

It's Time to Reboot Education for Adults with Low Literacy Skills

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Contents

Executive Summary ii

Introduction 1

The Scope of the Adult Literacy Challenge 1

The Literacy Deficit Will Not Go Away 3

Literacy Skills Are Central to Economic and Social Development 5

A Portrait of Low Literacy Canadians 6

The Importance of Community-Based Literacy Programs 8

Literacy Policy Aims Too Low 9

Workplace Literacy Is Also Falling Short 11

Targeting Literacy and Social Development Works 12

Concluding Comments 14

Notes 16

Tables and Boxes

Table 1: Canadians with Low Literacy Skills, by Age Group (2003) 2

Table 2: A Profile of English-Speaking Adults with Low Literacy Skills 7

Box 1: Testing Literacy Skills 3

Box 2: Early Childhood Education and Development 4

Box 2: Economic Impacts of Raising High School Completion for Aboriginal Canadians... 5

Box 4: Community Portals for Engaging Learners 8

Box 5: The Infrastructure Needed for Literacy Development 10

Box 6: How the United Kingdom Moved the Yardsticks 11

Box 7: Promising Practices for “Second Chance” Programs 13

Executive Summary

Canada is turning a blind eye to the low literacy skills of nine million working age adults. In doing so, it is putting future economic growth and social cohesion at serious risk.

Few adults are using the literacy programs now on offer and, if more were to apply, there would be no room to accommodate them. So the literacy “market” does not function well – both demand and supply are well below what is needed to keep the economy humming and give every adult a chance to live a good life.

The economic and social cost of this blindness will hit hard in the next decade when labour force growth will decelerate, selected labour shortages will stall economic growth, and growing inequality in incomes and employment will magnify social exclusion and promote an underclass.

One in three of Canadians aged 26 to 35 and over 40 percent of people aged 36 to 45 have low literacy skills. These people will form the core of the workforce for the next 20 to 40 years. It would be folly to ignore their literacy deficit.

Very few Canadians are illiterate, but there are far too many whose reading, writing and numeracy skills are not strong enough to deal with the daily challenges of life in a modern economy: Challenges such as keeping safe in the workplace, managing one’s own health, helping the children be successful in school, making appropriate financial decisions, and qualifying for a good, steady job.

The Canadian Council on Learning is projecting that the number of working age adults with low literacy skills will remain at about nine million in 2031, when they will account for roughly 40 percent of the working age population. Clearly, we are stuck in a rut – a low-productivity rut. Why?

- About 25 percent of the high school students graduating each year will not have adequate literacy skills.
- Another 10 percent of high school students, on average, will not graduate.
- The influx of immigrants who were educated in another language means there is a growing population with literacy limitations in English or French.
- Adults tend to lose their literacy skills if they are not being used regularly.

Among the six million English-speaking adults with low literacy skills, over half were born in Canada, more than half are under 45 years of age and 70 percent are employed. For the two million French-speaking adults with low skills, most are over 45 years of age and almost all were born in Canada. Most say that their reading skills are adequate for their current job.

In summary, the problem of low literacy skills is large and it is not going to disappear unless we reboot the learning system for adults with low literacy skills. And these people face serious personal barriers to learning – stigma, fear, inability to navigate the system and poverty.

It takes community programs to engage people on what matters to them, open their eyes to their own capacity to learn, help them gain the self-confidence they need to be able to consider a more

formal learning program. Informal learning activities organized locally in response to local needs are therefore the foundational infrastructure for a literacy system. When literacy and social services organizations work together, they can create a powerful lever for local economic and social development.

But the combination of tenuous financing and growing management complexity has driven many community organizations to the wall and led to the burnout of paid staff as well as volunteers. The end result is that the community networks that underpin informal learning have been eroded.

Clearly, Canadian society and the economy would be much better off if literacy skills were higher. But the people with low skills are trapped in low-wage, low-productivity jobs, and most do not have the leverage to overcome the barriers that block their way forward. In addition, most employers are not motivated to invest in their own workers' skills. And the community organizations that could create the portals to literacy development are themselves marginalized, when they should be regarded as the essential resources for engaging more learners.

The notion that community economic and social development will be the primary lever to strengthen the literacy system is becoming more widely recognized. In recent years, two provinces – Saskatchewan and British Columbia – have offered generous funding to communities that are prepared to build a coalition of local partners to strengthen literacy programming. But in both cases, the governments themselves undermined their own investments. They funded the planning but did not set aside funding for operations. The apparent assumption was that money will be generated by local fundraising – more book sales and golf tournaments. This is clearly a mistake.

