CUPE Literacy Program

Adult Literacy in Canada
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Acknowledgments

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Proviso

This report reflects information and issues that were discussed in interviews with the researcher in 2017. When seeking out feedback on the report in February 2018, it was brought to our attention that new initiatives and collaborations had started in a few places but also that some lines of communication had ceased to exist. Some interviewees have moved to new jobs and some organizations interviewed for this report may no longer be operational. It was a reminder that the literacy landscape is in a state of flux and that this can leave the field vulnerable to lost connections, even over the space of a single year.

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Executive Summary

In January 2017, CUPE National initiated a study to research a sampling of current adult literacy activities offered across Canada. It was unclear to CUPE which organizations were still delivering programs, training practitioners, or developing adult literacy policy after the major federal funding cuts to literacy, which started in 2006 and ended with the defunding of national adult literacy networks in 2014. It was unclear whether Indigenous, Anglophone, and Francophone programming had taken on new shapes and approaches as provinces tried to adjust to the new funding reality. It was presumed that the remaining providers and networks had hunkered down, refocused, and sustained their work in other ways. The need for adult literacy programming did not diminish in the intervening years.

In addition to getting a sense of who was doing what, CUPE hoped to identify individuals or groups that might be interested in reaching out across provincial and territorial boundaries to re-activate the national conversation and, possibly, form a coalition that could help to lobby the federal government to take up its leadership role in adult literacy.

Nearly forty representatives from across the adult literacy field in Canada were interviewed for the study. Their perspectives included:

> Grassroots literacy programs
> Umbrella organizations (Provincial and National)
> Federally-funded initiatives
> Provincially-funded programs
> Anglophone, Francophone, Aboriginal, Deaf, ESL literacy programs
> Official Languages Minority Communities (OLMC)
> Rural programs
> Urban programs
> Northern programs
> College-affiliated programs
> Community-based programs
> Reading, writing, math programs
> Culturally-embedded, intergenerational, values-based programs
> Digital literacy programs
> Educational preparation programs
> Essential Skills and employability-focused programs
> "Shoestring" programs
> Partnership-driven programs
> Volunteer programs

As seen from the list, the adult literacy movement is still vibrant and active across the country, in a wide range of formats, supported by provincial or some federal funding, project grants, corporate partnerships, and fundraising. And the work it does is fueled by the deep dedication and sheer grit of literacy practitioners who refuse to walk away from adults trying to learn new skills.

There is a universally strong desire to re-connect, to pick up the issues that need to be addressed, and to get the federal government engaged again. However, the last few years have been difficult for many adult literacy programs in Canada.

The defunding of most national and provincial/territorial organizations under the Harper government, as well as the deep cuts to research, outreach, development, and delivery, have had significant and long-term consequences. The unifying sense of being part of a national mission is fading and the corresponding loss of public profile likely contributes to weakened commitment in some provinces as well. Even closer to the grassroots, greater isolation of individual programs has meant fewer shared resources to ease pressures on tight budgets, and without provincial or national networks, common challenges can no longer be addressed with a collective voice. As well, new research and thoughts about alternate visions for literacy are less likely to become part of the discourse in the field.

The consequences are not just noticeable in the reduced cohesion and progress of the national adult literacy movement, but are also experienced by learners. Based on information from the grassroots, the lack of national vision and a reduced provincial commitment, means that resources are not always available to reach the vulnerable learners who are already struggling to keep up with information overload, bureaucratization of daily processes, the digitization of everything, highly competitive job markets, loss of culture, and accelerating technological changes.

The risk is that some members of our society are pushed even further to the margins, if appropriate learning opportunities are not widely accessible. Some learners from Francophone, Indigenous, Deaf, newcomer, and Official Languages Minority Communities (OLMC) may experience this to a greater degree than others. However, marginalization also includes an increasing number of disenfranchised youth, seniors trying to access online information, learners in remote locations, rural citizens looking for learning supports and services, and workers trying to keep up with changing job requirements. Literacy learning needs are everywhere, and if adequate resources are unavailable to meet the needs, difficult choices are forced upon us.

Grassroots literacy organizations are doing their best to address the diverse needs with the resources from various local or provincial partnerships, even if the needs exceed these resources. They are masters of innovation and efficiency and full of passionate, dedicated staff who have helped to keep the doors open to people in their communities, through thick and thin, for many decades. But literacy practitioners and leaders across Canada agree on the urgent need to revitalize the national conversation about adult literacy before the movement frays any further. Their wish to re-connect for a national conversation was universal and the sense of urgency palpable because, "you can only operate on dedication and a shoestring for so long". As provinces go through elections and local mandates change, literacy organizations keep having to seek out and re-align themselves with different funders' priorities to survive.

Thinkers and visionaries are taking jobs in other fields, invaluable institutional memory is getting lost, researchers are more isolated, and the national lines of communication built up so carefully over several decades are beginning to shut down. This leaves mainly economic arguments for funding literacy rather than a broader conversation that includes social and cultural considerations. The good news is that people interviewed for this report would like to see a long-term, national vision and an implementation strategy that addresses not only Canadians' foundational literacy needs, but also recognizes the impact of corollary issues: attachment to employment, income levels, physical and mental health, access to digital information, civic participation, and social well-being.

As so many interviewees said, "It is hard to overstate the importance of literacy in its various and interconnected forms. The outcomes of our lives are profoundly affected by the degree to which we can take in and use the different kinds of information around us to meet our various individual and social needs." Literacy practitioners and decision-makers want to re-connect to share information and resources, to learn from each other, to collaborate on training and development, to conduct research to improve programming, and to move forward with a unified sense of purpose. They also want to advocate on behalf of learners, many of whom are disadvantaged, disempowered, and disengaged, from the processes and systems that influence their lives. For groups that are spread out across the country, like Indigenous, Deaf and OLMC learners, connections would make it easier to share resources and expertise to support diverse learners.

Most importantly, the people interviewed know intuitively that adult literacy is the "canary in the coal mine" warning of risks ahead: the social impact of leaving some people marginalized will eventually be experienced directly or indirectly by everyone. "As a result, literacy practitioners and decision-makers across the country want the federal government to take a leadership role in adult literacy again and to demonstrate that leadership by supporting strategic planning and policy development that ensures that our collective future will include lifelong learning opportunities for all Canadians.

To summarize, interviews showed that adult literacy practitioners and leaders from across Canada want to see:

Strategy and Awareness-raising

> A realistic, long-term federal strategy to serve as a beacon for adult literacy, as defined in broad, inclusive terms, including a plan to support a range and continuum of learning and training opportunities.

> Awareness-raising campaigns to communicate what literacy is, why people might need to look for help to develop their skills, and the true nature of literacy development work as more than training or education.

> Recognition for the complexity of serious social issues that are often co-located with adult literacy development, and the resources needed to make solid progress with multi-disadvantaged learners

> A deeper public understanding about how higher levels of literacy, broadly defined, can positively affect individuals' lives, as well as systems functioning and community/societal well-being, and why literacy is worth the investment of time, energy, and money.

> A broad recognition that literacy is situated in culture and community-rural, urban, socio-economic, ethnocultural, new-comer, language, gender identity, worker, northern, Aboriginal, Deaf, and how this affects learning and program structure, approach, and content.

> A vision of the practices and programs that can holistically and effectively support diverse learners.

Networks

> A national, grassroots-focused network to facilitate policy development, communication, practitioner development, information and resource-sharing.

> E-learning opportunities, with accessible and open internet infrastructure, to reach remote communities and to offer accessible and flexible programs to learners-learning opportunities as well as critical governmental information being placed online.

Resources

> Sustained and long-term operational funding at the provincial/territorial level for relevant, responsive, learner-centered programs that can support learners with multiple barriers.

> Adequate program funding at the provincial/territorial level to recognize the value of tutoring and teaching with competitive salaries, pay increases, and professional development.

> Funding to conduct research and develop new programs and materials.

> Funding at the provincial/territorial level to carry out increasing expectations for reporting, and to update resources and technology when needed.

