



Multiculturalism and
Citizenship Canada

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Citoyenneté Canada

ILLITERACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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NATIONAL LITERACY SECRETARIAT

Canada

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INTRODUCTION

The guiding principles of Canadian democracy are written in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. These guiding principles recognize the equality of every individual and oppose all forms of discrimination. Thus, everyone is equal before the law. Also, everyone has the right to a decent quality of life and has access to all means instituted by the State to meet the basic needs and rights of the individual. This document will deal with the question of human rights. We will attempt to view the limitations and obstacles encountered by persons lacking basic literacy skills in the exercise of these rights. Finally, we will propose various means to be considered for removing these obstacles.

A few years ago, Canada, like all industrialized countries, recognized illiteracy as a very real phenomenon, despite the democratization of education and the universality of free and compulsory public schooling for all children. What's more, this problem is not restricted to the elderly, who either did not have access to education or who only attended school for a few years!

While a large number of persons who lack literacy skills are over 55 years of age, this phenomenon touches all age categories, even including a considerable number of young adults who have just recently left school.

As the century draws to a close, we are faced with a significant problem. Nevertheless, we must be careful in assessing the extent of the phenomenon. We must neither overestimate nor underestimate its gravity. In their publication entitled, "Adult Illiteracy in the United States: Rhetoric, Recipes and Reality," Fox and Baxter offer the following warning:

"Unfortunately, much of the current rhetoric about America's literacy problem is misleading, suggesting that the problem is larger than it is (that, for example, there are tens of millions of American adults who cannot read well enough to perform basic tasks like taking a bus across town or filling out a social security form) and simpler than it is (that the baseline problem of all these people is that they lack reading, writing and computing skills) and easier to solve than it is (that all we need to do is to get people into programs that will teach them to read).

In reality, literacy should be viewed as a continuum of under education, stretching from those who cannot read and write at all at the low end, to those who have less than a high school education at the high end. People at different points along this continuum have different needs, which may differ greatly from the needs existing literacy programs are trying to meet."

(1)

In fact, by overestimating the problem, we run the risk of penalizing a large number of adults who need a refresher course in basic education and who, in fact, are not truly illiterate. Overestimating the problem may have the direct result of provoking discrimination against these people in terms of their access to employment. But by underestimating the problem, we are maintaining as marginal these millions of adults who have problems reading and writing, problems which, among other things, may directly prevent them from fully exercising their rights in society.

Finally, it would be simplistic, at the very least, to think that literacy activities constitute the only remedy to illiteracy. If such were the case, it would not be so difficult to reach persons who lack literacy skills and motivate them to register in literacy activities.

In Quebec, literacy has been a government priority since 1985, with an open budget for encouraging access to the public education system for persons who have difficulty reading and writing. Moreover, a network of independent community groups also offers literacy services. In fact, it is this network, through its research projects and awareness and information activities, which has brought this problem to the public's attention, thus forcing the State to take action.

As a result, there are a number of literacy resources active in Quebec. Still, in 1988-89, there were only 18,000 persons registered in literacy activities out of a possible minimum of 300,000 persons!

In view of such a problem, our approach must involve more than merely setting up a framework of educational resources. We must support the development of literacy, but we must also ensure that persons who lack literacy skills are not prevented from fully exercising their social rights because they have difficulty reading or writing. This is even more important in industrialized countries where persons who lack literacy skills constitute a minority, albeit a sizeable one, among a large majority of literate people.

This document will deal with this more global approach. Before examining this issue relating to human rights, however, it would be wise to examine the situation as it presently exists in Canada.

ILLITERACY IN CANADA

In Canada various studies have determined that, almost three people out of ten have not yet acquired the basic education that is essential for their full participation in our society. Out of these three people, one is virtually unable to read a very simple text directly concerning him or her, and very often, he or she can only "draw" his or her name.

Concerning the other two people, some have already learned to read and write but have unlearned these skills because they have had very few opportunities to use them in their work or daily life. For many others, especially young adults who lack literacy skills, their academic skills are too weak for them to gain access to the work force or to vocational training programs. Others, mainly those over 50 years of age, have had to drop out of school at a very early age for various reasons - family, economic or social. These individuals do not feel that they are illiterate, and would certainly be shocked to be "categorized" as such. And with good reason! Such people were not considered illiterate in 1970, less than 20 years ago. Generally, even with less than nine years of schooling, they were able to find a decent job and be promoted within their factory or office, something which is almost unthinkable in 1990.

If we go back even further, to less than 40 years ago, many women teachers had less than 12 years of schooling and provided a very high quality of education. Needless to say, the school system, like society, has evolved considerably, with several new disciplines being added to the basic education curriculum, to meet modern society's needs.

