needs to be recognized that, for the majority of the eight million Canadian adults who have not achieved secondary school completion or an equivalent qualification, no amount of literacy skill development will materially improve their employment outlook unless it is accompanied by an improvement in educational qualifications. Indeed, though many of those excluded on the basis of low educational attainment may actually possess sufficient literacy skills to participate in training programs and perform well at a variety of jobs, in most cases there is no avenue for them to demonstrate their abilities. Unless—and until—steps are taken to regulate the use of inflated credentials by employers and training institutions, the only possibility for those with less than secondary school completion, or its equivalent, to get access to the majority of jobs and virtually all training is through the acquisition of the required qualifications. Any program which purports to meet their needs must, therefore, be able to either offer such qualifications or provide the foundational skills which will facilitate access to programs which can offer them.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the issue of adult illiteracy in Canada in the current period. The discussion has centred on the relationship between the way in which illiteracy has been defined, as a problem, and the solutions which have been advocated or instituted to deal with the problem.

It is argued here that, in the recent period of literacy campaigning in Canada, there has emerged a basic contradiction in the way in which adult illiteracy is perceived and acted upon. On the one hand, there has been the notion of illiteracy as a personal and social problem, amenable to solution primarily through a range of essentially individual and informal activities. A related notion has interpreted illiteracy as a set of discrete skill deficits which can be corrected through the application of a 'quick fix' skills program or minimal exposure to literacy tuition. This interpretation has given rise to a proliferation of policy and program short cuts which, it is
argued, create unrealistic expectations and frustrate adult students’ real educational and employment goals.

On the other hand, there has been the evidence presented by the general literacy surveys of the adult population—including two sponsored in part by the National Literacy Secretariat. These surveys have demonstrated the direct links between adult illiteracy or low literacy and low educational attainment. They have also demonstrated that both low literacy skills and low educational attainment are directly and negatively related to an individual’s employment prospects and income potential.

The evidence of the national surveys points clearly to the need for strategic public responses to the problem, responses which offer adults real opportunities to improve their literacy skills in ways which materially improve their employment qualifications.

If we are to address adult illiteracy, understood as the problem revealed by both the 1989 Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities and the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey, then it will be necessary first of all to document the extent to which current literacy strategies either promote educational ‘short cuts’ or informal solutions, on the one hand; or, on the other hand, the extent to which they advance realistic solutions to the problem of low literacy skills and offer genuine opportunities for adults to achieve their literacy and educational goals and, thus, to pursue their employment goals. The study on which this report is based represents a first attempt to begin that documentation in a comprehensive fashion.