As one interviewee put it: "Adult literacy should be respected, funded, and fully integrated." A national conversation is required to achieve this.

Introduction

The Literacy Heart Keeps Beating

If you ask many adult literacy practitioners and coalition leaders, the years of the Harper era were the dark days during which intentionally destructive actions were carried out by the federal government to try to shut down the national adult literacy movement. With the help of the National Literacy Secretariat, adult literacy had become a national conversation with a large and dedicated group of people working together to advance ideas about access to literacy learning for adults. The national conversations were silenced by the funding cuts that started in 2006 and continued to 2014. There remained, however, a few persistent voices.

First, the partnership between the federal government, and the provinces and territories ended. Programs immediately lost their capacity to outreach, research, develop innovative projects and materials, and share information. With the subsequent cuts, national organizations were starved and then forced to close their doors, scattering people and resources to the four winds after a last effort to stay connected, and rescue precious resources from the shredder. At the same time, provincial umbrella organizations that had served as communication arteries as well as local support and advocacy hubs were defunded. Many were closed, sometimes after distressing and futile attempts to regain financial footing through other avenues.

Practitioner training and resource-sharing slowed to a trickle and before long, program development and delivery was provided in whatever way could be sustained with provincial /territorial government, local government, post-secondary, or corporate partnerships. Unfortunately, many literacy organizations were not able to successfully make the transition to Labour Market Agreement (LMA) funding after 2008 or figure out how to lobby their provincial governments to influence how the provincial/territorial LMA dollars were being spent. For those who had been working in the literacy field for a longer time, the shock of the willful disregard for marginalized populations, accompanied by the shock of watching a proud field become thread-bare, took its toll. The vibrant, vocal, and beautiful fabric of the literacy movement was cut apart, and the pieces pulled until they frayed.

The strong emotions expressed around the federal defunding reflect the passion and commitment that adult literacy practitioners feel towards the field, the learners, and the social justice goals that draw them together. Thankfully, although the damage was deep and substantial, adult literacy work is still going on in many corners of Canada, even if literacy no longer has the profile and support that it used to. In some places, adult literacy programming is surviving on a shoestring thanks to the dedication and personal commitment of under-resourced staff who know how much their work matters in the larger scheme of things. In many places, it is operating in a basic but functional form because of a small army of volunteer tutors who are led and supported by an equally small and hard-working core of local decision makers who look for resources that they can send out into the field.

In some places, an inspiring spectrum of healthy program and policy activity can be found. Here, adult literacy programming is especially alive and well: carefully planned, innovative, research-based, exploratory, and actively engaged with policy improvements. There are even a few places where activism to get the federal government re-engaged with adult literacy is re-emerging and becoming more creative and vocal.

Reduced program and networks funding at any level does not make literacy needs disappear. People's lives are affected every day because they struggle to write an email to explain something, read a tenancy agreement, track bank statements, help grandchildren with school work, apply for a new job, pass on important cultural traditions, express creative ideas, manage their medications, read campaign brochures. People will always want to learn.

From the interviews with grassroots programs, the hope for more adult literacy programming has probably become more pronounced in the intervening years since the cuts because so many programs are reduced in scope and availability, or re-focused on higher-level skills and employability. Some practitioners, particularly those working in under-resourced areas, state that marginalized Canadians with lower levels of literacy seemed to be disappearing into the background again, feeling stigmatized, unsure of where to connect for help. Resources for mental health, English as a Second Language, and learning disabilities are needed to support learners, and to address the intersection of literacy and poverty, health, and community well-being.

There is not enough time for program directors to fulfill the growing responsibilities of program development and delivery, and write proposals off the sides of their desks for project funding, complete the reporting demands, plan fundraising events, educate policy makers, network to find new partners, and still do outreach to potential learners and volunteers in various regions of their provinces. It is hard to find colleagues in other provinces or territories with whom to compare experiences and problem-solve. A few personal blogs have become the go-to resources for more analytical information but, outside the academic environment, other research about adult literacy is rare. Big picture advocacy and policy work for adult literacy in Canada is primarily being done locally, or when specific projects can bring people together from several provinces or territories for a specific short-term purpose.

A few national conversations could serve as the basis for something more formal. An ad hoc group formed to discuss the implications of the Canada Jobs Grant (CJG) on adult literacy. Along with people from almost every province and territory, CUPE was active in this group, which continues to advocate for the inclusion of people with lower literacy levels in the CJG. A pan-Canadian mobilization committee was formed with RESDAC, ABC Life Literacy Canada, CDÉACF, ICEA, and others, as well as individual advocates. They wanted to move literacy onto the federal election agenda and to track the federal government's progress towards re-engagement with the issues.

However, for most people interviewed for this report, the national conversation was about funding, both federal funding and federal leadership in encouraging provincial/territorial funding. And it was also about practitioner development, resource-sharing, and collaborating across provincial boundaries. This focus may be especially poignant for programs that serve minority learners in majority contexts. It was about research and a deeper understanding of assessment, adult learning, and literacy's inextricable links with culture, the digitization of information, and individual and community well-being.

For literacy leaders, it was need for a vision and a national strategy that acknowledges what people in the field know all too well: "we are excluding fellow citizens from opportunities, and we do so at our peril." The consequences of ignoring the needs can be delayed, but not ignored. Not only is the lack of adult learning opportunities seen by many in the field as an injustice at the individual level, but the negative side-effects are observed across the system. At the same time, it is known that the positive social impacts of ensuring sustained, system-wide learning opportunities for all Canadians will increase well-being throughout society.

Does the urgency of adult literacy need to be brought back onto the national radar? Is it possible to weave together the stretched and frayed national fabric to meet the literacy needs of our current time? This study investigated where the broad, national conversation could pick up the smaller conversations that have already started.

Purpose of this Study

The initial purpose of this study was to re-connect CUPE National with representatives of the adult literacy movement and to determine how adult literacy practitioners and leaders at the local and provincial/territorial level may have refocused and sustained their work, given that the need for adult literacy development opportunities would not have diminished in the intervening years. It was hoped that some of the people or organizations involved in adult literacy work before the cuts could still be located, and that the wealth of resources and background knowledge might still be accessible.

In addition to determining who was still doing what, the study aimed to identify shared experiences and needs across the country and to identify individuals or groups interested in reaching out across provincial and territorial boundaries to practitioners and leaders in other regions. Perhaps there might also be an appetite to form a more formal coalition that could lobby the federal government to again provide leadership for adult literacy, in its diverse definitions and approaches, given its connection to so many other national goals.

CUPE itself has played an important leadership role in the national literacy movement over the years, providing alternative perspectives to the dominant discourse on adult literacy, but also implementing innovative labour literacy programs and developing related policies at local, provincial, and national levels. Once the current landscape is clearer, CUPE can make decisions about its role in future efforts.

A Word about Words

The literacy movement has long struggled with its name, in part because of the judgements and stigma attached to people's differing abilities to read, write, use computers, manage their finances, navigate systems, and read the world. The normative and often oppressive sense that being knowledgeable or successful should be expressed a certain way has marginalized people with other types of knowledge or expression. School learning is presumed to be the benchmark and so people who never have full access to it or who do not do well in that setting are treated as people with gaps because participation in contemporary urban society requires so many school-type skills. This challenge for people to participate on an equal footing affects individual lives deeply and broadly, but ultimately affects us all.

The literacy movement tries to address these inequities by making non-judgmental learning opportunities more accessible to people who want to learn new skills but might otherwise be sidelined. In the beginning, the aim was to remediate what was then described as illiteracy. In the process of exploring the different ways that people can know and succeed, new literacy lenses have now been applied in the field: workplace literacy, digital literacy, civic literacy, financial literacy, health literacy, systems literacy.

This understanding of literacy's diversity, coupled with research about multiple intelligences and growing awareness about the inappropriateness of cultural binaries, has made it clear that the term literacy represents something that is multi-faceted, adaptable, and transformative. Some theorists have suggested the term literacies or situated literacy to more accurately reflect the contextual nature of the field. What someone in northern Canada wants to learn may be quite different from what is valuable to a fisherman in the Maritimes, a worker in Saskatchewan, or a recently-arrived refugee in Toronto.