A Definition Related to the Evolution of Society

Are we to conclude that school no longer succeeds in educating young people, in fulfilling its mandate? Thousands of young people leaving school today are functionally illiterate. Is this really a new phenomenon? Unfortunately, there is a tendency to forget that, not so long ago, a considerable number of young people dropped out of school to join the work force before finishing high school. At that time, they had a choice of various jobs that would provide an adequate living such as: construction, retail sales, or factory work, etc.

Society, however, has undergone major changes during the last fifteen years. Advances in communication and the introduction of new technologies have led to the elimination of many job categories and to a rise in unemployment. In order to meet new needs, society has raised its requirements with respect to basic education, redefining the very concept of illiteracy.

Faced with society's present contingencies, we conclude that almost one third of the adult population is completely or functionally illiterate, and that this phenomenon is currently on the increase.

Are these people really illiterate? Are they, as the definition of the term states, "incapable of adequately functioning in today's society"? Many of these people "became" illiterate overnight because the factory where they had worked for years was forced to close as a result of the economic crisis of the early 1980s. Of course, they had problems reading and writing, but their work did not involve daily use of these skills. If necessary, their fellow workers were able to compensate for their deficiencies and help them out.

In short, both collective solidarity and the work organization model contained the problem. These people were recognized in their jobs. They raised their families, bought their houses and were involved in various volunteer activities up to the day they lost their jobs and found themselves unable to find another because they had difficulty reading and writing or because they had not completed enough years of schooling to fulfill job requirements.

Are there not as many illiterate persons as we claim? It is hard to accept the idea that almost 30 per cent of the adult population is considered illiterate, in the true sense of the word, that is, "incapable of functioning in our society due to major gaps in their basic education."

We must admit, however, that these people encounter major difficulties when dealing with the written word, and that this makes it very difficult for them to adapt to technological change. It is also increasingly difficult for them to take advantage of services offered to them and to exercise their social rights to the fullest extent. While these persons may need to complete their basic education, and while special remedial teaching methods need to be developed for them, this does not mean that they are incapable of functioning adequately in society.

Statistics Canada Survey

In order to gain a better understanding of the present state of literacy in Canada, the National Literacy Secretariat of Canada commissioned Statistics Canada to conduct a survey to assess directly the functional abilities of Canadian adults in the areas of reading, writing and numeracy skills of Canadian adults. This survey was completed in the fall of 1989. The initial results, dealing with reading skills, were made public in 1990.

The survey consisted of in-home interviews with approximately 9,500 individuals across Canada. It has been greeted as a major contribution to the concrete evaluation of literacy in Canada. Better still, it provides us with a different approach to the situation, enabling us to consider different solutions adapted to the various problems encountered by adults with insufficient basic education.

Instead of classifying persons lacking literacy skills into two groups (basic illiterates and functional illiterates), Statistics Canada decided to establish "comfort" levels with respect to reading, writing and numeracy. There are four levels involved.

Level 1: The respondents have problems using written material and are the most likely to say that they are unable to read. For example, these respondents were incapable of reading very simple information on a bottle of children's medicine. The survey reveals that seven per cent of Canadians are at Level 1.

Level 2: The respondents are capable of using written material only for performing elementary tasks such as spotting a familiar word in a simple text or identifying articles on a grocery list in a supermarket advertisement. They usually state that they have trouble understanding everyday reading material. The majority of people who take part in literacy programs are found in Level 2, which includes nine per cent of Canadians.

Level 3: The respondents are able to use reading material in a certain number of situations as long as this material is clear and the tasks to be performed are simple - for example, determining when to return a form to a child's school. In short, it is not a matter of spotting a word, but understanding a sentence and following up on it. These people tend to avoid situations where they are required to read. Many of these people will register in literacy programs or return to their high school studies on a full-time or part-time basis. 22 per cent of Canadians are found in Level 3.

Level 4: The respondents are capable of fulfilling most of the requirements for reading everyday materials and have varying reading abilities. 62 per cent of Canadians are in Level 4.

It can be seen, therefore, that 38 per cent of Canadians have problems with reading, to varying degrees. Of these, 16 per cent experience major difficulties, whereas 62 per cent are capable of satisfying most of the requirements for fluent reading.

Such a survey indicates that it is certainly possible to consider developing new training programs adapted to particular needs, for example, job-related requirements, such as integrating a basic education "refresher" program into a retraining program offered to workers as a result of technological changes. But it also clearly indicates that almost 40 per cent of the adult population experiences some difficulty with reading. While, for a large number of these people, the solution lies in "refreshing" their basic education, for at least 16 per cent of Canadians, i.e. more than two million people, this situation involves consequences of much greater magnitude.

