

INFLUENCES

LESSONS FROM POLICY
AND PRACTICES IN LITERACY
AND ESSENTIAL SKILLS
IN CANADA

1990-2019

Submitted by Linda Shoher, LPS Consulting, and Isabelle Coutant, Centre de documentation sur l'éducation des adultes et la condition féminine (CDÉACF) for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)

October 2019

Disponible également en français.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	2
List of acronyms	4
1. Introduction	6
2. Limitations	8
3. Methodology	9
4. Evolution of Federal Approaches to Literacy and Essential Skills	11
4.1 Historical highlights and development.....	11
4.2 Surveys and measures	13
4.3 Essential Skills development	14
4.4 Literacy and Essential Skills: early connections	15
4.5 Federal/provincial/territorial relationships	17
4.6 Merging literacy and Essential Skills: OLES.....	18
4.7 Essential Skills: What They Changed... and What's Next.....	19
5. Impacts	22
5.1 Provincial impacts	22
5.2 Positive impacts	23
5.3 Negative impacts	24
6. Official language minority communities	28
6.1 The case of New Brunswick and minority language adaptation of Essential Skills.....	29
6.2 Anglophones in Quebec	30
7. What we have learned	32
8. A look to the future	35
Summaries of key documents	38
Bibliography	64
Appendix: Interview guide	69

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project has been a model of cooperation and collaboration from its inception. It was a rare experience to work in two languages and across two cultures based on relationships built over many years. Isabelle, as a current researcher with Le centre de documentation sur l'éducation des adultes et la condition féminine (CDÉACF), and Linda, as the former executive director of The Centre for Literacy, had a previous working relationship on joint bilingual programs and projects through our two organizations. For this project, we used our experience of working together each in our own language, comparing and contrasting our perceptions and analyses, and translating back and forth accordingly.

We divided the readings and summary writing, and conducted interviews in the mother tongue of the informants. The two of us participated in each interview, one as interviewer, the other as an observer with a chance to add questions at the end. After each, we compared notes to make sure we had a common understanding or could clarify uncertainties. This process enabled us to capture some of the nuances and challenges of working across cultures, particularly pertinent in the context of literacy and essential skills where culture and context have been areas of contention.

We owe thanks to many – to Lina Shoumarova for her work on the English literature review and summaries and to Donald Lurette for his contribution on French documents and input on minority language involvement on basic skills. To the knowledgeable and insightful members of our advisory group – Daniel Baril, Brigid Hayes, Donald Lurette, Carol Proulx, and Isabelle Salesse – thank you for your feedback and guidance, with special appreciation to Brigid for a nuanced response to the final draft.

The nineteen informants who agreed to interviews of an hour or more were generous and forthcoming in their responses. Many suggested readings, and several gave us original unpublished documents that elucidated our topic in ways that few of the published materials did. This research was an opportunity to gather these valuable documents, some of which will now be accessible online.

We thank Daniel Baril, Paul Bélanger, David Gyarmati, Brigid Hayes, Sandi Howell, Stan Jones, Denise Labrie, Debra Mair, Carol McLeod, Louise Miller, T. Scott Murray, Karen Myers, Jim Page, Christine Pinsent-Johnson, Steve Reder, Margerit Roger, Sylvia Sioufi, Maurice Taylor, and Anonymous (1).

Collectively, these informants played seminal roles in the development of adult literacy and essential skills in Canada from the 1980s until today. Some are retired; many remain actively engaged. Their input shaped many of our findings and conclusions.

Finally, we thank the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), in particular Carol Proulx, for funding this project and giving us the latitude to refocus and refine as new information came to light.

We ended up with enough material for a book and have had to select the content and focus for this brief overview. We hope to continue the work and to seed interest in other researchers to use this as a foundation for further exploration. We take responsibility for any errors or omissions in the report.

Linda Shohet, LPS Consulting

Isabelle Coutant, Centre de documentation sur l'éducation des adultes et la condition féminine (CDÉACF)

List of acronyms

ALLSS or ALL	Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (2003)
CUPE	Canadian Union of Public Employees
ES	Essential Skills
ETS	Educational Testing Services
ESRP	Essential Skills Research Project
HRDC	Human Resources and Development Canada
HRSDC	Human Resources and Skills Development Canada
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey (1994)
IALSS	International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (the Canadian component of the ALL) (2003)
ISRS	International Survey of Reading Skills (2005)
LES	Literacy and Essential Skills
LSUDA	Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities (1989)
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PIAAC	Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (2011)
TOWES	Test of Workplace Essential Skills
YALS	Young Adult Literacy Survey

The nine essential skills

- Reading
- Document use
- Numeracy
- Writing
- Oral communication
- Working with others
- Thinking
- Digital Technology
- Continuous Learning

Literacy skills

Reading, writing, document use and numeracy are generally considered literacy or basic skills in the literacy field and are components of the Essential Skills Framework.

Skills assessed in the international surveys

International Adult Literacy Survey 1994:

- Prose Literacy
- Document Literacy
- Quantitative Literacy

International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey 2003:

- Prose and Document Literacy
- Numeracy
- Problem Solving

Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (2012):

- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Problem solving in technology-rich environments
- Reading components

Note to readers regarding terminology

For this report, we capitalized terms when they refer to a specific project or program. For example, “Essential Skills” is used for the framework developed by the government of Canada. “essential skills” is used when the term refers to basic skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

This project, Phase 1 of a proposed two, set out to answer two questions: What impacts have the theories, assessments and policies behind adult literacy, based on the International Adult Literacy Survey definition, and Essential Skills, as described by the Essential Skills Research Project, had on services for working and non-working adults in Canada with basic skills needs in the past three decades? How can we use the lessons learned to improve future access and provision for those with the greatest need?

In Phase 1, we gathered information through a literature review and interviews with nineteen key informants – practitioners, researchers and policy makers – in both Official Language communities who have been involved in the literacy and essential skills field from the mid-1980s, some even earlier, until 2019. More than 150 documents in English and French have been selected and organized into a database that will be shared and open for future additions. Several of the documents were not in the public domain. Several interviewees generously offered to share reports, policy papers and memoirs that they had written about the topics we were investigating.

We are not yet certain if all the unpublished materials will be made widely available. However, from the 150 documents collected, we wrote extended summaries of eighteen, including several of the unpublished ones. We think these offer a basis for understanding the development of the theories and the implementation of the Essential Skills Framework and the international adult literacy surveys (1993-2012) and the programs and practices they influenced. Arranged chronologically, the summaries also reflect the perspectives of both proponents and critics. They show how individual federal initiatives, one aimed at promoting adult literacy and the other at defining workplace essential skills, eventually intersected and overlapped, not always without tension, and evolved in several provinces/territories in decidedly different ways.

The report, based on the literature review and interviews, identifies some historical, political and social factors that influenced literacy and essential skills research and provision for the majority and minority English and French language contexts and in several provinces and territories. It outlines the different engagement and impacts in Quebec and for minority language communities across Canada. It draws lessons that we hope can inform sharper policy and practice for the current and future skills agenda in Canada and offers some recommendations to labour unions that once played a large role in promoting and supporting literacy for their membership. CUPE has maintained a literacy committee in its organization and hopes to re-assert the importance of basic skills in the current labour environment.

2. LIMITATIONS

Originally conceived to look at all thirteen provinces and territories, the scope of the project was partly dictated by budget and time constraints. Although we collected far more material than expected, we were contracted to write an initial overview report on the subject. In the selected documents and interviews, we have therefore focused on federal policy and two provinces with markedly divergent history and experience relative to literacy and essential skills – Quebec and New Brunswick. Other limitations were unforeseen. We were surprised to find very few documents written originally in French. Almost all the French documents in the list are translations from English. This reflects the lack of uptake of Essential Skills in Quebec, which followed a unique policy path in adult education and in workplace training. According to informants, Francophones as minority participants in other provinces were generally not engaged in the development of Essential Skills, except in New Brunswick.

3. METHODOLOGY

We began the research by collecting reports and other documents related to essential skills prepared by federal government departments and by literacy organizations beginning in the early 1990s. As some of these departments and organizations no longer exist, we consulted specialized catalogues as well as archived web resources.

The online catalogue of the Centre de documentation sur l'éducation des adultes et la condition féminine (CDÉACF, <http://catalogue.cdeacf.ca/>), which also currently houses the National Adult Literacy database (NALD/COPIAN), was a valuable source. The Resource Centre page on The Centre for Literacy website (http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/resource_centre) offers many archived discussion papers, summaries and research scans on literacy and essential skills. A search of the ERIC database also returned results.

To access government reports and papers, specifically on policy issues surrounding international literacy surveys and adult training as well as literacy in the workplace, we used the catalogue of archived resources at Statistics Canada (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/89-552-M>).

Searches were conducted using the following keywords (and combinations): “essential skill*,” “basic skill*,” “literacy,” “Canada,” “international,” “survey,” “workplace learning,” “workplace literacy,” “adult literacy,” “adult learning,” etc. Later, we added other search terms such as “Indigenous,” “Aboriginal,” “immigrant*,” and “francophone” to seek findings on essential skills for specific communities.

Finally, to answer the question about how past policies and practices related to essential skills in Canada can inform the future skills agenda, we included in the general bibliography resources on topics regarding current changes in the workplace, the future of work, and skills for the 21st century. A primary catalogue for these themes was the CERIC Resources page (<https://ceric.ca/literature-searches/>).

Additional resources were suggested, and some provided, by the key informants. Among these resources are unpublished reports originally prepared for internal use by federal departments such as Human Resources Development Canada (now ESDC). These materials, collected in the Bibliography Database, provide an overview of the evolution of literacy and essential skills policies and practices

in Canada — as well as critiques — from the point of view of policy-makers, and of practitioners and academics working in the fields of adult literacy and adult education.

The Summaries section of this report includes eighteen key articles, reports, unpublished papers, book chapters, selected from more than 150 resources compiled in the bibliography database. The summaries are arranged chronologically by date of publication to help delineate the background, history and development of the Essential Skills Framework in Canada.

Table: Qualitative Data Analysis Scale for reporting on informants

Descriptive	Percentage of Respondents
All	Findings reflect the views and opinions of 100% of respondents.
Majority/Most	Findings reflect the views and opinions of at least 75% but less than 100% of respondents.
Many	Findings reflect the views and opinions of at least 50% but less than 75% of respondents.
Some	Findings reflect the views and opinions of at least 25% but less than 50% of respondents.
A few	Findings reflect the views and opinions of at least two respondents but less than 25% of respondents.

4. EVOLUTION OF FEDERAL APPROACHES TO LITERACY AND ESSENTIAL SKILLS

4.1 Historical highlights and development

Federal interest in adult literacy and adult education dating back to the 1960s took more than two decades to develop into formal engagement. Awareness of undereducation among adults in Canada emerged in 1960. The Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act saw Ottawa invest \$1.5 billion with provinces to fund hundreds of new vocational schools over six years. Jurisdictional concerns between the federal and provincial governments, particularly Quebec, ended the collaboration, but many of the schools became the network of Canada's community colleges. In 1967, a new federal Adult Occupational Training Act focused on short-term re-training for unemployed and underemployed workers revealed that many adults could not qualify to retrain. The growth of second-language teaching following the Official Languages Act of 1969 heightened awareness of undereducation as many adults did not have enough literacy in their mother tongue to easily learn a second language. For a few years, two new programs, Basic Training and Skills Development (BTSD) and Basic Job Readiness Training (BJRT) targeted these groups through short-term programs for jobs and elementary and high school equivalencies as prerequisites for vocational training.

Federal spending was cut back in the 1970s but, with awareness raised, several provinces produced reports and commissions that addressed both illiterate and undereducated adults. Various committees examining poverty and finance also noted the issue, and the first major study of illiteracy in English was written, *Adult Basic Education in Canada and Literacy Activities in Canada* (Thomas, 1975-76). Activists identified literacy as a social justice issue.

During this period, unrelated to literacy research, at the federal Department of Manpower and Immigration, researcher Arthur Smith developed a theory and materials on Generic Skills for Occupations. He defined generic skills as behaviours that are common and transferable across many tasks in many occupations. They included academic reasoning, interpersonal and manipulation skills. His work would underpin the Essential Skills Framework twenty years later.

Meanwhile, momentum was building around adult literacy. The founding of the Movement for Canadian Literacy in 1977 gave English-speaking activists a voice. Publication of a second report in 1983, *Adult Illiteracy in Canada - A Challenge* (Thomas) and a growing number of federal and provincial studies and reports on adult illiteracy laid the groundwork for the 1986 Speech from the Throne that announced a national literacy initiative. Responsibility was given to the Department of the Secretary of State that began work in 1987 to prepare for the upcoming UNESCO International Literacy Year in 1990.

In 1988, the federal government created the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) to fulfill its commitment to literacy: to support organizations and institutions that worked in this sector, to raise awareness, to foster links between stakeholders, and to develop research and produce resources. Under the auspices of the Secretary of State of Canada, the NLS was independent of department-specific mandates. It promoted a broad vision of literacy as a means of integration and citizen participation, and valued all ways of acting in literacy, through family, community and workplace.

Also, in 1987, the first of several surveys using a new methodology to assess adult literacy appeared. *Broken Words*, a study commissioned by Southam publication interspersed personal stories with statistics that suggested almost half the Canadian population had a literacy deficit. The study galvanized readers across the country and produced the first shocking headlines that half of the population was « functionally illiterate ».