For the purposes of this report, the singular form literacy will be used but it will not refer to a fixed, pre-determined subject area. Instead, the term literacy will be used in its broadest sense to include the variety of definitions that were discovered during the interviews. Despite being an English term, it includes literacy services offered in French, sign language, or Indigenous languages.

Further, it is assumed for this report that:

> *"Literacy is a fundamental human right and the foundation for lifelong learning. It is fully essential to social and human development in its ability to transform lives. For individuals, families, and societies alike, it is an instrument of empowerment to improve one's health, one's income, and one's relationship with the world."* [1]

For further information about diverse definitions of literacy around the globe, please see the UNESCO document, *Understandings of Literacy*.[2]

Working Process

The first step was to clarify the scope of the research, given that the term "literacy" might be defined and used in a variety of ways. It was necessary to recognize that literacy programming might have been named Essential Skills, upgrading, adult education, financial literacy, or civic literacy by different kinds of institutions, organizations, and community groups in response to shifts in funding and accompanying mandates. A decision was made to use a broad sense of the term, more in keeping with the term literacies, so that learner-focused financial literacy, Essential Skills, digital literacy, systems literacy, and even health literacy might be included if there was a critical mass of programming in an area.

Initial research started with a cycle of social media networking, website review, and report reading. Leads from a 2015 CUPE/ABC report[3] by Patricia Nutter were invaluable for starting a contact list. Moving across the country, key people were contacted in each province or territory. New information gleaned from these initial conversations either expanded or reduced the contact list, depending on what was discovered.

1 http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/education-building-blocks/literacy/
2 http://www.unesco.org/educatgion/GMR2006/full/chapt6_eng.pdf
3 This 2015 report had investigated literacy program databases that were still active across the country.

In total, over 60 organizations and individuals were contacted by email or phone between January and April 2017. These ranged from small, grassroots programs to college-affiliated programs and umbrella organizations. Some, unfortunately, were no longer operational or did not have time to participate in interviews. Nonetheless, the aim was to capture a wide range of perspectives that came from different sectors within the literacy landscape: Anglophone and Francophone literacy, minority and majority language settings, Indigenous literacy, and Deaf literacy situated in small, medium, and large centres across the provinces and territories.

In the end, almost 40 organizations and individuals replied to initial emails and agreed to participate in the semi-structured interview[4] which asked about some or all the following:

- current programming and activities
- target audience for programming, if applicable
- format of programs offered (online, face-to-face)
- working partners in the world of literacy/ES (broadly defined)
- demographic shifts or trends observed
- issues perceived to be facing the adult literacy/ES field in each region
- innovation in programming or methodology
- research being conducted, if applicable
- advocacy work at municipal, provincial, regional or federal levels
- interest in re-connecting nationally with the adult literacy movement

Feedback was very generous and overwhelmingly positive that CUPE was making the effort to connect with literacy groups and start even a brief national conversation through the study. Many people said that it gave them hope. They expressed that they found it interesting to hear how literacy practitioners in other provinces were doing and what they were working on, and strongly supported any efforts to get a national group together.

In some cases, follow-up emails were sent by interviewees to provide additional information, references, or referrals. Around 30 other contacts were suggested during the initial interviews; phone meetings with these new people were pursued as appropriate. However, time did not permit follow-up with all the possible contacts that had been identified.

To research Quebec literacy activities, a second researcher from Montreal was engaged to speak to the Francophone and Anglophone literacy organizations (including programs for English minority speakers), as well as to identify possible labour literacy connections there. As themes and key issues emerged they were captured for the report, which is structured to provide an overview of recurring themes as well as insight into more specific activities and views within the provinces and territories.

This summary only contains information about the recurring themes, but if a national conversation about literacy were to begin again, it would very interesting to inventory the fuller picture of adult literacy programming in the provinces and territories. As one literacy leader said, "the literacy heart keeps beating" and there are many good reasons to feel proud of what has been achieved despite considerable adversity.

Findings

The Canadian adult literacy field is diverse and built to be responsive to local resources, needs, and interests. Nonetheless, there is a remarkably unified voice around key issues facing the adult literacy world in Canada. What follows is an overview of those issues on which there was a great deal of consensus during the research interviews, as well as some of the points of difference.

Literacy Landscape

The adult literacy movement has always been one driven by dedication, passion and activist spirit. The needs of learners motivate the practitioners, but also drive the structure, content and approach of literacy programming. The arising, deep understanding of the need for greater social equity through

[4] One group meeting was held in Manitoba because of the proximity to the researcher

access to learning fuels many in the field, and encourages the work to improve communities, organizations and systems for all. Nonetheless, the national adult literacy movement is only a shade of its vibrant, multi-faceted, evolving, progressive former self, regardless of what amazing things are happening at the local level.

Where there has been a provincial/territorial effort to maintain adequate operational funding, some diversity of programming is offered, and it is possible for literacy-related organizations to support volunteers or practitioners within relatively focused mandates. However, even in areas where geographical coverage may appear to be quite good, there is a sense that the programming cannot meet local needs because of volunteer turnover, too few hours a week, stale programming, or limited connections to progressive learning opportunities.

Some provinces have taken a more structured and employment-driven approach to literacy and have mandated programming and pathways, giving it a slightly higher provincial profile. This structure is accompanied by increased resources and coordination but also increased governmental control and evaluation metrics.

In small areas, there is research and innovation, funded by a combination of the province, territory and federal project funding. In these places, organizations have been able to strike up interprovincial partnerships to share information and collaborate. There also seems to be a related critical analysis that makes connections between literacy and culture, literacy and identity, and between literacy and socio-economic inclusion.

Grassroots fundraising efforts, innovative partnerships, and corporate connections have been necessary to keep adult literacy alive in regions where only bare-bones funding is available for programming or coordination. Even in areas where the provincial umbrella organization is reduced to a single person doing everything from soup to nuts to support local programs, everyone does their best with the thin shoestring that is left knowing how much it matters to the local learners.

However, the national connections have all but disappeared and with them, the unified voice for systemic and policy improvements. There are no opportunities to benefit from economies of scale, and professional development in one region cannot easily benefit another. Almost every single person interviewed yearned for interprovincial connection, first and foremost for professional development, but also for solidarity in the push for more resources and a national plan. CUPE National's research project to begin to re-connect the dots, was viewed with considerable excitement and hopefulness, and almost everyone interviewed wanted to participate in some way in a renewed national conversation, should it become possible.

Common Threads

Defining Literacy

What is it? Depending on where you are situated within the field of adult literacy, finding a suitable definition of literacy will matter to you. At the grassroots, defining literacy by specific parameters matters less than helping someone learn wherever they may find themselves. In funders' offices, the focus is on establishing limits for the use of finite resources and demonstrating the degree to which resources have been well-used. For big picture assessors like the ones involved with the PIAAC studies, the aim is to isolate aspects of literacy to collect data for a variety of policy purposes.[5] For labour market-driven politicians, literacy may be primarily a means to an economic end or a presumed cause of poverty, not a matter of individual transformation or community well-being.

These tensions may well lie at the heart of some of the field's challenges. Literacy means different things to different people and the lack or presence of it becomes important in different ways. Defining it loosely or tightly has consequences, and the willingness to acknowledge realities and address the associated inequities varies. However, based on the interviews, practitioners' experience says that literacy is a shape-shifting, knowledge, skill and culture, everywhere-at-once capacity that affects many aspects of someone's life, while at the same time affecting our whole society.

[5] The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) was implemented by the OECD to compare literacy levels across nations, not necessarily to improve learner success, but to investigate performance of education and training systems, the extent and dimensions of illiteracy and poor literacy, gaps between labour markets and education and training, equity levels in access to education and intergenerational mobility, young people's transition from education to work, identification of at-risk populations, links between key cognitive skills and variables, such as demographics, educational background, or health. http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/surveyofadultskills.htm

This suggests that the work of crafting a national vision or strategy for adult literacy will require considerable collaboration and negotiation. Still, most interviewees expressed that a much better public understanding of literacy was needed, and so finding a good way to explain what literacy is, will be important if we want to garner widespread support and make progress with the associated issues like unemployment and underemployment, loss of culture, social marginalization, unequal access to information, or disengagement from civic life.

