



EST. 1899

United for Literacy
Littératie Ensemble

LITERACY AND IMMIGRATION:

The Power of Literacy in Navigating the Immigration Experience

DISCUSSION PAPER 2024

About United for Literacy

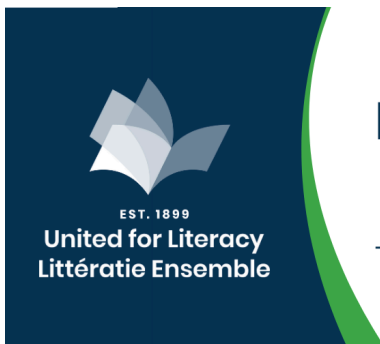
Formerly Frontier College, United for Literacy is a national registered charity dedicated to improving the lives of children, youth, and adults through literacy.



Since 1899, our All Welcome! approach and innovative services have been transforming every place into a learning place. In the past year, we worked with over 500 community partners to support over 41,000 people across Canada. Learners gained access to free, inclusive literacy and numeracy programs, in person and online, supported by 1,603 trained volunteer tutors.



Celebrating 125 years of empowerment through literacy



United for Literacy NATIONAL FORUM

Literacy and Immigration:
The Power of Literacy in Navigating
the Immigration Experience

October 16
1 p.m. ET

**Save the
Date!**

This paper is a launching pad for discussion. It is written at approximately an eighth-grade reading level to ensure it is accessible to as many participants as possible.

Introduction: Literacy and Immigration

Literacy touches every part of our lives. One definition of literacy is that it's the ability to engage with the written word. However, literacy has many different meanings, from the simple to the robust.¹ While every newcomer to Canada faces unique conditions, literacy is a common factor. Read on to find out more.

Today, society demands a sophisticated understanding of written language. Everyone deserves access to literacy and learning. United for Literacy is dedicated to making that possible. Literacy is a foundational tool to ensure newcomers to Canada can thrive. Bridging the literacy gap is something we can do. It's our most effective tool for improving the lives of millions of Canadians.

The Government of Canada's Evaluation of the Literacy and Essential Skills Program defines literacy as: "the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society."² This definition links literacy and immigration. To take part in Canadian society, immigrants to Canada need strong literacy skills.

Immigration is the process where people become permanent residents or citizens of a new country.³ Statistics Canada defines an immigrant as a person "granted the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities."⁴ While this definition seems simple, the process is often complex.

Immigrating can be full of challenges:



Social



Financial



Legal



Emotional

Literacy is also a complex term. When we say "literacy" we mean all foundational skills. These include reading, writing, digital skills, and oral communication. Literacy is the collection of skills people need to take part in Canadian society.

Today, Canada has a reputation as a multicultural country.⁵ While it is important to remember Canada's Indigenous history and presence on these lands, Canada's history of settlement and immigration is likewise key to understanding who we are as a country.

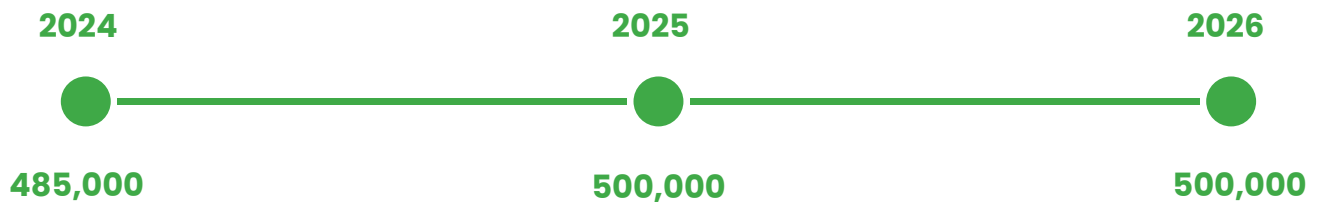
Immigration rates have increased greatly since 2020. Immigrants and refugees made up over **20% of Canada's total population in 2021.**⁶



