



Literacy:
Learning for Life.

L'alphabétisation,
Une leçon pour la vie.



Literacy and Essential Skills

as a Poverty Reduction Strategy

NATIONAL RESEARCH REPORT

FUNDED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA'S NATIONAL ESSENTIAL SKILLS INITIATIVE

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Frontier College is a national charitable literacy organization, established in 1899 on the belief that literacy is a right. Each year, we recruit and train 2,500+ volunteer tutors who work with more than 30,000 children, youth, and adults.



Frontier College retained the services of the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) to prepare the National Research Report.

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) is a non-profit research organization, created specifically to develop, field test, and rigorously evaluate new programs. SRDC's two-part mission is to help policy-makers and practitioners identify policies and programs that improve the well-being of all Canadians, with a special concern for the effects on the disadvantaged, and to raise the standards of evidence that are used in assessing these policies.

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Employment and
Social Development Canada

Emploi et
Développement social Canada

Report Highlights

At the core of the National Research Project is the conviction that literacy instruction can provide low-skilled adults living in poverty with the knowledge, confidence, resilience, and autonomy they need to overcome the challenges they face and live productive lives.

The positive effects of literacy skills are not limited to economic well-being, however. Literacy skills are necessary to complete even the most basic tasks in a person's life. Taken a step further, literacy can empower individuals to make informed choices about their lives. These skills help individuals make better decisions about how to manage their finances, how to manage their health, how to use technology, and how to understand the institutions that govern their lives, which in turn allows them to engage more fully. Literacy is a key step on the pathway not only to employment but also to broader social inclusion and full participation in valued-dimensions of society such as social, civic, and political engagement that are critical to the inclusion and well-being of all Canadians.

The report's key recommendation is that governments need to recognize literacy as not only a policy priority but a basic human right. Moreover, funders need to expand their thinking beyond support for single projects to include more comprehensive, integrated programs.

Key Research Findings

The National Research Project's findings are the culmination of extensive consultations with policy makers, national and regional literacy associations, services providers, researchers, poverty reduction organizations, and learners involved in literacy programming and poverty reduction programs across Canada.

Key finding 1

There is a clear and well-established relationship between literacy skills and the experience of poverty.

Key finding 2

Single-access points can reduce the challenges inherent in navigating poverty reduction programs and services.

Key finding 3

Strong partnerships between local literacy and essential skills (LES) and poverty reduction service providers can improve access to needed services.

Key finding 4

Project-based funding has increased innovation, but imperilled the sustainability of service providers.

Key finding 5

Knowledge sharing among LES practitioners and awareness raising among the public and employers

are necessary to improve the effectiveness of LES programs.

Key finding 6

Learner-centred approaches are most effective for low-skilled adults and require a holistic assessment of learner needs.

Key finding 7

Contextualizing program content to learners' goals is most effective in facilitating transitions to employment or education.

Key finding 8

Service delivery that combines contextualized programs with wrap-around supports are highly effective for transitioning individuals to employment.

Key finding 9

Awareness and accessibility to programs is the most significant challenge for stakeholders.

Key finding 10

Improving self-esteem, resilience, and self-confidence are key objectives and important indicators of success for literacy programs.

Key finding 11

Outcomes frameworks are often too narrow in scope and exclude the key indicators of program success that are recognized by practitioners and participants.

Strategic Recommendations

Strategic recommendations were informed by the project's key findings. They are organized into two focus areas: *policy recommendations* and *program and service delivery recommendations*.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Governments should recognize literacy as a basic human right.

Recommendation 2

Literacy should be recognized as a policy priority requiring cross-departmental and cross-jurisdictional cooperation.

Recommendation 3

Literacy should be a central pillar within any comprehensive poverty reduction strategy.

Recommendation 4

Policies and funding models should encourage collaboration rather than competition between service providers.

Recommendation 5

Funding for literacy and essential skills programming should be sustainable and predictable, while also fostering innovation.

Recommendation 6

Governments should facilitate partnerships and support knowledge translation and exchange (KTE) among providers of literacy and poverty reduction services.