What do we call it? The terms used over the decades in the literacy movement reflect a deepening understanding of the work and people at the heart of the movement as much as the terms may represent changing methodologies. However, despite having moved away from terms like "3 R's" and illiteracy, toward more neutral terms such as literacy, and the workplace-oriented term, Essential Skills (ES), many interviewees felt the current terms oversimplify, misrepresent, control, or stigmatize what the participants in the programs are trying to achieve in their lives.

Some interviewees said that they wished there would be less talk about what literacy is, or what to call literacy, so that more energy could go into providing programming. It appears that other terms like Adult Basic Education (ABE), adult education, skills upgrading, or computer training are sometimes used to minimize the stigmatization by refocusing attention on the learners' associated aims. The associated aims may be personal, such as being a role model for one's children, or educational, such as getting a high school diploma. However, the terms are often work-related in the sense that the word work is used as a stand-in for income, and a certain ease and quality of life.

In parts of Canada where the labour market is depressed, or where some segments of the population cannot find good work without a certain level of certification, an opportunity to learn new skills means access to hope that daily life will get easier. But, the term literacy may also refer to language development more generally.

In some Francophone programs, French literacy was very closely connected to French language development and retention of culture. For minority language Anglophone learners in Quebec, the same is true. In the North, an elder-sourced Inuktitut definition of literacy as "recognizing" attempts to address colonial layers that have accompanied formal education. One newcomer program was teaching English as a Second Language as much as it was helping with literacy development and settlement.

Literacy and so much more. No wonder then that interviewees almost all explained that when they use the term literacy, they mean something much broader than traditional reading, writing and math. In a small number of organizations, the definition of literacy explicitly included things like health literacy, financial literacy, and civic literacy. It appears however that literacy programs, within the limitations of their resources, try to address learners' needs to get themselves to their goal, in addition to what is monitored for funding purposes, or included in formal assessment tools.

No one explicitly used the plural term literacies in the interviews, but almost all respondents commented that participants are developing a multi-faceted, culturally embedded, and individualized skillset that falls within the loose parameters of understanding and communicating, using technology, and participating in society to meet individual and collective needs.

In the North, there were references to literacy as an integral contributor to well-being outcomes, for example because programming helped to build confidence to take new risks. The technically-oriented literacy programs also spoke emphatically about the need to understand and support the whole person. The learner builds confidence and hope, and attaches to culture, especially in minority language and Indigenous settings. The whole person approach helps us to understand the learner's context before we come to conclusions about who they are and what they need.

Beyond narrow, sometimes functional funding mandates, programs tried to support learners as holistically as possible. Nowhere was literacy seen as a standalone issue. Even organizations working with Essential Skills insisted that their programming was not about isolated skill development for the workplace, because critical-thinking, problem-solving, leadership, or work readiness required a broad and all-encompassing definition of literacy to lead to successful outcomes. They recognized that this had resource implications but also expressed that a lack of adequate resources shows that funders often do not understand what literacy is truly about.

In short, almost all interviewees explicitly or implicitly stated that literacy programs were vehicles for personal growth as well as social, professional, educational, economic, political, cultural, and/or civic inclusion and were therefore closely linked to human dignity, rights and equity issues.

Reducing the Stigma

The public does not understand what literacy is about. At least half of the respondents felt that there was a very unfortunate stigma attached to the term literacy, and almost everyone interviewed expressed a wish for much greater public awareness about what was really involved. One interviewee commented that: "how literacy is viewed needs to be changed. It's seen as an 'us and them' problem, not an all-of-us problem."

The link between literacy and class is complicated, as some funding arguments infer that individuals are to blame for their low levels of literacy, and hence their poverty an economic burden on society. This is seen to contribute to the stigma. Despite international research on the subject, there is very little public discussion about the interconnectedness between factors such as class, food security, mental health, culture, ability, geographic location, housing, race, gender, and education.

A few people said they therefore wished for federal leadership in campaigns to address the stigma because national literacy levels have far-reaching social and economic implications that are not widely recognized. Many people felt that learners were misunderstood and unfairly judged, that the responsibility for literacy programs was misconstrued as a failure of the school system - and unsupported because "enough tax dollars are already going to education". The work of literacy practitioners was significantly underestimated because of adult literacy's church basement image, coupled with the inability to pay tutors and teachers what they are worth. The reality that some people in literacy programs are struggling at the intersection of poverty, poor health, poor housing, precarious employment, or addictions is a further cause of stigma. "Literacy keeps getting passed over," said one interviewee, even though it is related to all these core issues.

Some of the interviewees who have worked in the field for years, wished for a return to the old days when literacy was a more visible part of the national adult learning discussion. Literacy was supported by fun, public events and gatherings that were organized by national and provincial literacy councils to keep the issue front and center, and to put proud learner faces to the issues. A few people attributed the returning stigma directly with the defunding under the Harper government. The result is lack of adequate resources and no coordinated, national voice.

Literacy and Essential Skills. Some people interviewed felt that the distinction between literacy and Essential Skills (as defined by, at that time, Human Resources Skills Development Canada, now Employment and Social Development Canada) reinforced the stigmatization, because Essential Skills are more obviously connected to jobs and are therefore seen as more valuable than general literacy. An even greater separation was felt by Northern programs, whose land-based economy creates a specific definition of what's essential. In some provinces, however, the two are treated interchangeably or as integrated parts of a related learning process.

In situations when the two types of programs are treated sequentially, literacy was most often described as being more elementary, again reinforcing the stigma, even though literacy levels follow the same range from low to high as Essential Skills.

In the absence of broader clarification that workplace literacy or Essential Skills are but one lens to put on literacy, the value attached to one lens over another is reflected in the ways that funders treat work-oriented vs community-based programming. In some provinces, a business-based ideology makes Essential Skills development easier to justify and therefore to fund. It leads to perceptions of greater importance.

If, by comparison, community-based programs are staffed by volunteers who are running literacy programs that focus on personal or social development goals, they are sometimes viewed as less essential, and more optional, leisure programming. Attaching literacy to issues of health, finances, and digital access, demonstrates literacy's importance to multi-facets of contemporary life and well-being.

Literacy practitioners are specialists. The perceived lower status of literacy was also linked to the lack of professional status of literacy practitioners. Despite requiring a broad and deep set of skills to help learners develop literacy skills, most literacy practitioners are not paid as professionals and are not given opportunities for professional development. For example, there are few places to study literacy instruction or to access workshops or conferences, no related credentials. As one interviewee said, no National Occupational Classification (NOC) code for the profession, despite all earlier efforts.

Without a national network, opportunities for sharing effective teaching/tutoring and programming practices are almost non-existent. Several people suggested that, like Early Childhood Education, previously seen as babysitters rather than educators, raising the profile of the literacy educator would help to reduce the stigma of the field.

Literacy and pride. The struggle to de-stigmatize literacy was shared across the country, but was particularly deep-rooted in the North because of a conscious effort to decolonize adult education. They seek to activate an elder-sourced definition of literacy as recognizing, the idea of seeing and knowing what you see. Connecting literacy to the land-based economy and to traditional arts and crafts has increased pride, and added new understanding to what it means to be literate. Having somewhat adequate funding for the past few years has helped.

Likewise, there was an activist spirit in Quebec that seemed to be based on pride in pursuing inter-related cultural and social justice goals, whether in majority language or minority language settings. The link to culture, whether Anglophone or Francophone, strengthened literacy's link to cultural identity and pride. Programs have received funding to carry out their activities and to incorporate elements of culture and social justice into their work.

On a smaller scale, interviewees from Bow Valley College also talked about literacy work with a great sense of pride, as programming is in a post-secondary centre of excellence and received funding in the recent past to do important research and innovation around Essential Skills.

