

Workplace Literacy

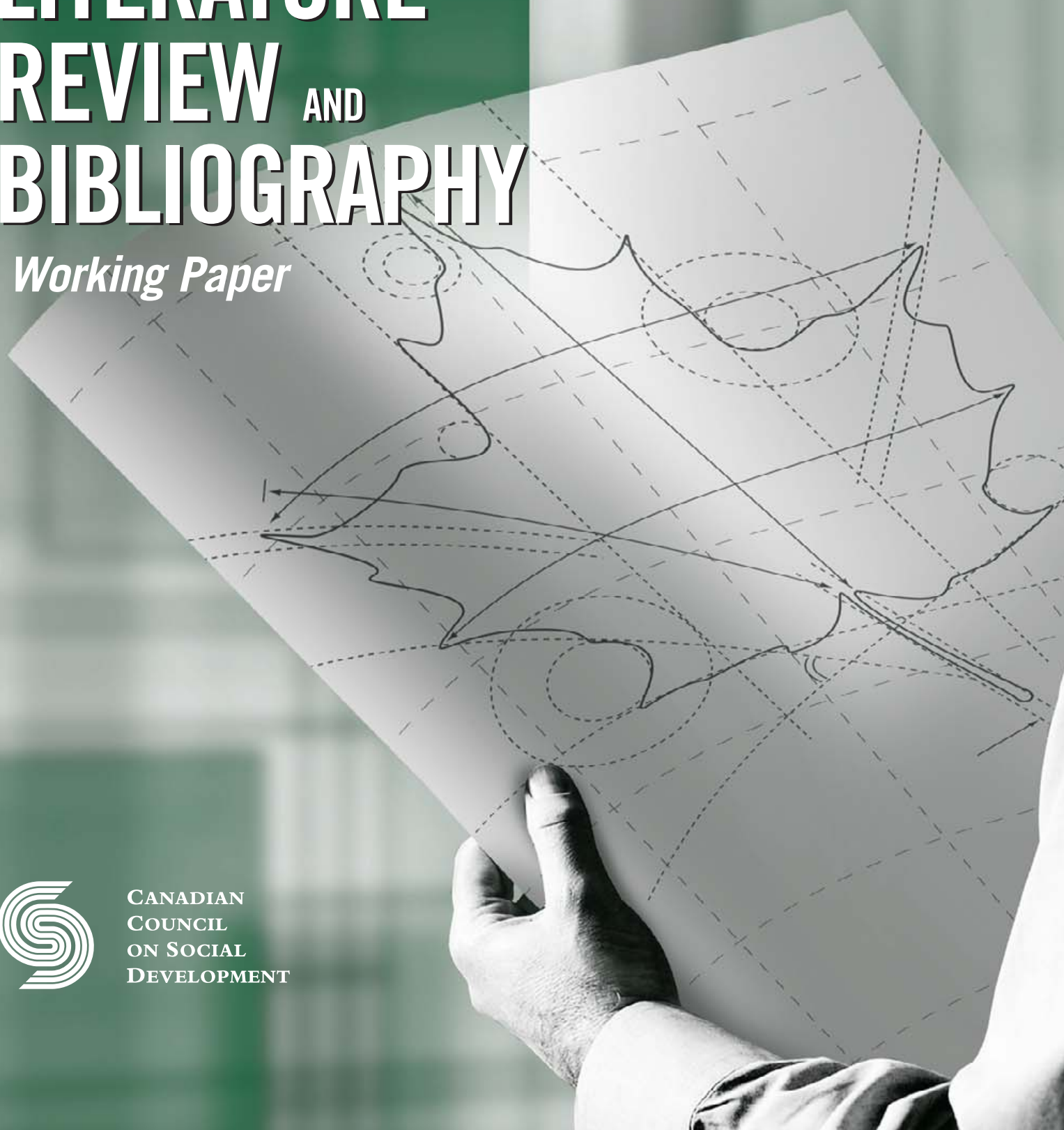
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REBECCA GOWAN

CANADIAN LITERATURE REVIEW AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Working Paper



CANADIAN
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Workplace Literacy

**Canadian Literature Review
and Bibliography**

Working Paper

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Foreword

In Canada and internationally, there has been increased attention paid to adult literacy in the workplace since the release of two surveys done between 1994 and 2003. However, workplace literacy in Canada is still a largely invisible issue, both for the public and politicians. There is no national strategy. Few provinces and territories have education and training strategies that include workplace literacy as a component – and those that do have significantly varied approaches.