According to some informants, adult education in Canada had always focused strongly on the cultural and social aspects of learning. The NLS followed in this tradition. Throughout its existence, it cultivated relationships and worked through a model of partnership and capacity building with all stakeholders concerned with literacy: community, government, institutional and union, as well as workforce sectoral committees. It also reached out to sectors not previously concerned, such as justice and health. This mandate for the NLS continued as it was moved from the Department of the Secretary of State to Multiculturalism and Citizenship and then to Human Resources and Skills Development (today Employment and Social Development Canada).

4.2 Surveys and measures

The first statistical surveys of adult literacy changed the landscape. In 1990, the Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities survey (LSUDA) provided a quantitative portrait of reading and writing skills in Canada. In 1995, the results of the first International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS, 1993), conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), were published. Statistics Canada was a major partner in the development of IALS. Both surveys corroborated that significant numbers of adult Canadians had literacy challenges. The National Literacy Secretariat promoted the surveys actively to raise awareness about the new way of assessing literacy and to engage stakeholders to address the needs.

These two surveys disrupted the way literacy had been viewed. The methodology of the assessments was derived from scientific methods used by psychologists to measure individual suitability for specific roles, usually in jobs, and becoming increasingly standard in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Psychometrics measure verbal, numerical and problem-solving capacity and behaviours. In the 1980s, the Educational Testing Services (ETS) in the United States applied the relatively new method of test design – item response theory — to measure reading ability directly rather than through indirect measures such as self-report or years of schooling as had been the norm for the entire century. ETS used it for the Young Adult Literacy Survey (YALS) which became the prototype for the later international literacy surveys.

Literacy was no longer conceptualized as a dichotomy of “literate/illiterate.” Moving away from equating literacy with levels of education, the developers looked at what people could do with written information, and assigned “levels” to literacy based on the complexity of specific tasks or “items”. They described five levels of literacy. At Level 1, a respondent can decode print and understand only the most literal information. At Levels 4/5, a respondent can comprehend and make inferences from multiple sources of print information. The same methodology has been used and adapted for each of the international surveys since 1993. They have measured numeracy and problem-solving as well as reading, prose and document use, and in the 2012 survey, expanded problem-solving to a “technology-rich environment”. As population studies, the surveys extrapolate from the sample of respondents in each participating country to produce statistics on the portion of the population at each literacy level.

Canada has had the largest sample of respondents in the three international surveys to date. The early surveys presented almost 50% of the population as having literacy problems, with some variation across the provinces/territories, and made the assertion that Level 3 was the required level of literacy. Misinterpretations based on these assertions would continue for many years as further surveys were released, and neither the public nor policy makers were familiar with the new definition of literacy now being used.

None of the earlier surveys included anyone in the sample who was “absolutely illiterate”; a respondent had to be able to at least decode print. The most recent survey (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, PIAAC) added a level below Level 1 to try to understand the specific barriers faced by adults with the most severe reading problems.

4.3 Essential Skills development

In 1994, a different unit of the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development was undertaking its own research on basic skills. The objective of the Essential Skills Research Project (ESRP)¹ was to identify the basic skills needed in the workplace.

In the 1990s, changes in the economy were more rapid and apparent. Technology was becoming increasingly central in workplaces, and its use required greater reading and problem-solving skills. At the time, several countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia had already compiled lists of core competencies required for the workplace. The federal government wanted to create its own evidence-based list by identifying the skills actually used at work rather than from needs expressed by employers.

The ESRP used the Generic Skills research from the 1970s as the foundation for the new project. They eventually settled on an Essential Skills Framework outlining nine Essential Skills – reading, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, thinking, computer use, and continuous learning – which applied to the workforce. Some of the researchers who developed the IALS methodology also worked on developing the Essential Skills Framework.

¹ Mair, D. (1997). The development of occupational Essential Skills profiles. Dans M. Taylor (Ed.), *Workplace Education: The Changing Landscape* (pp. 299-318). Toronto: Culture Concepts.

An objective of the ESRP was to develop Essential Skills Profiles to enrich the existing National Occupational Classification (NOC) by describing the skills required to perform tasks for jobs requiring a high school diploma or less. The developers set out to dissect the tasks performed at work to provide better grounding to assess training needs. They believed that adding a core competency framework to these skills profiles would improve the training capacity of the private sector.

Another objective of the Essential Skills Framework was to enhance the employability of people without qualifications to enable them to take entry-level jobs. Some informants described the initial methodology for developing the essential skills profiles as strong and rigorous. More than 3 000 interviews were conducted, and literacy task analysis methodology was used to identify the skill level required for particular jobs. A worker at mastery level of an occupation would be shadowed by fifteen to twenty trained « profilers » who documented the skills and collected authentic workplace materials. The ESRP adapted scales from the International Adult Literacy Surveys and the Canadian Language Benchmarks as well as other international sources to develop a common way to talk about the ES. Some informants described how the methodology nevertheless loosened over time, as lack of funding and time meant that fewer interviews were conducted and profiles could not be continuously updated. Despite that, between the mid-1990s and early 2000s, a commitment to quality research was evident. A selection of workplace materials collected during that period and published in 2001 (Lewe and McLeod) provides an example of the careful process used in the peak years of essential skills research.

4.4 Literacy and Essential Skills: early connections

Until the mid-1990s, there was limited interaction between the NLS and the ESRP. In 1993, the National Literacy Secretariat was moved to Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC). Although the Ministry worked with employers, the NLS kept relative autonomy and continued to work closely with the community and to fund multi-sectoral partnerships. Its Workplace Learning stream through a business-labour partnership model was developing and testing innovative models of intervention for workplace literacy and basic skills across the country, particularly in the West and in Nova Scotia. A program officer from this stream sat on the ESRP advisory committee, and several knowledgeable and deeply engaged researchers and practitioners happened to be working with the NLS workplace stream and the ESRP at the same time.

Some informants highlighted the key roles played by individuals in the eventual intersection and integration of adult literacy and Essential Skills at the federal level. These early champions were drawn into government or contracted from academia and from the field. They brought research knowledge and experience in adult education, second language, assessment and testing, workplace training, social work, and more. They also brought an energy and passion to this work that they believed would improve the lives of people in Canada. The interviews revealed a strong personal commitment on the part of government agents in the 1990s to quality research and to building relationships with community and with the work sector, both employers and unions. According to some informants, circumstances and a desire to use resources to better effect, rather than bureaucratic pressure, led to increased cooperation and collaboration between the NLS and the ESRP. However, this commitment could be seen as double-edged. Some informants identified specific individuals who continued, long after this period, to influence thinking and policy orientations about literacy and essential skills both inside government and in the field based on personal vision or beliefs.

At this time, the Employment Branch of HRSDC had funds only to develop ES profiles, while NLS had funds and a mandate to develop and test initiatives that aligned with good workplace literacy practice. In the mid-1990s, the ESRP and NLS collaborated to test Essential Skills profiles in workplaces and to develop usable tools for practitioners and employers. Through these joint initiatives, many models were tried out across provinces, and tools, such as the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES), were created and promoted. Documents and informants suggest that this was a pragmatic alliance, and that neither branch saw a necessary conflict. At the beginning, the ES Framework and profiles were used only in relation to workplace initiatives supported by the NLS. However, as time went on, Essential Skills developers began to link the ES Framework to other settings, including schools and daily living. This shift marked the beginning of tensions and divisions with many literacy practitioners and researchers who perceived literacy and ES as based on opposing worldviews or ideologies. Some informants noted that the divide between community literacy providers and ES providers was never entirely bridged even after the two streams were eventually formally integrated at HRSDC many years later.

In 2000, following a widely-publicized scandal at HRSDC that suggested billions of taxpayer dollars were unaccounted for because of poor or non-existent paperwork, the department reacted by introducing rigid accountability procedures. Although the charges were later shown to be unfounded, the new processes remained fixed, part of a general move in government away from collaboration with the voluntary sector towards a funder-client model. The NLS was pushed to integrate into the administrative structure of HRSDC and encouraged to abandon its practice of providing grants and to follow department guidelines designed to track contribution agreements. These changes undercut the focus on relationship building and experimentation and forced a rigid reporting system on organizations that did not have the inclination or capacity to adjust. They created challenges in minority contexts. Some informants noted that, at the same time, changes in staff saw the arrival of career bureaucrats with less experience in the fields of literacy and training and less understanding of the needs of the field. A strong emphasis was now placed on the accountability and efficiency of project funding, to the detriment of the long-term development of effective literacy activities and communities of practice.

4.5 Federal/provincial/territorial relationships

Between the late 1980s and the early 2000s, on the workplace side, the federal government, through the ESRP, worked with provincial and territorial governments developing skills profiles and thinking on workplace training and the competency-based approach to workplace training. NLS-funded projects were carried out with the active participation of provinces and territories, employer and union representatives. The NLS regularly held discussion tables, forums and symposia to exchange knowledge and mark progress.

This collaboration was happening almost everywhere in Canada, except in Quebec. At the time of the ESRP, Quebec was reviewing its own list of trades and professional standards, and did not participate in the work carried on in the rest of Canada. In 1995, Quebec passed an *Act to foster the development of manpower training*, which guaranteed, among other things, that companies with a payroll of more than \$ 1 million devote 1% of their payrolls to training and skills development for their employees. This law had major impacts in Quebec, which no longer depended on federal funds for workplace training. In addition, in 1997, after Ottawa had devolved responsibility for manpower training to the provinces and territories, Quebec negotiated the repatriation of the funds

dedicated to training, and created its Ministry of Employment and Social Solidarity. On the adult learning front, the Quebec Ministry of Education was preparing its *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* (2002) and the integration of generic skills into its Adult General Education program. Moreover, according to some informants, the popular literacy movement in Quebec rejected the vision underlying Essential Skills as « neoliberal », that is, driven by market forces as opposed to the pursuit of social good. These informants noted that this philosophical divide contributed to the lack of engagement of the province with the federal government on Essential Skills.

An area in which Quebec did participate was the Federal-Provincial Shared-Cost funding that the NLS had developed in the 1990s. This model saw annual agreements negotiated with each province/territory to transfer half the cost of adult literacy projects jointly agreed upon by both parties. One informant characterized this period as the « golden age » of adult literacy in Canada. It was a time of intense activity that supported development of resources, research and awareness in every part of the country. There was room for experimentation and for failure, and the seeds of family literacy, research in practice, and many innovative workplace models were planted and took root during this time.

In the early 2000s, after the NLS was forced to adhere more closely to the departmental focus on accountability, federal-provincial-territorial ties in adult literacy became more difficult. When the results of the second International Adult and Literacy Skills Survey (IALSS) were released in 2003, with no change in scores, the NLS which had no mandate for literacy provision, was nonetheless held responsible for the lack of progress on Canada's literacy scores. Provinces and territories began to pursue more of their own initiatives with their own budgets, but variation in adult literacy investments across the country that had always existed now increased. Federal-provincial shared funding for literacy ended in 2006.

4.6 Merging literacy and Essential Skills: OLES

In 2006, HRSDC, after several years of discussion, merged the National Literacy Program with two other programs, creating the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program (ALLESPP) and the National Office of Literacy and Learning (NOLL) to manage it. In 2007, NOLL was changed to the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES). This marked the end of efforts to align the NLS's

workplace literacy efforts with the department's Essential Skills initiatives. The branch of HRSDC responsible for the ESRP and sector councils now funded workplace essential skills projects while OLES was firmly embedded in the labour market mandate of HRSDC. Its family and community-based literacy activities diminished while Essential Skills found their way into Indigenous training projects and the Red Seal program.

With the federal-provincial-territorial funding stream that had supported research, capacity development and infrastructure across the country now ended, a policy of core funding for national organizations and provincial/territorial coalitions began. All other funding was project-based and awarded through Calls for Proposals. The allocation of funds based on continuous intake that had existed under the NLS for community, family and workplace literacy was now directed mainly to workforce-workplace projects. OLES began to use the term Literacy and Essential Skills, or LES, to describe its activities and insisted that essential skills had to be addressed in all literacy proposals. According to a few informants, this requirement led some literacy organizations to change their names and mandates, and others to pretend to be doing work that they were not. Over the next eight years, only three Calls for Proposals were issued. The total of funds allotted to OLES by Treasury Board was not increased, but in most of those years, the allocated funds were not fully spent. When a Call for Proposals was issued in 2013 to create a pan-Canadian network for LES to replace core funding, organizations across the country collaborated for more than a year to develop models. In May 2014, all proposals were refused except for one from three coalitions in the North, and in June 2014, core funding ended. Most national literacy organizations, including research centres, closed or dramatically reduced size and function. Many provincial coalitions closed, although a few still exist with provincial funding support. Literacy provision continues, funded by provinces and territories, but there are currently no federally funded pan-Canadian resource centres, meeting places, or general infrastructure to support the field.

4.7 Essential Skills: What They Changed... and What's Next

Informants identified both positive and negative outcomes from Essential Skills. Most informants said that the term « essential skills » made it possible to talk about basic literacy training with workplaces and policy makers without using the term “literacy”, which was viewed negatively and as stigmatizing. From the beginning, the Essential Skills approach and vocabulary appealed to employers

and some unions. It was now easier to identify concrete gaps and potentially overcome them with customized training focused on daily workplace tasks. The courses became more effective than those offered before which had more of a school approach. This was a major change which was perceived very positively by workplace educators. Even though the original ES research had profiled workers who operated at a mastery level, some informants reported that, initially, Essential Skills were very beneficial for people in low-skilled jobs that require basic skills. They noted that people in these jobs benefited from training, stayed in employment or progressed through job levels. Several informants said that the quality of training and essential skills has improved over the years, and that in some sectors, ES have been fully integrated. This varies across the provinces. Manitoba and Nova Scotia were identified as the provinces with similar models and the widest integration. In some provinces, it is integrated by sector, for example, construction in British Columbia through the work of SkillPlan.