However, strong pride was also expressed in some grassroots programs that felt they were strongly supporting and "fighting hard" for the marginalized people in their programs. It was as if they had refused to accept the stigma and had instead turned it against the oppressive systems that had unfairly led people to needing their programs.

The Need for National and Provincial Networks

The national network is silenced. Local, provincial or regional collaboration has become much more difficult and rare since the loss of the national umbrella organizations. Many respondents spoke about feeling siloed since most national organizations were forced to close. People who had been in the field for a longer time missed the connections they used to have; people who were newer to the literacy field wished to connect with colleagues in other provinces. There was a sense that the disconnection was worrisome and harmful to the field because information was not flowing about discoveries, needs, or opportunities. The lack of transparency and communication from the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) was perceived as contributing to this; one interviewee found OLES to be secretive.

The lack of communication nationally between literacy practitioners and leaders, as well as between the federal government and the field, was raised in virtually every interview. The connection to other colleagues in the country was described as a serious loss and disadvantage, given that the sharing of expertise, ideas and materials makes it easier to manage with minimal resources.

All respondents also mentioned the lack of contact with the federal government as frustrating and disconcerting. They felt strongly that literacy issues were inextricably linked to social and economic development issues that the federal government was trying to address, and so expressed that adult literacy should be on the federal government's radar as well.

A smaller number of interviewees said that the lack of communication nationally also made it impossible to bring forward strong policies, because the local voices on their own are not loud enough. The solidarity to not only improve the literacy field but also to fight collectively for positive change was perceived as significantly diminished but badly needed, even though some expressed a fear of losing funding for lobbying. A national organization, it was noted, would be able to advocate on behalf of literacy in a way that individual organizations cannot.

Connecting with colleagues. Some practitioners from a few provinces or territories have had the opportunity to work together on projects, but only a small number of people still have regular contact with adult literacy practitioners, managers, or organizations from other provinces or regions.[6] Literacy practitioners in the North had occasional contact with colleagues in the Maritimes; Indigenous and

[6] Feedback in 2018 stated that ABC Life Literacy Canada had started up national conversations via teleconference to discuss program and research needs.

Francophone organizations stayed in touch through their respective networks; a rare federally-funded project for rural areas had linked some BC, Saskatchewan and Quebec practitioners.

For some literacy leaders, the annual planning meetings for the Peter Gzowski Invitational are the only remaining national connecting point to connect with national colleagues. For provincial government staff whose literacy responsibilities are linked to education mandates (instead of economic/labour market mandates), the Council of Ministers of Education also serves as a connecting point.

National organizations. The Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (CLLN) was mentioned many times as an important literacy hub before the funding cuts. Likewise, many people were very sorry to have lost the National Adult Literacy Database/COPIAN and the Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC), now Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), literacy library. ABC Life Literacy Canada, Frontier College, and Réseau pour le développement de l'alphabétisme et de compétences (RESDAC) were identified as being part of the remaining national fabric.

Provincial coalitions. Besides losing most of the overarching national networks, the loss of smaller provincial umbrella organizations was also keenly felt by respondents. Some provincial coalition offices have managed to stay open and active with provincial funding. But in many cases, the remaining staff have had to significantly pare down activities and focus on very local needs. In some provinces, a provincial literacy group has taken on some of the functions that government used to do as part of a service agreement, for example, assistance for funding applications, practitioner development, speakers, administrative duties, etc.

Literacy Quebec, for example, provides support to Anglophone literacy programs in Quebec while also starting to support literacy programs for English minority populations in the Atlantic provinces. The groups or individuals who tried to step into those roles could not, however, take over all tasks of the original umbrella organizations. Their own resources were limited or new mandates emerged. Some felt constrained in their ability to strongly advocate for something, when they felt that their funding might be jeopardized. In some provinces, new organizations have been started to take on a provincial networking and advocacy again. In these provinces, it sounds like the need to connect and communicate has finally come to a head, encouraging literacy groups to re-assemble. It remains to be seen what role these groups will take in the future, and whether they will take on an advocacy or policy role once more firmly established.

Other Networks. It should be noted that there are also other organizations, like post-secondary institutions, newcomer organizations, cultural bodies, or labour-based trades groups that witness literacy-related issues and can contribute valuable insight from their networks. Colleges from across Canada, for example, receive base funding for foundational learning programs and can serve as a stable community resource, even though they are not adequately funded to tackle the full scale of the issues.

Diversity vs Fragmentation

Keeping the adult literacy field varied and still unified. One of the strengths of the adult literacy field has always been its ability to adjust to local learners and local context. This results in a healthy diversity of programming models and approaches that reinforce local responsiveness to learners' needs while creating a national wealth of experience and expertise. So, for example, we have programming based on Inuit culture in the North, programming for Creole French literacy in a medium-sized city in Ontario, a drop-in computer-based program with laid-off workers in small town Saskatchewan, Essential Skills programs for Atlantic fisheries, and training programs with wrap-around employment supports

and integrated literacy in Manitoba. The diversification of activities and partnerships to engage local support is clearly also an important contributor to survival; local stakeholders would want to support initiatives of local benefit.

However, without a national vision or strategy and without a national network to keep information flowing between regions, the fragmentation of the national literacy landscape is likely if provinces and territories each increasingly "do their own thing" without any action to re-connect and re-unify in the very near future.

For instance, in regions where the funding for literacy programming was moved away from education departments into the labour market/economy departments, success is more often measured in business terms such as performance indicators, instead of educational or learner-defined terms,

because performance indicators are the metrics captured in existing government databases. As another example, several provinces have developed provincial literacy strategies and, while some explicitly include Deaf literacy, Francophone literacy, and Indigenous literacy, Anglophone literacy is more commonly the focus.

Perhaps some aspects of literacy provision should be common across the provinces and territories. Without direction and funding from the national level, some provincially-developed strategies appear to be more effectively implemented than others: people from several provinces said that their provincial strategy was not being consistently and actively used to guide policy development or decision-making.

The power of funding. Of course, funding often defines what literacy activities are offered, but also what organizations can undertake aside from programming. There is a related, delicate balance between funding and autonomy. A larger fund from one or two sources may allow for comprehensive planning, longer-term implementation of programs and services, and greater likelihood of research but increase accountability to only one voice.

Conversely, the more funders that a literacy organization is accountable to, the harder it is to focus on programming and what learners say they need. Instead, literacy leaders need to spend a lot of time marketing their organizations to disparate funders, building up corporate relationships, writing endless proposals, and raising funds off the side of their desks, in on-going scope-creep just to keep the doors open. Funder priorities shape what an organization offers.

In the North (Nunavut, Yukon Territory, Northwest Territories), literacy has received more generous support through a partnership between OLES and CanNor, whose mandate is northern development. Collaboration, research, and innovation are actively encouraged and funded, usually through the college system. As a result, new types of program models are accompanied by both action research and communication back into the field about the findings. Likewise, Quebec has recently provided new funding for adult literacy, which opens the possibility of new projects, programs, research, partnerships, and professional development.

In most provinces, however, new funding is a rarity. Provincial governments have provided some degree of funding and engagement to replace portions of the federal funding that was withdrawn but, for several organizations interviewed, the amount of funding had stayed the same for the past few years or had recently decreased. It was suggested by several interviewees that, in the years following the switch to Labour Market Agreements, many provincial literacy organizations were ineffective in lobbying their local governments for increased funding. This study did not investigate why the skills and strategies used at the federal level were not more widely applied at the provincial level to secure new funding.

In some provinces, funding and oversight had recently been moved from an education or community development department - perceived to be more understanding of adult literacy - to a labour-market-connected department, which tended to have business-style expectations. Each of these departments add their flavor to adult literacy in the form of programming expectations or reporting requirements, and can pull activities into different directions. Without a shared national vision for adult literacy, several organizations felt that their funding had become precarious as the memory of a national, learning mandate was fading.

