

*Adult Literacy: Policies,
Programs and Practices*

Lessons Learned

Final Report

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This study summarizes lessons learned from policies, programs and practices directed at adult literacy over the past decade, in the context of industrialized economies. It is based on a technical paper prepared by Dr. Kathryn Barker of FuturEd, under the direction of the Evaluation and Data Development Branch of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC). The National Literacy Secretariat of HRDC made its knowledge and expertise readily available throughout the project.

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Series

Canadian governments are trying to achieve the most productive and cost-effective results from human resource programs and policies. Professionally conducted evaluations can help them reach that goal. They document our experiences with policies and programs that have had similar goals. They add to the “corporate memory” that helps us make still better decisions in the future.

At Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), we have a strong commitment to continuous learning and improvement. Over the past decade, we have invested time and money in evaluating many of our programs and policies covering a wide range of human resource development issues. These have been complemented by our reviews of evaluations conducted by other governments, in Canada and internationally, in the area of human resource initiatives.

HRDC developed the “Lessons Learned” series to make this wealth of information and insight available to more people more easily. The Lessons Learned studies are a series of documents and supporting videos that synthesize what evaluations in Canada and other countries have taught us about a range of high-profile human resource policy priorities. They summarize what we know about the effectiveness of policy initiatives, programs, services and funding mechanisms.

Lessons Learned are of interest to senior managers and policy analysts in Canada’s governments. Program managers, public policy researchers and other stakeholders can also benefit from understanding the lessons we have learned from past and present programs.

HRDC is pleased to announce the latest study in this series, which focuses on policies, programs and practices directed at adult literacy over the past decade, in the context of industrialized economies. The problems associated with adult literacy, for individuals and for society, were given special attention around the time of International Literacy Year – 1990. After approximately 10 years, it is time to ask what has been learned from the plans and activities that were meant to understand and address the problems associated with adult literacy, with a view to future interventions in Canada. What makes adult literacy programs successful? What factors are to be considered when designing adult literacy policies? These are some of the questions that this study attempts to address.

As a learning organization, HRDC will continue to experiment with new approaches and evaluate their effectiveness. HRDC recognizes the vital importance of the evaluation process and is committed to continuing its work in this area.

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1. Introduction

In industrialized societies, adult literacy is a public policy issue within the contexts of citizenship, human resources development, and lifelong learning. The problems associated with adult literacy, for individuals and for society, were given special attention around the time of International Literacy Year – 1990. After approximately 10 years, it is time to ask what has been learned from the plans and activities that were meant to understand and address the problems associated with adult literacy, with a view to future interventions in Canada.

This report summarizes lessons learned from policies, programs and practices directed at adult literacy over the past decade, in the context of industrialized economies. It is based on a review of studies and reports that set out the problems associated with low-level literacy skills among adults and what has been done to address those problems. The study focuses primarily on interventions that have been formally evaluated¹ with a view to including as many different types of interventions as possible (i.e. the focus has been more on breadth than on in-depth study of a particular type of intervention).

While the object of this study is extremely broad and deep, time has not allowed for an all-inclusive study. The teaching and the use of literacy skills are related to a number of other important issues, including ESL/FSL (English or French as a Second Language), “mother tongue” literacy, the teaching of reading in general (e.g. Whole Language vs. phonics), the teaching of reading in schools to children and school readiness, various literacies such as scientific, political, historical or cultural literacy, etc. However, this study focuses solely on the policies and programs related to adult literacy in the broader sense: interventions aimed at understanding and addressing problems, for individuals and for society, related to adult literacy.

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¹ The term “evaluation” is used to mean studies that have formally resulted in the judgement of a policy, program or practice; however, evaluations can take a wide variety of formats: (e.g. cost-benefit analysis, impact analysis, success by any number of standards). It is important to note that the evaluation reports included are not consistent in approach or methodology; however, all are considered to be credible sources of information.

2. Problems Associated with Adult Literacy

The terms “literacy” and “adult literacy” have been defined in a myriad of ways. For purposes of this study, the definition used is that employed by the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) by Statistics Canada, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD):

Literacy, as a mode of adult behaviour, is using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.²

Literacy is fundamental to citizenship in a democracy – to informed decision making, to personal empowerment, and to active and positive participation in the local and global social community. Literacy is an essential skill for work and participation in the economy and is a foundation for basic education and lifelong learning.

The policy issue is that, in Canada as in other industrialized countries, a considerable number of adults do not have the level of literacy skills that is required for active participation in the community, the economy and in lifelong learning. According to the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey, about 18% of working-age Canadians have extreme difficulty with reading and another 26% have the most limited of skills (OECD, Statistics Canada, and Human Resources Development Canada, 1995).

About 18% of working-age Canadians have extreme difficulty with reading and another 26% have the most limited of skills.

Problems related to adult literacy take two forms: (1) problems for people who have low levels of literacy skills and (2) problems of unnecessarily difficult and increasingly complex reading materials. Studies conclude that there are problems, for individuals and for society, associated with low literacy skill levels – problems that are personal, social, economic and political in nature.

