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FACT SHEET 1

WHAT IS LITERACY AND WHAT ARE ESSENTIAL SKILLS?

Literacy can best be described as “the ability to solve problems using information gleaned from the printed word, to be an efficient independent learner and applier of technology”¹. Four different literacies have been defined: school-based literacy, cultural literacy, community literacy and critical literacy².

- By **school-based literacy**, we mean the teaching and learning of essential skills. Essential skills are the skills needed for work, learning and life. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change. Nine essential skills have been identified³:
 1. Reading Text
 2. Document Use
 3. Numeracy
 4. Writing
 5. Oral Communication
 6. Working with Others
 7. Continuous Learning
 8. Thinking Skills
 9. Computer Use
- By **cultural literacy**, we mean linking school-based literacy to cultural activities and cultural information that increase learners’ level of personal knowledge, reinforce their sense of belonging to their community and encourage them to value their culture of origin.
- By **community literacy**, we mean linking school-based literacy to the appreciation, the understanding and the customs of a given community’s literacy practices.
- By **critical literacy**, we mean linking school-based literacy to a personal development that begins with awareness that the four literacies are connected to power.

¹ D. Wilms and T. S. Murray, *International Adult Literacy Survey. Gaining and Losing Literacy Skills Over the Lifecourse*, Ottawa, Statistics Canada, 2007, p. 10. On-line: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-552-m/89-552-m2007016-eng.pdf> (page consulted on January 13, 2009).

² M. Bissonnette, « Les littératies multiples dans le cadre de la réunion de travail pour le projet Étude de l’impact », Ontario, Coalition francophone pour l’alphabétisation et la formation de base en Ontario, 2006 (unpublished document).

³ Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, *Essential Skills*. On-line: http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/understanding_es_e.shtml (page consulted on January 13, 2009).



FACT SHEET 2

WHAT IS ADULT EDUCATION?

Adult education's goal is to help adults improve their literacy skills.

It may cater to persons of all ages and can take place in an adult learning centre or elsewhere.

It includes programs to help learners improve their school-based literacy, namely essential skills (reading, text document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, continuous learning, thinking skills and computer use), as well as the other literacies.

Through adult education, learners improve their chances of finding a job, of changing jobs, or of improving their performance at work; they can become more independent or get the prerequisites necessary to enter an apprenticeship program, to finish high school or to be accepted in a college program; they can also get the support necessary to fully play the role of primary educators of their child.



FACT SHEET 3

WHAT ARE LITERACY LEVELS?

Literacy is a continuum. The literacy levels are a way to situate adults on this continuum. Literacy levels are based on the 500 point scale used by the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey¹.

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Level 1 | People at Level 1 have a lot of trouble reading, writing and calculating. This is the lowest literacy level. An individual at this level may have trouble using written information to make decisions; they may, for example, be unable to determine from a package label the correct amount of medicine to give a child. |
| Level 2 | People at Level 2 can read simple documents with clear language, an uncomplicated layout and simple content. Most people who are at this level would have trouble filling out a job application, for example. In general, people at this level do not recognize their limitations. |
| Level 3 | People at this level can function reasonably well in society. Level 3 proficiency is considered to be the minimal level of competence for coping with the increasing skill demands of a complex and evolving society and the emerging knowledge and information economy. |
| Levels 4 and 5 | People at these levels can confidently use a variety of written documents and can solve complex problems using reading, writing and calculating skills ² . |

¹ Statistics Canada, *Building on our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*, Ottawa, 2003, On-line: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-617-x/89-617-x2005001-eng.pdf> (page consulted on January 13, 2009).

² These level descriptions have been translated and adapted from *L'alphabétisme : Pour mieux lire nos clients*, Canada Revenue Agency, Training and Learning Directorate, 2004. On-line : http://www.grandsorganismes.gouv.qc.ca/cego/app/DocRepository/1/Simplification/Douanes_Simpl_2000.pdf (page consulted on November 25, 2009).



FACT SHEET 4

WHO ARE ADULT LITERACY LEARNERS IN ONTARIO?

Adult literacy learners in Ontario are men and women aged 16 years or over living in either urban or rural settings. Many of them work, others are looking for work, and still others want to become more independent or help their families prosper.

Following are a few characteristics of Francophones in Ontario:

- Francophones have lower literacy levels than Anglophones: 55% of Francophones aged 16 and over are at Levels 1 and 2 for prose literacy, whereas the comparable figure for Anglophones is 40.3%¹.
- Ontario Francophones read fewer newspapers, magazines and books than Ontario Anglophones: 48% of Francophones never or rarely read books, whereas the percentage for Anglophones is 32%².
- Among young Ontarians aged 16 to 24, nearly 45% have not reached Level 3 for prose literacy and document literacy³ (that translates into almost 19 000 young adults).

On a national scale, about 48% of all Canadians aged 16 and over – in other words, some 12 million Canadians – have trouble in understanding and using information from written texts⁴.