The Essential Skills Framework is also seen as very useful by some informants to track the learning of individuals. It has been used to create recognized evaluation tools, such as TOWES, MeasureUp and Camera, and integrated into effective training programs such as the Red Seal certification program. However, also noted by some of our informants, the Essential Skills Framework addresses the needs of people who already have some basic skills. It cannot be used to train the less literate or those far from the labour market. Some informants said that the use of ES has widened the gap between those who are ready for work or already working, and those with the lowest skills, and crowded out lower-end funding and services. A few informants distinguished between the framework and its use and abuse by governments and providers.

Some informants pointed out that, despite the argument that the skills also apply to daily living and school, the Essential Skills Framework had been developed in and for the workplace and was imposed on the community sector. After 2008, the funding of literacy was increasingly dependent on the use of the Essential Skills Framework. However, this framework was not adapted to community-based literacy, which is often holistic and committed to addressing the living conditions of their participants (housing, health, poverty). The approach implicit in Essential Skills does not allow for contextualized learning outside the workplace or take account of culture.

A few informants mentioned that OLES and the ESRP reside in a department with an employment/labour market mandate, and that addressing community and family is not their focus.

One informant characterized the tendency to look for a « one-size-fits-all » approach as the perpetual search of governments for the « silver bullet ».

A few informants and documents mentioned a lack of objective independent research on ES, noting that some of the earliest and most knowledgeable researchers during the years of development were providers and/or government employees who eventually became program managers at colleges or consultants selling ES services and products. More recently, OLES has commissioned and published in 2019 external reviews of Essential Skills products and evaluation tools and selected projects with a view to updating the skills and profiles. For the moment, the last update on ES tools on the government web site was done in September 2015.

This report looks at some impacts, positive and negative, from the integration of adult literacy and the ES framework and at lessons learned that should be applied as we develop and implement a future skills agenda.

5. IMPACTS

The international literacy surveys and the Essential Skills Framework have had both positive and negative impacts on policy and practice at the federal and provincial/territorial levels, but as is typical in Canada, the impacts are varied. This report looked at two provinces – Quebec and New Brunswick – for examples of this variation, but found references to all provinces and territories in the literature review.

It is not always possible to distinguish the impacts from the literacy surveys and the Essential Skills Framework as they increasingly overlapped and eventually merged, first at the federal policy level after 2007 and then in some provinces/territories. The impacts discussed in this section have been synthesized from the interviews and document summaries.

5.1 Provincial impacts

The fewest impacts of the Essential Skills Framework are found in Quebec which has always taken a unique approach to adult education and workplace/workforce training and developed its own competency frameworks which tend to be broader than the nine Essential Skills. There has been some uptake of the federal framework among a few Quebec CÉGEPs, but it has generally been relegated to the services offered to employers by those specific colleges. In Quebec today, one college offers the Test of Workplace Essential Skills. Quebec labour unions supported many adult basic skills programs through school boards in the 1990s and 2000s; however, one informant suggested that this work has now generally been integrated into other training, but noted that the skill level among unionized workers has risen over time, making literacy training in the workplace less relevant today. The informant acknowledged that, like everywhere in Canada, Quebecers found the term “alphabétisation” pejorative.

Quebec did take up the results from the international literacy surveys to raise public awareness and to pressure the provincial government to increase funding for adult basic education. Quebec identifies basic education as part of its adult education policy which makes it less vulnerable to dramatic rise and fall in funding. However, school boards that have primary responsibility for this delivery have not increased their offer of basic education and popular education,

and the model of popular adult education unique to Quebec has lost ground in recent years. The province provides core funding to the community sector that includes literacy programs and increased the base amount in 2017. However, as noted earlier, there remains a deep philosophical divide over literacy and skills between socially progressive community adult educators and the proponents of the international surveys model. As in most provinces/territories, provision for the least educated adults has diminished over the past decade.

5.2 Positive impacts

International surveys make comparisons possible

The international surveys gave provinces and territories ways to compare adult literacy and skills that they had not previously had. Within provincial and territorial adult education systems, none collects outcome data on adult literacy provision or engagement in a comparable way. This systemic gap helps explain why Canada has consistently had the largest sample among participating countries in the three international surveys and why provinces/territories paid for oversampling of specific populations.

Terminology of essential skills and “levels” is easier to communicate

Almost all informants noted that organizations across Canada today use the language of “essential skills” and “competencies”. This usage, they suggested, makes it easier to talk about the real issues of literacy with employers and unions. The terms “literacy”, “alpha” and even “basic” skills all carry pejorative connotations of individual deficit and shame.

However, several informants noted the inherent difference in connotation among the terms. For Francophones, said two informants, “alphabétisation” is “more than a word”; it is a movement with a history and ideology. For Anglophones, as well, before the surveys, literacy advocates had a fixed understanding of “literacy” as a dichotomous term that described the in/ability to read and write. The first studies in Canada in the 1970s all had “illiteracy” in their titles. Anglophone practitioners and advocates generally saw « literacy » as a way toward individual empowerment and social equality. Nevertheless, several informants said that the newer terms feel less negative, more objective, and the concepts of “levels” and a “continuum of literacy” seem to suggest the possibility of improvement.

Essential Skills and scales from IALS have been integrated into many effective models and programs

More than half the informants gave examples of effective programs or models that were based on, or integrated, essential skills. These included some early workplace programs such as one at Durabelt, a manufacturing firm in Prince Edward Island that was showcased by the Conference Board in 1997, or a successful collaboration between a community college and MacMillan Bloedel Sawmill in British Columbia in 1996-97 to upgrade their workers' essential skills during a transition to automation. Interestingly, both programs were short-term interventions to meet a specific need. A more enduring example is found in Red Seal, the interprovincial program that certifies the skills of tradespeople across Canada, which has integrated Essential Skills with a dedicated page on its web site. Tools such as TOWES, CAMERA and Measure UP were also mentioned by informants, as were programs and tools developed for the British Columbia construction industry by SkillPlan. These are only a few examples of many cited. A few said that the IALS scales have been used to effect in tools such as Read Forward developed by Bow Valley College. It is important to note that almost all the examples given by informants were either workplace or work-related.

5.3 Negative impacts

New definition of literacy and methodology of surveys brings new misinterpretations

The methodology for the international surveys and ES, described earlier in this report, was derived from psychological methods originally used to measure individual suitability for specific jobs. Item response theory was supposed to allow finer distinctions among levels of ability in test-takers. Its use as a “direct” measure of reading ability described in five levels based on the task complexity became the prototype for the later international surveys. Level 3 was identified in both the 1993 and 2003 surveys as a « minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society... ». This assertion would eventually become problematic.

Some informants raised concerns about the assumptions that underlie the new model. One informant called the assumption that task difficulty is so tightly linked to an individual's skills “powerful but restrictive” and suggested that the methodology conflates skill use with context. To get a real sense of skill distinction in the use of math, for example, one would need to compare people doing the same task in the same job in the same workplace. Noting that while it was not intentional, this informant believes the implication of the methodology has made it difficult to measure literacy and basic skills work in cross-cultural

contexts. Other informants and critical commentators question the claim that the surveys are direct assessments, arguing that the format of reading information and answering questions is a school-based design and that people do not make daily choices that way.

Focus on Level 3 has affected federal and provincial/territorial literacy policy and reduced services for those with greatest needs

The Level 3 « story » was described by many informants and in some critical papers as one of the most damaging outcomes of the international surveys and the Essential Skills movement. As noted above, Level 3 was initially identified in the 1993 and 2003 surveys as a « suitable minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society... »

A few informants described how some government officials and researchers first began to focus on Level 3 to simplify the key message when other policy makers, politicians and the media found it difficult to understand the new definition of literacy and the complexities of the survey findings. The interpretation of results published by the OECD and Statistics Canada were very nuanced, explaining that results were population-based, and that respondents did not operate entirely at a single level of literacy. Nevertheless, people found it incomprehensible that 50% of the population could have literacy problems. The message about Level 3 being the desired level was much easier to grasp. The unintended consequence was that, without evidence to support it, it was picked up as a scientific fact and accepted by bureaucrats and stakeholders.

Provincial and territorial governments wanted to ensure that their populations reached Level 3. In some cases, they developed and promoted assessment tools or designed skills frameworks such as the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Frame-work that increasingly assigned levels to individuals rather than to populations.

One informant noted that the obsession with Level 3 has created a new dichotomy to replace « il/literate ». For example, one model program, noted by an informant, ran a successful ES project two decades ago and said in a 1997 interview that they no longer needed to offer it because their employees had now reached the level needed for their jobs and the company could concentrate on offering higher level skills training. They already perceived essential skills as « lower » and this dichotomy persists until today. Some informants mentioned that most unions have stopped supporting basic skills because they mistakenly believe there is no longer a need and that they have to focus on training for the future.

Many policy makers and the media continue to talk about the need to get learners to Level 3, to be considered “functionally literate”. Some informants commented that federal funders began to direct funds to projects which targeted people at a high Level 2 to yield the fastest measurable results of interventions. Some informants noted that one consequence of the federal government making Level 3 normative rather than descriptive has left provinces/territories and the community sector solely responsible for services and supports for individuals at Levels 1 and below. In many parts of Canada, these individuals are said to currently have fewer services or none at all.

The end of core funding has brought loss of knowledge, resources and infrastructure

Most informants commented on “loss” in the five years since federal core funding ended for national organizations, including research and resource centres, and provincial coalitions. A consequence of the end of infrastructure and core funding is loss of knowledge, expertise, models, practice and networking opportunities. One informant noted a loss of energy and activism in the field. Cost-sharing models such as the federal-provincial funding agreements seeded what one informant called the “Golden Age “of literacy in Canada when innovation and experimentation were welcomed, and Canada was recognized as an international leader in creating and contributing to new models. For example, Research in Practice flourished in the West with support for practitioners to become researchers of their own work. In the research field, one informant noted that the last generation among English-speaking adult educators at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) is retiring, with only a small number of younger researchers ready to take over. Some informants said that in enlarging the concept of literacy, reading and writing had been lost as areas of attention although the need persists. One informant summed up the situation in the field as a “loss of balance”.

Conclusion: We need a return to balance

All informants felt that the language of essential skills is strongly embedded in the discourse and practice of workplace and community adult learning in most parts of the country and will be around for the foreseeable future. They noted that the profiles have not been kept current and that the list of skills needs to be revised to reflect the realities of life and work today where the skills of communication, interpersonal cooperation and continuous learning are in great demand. These have not been a focus in the past because they are not easily measured. A few informants noted that OLES is in the process of examining the Essential Skills Framework, and has recently published two independent studies, one that provides an overview of existing ES evaluation tools and another that examines three models of ES interventions. Many informants called for a return to balance in addressing the literacy and skills needs of the most disadvantaged and in devising new funding models beyond only project-based. These suggestions are discussed in the sections on “What we have learned” and “A Look to the Future”.

6. OFFICIAL LANGUAGE MINORITY COMMUNITIES

2.7 million Francophones live and work in an environment where the predominant language is English. Very often, to integrate into a workplace or to carry out daily living operations, these people must communicate in English and use bilingual or English documents. In this context, using their literacy skills involves higher levels of complexity than the same exercises in a monolingual setting (Lurette 2013). In addition, Francophone Minority Communities (FMCs) have lower levels of education and skills than Anglophone communities (Bérard-Chagnon, Lepage).

One of the questions we have tried to answer through this research is whether the Essential Skills Framework, as widely disseminated and used, has addressed the unique needs of FMCs.

First, regarding the development of the skills profiles, our informants confirmed that there have been no specific studies of the skills used by Francophones in minority communities, whether they worked in French or English.

Second, the ESRP included the collection of authentic documents to be disseminated to the training sites where the profiles and the Essential Skills Framework were being used. According to informants, the document collection was done in English, and documents and resources were translated into French; there was no collection of source documents in French. In the collection process, informants said that the cultural dimension of skills was somewhat considered by including some authentic material in Indigenous languages. In Manitoba, where the Essential Skills Framework was used to develop programs with a strong partnership approach, especially with the unions, the realities of immigrants and Indigenous people were considered. However, there were absolutely no consultations with the Franco-Manitobans on their needs, some informants reported.

Since the Essential Skills Framework was developed primarily on a monolingual experience, it is questionable whether it meets the needs of Francophones in minority communities (Lurette 2013).

6.1 The case of New Brunswick and minority language adaptation of Essential Skills

According to a few informants, New Brunswick is the province that has used the Essential Skills Framework the most. Moreover, Francophones account for more than one-third of its population, and they are the majority in several regions.

When the Canadian results of the first two international surveys on adult skills and literacy were published, New Brunswick Francophones had lower scores than other FMCs (Bérard-Chagnon & Lepage, 2016). In 2006, in response to these numbers, the provincial government set up a more formal structure to coordinate adult education by creating a dedicated department within its Ministry of Education. This department tested approaches, initiated several projects and experimented with training and evaluation tools. These activities were mainly conducted with Francophone communities and integrated the Essential Skills Framework that was perceived as meeting the needs of the communities.

Although these projects are centralized, each region of the province operates independently with respect to its training programs: regional offices can choose whether to use the tools and they can adapt them to their local reality. One informant suggested that this regional adaptation is responsible for the success of these experiments. Over the years, the products of the various projects were translated and adapted to the training environments of the English-speaking community, an unusual model of development.

The Essential Skills Framework has been adapted as existing programs incorporate other competency frameworks (such as generic skills or pre-employability skills), and tailored to local needs. As one example, the New Brunswick Community College now offers qualifying training with ES-based programs for young adults at Levels 1 and 2 who are not eligible to enter the regular academic pathway.

