

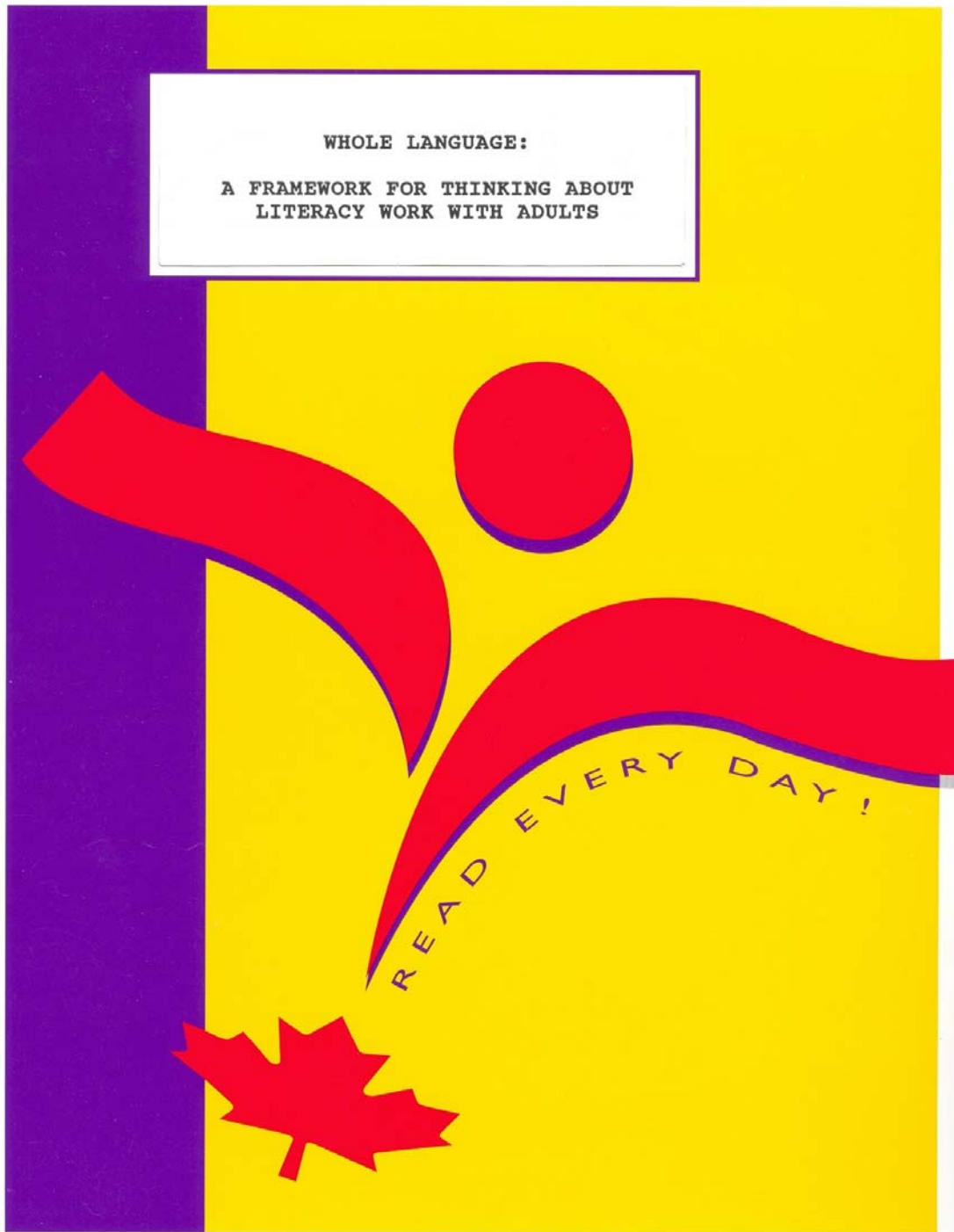


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WHOLE LANGUAGE:

A FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT  
LITERACY WORK WITH ADULTS



*National  
Literacy  
Secretariat*



*Le Secrétariat  
national à  
l'alphabétisation*

Canada

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A FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT  
LITERACY WORK WITH ADULTS**

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Published by the  
National Literacy Secretariat  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0M5

May 1991

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The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views or policies of the National Literacy Secretariat.