- Most adults with acknowledged literacy problems have personal and/or learning difficulties. They also have much in common with each other. Among them, there is an increased likelihood of three characteristics: (1) learning disabilities and other reading-related problems (NCES, 1993); (2) unemployment and reliance on government assistance (Smith, 1997); and (3) low self-esteem and associated social problems (Fowler and Scarborough, 1993).

² *Literacy, Economy and Society*, p. 14. (OECD, 1995)

- Adults with literacy problems are reported to have two-thirds the income of other Canadians. They are twice as likely to be unemployed, and they are much more likely to receive some form of social assistance (Smith, 1997).
- It is speculated that literacy-related problems cost business and industry in terms of lost productivity, health and safety problems, training and retraining. The majority of employers – 70% – feel that they have a significant literacy problem in some part of their organization (Huget, 1997).

At the same time, some reading materials have become unnecessarily difficult, technical information from institutions and industries being an example. The levels of literacy and formal education/training demands are increasing, particularly in the workplace. High-level literacy is an essential tool in the knowledge-based economy. Those without adequate literacy skills cannot participate in the new mode of “learning a living.”

Therefore, literacy-related solutions – policies, programs and practices – have taken two forms: (1) efforts to understand and address the problems that individuals face; and (2) efforts to promote plain language and appropriate readability. The interventions that have been undertaken are aimed at one or all of these contexts: literacy for citizenship and personal empowerment, literacy for work, and/or literacy for lifelong learning. This report focuses on the lessons learned as they relate to efforts to address the literacy problems that adults face.

3. Adult Literacy Interventions in Canada

Interventions to address adult literacy have fallen into three categories: (1) policies that support research, partnerships, information dissemination and public education; (2) programs such as workplace or family literacy programs; and (3) practices or strategies, typically developed on a pilot or demonstration basis within the education/training context.

3.1 Adult Literacy Policies and Research

At the national level, adult literacy policies are linked to various problem areas such as unemployment, declining industrial productivity, dependence on social assistance, health and wellness of Canadians, youth unemployment, and barriers to lifelong learning. Policies related to adult literacy have been shaped by three factors:

- the changing understanding of what “literacy” is;
- the two dimensions of the literacy problem – individuals with low skill levels and reading demands that may be inappropriately difficult; and
- jurisdictional responsibilities and priorities.

Public policies related to adult literacy in Canada have largely supported: (1) researching the nature of adult literacy; (2) promoting the values of literacy through public education campaigns; (3) developing delivery models and materials; (4) implementing plain language initiatives; and (5) encouraging the non-governmental sector to deliver programs.

Research, and the policies supporting it, has been successful in improving our understanding of the nature and extent of the adult literacy problem. Large amounts of research and analysis have resulted in a good understanding of the target population – adults for whom literacy skill levels are a problem. The 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the resulting analysis papers have provided detailed information about the characteristics of adult literacy problems in general and for such specific populations as youth, seniors, working and unemployed adults, and social assistance recipients. From research, it is now possible to characterize those who have, or are likely to have, literacy problems by age, gender, geography, education level, first language and other identifiers (HRDC, 1996). Most adults with low literacy skills have a great deal in common: overall literacy levels, educational and vocational histories, social-emotional difficulties, expressed needs and, potentially, degree of responsiveness to literacy instruction in adulthood (Fowler and

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Scarborough, 1993). As a result, it is possible to target various groups with appropriate adult literacy policies, programs and practices.

Through research, as well, a good understanding of the context-specific literacy continuum – both of skills that individuals possess and literacy demands in contemporary society – has been developed (NLS, 1995). In the late 1980s, literacy was considered to be an “either/or” attribute – either a person could read adequately or could not. In the 1990s, we have come to see literacy on a continuum of both the levels and types of skills an individual possesses and the societal context of increasing and changing literacy demands. Research has provided much understanding and direction; however, the gap between research and practice in all literacy-related programs and practices is a significant barrier to policy development, implementation and analysis.

Research and policies have not supported the development and delivery of ongoing, targeted programs by the formal education/training system within Canada. In the absence of a concerted public outcry about the problem of adult literacy, governments and policymakers are most likely to allocate resources to research and public awareness of the issue. That adult literacy is still a recognized public policy issue can be attributed to the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) and its partners. An independent evaluation found that the NLS’s support played an important role in stimulating research and advocacy work done on adult literacy (HRDC, 1995).

3.2 Adult Literacy Programs and Practices

Adult literacy programs typically take the form of teaching/learning programs for individuals.

Adult literacy programs typically take the form of teaching/learning programs for individuals. Practices and strategies related to adult literacy take such forms as specific reading materials, teaching strategies and public relations campaigns.

Programs for teaching literacy skills use paid and volunteer staff in community and/or institutional settings with various approaches and results. Programs are offered within the context of the public education system as well as by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community agencies. As an education and training issue, literacy is the responsibility of the provinces and territories; and little research is available about the effectiveness of provincial/territorial literacy education programs. However, some individual programs – offered by NGOs, other educational institutions and other governmental organizations (such as those within the justice system) – have been evaluated.

As an intervention, the development of appropriate practices and strategies to provide remediation and to reduce literacy demands appears to have been the most successful. As a result of innovations and pilot projects – typically in isolated environments – we know how to design and deliver quality programs in general and for particular adult groups. We know both who to target and how to implement programs that address their needs and circumstances: offenders, families, employed and unemployed workers, adult upgrading students, adults with learning disabilities, and others.