Program and Service Delivery Recommendations

Recommendation 7

Raising awareness and accessibility of existing services and programs should be a key priority for improvement.

Recommendation 8

Learner-centred approaches should be used to maximize engagement in literacy programming.

Recommendation 9

Literacy programs should be contextualized to the goals of learners.

Recommendation 10

Greater integration of services should be a primary objective to improve the quality of literacy and poverty reduction services.

Recommendation 11

Outcomes frameworks used to evaluate success should be expanded to include indicators of life skills and psychological capital.

Summary and Recommendations

The *National Research Project on Literacy and Essential Skills as a Poverty Reduction Strategy* offers important insights into the links between literacy and essential skills upgrading for low-skilled adults and poverty reduction strategies in Canada.

Key stakeholders involved in the development and delivery of literacy and essential skills (LES) programs across Canada shared their opinions, thoughts, and experiences to help identify where future investments in LES programs would be most effective in lifting low-skilled adults out of poverty. Other stakeholders, including policy makers in government, practitioners and researchers working for non-governmental poverty reduction organizations, and community groups working in partnership with literacy organizations, contributed to a comprehensive understanding of literacy programming and its importance in poverty reduction.

Over the course of the study, practitioners were clear that their work is at the forefront of Canada's efforts to reduce the incidence of poverty. Low-skilled adults are more likely to experience poverty and are less likely to be active in the labour market. In addition, adults living in poverty often face a number of challenges in their lives that contribute to their social and civic exclusion. Findings from the National Research Project clearly show that literacy practitioners are well aware of their role in addressing not only their learners' skills, but also the barriers that limit their potential.

LES practitioners provided important insights into the kinds of programs that are available in Canada today to help support adult learners with low literacy skills living in poverty. The national survey allowed respondents to identify areas where their programs are innovating, where improvements are still needed, and how service providers can best support transitions from LES upgrading to education and employment.

Summary of findings

The National Research Project' findings are the culmination of extensive consultations with policy makers, national and regional literacy associations, services providers, researchers, poverty reduction organizations, and learners involved in literacy programming and poverty reduction programs across Canada.

Key Finding 1: There is a clear and well-established relationship between literacy skills and the experience of poverty

Literacy proficiency and the experience of poverty are intrinsically linked. Correlational studies have demonstrated the positive relationship between earnings and literacy skills. Adults with low literacy skills are also less likely to be employed and tend to stay unemployed for longer periods. Beyond correlational studies, recent evidence clearly demonstrates that literacy upgrading has large positive impacts on not only skills but also improved job performance, increased employment, higher earnings, and longer-term job retention.

Literacy can also improve the quality of a person's life and alleviate the symptoms of poverty. Literacy skills can help individuals make better decisions about how to manage their finances, how to manage their health, how to use technology, and how to understand the institutions that govern their lives, which in turn allows them to engage more fully. Literacy is a key step on the pathway to not only employment but also to broader social inclusion and full participation in valued-dimensions of society such as social, civic, and political engagement that are critical to the inclusion and well-being of all Canadians. Addressing the skills needs of adults living in poverty is a necessary step towards lifting them out of poverty.

Key Finding 2: Single-access points can reduce the challenges inherent in navigating poverty reduction programs and services

Federal, provincial, and territorial governments offer a comprehensive menu of poverty reduction programs for low-income adults and their families. However, program silos often add a layer of complexity that can limit the kinds of services offered by LES providers. Additionally, having to navigate a system with multiple access points is an additional barrier for adults with low-literacy skills.

Literacy practitioners see themselves as trusted advocates who can help learners navigate and access the programs they need. Some LES practitioners commented that they are often the first access point for adults living in poverty.

Nevertheless, many practitioners believe that structural changes are needed. Indeed, the majority of stakeholders (77 per cent) identified greater intergovernmental coordination in the delivery of literacy and poverty programming as a crucial priority.