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## INTRODUCTION

When a group of adult students heard that their learning centre had to relocate, they decided to do something about it. They wanted to make sure that wherever they moved, they would move together; they didn't want the centre's programs to be split up. The group worked together, they brought in a community developer to help, and eventually an organization was formed.<sup>1</sup> Students in the organization wrote letters, made presentations, and carried out various projects to maintain and promote support for their centre. They learned with and from each other. And as they learned about organizing, they used and developed their language and literacy. This *is whole language* education in action.

During the past decade, whole language education has taken hold in literacy work with children. Individual teachers, school boards, and some provincial departments or ministries of education have adopted a whole language approach in their schools. In whole language classrooms, children work together to learn language and learn about language as they are learning about their worlds.

During the same ten years, there has been an increase in the number and kinds of literacy learning opportunities available for adults (see Appendix A). There has also been an increase in the numbers and roles of adult literacy educators.<sup>2</sup> Certified teachers, community teachers, coordinators, tutors and others work in a variety of settings and circumstances to support adult literacy development. These educators have drawn from various sources and experiences to develop their practices.

A whole language approach appears to "work" with children.<sup>3</sup> Does it work with adults, too? Can it be applied in the variety of settings, by the variety of educators, and with the range of adult learning experiences that make up the fabric of adult literacy work? To address these questions, we reviewed some of the current literature on whole language, we drew from our own backgrounds in the adult literacy field, and we talked with some literacy educators we know whose practices seemed to reflect whole language principles (see Appendix B).

As we read and talked and wrote, we began to realize that our initial questions were too simple, that they did not account for the richness of whole language education. Although we found many examples of whole language "working" with adults, we learned that there is no one way to practise whole language, and that literacy educators may be at various stages of developing their practices. We began to see whole language as providing a framework for shaping literacy practices, and for reflecting on practices which have been formed.

If you are working as a literacy educator yourself, you will likely see some of your own practices mirrored in what we describe. You no doubt share the beliefs of whole language educators about learner-centred programs and relating

instruction to learners' experiences and interests. You may share some of the other beliefs that are hallmarks of a whole language approach. We hope that as you read this paper, and listen in on the conversations we had with people in the field, you'll find support for your work and see some ways to extend it.

If you are new to the adult literacy field, this paper may introduce you to its breadth, and to some of the challenges and questions which people in the field are attempting to address.

## WHOLE LANGUAGE: A FRAMEWORK

In a whole language approach, language development - reading, writing and oral language - is integrated with learning about topics of interest. Students and teachers learn with and from each other. Whole language is not a method or technique. Rather, it is a way of thinking about language learning, and about which methods and techniques are appropriate for helping people learn. Some of the ideas underlying whole language work have a long history, and the ideas continue to develop and change as people apply them and reflect on them.<sup>4</sup> However, whole language educators seem to share certain beliefs about three aspects of their work: about language, about learning, and about people.

### Learning language<sup>5</sup>

*Whole language... you're not dealing with something that is artificially constructed; you're dealing with things that are real world, real life, realistic. You are imitating in your classroom the real world, the whole world... experiencing language in all its forms... (Pauline)*

*Experiencing language in all its forms...* This is a first principle of whole language learning and is one of the meanings of *whole*. Reading, writing and oral language are learned in an integrated way. Students and educators talk about their ideas, read about them, write about them, and then read and talk about what they have written.

A conscious focus on oral language along with reading and writing development is one aspect of whole language education which may distinguish it from other approaches to literacy education. Another distinction may be the focus on writing: whole language programs are very *writing rich*. Writing is worked on as much as, and along with reading; in some instances, writing actually provides the text and impetus for reading.

*...we were going to work on writing as a primary method of learning to read, and that's what we do. The only thing given to a student is a blank notebook. (Lee)*

Whole language education also reflects the principle of using whole "texts" for teaching and learning - stories, articles, signs, labels, conversations, debates, plays and so on. This does not mean that the parts - words, letters and sounds, grammar are not dealt with. One misconception about whole language work is that students don't learn spelling or phonics. True, you may not find many phonics workbooks in a whole language class. But students do learn about letters and sounds and how to use that knowledge to read and spell. In a whole language context, such parts are dealt with in relation to whole texts.