The Canadian Council on Social Development’s project, “Literacy Programs in the Workplace: How to Increase Employer Support” examined what might be done to strengthen the infrastructure of literacy programs in Canada, specifically in the area of workplace literacy. The project, launched in 2004, sought to identify the types of approaches to workplace literacy training – internationally and across Canada – that have proven to be effective in engaging employers in workplace literacy initiatives.

Research for the project proceeded in four phases: an extensive literature review; a survey of the international program and policy literature; a review of Canadian policies and programs at the provincial level; and three detailed provincial case studies including interviews with employers. Our interviews with select employers in Canada indicated areas where the employers agree about the types of approaches, incentives, and programs that work best in a range of employment environments.

Findings from this project are presented in a series of Working Papers, a Final Report that includes an analysis of the case studies and the findings from employer interviews, and an Executive Summary.

Reports from the Workplace Literacy Project include the following:

- **Overview of Selected International Programs: Working Paper**, by Paul Roberts and Anna Torgeson, looks at the conditions for adult education and training, including workplace literacy, in eight OECD countries;
- **Overview of Provincial and Territorial Policies: Working Paper**, by Emily Watkins, provides an overview of current adult education and workplace literacy policies and programs across Canada;
- **Canadian Literature Review and Bibliography: Working Paper**, by Paul Roberts and Rebecca Gowan, looks at various perspectives and approaches to workplace literacy by different stakeholders. It also examines research on the benefits of workplace literacy programs for employers and workers;
- **Programs in the Workplace: How to Increase Employer Support**, by Lynette Plett. This report draws together the findings of the working papers and discusses the lessons learned from Canada and elsewhere regarding successful employer involvement in workplace literacy programs. It also includes an analysis of three provincial case studies of workplace literacy programs and interviews with employers in those provinces;
- **Programs in the Workplace: Executive Summary**; and,
- **Programmes en milieu de travail : Sommaire.**

All of the Workplace Literacy reports are available free of charge on the CCSD's website at www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2007/literacy/.

The bulk of research for this project looked at workplace literacy practices between 2004 and 2006. However, much has changed in the international and Canadian contexts since that time. For example, in 2006, the federal government created the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program (ALLESP) which integrated the National Literacy Program, the Office of Learning Technologies, and the Learning Initiatives Program, then subsequently announced spending cuts totalling \$17.7 million to literacy programming across the country. It is beyond the scope of our current study to explore the implications of these more recent changes in government policies and programs.

As we look forward, evidence from these reports suggest that employers have an important role to play in building a literacy program infrastructure that responds to local needs. But employers aren't interested in playing this role on their own. They view workplace literacy programming as a partnership endeavour, one that demands leadership and resources from different levels of government. We hope that the findings from this project will support collective efforts to advance the provision of literacy and lifelong learning opportunities for all Canadians.

Workplace Literacy in Canada

There has been a dramatic increase in the level and type of attention paid to adult literacy skills in Canada since the late 1980s (Long and Taylor, 17). The release of the Canadian results of the 1995 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) has contributed to the increased focus on adult literacy skills. The frequently cited IALS results are alarming: 22% of Canadians have serious difficulties with day-to-day reading and writing tasks (Statistics Canada, *Highlights from the Canadian Report*, 2). According to the IALS results, another quarter of the Canadian population, 24% to 26%, can only deal with simple written material that does not include very complex tasks (ibid). The IALS results suggest that nearly half of Canadians experience serious challenges with reading and writing.