The example of New Brunswick suggests that the assimilation of the ES Framework into a minority context can be done when it is adapted and tied to the complex realities of the community. This integration work took place over several years and is ongoing in 2019.

6.2 Anglophones in Quebec

Anglophones in Quebec share both similarities and differences with the francophone minority in the rest of Canada.

Anglophones number 1,103,480 (13.7% of the Quebec population), of whom one third are immigrants with English as their First Official Language Spoken (FOLS). The population is unevenly dispersed. While 86.8% live in urban areas, most in Montreal, the remaining numbers are scattered in small communities from Gaspé to western Quebec.

Despite performing better than the Francophone minority language communities on the 2012 PIAAC, Anglophones do not have better access to training or jobs. The biggest identified barrier to seeking a job is lack of French language skills followed by lack of self-confidence and lack of employability services of any kind or in English. All government forms (applications and reports, and program material) are in French only. Access demands fluent bilingualism.

Quebec controls its immigration and uses language training and literacy (*francisation*) as central tools in the social integration of newcomers. However, FOLS immigrants tend to seek services and support in English even while learning French.

Training has been a provincial jurisdiction for two decades. Services for English-speaking job seekers are uneven to non-existent.

As noted in this report, Quebec was not involved in the original development of the Essential Skills Framework, and in the 1990s and 2000s, Anglophones literacy services were offered through a volunteer network and local school boards. Both benefitted from federal-provincial shared cost funding until it ended in 2006.

However, when OLES integrated literacy and essential skills in 2007 and set up core funding for provincial coalitions, Literacy Quebec, the Quebec Anglophone coalition that included both volunteer and school board members, changed its mission and mandate to access funding. Literacy Quebec hired a marketer as its executive director and began to actively promote Essential Skills and workplace outreach. Most of its volunteer members felt ill-equipped to offer workplace services. After some attempts at ES projects and when core funding ended,

Literacy Quebec was the sole remaining English-language organization, now an association of its thirteen volunteer LES providers. Its web site currently talks about literacy as a basic human right and universal access to literacy services through volunteer and community services. There is no mention of essential skills on its home page and only one reference on its history page.

Quebec is also unique in providing core funding to certified popular education groups, including Anglophone literacy groups. Funding was increased in 2017 and the same year, the province created a secretariat with a minister for Anglophone Affairs. The province has also launched policy initiatives that include literacy and employability as areas for action to raise Quebec's scores on PIAAC 2022.

It seems that even though the Essential Skills Framework was developed mainly in English, its impact for the Anglophone minority language community in Quebec has been limited.

7. WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

This section reflects a consensus which emerged from the interviews. Each of the following statements is synthesized from views expressed by at least 50 % of our informants (designated below as « informants » without qualifiers), in response to the question: « What lessons do you think we can take from past experience with successful or unsuccessful policy or program directions in LES to inform a future skills agenda that serves the least skilled Canadians? ».

Literacies and literacy are both necessary in today's world and the world of the future

Informants noted that the concept of multiple literacies is more relevant than ever in a world that relies increasingly on electronic and visual media as well as print. One danger is that literacy has recently come to be used as a metaphor to convey the idea of comprehension and understanding of anything, e.g. food literacy, environmental literacy. This popular use of the term, combined with the government focus on employability skills, has tended to obscure a continuing need to enhance the basic literacy skills of reading, writing, and numeracy. One informant mentioned that while essential skills can help individuals adapt to their environment, the foundation remains literacy skills. Some informants pointed out that the long-standing reluctance of employers, unions or policy makers to talk about literacy prevents the development of a training offer in basic skills, which nevertheless remains a base on which to build other skills.

Adult learning starts from the needs and goals of individual learners

Informants insisted on the need to respect a basic principle of andragogy – to start from the needs of the learners, their experiences and the contexts in which they live – and suggested that this has too often been forgotten in many Essential Skills programs. In focusing too narrowly on the needs of the labour market, some adult education programs have forced people to adapt to training rather than vice versa. Informants also talked about a disturbing trend to make assumptions about the abilities of people to learn. This has been a negative outcome of assigning literacy levels to individuals. While some research has

suggested that investing in people at the lowest skill level brings a higher return on investment, many funders today target mainly learners at higher skill levels excluding those most in need under a mistaken assumption that they cannot learn or progress quickly enough. Some recent commentary in mainstream media have supported this view. Informants who flagged the issue spoke of the need to push back and promote inclusion of those learners with the greatest needs in all contexts including workplace learning.

Culture matters

Informants specified that programs should take account of the culture and respect the language of the learners. Products and tools, even if developed in one language, should be adapted, not merely translated. Psychometric tools do not generally account for culture. There is an extensive literature on the cultural sensitivity of the international surveys and the concerns have been carried over to the ES Framework. In Canada, with a large immigrant population often living and working in a second, third or fourth language, these issues are pertinent. Informants noted the Northern territories as having found a way to blend their literacy and ES programs to meet the cultural needs of their Indigenous populations. On the other hand, as noted, in most parts of the country, apart from New Brunswick, Francophones in minority language communities were not involved with Essential Skills development, nor was their reality of working in English or bilingual contexts accounted for in the international surveys.

Partnerships are effective in addressing basic skills needs

Informants suggested the programs that best meet the needs of individuals are those that have been developed and delivered in partnership, from design to evaluation. They pointed out that partnerships have long been valued in literacy skills development programs, and were actively encouraged by the National Literacy Secretariat. They suggested that partnerships should be natural in literacy programs because the learners have complex needs that require a variety of expertise. Informants highlighted effective partnership models of government, employers, and unions that focused on ES, such as at Workplace Education Manitoba. Career Pathways, a U.S. model with various program designs, is currently seen as effective and being investigated by the Future Skills Centre in Canada. This model was also highlighted in a recent report to OLES by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC). These programs involve multiple partners from government, institutions and community, to support learners over an extended learning path to reach a personal goal. Basic skills are integrated into most of the programs.

A broad vision of adult learning should be part of a Canadian strategy for lifelong learning

Informants noted that adult literacy and basic skills needs should be addressed in the context of a life-wide and lifelong learning strategy. This strategy would include formal, informal, and non-formal learning sites and opportunities. If the focus remains primarily on workplace and labour markets, they suggested, adult education will remain utilitarian. Strong leadership at the federal level would help develop a culture of training, which is the most fertile ground for effective programs. Informants perceive that Quebec offers a positive example in this regard, as it is the only province with an adult education and training policy and a legislative framework that mandates investment in training (*Act to promote workforce skills development and recognition*). One informant suggested that effective basic skills programs in the future may not look like the narrow accountability-driven ones we have become used to and may resemble the longer-term pathways models currently evolving in some American states.

Research and evidence about what works, need to be broader and more diverse

Informants had a lot to say about research and evidence. One talked about needing more research that met the « gold standard » of randomized control studies. Another suggested that we need to shift understanding of what counts and not rely solely on quasi-experimental designs. The same informant would like to see practitioners generate more evidence. Informants shared a consensus that the range of evidence has been too narrow and most studies too short, with employment or further education the only valued outcomes (further education is sometimes dropped in a tight labour market). One informant believes that we have been asking the wrong questions, e.g. focusing on finding a better or best methodology or looking for the « silver bullet ». The same informant suggested that we need to look at broader, longer-term outcomes based on learners' meaningful goals. Informants noted that longer-term research models, combining quantitative and qualitative evidence such as Upskill, have been developed in Canada through OLES in the past decade to look at workplace outcomes. Finally, two informants suggested that we need to re-visit the theory underlying the international surveys and ES framework considering more recent research on reading and brain development. Overall, there was interest in strengthening the evidence base on basic skills using both new and traditional research methods to take account of the realities of learners and educators and trainers.

8. A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

As governments turn their attention to the future skills that they expect citizens to need for work and life in an electronic society, the federal government through ESDC has recently established a Future Skills Council and a Future Skills Centre. The Council will “advise the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour on national and regional skills development and training priorities” with a focus on “how technologies and other emerging trends are creating new opportunities for Canadians.” Among their topics of investigation are “emerging and persistent skills gaps” and “identification of transferable skills and competencies needed across different sectors.” The language suggests some potential points of intersection with past Canadian work on basic skills and competencies, but some informants to our research expressed skepticism about the possibility.

We asked key informants a question about the connections between literacy and Essential Skills and future skills that generated thoughtful response and common themes. Almost everyone talked about continuous learning and the need for the soft skills of interpersonal relations and cooperation.

Some highlighted information competence that includes the ability to find and evaluate sources, currently identified as critical literacy (Level 4) in the international survey framework. One informant suggested that we will need centres of expertise in written communication, rather than literacy. Another pointed out current trends in communication that favour texting over e-mail over telephone over face-to-face exchange which have implications for what will be considered “essential” or basic skills.

Some informants talked about new models of basic skills learning – peer-to-peer, free, with badges – that can offer alternatives to traditional sites/spaces/recognition for learning. Many spoke of concerns about growing inequality and issues of equity. They worried that the 12 -15% of the population with limited or low skills will be further marginalized as the discourse on future skills consistently foregrounds artificial intelligence (AI) and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

The new Future Skills Centre announced six innovation projects in June 2019 that target Indigenous and Northern youth, youth employment seekers, underemployed people, newcomers with employment barriers, and other marginalized groups. They mainly focus on digital tools and technologies, test program models and define digital competences. These projects were announced after we had completed our interviews, but they called to mind the concerns that some informants had raised about the fact that literacy and basic or essential skills are rarely or never mentioned in discussions or Calls for Proposals related to future skills.

Many informants noted that the adult literacy and workplace essential skills communities have largely operated in separate domains philosophically and in practice in Canada, even after the forced merger through ESDC. A 2011 study of the field of adult literacy scholarship since the mid-1980s that looked at publications by academic literacy researchers, literacy practitioners and government sponsors of literacy found some common ground between the academics and practitioners, yet concluded that the field was characterized by “three researcher solitudes” and “an absence of cross-authorship and cross-dialogue”. The three stakeholder groups rarely referenced or acknowledged each other’s research.

Informants expressed some concern that the current federal Future Skills initiative is situated in a section of ESDC separate from OLES and that research activities supported through the Future Skills Centre will not acknowledge or use lessons learned from thirty years of experience and learning about literacy, basic and essential skills that remain foundational for the future.

Some informants envisioned a future for both literacy and essential skills in Canada – “We need both” – based on knowledge and lessons from the past. More dialogue and exchange are needed. The Essential Skills Framework needs to be updated and renewed, but understood for what it can and cannot do. Some informants discussed how all frameworks tend to eventually drift from their original purpose and become formulaic and rigid, often used by people who have forgotten or never understood their origin or purpose.

A few informants talked about finding a middle ground for future federal funding that includes a stream of stable core funding to support learning adapted for people with the lowest skills and a project-based stream to support innovation

and research. Many noted the need for infrastructure and collaboration and partnerships with the public system and community organizations. Some informants regretted the limited engagement of unions in literacy and essential skills today when some unions once played a vibrant role and developed holistic models of basic skills learning that focused beyond the workplace. Hope was expressed that we can show how training relates to many of the current challenges faced by unions, including elimination of jobs and re-training for new futures.

The need for champions was raised implicitly by the many stories about the knowledgeable and passionate individuals inside government and out who built the literacy and essential skills fields from inception and ensured their development and survival for many years.

Some informants spoke about the need to build on our history. The loss of resources, organizations and expertise lamented by many challenges the capacity of remaining stakeholders and advocates to capture that history. This project tries to make a small contribution to that endeavour.

We end on a note of hope.

A new report from SRDC published in August 2019 and commissioned by OLES to review options for assessing outcomes of LES initiatives and to develop a framework for broader performance measurement has made several recommendations that dovetail with the findings from our study.

The authors propose that LES initiatives should not be evaluated only with single LES metrics, but include a wide range of indicators linked to employability, such as contextual, attitudinal, behavioural and psychosocial factors and skills.

“A best practice in LES performance measurement is that Essential Skills assessments should be part of a broader conceptual and measurement framework that links training goals and expectations with a variety of short- and long-term outcomes based on learner needs” (p. 67). They propose a more holistic measurement framework that takes into consideration both core and soft Essential Skills.



SUMMARIES OF KEY DOCUMENTS

Jones, S. (1993, Nov. 10). *The Definition of Basic Skills and Development of Measurement Instruments*. Unpublished background paper prepared for the Department of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC).

This is the first of three documents developed for the Essential Skills Research Project (ESRP) at Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) that laid the theoretical groundwork for a Canadian framework and tools to assess the relationship of basic skills to specific occupations. This involved defining a set of criteria to identify skills, organizing the skills into lists, determining the levels of ability within each skill, and selecting the best techniques for investigating these skills (p. 1).

The report outlined some current definitions of basic skills. While the traditional notion of basic skills includes reading, writing and arithmetic, it had been extended beyond an individual's learned abilities to include attributes such as motivation and attitude. In their extended sense, basic skills have also been called "generic skills" or "employability skills"; these often "focus on the effect of the skills (i.e. they enable the employee to be more productive) rather than on characteristics of the skills themselves" (p. 1).

The report examined lists of skills proposed in different jurisdictions in the English-speaking world (Canada, the US, the UK, Australia), and concluded that: "The most common kind of research to support the inclusion of some characteristic on a skills list is a survey of employer/employee opinion. There is little research that ties the skills to specific features of workplaces. The exception is the research on workplace literacy, which has begun to document the relation of ability to workplace performance" (p. 1-2). In contrast, the goal of the ESRP was to advance a framework of basic skills that integrated real-life workplace context into the instruments for defining and measuring these skills.