*...the most important thing is can you get your message across... then we'll talk about spelling, punctuation, whatever. (Mark)*

Choice of texts and topics in whole language settings reflects another belief, namely that language is learned best by using oral language, reading and writing for real, meaningful purposes: *you're dealing with things that are real world, real life, realistic*. Purposes and texts emerge from people's experiences, needs, goals and interests and provide contexts for language and literacy development. For example:

*... somebody brought instructions on how to use a fire extinguisher and the instructions were loaded with very, very difficult words like "incendiary". They simplified it into language that they could all understand. The important thing was to understand how to use the fire extinguisher... (Tamara)*

In whole language programs, literature also provides context for language learning. A strong literature base has been central for whole language programs with children, and adult educators are learning the value of introducing literature as well. Learners develop language as they read and respond - orally and in writing - to the literature they read.

*I think the component of literature has improved the quality of my students' lives, has improved the quality of every discussion that happens in my classroom. ... I think there are some limits, but before I wouldn't have considered the Joy Luck Club<sup>6</sup>, any part of it, even the name, as something that my students could deal with. Now there is nothing that will stop me; when I look at literature I think how can I make this readable for my students... (Mary Ann)*

### **Learning through language**

In a whole language approach there is as much emphasis on learning *through* language as there is on learning language. So context is also provided by topics themes about which students want to learn.

*... people talk about literacy learners reaching a level and then bottoming out. I think it's because all they're working at is reading and writing and they're doing it in a very restricted environment. But if you brought in things that they were interested in, say a film, or talking about current events... you'd be working on developing knowledge as well as reading and writing... (Nadine)*

### **Learning about language**

The belief that you learn to write by writing, and learn to read by reading, is common among whole language educators. This means that students are engaged in real reading and writing activities. It does not mean that students are just given a book, or a pencil and paper and left to their own devices. Whole language educators are committed to helping students learn *about* language.



## What people said...

about keeping language whole:

*... it doesn't only include the reading and writing; the oral language should be a very important part of it. I'm not sure that some of the literacy programs are focusing enough on that. (Denise)*

*... and they can still do the phonics and they can still do the spelling, but it has to come from the students' vocabulary. (Denise)*

about writing:

*... start with writing, from the beginning. One of my criticisms of adult literacy work in general is we don't get students writing on their own early enough. [We] often work with reading, then teach spelling in a very workbook-based kind of approach... (Robin)*

*... we've been reading as a writer, looking at structures. One author of workplace material writes very well and the guys are getting really good at picking that kind of thing up: This guy's so clear. Well, what makes him clear?... (Nadine)*

about using language for real, meaningful purposes:

*... we learn language by understanding what's involved in communication: What is this written passage really trying to say? What am I really trying to communicate in writing? What is this person saying to me orally? What is their point of view? You can't do that by breaking language down into bits... (Tamara)*

*[There was] a Portuguese speaker, an excellent gardener who knew everything about gardening... One of the exercises would be to have him do a lesson in English on some aspect of gardening. So he was starting from somewhere he already knew well... and he could learn the terminology and vocabulary and how to express himself through something he already loved. (Tamara)*

and about using literature:

Students from one class read a story to students in another, omitting the ending. The students in the second class each wrote an ending to the story. After these students shared their endings and heard the author's, they decided that one of theirs was better.

*... and it was! They were literary critics. In three months, five months, they were able to say what they thought and had a right to say it... (Paula)*

How educators help students learn about language is shaped by their understanding about reading and writing. Reading is viewed as an *interactive, constructive* process: readers use their knowledge, along with the information in the text, to construct or rebuild an author's message. Writing is also viewed as a process of building meaning. Writers generate or research ideas; they write, re-read and re-write as they attempt to make sense for their audiences. (See Appendix C for a brief overview of reading and writing theory.)