Because the federal government defers to the provinces on adult literacy issues, the field is wide open to the provinces. But governments have each gone their own way on literacy programming. The sum total of their efforts was described by the OECD in 2006 as “inadequate.” In coming years, the federal government can reinforce provincial efforts by taking responsibility for financing provincial literacy programs for Aboriginals and immigrants, since both groups are in federal jurisdiction.

The good news is that many provinces are now in the process of enhancing their literacy programs. Alberta has just set an ambitious goal: to raise the share of Albertans with Level 3 skills or higher by 10 percentage points to 70 percent by 2020. The Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training also released a literacy plan in the fall of 2009; Manitoba and New Brunswick are working on a strategy; and Ontario is redesigning its curriculum.

Meanwhile, the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada is in the early stages of developing a Literacy Action Plan designed to foster more information-sharing across provinces and strengthen the knowledge base about what works.

Elements of a Literacy Strategy

The key components of a sustainable and seamless system for literacy development would include:

- An ambitious goal to raise the share of the population with Level 3 literacy skills over five to ten years.
- A robust curriculum framework, like the Stages Curriculum in Manitoba, which creates logical pathways for students moving from programs offered by community organizations, to school boards, colleges, workplaces and others.
- Recognition by all institutions of the credits awarded by others in the system within the curriculum framework.
- A policy framework which integrates literacy development with community economic and social development. This means that community-based organizations must become a valued and integral part of the provincial literacy effort.
- Creative targeting of programs to disadvantaged populations with unique needs – lone parents, immigrants, young drop-outs, offenders and so on.
- Financial and professional development systems which give community-based organizations the capacity to plan for the medium-term and to design programs which are responsive to local needs.
- A student identifier number which permits effective program management and continuing improvement in program design.

If we remain blind to Canada's literacy deficit, we will miss the opportunity to improve economic growth, productivity and the quality of life of millions of Canadians. Let's take off the blinders and get on with the job.

It's Time to Reboot Education for Adults With Low Literacy Skills

By Judith Maxwell

Introduction

Canada is turning a blind eye to the low literacy skills of nine million working age adults. In doing so, it is putting future economic growth and social cohesion at serious risk.

Most Canadians simply do not believe the numbers which tell us that 42 percent of the potential workforce cannot read well enough to deal with the challenges of daily life and to get a good job. They are blinded by four things:

- Our self image is that we all go to school and our students do well on international reading tests,
- Employers do not test for literacy and have no idea where their employees would score,
- We cannot see the costs of low literacy because the majority of people with low skills are hidden in poor urban neighbourhoods and in rural areas, and
- People with low literacy skills are good at hiding their handicap.

But the problem and the number have been around for a long time. The first international survey of adult literacy skills in 1994 reported that 41.4 percent of adults had low skills; by 2003, the second survey reported 41.9 percent; and the Canadian Council on Learning estimates that, based on current education trends, the number will still be 40 percent in 2031.¹

The current state of learning is that few adults are using the literacy programs now on offer and, if more were to apply, there would be no room to accommodate them. So the literacy “market” does not function well – both demand and supply are well below what is needed to keep the economy humming and give every adult a chance to live a good life.

The economic and social cost of this blindness will hit hard in the next decade when labour force growth will decelerate, selected labour shortages will stall economic growth, and growing inequality in incomes and employment will magnify social exclusion and promote an underclass.

In this paper, I will try to remove the blinders, by explaining the dimensions of the problem of low literacy skills, the barriers that prevent people from upgrading their skills, and the gaps in the adult education system. Overall, literacy policy in Canada is aiming too low. The paper then proposes a strategy to reboot adult education in the community and in the classroom.

The Scope of the Adult Literacy Challenge

The problem of low literacy skills exists for all age groups (see Table 1). The main concern, from the point of view of the economic and social health of the country is working age adults in their prime working years between 25 and 45. One in three of the most recent graduates aged 26

to 35 and over 40 percent of people aged 36 to 45 have low literacy skills. These people will form the core of the workforce for the next 20 to 40 years. It would be folly to ignore their literacy deficit.

Table 1: Canadians with Low Literacy Skills, by Age Group (2003)

| Age Group | Percent with Low Literacy |
|-------------|---------------------------|
| 16-25 | 37.8 |
| 26-35 | 33.5 |
| 36-45 | 41.4 |
| 46-55 | 43.7 |
| 56-65 | 57.8 |
| Total 16-65 | 42.0 |
| 66+ | 80.1 |

Source: HRSDC and Statistics Canada, 2003. *Building on our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-617-x/89-617-x2005001-eng.pdf>

A very small number of Canadians are truly illiterate, meaning that they cannot read. But there are millions whose reading, writing and numeracy skills are not strong enough to deal with the daily challenges of life in a modern economy: Challenges such as keeping safe in the workplace, managing one's own health, helping the children be successful in school, making appropriate financial decisions, and qualifying for a good, steady job.