In addition, through a plain language initiative and through support to agencies wanting to reduce literacy demands, more and more materials are written or rewritten using clear language and consideration of the target audience. Plain language initiatives – those of the federal government, the Canadian Bar Association, the Consumers Association of Canada, and the John Howard Society – appear to have had a positive effect in reducing the literacy difficulties in legal, health-related and government documents, but the actual extent is not known.

Reducing literacy demands has been easier than reducing the number of adults with low literacy skill levels. Regardless of the measures used – from such proxies for literacy as grade-level achievement to demonstration of actual literacy tasks – the number of adult Canadians with literacy-related problems has not been reduced. Despite numerous policy and program interventions, literacy-related problems persist.

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4. Adult Literacy Lessons Learned

Lesson 1 Adult literacy programs benefit both individuals and society, but these benefits have not been fully realized due to insufficient levels of public interest and political support.

Where they exist, adult literacy programs can benefit both individuals and all of society: families, employers and industry, and education/training institutions (Barker, 1991; Padak and Rasinski, 1997). When adults do engage in adult literacy teaching/learning programs, most acquire an increased level of literacy skills. For learners, there is a long list of potential benefits from literacy programs, such as improved self-confidence, better parenting, employment opportunities and community leadership for some (Alamprese and Kay, 1993; Barker, 1991; NIL, 1995; Padak and Rasinski, 1997; Smith, 1997); however, the nature and extent of these impacts is not well known or documented. In addition to benefits from adult literacy programs in general, there are specific benefits from family literacy and workplace literacy programs.

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From family literacy programs, learners most often mention that they have experienced improvements in basic skills, self-esteem, problem solving, involvement in community affairs, parenting skills, family relationships and their children's willingness to learn (NIL, 1995). Adults and children in family literacy programs report increased and/or improved attitudes about education, reading achievement, writing ability, math and science knowledge. Adults report increased knowledge about parenting options and child development, and enhanced employment status or job satisfaction (Padak and Rasinski, 1997). Through family literacy programs, families learn to value education. They become more involved in schools, and this leads to better achievement for children. Families become emotionally closer, read more and engage in more literate behaviours at home. Society benefits as literacy achievement can in turn break cycles of economic disadvantage. In particular, family literacy programs positively affect several major social problems: (1) nutrition and health problems; (2) low school achievement and high school dropout rates; and (3) teen parenting, joblessness, welfare dependency and social alienation (Padak and Rasinski, 1997).

From workplace literacy programs, individuals experience many benefits:

- increased or enhanced basic skill levels, self-confidence and self-esteem, interpersonal and workplace communications, attitudes toward continuing education, job performance, and motivation;

- lessened apprehension about learning new skills, acquired confidence in self-directed learning, and changed attitudes toward education in general; and
- increased ability to cope with change, confidence in co-workers, and interest in an industry (Barker, 1991).

According to employers, “graduates” from workplace literacy programs are more assertive, confident and articulate; their work habits and abilities improve considerably; and they are generally more willing to initiate positive interactions with co-workers and customers (Alamprese and Kay, 1993). According to Barker (1991), the benefits of workplace literacy programs for employers and industries include:

- a system for continuous workforce upgrading;
- improved communications with employees;
- awareness of links between basic skills and job performance;
- awareness of skill deficits of employees;
- a ripple effect of graduates who promote skills upgrading;
- awareness of public and commercial education services;
- increased efforts at plain language in both written and verbal communications;
- sensitization to needs and worries of employees; and
- successful partnerships with educational institutions and government.

For educational institutions, planned and unanticipated impacts of literacy programs have included: (1) the development of appropriate adult literacy or workplace basic skills curriculum; (2) an enhanced reputation for innovation and flexibility; (3) cultivation of new partnerships and new funding; (4) a pool of instructors trained for customized adult education programs; and (5) enticement of adults to register in other courses (Barker, 1991).

In summation, for each and every stakeholder group, outcomes of interventions – policies, programs and strategies aimed at addressing adult literacy problems – are typically positive. Knowing this, however, has not resulted in a concerted national or pan-Canadian initiative to realize these benefits. Evidence from the ABC CANADA public education campaign, through magazine ads and the Peter Gzowski golf tournaments (ABC CANADA, 1997), reveals that the public is increasingly aware of the importance of literacy and supportive of “adult illiteracy” as a charitable

cause. While there is no evidence of substantial growth in the size or number of programs using volunteers, individuals do continue to come forward to volunteer as tutors and literacy advocates. However, the support appears to end there, with no great outpouring of support for other policy alternatives, such as increased spending on adult education. As a result, considerable amounts of adult literacy resources go to research and public education (HRDC, 1995), but few dedicated resources have been directed at modifying the current education and training system to accommodate adult literacy in a meaningful way.

In the meantime, interventions have not convinced adults with low literacy skill levels that adult literacy programs will address their problems – literacy and/or related problems (OECD, Statistics Canada and HRDC, 1995). Many individuals with low literacy skill levels do not consider that they have a problem. This is clearly reflected by participation rates in literacy programs, and this has sweeping implications for policy implementation. Many of the most needy do not attend adult literacy programs; and if they are to be reached, either significant new funding will be required or priorities will need to be set (Venezky, Sabatini, Brooks and Carino, 1996).