Whole language educators help students be aware of their background knowledge and of how it helps them read and write. They help them extend their knowledge, and they demonstrate strategies that students might use for making sense.<sup>7</sup>

*... going through the whole process of pre-reading, making predictions, getting involved. If they're not getting strategies, they're getting short-changed. And you've got to be talking about reading and process... I do a lot of modelling... verbalize what's in my head, then they're more confident in trying it themselves.*  
**(Nadine)**

*Modelling, verbalizing...* Such approaches to helping students learn strategies reflect contemporary views about the role of strategies in reading and writing, and about the importance of being conscious of those strategies. Implementing such approaches requires that educators have a clear understanding of language and reading and writing processes themselves.

*... whole language demands a lot more experience and training for a teacher. You have to teach more from your own resources, you have to teach more creatively...* **(Robin)**

### **People learning together**

Whole language education is learner-centred. Students are viewed as capable people with experience and knowledge. Differences in culture, language, value systems, interests and learning style are expected and respected. As already described, themes for learning are drawn from these experiences and interests.

Whole language educators also work to make their programs learning-centred, with a focus on learning, rather than on teaching. Learning is seen as a process of relating new information to what is already known. In whole language settings, there is plenty of discussion and interaction among students as they share what they know and learn from what others know.

*... wherever possible, get your information from them, rather than standing there teaching. Let them tell you everything they know, and then they have ownership.*  
**(Nadine)**

## What people said...

about understanding language:

*If you want successful whole language classrooms, people have to know what they're doing and why...They definitely need to know why they're doing things...*  
**(Nadine)**

*I often explain to my class that I can't imagine life without reading and writing. I don't know, my life would be just so much smaller, and so much narrower. Its been such a pleasure to me; I want to find a way to extend that pleasure to you, but I don't think short vowels is the way to do this. We have to read something that we can grapple with, that we can talk about, that matters to all of us.* **(Mary Ann)**

about learning:

*Another basic tenet is that adults come to the learning situation with lots of skills already; they may not have great reading or writing skills but they have all kinds of other skills. We always presume that and build on the skills that people already bring...* **(Tamara)**

*[A whole language approach] asks people to stop being teachers and become facilitators. A lot of people find this difficult because they think they need to stand up and teach.* **(Robin)**

*... I walk around and still get the question, is this right? And we have this discussion, why do you think it's right, what is it about this that you relate to... I have an opinion that I can express and I don't know anymore that it's right than you do; we both read the same thing, what does it mean to you?* **(Mary Ann)**

*I think people can be convinced about the whole language approach intellectually, then they still find it hard to implement... trusting that the person will learn it. They have difficulty trusting the process.* **(Robin)**

*It takes the right combination of humility and confidence to be a good ... instructor. You have to have enough confidence in yourself to not have all the answers, to assume that you don't have all the answers and that's OK... And you also have to have a certain amount of humility - that this program belongs to the group...* **(Tamara)**

Previous experiences are a resource for learning, but can also get in its way. Adults may have been labelled as learning disabled, or slow, or stupid.<sup>8</sup> They may have learned to view themselves as non-readers or non-writers, and even as nonlearners. Some may have learned not to value literacy except for what they think it can "fix". Whole language educators acknowledge these experiences and work to help students address them. They create learning environments where students learn to revalue literacy<sup>9</sup>, and in some cases, to revalue themselves.

People learning together is an important element of such learning environments. Whether the "people" can be a tutor/student pair, or whether there has to be a group of students, is a point for discussion. Tamara noted that *one of the fundamentals about our program is that we always work as a group*. She explained that group learning is essential to addressing students' feelings of isolation and self-blame for not having the skills they wanted. Nadine prefers working with a group because *there's support, and they can learn from one another*.

Denise noted that some of the adults she works with are resistant to group work. Because of previous experience, they need the support of working one-to-one. However, they like to work with other pairs at the learning centre. Paula stressed that learning is a social activity and she is planning ways to encourage learners, who are working with individual tutors, to communicate with each other. Robin suggested that a whole language approach could work one-to-one, but added that she encourages group learning: there is greater equality among learners working together than between a tutor and learner.

Whether working with a group, or one-to-one, the educator's role is to facilitate learning, rather than to "stand up and teach". Facilitating learning requires a great deal of trust, by both educators and students, that given appropriate resources, people can learn. Students may have expectations of "their teachers", and may be resistant to a learning-centred approach. Educators may also have long-standing experiences with teaching-centred approaches to education. These can get in the way of being a facilitator.