Between 1994 and 2003, when international literacy surveys were done here in Canada, the number of adults of working age with low literacy skills increased by 1.2 million to 9 million.² Box 1 shows how statisticians test for literacy, using five levels of skill.

Box 1: Testing Literacy Skills

Here are some sample test questions from the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey. The questions are used to determine whether the reader can extract meaning from what he has read.

- **Level 1** – Look at a medicine label to determine the maximum number of days you should take this medicine.
- **Level 2** – Read an article on the impatiens plant and report what it says about the impact of cold temperatures.
- **Level 3** – Read an article about cotton diapers and list three reasons why the author prefers disposables.
- **Level 4/5** – Read a memo from the personnel department and then list two ways in which an employee support initiative within the company helps people who lose their jobs.

Source: Murray, T.S., Clermont, Y. and Binkley, M. (2005) *Measuring adult literacy and life skills: new frameworks for assessment* (Catalogue Number 89552-MIE, no. 13). Ottawa, Statistics Canada, pp. 105 to 111.

Obviously, people who raise their literacy skills from Level 2 to Level 3 will not be able fill all the labour shortages. They are not likely to become nurses, for example, because of the long training time. But they can be trained to take on the lower skill tasks which nurses are now required to do, leaving the nurse to focus on higher order tasks and to supervise the work of the assistant. This process of redefining positions can apply in many other professions and high skill jobs, making all workers more effective in their jobs. Why should we accept slower productivity growth when we have the option to lift so many people out of low-wage, low-productivity jobs?

The Literacy Deficit Will Not Go Away

The Canadian Council on Learning is projecting that the number of working age adults with low literacy skills will remain at about nine million in 2031.³ They will account for roughly 40 percent of the working age population. Clearly, we are stuck in a rut – a low-productivity rut. Why?

First, a high school certificate is supposed to approximate Level 3 literacy. But the quality of high school education varies from one school to another. About 20 percent of high school graduates in Alberta, British Columbia and Quebec do not meet the British Columbia reading standard for Grade 10, according to a Statistics Canada study.⁴ The other provinces do even worse: 25 percent of graduates fall short in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario, and about 30 percent in the Atlantic provinces. These students are unlikely to have Level 3 literacy by the time they graduate. Not surprisingly, 40 percent of the students in Literacy and Basic Skills programs in eastern Ontario have completed Grade 12, but do not have Grade 12 skills.⁵

Second, on average, about 10 percent of students do not complete high school. Those drop outs are concentrated in poor inner city neighbourhoods, in rural areas⁶ and on First Nation reserves.⁷ Young people in these locations face risk factors in the home, where parents are less able to support reading activities; in the community, where peer pressures and work opportunities

discourage interest in reading; and in the schools, which are not as well equipped to provide the necessary learning opportunities.

Third, the continuing influx of recent immigrants who were educated in another language means that there is a growing population whose capacity in English or French is below the level needed to cope with daily living needs. This helps to explain why a recent Statistics Canada study showed a large gap in earnings between immigrants and Canadian-born even though the immigrants are better educated, on average.

Finally, adults tend to lose their literacy skills over their life course if they are not using the skills they acquired in their youth. The average loss over a lifetime is about 20 percent. This means a person with Level 3 literacy in his 30s could drop to Level 1 by the time he reached his late 60s.⁸

In summary, the problem of low literacy skills is large and it is not going to disappear without a revolution in education. To prevent future literacy gaps, Canada needs two strategies – one to improve the learning environment for young children (see Box 2) and another to give adults a second chance to acquire basic skills.

Box 2: Early Childhood Education and Development

About 28 percent of Canadian children aged 6 are not ready to learn when they begin school. This is in large part due to Canada's lack of support for families in their parenting role. UNESCO⁹ has compared the policies of 25 industrialized countries and ranked Canada 24th out of the 25.

Parents and community programs can give young children the foundational skills through activities such as reading to children, telling stories, teaching letters, words, and numbers, teaching songs or music, doing arts and crafts and visiting a library.¹⁰ Experts measure readiness to learn by examining both social and cognitive skills. Social skills include the motivation, attention span, co-operation and discipline required to participate effectively in learning. Cognitive skills include the ability of the brain to process information – often measured as IQ.¹¹

If the child is neglected, if she is bullied at the playground, if parenting is ineffective, then she may not acquire early language skills or she may develop behavioural problems. These can become roadblocks to learning in later years. The Canadian Language and Learning Research Network recently released a National Strategy for Early Literacy,¹² designed to reduce the incidence of low literacy skills in future generations.

There are hundreds of inspiring stories of adults who overcame their literacy handicap, completed their high school equivalent and went on to higher education and a whole new life – as workers, parents and citizens.