As we specified earlier, the problem is not unique to Canada. Fox and Baker inform us that in the United States, "various studies and surveys have determined that between 50 and 70 million Americans 17 and older are considered to be "educationally disadvantaged." (2)

A Social Problem Affecting the Entire Community

As we can see, illiteracy is not a marginal phenomenon, a problem affecting only a minority of individuals or mainly the elderly. It is a social problem that requires global intervention involving the entire community. People have recently been talking about major economic costs for society as a whole. In fact, these costs are proving to be high. But there are other costs, which perhaps cannot be measured in financial terms, but which nevertheless have a major impact on the individual and on society as a whole.

We are talking here about social costs, about what it means for our democratic society to realize that millions of people are prevented from exercising their rights to the fullest extent because they have difficulty reading and writing.

Hundreds of thousands of people live below the poverty line because job requirements that are too high prevent them from finding work. Hundreds of thousands of people are involved in legal disputes because they signed documents that they could not understand. Hundreds of thousands of people cannot adequately benefit from the services offered to them because they involve procedures that include writing. Hundreds of thousands of people cannot help their children in school, thus limiting their children's chances of truly benefitting from their learning experience.

It is true that we have a Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. And it is true that everyone is equal before the Charter. Unfortunately, however this equality - this recognition of rights - is only true in principle for millions of people in Canada. Not everyone has the same starting point in life.

"An "even start" for the child of an illiterate parent begins when the parent (...) leave(s) the maternity ward of the hospital able to read the low-level reading materials the hospital or the Red Cross provides on parenting. (...) An "even start" begins when the father knows how to go into the local bookstore and select books that he and his child can read. (...) An "even start" continues when the parents know how daycare, headstart preschool and the public education system work; (...); know how to (at a minimum) read school notices, progress reports and report cards." (3)

The battle against illiteracy, therefore, must take place on several levels. It must ensure that the basic education offered to young people is suitable, and that these young people can benefit from good learning conditions.

Obviously we must develop literacy programs to their fullest potential. Nevertheless, according to Frank Smith, to whom Fox and Baker refer:

"When literacy is promoted as the solution to all economic, social, and educational problems, it is easy to assume that inability to read and write creates those same economic, social, and educational problems. Literacy becomes a caste mark, and those who haven't got it are discriminated against... The language used to describe people who don't read and write well is often reminiscent of some of the most prejudiced ways in which handicapped people or racial and other minorities are discussed." (4)

"Today's political talk about literacy is not about empowerment of people who are poor and disenfranchised. It's really about maintaining the present distribution of wealth and power (...). The talk today is not about literacy for social mobility, but it is about literacy for basic entry level employment. These arguments focus only secondarily on improving the quality of life for individuals and communities (...)." (5)

These two quotations force us to think about the choices we are currently making in developing programs for literacy. Meanwhile, however, it is becoming increasingly important to ensure that illiterate and educationally disadvantaged people are not doubly penalized by also being prevented from exercising their social rights to the fullest extent. Illiteracy is not solely an individual problem. It is a social problem and, as a society, we must do all we can to ensure that persons who lack literacy skills enjoy the same rights as educated people. The problem of illiteracy concerns us all, and we must all contribute to improving the living conditions of persons who have difficulty reading and writing.

ILLITERACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS: CASE HISTORIES

How does the problem of illiteracy translate into concrete terms in the daily lives of persons lacking literacy skills? Based on the many case histories that we received from members of community literacy groups, we have selected three different situations which we present to you through the following case histories.

Lucie... The Problems of a Young Mother

Lucie is twenty-four years old. She lives alone with her daughter, Julie, who started school this year. She works as a waitress in a small snack-bar in her neighbourhood. For two years, she has been attending a community literacy group two evenings a week to relearn how to read and write. She decided to go back to school so that she could help her daughter: but especially so that her daughter will not be ashamed of her.

"I left school the day I turned 16. I had always hated school. I couldn't learn. I had problems right from grade one. I was never able to keep up. I had too much on my mind, I was absent-minded. At home, my parents couldn't help me because they didn't know how to read. And they were always fighting. Especially about money problems.

There were seven of us children, and my father barely earned the minimum wage. So there were always problems. The week the rent was due, we ate potatoes or macaroni, and often skipped dinner because there was nothing left to eat in the house. When things were going well, if my father had worked overtime, we had meat as often as three times a week. But the rest of the time we pretended not to be hungry. We didn't eat breakfast. We left for school as soon as we were up because we knew that at school, at least, we would have milk.