Canada's Immigration Policies

Canada's newcomer umbrella includes immigrants and refugees. Both immigrants and refugees have unique realities and needs, as well as rights, in Canada. Looking ahead, the Canadian government has stated that Canada will welcome:

New permanent residents ⁷



Today, newcomers come from all over the world. Canada has over a dozen immigration pathways to suit people from across the globe as well as numerous programs designed to help newcomers feel at home in Canada. ⁸

However, in the past, Canada's immigration policy included racist policies: ⁹

- The internment of Ukrainian Canadians during World War I
- The 1923 Chinese Immigration Act (Chinese Exclusion Act)
- The internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II

As we look to the future, we must consider how Canada's immigration policies impact larger political contexts and day-to-day life.

Currently, there are three broad categories through which people come to permanently settle in Canada: ¹⁰

- Economic immigration
- Family reunification
- Humanitarian considerations

This paper opens the conversation about literacy and immigration. It will examine:

- 1) Cultural considerations
- 2) Immigration's impact on adults' literacy
- 3) Immigration's impact on children's literacy.

Cultural Considerations

When designing literacy programs for newcomers it is important to remember the learner's background and culture. Some learners may arrive in Canada already fluent in one or both of Canada's official languages. Others might not. Either way, newcomers need to show an "adequate knowledge" of English or French to apply for Canadian citizenship.¹¹

But what is "adequate knowledge?" According to the Government of Canada website, people with "adequate knowledge" of English or French should:

- Be able to have a short conversation about everyday topics
- Understand simple instructions and questions such as those they might encounter in everyday conversations
- Use basic grammar
- Be able to express themselves¹²



Cultural Considerations

Newcomers to Canada may need support to reach this level of “adequate knowledge.” They might seek literacy practitioners to support their learning. Literacy practitioners must remember that social and cultural practices impact people's ability to learn.¹³ That means a one-size-fits-all approach to literacy is not always effective.

A learner's culture must be considered. This can be as simple as providing flexible scheduling. For example, a learner might need time off for a religious holiday. It may be difficult to catch up without accommodations. Taking time to plan in advance provides a more welcoming environment and sets up the learner for success.

Culture also influences education in a broader sense. Ideologies form school curricula. In other words, what you grow up learning influences how you approach new knowledge. For example, someone raised in a writing-based school system may struggle in a classroom that prioritizes oral presentations. Similarly, someone who received an education within a context of a religious institution might struggle with a secular education in their new country. So, it is important to consider learners' cultural practices when creating literacy programs.



Discussion questions

1. How are newcomers to Canada integrating with the educational system?
2. Should people have to “integrate”?
3. What does it mean to integrate into an education system?
4. What can people do to welcome newcomers to Canada in a meaningful way?
5. What models exist for culturally mindful education?

Impact on Adults

Immigrating to a new country can be confusing and challenging. It is even harder for those with low literacy skills. Some adults coming to Canada have high literacy skills in their first language, while other do not. Passing a language test is a mandatory step for most immigration pathways. That means most newcomers to Canada have some knowledge of English or French.¹⁴ However, despite having *some* literacy skills, many newcomers encounter literacy-related challenges like:¹⁵

Finding employment without Canadian experience



Newcomers to Canada often face barriers to good jobs and economic prosperity. People might have trouble using financial and employment resources in their second language. They often lack Canadian experience and may struggle to get recognition for their employment credentials received outside of Canada.¹⁶ With strong literacy skills people can ensure they are treated fairly in the workplace.



Finding housing without a Canadian credit history

Some landlords use a lack of Canadian credit history or a guarantor to deny housing to newcomers to Canada.¹⁷ Strong literacy skills are a must for making sense of Canadian banking and housing systems.



Understanding and navigating healthcare, childcare, and social assistance programs

Making a new home in Canada requires a grasp of healthcare, childcare, and social assistance programs. Strong literacy skills make these complex systems easier to navigate.