Key Finding 3: Strong partnerships between local literacy and essential skills (LES) and poverty reduction service providers can improve access to needed services

Individuals living in poverty often face a number of barriers, both structural and personal in nature, that prevent them from accessing and completing literacy upgrading programs. Sustainable and reciprocal partnerships between LES service providers and poverty reduction organizations at the community level are necessary to ensure that learners receive the services and supports they need.

Respondents confirmed that their learners face a number of barriers, most often linked to their experience in poverty. The most common barriers include a lack of access to reliable transportation to and from LES upgrading programs (80 per cent), previous negative experiences with learning (80 per cent), and access to affordable childcare while attending skills upgrading programs (77 per cent).

Respondents were clear that any effort to increase literacy skills must be coupled with necessary supports and services that alleviate the burden of poverty and remove barriers to learning. However, LES service providers do not always have the capacity to deliver additional supports to learners. Among the services that are provided directly to learners,

LES practitioners tend to focus on areas that advance their learners' progress in skills upgrading programs, including the development of personalized learning plans (54 per cent), providing information about post-upgrading educational options (41 per cent), as well as removing accessibility barriers by providing bus tickets or other transportation supports (42 per cent).

LES service providers rely primarily on partner organizations to provide learners with professionalized services, such as health and mental health services, including addictions counselling (49 per cent), mental health supports (48 per cent) and physical health supports (41 per cent), trauma-informed care (41 per cent); housing or shelter services (48 per cent); legal advice (47 per cent), and financial supports (45 per cent).

Having a well-coordinated support system can leverage the expertise of different service providers and help adult learners access the services they need, regardless of their primary access point.

Key Finding 4: Project-based funding has increased innovation, but imperilled the sustainability of service providers

The shift towards project-based funding has imposed significant constraints on the capacity of community organizations to do their work and on the long-term viability of their services.

Participants in the National Research Project overwhelmingly support the development of a funding strategy that is sustainable, predictable, and supported by cross-governmental sources. They emphasize the need for an expanded mandate that combines literacy and poverty reduction objectives (76 per cent), allows for the delivery of wrap-around supports (76 per cent), and provides more flexibility in the use of resources (69 per cent).

Key Finding 5: Knowledge sharing among LES practitioners and awareness raising among the public and employers are necessary to improve the effectiveness of LES programs

A persistent challenge for service providers is informing the public and employers on the abilities of their learners. One of the most important priority area for improving the effectiveness of literacy programs is informing the public on the importance that LES upgrading contributes towards supporting poverty reduction actions (73 per cent).

Survey respondents also identified information sharing about their work with others in their field as an area that requires improvement (59 per cent). Indeed, there is no formal or consistent process for practitioners to share information nationally about promising approaches, effective learning tools for specific groups of learners, and innovative programs.

Key Finding 6: Learner-centred approaches are most effective for low-skilled adults and require a holistic assessment of learner needs

Learning approaches that customize materials to the individual's needs are most effective for low-skilled adults. A deep understanding of these needs requires an intake and assessment process that is holistic in nature – and one that learners will be receptive to and see value in.

Indeed, most service providers commonly use an intake and assessment process. Page
most respondents (72 per cent) believe that available assessment tools could be used to better serve multi-barriered individuals.

Key Finding 7: Contextualizing program content to learners' goals is most effective in facilitating transitions to employment or education

Contextualized programs align learning activities, materials, and concepts to a specific subject matter or occupations in line with learners' objectives. Contextualizing learning content to a specific occupation, or a specific educational program can ensure that learners have the skills they need to succeed in their next steps.

Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of respondents are already innovating with customization of program content to better align with learner needs and more than half (58 per cent) report making program content more culturally-sensitive.

Over 40 per cent respondents identified customization of LES programming as a priority area for further investment and innovation, especially for persons with disabilities (47 per cent), Indigenous Peoples (43 per cent), and newcomers to Canada (43 per cent).

Key Finding 8: Service delivery that combines contextualized programs with wrap-around supports are highly effective for transitioning individuals to employment

Integrated service delivery is an innovative and successful model for LES program delivery. By convening community partners at the onset, needed services and supports can be integrated within the delivery of the program itself.