Even when there is some provincial funding for development, research or networking, it appears that most adult literacy organizations must be creative, and develop other partnerships and form alternate revenue streams for their programs. Community-based programming rely on community groups, businesses, and other local partners to support their programming. Some literacy organizations felt uncomfortable that they might be competing with the local foodbank for scarce charity dollars.

There appears to be little labour literacy across Canada, so interviewees did not mention partnerships with unions or union members in more than a few locations, where union members may sit on a literacy network's board. For example, CUPE was mentioned several times because of its programming and national engagement in the past. It appears that labour may only collaborate with community in the Literacy Network of Quebec. As a result, labour-related philosophical or tangible contributions, which used to serve as a unifying force and underscored learner-centered mandates, are not evident.

The Learners

Slight demographic shifts. The interviewees were asked about any demographic shifts they were experiencing in their learner populations. Based on the responses, it appears that most literacy programs across the provinces and territories are being offered to the same types of learners as always - mainly urban-centered, low-income, marginalized learners

between ages 30 and 50 with mid-literacy levels.

Some programs were seeing an increase in learners under 30 and over 50, but that seemed to depend on local economies or connections to employment programs. For example, one program was seeing more older workers because of the labour market shifts in the local economy. Older workers in other areas were said to be attending because they were interested in improving their computer literacy.

In Ontario, several programs mentioned that they were seeing more younger learners. They may have been coming out of high school with lower skills, but interviewees said that there were other forces at work as well. Employers were surmised to be more demanding, requiring young workers to have soft skills that are now included in Essential Skills programming. A GED or Grade 12 diploma was said to be required more often.

Finally, government-funded youth employment and youth employment-related programming in Ontario was presumed to be bringing more young people into literacy programming. One interviewee said that people who had not completed Grade 12 used to wait about ten years before returning to complete literacy or upgrading programs. Now, it appeared that students who were unable to find work after high school were more quickly returning to the classroom to complete their diplomas as mature students.

Some formal program laddering, for instance, conscious planning to help learners progress from one program or institution to another, appeared to bring in literacy learners who were explicitly interested in associated college programs and some of these appeared to be focusing more on the needs of Indigenous learners. However, there was no appreciable increase in online learning participation or programming that might bring in other learner populations; very little programming mentioned that included childcare or transportation assistance; and very low-level learners were still under-represented.

Increased need for supports. While learner demographics had not changed much, the needs being addressed by literacy programs appeared to have become more complex, due in part to a better understanding of mental health needs and of the physical, housing, health and social needs of individuals who so often participate in literacy programming. Several respondents mentioned that they were having difficulty addressing critical issues with the resources they had. Where adequate supports were not available, providers felt that vulnerable learners were retreating into the background, unable to participate in programming without additional help like bus tickets, childcare, assistance with housing conflicts, etc.

The increased complexity was also attributed to the increased awareness of needs for support in the post-secondary environment. For example, because some colleges in the Maritimes provide support for learning or other disabilities, that same expectation of support was showing up in literacy programs associated with the colleges. Unfortunately, the resources are not generally available to respond to these needs unless project funds are secured from creative partnerships or other funding sources.

English as a Second Language (ESL). Several respondents spoke about the need to address more newcomers' literacy needs, in part because local ESL programming was not always available. Although it was beyond the scope of this study to interview ESL programs about the prevalence of adult literacy learners in their programs, a small number of programs interviewed did mention that they were seeing an increase in newcomer learners who wanted or needed to develop their literacy skills. This was stretching the responsibilities of some literacy practitioners, as they were not all familiar with the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) or the associated ESL Literacy materials. Programs with ESL literacy students also needed to pay attention to boundaries with the federal Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)-funded programs in their area. In some cases, programs had started to offer parallel programming streams to address ESL Literacy needs.

Indigenous learners. Only a small number of respondents from non-Indigenous programs said that they were seeing more Indigenous learners. Beyond trying to use more culturally-appropriate materials, no significant adjustments were made to programming however. One interviewee in Alberta mentioned that there seemed to be a significant need for on-reserve programming in their province, but that there was neither enough funding nor volunteers available. She presumed that Indigenous students might have parallel programming they could attend but was unaware of any.

The network of Indigenous literacy programs and organizations does indeed seem to run somewhat parallel to Anglophone and Francophone programs in places other than the northern territories and Ontario, where there is a

network of connected organizations that provide a sequence of culturally-appropriate programming all the way from lower literacy levels to college-level learning opportunities. This programming may be supported in some areas through funding for first-language programs (in Inuktitut, for example) intended to support the preservation of Indigenous languages and culture.

Francophone/minority Anglophone learners. In general, French language literacy programming seemed to follow the same trends as English programming. However, additional factors affect Francophone and Anglophone literacy programming when the program is offered in a minority-language context. Minority-language literacy organizations (for example, for Francophone programs outside Quebec and for Anglophone programs inside Quebec) may seek out connections to programs for similar populations outside their provincial borders. Teaching materials may be more difficult to access. Per capita, funding for one group may be higher than the other's. Decision-making power or public visibility may differ.

The increase in newcomers means that ESL/FSL/literacy materials may be required along with settlement supports. In Ontario, for example 95% of the Francophone literacy classes are composed of Canadian-born learners who speak French as their mother tongue. Whereas in one region, the learner group in French-language literacy programming was 95% newcomers whose first language may have been something other than English or French. Arriving from Syria, Bhutan, Lebanon and countries in Africa such as Mali, Senegal, Niger, they needed to have sufficient oral French to participate but were otherwise welcome to attend. Settlement services are officially provided to these learners by organizations with LINC funding. However, it is inevitable that the literacy program will address some of the needs without specific funding. This underscores the diversity of programming needs within the Francophone literacy community.

The Quebec and French minority community reality also brings to attention the complexity of developing literacy in the individual's first language, where literacy is ideally developed. When funding is allocated for literacy in the two official languages, the reality of many Canadians whose first language is neither English nor French is not addressed.

Deaf learners. Only one organization for Deaf literacy learners could be interviewed during the timeframe of this study, but Deaf Literacy Initiatives in Ontario sees learners from all ages and walks of life, just as do other programs. Some are young students who struggled in school programs and are now preparing for college. More Aboriginal and newcomer learners have started to attend their Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs. Deaf Literacy Initiative supports programs with Deaf and Deaf-Blind learners.

Looking for Sustainability

Almost all programs spoke yearningly about the dream of attaining a sense of stability and sustainability for their programs. "Sustainability" was defined by most as stable operational funding which would allow for stable staffing, reasonable administrative support, adequate material resources, and occasional experimentation and development in program offerings. It also meant being able to keep a steady focus on one set of goals instead of having to refocus regularly on new government or partner goals to secure funding.

Money. Quite simply, as indicated above, without a significant infusion of funding that acknowledges not only the complexity of what adult literacy programs provide to learners but also the "keystone" function that literacy plays for our society, it was widely expressed that local programs could not be fully effective at the provincial level and that the gains made in the delivery of national adult literacy (through supportive research, materials development, networking, outreach strategies) in the decades before the Harper cuts would be lost.

Respondents in the North expressed appreciation for sustained federal funding. In Quebec, significant provincial support is available even if it did not compensate for the loss of federal funding. However, most interviews underlined the loss of long-term, reliable, operational funding was the most significant barrier to making the kind of progress in adult literacy that might otherwise be possible. One group's funding was a closed envelope, or fixed amount, that had not been increased in fifteen years. Teachers in that program had not had a raise in the 30 years that the program had been open.

A portion of the responsibility for financial stability clearly lies at the provincial/territorial level because it has been over a decade since the first federal funding cuts were made. Still, the federal funding that was available in earlier years was described as playing an important catalytic or developmental role. The lack of communication from OLES has

therefore contributed significantly to the frustration about funding for innovation or development that cannot be covered through provincial funds. Without provincial increases and without information about federal government funding priorities or timelines for special projects, it is impossible for organizations to plan.