The frustrating problem is that so few adults are engaged in learning activities that improve their literacy – less than ten percent of adults who could benefit from literacy training enrol in a given year and almost one-third drop out without completing their program.¹³ For many, the drop-out was triggered by job conflicts and family responsibilities, for others, though the problem is linked to program design – the programs simply do not meet learners' needs.

The low uptake on literacy programs means that the majority will continue to live in insecurity. If they work, they are in low-paid, low-productivity jobs. Low literacy skills are strongly correlated with poverty, dependence on government transfers, poor health, and incarceration. The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) maps of health literacy show high concentrations of people with low skills in the poorest neighbourhoods of cities and in the rural periphery. The maps are a vivid reminder that Canada is at risk of creating a permanent underclass.

For millions of Canadians, getting a chance to acquire higher literacy skills is the ticket to exit poverty and insecurity. Giving them a second chance generates a payback for individuals but it also accelerates growth in the economy and in productivity and improves governments' fiscal balance. (See Box 3). All this payback comes from helping a group which accounts for only 4 percent of the population. Imagine the payback if we could create this kind of turnaround for the 40 percent of adults with low literacy skills.

Box 3: Economic Impacts of Raising High School Completion for Aboriginal Canadians

In 2009, the Centre for the Study of Living Standards released projections of the impact of a future where Aboriginal Canadians raised rates of high school completion from 56 percent (in 2006) to 77 percent in 2026, and were able to find jobs commensurate with their skills. The projections showed that GDP would rise by 0.07 percent per year; and productivity would increase by 0.033 percent per year.¹⁴

This is not small change, particularly in an era when productivity growth is weakening. By 2026, the cumulative effect of these apparently small increments in GDP each year adds up to \$400 billion (in constant dollars). By 2026, GDP would be \$36 billion higher than in the status quo projection.

There is another bonus from helping a generation to improve their education outcomes. As Aboriginals earn better incomes and become more self-reliant, the improvement in social conditions will produce significant savings in government spending and higher government tax revenues. The overall improvement in government balance sheets in 2026 is projected to be \$12 billion and the cumulative effect over 25 years to be roughly \$115 billion.

Literacy Skills Are Central to Economic and Social Development

In addition to these national benefits, literacy is an essential tool for economic and social development at the community level. This link was first demonstrated by the Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia in the 1920s.

After World War I, Moses Coady, a Roman Catholic priest from Cape Breton Island spearheaded informal adult education through economic cooperation. The Movement enabled many Nova Scotians to cope during the dark years of the depression and attracted attention from all over the world.¹⁵ That experience provides important lessons today as Canada tries to reach out to the marginalized citizens in inner cities and the rural periphery.

The goal was to energize poor people to solve their own problems. Literacy was the hidden agenda. Moses Coady would speak at a town meeting: “You can get a good life,” he would say. “You’re poor enough to want it and smart enough to get it.”

He then encouraged the community to form a study club where members would meet to understand the factors that kept them poor. The idea was that those who could read would help those who could not. Many of them decided to form co-ops so they could sell their produce (fish, wood, or crops) and/or buy their inputs at a better price.

Once the co-op was formed, the adult education program at St. Francis Xavier would offer a six week program to teach the co-op leaders the basics of business, economics and bookkeeping.

It is important to note that Coady did not tell people to go back to school. Instead, he inspired them to attend study clubs where they could acquire literacy skills through a community effort to solve shared economic problems. Each village, up and down the coast of Nova Scotia, had to learn its own issues and consider its own options.

Today, we are blessed with a vast education system with sophisticated infrastructure. But an effective adult literacy education system has to meet the needs of a marginalized population facing serious personal barriers to attending school.¹⁶ It therefore has to offer an informal education option as well as the formal classroom education. It is the informal, community-driven system that can engage learners and get them ready for more formal instruction. The two systems are interdependent.

A Portrait of Low Literacy Canadians

Like the impoverished fishers and farmers who enrolled in Moses Coady's study clubs, people with low literacy skills need inspiration and a sense of shared community to become learners again.

Four personal barriers prevent people with low literacy skills from participating in further education: stigma, fear, inability to navigate the system and poverty.¹⁷

- **Stigma:** In a population that does its best to hide low literacy, the prospect of signing up for a course is unacceptable: "I wouldn't go there, people would know how stupid I am."
- **Fear:** Many wish to avoid the failure and humiliation they experienced as a child in the classroom.
- **Navigation:** Karen Myers and Patrice de Broucker concluded that provincial adult learning environments are extremely complex. Easy-to-navigate, plain language information about learning opportunities is hard to come by. Most websites are text heavy and hard to navigate. In many provinces, information is only available from individual service providers so the learner has no way to compare his options.¹⁸
- **Poverty:** People with low literacy skills earn low wages and work in insecure jobs with unpredictable shifts. Their employers are the least likely to invest in training or education. And government programs like Employment Insurance only provide training support for those who are unemployed. People with low literacy skills work hard to support their families, and cannot afford to take time off to learn. They often face challenges with transportation or child care, as well as financial barriers. Even if tuition fees are low, learners have to rely on family and friends to cover living costs.