I always fell asleep in class and was always punished by the teachers because I couldn't keep up. I certainly did a lot of copying, even if I didn't understand what I was copying. And I always had to make excuses - because my parents had not signed my report card, because they did not go to the parents' meeting for my assessment, because I never had notes from my parents when I was absent. I didn't want to tell the school that my parents were ignorant. I really didn't learn much at school. In fact, I didn't even finish the primary program. I was soon placed in special classes where we were kept busy.

At 16, I celebrated my liberation. Real life at last. But what a life! It took me six months to find a job. Everywhere I went they gave me a form to fill out. I didn't even understand the questions. I ended up working as a "thread cutter" in a factory. I earned the minimum wage. I often worked as much as sixty hours a week- and, when I received my pay, I always had the impression that not all my hours were counted. Once I spoke to the boss about it. He took a piece of paper to show me how, on the contrary, he was giving me extra. I couldn't say anything, especially that I didn't understand a thing he wrote! When I think back on it, I am sure that he was exploiting me and that he knew that I couldn't read.

After three months, I had had enough. I went to work as a waitress in a small restaurant. It was poor pay but the tips were good. I had tried to work in larger restaurants but I didn't know how to count well enough and I couldn't even read the menu. I didn't even last there two weeks!

By working, I was able to get my own apartment. It wasn't fancy, but I had my freedom, a room that I didn't have to share with three other people. I had just turned 18 when I found myself pregnant and alone.

I went to Unemployment but, since I didn't have enough weeks, they sent me to Welfare. I became frightened when I saw the long form to fill out. But the government employee was nice, he filled it out himself.

Then Julie was born. Things haven't been easy. It was okay at the hospital. The nurses took care of us. But, alone at home, it was not so easy. When I left the hospital, they gave me a stack of papers explaining what to do with Julie: health care, vaccination dates, how to feed her. All those papers were very nice, but they ended up in the garbage because I couldn't read them.

At three months Julie cried non-stop. I didn't know what to do. I didn't dare tell people around me about it. I was afraid that my child would be taken away because I was alone and too young. Finally I took her to the hospital where they told me she was suffering from malnutrition. I didn't understand why, since I was nursing her. The doctor explained that I was not eating well enough and that my child was suffering the consequences. He bawled me out because she hadn't had her vaccinations yet.

In the end, he grasped the situation and arranged for a social worker to teach me how to look after Julie. She helped me a lot. She had seen a lot of people like me, and suspected that I couldn't read well enough. She was the first one to encourage me to go back to school to learn how to read again. But I wasn't interested. I didn't see how I could learn now when I hadn't succeeded in ten years of school.

When Julie was three, I went back to work in the snack-bar where I still work. That's when I started asking myself questions. I put Julie in the neighbourhood daycare and I realized that she was beginning to learn new things. And in the evenings she asked me to read her stories. That's what made me decide to go back to school. I didn't want her to be ashamed of me when she was in grade one, and I also wanted to be able to help her. I knew what I had missed and I didn't want the same for her.

It wasn't easy at first, but I don't regret it at all. I realize now everything that I was missing. I also realize that people often took advantage of me because I didn't know how to read."

Mrs. Tremblay... Not Really the Golden Years!

Mrs. Tremblay's story is told to us by her neighbour who, although actively involved in the literacy movement, did not realize up until then to what extent people lacking literacy skills are often prevented from exercising their basic rights.

"I want to talk to you about my neighbour. Not because she is special because, without being aware of it, you certainly know many people like her. (...)

My neighbour is 69 years old. She is a widow with no children, her only son having died in a car accident a few years ago. Her husband, who was a cab driver, died five years ago, leaving her a small insurance policy which provided her with a capital of \$5,000. He had no pension fund, and she suddenly found herself without resources, having never worked and barely knowing how to read and write.

I learned all this by chance three years ago. I had just received my lease renewal notice and the new owner was asking for a 30 per cent increase. Being well informed of my rights, I then decided to fight this notice of increase and asked my neighbours to join me in a common front.

So I went to see my neighbour upstairs to speak to her about this. She was not aware of what was happening. She had indeed received the letter ... and had put it in her "paper drawer", still sealed. In previous years, the owner had increased the rent each year by ten dollars per month and she had taken it for granted that this would not change.

We looked at her letter and her rent was also being increased by 30 per cent, or \$60 per month. So I offered to prepare the whole case and to go with her when we went to the Régie du logement (Housing Office). She was obviously relieved. Seeing all her letters still sealed in her drawer, I offered to sort through them to make sure that she didn't have other problems of the same type.