The majority of survey respondents were supportive of integrating suggested poverty reduction programs with LES services. In particular, most respondents identified employment supports (74 per cent) and upgrading (70 per cent) as those that should be prioritized for integrated approaches.

A majority of respondents identified programs that target basic needs, including those that address food insecurity (63 per cent), housing (61 per cent), and income supplements (58 per cent), as being apt for service integration.

The approach is resource intensive and is not appropriate for every organization or learner. However, this approach has proven to be successful in moving vulnerable adults out of poverty in pilot projects that targeted specific groups of learners facing common barriers and sharing similar needs. A number of pilot projects, including the RESDAC model

and WoodGreen's Homeward Bound, are testing the effectiveness of these models for specific groups of learners.

Key Finding 9: Awareness and accessibility to programs is the most significant challenge for stakeholders

Many organizations have adopted new approaches for reaching potential learners, including developing new strategic partnerships (67 percent) and adopting targeted outreach approaches through new channels for reaching client groups (63 percent).

However, improving awareness and accessibility of services for all targeted groups is an important challenge and was identified as the most important priority by all stakeholders, especially practitioners working with low-income learners (72 per cent), persons with disabilities (59 per cent), newcomers (56 per cent), and Indigenous Peoples (55 per cent).

Key Finding 10: Improving self-esteem, resilience, and self-confidence are key objectives and important indicators of success for literacy programs

Beyond skills, literacy upgrading is fundamentally about developing a person's psychological capital: increasing their self-esteem, improving their attitude towards learning, and building their resilience in the face of challenges.

Most respondents (80 per cent) identified negative experiences with learning as one of the most important barriers to learning. Indeed, low-skilled adults may have experienced a series of failures in the formal education system. By internalizing their failure in education, they often lack the confidence and resilience they need to overcome challenges in learning. Addressing the psychological barriers to learning is a critical step to skill development.

In fact, respondents overwhelmingly identified improvements in psychological capital, including higher self-confidence (82 per cent) and positive attitude towards learning (76 per cent) as being the primary indicators of their program's success.

Key Finding 11: Outcomes frameworks are often too narrow in scope and exclude the key indicators of program success that are recognized by practitioners and participants

Respondents were clear that program outcomes are too narrow in scope, focusing overwhelmingly on skill gains, employment, and education.

Over two-thirds of survey respondents (67 per cent) identified a need to expand existing evaluation frameworks to better reflect the work that they do in building their learners' life skills and psychological capital.

In addition to improving psychological capital, a majority of practitioners also identified changes in a learners' health and well-being as key indicators of success, including improvements in their quality of life (60 per cent) and in their mental health (52 per cent).

Recommendations

Strategic recommendations intend to advise policy makers, service providers, and other stakeholders offering literacy and essential skills programming across Canada on how policies and programs should be structured, funded, and delivered in order to increase their effectiveness in reducing poverty.

Recommendations are organized into two focus areas: policy recommendations (the role and responsibility of government, the structure and nature of program funding, and policy tools to enhance partnerships and strengthen the central role of literacy in poverty reduction strategies) and program and service delivery recommendations (best practices in the design and delivery of literacy programs).

Policy recommendations

Recommendation 1: Governments in Canada should recognize literacy as a basic human right

Every Canadian should have the right to learn the skills they need to meet the demands of their daily life. Recognizing literacy as a human right acknowledges that basic skills are necessary and fundamental to ensuring self-sufficiency, independence, and basic human dignity.

In the information age, basic literacy and essential skills are essential for any individual to survive. Adults in need must have access to quality basic education to protect against the social and economic isolation of vulnerable citizens.

International covenants, of which Canada is a signatory, have recognized literacy as an important contributor towards a person's social, civic, and economic engagement. Governments must ensure that every individual has the right to gain the skills needed to participate in and contribute to our shared institutions.