The report also examines different approaches to measuring basic skills and found that most existing methodologies used an anchored difficulty approach. This means that specific tasks are identified as exemplary of a particular skill at a particular level and become markers for that level. Then, other tasks are matched to these anchor tasks to identify the skills and skill levels they require (p. 3). This approach also allows measuring of individual skills by comparing the tasks a person can do to the anchor tasks; in this way, an individual's ability can be matched to task difficulty.

The report concludes with an overview of programs, activities, and research on basic skills as employability skills, such as the Conference Board's Employability Skills Profile in Canada, the Secretary's Commission on Achieving the Necessary Skills (SCANS) proposal in the US, and the national basic skills curriculum and individual assessment projects in the UK and Australia.

Jones, S. (1993, Dec. 7). *Criteria for Identifying Basic Skills: A Research Note for the Definition of Basic Skills and Development of Measurement Instruments*. Unpublished background paper prepared for the Department of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC).

The second document in the series described the principles and criteria for identifying basic skills for the workplace.

Two principles are articulated. The first states that basic skills must be specific, so that job seekers as well as employers, HR personnel, and workplace trainers can compare an individual's skills to those needed to perform a specific occupation. The second principle states that these skills must also support and enable the acquisition and application of other skills.

The document outlined four criteria for defining basic skills: They can be learned, used to facilitate other activities, used to learn new skills, and measured. Eight skills were identified as meeting these criteria: problem-solving, reading, numeracy, writing, oral communication, information technology, working with others, and the ability to learn.

Jones, S. & Déry, L. (1994, Aug. 1). *Levels for the Basic Skills: A Research Note for the Definition of Basic Skills and Development of Measurement Instruments*. Unpublished background paper prepared for the Department of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC).

Having identified, in the second document, the basic skills of the Essential Skills Research Project (ESRP) framework, this research note outlined the levels of each skill to be included in measurement instruments and tested during the methodology trial phase. Since the aim of the ESRP was to measure the skills content of jobs, and not the abilities of individuals, the skill levels were

formulated in a way to determine whether a particular occupation requires a particular skill (p. 16). The levels proposed are cumulative, meaning that the higher levels are understood to include all the tasks in the preceding levels. Given the complexity of many of the listed skills, some were divided into sub-skills, which were also divided into levels.

In devising the levels scale, the research team consulted several of the most comprehensive level frameworks developed in Canada, the US, UK and Australia; a table is included to show how the proposed ESRP framework compares to other level frameworks.

Mair, D. (1997). *The development of occupational Essential Skills profiles*. In M. Taylor (Ed.), *Workplace Education: The Changing Landscape* (pp. 299-318). Toronto: Culture Concepts.

This chapter describes the first phase of the Essential Skills Research Project (ESRP) during which a methodology for examining and systematizing the essential skills required in lower-skill, entry-level occupations in Canada was developed and tested. The project was initiated in response to the deficit in essential skills observed by employers in the changing economy of the early to mid-1990s. Another purpose was to support curriculum development and improve the quality of workplace training. The project built on earlier research on generic skills conducted for the federal government by Arthur Smith in the 1970s. For the ESRP, essential skills are defined as “those skill dimensions that are found in virtually all occupational areas, though their specific form and level of complexity may vary” (p. 301), and are “particularly important in a changing economy” and “in facilitating the acquisition of other skills” (p. 302). The following skills were included: reading, writing, and numeracy skills; thinking skills (problem solving, decision making, planning/organizing job tasks, use of memory, finding information); new essential skills (leadership, teamwork, HR management); and computer use (as an essential skill for the future) (p. 300).

The project included all occupations ranked as Levels C and D in the National Occupational Classification (NOC), occupations for which an education of high school or less is required. A multifaceted approach was developed to describe the essential skills content of these jobs. After reviewing work from other countries and consulting with “experts, workplace literacy practitioners and potential users

of essential skills information” (p. 304), the ESRP research team revised their initial strategy and decided to focus on information about skill content. Profiles of essential skills for each occupation were created; they included information from actual job incumbents, examples of how each skill is used on the job, and sample tasks.

The research team decided on interviews with open-ended questions as the best data-gathering strategy to allow workers “to talk about their jobs in their own words, as this can obtain more information and the kind of realistic information required” (p. 313). The methodology was tested in 1995 in five regional pilot studies (which produced over 800 interviews with workers from a broad range of industries and occupations); simultaneously, a reliability study of the scales, the questionnaire and coding methods was also carried out. Preliminary data were made available to the federally funded Sector Councils.

Jackson, N. (2005, Fall). Essential Skills: Essential Confusion? *Literacies*, 6, 38-43.

This article traces the broader context that helps explain the interest in essential or generic skills, both in Canada and internationally -- the changing nature of work and the workplace, which entails the necessity for people to become more adaptable and to view learning “as a condition of economic survival” for both businesses and individuals (p. 39). In this new environment, the focus of employers and policy makers has shifted towards job performance and skills development. But what are the implications of this shift for the field of literacy? Research on generic, essential or core skills shows that this is a more “complex and contested terrain” (p. 40) and that the concepts associated with these skills “may actually be more useful to policy makers than to employers or individuals” (ibid.). The notion of “transferability” of skills is one such contested issue, with some researchers arguing that the meaning of “transfer” may be lost if the concept is used in an abstract way and out of context. Another issue of debate is the distinction between using the essential skills framework for skills assessment and skills development. Depending on how these functions are viewed by different stakeholders, they may or may not be connected. For example, policy makers at an international level or employers at a national level might be more interested in assessment tools that are disconnected from skills development.

In conclusion, Jackson proposes that Canadian employers, educators and workers can benefit from “bold and innovative” ethnographic research, which would move away from viewing individuals as “cognitive or behavioural units in isolation” and instead ask “how people function in the context of workplace culture and relationships” (p. 43), and how that impacts an individual’s learning behaviour at work.

MacLeod, C. (2007, April). *The Genesis and Evolution of Essential Skills in Canada*. Unpublished report prepared by Carol MacLeod & Associates for the Department of Human Resources and Social Development (HRSDC).

This report has two parts: The first traces the early years of what was then known as the Essential Skills Research Project (ESRP) and its implementation until 2007; the second examines the Essential Skills methodology. The report uses information gathered from interviews with several key individuals in the ESRP development process, such as Debra Mair, who led the project from 1993 to 2002, and Stan Jones, who had worked on the design of methodologies for the 1989 *Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities* (LSUDA) and the 1992 *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS) surveys and who was a consultant for ESRP research. The report also draws on articles written by key respondents, such as Mair’s chapter “The development of occupational Essential Skills profiles” and Jones’ preliminary reports and research notes, all summarized above.

The idea for the project was initiated by Margaret Roberts, Director of Occupational Systems and Standards at Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC). She was interested in Arthur W. Smith’s research for the federal government in the 1970s on generic skills which had pointed towards the possibility of developing a “methodology to identify and describe transferable skills used in all occupations” (p. 80). In 1992, Roberts’ unit completed the latest version of the National Occupational Classification (NOC), “the nationally accepted taxonomy and organizational framework of occupations in the Canadian labour market” (p. 51). Roberts saw the generic skills research as “a window of opportunity” (p. 80), a starting point for the development of the Essential Skills methodology, which she considered could be an important element of the NOC. She wanted to build on and expand Smith’s research and formulate a framework for the analysis of occupations across NOC’s four skill levels (A, B, C and D), which ranged from occupations requiring a university degree to those requiring secondary-level education or less.

In 1992-93, the Canadian economy was experiencing structural and demographic changes, unemployment was high, and there were fewer young people entering the labour force. In addition, following the results from the 1989 LSUDA, there was a concern among employers that young graduates did not have the skills to prepare them for the workplace. In this economic climate, HRSD wanted to stimulate more private-sector investment in training, both for jobs requiring university degrees and those requiring high school or less; it also wanted to improve the quality of training (pp. 14-15). Integrating Essential Skills into the NOC provided the opportunity to address this long-standing interest. In 1993-94 the ESRP was approved. Debra Mair was selected to lead it.

The ESRP was initially called “the Basic Skills Research Project.” However, some potential users of the methodology, such as employers and literacy organizations, perceived the term “basic skills” as referring primarily to the complexity of skills rather than to skills transferable between occupations. To avoid this confusion, in 1996, the project was renamed “essential skills.”

The development of the Essential Skills methodology was based on a three-pronged approach: identifying the skills to include, describing the Essential Skills content of occupations, and developing a data collection strategy to gather information on Essential Skills. As part of the methodology, unique complexity scales were used for each skill; profiles, supported by illustrative examples, were created for the most important skills to show how each skill is used in performing job tasks, and “the commonality of transferable skills instead of the uniqueness of occupations” was examined (p. 12). This last element was preserved from the generic skills approach.

In 1995, the methodology began to be tested across Canada in five regional pilot studies, and a reliability study of the complexity scales was developed for some of the essential skills. Preliminary ESRP data was also provided to the Sector Councils that existed at the time and which were encouraged to integrate the ES profiles into their “occupational standards development processes and to develop strategies to identify and address ES learning needs” (p. 26). In 1996-97, ESRP field research and data collection began for NOC Skill Levels C and D followed by the creation of Essential Skills profiles for occupations on those levels.

In 1998, HRSDC became interested in including the K-12 school system within the ESRP, which prompted the need to establish partnerships with provincial and territorial governments. In 1999, an Essential Skills Product Development Committee was established with a three-year mandate to guide the development of Essential Skills resources, including the Essential Skills database, ensuring that the project met the unique needs of each provincial or territorial jurisdiction. After the Committee completed its mandate, it was replaced, in 2002, by the Technical Working Group on Essential Skills.

The years between 1999 and 2007 were dedicated to enhancing and updating the Essential Skills methodology and database and building capacity by creating a pan-Canadian Essential Skills training program and offering workshops—and, later, certification courses—to professionals from different industries. Several Essential Skills resources were developed—for example, a training curriculum that combined the Essential Skills methodology of occupational analysis with that of the DACUM (Developing a Curriculum) used by Sector Councils. The Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES), developed by SkillPlan and Bow Valley College, continued to be offered.

The second part of the report examines the Essential Skills methodology. It outlines the list and definitions of the Essential Skills, as well as their links to the NOC, their complexity scales, sample tasks, and profiles. MacLeod calls the link between the Essential Skills methodology and the NOC a “significant strength” (p. 51) of the Essential Skills approach.

Starting in 2001, the federal government began signalling its intention to invest in skills development for adults to address the increasing demand for a well-educated and skilled workforce and the continuous demographic challenges in all sectors of the economy. Budget 2003 announced the creation of the Essential Skills and Workplace Literacy Initiative (ESWLI) with the idea of “bridging ES research into practice” (p. 63). The focus was on “developing ES Profiles for the rest of the NOC (Skill Levels A & B); accessing a dedicated stream of project funding to operationalize the research; raising awareness; and implanting ES into other areas” (p. 61). Rolled into the ESWLI was the workplace program stream of the National Literacy Secretariat. The ESWLI put the Essential Skills methodology into action through engagement with employers, the provinces and territories, and with Sector Councils.

Partnerships in Learning. (2007). *Fostering partnership development: An historical look at the National Literacy Secretariat Business and Labour Partnership Program*. Ottawa: Partnerships in Learning.

The Business and Labour Partnership Program was established in 1988 as a federal government initiative through the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS). It promoted closer cooperation in fostering workplace literacy activities and programs across sectors—business, labour, literacy practitioners and provincial and territorial governments. This report presents an in-depth case study of the Business and Labour Partnership to explore both the strategies that made this program effective and the process of partnership development in the context of literacy work. The case study used a qualitative methodology, including interviews and analysis of archival records and other documents. The researchers looked at three periods in the development of the program and outlined eight themes that emerged from the data: major accomplishments of the program; impact on workplace literacy practices; definitions of partnerships; factors of a successful partnership; dynamics of the program; proposal and project support experiences; stakeholders' views on what makes a partnership unsuccessful; lessons and program changes.

The Business and Labour Partnership has been described as a “system enabler” (p. 11) within the field of adult literacy in Canada, which has generally been characterized by the lack of a coherent national strategy. The premise of the program was the core belief of the NLS in the role of literacy in “capacity building and community development” in a practice-based framework (p. 7). The projects spearheaded by the program enabled the development of “assessment and evaluation tools” and “innovative models for delivering workplace literacy” (p. 6). It also supported “training and consultations” and outlined best practices (ibid.). Notable projects, tools and delivery models developed include the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) and the Workplace Education Manitoba Steering Committee.

The report outlines its “focus on literacy practitioner training and development” (p. 12) as one of the major contributions of the program, with the effect of increasing awareness about the importance of literacy education in the workplace and recognizing literacy trainers as professionals. Another impact was its approach to partnership—a model based on trust, full commitment, exchange of information, support from NLS staff and from champions of social development, “equal sharing of the workload and a lack of hidden agendas” (p. 8).

An important lesson to draw from this research is that “partnership development and sustainability is possible when a funding agency understands the work of the stakeholder organizations and becomes an equal partner in the process” (p. 11). The report terms “policy steadfastness,” or the systematic adherence to policy objectives yet another key factor in policy success. A change was observed in the later years of the Business and Labour Partnership when its focus began to shift away from social development objectives and towards the essential skills framework. As the report concludes, “achieving literacy gains in the workplace became secondary to the preoccupation with accountability” (p. 13).