It wasn't because she didn't know how to read and write, she told me. It was that, as she got older, her eyesight was failing and her husband used to look after all that. So, I dove into her papers and noticed that she had never completed a tax return. Knowing that she could benefit from a property tax refund, I then offered to do it for her. Filling out the form, I realized that her only income is her Canada Pension. I also realized that she is entitled to a guaranteed income supplement, but that she has never claimed it! I found the application form in another sealed envelope. She was missing out on at least \$300 per month because she did not know her rights and because she did not know how to read or write. (...)

In fact, she could barely read and, as I was able to observe, only managed to sign her name with great difficulty. At her age, she was not a special case. Coming from Abitibi, she had grown up in the country and had had to walk three miles to get to school. Since she was the oldest of a large family, she had left school at a very early age. (...)" (6)

Jean... When Progress Pushes Us Backwards!

Jean is 46 years old. He is married, with three children - a son, 17, and two daughters, 14 and 12. He has worked in the main factory in town for 22 years as a turner, a trade he learned in a specialized trade school. Following the Free Trade Agreement, his employers decided to modernize the business. As a result, a vocational training program is about to begin in the next few weeks for retraining factory employees. But the company has to eliminate some jobs, and that is causing Jean some anxiety, even though he has a great deal of seniority.

"It's all very well to have seniority, but the bosses have said that they will only keep workers who are retrainable. And I have the impression that this does not include me since my foreman talks to me every day about the advantages of early retirement.

With three children in school, I don't have the means to quit working. The coming changes scare me. They have said that after the training they will only keep the best ones. To understand what they meant by that, we went to another factory to see how the changes were made and I didn't understand very much. They had to learn a stack of notebooks and they now work with computers. But my trade is a craftsman's trade. I do everything myself. I am the one who runs my machine; the machine does not run me.

I have nothing against learning new things, but I don't know if I will be capable of it. I'm a little rusty. Aside from the sports section, I read very little. Even with the children, it's my wife who has done the reading. And it's been more than 25 years since I set foot in a school. I get by alright, but I never wanted to be foreman because there is too much paper work and I don't write well enough.

I started to look for another job but it's no easier. Everywhere I go, they ask for a Secondary V - something which didn't even exist in my time. It doesn't matter if I tell them I have lots of experience, it's not enough. Last week, I filled out a job application. When I gave it to the secretary, she started to laugh because it was full of mistakes and also because I hadn't understood half the questions. I was so humiliated that I don't know if I will look anywhere else.

At home, it's my wife who looks after the paper work, the banking and the contracts. I'm not interested in it and I don't understand much of it either. But my wife can't look for a job for me as well!

So, I wait and I worry. The famous course starts in three weeks and I hope they are going to give me a chance. At least, if we were unionized, I would be protected. I'm only 46 years old. I am in no way "finished".

Reading these three case histories, it is easy to identify the difficulties that people who lack literacy skills can encounter in their daily lives. These difficulties are related to the exercise of their basic rights.

For example, we notice that Lucie actually went to school, but she was unable to really benefit from the experience, because her parents were partially illiterate, and, most importantly because her family's living conditions deprived her of suitable learning conditions. By quitting school, Lucie believed she could improve her life, but she was quickly faced with many problems: difficulty finding a job, exploitation in the workplace, embarrassment in front of public servants, health problems, difficulty taking good care of her child and, finally, fear of not being a good mother and not being able to help her child in school.

Many women who lack literacy skills can identify with Lucie's situation. These women are almost always found in non-unionized job ghettos where they are easily exploited and where the wages and working conditions, in general, are unacceptable. Most of these women live in situations of poverty because of these conditions, and their situations become even more dramatic when they are single parents. There is much that can be done to help these women extricate themselves from their misery, and the steps to be taken must involve more than simply greater access to literacy.

For Mrs. Tremblay, the fact that she cannot read or write means that she does not know her rights and that she is also in danger of encountering legal problems. In her case, her lack of literacy skills has clearly kept her living in conditions of poverty since she was unable for several years to receive the benefits to which she was entitled. As well, her problem is further isolating her from society itself.

As for Jean, he is in serious danger of losing his job and having a lot of trouble finding another. He also informs us that he was unable to accept a promotion because he had too much trouble with the "paper work". In the end, if he were to lose his wife, who looks after all the paper work, he would be even more disadvantaged.

All of these people are prevented from exercising their rights because they have trouble reading and writing. Lucie is already taking literacy courses, but she is aware that it will be a few more years before she feels really comfortable, no longer embarrassed by her problem. All the men and women who experience these same problems need help. They need to be offered services adapted to their needs, not to be further penalized. We must, therefore, understand this reality and develop ways of enabling them to live normally as they work to become literate or to live normal lives if they cannot, or feel they cannot, resume their studies.