¹ Statistics Canada (2003). *The Canadian Component of the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS): The Situation of Official Language Minorities*. On-line: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-552-m/89-552-m2006015-eng.pdf> (page consulted on January 13, 2009)

² P. Corbeil, *The Canadian Component of the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS): The Situation of Official Language Minorities*, Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 59, table 11d. On-line: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-552-m/89-552-m2006015-eng.pdf> (page consulted on January 13, 2009).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 86. Note that prose literacy is defined as the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts including editorials, news stories, brochures and instruction manuals, and that document literacy is defined as the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats, including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and charts (*ibid.*, p. 30).

⁴ Statistics Canada (2003). *Building on our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*. On-line: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-617-x/89-617-x2005001-eng.pdf> (page consulted on January 13, 2009).



FACT SHEET 5

WHAT SERVICES DO ADULT LEARNING CENTRES PROVIDE?

1. Information and Referral

This is where the adult learning centre informs learners of the services it offers and directs them to other organization's services, if need be.

2. Literacy Assessment

Next, the centre conducts an assessment to determine each learner's current literacy level. Each learner is thus assured of receiving literacy training that fits his or her specific needs. This assessment is also used to determine whether the learner could benefit from other forms of training.

3. Training Plan Development

Once the assessment has been completed, a training plan is developed with each learner. This plan sets out the steps that the learner will have to achieve his or her learning objectives. The training plan also identifies the learning methods that best suit each particular learner.

4. Training

At this stage, the training plan is implemented: the learner is provided with the literacy training services specified in the training plan. This training can be flexible and may be provided in groups, but it is often given individually, because of the each learner's personal learning objectives.

5. Follow-up

The follow-up is a means to check on the learner's progress three to six months after he or she has received the literacy training¹.

Though all adult learning centres offer programs to improve literacy skills, many offer other programs as well, such as family literacy programs, courses on computer use, second language training and programs that lead directly to employment.

¹ These five steps are taken and adapted from Literacy and Basic Skills Section, Workplace Preparation Branch, *Literacy and Basic Skills Program Guidelines*, Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2000.



FACT SHEET 6

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR ADULTS TO LEARN IN THEIR MOTHER TONGUE?

Studies demonstrate that people learn more efficiently when they learn in their mother tongue, even if they speak another language.

The reason, simply stated, is that language models are etched into the brain in infancy and early childhood. Adults whose mother tongue is French, and especially those who received their primary-school education in French, will learn more effectively in French, because they can call on these language models to integrate new knowledge¹.

For Comeau, it is vital that formal learning be done in one's mother tongue, for the same reasons mentioned above². He adds that: "Throughout the world, all attempts at literacy training in a language other than the learners' mother tongue have been resounding failures"³. It is important to note that all learning done in one's mother tongue can then be transferred to one's second language.

The success of adult education depends on:

- the use that learners can make of their language in daily life;
- the effective teaching of their language and the transmission of their culture⁴.

"Language and personality are one and the same. Language is one of the most important components of identity"⁵.

¹ Coalition pour l'alphabétisation et la formation de base en Ontario, « Mémoire présenté au ministère de la Formation et des Collèges et Universités dans le cadre de l'examen de l'éducation des adultes », Ottawa, 2004, p. 6. Internal Document.

² Y. Comeau, Alpha en milieu de travail. *Étude de l'expérience du Centre d'alphabétisation de Prescott (CAP) avec des travailleurs franco-ontariens*, Hawkesbury, Centre d'alphabétisation de Prescott en collaboration with Université Laval, 1996, p. 67. On-line: <http://www.ca-fa-rca-t.on.ca/PDF/alpha%20en%20milieu%20de%20travail.pdf> (page consulted on November 25, 2008).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴ S. Wagner and P. Grenier, *Analphabetisme de minorité et alphabétisation d'affirmation nationale, à propos de l'Ontario français*, Toronto, ministère de l'Éducation, 1991.

⁵ Bergeron, Stéfan, "Apprendre à lire dans sa langue". *Le Bulletin de la FCAF*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Fall 2001, pp. 14-15.



FACT SHEET 7

HOW TO RECOGNIZE PEOPLE WHO HAVE TROUBLE READING AND WRITING

Characteristics

Some people counterbalance their difficulty reading and writing through a sometimes remarkable combination of observation, memory, and resourceful improvisation. These people are found in all age groups and come from all walks of life.

Telltale signs

- They say that they have lost or forgotten their glasses or that their eyes hurt, so they cannot read.
- They say their hand or arm hurts, so they cannot write.
- When handed a brochure, they stuff it in their pocket or purse without glancing at it, saying that they want to read it later.
- They never make a written note when given an appointment. They memorize lists of tasks that they have to do, instead of writing them down.
- They always have some good reason for avoiding any task that involves reading or writing.
- They take notes in the form of simple sketches instead of words (for example, draw a dollar sign to remember to bring money to some event).
- They rely solely on memory to take messages.
- They are reluctant to fill out forms, want to take them away and fill them out at home.
- They ask for help in filling out forms, saying that they don't understand the questions.
- They say that their spouse "takes care of that".
- They never volunteer for any tasks that involve reading or writing.
- They seem uncooperative with professionals, by failing to act on the notes that a teacher sends home about their child's progress, for example.
- They forget documents they have been given.
- They ask for explanations when they have in hand a written document containing all the information they are asking for.