Reder, S. (2009)*. *Scaling up and moving in: Connecting social practices views to policies and programs in adult education. Literacy and Numeracy Studies, 16(2) and 17(1), 35-50.*

This paper argues that research on adult education—including new assessment tools, curriculum design and program evaluation—needs to be aligned with the social practice engagement framework, according to which “engagement in literacy practices leads to growth in literacy proficiency” (p. 42). In this way, a new discourse on adult education would emerge acknowledging “the diverse settings, contexts and identities associated with adult literacy and numeracy practices and programs designed to foster them” (p. 36). It would counter the prevailing institutional discourse, which uses quantitative proficiency measures to assess “learning gains”—and therefore funding levels—of adult education programs. Research has shown that the most direct effect of educational programs is on learners’ literacy and numeracy practices, that educational programs can foster high levels of engagement in the participants even after the end of the program and that this increased engagement in literacy and numeracy practices can lead over time to increased proficiency levels. Reder concludes that there is “a major misalignment between the effects programs are having on their students’ literacy and numeracy development [...] and the short-term proficiency gains for which programs are accountable under the dominant policy and funding regimes” (p. 47). Reder supports his argument with data from the *Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL)*, conducted in the United States with close to 1,000 participants who had not completed high school. He also cautions that, to avoid “narrow and reductionist” results (p. 47), measures based on the social practices framework should be carefully elaborated and should take into consideration learning outcomes and literacy and numeracy practices from a broad range of social and geographical contexts.

* Steve Reder, a professor of adult education at Oregon State University, is included in this list because he has done some seminal longitudinal research on the outcomes and impacts of adult basic and literacy education. He has consulted widely in Canada and been involved in projects relevant to this study.

Darville, R. (2009). Knowing literacy for teaching, testing literacy for policy: Literacy workers and a survey of reading skills. In S. Carpenter, M. Laiken, & S. Mojab (Eds.), *Spaces/places: Exploring the boundaries of adult education*, 65-71. Proceedings of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, Carleton University, Ottawa.

In this conference presentation, Darville calls for a literacy policy discourse that is grounded in practice-oriented research and knowledge. He presents a critical reading of two reports—*Learning Literacy in Canada* (2008) and *Reading the Future* (2009)—that analyze the results of the *International Survey of Reading Skills* (ISRS) and their implications for teaching literacy. Darville adopts the perspective of literacy workers in order to show that “tests capable of informing instruction must be aligned with how people construe reading, and how practitioners actually teach” (p. 65), and says that because the ISRS is not so aligned, it cannot claim to inform instruction. One main critique is that the ISRS does not present authentic reading situations for testing: “There is no actual reading, let alone of the particular reading that people do in their lives” (p. 66). Darville argues that this is a policy-oriented test designed to measure skills that might explain why some people are performing below Level 3 on literacy assessment tools such as the *International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey* (IALSS). The danger he sees is that such tests, with a partial representation of literacy practices, may be used to design assessment tools, training programs for teachers or curricula that can negatively impact the effectiveness in practice of literacy teaching.

Darville argues that tests such as the ISRS also do not take account of “people’s actual learning needs or [the] realities of teaching” (p. 68). He points out, for example, that people read for different reasons; that emphasis on phonics alone is not a sufficient base for instruction; that when people learn to read or write, they do more than decode and use words...(p. 69); that a focus on decoding skills of isolated words disregards the fact that people become proficient readers by reading—outside of the classroom ; and importantly, that “‘confidence’ and

'participation' gains are an important form of success in literacy programs" (p. 69) difficult to measure, but for many adult learners, "life-changing gains" (p. 70).

Hayes, B. (2009, Spring). *From community development and partnerships to accountability: the case of the National Literacy Secretariat. Literacies, 10, 19-22.*

This article traces the history of National Literacy Secretariat (NLS). Created in 1988, the NLS had two main objectives: to increase opportunities for people to improve their literacy skills and to ensure that people with low literacy can fully participate in Canadian social, economic and political life. The NLS was initially part of the Secretary of State and, subsequently, the Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship, working within a broad citizenship mandate. For the first decade of its existence, the NLS situated literacy within the context of community development. Forging partnerships with community literacy groups was an important part of this capacity-building process and led to "a shared responsibility for literacy" (p. 19-20) between government, the provinces and territories and literacy partners from the voluntary sector.

In 1993, the NLS was brought under the mandate of HRSDC whose focus was primarily on employment. In 2006, the NLS and two other programs were merged to form the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program, managed by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES). As a result of these changes, the governance and management paradigm within which the NLS existed also shifted. The Secretariat transitioned from a hands-on, partnership- and development-based grant program to an objective and standardized one, in line with the government's "Results-Based Accountability Framework emphasizing measurable outcomes" (p. 21). Partners were transformed into clients; assessing the value and impact of collaborations gave way to measuring the number of grants and contributions. The NLS's main objective shifted towards improving Canada's IALS literacy scores and bringing people with low literacy skills to Level 3. Another outcome was a broken trust between the federal government and the literacy community as the relationship between them had become more transactional. Hayes concludes by suggesting that the government could have established a "shared accountability framework" elaborated in collaboration with "the literacy field, the provinces and territories, and the other stakeholders" (p. 22). Such an approach could have led to a better understanding of the needs of the sector and to more balanced measures of success that rely on both financial indicators as well as non-quantitative evaluation of achievements in the field of literacy.

Taylor, M., Quigley, A., Kajganich, G., & Kraglund-Gauthier, W. (2011). Shaping literacy: Evolution and trends in Canada's literacy research since the mid-1980s. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, 23(2), 45-67.

This study asked: "How has the field of adult literacy scholarship been shaped in Canada since the mid-1980s?" (p. 46). Using critical discourse analysis, the authors examine and interpret texts from several data sources: all issues of the *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* (CJSAE) from 1987 to 2010; ten issues of the then-discontinued journal *Literacies* from 2003 to 2009; reports produced within the framework of the Research-in-Practice Movement; and the comprehensive review of Canadian adult literacy literature since the mid-1970s, *State of the Field Report: Adult Literacy*. The study thereby captured the discourses presented by academic literacy researchers, literacy practitioners and government sponsors of literacy—three key stakeholder groups in the field.

The authors use the concept of metaphor to organize the findings from their analysis. They identify seven metaphors that have shaped the adult literacy research literature in Canada: 1) literacy as emancipation; 2) literacy as commodity; 3) glimpse of literacy as social practice; 4) opening the door on sociocultural literacy learning; 5) literacy as critical social practice; 6) the continuum of formal and informal literacy learning; and 7) literacy as relationship. Each of the examined data sets is characterized by the predominance of some of these metaphors. The first and second metaphors are most recurrent in the *CJSAE and Literacies* journal issues. "The glimpse of literacy as social practice" was also prominent in the latter journal. The "literacy as commodity" metaphor "dominated the governmental literature" (p. 59) and reflected the economic turn in literacy discourse in Canada, with a greater focus on accountability requirements, test measurements and interpretation of data from international literacy assessment surveys. This economic framework was challenged in *CJSAE's* later issues when, the authors observed, the discourse evolved the use of "theoretical constructs closer to literacy practice and the lived experiences of learners" (p. 60).

Although the authors find common ground between research produced by academics and by practitioners, their overall conclusion is that the field is characterized by "three researcher solitudes" and "an absence of cross-authorship and cross-dialogue" (ibid.). The study shows that the three stakeholder groups rarely reference and acknowledge each other's research and that this trend

was becoming more pronounced. The authors also express concern about the observed decline of practitioners' contributions—for example, with the demise of the journal *Literacies* due to funding cuts, a publishing venue for Research-in-Practice studies also disappeared. Finally, and significantly, the voices of adult learners were rarely heard in the discourse examined in the study.

George, N. & Murray, S. (2012). *Strengthening adult literacy among indigenous populations in Canada and other OECD countries*. Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring report 2012. Paris: UNESCO.

This report provides an overview of the adult education field related to the Indigenous peoples in Canada. It outlines some of the challenges that adult Indigenous learners face and describes several initiatives aimed at reversing the literacy disadvantage that many experience. Throughout the report the authors briefly compare the Canadian situation with that of Indigenous peoples in Australia, New Zealand and the US.

Statistics show that Indigenous adults in Canada are much more likely to be classified as Levels 1 and 2 on the *International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey* (IALSS) scale, even though, as the authors observe, the assessment is based only on English and French official languages and does not take into consideration the fact that many Indigenous peoples speak a different mother tongue. In terms of literacy skill demands for the Canadian job market, statistical information gathered from the 2003 IALSS survey, the 2006 Canadian Census as well as the Essential Skills Profiles shows that Indigenous adults are more likely than their non-Indigenous peers to work in jobs that demand Levels 1 and 2 literacy skills and less likely to work in jobs that demand Levels 3, 4 and 5. These skill disadvantages translate into lower wages and higher levels of unemployment for Indigenous workers. The authors note that “Aboriginal workers are having difficulty competing in Canada’s labour markets” (p. 10). Higher levels of literacy have a positive impact not only on labour market outcomes, but also on educational attainment, improved health and quality of life, as well as on social outcomes such as participation in civic life and lower levels of incarceration. George and Murray conclude that “increasing the literacy skills of Aboriginal adults would improve their overall standards of living and reduce the levels of inequality in valued outcomes both within Aboriginal populations and between Aboriginal populations and their non-Aboriginal peers” (p. 17).

The authors dedicate a chapter to discuss some reasons that explain this situation and specifically why and how Indigenous cultures, worldviews, languages and knowledge are not valued in the educational systems of Canada and other countries. The barriers to learning include historical traumas, such as the residential schools policy; geographic distribution of Aboriginal people in Canada many of whom live in rural areas where access to schools and training is limited or non-existent; cultural and socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment and different understanding of learning and knowledge transmitted in languages that are very different from English and French; systemic causes, such as underfunded and under-resourced educational and literacy programs for Indigenous people.

Indigenous people have begun the process of reversing these negative impacts by founding “culturally relevant or culture-based literacy initiatives” (p. 20). The report cites several relevant national initiatives, but notes that even though some of these initiatives are supported through legislation, policies or funding frameworks on provincial or federal levels, “very few programs across the country have adequate or stable funding” (Malatest, 2011, quoted on p. 20) and they resemble more a “patchwork” (ibid.) of activities, rather than a sustained literacy framework. The authors point out, however, that this is a common feature of the Canadian adult education field in general, which lacks a coherent national literacy policy.

Pinsent-Johnson, C. (2014). *Managing and monitoring literacy for a “knowledge society”: The textual processes of inequality in adult education policy, pedagogy and practice* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada.

Two chapters of this doctoral thesis are summarized below, one that analyzes and critiques the Essential Skills Framework and one that looks at the Implications of the Level 3 designation from the International Literacy Assessments.

“Constructing and Using the Essential Skills” (Chapter 5) discusses a “uniquely Canadian project” (p. 109), namely, the “intersection of large-scale [literacy] testing with curriculum and educational policy development” (ibid.) via the framework of Essential Skills (ES). The chapter offers a detailed explanation of how the level descriptions of international literacy assessment instruments have been adapted and integrated into the Essential Skills framework. The

author describes the level description as statements about observable and measurable test tasks in three areas (prose, document, quantitative) and across five hierarchical levels. She shows how these were used to develop and describe job skill competencies in the nine domains and five levels of Essential Skills through a process similar to creating a competency-based curriculum framework. The descriptions, called “complexity ratings” in the ES framework, provided “categories, assessment methods and a hierarchy of skill development” (p. 110) that made the nine skills measurable. Subsequently, skill profile charts were developed containing a series of standard-setting statements that described work tasks for more than 300 entry-level occupations in Canada. This Essential Skills methodology (Pinsent-Johnson puts this phrase in quotation marks in her text) “acts as an operational model for other curriculum development projects” (ibid.). This has been facilitated through federal funding (via the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills) and through training for literacy educators in how to use the framework “to plan and deliver instruction that conforms to the same task analysis strategy used in the Essential Skills project” (p. 111).

Pinsent-Johnson argues that these job profiling statements are not meant to describe daily employee experiences nor employers’ expectations in the workplace and that they disregard learners’ knowledge. She argues that educators, employers and employees have found them too abstract and removed from everyday realities and concerns in the workplace. The educators interviewed for her study expressed confusion and frustration in their effort to make relevant connections between the Essential Skills and “actual program learning activity” (p. 110). Many employers, she says, prefer custom-made workplace learning programs, instead of an approach they find “unfamiliar, bureaucratic and disconnected” (p. 140). She concludes that the Essential Skills framework becomes “a barrier” to both “program development and employer partnerships” (ibid.).

Pinsent-Johnson raises other criticisms such as the skills lists, which have been termed “a skills menu,” combining a variety of skills without “understanding the nature of learning nor work” (Jackson, 2005, cited in Pinsent-Johnson, p.131). She suggests the framework is seen by some as promoting a deficit view of literacy “that assumes deficiencies have to be met by interventions” (p. 130) and that does not “assess the inherent abilities of workers” (p. 130-1).

“Directing Education Policy and Developing Pedagogy” (Chapter 7) analyzes how the discourse around the Level 3 “suitable minimum” of literacy skills, derived from international surveys, has brought about changes in adult education policy and pedagogy in Canada. In policy as well as in public discourse, Level 3 has become an accepted demarcation line between those adults deemed to have high and low literacy skills. This has had an impact on the direction of adult education policy in provinces such as Ontario and Alberta and some other parts of Canada where the levels have been integrated into testing regimes. Pinsent-Johnson points out that being categorized into each of the five levels of the literacy tests has individual and socio-economic consequences. She also shows how assumptions about the connection between literacy proficiency and economic outcomes are embedded within a set of statements, known as a “level implications scheme” (p. 191). .. “[a] connection ... not based on empirical study or analysis of the international literacy assessment data, but ... made using a series of discursive manoeuvres and assumptions,” Pinsent-Johnson argues (ibid.).