The results of literacy surveys such as the IALS have created the widespread impression that the Canadian workplace is facing a literacy crisis, and that to maintain a competitive advantage, Canada's workers must improve their literacy skills. Many researchers and stakeholders in the field of workplace literacy contest this view of Canada's literacy crisis, which focuses on low literacy levels as an individual problem rather than a social and systemic problem. "While there are different opinions on why it is important to increase basic literacy skills, and on how best to do this," state Ellen Long and Leanne Taylor, "most people generally agree that having solid basic literacy skills is socially and economically advantageous" (17). Within the field of workplace literacy, researchers, stakeholders and policy-makers generally agree about the need for increased literacy skills in the workplace; however, they disagree about why this is necessary and what the goals of workplace literacy programs should be.¹

This literature review is part of a larger research project investigating the following question: What makes some employers want to invest in literacy programs and what keeps other employers from doing the same? To address this question, this paper first provides an overview of the literature in the field of adult literacy in Canada, identifies emerging themes within workplace literacy research, and discusses the various theoretical and ideological perspectives of researchers and stakeholders in the field. The paper then summarizes findings on the benefits of workplace literacy programs and explores recent data regarding employee participation in workplace training and employer support for this training. The paper also discusses barriers to participation in workplace literacy training and provides an overview of the literature on adult literacy policy and, specifically, workplace literacy policy in Canada.

This is a working literature review which evolved as the research project progressed. In addition to investigating emerging themes and areas of research in the workplace literacy

¹ A number of governments, such as in Canada and the UK, provide Essential or Basic Skills programs that generally include literacy and numeracy as components of the skill set conceptualized within the program. This widens the forms of education being offered to workers but can lead to some confusion regarding exactly how literacy and workplace literacy in particular, fit within this broader concept. It is therefore important to remember that Basic skills or Essential skills are not reducible to literacy. However, when discussing programs to develop these skills, workplace literacy and numeracy are key components.

literature, this paper will also identify gaps in the literature of relevance to this research project. Another working paper in this project series focuses on workplace literacy policy case studies within a national and international context.

Adult Literacy Research in Canada

In recent decades, there has been an increased focus on adult literacy in Canada and this is reflected in the well-developed literature in this field. Audrey Thomas views the plentiful and expanding literature on adult literacy and the development of specialty areas in the field, such as workplace literacy and family literacy, as indicators of the field's maturity (xviii). Pat Campbell's report (2003) on adult literacy research provides a broad overview of the field's development over nearly a decade. Campbell's work analyzes the Canadian research conducted from 1994 to 2003 and compiled in the on-line database, the Directory of Canadian Adult Literacy Research in English. Campbell identifies the following 10 themes and categories of research that emerge in the literature and the proportion of research allocated to each of these categories:

- Family Literacy (17%)
- Programs (14%)
- Enhancing Access and Increasing Retention (12%)
- Educators and Students (11%)
- Literacy and the Labour Market (10%)
- Workplace Education (10%)
- Technology (8%)
- Learning (7%)
- Health (6%)
- Reading and Writing Strategies (5%) (Campbell, *From Coast to Coast*, 5)

The on-line database Campbell examines does not include all the Canadian research conducted in the field of adult literacy; however, her analysis demonstrates the range of themes researched. She identifies two categories of research dedicated to themes related to workplace literacy: literacy and the labour market, and workplace education. About 20% of the research represented in the Directory of Canadian Adult Literacy Research in English was conducted in areas related to workplace literacy.

The research on workplace education reflects different ways of "thinking about literacies in the workplace," states Campbell (143). She identifies three different theoretical approaches that inform the research done on workplace education: cognitive, social and economic. She notes that research conducted in this area is broad and ranges from investigating the economic benefits of improving literacy skills in workplace, to investigating the nature of workplace literacies (143).

Collaborative efforts are needed, suggests Campbell, to identify additional themes in the field of adult literacy (*Research Review*, 44). She identifies several areas in need of further investigation, such as: Aboriginal literacy programs and learners; the history of adult literacy; and the impact of policy and educational reforms on programs, educators and learners (ibid). As Campbell notes in her summary, the literature is informed by

various theoretical – as well as ideological – perspectives regarding the subject matter. The following categories represent additional themes which emerged during the review of workplace literacy literature for this project:

Themes
1. Human capital/individual skills perspectives regarding workplace literacy;
2. Workplace literacies as social practices;
3. Perspectives on workplace literacy: unions and workers;
4. Benefits of workplace literacy programs;
5. Participation in workplace literacy programs and employer support;
6. Nonparticipation in workplace literacy programs;
7. Barriers to the initiation of workplace literacy programs;
8. Guidelines for workplace literacy programs good practice, implementation models, and “how-to” handbooks;
9. Case studies: small, medium and large companies;
10. Workplace literacy program evaluation;
11. National, provincial and territorial policy, programs and initiatives including specific workplace literacy policies;
12. Workplace literacy: international perspectives.