Warning

It is important not to jump to conclusions: these behaviors are indications, not formal proof. A person may on occasion display some of these behaviors and yet be able to read and write. However, repeated observation of several of these telltale signs in a person is reasonable grounds to conclude that that person has trouble reading and writing¹.

¹ Centraide Montréal, *Intervenir en para-alphabétisation*, Montréal, 1990.



FACT SHEET 8

HOW TO DEAL WITH A PERSON WHO HAS TROUBLE READING AND WRITING

Following is advice for better dealing with a person who may have difficulty reading and writing.

- Don't ask whether they have difficulty reading and writing.
- Be diplomatic and respectful¹.
- Listen to them and strive to understand their needs.
- Make the message as simple and straightforward as possible and make sure the message is understood.
- Simplify communications within the organization.
- Improve one's own writing skills and use clear and simple language.
- Avoid using technical jargon when speaking with them.
- Use a vocabulary of general nature when possible.
- Use short sentences.
- Avoid using a vocabulary which is too common.
- Use the active voice rather than the passive voice.
- Encourage them to ask questions.
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Offer to explain the information which has been given and be ready to rephrase, if need be.
- Be patient, accessible and courteous when dealing with them.
- Remember that the manner in which they are assisted can be either helpful or harmful.
- Put good practices to work.
- Be prepared to continue to learn.
- Concentrate on the person².

When possible and pertinent to do so, encourage them to participate in activities where they can become more aware of their literacy difficulties. They may discover that they are not the only ones with such challenges, that free, specialized services exist that can help them and that literacy training is an option for them³.

¹ The first two statements are taken and adapted from *Intervenir en para-alphabétisation*, Centraide Montréal, Montréal, 1990.

² Adapted and translated from *L'alphabétisme : Pour mieux lire nos clients*, Canada Revenue Agency, Training and Learning Directorate, 2004. On-line: http://www.grandsorganismes.gouv.qc.ca/cego/app/DocRepository/1/Simplification/Douanes_Simpl_2000.pdf (page consulted November 25, 2009).

³ Centraide Montréal, *Intervenir en para-alphabétisation*.



FACT SHEET 9

DID YOU KNOW?

- Adult learners participate in literacy upgrading programmes in order to strengthen and expand their culture, knowledge, and know-how, to know themselves better and enrich their personalities, to become more independent, and to know more about and adapt more effectively to their environment and their society”¹.
- A lack of literacy skills has consequences for the economy in general. Some of these consequences are as follows:

the development of businesses and the economy is impeded, as are modernization and the use of new technologies; productivity and earnings decrease; product quality diminishes; the number of workplace accidents and costs go up; costs of training workers increase; equipment breakage and losses increase; workplace health and safety costs rise.²

- A lack of literacy skills also has consequences on people’s health. Studies show that people with low literacy skills have more health problems than people with strong literacy skills. Some of these consequences are as follows:

the incorrect use of medications, lack of compliance with medical instructions, and risks to safety at home and in the workplace [...] Unhealthy lifestyles such as smoking, poor nutrition and not enough physical activity are associated with low levels of literacy. [...] Individuals with low literacy skills are more prone to stress and often have fewer coping skills. They typically lack information about health issues, are less aware of and less likely to use preventive health services, are more likely to be hospitalized and have more trouble using the health-care system effectively³.

¹ Translated from F. Bélanger, H. Brousseau, L. Foley and J. Jobidon (2000), *L’alphabétisation et les maladies mentales; deux réalités à conjuguer*. On-line: <http://www.bdaa.ca/biblio/recherche/ebyon00/cover.htm> (page consulted on November 25, 2008).

² *Ibid.*

³ Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), State of Learning in Canada: *No Time for Complacency, Report on Learning in Canada* 2007, Ottawa, Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 106. On-line: <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/StateofLearning/SOLRByChapter.htm?Language=EN> (page consulted on January 13, 2009).



FACT SHEET 10

CERTAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF LESS EDUCATED CANADIANS¹

General considerations

- They are less optimistic, less self-confident and find change difficult.
- They are critical of government performance.

Information needs

- They want to be informed, but are not always sure about what.
- They have the same priorities as other Canadians, that is, health care, education and unemployment, but they are not familiar with initiatives that have already been undertaken.
- They are more focused on day-to-day concerns and want information on matters that are important to their daily lives.

Perceptions relating to government communications

- They have greater difficulty understanding information and recognizing information sources.
- They are ambivalent about whether the information they receive meets their needs.
- They are uncertain about whether they can fully rely on the information provided.
- They contact the Government of Canada less frequently.
- They rely heavily on others to obtain information (relatives, friends, professionals).

Communications vehicles

- They watch a lot of television (especially in the evenings) that is their main source of information.
- They are apprehensive about new developments in information technology, including the Internet.
- They want to be informed through government advertising, as much on television as in print.

¹ Government of Canada Publications, *Issues and Challenges in Communicating with Less Literate Canadians*, Government of Canada, 2000. On-line: <http://publications.gc.ca/pub?id=93796&sl=0> (page consulted on January 13, 2009).