She discusses some of these manoeuvres. For example, even though the stated purpose of the tests is to assess populations, not individuals, the statements establish a connection between the results of the literacy tests and individual abilities. Another suggests that the ability to do a test task corresponds to a real-life situation, which is not necessarily the case. This extends into considering the test results on the use of print-based information as measures for the person’s actual reading abilities outside the test context. Pinsent-Johnson notes a “more worrisome” tendency to make “sweeping and pejorative social judgement [...] based on an interpretation and assumptions” (p. 197). The level implication statements contain ability descriptors, often negative, such as “very poor skills” or “low level of proficiency” (p. 198).

These level implication statements have not always remained abstract, but in some cases have been incorporated into literacy education and pedagogical practice, with direct implications on the lives of individual learners. Pinsent-Johnson cites the example of the PDQ (Prose, Document, Quantitative) test developed by ETS and the PDQ Literacy Profile, which “matches an international literacy test level obtained by the test-taker with statements about the implications of test results” (p. 199) as well as with the level descriptions. Learners are then given advice on future career paths based on their PDQ Literacy Profile, without taking account of experience, knowledge or learning potential.

The level descriptions have also been used to influence policy. Pinsent-Johnson outlines several “policy devices” and “policy persuasion projects” (p. 189) developed by what she calls “policy entrepreneurs”, some former government employees, who have gone into private consulting. She discusses examples of policy devices, particularly three reports co-authored by Scott Murray and others, proposing a plan for the “overhaul [of] Canada’s approach to developing adult literacy education and training initiatives” (p. 203). The three reports are: *Learning literacy in Canada: Evidence from the international survey of reading skills* (2008), *Reading the future: Planning to meet Canada’s future literacy needs* (2008) and *Addressing Canada’s literacy challenge: A cost/benefit analysis* (200notes (p. 231, italics in original).

Another policy device she cites is an online mapping tool developed by the now-defunct Canadian Council on Learning which showed how different communities and jurisdictions across Canada scored on the international literacy tests. “Such a visual display of difference and disparity,” Pinsent-Johnson argues, “actualizes what is *de facto* socially divisive thinking” (p. 209).

Finally, Pinsent-Johnson observes a change in the tactics of policy entrepreneurs: instead of trying to convince policy-makers to change adult literacy education in Canada, they have focused their attention on developing—and selling—their own pedagogical and instructional solutions to the country’s perceived literacy challenges. She cites examples such as *TOWES Prime*, “a stand-alone curricular, managerial and accountability system,” and its instructional component *TOWES Scaffold* (p. 231-2329). They use a market segmentation analysis to profile Canadians according to their literacy proficiency, determined by the international surveys, as well as by gender, first language and education. “Aboriginal Peoples and immigrants are specifically profiled,” Pinsent-Johnson points out. Those categorized in Levels 1 and 2 are identified as needing educational “intervention” to bring them to Level 3. One report proposes using a cost-benefit analysis to determine the cost of this “intervention” for each group. “Canadian-born adults with levels of literacy equivalent to a post-secondary education who are *already* working are deemed to be most ‘efficient’ to educate,” the author notes.

Howell, S. (2015). *Essential Skills for labour marketing programming in Manitoba*. Unpublished report.

This report, written by Sandi Howell following her retirement from government, follows a 25-year history of workplace programming in Manitoba and, specifically, the implementation of the Essential Skills framework.

The report begins in the early 1990s when workplace literacy programs in the province were on the verge of transformation due to several factors, including increased automation and computerization, movement towards systems thinking in organizations, shift in demographics and employers' dissatisfaction with workers' level of skills. A shift was also happening in Manitoba and other parts of Canada from a more traditional understanding of literacy to a new focus on literacy as skills development in the workplace to respond to the needs of employers (p. 6). In 1991, Workplace Education Manitoba (WEM) was created as a "third party service provider to focus on literacy programming for existing workers" (p. 4). WEM's Board members were strategically selected to represent business and labour, as well as government through one ex-officio member. WEM also worked, and continues to work, with Sector Councils. The organization was able to access federal funding from the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS). With time, WEM became "a leader in the field" (p. 16).

The 1990s were also a time of "awareness raising" (p. 12), specifically for employers to "pay attention to Essential Skills for the health of productivity and the economy" (ibid.). Howell notes two key elements of success in fostering labour market programming in Manitoba: creating partnerships and working with Essential Skills champions within each stakeholder group—labour, business and government. In the late 1990s, Manitoba made a "major change in thinking and direction" by "attach[ing] workplace literacy to the provincial branch where sector councils and supports to small and medium business resided" (p. 14). Importantly, this also meant dedicated provincial funding.

By the early 2000s, the language in the field had changed, the Essential Skills framework had been widely adopted, which Howell sees as a positive development, "easily understood by employers and workers" (p. 8). In later years, another organization, Essential Skills Manitoba (ESM) would be created, specializing in developing pre-employability skills. Howell writes, "[t]hrough WEM and ESM alone, close to 9,500 clients annually receive Essential Skills services—assessment and training" (p. 10). Essential Skills were also part of systems and programs of sector councils and many workplaces. It was "embedded within a government integrated service delivery system, which has been

developed on a conceptual model of what needs to happen to create client and employer success” (ibid.). The provincial government also created a department for workforce development entitled Jobs and the Economy, which aims to encourage individuals to set career goals and follow a career path—Essential Skills play a “critical and foundational role in achieving [this] vision” (ibid.).

In 2004, after a series of further changes in the field, Manitoba created its own Essential Skills Policy Framework with the idea to provide a “coordinated response to the Essential Skills training needs of Manitobans” (p. 25). The policy outlined five goals, among which were an increase of the use of Essential Skills in “literacy, secondary and post-secondary programs” (p. 24) and in “pre-employment and training for under-represented groups” (ibid.); and setting Essential Skills benchmarks and programs for apprenticeships and trades.

Over the next several years, the Manitoba Essential Skills model was expanded to reach other demographic groups such as First Nations and Metis through the programs such as Igniting the Power Within, which offers four levels of training, and Awakening DAWN, which is conducted by WEM and targets “literacy level learners on reserve for Document Use using treaty materials” (p. 33). The WEM also increased its capacity to offer Essential Skills training to immigrants, emphasizing communication skills. The model further supported unemployed individuals to find work through a program called Training to Employment Pathway, implemented with industries in Northern Manitoba. Also in the North, the NEST initiative, which ran from 2008 to 2012, provided “pre-employment and pre-college training focused on industry Essential Skills needs and Employability Skills” (p. 42) with the purpose to increase employment and retention of skilled workers in the trades (including Aboriginal workers). Yet another project, Connecting Aboriginals to Manufacturing (CAM), aimed to respond to labour shortages in the manufacturing sector by establishing partnerships between “government, First Nations communities, manufacturing employers, post-secondary educational institutions, and a number of professional organizations and advisors involved in Aboriginal support services and training” (p. 51).

The partnership-based, holistic conceptual model that the CAM program offered became a central feature of labour market programming in Manitoba through the integration of employment and training systems. This model was based on work with Aboriginal communities and emphasized a “continuum of services”

that involved business and government alongside communities and families and that created “a climate of respect for culture and individuals” (p. 48). Training was also seen as a continuum between “life skills, literacy skills, employability skills, Essential Skills, technical/professional skills, career self-management skills and workplace transition/culture skills” (p. 45).

Starting in 2011, several substantial changes happened in the province. The Integrated Service Delivery system was initiated, which included a provision on Essential Skills assessment and training. In 2012, Essential Skills Manitoba (ESM) was created to supplement the work of WEM, with job-seekers, rather than employers and employed individuals. Also, in 2012, Family Services and Housing, Employment Income Assistance branch became part of Manitoba Entrepreneurship, Training and Trade and a new Division on Workforce Development and Income Assistance was established in order to use expertise on “adult training and employer engagement [to] create better, more successful pathways for Income Assistance clients” (p. 54). Yet another initiative, Manitoba Works!, was created in alignment with the province’s Strategy for Sustainable Employment and a Stronger Labour Market. Manitoba Works! “incorporates pre-employment, essential skills training, career exploration, and technical training options with supported co-op work experience and wage subsidy” (p. 61). This program is designed in a way that supports particularly individuals who face multiple barriers to employment—it provides those with little work experience an opportunity to gain such experience and it makes “an immediate connection” (ibid.) between employers and job seekers.

Smythe, S. (2015). Ten years of adult literacy policy and practice in Canada: Literacy policy tensions and workarounds. *Language and Literacy*, 17(2), 4-21.

In this policy analysis paper, Smythe outlines policies, practices and discourses that have shaped the adult literacy field in Canada from 2003 to 2013, a period of a “rise and intensification of regimes of international adult literacy measurement, as well as accountability and curricular frameworks that define what counts as literacy, its purposes” and which educational programs are worthy of investment (p. 4). The author addresses some key texts and policies that resulted from the *International Adult Literacy Skills Survey* (IALSS) as well as the Literacy and Essential Skills (LES) Framework by Employment and Social Development Canada.

Smythe argues that even though IALSS was not supposed to measure abilities of individuals, but to “describe distributions of skills *across populations*” (p. 9, emphasis in original), the results from the survey have produced “technologies of categorization” that “attempt to describe *actual people and literacy uses* in local settings” (ibid.). Based on the survey’s five literacy levels, adult learners have come to be categorized as “Level Ones,” “Level Twos,” etc., which tends to obscure actual learning and literacy practices that people have access to or perform in their everyday lives. In Canada, the results also prompted the emergence of the “40 percent story” of adult literacy, replacing the old “literate/illiterate” dichotomy with a new one— “below or above Level 3.” The effect of this discourse on adult education programs in Canada has been a “shift towards a more targeted approach to literacy funding oriented to ‘return on investment’” (p. 11).

As another “powerful and ubiquitous organizer of adult literacy work in Canada” (p. 12), the LES Framework requires that individuals as well as literacy programs demonstrate learning gains, measured with tests such as TOWES. However, both researchers and practitioners have observed that these tests do not always accurately represent a person’s literacy level as they are not constructed around authentic literacy situations, and thus align with global processes of “literacy standardization” (p. 14). Smythe argues that in Canada “[l]iteracy skills and employment participation have been reduced to matters of personal choice rather than public policy” (p. 16). She also provides examples of “workarounds” that literacy educators and organizations use in order to open spaces beyond prescribed adult literacy policies; spaces where learners’ voices can be heard and where the multiple literacies that characterize everyday life and work, but are neglected in policy discourses, can be explored, affirmed and sustained. These workarounds, Smythe concludes, “align literacy learning with local cultural and linguistic resources, including access to mentorship, apprenticeship and other real-world learning strategies: an issue ignored in IALSS/LES frameworks” (p. 17).

Elfert, M. & Walker, J. (2018). Level 3, Bureaucrats, and Stigmatisation: Why “Mainstreaming” Literacy Failed in Canada. In M. Schemmann (Ed.), *International Yearbook of Adult Education 2018: Trends and issues in Canadian adult education research*. Köln, Germany: Böhlau Verlag.

This article advances the argument that, despite several windows of opportunity since the 1970s, the promise of “mainstreaming” adult literacy in Canada was never fully realized. Elfert and Walker define “mainstreaming” as “bringing

literacy in from the periphery to the centre of both educational and social policy” (p. 2). It also “refers to embedding literacy into existing vocational, language and skills curricula in a contextualized manner and it involves institutionalizing adult literacy policy, so it links with other policies and government bodies to which it connects (for example, housing, homelessness, correctional services, employment, etc.)” (p. 2-3).

They outline several reasons that, in their view, explain what they see as the failure of adult literacy to take permanent hold in Canadian public and educational policy. One is the lack of adequate and sustained infrastructure and a coherent policy for adult education in the country. Another is the results from the *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS) and the *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey* (ALL), which on the one hand helped bring literacy to the attention of the general public and policy-makers, but on the other framed literacy as a “problem” and adult learners who score below Level 3 as inadequate. This situation is further compounded by the frequent association between adult literacy education and poverty. Consequently, the authors argue, we have “a single story” of literacy in Canada, which has had the effect of stigmatizing learners and funneling funding towards “raising people to level 3, neglecting those with lower literacy levels” (p. 12). Furthermore, by neglecting most of the educational and pedagogical data that IALS and ALL also revealed, the survey results—with the support of media and policy-makers—helped foreground the argument for literacy’s economic impact, further solidifying “the single story,” rather than promote multiple narratives. Another explanation for not mainstreaming adult literacy in Canada is the institutional management reforms in federal government departments that have moved away from partnership-oriented and collaborative relationships and towards a greater bureaucratization. This furthered the separation between policy and practice. Finally, another challenge comes from the federated nature of education in Canada where education is a provincial/territorial responsibility and “the responsibility for adult education is spread across sectors” (p. 13).

Elfert and Walker also briefly trace the history of the adult education sector in Canada since the 1970s to the present day, pinpointing the moment when literacy became correlated with essential skills and tied to employability through public policy. The article concludes with a look at the current status in the sector characterized by an almost complete dismantlement of adult literacy infrastructure and by a prevailing sense of disillusionment and fatigue on the part of civil society organizations working in the field, which results in a lack

of response and lack of lobbying to counter funding cuts. This indifference is evident in the fact that results from the *Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies* (PIAAC) survey did not produce any “policy impact in Canada,” the authors argue, and that, consequently, the priorities of the federal government have shifted “towards K-12 schooling and education for the Indigenous population” (p. 14).

Lane, J. & Murray, S. (2018, December). Literacy lost: Canada’s basic skills shortfall. Calgary, AB: Canada West Foundation.