The Canadian Council on Learning has identified four groups of Canadians with low literacy skills (see Table 2).

Table 2: A Profile of English-Speaking Adults with Low Literacy Skills

| | Group A | Group B | Group C | Group D |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Literacy Level | Level 1 – Low | Level 1 – High | Level 2 – Mid | Level 2 – High |
| Number | 620,000 | 480,000 | 1,900,000 | 3,200,000 |
| Origin | 60% immigrants | 82% immigrants | 73% Canadian born | 76% Canadian born |
| Employed | 60% | 80% | 64% | 66% |
| Income under \$25,000 a year | 48% | 74% | 64% | 57% |

Note: The profile of the two million French-speaking adults with low literacy skills differs in three ways. They were almost all born in Canada, the majority are over 45 years of age, and nearly half did not complete high school (compared to one-third for English-speaking people).

Source: Canadian Council on Learning, *Reading the Future*, June 2008.

Well over half of the people profiled in Table 2 were born and educated in Canada and more than half are under 45 years of age. By far the majority have Level 2 literacy skills, putting them within shooting distance of the Level 3 skills which would enable them to cope more effectively with the literacy requirements of modern life and potentially qualify for a better job.

In contrast, there are too many immigrants with deep literacy deficits, an indication that English as a Second Language training is not achieving the outcomes people need to flourish in the Canadian labour market. Most of these immigrants are over 45 years of age.

Roughly 30 percent of people depicted in Table 2 have children living at home. And about the same proportion are working for a small employer with less than 100 employees. Research shows that Canadian employers, especially small business, take little interest in investing in literacy skills, even though there is strong evidence that their businesses would benefit (Myers and de Broucker).

What is striking is that two-thirds of the people with low literacy skills report that their reading is adequate for their work. And the majority have a negative attitude toward computers. In short, they do not seem to be predisposed to take steps to improve their literacy skills. They need some kind of external stimulus and support to turn them into learners. This is the job of the informal learning system.

However, literacy will not be the issue that brings people through the door. Instead, it will be a means to achieve a personal goal – getting a better job, helping the kids with their homework,

being able to care for one's own health or a family member, learning how to use a computer, getting involved in community initiatives. Doris Gillis and Allan Quigley called this transformation "taking off the blindfold."¹⁹

The Importance of Community-Based Literacy Programs

There are natural portals for this kind of engagement in every community – through public libraries, churches, recreation centres, health clinics, and so on. Some examples are given in Box 4.

Box 4: Community Portals for Engaging Learners

- **Health Clinics:** If, for example, someone in the family has diabetes then the whole family needs to learn about nutrition and about how sugar and fat affect the human body. This requires reading skills.
- **Arts Programs:** If an adult likes to draw or paint or make music, then he will be keen to learn what has made other artists successful and to their techniques through reading and pictures.
- **Family Literacy:** If a parent comes to understand her role in meeting the learning needs of a pre-school child, she will develop a thirst for learning to stay ahead of her child when she starts school. This is why most provinces support Family Literacy programs.
- **Community Initiatives:** If there is high unemployment in the community, people will come to meetings to consider why unemployment is high, what the community can do to create more job opportunities, and what individuals can do to be part of the process. Engaging with others who want to see the community prosper can also create a desire to learn.
- **The Workplace:** If employers in the community offer literacy training as an integral part of their safety and on-the-job training, employees can be empowered to pursue more learning on their own.

For more specific examples of good learning experiences, see the personal stories in *Reading the Future*, published by the Canadian Council on Learning

<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/ReadingFuture/LiteracyReadingFutureReportE.PDF>

Informal learning activities organized locally in response to local needs are the foundational infrastructure for a literacy system – engaging people on what matters to them, opening their eyes to their own capacity to learn, helping them gain the self-confidence they need to be able to consider a more formal learning program.

The community networks that underpin informal learning have been eroded over the past 20 years.²⁰ Core funding has become the exception rather than the rule in many provinces. Governments and private philanthropists like to fund a project for a year, rather than support organizations for, say, five years and then evaluate their performance. So many organizations live hand to mouth, trying to boost revenues through fundraising (book sales and golf tournaments, for example). The result is that the program quality is not improving, volunteers are not well trained, and the managers are not equipped to recruit, screen, train, deploy and assess.