*... this kind of approach isn't anything that anybody grew up with. We've all spent greater or lesser amounts of time in the school system that in fact was the antithesis of the approach. We really didn't learn how to start from who we were... and we got back papers full of red marks. It's very, very difficult to decondition ourselves from that way of teaching... (Tamara)*

### **Learning to be a whole language educator**

The people with whom we spoke developed their beliefs and practices in various ways. Most started practising whole language approaches before the term was coined, or before they were aware of the term. For instance, Denise started teaching in Europe and

was immersed in a child-centred, experiential approach from the start. For her, it made sense to take the same approach with adults.

Nadine's first teaching assignment was with a grade two class of 8 to 11 year olds. All they had been reading was a particular pre-primer. "*I was supposed to do the same thing*", she said, "*and I just couldn't do it to those kids.*" She proposed and implemented a successful language-experience-based program, and hasn't looked back since.

Mark and Mary Ann also started teaching with children, and both talked about their dissatisfaction with basal reading series. Mark knew that they were not "*the way to go. But I did it because they were there, because everyone else was doing it, not because I was happy with it.*" Mary Ann sensed "*that something was wrong with the way reading was taught.*" At some point, both dispensed with the "*manuals*" and their "*kids did fine*". However, it was not until later, when they started teaching with adults, that they were able to connect with other teachers of like mind.

Learning on the job and talking with others has been a main approach to educator development, even for those with previous teacher training or experience. Workshops and short courses are becoming another avenue, but it is hard for full-time teachers to find time for their own development. Can teachers, coordinators, and tutors who work part-time, and often on their own, develop an understanding of a whole language approach? Do they apply what is presented in workshops, or do they rely on what they remember about learning to read? Denise approaches this challenge by having tutors and learners work together at the learning centre. Robin addresses the issue by building practicums into training sessions: tutors and teachers actually tryout strategies with learners. As a trainer, Robin also stresses the importance of modelling whole language approaches in training; all this requires time and resources which may not be readily available.

## CHALLENGES

Whole language work requires educators to be knowledgeable about language. It requires educators and students to trust in people's abilities to learn, and to trust that people can share responsibility for learning. It also requires the trust of program administrators, curriculum writers, test makers and program funders that educators and students are capable of *writing their own curriculum*.<sup>10</sup>

Sharon Rich (1988) suggests that whole language education *returns power to where it belongs - to the children [adults] and teacher in the classroom*. Educators and students set the learning agendas together, rather than having them set for them by curriculum writers or other external authorities. In some literacy programs, students and educators share in decision making about their program, as well as about their learning. Rich calls whole language education a political activity because of this sharing of power.

For similar reasons, others refer to whole language education as *democratic*. But Patrick Shannon (1989) suggests that the democratic focus of whole language work has a more psychological than political basis: learning is more likely to occur if learners are engaged in creating and sharing knowledge as it is learned. He challenges educators to work to extend democracy beyond the classroom walls, beyond the boundaries of the program and into the community.

Some people do see literacy training as a way for people to work together to change social conditions that challenge them, and in some programs addressing these challenges becomes the content for language and literacy learning. In these cases, additional principles may be at work:

*I think maybe it is an approach to life in general... a belief not just in an educational setting, but in a societal one, what role people should play, what rights people should have...It's a philosophy not only of learning, but of living.*  
**(Paula)**

Whole language education is guided by principles about language, about learning and about people. Whole language does not provide a quick or easy solution to any "literacy problem". It does provide a framework for thinking about literacy work with adults, for thinking about the kinds of learning opportunities we want to make available, and for thinking about the kind of society we want to build.