Lesson 2 Experience suggests how to design and deliver quality adult literacy programs, but conditions do not always exist to allow that to happen consistently or systematically.

There are some common elements that comprise good practice in adult literacy programs (Boivin, 1993; De Bruin Parecki, Paris and Seidenberg, 1996; Marshall and Selman, 1992; Ziegler, 1996). Among them are trained instructors; non-threatening learning environment; adult-oriented materials and approaches to teaching and evaluation; and individualized instruction. Quality literacy programs are flexible and able to accommodate different skill levels and personal goals. They provide support services and linkages to other service providers. Instruction is focused on the interests of the learners, emphasizing life skills and contextual skills. In effective programs, issues of access, child care, transportation, community and cultural orientation, and personal meaningfulness are considered (De Bruin Parecki, Paris and Seidenberg, 1996). The strongest predictors of student retention and attendance are the presence of support services such as counselling, instruction during the day, and the type of learning environment – a learning lab or independent study in addition to classroom learning (Ziegler, 1996).

Programs that offer more than just reading and writing instruction appear to be most successful. Literacy instruction is often more effective when it is combined with teaching practical skills (Eisemore,

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Quality literacy programs are flexible and able to accommodate different skill levels and personal goals. Also, issues of access, child care, transportation, community and cultural orientation, and personal meaningfulness are considered.

Marble and Crawford, 1998). Teaching materials should reinforce all aspects of learners' experiences – home, work, community. Culturally relevant teaching and support materials should be used, and instructors should assess materials for cultural bias (Marshall and Selman, 1992). Context-specific reading materials – workplace reading tasks in workforce training, for example – are the most successful (Phillipi, 1987).

The variety of programs is virtually limitless, with various combinations of paid and volunteer staff, formal and non-formal design, individual and group instruction, flexible and rigorous learning management. There is no “one way” to deliver literacy instruction, and variety in programs and approaches is important (HRDC, 1999).

Lesson 3 Adult literacy programs aimed at specific target groups appear to have better results.

Some types of programs have more appeal to and/or success with adults who have literacy problems. For example, parents are far more likely to persist in family literacy programs than in other types of adult literacy programs (Padak and Rasinski, 1997). Employees are more likely to participate in programs if training occurs during normal working hours (Conference Board of Canada, 1992). Workers are more inclined to participate in skills upgrading programs while they are employed rather than unemployed, because of the stresses associated with unemployment (Barker, 1991).

Program goals are easier to define for more targeted, “contextualized” programs, such as family literacy or workplace programs.

Different program and teaching approaches are favoured for different target populations; and targeted programs are the most appropriate and effective (Ziegler, 1996). Program goals are easier to define for more targeted, “contextualized” programs, such as family literacy or workplace programs. The practicality of such programs is also appealing to funders (Ziegler, 1996). Targeted programs are motivating because of a direct relevance to the learner's situation – for example, the promise of a job, a promotion or some other recognition. The amount of time needed for skill improvement may be decreased by half when targeted programs use materials that learners use in everyday work (Ziegler, 1996). It has been concluded that the impact of literacy programs can be improved with better targeting: for offenders, families, employed and unemployed workers, adult upgrading students, adults with learning disabilities, and others.

Programs for Offenders and Ex-offenders

According to research related to offenders and ex-offenders (Newman, Lewis and Beverstock, 1993), an ideal program in prison literacy: (1) educates broadly; (2) is governed for the sake of the learners; (3) makes

prison life more livable; (4) is cost-effective; (5) improves quality of life; (6) has a new-reader's library; and (7) makes appropriate use of educational technology. Offenders have a different preferred learning style, preferring a hands-on approach rather than the more passive, visual methods practised in schools. Prison education programs should be more closely integrated with programs on social skills, substance abuse, anger management and family violence.

Family Literacy Programs

Successful family literacy programs may be found on a continuum from traditional delivery, skills and materials to being responsive to the special needs of the participants. Programs offering more than just reading and writing instruction appear to be more successful. Issues of access, child care, transportation, community and cultural orientation, and personal meaningfulness need to be taken into consideration (De Bruin Parecki, Paris and Seidenberg, 1996).

Workplace and Workforce Literacy Programs

Among the elements of a successful labour-based workplace literacy program for workers (Connon Unda, 1995) are inputs such as appropriate time-tabling; evaluation tools and processes guided by labour goals; good instructors; committed participants; committed management and effective support for participants and instructors; a wide variety of learning materials; and effective organizational links. Additionally, processes and practices in successful labour-based programs may include:

- reliance on non-prescriptive success indicators;
- respect for autonomy and diversity;
- manageability within ongoing work constraints;
- absence of competition from other workplace deliverers;
- appropriate learner–instructor ratio;
- respect for learners/workers;
- access for the most in need;
- excellent initial and follow-up practitioner training;
- participatory and continuous process of evaluation at all levels – project, program and classroom;
- celebration of achievements; and
- detailed program documentation.