In summary, Canadian society and the economy would be better off if literacy skills were higher. But the people with low skills are trapped in low-wage, low-productivity jobs, and most do not

have the leverage to overcome the barriers that block their way forward. In addition, most employers are not motivated to invest in their own workers' skills. Meanwhile, the community organizations that could create the portals to literacy development are themselves marginalized, when they should be regarded as the essential resources for engaging more learners.

The notion that community economic and social development will be the primary lever to strengthen the literacy system is becoming more widely recognized. In recent years, two provinces – Saskatchewan and British Columbia – have offered generous funding to communities that were prepared to build a coalition of local partners to strengthen literacy programming. But in both cases, the governments undermined their own investments. They funded the planning but did not set aside funding for operations. The apparent assumption is that money will be generated by more book sales and golf tournaments.

In British Columbia, the government recently went one step further: It cut the grant which paid salaries for the 16 regional coordinators whose jobs were to facilitate, stabilize and sustain literacy work generated by community and district plans. Decisions like this drive community practitioners to despair.

The decision also demonstrates the damage that is being done to the community-based informal learning system when adult education policies do not recognize the essential role that the informal programs play in recruiting the students who go on to the formal classroom programs offered by colleges and school boards.

Literacy Policy Aims Too Low

Literacy has major consequences for the success of many public policies – economic development, health, social services, justice and corrections as well as labour and education policies. All these policy domains are shared by federal, provincial and local governments, but governments have each gone their own way on literacy programming. The sum total of their efforts was described by the OECD in 2006 as “inadequate.”²¹

That general assessment is still true, on average. But it is important to note that there are best practices in place in many provinces, including the smaller ones. There are therefore strengths to build on in Canada, if provinces and territories are willing to learn from each other. The challenge is to get all jurisdictions to aim high – to improve both quality and quantity of education for people with low literacy skills.

The federal government defers to the provinces on adult literacy issues because they have direct responsibility for education and training systems. The federal Office of Literacy and Essential Skills stipulates that it will not support the direct delivery of literacy training – limiting its role to providing employers, practitioners and trainers with the tools and supports they need to improve the literacy and essential skills of adults. This is disappointing, to say the least, since the federal government has direct responsibility for immigrant settlement and for Aboriginal education – two groups with lower than average literacy skills and higher than average rates of poverty and insecurity.

This leaves the field wide open to the provinces, which for the most part deliver a patchwork of programs aimed at communities, workplaces, school boards and colleges. Typically, responsibilities are divided across two or more ministries, such as education and labour.

The good news is that many provinces are now in the process of enhancing their literacy programs. Alberta and the Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training released literacy plans in the fall of 2009, Manitoba and New Brunswick are working on an adult literacy strategy, and Ontario is redesigning its curriculum.

The Council of Ministers of Education of Canada is in the early stages of developing a Literacy Action Plan designed to foster more information-sharing across provinces and strengthen the knowledge base about what works. This cross-fertilization of knowledge about what works has the potential to facilitate a leap forward in the quality of provincial literacy programming. Box 5 outlines the kind of infrastructure required.

Box 5: The Infrastructure Needed for Literacy Development

Every jurisdiction needs a set of generic tools for instruction, credit recognition and professional development. For example, they need

- Better assessment tools to be able to identify learners' needs and then match them with the best possible programs.
- A system for prior learning assessment and recognition to give learners credit for what they have learned from their work and life experiences.
- A curriculum framework to ensure learners' achievements will be recognized as they continue their studies.* For example, the framework should enable a score on the Canadian Language Benchmarks assessment (which has eight levels) to be linked to the five levels of the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey.
- Clear pathways from the community literacy programs where many learners take their first tentative steps before enrolling in classroom training offered by a school board, a community college or others so that credits earned from one source are fully recognized by other institutions.
- Professional development for tutors and teachers to ensure high quality learning experiences at all levels.
- A single student identifier number which permits effective program management and continuing improvement in program design.

It is still too early to say where the new focus on adult literacy training will lead. Provinces will need to upgrade quality, increase overall capacity and significantly improve their capacity to assess progress. Box 6 describes the national effort made in the United Kingdom in the 2000s.

* For example, Manitoba has developed a Stages Curriculum which integrates the requirements of the learning benchmarks that already exist for Essential Skills, Canadian Language Benchmarks, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey and the provincial language arts curriculum.

Box 6: How the United Kingdom Moved the Yardsticks

In the United Kingdom, the burden of low adult literacy skills was described by the Minister of Education as “a crime.” In 2001, the government pledged to reduce and eventually eliminate that burden, and launched a revolution in adult literacy training. It has built a national learning infrastructure for Skills for Life, (a new curriculum, standards for training, and professional qualifications for the teachers), invested heavily in awareness programs, and offered free training to the seven million working age adults who could not read or write at the level expected of an 11 year-old.²²

In October 2009, Ministers announced that “nearly six million adults across England have been helped to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, with over 2.8 million achieving a qualification” since 2001.²³ The initial budget allocation was significant: 1.5 billion pounds sterling (or about \$5 billion [Cdn]) for the first three years.