Overwhelmed by bureaucracy. The ongoing underfunding was described as demoralizing and exhausting by many, but the over-administration was described as equally damaging. Where there has been new funding, there has been an associated increase in monitoring and reporting. The increased documentation on increasingly short timeframes (monthly or quarterly) was described as "staggering" by one executive director. Another program had to do fundraising just to be able to hire someone to do the new data capture. Yet another program talked about death by a thousand papercuts. Several programs in different provinces spoke of doing endless proposal-writing just to stay open.

Most others expressed feeling tapped out with grant-writing and partnership-building. To them, year-to-year survival was not equivalent to real sustainability. Low funding and/or very strict performance indicators leads to a cynicism about the entire process, because "you can't get your head above water." Yet the needs of the learners are so real. This was especially pronounced in smaller programs in smaller communities where learners and practitioners are neighbours, collectively invested in the economic well-being and development of their region. The needs are great but the bureaucracy was perceived as wasteful.

A few interviewees mentioned that the personal information that they needed to provide to funders about learners in the statistics-gathering was an example of "worrisome invasiveness" and that "good algorithms do not make for good programs."

Boutique programming. Although literacy program providers know all too well that literacy is about playing a long game, several organizations across the country have started to offer short programs for specific purposes, almost entirely work-related, as a way of being more responsive and to keep learners attending. Sustainability has become, for some, about offering what will sell and keep numbers high for reporting. Such short and snappy programs were said to be very effective for giving learners a low-risk opportunity to try out and customize a program of studies. However, they were not seen as effective in solving the more complex learning needs of learners at lower levels of literacy. Several interviewees said that literacy development is all too often viewed as an optional extra. A focus on too many short-term programs might lead to piecemeal offerings and affect program sustainability.

Project-based funding. In a similar vein, the focus on project-based funding was described by several organizations as an impediment to real sustainability, not only because it takes longer than an election cycle to make real progress in adult literacy. A great deal of energy goes into just managing organizational survival from project to project. Only a small number of interviewees saw project-based funding as a positive way to find other sources of revenue for innovation or experimentation.

Most people felt that the mental gymnastics of figuring out how to convince new funders to get on board through a steady stream of one-off projects was time-consuming but necessary to keep doors open. It also led to a gradual, ongoing overextension because some organizations were doing things slightly outside their mandate just to get funding, something that was unsustainable in the long run.

Competition instead of collaboration. In provinces where funding was quite scarce and/or reporting requirements were focused on strict performance indicators, there was an added sense of competition between different government-funded programs, employment, education, literacy, because each was trying to reach participant quotas to retain its funding. This introduced precariousness to literacy work because programs were never sure of their future. Lines of communication and systems could not ever be firmly established. Participants in an employment program were not necessarily being referred to literacy programming despite that being what they needed most. No one wanted to lose numbers.

Sustainability is difficult to achieve without an understanding of this type of collective impact. Practitioners and decision-makers know from experience that without literacy, all the other outcomes are worse. For example, one interviewee felt that literacy was at the heart of low apprenticeship completion rates and that the skills shortage is affected by literacy levels to a significant degree. Longer-term planning (the length of an apprenticeship cycle, for example) would benefit everyone, it was suggested.

Partnerships affect sustainability. Literacy is often seen as the underpinning of education, economy, and socio-cultural well-being. As such, it makes sense that literacy programs

would collaborate with a range of other stakeholders from various realms, even if partnership development itself takes time and resources. United Way was mentioned by many interviewees as a valuable funder and partner; corporate partnerships were nurtured in several provinces; partnerships with community groups were also generally seen as invaluable.

However, if there is a power imbalance between the literacy program and its collaborators, partnerships can pull literacy programming away from the primary focus on learners, affecting the organization's mission and sustainability. Without government support and/or facilitation, service providers can feel left to fend for themselves in often unequal relationships.

Also, some interviewees mentioned that literacy instructors sometimes leave and take jobs with partner organizations because they can pay their employees more, negatively affecting staff stability and sustainability of organizational knowledge and memory. This was felt most keenly after the Harper cuts, when specialists left to find other work. The good news is that many are still passionate about the adult literacy field, even if they are retired or working in related areas.

Social Impact Bonds. To encourage private investment in social initiatives, some governments are creating new funding tools, like Social Impact Bonds, which offer investors a return on their investment if the service provider delivers on promised performance targets. The Saskatchewan government is experimenting with funding Essential Skills through social impact bonds, and there are similar discussions in Manitoba and Saskatchewan about getting private investors involved in other types of social and educational infrastructure and programming.

OLES is actively undertaking social impact bond projects. Unfortunately, requiring certain levels of performance on a given investment is a potentially slippery slope towards privately-funded literacy programming. This approach focusses on investors who profit on pay-for-performance type programs that inevitably favour higher-level learners linked to the labour market. Socially-focused programs risk being evaluated with inappropriate business metrics to favour investments.

A widespread move towards this type of social financing would lead away from the longer-term planning and resources for more complex issues, decreasing sustainability.

Evaluation metrics. Closer and closer ties to economic outcomes or "pay for performance" funding models would require literacy programs to make business-case arguments to secure and sustain funding, even if literacy practitioners are not familiar with that type of evaluation methodology (cost-benefit analysis, social impact analysis).

Likewise, there was a considerable amount of frustration for energy that goes into Ontario's Milestones and Culminating Tasks reporting system, which is tied to Literacy and Basic Skills funding. Both systems are time-consuming and sometimes intimidating progress assignments that learners must complete as they move through Literacy and Basic Skills programming. They are also used to evaluate the effectiveness with which literacy organizations are succeeding with their funded mandates. Because energy, time and resources are focused on evaluation to secure or maintain funding, the true sustainability of the program is jeopardized. Evaluation metrics are then not about program quality towards long-term effectiveness, but rather about the immediate enticement of funders.

In a similar vein, much has been written about the faulty associations between the results of PIAAC and policy that might be based on those findings. Among other things, questions were raised about the construct on which the PIAAC survey was based, the validity of large-scale assessments, the link between assessment tasks and real life, and even the focus of the Canadian report as compared to the European one. Evaluating the success of literacy programs built on policies that are in turn built on faulty assessments cannot lead to sustainability.

Research and Development

Little time or money for research or innovation. From the interviews, limited program innovation has been possible given the severe limitations of provincial resources. Only a few interviewees spoke about doing informal research within their program. Academics who were interviewed for the study appeared to be the only ones completing formal research. These academics were doing lit-

eracy-related analysis and research as part of their teaching, their work, or their Masters/Doctoral theses. Upcoming research by RESDAC on outcomes (impacts) of adult literacy programming may fall into the formal research category, however.

More often, respondents spoke about the frustration that so much time was required to write proposals, report on funded activities, develop new partnerships, and find ways to survive on a shoestring, to the extent that more significant program development and innovation could only rarely be done. Project-based funding, sometimes from corporate sponsors, did allow some groups to try new types of programming or outreach. Some of the literacy organizations have actively sought out corporate sponsors for specific activity streams. The hope for some provinces was that online programming might compensate for the fact that no money was available to do in-person outreach anymore.

Another example of innovation is the northern focus on Indigenous and Inuit culture, which integrates traditional cultural activities, intergenerational participation, and literacy in its broadest definition. Online learning opportunities were being piloted in a few provinces. Regardless, almost every person interviewed expressed frustration with not knowing what development work might have been done in other provinces. It was clear that information or materials-sharing would save everyone time, effort, and money.

Curriculum Resources. Although several organizations spoke about developing programs, described as curriculum or teacher guides, learner materials such as handouts, visuals, learner aides, games, readers were not often mentioned by interviewees unless they had specific target populations or specific revenue sources for that. Possibly, the materials development is happening at the instructor level and not being shared more widely.

However, several people mentioned how much they missed the National Literacy Secretariat for funding materials development and the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD)/COPIAN. It contained so many tried-and-true resources for both teachers and learners. Some practitioners did not make the transition to COPIAN and therefore lost touch with available resources. Where possible, some provincial or regional organizations are storing resources online, thereby making them accessible to the field.