Workers need to be involved in all phases of program development, which requires an atmosphere of respect, ownership, flexibility, and an open labour–management relationship that literacy practitioners cannot always affect or influence. All stakeholders – from workers to top administrators – need to buy in to the goals and methods, which is especially difficult to achieve where different interests are at stake. Key advice to educators is to act as “consultants” and guide rather than direct; and to find the right combination to unlock the particular organization, but not compromise on what it takes to run a quality program (NIL, 1993). Key factors identified for the success of workplace literacy management–labour partnerships are respect, convergence of respective goals and expectations, clear roles and responsibilities, significant contributions of each, and true collaboration in activities such as task analysis (Alamprese and Kay, 1993). According to Marshall and Selman (1992), among the other elements that contribute to the success of workplace literacy programs are:

- regularized positions for instructors;
- learner buy-in;
- written policies and procedures;
- individualized assessment and instruction;
- proper classroom space;
- counselling services;
- efficient administration;
- job descriptions for instructors and a performance appraisal system;
- knowledge of the staff in the workplace;
- orientation for instructors; and
- ongoing data collection for program evaluation.

In the context of a labour adjustment program, an effective literacy program treats potential participants as intelligent adults who are interested in doing something for themselves and their families.

Programs for Unemployed Workers

In addition to programs for employed workers, there are successful models for unemployed workers. In the context of a labour adjustment program (Fish, Food and Allied Workers, 1996), an effective literacy program treats potential participants as intelligent adults who are interested in doing something for themselves and their families. It is provided by an organization that the former workers trust to defend their interests. In addition, it:

- encourages a sense of local ownership by, for example, putting control in the hands of union representatives and community volunteers;
- makes attendance voluntary;
- starts at where people are and tailors instruction to individual needs and interests;
- collects evaluation data from the outset;
- provides a friendly and relaxed atmosphere with flexible hours;
- engages instructors who have the same background and status as the participants;
- uses a variety of techniques to encourage learning; and
- provides informal support and counselling for personal and family problems.

Classroom-based Adult Basic Education Programs

Some programs are offered in the context of upgrading for further education or training. According to Hambly (1998), an effective adult upgrading or basic education (ABE) classroom-based program has the following characteristics. Instructors engage learners in the examination of their relationship to learning rather than simply seeing themselves as teaching a set of de-contextualized skills. Instructors see themselves as testing and refining the developing knowledge base. A decision that an adult learner is unable to progress is not made on the basis of attempting instruction through only one model. Classroom instruction is participatory, and involves cooperative learning to build a sense of community within the classroom. Both traditional and non-traditional learning strategies are used. Caution is exercised when using employment gains as a rationale for program development or as a criterion for evaluation. According to Marshall and Selman (1992), literacy teachers accommodate various learning styles, conduct progress checks, acknowledge student achievement, foster the development of independent learning strategies, and acknowledge the learner's prior knowledge and experience.

According to Boivin (1993):

- learners should be grouped according to age, similar life experiences and learning goals;
- follow-up of each learner should be regularized;

- classes should be open and flexible, adapting to learners' schedules outside literacy training; and
- learners' objectives and motivations should be reviewed after establishing a trust relationship.

Programs for Adults with Learning Disabilities

With regard to programs for adults with learning disabilities, research results indicate that interest-driven reading is key to the development of high literacy levels. Development is augmented by avid reading in a content area of passionate personal interest along with systematic decoding instruction; and reading about a favourite subject enhances depth of background knowledge and enables practice, fostering development of fluency and increasingly sophisticated skills.

In short, from the lessons learned, it is possible to develop and implement model programs for many target populations. These observations are based on evaluations of existing programs, but it is important to note that few programs appear to have been formally evaluated, and evaluation reports for some types of programs have not been located, if they exist. Targeted programs are typically offered in an isolated and ad hoc fashion, existing as long as “champions” are there to sustain them.

Lesson 4 Barriers facing adults in need of literacy upgrading limit their capacity to enter and remain in literacy programs.

Adults can and do learn to read, but they require time and individualized attention (Ziegler, 1996). Regardless of form or format, literacy instruction does promote literacy acquisition. Age is not a barrier to acquiring literacy. Adults are as able to acquire literacy as children but it takes longer; they may acquire fluency more slowly than children (Ziegler, 1996). A substantial investment of time is necessary for a learner to significantly increase literacy skills. The best way to maximize learning time is to extend it, through out-of-class practice, and this is most likely to occur if the instruction is keyed to materials and situations which the client encounters daily and needs to master. Increasing hours of instruction is not sufficient to assure increased skill development. The most effective instructional methods and learning environments are likely different for different kinds of learners. Literacy programs – using volunteer tutors and/or within formal classrooms, workplace and family programs – have enabled some to improve their literacy skills.

However, programs to provide literacy instruction and skills upgrading have had mixed success. In general, they have not been successful in recruiting and retaining students. Most adults with low-level literacy do not enrol in literacy programs. Estimates of participation rates for targeted

populations range between 6% and 10% of those who could or should be in literacy programs.

One reason for low participation rates is barriers to access and accommodation in teaching/learning programs combined with the associated problems of unemployment, poverty and disenfranchisement (NIL, 1995; NLS, 1995; Smith, 1997). They include:

- lack of appropriate, accessible education and training programs;
- lack of financial resources;
- lack of support systems, including child care and transportation;
- unsuitable living conditions, including poor health and nutrition, and inadequate housing;
- personal circumstances and attributes, including stress and low-self esteem;
- issues of violence, abuse and addictions;
- need for eyeglasses or hearing aids; and
- discrimination based on race, class, gender and ability levels.