LET'S TAKE ACTION!

Access to Information and Services

The majority of persons who lack literacy skills do not have access to information either on issues that affect them personally, such as access to various services, or on social, political or economic issues that can influence their lives. It is very often said that people are reading less and less because the audiovisual media have replaced the written word.

We cannot help but notice, however, that it is not often through these media that relevant information concerning human rights is really distributed. There will be a brief mention, a summary, sometimes a presentation by an expert in specialized jargon. Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public will then change the channel because they will not realize that this information is addressed to them. How do we explain this situation? According to Fox and Baker:

"(...) institutions in American society generally do not consider whether or how the educational and promotional information they publish is received by the general public, and writers are too often preoccupied more with the medium than the message. As a result, tens of millions of Americans, that is, who read at a fifth to ninth grade reading level cannot read basic public materials - tax forms, warnings on medical bottles, memos on factory bulletin boards and notices sent home from their children's schools. Writers and document designers, by not writing what's important in a way that can be read and understood by tens of millions of marginally literate adults, keep the reader alienated from, and deprived of, crucial information, services, and in some cases, their civil rights.

(...) Local governments, utilities, banks, social and political advocacy groups, businesses, and health agencies produce information with little awareness of its readability. State and federal documents render even the most skilled readers functionally illiterate; ironically, the overly complicated language used in such documents serves as the model for the language used in much public information." (7)

In 1987, the Regroupement des groupes populaires en alphabétisation completed a small study on the readability of the Québec Government forms most commonly used by the general population. These forms included, among others, an application under the Small Claims Act, the provincial tax return, an application form for the Regie du Logement (Housing Office), as well as an application for government employment. The results of the study indicated to what extent the forms had been designed primarily to meet the needs of the public servants who would be processing them and not in accordance with the needs of the users, e.g. the use of numerous abbreviations, legal language, specialized jargon, and little space allowed for recording information. In short, even a person with a university education would have trouble with them!

The departments that had designed these forms were very surprised by the comments they received. It was not a question of ill will, for these documents had been prepared with a concern for simplicity and readability, and they seemed very easily understood by those who had designed them.

How do we correct these gaps, which are becoming increasingly pronounced, between public, community, social or government services and the average citizen, mainly those who are educationally disadvantaged? How do we ensure that these services and information are truly available to illiterate or educationally disadvantaged persons?

Where There's a Will...

It is obvious that a broader and more generalized use of audiovisual media would certainly contribute towards ensuring better distribution of information. But in order for this method to be truly effective, the information must, first and foremost, be made accessible, that is, understandable.

This is an essential condition, not only for audiovisual media, but also for all documentation produced by government and public services and destined for the general public. The presentation and the vocabulary used to convey the information must be modified: avoiding texts that are too long and that contain small print; providing illustrations; getting to the point; clearly identifying the important information and eliminating everything that does not directly concern the person using the service.

And, finally, why not work with a literacy group to review the document and identify the problems that an educationally disadvantaged person may have?

Other means may also be considered, both for persons who lack literacy skills and for other sorts of people who have problems with the written word (e.g. some persons with disabilities, many allophones). Thus, special "wickets" where these persons can receive answers to their questions and public reader and writer services could be implemented.

Finally, we must also ensure that people who work directly with these users are aware of the problem and that they pay special attention to the needs of persons who lack literacy skills. Going back to Lucie's case: if the nurse on duty at the time she left the hospital had been aware of her problem, she probably would not have given her a whole stack of written information. She would have taken more time to explain to her what to do or to ensure that Lucie had support at home. Sensitizing personnel to the problem, therefore, is essential if we want individuals who cannot read or write adequately to be able to exercise their rights to the fullest extent without embarrassment or shame.

Access to Jobs and Awareness of Their Rights

"The recent evolution of our societies, the economic upheavals and the introduction of new technologies are changing both the very structure of the work-force and the training requirements for gaining access to it.

Do people who lack literacy skills have the same opportunities as others for obtaining jobs that guarantee fair conditions? Do they have the same opportunities for keeping their jobs, coming to terms with current changes and improving their situations? What are the chances of adults who lack literacy skills gaining access to the work-force in a context where, from one year to the next, the unemployment rate hovers around ten per cent? Do the "employability" programs meet their needs?

For employees who lack literacy skills, what are the chances of understanding the written information circulated in the work place? What chances do they have in the face of technological changes? Are they able to participate in vocational training activities? Do they know their rights and exercise them to the fullest extent possible? What are their chances for participating in company and union activities? Do they know the law concerning minimum working standards?" (8)

These questions are part of the preparatory documents for the forum, "Une société sans barrières", organized by the RGPAQ, the Institut canadien d'Éducation des adultes and the Quebec Teaching Congress, which will be held in Montreal in November, 1990.