Source: Life Skills Improvement Services, Excellence Gateway.

<http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=256432>

Here in Canada, two provinces have set ambitious goals.

In 2004, British Columbia announced its objective to become “the most literate jurisdiction in North America.” A comprehensive strategy *ReadNow Action Plan* was launched in 2006, and improvements were recommended by the Auditor General in 2008. British Columbia was also a key champion for adult literacy at the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada and the Council of the Federation. With the recent cuts to regional coordination, however, the government’s commitment is now in question.

In its recent literacy framework report *Living Literacy*, Alberta plans to raise the share of Albertans with Level 3 literacy skills or higher to 70 percent by 2020, up 10 percentage points from the 60 percent reported in the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey. The framework is comprehensive – including early childhood learning and school outcomes as well as adult learning. However, it is not clear how much muscle Alberta will devote to achieving this goal in terms of money for infrastructure and for operations.

Workplace Literacy Is Also Falling Short

There is a strong business case for investing in workplace literacy, yet most are under-investing. Workplace training is neglected for three reasons. The first is that governments regard workplace training as an employer responsibility. The second is that workplace training is usually assigned to the labour ministry and is therefore separated from the literacy functions in the education ministry. The third is that all parties have ignored the integral links between the workplace, the community and the formal programs in schools and colleges.

Since nearly 70 percent of people with low literacy skills are employed, the workplace is a natural site for literacy training. Indeed, literacy training may be more effective when it is woven into the curriculum for safety and job-specific training, since literacy skills have a direct

impact on employees' capacity to manage safety risks, to absorb job-specific training, and to work more efficiently.

The fact that employers, especially those with small- and medium-sized businesses, do not sponsor literacy training suggests that governments must get involved if the workplace is to play its natural role in literacy development.

Nova Scotia and Manitoba are regarded as having effective workplace literacy programs. They have found that once employers have experience with literacy training, they become enthusiastic champions. But officials in a number of provinces admit that they are under-investing in the network of regional coordinators who work with employers.

Governments should also see employers as their best ally in ensuring that immigrants acquire the language and literacy skills they will need to be effective on the job and in achieving their full potential. Second language programs in English and French are offered to immigrants when they first arrive, but the evidence from literacy tests shows conclusively that the second language courses stop long before the immigrants are truly fluent in their new language. This is partly because the immigrants themselves are anxious to find a job and begin earning an income.

For long-term success, the federal government, which has first line responsibility for second language training, should ensure that each immigrant can continue his language development until he reaches at least Level 3 proficiency. This could be done by issuing vouchers to immigrants which can be used to encourage employers to support literacy development while they are working.

Targeting Literacy and Social Development Works

If the potential population for literacy training in Canada is nine million working age adults, there is no way that they can all be supported at once, so it is sensible to establish priorities. For example, governments could jointly decide that their priorities are recent immigrants, lone parents, high school drop-outs, or workplace situations. They can then design creative programs which directly address the personal barriers to literacy development – stigma, fear, poverty, or navigation – as well as the weaknesses in the program offerings. Box 7 outlines a number of creative ideas that target literacy as well as social development.

Box 7: Promising Practices for “Second Chance” Programs

Second Chance programs are designed to overcome the personal and community barriers that prevent people from enrolling in courses for literacy and other basic skills. They give people a second chance to become self-reliant.

- *Taking the learning to the neighbourhood.* There are powerful new ideas for community development in urban settings designed to break the cycle of poverty and despair in neighbourhoods afflicted with racism, drugs, gangs and violence.
 - The Urban and Inner-City Studies Program at the University of Winnipeg has established training programs for education assistants and early childhood educators and is planning to offer training for recreation and sports leaders in the North End of Winnipeg. The goal is to bridge the “cultural/class/experiential divide between Aboriginal students and their families on the one hand, and the school system on the other.”²⁴
 - In Toronto, Pathways to Education in Regent Park, where the majority of residents are recent immigrants, has succeeded in reducing drop-out rates from 56 percent to about 10 percent, while reducing violent crime and teenage pregnancy rates significantly. Pathways enters a contract with Grade 9 students and their parents, offering tutoring, mentoring and other supports throughout high school plus a bursary to help cover post-secondary tuition.²⁵
- *First Steps for teen mothers.* The Saint John Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative launched First Steps in 2002 to address the high rate of teen pregnancy in the city by partnering with a community organization. The program provides a supportive transitional facility for homeless pregnant youth and their infants; supports the mothers to complete their high school education and build life skills so they can reach self-sufficiency and a better quality of life. To date, 178 women have been helped.
- *Refurbish skills for the chronically unemployed.* The Community Employment Innovation Project in Cape Breton was designed to help people living on Income Assistance (welfare) and Employment Insurance through job opportunities in the non-profit sector. Two hundred and fifty organizations in five communities agreed to generate meaningful work in 1,300 positions over three years. The participants were paid a community wage. When the project ended, many of the participants found higher skill jobs than they otherwise would have.²⁶
- *Take the training into prisons.* The average education level of newly admitted offenders serving two years or more is Grade 7.²⁷ Yet governments have cutback on the education opportunities for offenders in prison. Higher skills will be essential to reduce the risk of re-offending. Governments could motivate offenders to learn by offering a tuition bursary to those that commit to completing high school while they are inside.
- *Sponsor workplace training co-ops.* Small businesses do not have the capacity to organize training for job skills or literacy skills on their own. Why not sponsor workplace training co-ops which integrate literacy into job-related safety and basic skills? Employers would pay wages while the employees are on training.