A second reason is related to learner perceptions of the teaching programs themselves. This might include instructional approaches, settings and facilities, testing procedures, teaching materials, and/or time frames that are inappropriate or inadequate from the individual “learner” perspective.

A third reason for low participation rates is a lack of awareness or agreement that low literacy skill levels are either “a problem” or “the problem” for a large number of individuals. The more “real” problems for some may be related to social or economic disadvantage, physical and/or learning disabilities, inequalities based on gender or ethnicity. Many of those adults who have low levels of literacy skill do not consider that they have a problem (HRDC, 1996).

A fourth reason is the nature of programs intended to assist those in need of remediation (i.e. problems for learners created by strict funding guidelines and/or time limitations). It would make sense to remove or circumvent these barriers for learners. Some barriers have been partially addressed; for example, public education and advocacy efforts of the NLS and its partners have reduced the low self-esteem of learners, lack of past success in school and lack of awareness (NLS, 1995).

For adults with low-level literacy skills, there are both barriers to participation in programs and barriers to completion. Many individuals

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who begin literacy remediation programs do not complete their program of study and the number of learners who are unsuccessful for whatever reasons is high (Ziegler, 1996). The dropout rate in adult literacy programs is very high, and although few actual statistics are kept, the following have been recorded: 25% in Quebec (Boivin, 1993) and 60% in Vermont (Dickinson, 1996). Among the reasons given for “dropping out” of literacy programs are previously acquired negative attitudes toward learning, lack of motivation, work and family responsibilities, and elements of program delivery such as inappropriate materials and/or lack of learner involvement (Boivin, 1993; Dickinson, 1996; Ziegler, 1996).

While program outcomes are largely positive, there may be short-term negative impacts for learners that have to do with changing the power in established relationships. In some families and employment situations, the balance of power is “disrupted” as a learner moves from a position of total dependence to one of self-reliance through the new-found ability to make informed choices (Barker, 1991).

For different, sometimes unknown reasons, programs and practices do not result in positive outcomes for learners. One adult basic education (ABE) study (Venezky, Sabatini, Brooks and Carino, 1996) concluded that:

- no examples of learning breakthroughs were found in the three individual case studies they conducted;
- all the learners struggled to advance in basic skills, particularly in writing; and
- the teachers were confronted with a wider range of abilities in their classrooms than they could handle effectively and had little, if any, diagnostic information to guide their individual instruction.

These researchers concluded that allowing each student to set his or her own instructional goals is a democratic approach to adult education, but it was not an effective way to use limited instructional resources. More restricted program designs, with fixed sets of skills offered at specified times, would be a more effective approach for adult basic skill education (Venezky, Sabatini, Brooks and Carino, 1996).

There are a considerable number of acknowledged problems with teaching/learning programs. Some examples are unstable funding, untrained personnel and limited accountability. Suggestions most commonly made by program staff and researchers for improving programs include the need to increase program funding, hire more staff, expand learner participation in guiding the program, arrange for good child care, and improve the assessment and documentation of learners’ progress (NIL, 1995). Suggestions made by funders and sponsors include a pressing need to demonstrate accountability through evaluation (HRDC,

1995). As well, paid and volunteer teaching/tutoring staff have unmet and ongoing learning needs (Hambly 1998; NCAL, 1993). With regard to learning technologies, levels of staff expertise are inadequate, and there is a notable lack of training, information about computer technology or effective uses of technology. Studies indicate a major need for general staff development – high quality, multi-content, hands-on, and ongoing (NCAL, 1993). In terms of training, volunteer tutors need initial and ongoing training, extra training as they take on new responsibilities, and links with specialists who can serve as consultants. Tutors need to learn about the adult education sector and about the variety of ways of offering adult literacy instruction; and they should recognize that their efforts have an impact on the learner’s life and future aspirations (Hambly, 1998). Corrections-specific training is not generally provided to teachers of offenders, so they are disadvantaged in dealing with prison-specific problems (NCAL, 1993).

Lesson 5 It is important that adult literacy learners have a say in policies and programs addressing their needs.

To fully realize the benefits of adult literacy programs for individuals and for society, the barriers to participation and completion must be systematically removed or circumvented, and the acknowledged problems with programs must be addressed. To do this, an important strategy is to involve learners in decision making about the programs and policies; however, of those adults who recognize their own literacy problem, most are not in a position to advocate on their own behalf. They do not have the resources or the sense of personal empowerment to engage “the system” in solving their literacy problems. Various advocacy groups work on their behalf – NGOs that are concerned with poverty, adult education and lifelong learning, unemployment, public health, crime, educational and social disadvantage in Canadian society.

A very small number of actual learners, with assistance from government and NGOs, have been able to advocate for themselves. The majority of students in literacy programs demonstrate a strong commitment to learning, a keen understanding of the issues that affect their lives, and a willingness to become involved in making positive choices for themselves and their families (Smith, 1997). Learner participation in decision making is a must (MCL, 1994). To increase success rates, interventions should focus on the customers and seek to meet their needs (NIL, 1995).