Most of the themes outlined above will be investigated during the on-going development of this literature review, with the exception of those that are of less relevance to this research project.

Overview of Various Theoretical and Ideological Perspectives on Workplace Literacy

As noted earlier, researchers, stakeholders, and policy-makers have different theoretical and ideological orientations to the field of workplace literacy. These perspectives can be identified as follows: human capital and individual skills perspectives; a social practice view; labour perspectives; and the views of other stakeholder such as employers, educators and government or policy-makers. As Adrian Blunt asserts, ideologies regarding workplace literacy inform policy and the effect of policy is not neutral on our communities, workplaces and labour markets (98). Blunt’s discussion of two distinct approaches to workplace literacy provides an overview of the central theoretical and ideological perspectives in the field.

In his article, “Workplace Literacy: The Contested Terrains of Policy and Practice,” Blunt discusses the competing discourses within the field of workplace literacy, their historical development, and the impact on research, policy and practice (2001). He provides definitions of workplace literacy from two opposing perspectives, and identifies the major stakeholders and their preferred approaches to workplace literacy. Blunt outlines the major shifts in workplace literacy policy and suggests directions for future policy development and stakeholder cooperation.

According to Blunt, the first perspective views workplace literacy as:

...essential to social development, the maintenance of democratic institutions and the achievement of social equity and justice. This perspective informs an emancipatory literacy education focusing on social outcomes and is located in community-based programs managed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and publicly funded institutions to respond to individual, family and community needs, including employment (89).

In contrast, Blunt summarizes the second workplace literacy perspective as viewing

...literacy as a component of human capital, that is, as an essential skill required of the labour force, upon which production and service effectiveness and efficiency are dependent. Human capital is enhanced through increased literacy functioning of individuals; therefore, literacy serves as an occupational skill. This technical-rational view informs a literacy education that has emerged from this technical-rational paradigm (89-90).

According to Blunt, Canada's literacy policy priorities have shifted and the dominant paradigm in policy and spending-priority decision making is now technical rationality (98). Blunt notes that "because policies are grounded in ideologies, the effects on communities, labour markets and the workplace are not politically neutral" (98). Blunt argues that practice and research in workplace literacy has been influenced by historical tensions between the two competing perspectives (90). Tensions continue to affect how workplace literacy is practiced and researched. Competition for limited public resources for literacy programs further divides these opposing paradigms (90). The author has practical suggestions for finding common ground in the area of workplace literacy, including a change in literacy discourse to bridge the opposing views.

It is conceptually useful to consider these two competing discourses related to workplace literacy and to generalize about who the proponents of each perspective are. In practice, however, the lines between the two perspectives on workplace literacy may be less rigid, and there are numerous examples of stakeholders with varied interests working together to achieve common goals. "In practice, experience shows...that different interests can co-exist to develop initiatives that meet the needs of different stakeholders," states Sue Folinsbee (*Briefing...*, Appendix, 2).

1. Human Capital/Individual Skills Perspectives

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) is informed by an individual skills perspective and has had a profound impact on the adult literacy discourse in Canada. The central report released with IALS data was Statistics Canada's 1997 report, *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada*. Additional reports have been published using the IALS data which also generally reflect a human capital and individual skills orientation to adult literacy. A thorough analysis of the impact of IALS on the adult literacy field in Canada is beyond the scope of this paper; however, in general, one could say that the effect has been mixed. On the one hand, the IALS findings have resulted in an increased focus on adult literacy in Canada. On the other hand, the IALS data and

reports have created an almost hegemonic discourse on adult literacy that is informed by an individual skills perspective and which has had a profound impact on research, policy and programs. Although the IALS data and reports have been criticized for casting the need for literacy skill development as an individual problem, rather than representing it as a systemic social issue, the IALS data has undoubtedly increased awareness of the need to support literacy skill development in Canada. The influence of IALS will continue to be significant with the release of new survey results.