Combining literacy and social development requires partnerships between the literacy movement and community-based social agencies and employers to transform the lives of people who are trapped in low income.

Concluding Comments

There is no question that the Canadian economy would be better off if literacy skills were higher. But Canadians do not see the direct links between low literacy and slow productivity growth. Nor do they acknowledge the negative impacts on families and communities when people with low skills are trapped in low-wage, low-productivity jobs. This blindness is costing us and future generations a high price.

Much is made these days of the importance of post-secondary education and significant investments have been made to encourage more students to attend college or university programs. Parallel investments are needed to help the prime age workers in this country (aged 25 to 45) with low literacy skills. Almost 40 percent of these younger workers have low skills and they have 20 to 40 years of work ahead of them. By ignoring their needs, Canada is ignoring an important lever for economic and social development.

Myers and de Broucker note that there is now a small but comprehensive body of research which demonstrates that a) “less educated adults are no less likely than their more educated counterparts to benefit from learning;”²⁸ b) that adult learning has the potential to significantly improve the economic well-being of those with relatively low educational attainment; and c) that countries that do upgrade the skills of the least educated members of the workforce will experience significant gains in labour productivity and economic growth.

There are three big obstacles blocking progress on education for people with low literacy.

- Most people with low literacy skills do not have the leverage to overcome the barriers that block their way forward.
- Most employers are not motivated to invest in their own workers’ skills.
- The community organizations that could create the portals to literacy development lack the capacity for assessment, professional development and updated program design because they are marginalized, when they should be regarded as the essential resources for engaging more learners.

All of these obstacles must be overcome, if Canada is to achieve its potential in coming decades when labour will be in short supply and communities will be looking for new engines for prosperity.

The good news is that the provinces are beginning to address this issue. It is still too early to say where the new focus on adult literacy training will lead. The federal government should reinforce their efforts by taking responsibility for the literacy needs of Aboriginal Canadians and newcomers.

Provinces will need to upgrade quality, increase overall capacity and significantly improve their ability to assess progress. The key components of a sustainable and seamless system for literacy development would include:

- An ambitious goal to raise the share of the population with Level 3 literacy skills over five to ten years.

- A robust curriculum framework, like the Stages Curriculum in Manitoba, which creates pathways for students moving from programs offered by community organizations, to school boards, colleges, workplaces and others.
- Recognition by all institutions of the credits awarded by others in the system within the curriculum framework.
- A policy framework which integrates literacy development with community economic and social development. This means that community-based organizations must become a valued and integral part of the provincial literacy effort.
- Creative targeting of programs to disadvantaged populations with unique needs – lone parents, immigrants, young drop outs, offenders and so on.
- Financial and professional development systems which give community-based organizations the capacity to plan for the medium-term and to design programs which are responsive to local needs.
- A student identifier number (similar to the ones used in the K to 12 system) which permits effective program management and continuing improvement in program design.

If we remain blind to Canada’s literacy deficit, we will miss the opportunity to improve economic growth, productivity and the quality of life of millions of Canadians. It is quite simply not good enough to serve less than 10 percent of the population with literacy needs. We must set higher goals for adult education and then invest resources in the community and education institutions which can engage learners and give them a rich array of opportunities to learn.

In its Skills for Life initiative, the United Kingdom managed to move one million adults up one level of literacy in its first five years. Here in Canada, it’s time to take off the blindfold and reboot education for adults with low literacy skills. Literacy must be one pillar of any dedicated effort to foster economic recovery and renewal in the next five years.

Moses Coady was right when he told the fishers and farmers of Nova Scotia: “You can get a good life. You’re poor enough to want it and smart enough to get it.” They just need our help to get started.

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