We cannot talk about the right to work without referring to job access or to the work environment. It is obvious that, in the case of educationally disadvantaged workers, access to the work-force is becoming increasingly difficult for those who are jobless, as is opportunity for promotion in the case of those who are employed.

Recent studies tend to demonstrate the economic toll of illiteracy. While these studies seek to encourage the development of training programs for people who lack literacy skills, they do not always have the desired effect. In fact, the conclusions that can be drawn from these studies suggest to employers that they would be well advised not to keep or hire persons who have difficulty reading and writing.

It is found, for example, that illiteracy is a determining factor in work accidents. What these studies do not say, however, is that these accidents generally occur in very high-risk job sectors where people who lack literacy skills very often work.

Lack of literacy is increasingly becoming a discriminatory factor in access to jobs. High unemployment rates provide employers with a pool of unemployed workers, thus enabling them to choose those who will cost them the least in terms of vocational training should technological changes occur within the company.

When workers who lack literacy skills are given preference, it is often for high-risk job categories or in companies where they are easily exploited in terms of their working conditions.

There are laws to protect workers, but workers must be informed of these laws. Several literacy groups have had to supply information focusing on the Quebec law concerning minimum working standards after having observed that workers registered in their programs did not know their true rights or were afraid to exercise them for fear of being fired.

Even in sectors where workers are unionized, it is observed that they know very little about their rights or their collective agreement. They ask few questions and suffer injustices because they dare not admit publicly that they have trouble reading and writing for fear of losing their job or being ridiculed by their colleagues. Finally we will not go back to the whole question of training programs associated with technological change or vocational training, since we have already tackled this subject in JEAN's case history.

There is much to do in the workplace to ensure that workers who lack literacy skills are not penalized for exercising their rights and that they have access to employment.

What We Can Do...

First, in order to improve job access for people with low literacy levels, it is essential that training programs designed for the jobless allow unrestricted access to literacy activities and that they be offered under conditions which take into consideration the true needs of these individuals. Thus, these programs must recognize that the literacy process can take more than one year and that they must allow these persons to complete the process without having their benefits cut off.

There are several job categories that do not require reading and writing skills. Workers in these types of jobs will be more likely to lose their academic skills if they don't use them outside of work. We might consider affirmative action programs for hiring persons who lack literacy skills while offering them the opportunity to participate in literacy programs.

Finally, we must ensure that workers with low literacy levels know and exercise their rights, as well as the laws regulating working standards and conditions.

For workers who are employed, different measures could be considered. For example, we might consider measures related to the upgrading of skills, e.g. incorporation of literacy programs into the company, educational leave for workers with low literacy levels, "refresher" courses integrated into vocational training programs, etc. More and more of these measures must be developed, and organizations representing workers must, from now on, plan for them in their collective demands.

Finally, unions and employers must also examine closely all clauses in job contracts that lead to discrimination against educationally disadvantaged workers. This does not mean that we should eliminate job qualifications or force companies to open all jobs to workers who lack literacy skills. However, as we noted earlier, the requirements for several job categories were raised arbitrarily, often excluding any form of promotion for workers with little or no literacy skills, regardless of their experience or knowledge of the company.

Participation in Democracy

Our society is founded upon certain democratic principles whereby each and every person can be party to the decisions that affect him or her. In this way, citizens choose, by means of elections, those individuals who will work to meet their concerns, expectations and needs.

This democratic right is exercised on several fronts. Citizens elect their representatives at the various levels of government, but they also choose the individuals who will represent them in their union, local association, recreation committee, etc. And many of them will become actively involved, accepting

various degrees of responsibility.

"The quality of democratic life rests mainly on the electoral process. Are persons with low literacy levels (...) able to exercise their right to vote in complete freedom? Can they participate in all aspects of public administration, obtain needed information or run in elections?" (9)

How can persons who lack literacy skills exercise their democratic rights when the majority of meetings or decision-making opportunities are linked to written communication? Information about public meetings as well as the notice to attend such meetings and the stated agenda are in writing. The procedures are often complex and most of the discussions and decisions focus on written documents. Even in less formal settings, such as local organizations and unions, there are constant references to written documents.

Some Solutions...

When focussing on the electoral process itself, one of the foundations of our democracy, we must ensure that all citizens are able to express their choice, whether in elections for the different levels of government or in organizations that represent these citizens. Literacy groups have observed that persons who lack literacy skills do not generally vote. The voting process is too complex. In order to vote, a person must first verify that he or she is on the voters' list, and become informed about the platforms of the different candidates and parties.