Additional reports using the IALS data have been conducted, some of which have specifically addressed workplace literacy. For example, Constantine Kapsalis examines the international workplace training trends (1997) based on the 1994 IALS survey. The results of this study and Canada's Adult Education and Training Survey (AETS) will be examined at length later in this paper. Other studies on workplace literacy using the IALS data include Harvey Krahn and Graham S. Lowe's examination of how workers use their literacy skills on the job (1998). Their findings challenge the assertion that Canada faces a crisis of under-skilled workers, and indicate that a large proportion of adult workers are instead *under-employed*. The authors' analysis of the data reveals a "considerable degree of literacy mismatch in the Canadian workplace" (59). According to Krahn and Lowe, the larger proportion of mismatch occurring in the skill surplus situation (or under-employment), compared to the skill deficit situation (insufficient literacy skills for one's job), lead them to rethink the meaning of the "job-skills gap" (59).

Other reports using the IALS data have addressed the following workplace literacy topics: the effects of literacy and numeracy on labour market outcomes; comparative studies of Canadian workforce literacy skills from an international perspective; and the relationship between literacy levels and individual earnings.

A human capital or individual skills perspective is also represented in other research that focuses on literacy in the workplace from the perspectives of employers. Drawing on his experience gained in establishing and maintaining workplace literacy and training programs with Bristol Aerospace Limited, Wendell C. Wiebe presents his perspective of workplace literacy program within a larger business context (2001). Wiebe believes that "literacy programs, delivered within the context of a business, need to focus on the enhancement of employees' performance" (110). Wiebe stresses the importance of understanding the business context in which workplace literacy programs are situated. Workplace education programs need to be justified within a context where decision-making is informed by an evaluation of the return that an activity is expected to generate (110). Training is linked to the business imperative of continual improvement to become more efficient and to respond quickly to change (110).

According to Wiebe, to make a successful business case for workplace literacy programs, the following approaches need to be incorporated: the initiatives need justification (this will ensure support and commitment from supervisors); literacy needs to be linked to technical training; and there is a need to have a system in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the program (113-116). Wiebe stresses the need to consult with all stakeholders potentially affected by the training and to establish a needs analysis. This

process ensures that there is commitment to the program, and outcomes and goals are clearly outlined (116).

2. Workplace Literacy as Social Practice

In her introduction to *Reading Work: Literacies in the New Workplace*, Nancy Jackson provides a description of a social practice view of workplace literacy. In her opinion, this view represents a paradigm shift in thinking about the nature of literacy (4). Instead of viewing literacy as isolated reading and writing skills, new views of literacies ...involve shifting away from treating all forms of literacy as a discrete set of “skills” to be mastered by individuals. They even involve more than putting skills in “context” in the manner familiar to second-language teachers. They call for a change in how we define literacy itself, stretching its fundamental meaning to include the ways that reading and writing are intimately interwoven with knowledge, activities, intentions, social relationships and cultural meanings (5).

The In-Sites Research Group’s collection of ethnographies and related analysis represented in *Reading Work: Literacies in the New Workplace* “looked at the social practices of work and literacy by asking what, why and how people participate in literacy practices as part of their jobs” (Belfiore and Folinsbee, Chapter 5, 195). Throughout the book, the research group examines how such factors as social relations, power dynamics and workplace norms inform how people use literacies in their workplaces (ibid). The In-Sites Research Group examines the meaning of literacy in contemporary work environments considering the social, cultural and work norms that affect how skills are used within this context.

The Group’s review of workplace literacy literature (2002) is an annotated bibliography written for “those interested in reading further about workplace literacy as a social practice” (5). The authors identify readings that challenge the skills-driven approach to literacy. The work provides a thorough overview of research conducted from a social practice perspective in the field of workplace literacy and orients the reader to the central issues and debates within the field.

3. Perspectives from Labour

The workplace literacy literature written from a labour perspective addresses a range of subjects including guides for union negotiation of worker-centered literacy programs (Canadian Labour Congress, 2000) and the coordination of education and training projects (Labour Education Centre, 2002). Other topics addressed from a labour perspective include a history of labour’s involvement in workplace literacy education; workers’ discussions of their experiences in workplace training programs; and union approaches to literacy (Levan, May Beth et al., 2001; Bush et al., 2001; Levine, 2003; Thorne, 2001).