Impact on Adults

Understanding Canadian legal systems



It's necessary to be aware of local laws and regulations. Newcomers to Canada might find it challenging to adapt to Canada's legal system. Having strong literacy skills ensures that immigrants are not caught in difficult situations due to a simple lack of legal knowledge.¹⁸ It's also helpful for newcomers to understand how to access legal assistance if necessary.

Dealing with racial, religious, and linguistic discrimination¹⁹



Canada's immigration history has been full of discriminative policies. Today, newcomers to Canada still often experience discrimination.²⁰ Strong literacy skills allow newcomers to advocate for themselves and address injustices.

Helping children integrate into Canada's K-12 education system



Strong literacy skills help parents support their children at school. Parents must enroll their children in school,²¹ and classroom integration can be challenging. Challenges can include:

- Bullying,
- Struggling to reconcile what's taught at home and in school,
- Culturally specific words and concepts,
- Isolation, and more.

In addition to these daily challenges, many newcomers to Canada experience long-term emotional challenges. Newcomers might be homesick or feel that the opportunities available in their new home are out of reach. Literacy programs help people improve their skills and connect to a community. Collaboration and mentorship help newcomers build skills while also forming stronger community bonds.

Skills for Success

The Government of Canada has identified nine Skills for Success to help Canadians—including newcomers to Canada—succeed:²²

- ✓ **Reading:** the ability to find, understand, and use information presented through words, symbols, and images.
- ✓ **Writing:** the ability to share information using written words, symbols, and images.
- ✓ **Numeracy:** the ability to find, understand, use, and report mathematical information presented through words, numbers, symbols, and graphics.
- ✓ **Communication:** the ability to receive, understand, consider, and share information and ideas through speaking, listening, and interacting with others.
- ✓ **Adaptability:** the ability to achieve or adjust goals and behaviours when expected or unexpected change occurs, by planning, staying focused, persisting, and overcoming setbacks.
- ✓ **Digital:** the ability to use digital technology and tools to find, manage, apply, create, and share information and content.
- ✓ **Problem Solving:** the ability to identify, analyze, propose solutions, and make decisions.
- ✓ **Creativity and Innovation:** the ability to imagine, develop, express, encourage, and apply ideas in ways that are novel, unexpected, or challenge existing methods and norms.
- ✓ **Collaboration:** the ability to receive, understand, consider, and share information and ideas through speaking, listening, and interacting with others.

Of these nine skills, five (collaboration, communication, digital, reading, and writing) are directly related to literacy. The other four are enhanced by strong literacy skills. By developing their ability to read and write, adults become better equipped to handle challenges, support their children, and succeed in work and life.

United for Literacy Programs

United for Literacy works in partnership with organizations across Canada to support adult learners. These programs take a variety of forms depending on the needs of local learners. Some common program models include:

English/French as an Additional Language (EAL/FAL) Programs

EAL/FAL are diverse programs that provide adult learners with English or French tutoring. For example, in Ontario, programs are available both online and in person and fit into a variety of schedules and durations.²³

Workplace Literacy Programs

Workplace literacy includes the skills that people need to succeed at work. These programs occur in the workplace. They are often co-funded by governments and employers.²⁴ For example, in Alberta, United for Literacy worked with HelloFresh and the Government of Alberta to run foundational skills upgrading for employees at a HelloFresh distribution centre. Learners improved their current job performance and their professional potential.

Family Literacy Programs

These programs support families and entire communities. United for Literacy also has a longstanding family program in Nova Scotia called Immigrant Families Learning Together. Tutors provide support for parents and children, encouraging them to learn at their own pace and to use their own strengths.