In order to encourage Haitians to exercise their right to vote when Duvalier left, the Canadian Government contributed to the democratic process by agreeing to fund the printing of ballots ... with photos of the candidates, since over 90 per cent of the population of Haiti lacks literacy skills.

Why not apply such measures in Canada to encourage persons with little or no literacy skills to exercise their right to vote. They could also be used for other sectors of the population who may have difficulty with the written word. In Quebec, when René Levesque ran for election in his riding during 1981, there were three other candidates with the surname of Lévesque! How can an educationally disadvantaged person distinguish his or her candidate if he or she had visualized only the name Levesque before going to vote? It is obvious that persons who lack literacy skills would exercise their right to vote more often if there were a way to ensure they would recognize the candidates and the parties when they went to cast their ballot. More extensive use of party abbreviations and colours would also help people when voting.

It is also necessary to ensure that people who lack literacy skills have real access to the information needed to help them make their choice, just as it is necessary that they be able to verify that they are really registered on the voters' list.

As for all the activities related to community life - cooperatives, unions, parent committees, recreational organizations - these organizations must find ways to ensure the full participation of people with low literacy levels, just as they must ensure that these same people are capable of knowing and respecting their rights. Unions must, therefore, develop ways to ensure that the workers they represent know their collective agreements. These means include the oral transmission of information: departmental meetings, accessibility and simplification of grievance procedures, the employment of union delegates who are familiar with the issue of literacy and who take care to verify that workers are sufficiently informed, etc.

Several visual and audiovisual means can also be used to encourage participation in society and to improve the communication of information. Community groups have developed original and effective approaches to encourage the involvement of their members. These groups will no doubt contribute to the development of new ways of meeting the needs of persons with low literacy levels as well as those of educationally disadvantaged persons.

This discussion and the measures outlined are not aimed at minimizing the importance of developing literacy services. Rather, it is our view that such a discussion will make the public more aware of what people who lack literacy skills experience, and thereby help eliminate the prejudices of which they are the victims. We must take action now to ensure that people with low literacy levels feel respected, that they know and exercise their rights and that they no longer feel ashamed and embarrassed to admit that they have trouble reading and writing.

We must make people who lack literacy skills understand that they are not alone. We must help them regain the confidence necessary to exercise their rights to the fullest extent and to commit themselves to literacy programs. In short, we must adjust to this reality that is experienced by over thirty per cent of Canadian adults. What we are talking about is nothing less than a vast movement towards greater solidarity.

TIES WITH LITERACY ORGANIZATIONS

While literacy organizations have a key role to play in meeting the needs of people who lack literacy skills, as much through the recognition of their rights as through the literacy services that they offer, the issue of illiteracy must not be tackled solely from the unique viewpoint of educators. It is the duty of these educators to involve all social services in promoting literacy activities as well as the rights of people who lack literacy skills.

Their first-hand knowledge of the reality and experience of persons with low literacy levels must be shared with other agencies and social services in order to help correct the injustices that still exist. The time to open the debate and to increase public knowledge of the issue of illiteracy - both its causes and consequences - is long overdue. This is one of the principle challenges of the next decade: to ensure that every individual has genuine access to literacy and basic education, and to remove once and for all the obstacles that prevent persons who lack literacy skills from exercising their basic human rights.

Quotations

- (1) FOX, Mike and Catherine BAKER. "Adult Illiteracy in the United States: Rhetoric, Recipes and Reality", in ALPHA 90, under the direction of Jean-Paul Hautecoeur, Quebec: Quebec Department of Education, to be published in 1990.
- (2) FOX, M. and C. BAKER. - Ibid
- (3) FOX, M. and C. BAKER. - Ibid
- (4) SMITH, Frank. "Overselling Literacy" (Phi Beta Kappan, January, 1989, p.355). - Ibid FOX, M. and C. BAKER
- (5) FINGERET, Arlene. "The Politics of Illiteracy", ISEP Monitor, Vol.7, No.3-4 (Special Edition) 1983. - Ibid FOX, M. and C. BAKER.
- (6) MILLER, Louise. "Question de fond: histoire de parler", in ALPHA-POP, RGPAQ: International Literacy Year Journal, No.4, April 1990. [Unofficial translation into English]
- (7) FOX, M. and C. BAKER - Ibid
- (8) BOUCHER, Andrée. Preparatory documentation for the forum, "Une société sans barrières". Forum organized by the RGPAQ, the ICEA and the CEQ to be held in November, 1990. [Unofficial translation into English]
- (9) BOUCHER, Andrée - Ibid [Unofficial translation into English]

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