In his article, “Literacy is a Labour Issue” (2001), Ian Thorn asserts that for the labour movement, literacy is a social issue (123). In his view, literacy training must address the

needs of whole individuals and the varied roles they may play as workers, union members, citizens, parents and community members. For the trade union movement, literacy development is “a democratic societal issue, which is essential to human development, democracy, and the achievement of social equity and justice” (125). In Thorn’s opinion, the union’s purpose is to support the learner’s acquisition of knowledge and skills which allows them to participate more fully in increasingly complex daily living and employment situations (125).

Thorn highlights the additional benefits reaped by literacy development such as the creation of a more highly skilled, motivated and adaptable workforce that improves the international competitiveness of Canada’s businesses and industries (125). However, he maintains that the primary purpose of literacy is to gain “the knowledge and skills that are relevant to, and applicable in, the learners’ whole personal life” (125).

Thorn summarizes the two opposing views of workplace literacy as either asserting that literacy should be for the workplace which also benefits the individual, or that literacy should be for the individual which also benefits the workplace (127). Thorn acknowledges the indisputable need for increased literacy levels, but firmly takes the position that literacy must be for the whole person, because justice, humanity and democracy demand that, and also because, “literacy for the whole person will provide greater opportunity for real and lasting success” (127).

Thorn discusses the broader economic forces that shape the business context and as a result, the demands of training. He argues for collaboration between labour, government, and the educational system in literacy work. He outlines some examples of successful union and joint union-management literacy programs (132).

4. The Benefits of Workplace Literacy Programs

The benefits of workplace literacy programs are well-documented and supported by qualitative data. Due to the challenges, time requirements and costs involved with monitoring and measuring workplace literacy programs, however, there is little quantitative data demonstrating the benefits of these programs. In her study of the benefits of workplace literacy programs, Ellen Long observes that many employers do not formally evaluate workplace literacy programs, either because the positive results are obvious or they do not wish to intensively monitor their employees (1997).

In a similar vein, the Conference Board of Canada states that few companies gather quantitative data on the benefits of literacy programs because tracking the effects of employee training is very difficult and prohibitively expensive (4). Researchers primarily cull information on the benefits of workplace literacy programs from interviews and surveys, and within this research, the programs’ positive impacts on employee confidence and participation in training is well documented. While difficult to quantify, the benefits of literacy programs are numerous and are associated with other important workplace improvements, including improved bottom-line performance.

Within the Canadian context, two important studies have been dedicated to investigation of the benefits of workplace literacy programs: Ellen Long's survey of the impact of basic skills programs on Canadian workplaces (1997), and the Conference Board of Canada's analysis of the economic benefits of increased workplace literacy skills (1997). Long's study includes interviews with 86 individuals from 53 workplaces across Canada (with the exclusion of the Yukon). Fifty-nine per cent of the survey participants were employers, and 41% were employees. The participants represented a range of workplace industries and community sizes.² There were differences in literacy program delivery within the participants' organizations (Long, 1997).

The Conference Board of Canada's study investigated the economic benefits for employers and employees of increased levels of workplace literacy skills. The first part of the study surveyed 40 Canadian employers who had offered, or were offering, a workplace literacy program. The survey's first section asked participants about the literacy skills outcomes they had sought and observed in their employees. The second section addressed the benefits of increased literacy skills as observed by employers. Most employers stated that measuring the impact of increased literacy skills on the organization and on employee performance was extremely difficult, and only half of the employers completed this section of the study (Conference Board of Canada, 4). The benefits of increased literacy skills for employees were analyzed in the second part of the Conference Board study. Data from the International Adult Literacy Study provided the basis for the analysis.

Participants in Long's study were asked open-ended questions about outcomes or changes in the workplace related to the workplace basic skills program. Participants were also asked directly about the impact of the program in specific areas, such as on confidence, communication skills, and problem solving (Long, 1997). The Conference Board of Canada's study provided employers with a questionnaire that listed possible benefits of enhanced literacy skills based on the findings of previous studies and human capital theory (4).