Recommendation 2: Literacy should be recognized as a policy priority requiring cross-departmental and cross-jurisdictional cooperation

Improvements in literacy proficiency affect adult learners across a number of dimensions that extend beyond skill gains and labour market participation. As a result, governments must define literacy as being more than a dimension of a broader education policy.

Given its influence on individual empowerment and wellbeing, literacy requires strategic alignment and cooperation across departments. Literacy must be understood as a key priority for government policies targeting health, employment, education, housing, income supports, and other social programs working towards poverty reduction.

Broadening the scope of literacy's policy objectives provides an opportunity for all levels of government to work in concert to develop a common set of priorities. Better coordination between jurisdictions and across levels of government is necessary to improve resource

allocation towards and to enhance overall effectiveness of adult literacy programming across the country.

Recommendation 3: Literacy should be a central pillar within any comprehensive poverty reduction strategy

Literacy and poverty are closely related. Studies show that a person's income and their labour market participation correlate with their proficiency in literacy. Additionally, most people experiencing poverty have low literacy skills.

Literacy upgrading alone is insufficient to move people towards independence and self-sufficiency, however. Adults experiencing poverty often face a number of barriers that prevent them from exiting poverty. These same barriers often limit adults from participating and succeeding in literacy programs. Addressing these barriers is therefore the key to enabling individuals to learn and to move out of poverty.

The Government of Canada has recently introduced a National Poverty Reduction strategy with programs targeting literacy and clear indicators to measure changes. Governments across Canada that seek to develop similar strategies to reduce the incidence of poverty in their jurisdiction must first recognize that literacy upgrading is a critical step on the pathway out of poverty.

They must also appreciate that increasing literacy skills can help move individuals out of poverty, but only if needed supports are available, accessible, and adequate.

Recommendation 4: Policies and funding models should encourage collaboration rather than competition between service providers

Stakeholders from across the country shared their experiences developing partnerships with other service providers in their communities. Across the country, service delivery partnerships and integrated programming for literacy skills upgrading and poverty reduction naturally arise. Indeed, survey respondents identified a number of supports that are offered in partnership with local service providers.

However, policy silos and funding constraints on providers impede these efforts. Additionally, competitive project-based funding discourages collaboration between local organizations.

Governments and other program funders should continue to prioritize funding strategies that reward and encourage collaboration between organizations and integrated service delivery. Service providers have expressed an openness to increase their level of engagement with others across sectors in order to improve the overall quality and comprehensiveness of supports available to adult learners. However, more attention must be paid to the barriers that hinder the development and sustainability of such partnerships, notably the amount of time and resources dedicated towards maintaining the stability of the partnership.

Governments can encourage the development of programs that are holistic and that leverage the expertise of multiple service providers by incorporating partnership requirements in grants and contribution agreements. Program funders should also recognize that coordinating partnerships is most effective when done locally, by building on existing relationships within communities.

Recommendation 5: Funding for literacy and essential skills programming should be sustainable and predictable, while also fostering innovation

Literacy and essential skills service providers require a funding strategy that can sustain their programs, that is predictable year over year, and that can foster innovation.

Increasingly, governments are adopting a project-based funding approach that encourages innovation and tests promising new programs. The model has contributed to a dynamic culture in LES service delivery. In the last few years, new and innovative programs have emerged, demonstrating the transformative effect that well-developed and well-financed programming can have on the lives of low-skilled adults. However, the cycle of project development and grant applications significantly lowers the amount of resources available for program delivery.

A core-funding model embedded within an innovation strategy would provide the stability service providers seek while encouraging greater innovation in the field of literacy and essential skills upgrading.

Recommendation 6: Governments should facilitate partnerships and support knowledge translation and exchange (KTE) among providers of literacy and poverty reduction services

Governments can improve the quality of literacy and essential skills upgrading in Canada by encouraging greater partnerships between local organizations and by disseminating knowledge about promising programs.

Federal, provincial, and territorial governments should facilitate partnerships through flexible joint-funding models that encourage integration of service delivery and that support local networks of community organizations.