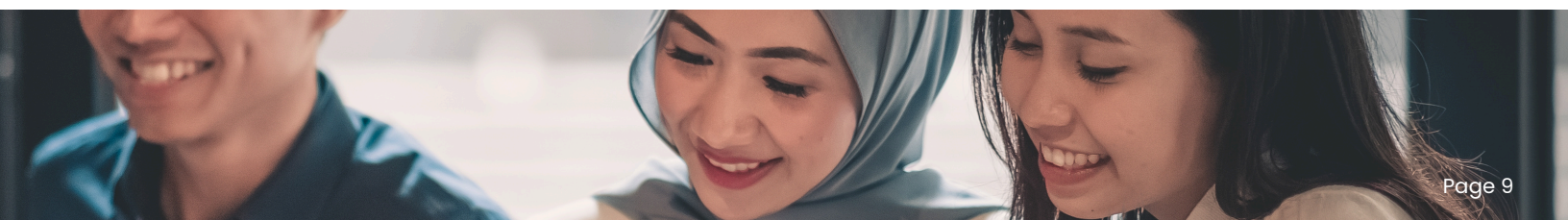
An impactful adult literacy program always:

- Creates a safe and welcoming environment
- Provides programming with flexible schedules at no cost to the person
- Encourages feedback from learners
- Articulates the practical value of learning activities.²⁵



Discussion questions

1. How can organizations best design adult literacy programs?
2. How can parents support their children's learning in the and short- and long-term?
3. What can employers do to support employees who are new to Canada?



Impact on Children

Like immigrating as an adult, immigrating as a child can take many different forms and involve both exciting opportunities and unique challenges. Children immigrating to Canada might be:

- Immigrating with their family
- Coming to Canada alone to attend school²⁶
- Being sponsored by a parent or caregiver already living in Canada²⁷

Enrolling in a new school system can be challenging for immigrant children. While experiences vary between children, some common challenges are:

- Bullying or discrimination from other students
- Integrating into a group of peers who are already bonded
- New and unfamiliar school routines
- Missing resources: school supplies, healthy lunches, homework help, before- and after-school care
- Conflicts between things taught at school and at home (for example, those related to science, religion, or sexuality)
- Negative emotions associated with learning or the immigration process
- Large classroom sizes that don't allow for individual attention
- Translating and interpreting for the whole family
- Following a curriculum in a language other than their own
- Being placed in a lower grade than previously achieved^{28, 29}

For many children, a key challenge after immigrating is starting school in a new language. Jumping into the Canadian classroom can be intimidating. This is especially true for kids whose first language is not French or English. Teaching practices that highlight emotions can help address language and cultural challenges. Acknowledging all literacy practices, including those in other languages, can also help.³⁰



Impact on Children

United for Literacy collaborates with community partners to support children who are new to Canada. Some examples of impactful programs include:

United for Literacy’s Fredericton Program, Fredericton, New Brunswick

This program provides free, year-long support. The program helps newcomer learners improve their English, math, and science skills. It also helps learners complete their schoolwork and build their academic skills. The program promotes collaborative learning and sharing. Programming is always free and open to everyone. It is fun, culturally responsive, and barrier-free.

East York East Toronto (EYET) Family Resource’s Ready for School Connects, Toronto, Ontario

This program supports immigrant children. Literacy practitioners provide two weeks of class before the official school year starts. Kids start school feeling prepared and supported.³¹

In addition to these programs, family literacy programs across Canada work to benefit both children and entire families through activities that involve children and their caregivers.



Discussion questions

1. How do children understand themselves as learners?
2. How do children of immigrants support their parents’ learning?
3. What is the role of family literacy in children’s educational journeys?



Moving Forward

At United for Literacy, we believe that words can rewrite lives! As literacy advocates and practitioners, we work in partnership with community organizations to provide newcomers with the reading and writing support they need to write their own futures in Canada.



Discussion questions

1. What is the impact of low literacy skills on immigration rates?
2. How does low literacy limit newcomers' ability to fully and meaningfully take part in Canadian society?
3. How can literacy practitioners best support newcomers to Canada?
4. What are the long-term effects of literacy programming on immigrant populations?
5. How do learner needs evolve for newcomers who become Canadian citizens?

Resources

Newcomer services: [Newcomer services - Canada.ca](#)

Skills for Success: [Skills for Success - Canada.ca](#)

Paths to immigration: [Immigrate to Canada - Canada.ca](#)

Supporting young learners: [Final - Together Project Education Support Guide v2](#)

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