Both studies indicate that one of the greatest benefits of workplace literacy programs is increased employee confidence, a benefit which is linked to other workplace improvements. Long likens confidence to an engine that drives employees to problem-solve, communicate and lose their fear of technology (1997). Challenging the commonly held view which separates confidence from skills, Long asserts that "confidence provides the critical underpinning upon which everything else is built" (1997). If employers understood this connection, Long argues, they would not continually request "hard measures" of the benefits of workplace basic skills programs. Instead, they would understand that an increase in employee confidence positively affects the bottom line (1997).

The Conference Board of Canada's study also suggests that increased worker confidence is a fundamental benefit of workplace literacy programs and provides a base for other workplace improvements:

² Most participants represented workplaces with more than 200 employees (Long, 1997).

Employees have greater confidence in their ability to communicate, feel more empowered, are more inclined to take ownership of their work, become more effective decision makers, and assume a more engaged and participative role within their organization. It is from this starting point that many of the other benefits arise (5).

Like Long, the Conference Board suggests that increased self-confidence is central to both the direct and indirect benefits of literacy training (5). The Conference Board's study reinforces Long's assertion that increased confidence should not be dismissed as an incidental "warm-fuzzy" impact of workplace literacy programs. Rather, increased employee confidence emerges as a central program benefit that is linked to other indirect and direct benefits to the workplace and to the bottom-line performance of companies (Long, 1997).

Similarly, in Kathy Todd and Rhonda Tone's article on the City of Winnipeg and the Canadian Union Public Employees Local 500 Essential Skills program, increased employee confidence emerges as a central program benefit. The program is also credited with having increased employees' positive feelings toward their job and with having created a culture of continuous learning. Employees' successful completion of other work-related training and their increased participation in higher education are other benefits associated with the program (Todd and Tone, 68-69).

The positive impact that workplace literacy programs have on employee training and education also emerges in both the Conference Board of Canada and Long's research. Both studies link increased workplace literacy levels to improvements in the areas of employee training, working relationships, productivity, and health and safety records. Long's study identifies the following positive impacts of basic skills programs, in order of importance: increased worker confidence; improved literacy skills; worker advancement to other training; development of a learning culture; increased problem-solving skills; increased ability to use technology; enhanced ability to work in a team; improved health and safety; increased worker promotability; improved employee morale; decreased barriers among workers; improved labour relations; and increased productivity (1997). "Based on this study of 53 workplaces," Long asserts, "it can be stated without reservation that basic skills programs are having a dramatically positive impact on workplaces in Canada" (1997).

The Conference Board of Canada's study associates similar benefits with workplace literacy programs.³ Of the 15 benefits arising from increased workplace literacy levels, the following were ranked among the top: increased ability to handle training on the job; better team performance; improved management-labour relations; increased quality; improved results in job-specific training; quicker training results; reduced time per task; increased output of products and services; reduced error rate; better health and safety records; and reduced wastage (5).

³ It is important to note, however, that the Conference Board of Canada's survey focuses on the benefits of increased workplace literacy programs from the perspective of employers.

The Conference Board concludes that increasing employee literacy levels can be seen as important to increasing the competitiveness of a business due to the program's impact on employee performance in areas that reduce costs and improve quality (4). Additional benefits to firms from workplace literacy training include improved employee ability to benefit from on-the-job training and to quickly apply the newly acquired skills and techniques (5). Having staff that are able to learn and apply new knowledge quickly enables companies to adapt well to change. The Conference Board suggests that the direct benefits of workplace literacy programs – time savings, lower costs and quality improvements – are only the tip of the iceberg, and that both direct and indirect benefits have a positive effect on the bottom-line performance of companies (4).

Drawing on data provided by the International Adult Literacy Study, the Conference Board identifies the benefits of increased literacy skills for employees as follows: higher incomes; shorter periods of unemployment; greater likelihood of having full-time employment as opposed to part-time; and increased likelihood of receiving further training (10).

The results of workplace literacy programs are difficult to quantify, however, the qualitative benefits of these programs are well documented. In the literature, increased worker confidence emerges as a fundamental – and perhaps, undervalued – benefit of workplace literacy programs (Conference Board of Canada, 1997; Long, 1997; Todd and Tone, 2003). This core program benefit is associated with other workplace improvements, such as increased employee participation and communication and improved workplace problem-solving and decision-making (Conference Board of Canada, 1997; Long 1997). Employees' increased ability to take on and apply workplace training as a result of literacy programs is another benefit that consistently emerges in the literature (Conference Board of Canada, 1997; Long, 1997; Todd and Tone, 2003). Workplace literacy programs are also associated with improved working relationships, productivity, health and safety records, and bottom-line performance (ibid). Increased literacy levels have been associated with many economic benefits for employees including higher incomes and a greater likelihood of having full-time employment (Conference Board of Canada, 1997).