## ENDNOTES

1. The organization is called Friends of Invergarry and operates in conjunction with the Invergarry Learning Centre in Surrey, B.C.
2. We use the term *literacy educator* when referring collectively to teachers, instructors, community workers, coordinators, tutors and others who help adults in developing literacy.
3. Although recent and therefore inconclusive, research suggests that whole language approaches are effective in supporting children's literacy development. See, for example, Goodman, K.S. (1989).
4. The term *whole language* has been used mainly since 1980. Kenneth Goodman reviews the development of whole language principles in the above-mentioned article.
5. Halliday (1984) introduced the idea that children learn language, they learn through language, and they learn about language. This idea underlies whole language work and provides headings for our discussion of whole language principles.
6. Mary Ann is referring to The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan (N.Y.: Putnam, 1989).
7. Strategies refer to the "plans of action" which readers use to make sense as they are reading. For instance, when they find that they are not understanding a passage in a text, they may reread the passage, read ahead, or consult another source. Each of these actions is a strategy. Teaching strategies focus on *how* people read, as distinct from teaching skills. Skills instruction tends to focus on observable behaviours, such as being able to say what sound relates to a particular letter, or answering questions about a passage.
8. Some educators question whether a whole language approach is appropriate for adults with learning disabilities. Ricki Goldstein (1990) suggests that a whole language approach has not "proven to be that effective with dyslexic children". She says that because dyslexic children cannot generalize about language, they must be "taken aside and taught through an intellectual approach using sound-symbol relationships". Goldstein assumes that adults with learning disabilities will follow the same pattern.

Grace Malicky and Charles Norman (1988) present a different perspective. They suggest that many of the programs which have been developed for special needs children are "artificial, uninteresting, irrelevant and out of context". It is crucial, they say, to "immerse special-needs children in literacy activities". They also emphasize the significance of the teacher as an observer, guide and facilitator of literacy development.

Goldstein's argument may reflect a view of whole language work as unstructured or undirected. Denise Theunissen, one of the people with whom we talked, works specifically with adults with learning difficulties and she suggests that some of these adults do need very structured guidance to learn. It is not contrary to whole language principles to provide structure or direct instruction if that is appropriate for a particular student, and if the instruction and practice are done in the context of whole, meaningful texts.

9. Ken Goodman (1988) introduced the concept of revaluing literacy. He notes that work with students who have not learned to read and write is often called remedial, and that the students are viewed as needing remediation. He suggests that because these students have often learned to not value literacy, helping them revalue literacy is a first step for helping them learn to read.
10. Lee Weinstein used this phrase. He was referring to efforts in his centre to build High School curriculum around the needs and interests of students.



## APPENDIX A

### Providing Adult Literacy Education in Canada

When speaking about whole language approaches with children, it is generally safe to assume a common setting, namely a school-based classroom. Although arrangements within the classroom vary, there are usually a minimum number of children and a teacher; the teacher most likely has an education degree and holds a teaching certificate. Children attend school for five hours a day, five days a week, for ten months of the year.

While some adult literacy education is provided in a similar way, there is a wide range of provision with adults. Adult literacy programs may be sponsored by educational institutions such as colleges, adult vocational centres or school boards, or they may be sponsored by public libraries, friendship centres or similar community agencies, or coalitions of those agencies. Some literacy programs are incorporated as non-profit societies which operate independently of any sponsor. Programs also operate in workplaces, and may be sponsored by an educational agency, by the employer, the union, or a combination of these.

Instruction in any of these programs may be provided by certified teachers, community literacy workers or volunteer tutors. Those literacy educators who are paid for their work may receive salaries and benefits or they may work for wages, with or without benefits. Some are "tenured", others have annual or shorter-term contracts.

Students in these programs may attend programs full-time, part-time or one to two hours a week. They may meet in a formal class or in a less formal group. They might meet at a learning centre, where they work individually with the support of a teacher, or they might work one-to-one with a tutor (usually a volunteer). When working with a tutor, adults may meet at a learning centre along with other "pairs", or they may meet in another setting, such as their or the tutors' homes.

The people we spoke with work in settings which represent this range. The adults with whom they work have varying backgrounds and are at varying stages of literacy development. English is the first language of many; some have learned English as an additional language; and some are learning English.

## APPENDIX B

We talked with the following people and have quoted them in this paper. We appreciate the generosity and enthusiasm with which they shared their knowledge and views.

Paula Davies, an adult literacy instructor and Mary Ann Tierney, an adult ESL instructor, worked together at the College of New Caledonia in Prince George, B.C. Mary Ann continues in that position, while Paula now coordinates a literacy tutor program in the same city.