Governments should also support ongoing activities related to knowledge translation and exchange (KTE). Indeed, governments are best suited to provide support for the work of national and regional convening organizations who have the capacity to bring practitioners together to share best practices and innovations in service delivery.

In addition, the establishment of a permanent National Advisory Council on Literacy and Poverty could serve as a pan-Canadian, bottom-up process for information sharing. The Council would serve to advise all levels of government on potential policies and programs at the intersection of literacy and poverty in Canada, and could help develop common strategic objectives across provinces and territories.

Program and service delivery recommendations

Recommendation 7: Raising awareness and accessibility of existing services and programs should be a key priority for improvement

Practitioners are struggling to reach new participants. Investments into innovative strategies that improve learners' awareness of and accessibility to programs should be prioritized, including:

- Funding creative partnerships between providers servicing similar populations;
- Allocating additional resources towards outreach and communications strategies; and
- Promoting the development of innovative models to facilitate increased access and engagement in literacy programming, particularly among marginalized learners who may have more limited access to traditional models.

Recommendation 8: Learner-centred approaches should be used to maximize engagement in literacy programming

Learners are more responsive and engaged in literacy programs when the materials and approaches used are relevant and appropriate to their goals and lived experience. Learner-centered approaches are fundamentally about having a deep understanding and appreciation for a person's experiences and valuing the skills and knowledge they bring with them into the program.

Providing culturally appropriate programming will also maximize engagement of learners from Indigenous and newcomer communities.

Program funders should support practitioners' work in developing tools and resources for holistic and comprehensive needs assessment, particularly for marginalized groups. A common objective for program funders and service providers across the country should be to create programs that are learner-centric and better aligned with participant needs.

Recommendation 9: Literacy programs should be contextualized to the goals of learners

Learning activities and programming materials should be contextualized to specific subject matter or occupations that align with learners' objectives. Programs that intend to build the specific skillsets a learner needs to achieve their stated goals are more effective than skills upgrading programs that follow a generic curriculum.

This is particularly true for skills upgrading programs that embed literacy within an occupational framework and customize their content to specific jobs. These programs are effective in transitioning and retaining learners in the labour market. Similarly, aligning literacy program content to specific postsecondary program requirements can improve a learner's chances of success.

The importance of contextualization also extends beyond facilitating employment or educational transitions. Developing programs that align with an individual's broader objectives, including those related to their health, their finances, or their community engagement, can make the content seem more relevant, purposeful, and engaging, particularly for marginalized groups.

Governments can further support the contextualization of literacy programming by funding projects and programs that aim to develop and test contextually relevant tools and resources, particularly for marginalized groups.

Recommendation 10: Greater integration of services should be a primary objective to improve the quality of literacy and poverty reduction services

Literacy organizations should strive to work with community partners in the development of integrated service delivery that provides wrap-around supports to learners while leveraging the expertise of community partners.

While not all literacy organizations have the capacity or the resources to implement integrated service delivery models, this model has been proven effective in addressing the barriers common to specific groups of learners while supporting their training.

Governments should encourage integrated service delivery models when appropriate and should target programs that are most appropriate for integrated delivery, such as access to food, housing and shelter supports, and income supplements.

Recommendation 11: Outcomes frameworks used to evaluate success should be expanded to include indicators of life skills and psychological capital

Assessing outcomes solely in terms of skills, employment or education fails to capture the broad depth of impact that literacy programs have on individuals' lives. Building up a person's self-esteem, resilience, and attitudes towards learning is often the key to their success. Indeed, many low-skilled adults have a history of failure in formal education and associate learning with these negative past experiences.

Broadening our understanding of success in the context of literacy programming requires looking at changes in a learner's health and well-being, including improvements in their quality of life and in their mental health.

Governments should work with service providers to improve and simplify the outcomes reporting process. Ultimately, outcomes evaluation should provide accountability for literacy programming by accurately and effectively measuring changes that practitioners are expecting to see in their learners. A process that minimizes the burden on instructors should be favoured.



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