One U.S. lesson with direct applicability to Canada is that an effective jurisdiction-wide literacy system is not only results-oriented and quality-driven, but also customer-focused. Agencies seeking to build effective state-wide literacy systems must begin with a focus on the customer – the adult learner – and use their goals and their strengths to help define the

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desired outcomes more accurately (NIL, 1995). Positive results for a client will be possible only if all levels of human resource and economic development initiatives are networked with the adult literacy system. Adult literacy systems do not exist in a vacuum, but are one piece of a puzzle to help governments address multiple systems and overlapping needs. It is yet to be realized that multiple systems are all serving the same client and these systems must be networked together (NIL, 1995).

Lesson 6 While evidence suggests considerable advantages in using learning technologies in adult literacy programming, some question their effectiveness and appropriateness.

While there is still resistance and questioning about the effectiveness of using technology among some providers, the overall level of interest in using technology is reported to be high. On-line technologies are not yet being used by the majority (Hopey, Harvey-Morgan and Rethemeyer, 1996). Studies report that cost, training, inappropriate instruction, integration and access are problems (Millar, 1996). Inadequate availability of technology means that most learners who do have access have a limited amount of time to use the technology. Many learners have no access whatsoever, and few learners have access to anything approaching the latest technology. Lack of financial resources means that, while many programs are reasonably able to address their administrative needs, most do not have the funds to purchase the hardware and software needed to provide their students with adequate computer access.

The use of learning technologies presents challenges. There is evidence of higher productivity and more positive attitudes to learning from students who are using technology. As well, there is evidence of increased output and greater understanding of what producing written text involves, increased participation by learners, and higher levels of enthusiasm and interest using learning technologies (Victoria University of Technology, Australia, 1998). The advantages of using any computer software with adult students are that: (1) learners acquire basic computer skills; (2) computers give students the privacy they may desire; (3) computers are prestigious for the programs and they attract more students; and (4) computers provide fast feedback for each student. However, there is no evidence that computers result in dramatic achievement gains, improved attitudes, increased self-esteem, individual content, control or flexibility. Overall, no type of software has been shown to be particularly more advantageous (Millar, 1996).

In a broader application, information and communication technologies may be valuable (Hopey, Harvey-Morgan and Rethemeyer, 1996; NCAL, 1993) in:

- lessening the isolation that many adult literacy providers and students experience;
- increasing the communication between staff and students within and between programs;
- increasing access to high quality materials and current resources and information;
- streamlining administrative and reporting processes;
- developing a centralized “clearinghouse” of information and resources;
- maintaining information and tracking funds;
- matching learners to support services; and
- exploring innovative instructional and staff developmental approaches.

Adult literacy programs are somewhat behind in the adoption and development of technology resources; and economic considerations remain a major impediment to technology use in adult literacy programs (Elmore, 1997). Technology is not being exploited because: (1) much of the software lacks creativity; (2) products are geared toward children instead of adults; (3) few literacy providers have sufficient technology for broad sustained use; (4) staff and volunteers have limited knowledge and training in the use of technology as a teaching tool; and (5) consumer electronics and broadcast technologies are surprisingly underused in adult education (NCAL, 1993).

Lesson 7 More systematic evaluation of adult literacy policies, programs and practices is needed to increase accountability and to improve the knowledge base in the field.

Consistent evaluation would contribute to the systematic planning, development and accountability of all types of adult literacy interventions in the future (Eisemore, Marble and Crawford, 1998). In this attempt to gather evaluation studies, it became clear that most programs, policies and practices have not been formally evaluated. Among the many reasons for this is an absence of recognized quality standards for literacy programming. For example, employers, employees, educational institutions and various levels of government have yet to agree on the measures of success of quality workplace literacy training (Barker, 1991). As well, the current lack of comparability of results of programs makes it difficult for practitioners or researchers to confidently identify characteristics associated with effective practice (Ziegler, 1996).

While there is no “one way” to evaluate programs, the results of studies reveal some basic principles for accountability and good program evaluation. These principles should focus on:³

- measuring results or impacts;
- matching services to clients’ needs;
- providing continuous improvement, accountability and coordination;
- ensuring centralized databases and compatible technologies;
- linking programs to provincial and national goals;
- examining the concept of a “one-stop shop” with multiple access points and integrated service delivery; and
- identifying commonalities and best practices.

A national study is currently under way in the United States on the instructional methods and organizational conditions that are associated with adults’ acquisition of reading skills as a result of their participation in ABE programs. Utilizing a pre and post follow-up design, this study is collecting data from several hundred adults enrolled in ABE programs across the United States through 2002. The study team is examining the extent to which adults’ attendance in ABE, the type of reading instruction they receive, and the type of program services offered, affect their acquisition of reading skills, development of self-efficacy and social support networks, uses of literacy outside class, and their changes at work, at home and in the community. The study’s results are intended to inform adult education state policy and local practice in the United States with regard to the criteria for effective instructional practice in reading and the operation of ABE programs.⁴

Documenting effective practices requires systematic development of research and technical capacity to serve the community of literacy providers (Eisemore, Marble and Crawford, 1998). A performance management, reporting and improvement system is a powerful tool to change paradigms, change systems, revise policies and transform processes – all with the goal of wise investment of public funds to change lives for the better (NIL, 1995). Undertaking this study has led to the conclusion that literacy policies, programs and practices have not been consistently evaluated, and assistance is needed with this for the future.