Nadine Dupont is a full-time instructor in a workplace program sponsored by Syncrude Canada, and provided through Keyano College in Ft. McMurray, Alberta. The program is intended to help employees develop effective reading and writing strategies. Pauline Larabee works part time for the Ottawa Board of Education. The students she works with attend four hours a day. They speak English, although it is not a first language for some. They are generally working at a beginning stage of literacy development.

Sally Lefebvre works part time with adults who have developmental disabilities. The program is located in a community centre and is sponsored by the Ottawa Board of Education. Students attend the program each morning and participate in work activities in the afternoons.

Tamara Levine is the Eastern Regional Coordinator of BEST (Basic Education for Skills Training), a literacy and ESL/FSL program sponsored by the Ontario Federation of Labour. BEST works with local unions to set up literacy programs for union members. Employees participate in programs partly on work time. Union members are recruited and trained to instruct groups of co-workers at their workplace.

Robin Millar is the Adult Learning Specialist in the Literacy Office of the Manitoba government. Robin is responsible for literacy practitioner training throughout Manitoba. The people with whom she works include workers from small, northern communities, and tutor coordinators and volunteer tutors from rural and urban settings.

Mark McCue and Lee Weinstein work in the Invergarry Learning Centre in Surrey, B.C. as a full-time instructor and director, respectively. The centre is sponsored by the local school board and offers programs in literacy, Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language, and adult High School. Literacy learners attend for varying numbers of hours each week and generally work individually with Mark or with a volunteer tutor. Some may group with others to work on writing.

Denise Theunissen coordinates the adult program at the Calgary Learning Centre. Sponsored by the Calgary Board of Education and the University of Calgary, the centre serves children and adults with learning difficulties. Adults work individually with volunteer tutors; pairs meet at the Learning Centre for two hours, once per week. Learners do follow-up work at home; tutors contact learners between meetings to discuss this work.

## APPENDIX C

### Views About Reading and Writing

Approaches to teaching reading and writing with adults vary, depending on what program developers, teachers and learners believe about how people learn to read and write. These beliefs generally reflect one or another theory or view of reading.

For instance, some believe that reading involves decoding words in order to understand what is "on the page". "Phonics" and "whole-word" are familiar examples of decoding approaches. In a phonics approach, students are taught letter-sound relationships in order to decode words; whole word approaches focus on memorizing words in order to recognize them when reading. In the late 1960s, Jean Chall (1967), a Harvard reading specialist, conducted a study about which of these approaches was more effective; she called her research report Learning to read, the great debate.

This debate continues to surface, but research about reading since the 1960s shows that emphasizing phonics or whole words both focus attention on relatively minor aspects of reading. In some instances, emphasizing either of these "decoding" approaches may distract attention from the real purpose of getting meaning. How readers get meaning is the focus of a new debate (Wray, 1988).

Phonics and whole word approaches focus readers' attention "on the page". Readers decode the print into spoken language from which they get meaning. This is a "bottom-up" view of reading.

In another view, reading is seen as an "interactive, constructive" process. Readers use their knowledge and the information that is on the page to reconstruct an author's meaning. Readers knowledge includes their world experience and what they know about the topic, as well as their knowledge of letters, sounds and words. Readers are also influenced by their interest and purposes for reading.

These "interactive" views of reading have grown out of research in language and psychology (psycholinguistics). In 1969, Kenneth Goodman published his study of children learning to read. By analyzing children's "miscues" (substitutions or other changes they made while reading), he concluded that they draw from their knowledge of language and from their experience, as well as their knowledge of letters and sounds, to try to make sense as they read.

While the bottom-up/top-down labels have been most commonly applied to reading, they have their parallels in writing. For instance, a focus on the visible aspects of writing - spelling and handwriting - would reflect a bottom-up view. An alternate view encourages a focus on developing meaning by engaging in a writing process. This process involves generating, drafting and revising ideas. Spelling and other bottom-up aspects of writing are dealt with in the context of creating meaning.

The different language used to talk about reading and writing may reflect the fact that they have been formally taught and practised in isolation from each other. Whole language approaches integrate reading and writing development; reading is viewed from the "interactive-construction" perspective, and writing is developed as a process.

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