The importance of resources for literacy programs becomes even more clear in the urgent attempts to save resources when the HRSDC (now ESDC) library closed its literacy collection. COPIAN, the Centre for Literacy, and others intervened and had literacy resources shipped to them when the library shut down. Rumour has it that some of the boxes ended up in a garage for safe-keeping, lest they be destroyed.

In terms of literacy-related publishers, Grassroots Press was the main Anglophone press mentioned; Arrowmight was mentioned as having Indigenous literacy materials; there was also one French-language literacy press. The internet apparently does not have a lot of material at suitable literacy levels for learners from Francophone or Indigenous programs.

Practitioner development. Several literacy organizations spoke about trying to create professional development opportunities by bringing local practitioners together for information-sharing and networking, but practitioner development was mentioned by almost all interviewees as a critical need and a key purpose for a national network. Not only basic instructional technique was mentioned as an area of interest, but also, assistance for the increased complexities that literacy tutors and practitioners were expected to address such as ESL, mental health, settlement, housing and food scarcity, and unemployment. Interaction between practitioners to share materials and teaching ideas, were considered invaluable.

As mentioned earlier, several individuals' blogs, including Dr. Allan Quigley, Brigid Hayes, Christine Pinsent-Johnson, are used as resources for academics and activists, not volunteers or teachers. New ideas about literacy or literacy-related research at a conceptual level were not circulating widely, and therefore could not influence new approaches to programming or instruction.

[7] Thomas Sork identifies three levels of quality of program planning: technically competent, socially aware, and ethically responsible. Only the more experienced practitioners or decision-makers interviewed spoke directly or indirectly about ethical responsibilities in the adult literacy field. These inevitably also mentioned the frustration of trying to work with the Canada Jobs Grant and the frustration of the PIAAC study being used to guide policy without analysis or critical thinking about the results.

Advocacy and Policy

All the points made above come together in the realm of policy. Although many interviewees spoke of the urgent need for stronger national, provincial and territorial policy, only a few of the people interviewed for this study were actively working with their own governments to develop adult literacy-related policies. It is unclear whether the hesitation to lobby more forcefully or to make specific policy recommendations is a caution about biting the local hand that feeds, but it may have practical reasons as well. There seemed to be no time to talk policy at either provincial or national levels, no way to connect with colleagues on a national basis to find out about priorities, and no national organization to encourage policy work.

Generally, literacy leaders interviewed therefore did not seem to see their role in the policy realm. For people newer to the adult literacy field, there did not even seem to be a great deal of critical awareness about adult literacy in a policy or political sense.[7]

More seasoned practitioners, who had experienced a range of political environments and their approaches to funding, were blunter but also had a resigned tone. One interviewee said: "Policy is like air. It's around you all the time and usually invisible, but it's critical ... and you can sure tell if there's a skunk in the room!"

Nonetheless, several literacy leaders were actively working in their regions in the hopes of being able to increase awareness for literacy and thereby secure more political support, including more funding. It seemed as if their hope was that this increased awareness and support among policy makers might indirectly lead to more formal policy improvements even if they themselves were not actively involved in the policy development. For example, literacy leaders mentioned that they invited government representatives to special literacy events knowing that meeting the teachers and learners would provide real-life context for policy decisions.

Several people mentioned that the adult literacy policies in their provinces seemed to be made by administrators without a lot of input from the literacy specialists. As such, a national policy or framework might set a positive example for provinces more inclined to cut literacy funding or take directions that do not support literacy learners, even if literacy specialists are not included in the policy development itself. In that way, a national policy or framework could also contribute to increased equity across the country.

Several provinces have provincial strategies or frameworks of some sort, but it was unclear to the people interviewed how effectively these were guiding regional actions given that their programs were experiencing problems related to poor policy development. These may include funding formulas, communication between various stakeholders, poor laddering between programs, funding linked to unrealistic definitions of progress, disconnection between agencies providing learner supports.

There were examples of small groups that had formed to bring adult literacy policy to the federal government's attention again. These groups appeared to have been formed as ad hoc committees and so did not meet regularly. In one case, the group leader retired, and it was unclear to one of the interviewees whether the group would continue its discussions. In a more recent case, a group of literacy leaders was asked to submit a brief on adult literacy to provide information to the federal budget process.

For people who had been involved in the literacy field for a longer time, there were nostalgic, longing comments about the National Literacy Secretariat and equally passionate negative comments about OLES. It is perceived that policy decisions may have been made by individuals or groups far removed from the literacy grassroots, so no information is flowing about aims, schedules, or priorities. This is causing a considerable amount of distrust about the current government's aims.

Similarly, the Canada Jobs Grants (CJG) were described by several people as if they were one big, insulting trick question. The few interviewees who had tried to maneuver their way through the funding processes by developing partnerships with employers or colleges came up empty-handed and felt that they had never been intended to be successful. One interviewee stated that literacy was simply not closely enough linked to the types of training needs that could be addressed by CJG funding. It was further affirmation to some interviewees that literacy was perceived as a peripheral, inconsequential expense rather than an integral part of economic and social development strategies.

To close, for those interviewees who were especially interested in restarting a national policy discussion, the issues raised for national policy discussion might be summarized as follows:

- **Identity:** What do we mean when we say literacy? Who is affected by varying degrees of its presence or absence? What is affected by varying degrees of its presence of absence? How does related stigma affect government's willingness to take on literacy more comprehensively?
- **Programming and resources:** What is the best way to help people gain the "literacy" that they seek? What resources (human and material) best assist in this work? What is federal responsibility and what is provincial responsibility?
- **Research and development:** What do we need to know or understand to make the adult literacy practice as relevant, integrated and useful as possible? How can we transfer that knowledge into concrete actions that improve the outcomes? How can the federal government gain from literacy research and development?
- **Communication:** How do key ideas and information about adult literacy best reach the people who need them the most, including all levels of government? How can issues be linked to policies for stronger communication?
- **Responsibility for the fight:** How do we re-activate the conversation about adult literacy but de-politicize it so that every political party sees it as part of their responsibility? How do we move the needle on the public and government's understanding of literacy, so that we can have a diversified and yet unified effort that helps citizens increase their understanding and communication of the things that matter most to them? How do we embed literacy more firmly and permanently in governments' consciousness, decision-making, and actions?

More specifically, the policy hopes were for:

Strategy and Awareness-raising

- A realistic, long-term federal strategy to serve as a "beacon" for adult literacy (defined in broad, inclusive terms), including a plan that supports the development of a range and continuum of learning and training opportunities.
- Awareness-raising campaigns to communicate what literacy is, even if the terms themselves differ across locations or institutions, why people might need to look for help to develop their skills, and the true nature of literacy development work as more than just training or education.
- Recognition for the complexity of serious social issues that are so often co-located with adult literacy development, and the resources needed to make solid progress with multi-disadvantaged learners.
- A deeper public understanding about how higher levels of literacy, broadly defined, can positively affect individuals' lives as well as systems functioning and community/societal well-being, and why literacy is therefore more than worth the investment of time, energy, and money.
- A broader recognition that literacy is situated in culture and community (rural, urban, socio-economic, ethno-cultural, newcomer, language, gender identity, worker, northern, Aboriginal, deaf), and how that affects learning and program structure, approach, and content.
- A vision of the practices and programs that can holistically and effectively support diverse learners.

Networks

- A national, grassroots-focused network to facilitate policy development, communication, practitioner development, and information and resource-sharing.
- E-learning opportunities, with accessible and open internet infrastructure, to reach remote communities and to offer accessible and flexible programs to learners -learning opportunities as well as critical governmental information being placed online.

Resources

- Sustained (long-term) operational funding at the provincial/territorial level for relevant, responsive, learner-centered programs that can support learners with multiple barriers.
- Adequate program funding at the provincial/territorial level to recognize the value of tutoring and teaching in the form of competitive salaries, pay increases, and professional development.
- Funding to conduct research and develop new programs and materials.
- Funding at the provincial/territorial level to carry out increased expectations around reporting and to update resources and technology from time to time.

CUPE Literacy Program

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