³ For more information, see NIL (1995).

⁴ This study is being conducted by Abt Associates Inc., with funding from the U.S. Department of Education.

5. Potential Future Directions

From the analysis of evaluation and research reports and from the lessons learned, potential future directions emerge.

First, descriptions of good practice and the indicators of quality can be found for all program elements and types; however, this information is in many different places. Although it is quite possible to set out the principles of good practice in teaching literacy skills to adults – including the preparation of teachers, materials used, learning technologies and learner involvement – this has not been done in a coordinated way. This makes the development and evaluation of programs both complex and difficult. A comprehensive, consensus-based set of guidelines for good practice could be developed for both planning and evaluation purposes, and begin to ensure equitable access to effective and efficient adult literacy programs for all Canadians.

Second, as adult literacy is not a discrete issue, it must be embedded in most social policies. A large number of adults seeking literacy instruction today present limited reading skills which reflect a more generalized learning problem and/or the motivational and educational disadvantages of a history of failure and a lower socio-economic status. Evidence suggests a cohort of literacy-disadvantaged persons who have common characteristics, including low literacy skill levels, low income, low social status, learning disabilities and other disadvantages. There are groups within Canadian society that have a greater incidence of low-level literacy skills among adults – for example, First Nations, offenders and people living in poverty. It is impossible to disentangle the multiple problems contributing to and stemming from low-level literacy. Hence, future efforts should build on this knowledge and result in effective targeted programs.

Evaluation of policy initiatives reinforces different jurisdictional roles and responsibilities. It has been concluded that there are different roles for different levels of government, and a demonstrated need for continued federal intervention in literacy (HRDC, 1995). NLS support for research and advocacy, and other HRDC initiatives in support of learners through Employment Insurance (Part II) and the designated equity-seeking group policies, are a necessary complement to the actual provision of programs by the provinces and territories which have jurisdiction for education and training. The federal government has demonstrated leadership in adult literacy, but much remains to be done (HRDC, 1995; NCES, 1993). Suggestions for the federal government from a 1995 evaluation of the NLS included:

- more work on preventing duplication in projects;

- more work on distribution of materials and research findings;
- more involvement with projects when they are under way to ensure quality;
- exploring the establishment of a national network for resource material and information;
- sponsoring more regional and national meetings so that information can be shared;
- publishing a newsletter; and
- taking on more of a “superagency” role, operating across federal departments to improve coordination, consultation and assistance.

Many of these recommendations have been implemented, but not yet evaluated. For example, good information dissemination has been judged to be critical (HRDC, 1995); and financial support for the National Adult Literacy Database reflects the recognition of that reality. Partnerships and flexibility are critically important (HRDC, 1995); and partnerships between governments, with NGOs, with business and labour, and with education providers have contributed to positive policy outcomes. Despite this, however, no concerted effort involving all government jurisdictions has been made to reduce the number of individuals with literacy-related problems.

Third, the lessons learned should be addressed as challenges. Leadership and commitment are needed to ensure that, in the coming years, the following goals are met:

- The benefits of adult literacy programs are fully realized for individuals and for society at large.
- Effective and efficient adult literacy programs are designed, delivered and evaluated consistently and systematically.
- Learning technologies are used appropriately and effectively in adult literacy programs.
- Targeted programs for those in most need are designed and delivered in an effective, efficient and equitable manner.
- The barriers, for adults, to participation in and completion of programs are addressed and overcome.
- Learners are involved in all interventions intended for them in a coherent, coordinated and effective manner.

- Policies, programs and practices are systematically evaluated in order to demonstrate accountability and increase the knowledge of the field.

These lessons are based on what has been learned to this point, but further research is needed. An extensive literature review revealed large numbers and varieties of policies, programs and practices – international, national and provincial policies; education and public relations programs; research projects; teaching and evaluation strategies. Some of these interventions had been formally evaluated, and specific lessons are drawn from those evaluation studies. There are many interventions that have not been researched or evaluated; many studies that have been conducted in an industrialized-economy context but not in Canada; and much that is simply not known. At this point, it does not appear that such critical issues as the following have been evaluated:

- provincial/territorial literacy education policies and programs;
- the actual effects or impacts of programs on learners;
- the means by which to encourage potential learners to join programs (i.e. the rewards to improved literacy skills for adults); and
- the effects and effectiveness of plain language initiatives.

The intention of this report has been to set out what has been learned from studies of interventions aimed at adult literacy in the context of literacy for citizenship and personal empowerment, work and lifelong learning. The inclusion of studies was dictated by the resource and time constraints of this study, by availability, and by the validity and reliability of the research. Details of various interventions and of the evaluation studies are found in the technical report which is available from HRDC upon request and on the Internet at <http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/edd>.

These “lessons learned” are from the view of policymakers and academics for whom the outcomes of this report can inform policy development and analysis. These lessons can be used for (1) the development and analysis of policy, (2) the planning and implementation of programs, and/or (3) the design and evaluation of practice. Each lesson learned presents an important opportunity to enhance equitable access to and supports for quality lifelong learning for all Canadians.

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