Based primarily on information from three international adult literacy surveys (IALS [1994], IALSS [2003] and PIACC [2011]), this report analyzes Canada’s shortage of literacy skills in a context of rapidly changing economy and workplaces. The authors view literacy as the “learning to learn skill” (p. 2), as a prerequisite skill for acquiring other skills. The problem they identify is that a great number of Canadians do not have the necessary critical thinking and problem-solving skills to be able to adequately respond to the changing demands of their workplaces or even to keep their jobs. Research shows that more than 40% of Canadian workers, including young people and recent graduates, are below literacy Level 3, despite a steady increase of educational attainment in the country over time. At the same time, as many as 60% of workers are employed in jobs that do not match their skill levels, which, in turn, leads to further loss of those skills not used on the job. The problem is compounded by the fact that training opportunities are less accessible for those who need them most: the 2003 IALSS survey found that only 20% of adults with low literacy skills and employed in low-skilled jobs were engaged in learning and training courses and programs, while 60% of high-skilled adults employed in high-skilled jobs were. This latter group was also more likely to receive employer-sponsored training (35%), compared to 7% for lower-skilled people in low-skilled jobs. Lane and Murray cite the economic benefits of literacy: an increase in literacy levels even only by an average of 1% would result in an increase of 2.5 to 3% over time in GDP and 5% in productivity.

The authors offer several solutions to resolve what they call “Canada’s literacy problem.” Canada should better understand the skills needs of employers as well as the skills proficiencies of the workforce, including young people, with special attention on the basic skills of language, literacy and numeracy. They recommend that Canada reduce reliance on credentials and provide

employers with competency frameworks where every job is described through a competency profile, listing tasks, sub-tasks and the levels of competency required to perform them. Other recommendations include: embedding basic literacy in all education and training initiatives for adults as well as in the work of the new Future Skills Centre; encouraging employers to prevent skill loss on the job by increasing the knowledge and skill intensity of some jobs, “investing in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skill upgrading” (p. 3), especially to Level 3, and adjusting work processes to ensure the use of the upgraded skills. Finally, the authors recommend that the federal government focus on offering evidence-driven labour market programs, especially to people trying to re-enter the job market.

Nguyen, C., Palameta, B., Lee, W., Howard, S., Shek-Wai Hui, T., Lalonde, P., & Gyarmati, D. (2019). *A comprehensive review and development of measurement options for essential skills initiatives. Final Report.* Ottawa: Social Research and Demonstration Corporation.

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) was contracted by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) to conduct a review of measurement options for assessing outcomes of LES initiatives and to develop a framework to support a broader performance measurement strategy. This final report presents their conclusions and offers a practical guide for Literacy and Essential Skills (LES) practitioners in designing assessment measurements for LES initiatives in the workplace and for jobseekers.

Given the vast complexity of the LES field, the authors propose that an effective program evaluation should be based on a range of subjective and objective tools as well as generic and industry-specific approaches. LES initiatives should not be evaluated only with single LES metrics, but include a wide range of indicators linked to employability, such as contextual, attitudinal, behavioural and psychosocial factors and skills. For example, research suggests that LES programs that increase a participant’s ability to conduct successful job search or plan a career path, can also increase that individual’s self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy. This, in turn, can lead to a decrease of stress and an increased trust in the community. The authors of the report argue, “A best practice in LES

performance measurement is that Essential Skills assessments should be part of a broader conceptual and measurement framework that links training goals and expectations with a variety of short- and long-term outcomes based on learner needs” (p. 67). Thus, the report offers a more holistic measurement framework that takes into consideration both core and soft Essential Skills. They note that “thinking, communication, and receptivity to continuous learning” [p. 5] are often viewed as soft skills due to the lack of quantitative ways to measure them.

The report is careful to point out that the performance measurement of LES programs should be tailored to the target audiences, especially newcomers, youth, and Indigenous peoples. One section of the report is dedicated to Indigenous jobseekers, and makes the following recommendations to LES program staff and trainers who work specifically with this population: acquire a better understanding of the barriers to employment that Indigenous people face; develop a Prior Life experiences Essential Skills Portfolio, which asks users to “identify all the ways in which they have already used Essential Skills in a cultural or lived context” (p. 41); and provide Indigenous learners with customized tools to self-assess cultural identity attitudes, sense of belonging, and social networks.

The authors suggest that another effective way to organize measurement frameworks is the milestone-based learning pathways design, especially for job seekers. This approach avoids focusing on a single measure of success, but uses instead “a series of interconnected indicators” to guide and improve the strength of training and evaluation activities (p. 4). The advantage of this method is that “[m]ilestones are arranged in a logical hierarchy where achievements of earlier, foundational milestones provide the necessary pre-conditions to maximize the chances of achieving subsequent, longer-term milestones” (p. 4). They recommend this strategy as particularly important in developing LES programs for jobseekers who wish to improve their job-readiness and to re-enter the labour market.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

AlphaPlus (2015). Practices Developed When Using the OALCF Milestones. Retrieved from <https://alphaplus.ca/download/research-brief-practices-developed-using-oalcf-milestones/>

Bérard-Chagnon, J. & Lepage, J.-F. (2016). *The literacy skills of New Brunswick francophones: Demographic and socioeconomic issues*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2016/statcan/89-657-x2016001-eng.pdf. French version: *Les compétences en littératie chez les francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick : enjeux démographiques et socioéconomiques*, retrieved from http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2016/statcan/89-657-x2016001-fra.pdf

Brennan, K., Carriere, B., Currie, S., Taylor, S.H., Nguyen, C., Palameta, B., Voyer, J.-P. (2019). *Social finance pilots on Essential Skills training: Final report*. Ottawa: Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. Retrieved from <http://www.srdc.org/media/553020/social-finance-final-report.pdf>

Cathexis (2016). Evaluation of the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Program Final Report. Retrieved from <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/publications/lbs-eval-report-2016-en.pdf>. French version: Évaluation du Programme d'alphabétisation et de formation de base (AFB), retrieved from <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/fre/eopg/publications/lbs-eval-report-2016-fr.pdf>

Darville, R. (2009). Knowing literacy for teaching, testing literacy for policy: Literacy workers and a survey of reading skills. In S. Carpenter, M. Laiken, & S. Mojab (Eds.), *Spaces/places: Exploring the boundaries of adult education*, 65-71. Proceedings of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, Carleton University, Ottawa.

Elfert, M. & Walker, J. (2018). Level 3, Bureaucrats, and Stigmatisation: Why “Mainstreaming” Literacy Failed in Canada. In M. Schemmann (Ed.), *International Yearbook of Adult Education 2018: Trends and issues in Canadian adult education research*. Köln, Germany: Böhlau Verlag.

Employment and Social Development Canada. Evaluation Directorate (2018). *Evaluation of literacy and essential skills: final report*. Retrieved from http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/edsc-esdc/Em20-80-2018-eng.pdf. French version: *Évaluation de l'alphabétisation et des compétences essentielles*, retrieved from http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/edsc-esdc/Em20-80-2018-fra.pdf

Hayes, B. (2009, Spring). From community development and partnerships to accountability: the case of the National Literacy Secretariat. *Literacies*, 10, 19-22.

Howell, S. (2015). *Essential Skills for labour marketing programming in Manitoba*. Unpublished report.

George, N. & Murray, S. (2012). *Strengthening adult literacy among indigenous populations in Canada and other OECD countries*. Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring report 2012. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000217867>

Government of Quebec, Ministry of Education. (2002). *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training*. Retrieved from http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/dpse/politique_a.pdf. French version: *Politique gouvernementale d'éducation des adultes et de formation continue - Apprendre tout au long de la vie*. Retrieved from http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/dpse/educ_adulte_action_comm/Politique.pdf

Jackson, N. (2005, Fall). Essential Skills: Essential Confusion? *Literacies*, 6, 38-43.

Jones, S. (1993, Nov. 10). *The Definition of Basic Skills and Development of Measurement Instruments*. Unpublished background paper prepared for the Department of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC).

Jones, S. (1993, Dec. 7). *Criteria for Identifying Basic Skills: A Research Note for the Definition of Basic Skills and Development of Measurement Instruments*. Unpublished background paper prepared for the Department of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC).

Jones, S. & Déry, L. (1994, Aug. 1). *Levels for the Basic Skills: A Research Note for the Definition of Basic Skills and Development of Measurement Instruments*. Unpublished background paper prepared for the Department of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC).

Lane, J. & Murray, S. (2018, December). *Literacy lost: Canada's basic skills shortfall*. Calgary, AB: Canada West Foundation.

Lewe, G., MacLeod, C. *Step into the world of workplace learning: a collection of authentic workplace materials*. Scarborough, Ont.: Nelson Thomson Learning / Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada. Office of Learning Technologies. French version: *Le plaisir d'apprendre à découvrir le milieu de travail : collection de documents authentiques recueillis dans ce milieu*.

Lurette, D. (2013). Les grandes enquêtes internationales sur les compétences des adultes : des enjeux andragogiques pour les milieux linguistiques minoritaires. Montréal: Centre for literacy. Retrieved from http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/sites/default/files/LURETTE_SI2013.pdf

MacLeod, C. (2007, April). *The Genesis and Evolution of Essential Skills in Canada*. Unpublished report prepared by Carol MacLeod & Associates for the Department of Human Resources and Social Development (HRSD).

Mair, D. (1997). The development of occupational Essential Skills profiles. In M. Taylor (Ed.), *Workplace Education: The Changing Landscape* (pp. 299-318). Toronto: Culture Concepts.

Nguyen, C., Palameta, B., Lee, W., Howard, S., Shek-Wai Hui, T., Lalonde, P., & Gyarmati, D. (2019). A comprehensive review and development of measurement options for essential skills initiatives. Final Report. Ottawa: Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. Retrieved from <http://www.srdc.org/media/553018/oles-measurement-phase-4-report.pdf>

Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. (2011). *Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework: Conceptual Foundation*. Retrieved from http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/publications/OALCF_Curriculum_Framework_Conceptual_Foundations_March_2011.pdf. French version: *Cadre du curriculum en littératie des adultes de l'Ontario: Fondements conceptuels du cadre du curriculum*, retrieved from http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/fre/eopg/publications/CLAO_Fondements_conceptuels_du_cadre_du_curriculum_mars_2011.pdf

Partnerships in Learning. (2007). *Fostering partnership development: An historical look at the National Literacy Secretariat Business and Labour Partnership Program*. Ottawa: Partnerships in Learning.

Pinsent-Johnson, C. (2014). *Managing and monitoring literacy for a “knowledge society”: The textual processes of inequality in adult education policy, pedagogy and practice* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada. Reder, S. (2009). Scaling up and moving in: Connecting social practices views to policies and programs in adult education. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 16(2) and 17(1), 35-50.

Shohet, L. (2002). Adult learning and literacy in Canada. In J. Comings, B. Garner, & C. Smith (Eds.), *Annual review of adult learning and literacy* (Vol. 2, pp. 189-241). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Smythe, S. (2015). Ten years of adult literacy policy and practice in Canada: Literacy policy tensions and workarounds. *Language and Literacy*, 17(2), 4-21.

Taylor, M., Quigley, A., Kajganich, G., & Kraglund-Gauthier, W. (2011). Shaping literacy: Evolution and trends in Canada’s literacy research since the mid-1980s. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, 23(2), 45-67.

Thomas, A. M. (1983). *Adult Illiteracy in Canada—A Challenge* (Occasional Paper 42). Ottawa: Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

Thomas, A. M. (1976). *Adult basic education and literacy activities in Canada 1975-76*. Toronto: World Literacy of Canada.

APPENDIX

Interview guide

Informing Canada's future skills agenda: Lessons from Literacy and Essential Skills policy and practice Phase 1: Semi-structured interview Guide

Objective of interviews: To gather input from key informants on the development and impacts of literacy and essential skills policies and programs at federal and provincial levels from 1989-2019

Guiding questions:

- What impacts have the theories, assessments and policies behind adult literacy and Essential Skills in the past three decades had on services for working and non-working adult Canadians with basic skills needs?
 - How can we use the lessons learned to improve future access and provision for those with the greatest need?
1. Informant's background/experience in literacy and or essential skills
 - Can you tell me about the work you did with adult literacy and/or essential skills? For whom did you work (government, institutional, community sector, other (please specify)
 - How long were you involved? In what years?
 - At what level - national, provincial/territorial, international?
 2. The theoretical underpinning of the international adult literacy assessments in the 1990s
 - What was the underlying theory behind the development of the first international assessment (IALS)?
 - How have those theories evolved or changed between the first assessments and the current PIAAC series?
 3. The theoretical underpinning of the essential skills framework in the 1990s
 - What was the underlying theory behind the development of the Essential Skills framework? Was it the same or a variation of the theory behind the international assessments?
What was the purpose for developing the ES framework?
 - What kinds of research were done, and by whom, to develop applications to practice?
 4. Why, and how, were adult literacy and essential skills merged at a federal policy level?

5. From your perspective, how did the international adult literacy assessments impact federal and provincial/territorial policies and programs in adult literacy and workplace basic education?
6. From your perspective, how did the merger of adult literacy and essential skills impact provincial/territorial policies and programs?
7. How would you define an effective program in adult literacy or in workplace basic skills? What characteristics would you look for?
8. Can you name two policies or program models or initiatives that you know of or were involved in that met those criteria?
9. Is there documentation or publications available for these initiatives, either descriptive or evaluative?
10. During your years of involvement, did you see changes in the ministerial or institutional structures in charge of literacy or workplace basic skills that lead to changes in the delivery of services to Canadians? If yes, how would characterize those changes?
11. What aspects of past definitions of literacy, competencies, essential skills do you consider relevant to today's focus on future skills?
12. What lessons do you think we can take from past experience with successful or unsuccessful policy or program directions in LES to inform a future skills agenda that serves the least skilled people in Canada?
13. Is there anything else that you consider relevant to this project that we have not addressed?