5. Participation in Workplace Training and Employer Support

Conducted in both 1997 and 2002, the Adult Education and Training Survey (AETS) facilitates the study of Canadian workplace training data and trends over time, which is of particular importance to the field of workplace literacy training. According to the 2002 data, a little more than one-third of Canadian workers participate in formal job-related training: about 4.8 million adult workers between the ages of 25 and 64 (Peters, 6).

Between 1997 and 2002, the participation of Canadian workers in job-related training increased from 29% to 35% (7). Many of the AETS survey findings further reinforce the Canadian and international trends that Constantine Kapsalis outlines in her 1997 study of

the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey.⁴ The Canadian and international data suggest that workers are more likely to participate in workplace training, if: they have education levels higher than high school; they are young; they are professionals or managers; and they work for large companies. The Canadian data also demonstrates provincial and sectoral trends in workplace training, and an increase in employee participation in self-supported training.

Trends of particular interest to the investigation of workplace literacy programs are participation rates in employer-supported training activities.⁵ Canadian participation rates in employer-supported training increased only slightly from 1997 to 2002 for most worker age and educational groups. However, in the provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick, worker participation rates in these programs increased significantly (Peters, 13). In Quebec, the participation rate rose from 15% to 24% over the five-year period, constituting a 60% increase in participation (*ibid*). As Valerie Peters observes, this trend may reflect the change in Quebec worker training policy (13). The Quebec Act to Foster the Development of Manpower Training, adopted in 1995, requires employers who pay more than \$1,000,000 a year in employee salaries to invest at least 1% of the total annual payroll in employee training (Emploi Québec, “1% Training...”). The New Brunswick participation rate increase of over 33% is also significant (*ibid*).

Despite these two provincial exceptions, the overall increase in the participation of employees in workplace training appears to be a result of employee investments in their own training. Examining the 1997 and 2002 data, Peters notes stability in worker participation in employer-supported training, despite an overall growth in employee participation. From 1997 to 2002, there was an increase in employees participating in job-related training that was not supported by employers (15). In 1997, 79% of employees in training were in programs supported by employers, and by 2002, this rate had decreased to 72% (15). As Peters observes, over this five-year period, employees increased their participation in training largely at their own initiative and at their own expense (15).

The Canadian and international data demonstrate a strong relationship between an employee’s education level and workplace training. The 1994 IALS data demonstrate that in all countries, workers with higher education and literacy levels – which are positively related to education levels – receive more workplace training, both through their employer and on their own (Kapsalis, 27). The 2002 AETS data further reinforce this finding. In 2002, 52% of university-educated Canadian workers participated in formal workplace training, and 38% of workers with college or trade certificates or diplomas received training (Peters, 9). In contrast, only 18% of Canadian workers with high school education or less received formal workplace training (Peters, 9). Between 1997 and 2002, the participation rate for workers with post secondary education in workplace training

⁴ The following seven countries participated in the 1997 IALS survey: Canada, the United States, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Poland, Germany and Sweden.

⁵ The Adult Education and Training Survey considers training to be employer-supported or -sponsored, if the employer’s involvement includes activities such as providing the training, paying for the training, or allowing the employee to work a flexible schedule to accommodate training, for example (13).

increased from 20% to 25%; among workers with high school education or less, there was a negligible increase (ibid). A large percentage of Canadian workers (82%) who participated in formal training also engaged in self-directed learning (Peters, 17).

The IALS and AETS results also demonstrate the existence of a strong relationship between a worker's age and their participation in workplace training. In Canada in both 1997 and 2002, young employees had the highest participation rate in workplace training and the rate decreased with employee age (Peters, 8). The participation rate for workers aged 25 to 34 was about 42%. In contrast, the participation rate for those aged 35 to 54 was 34%, and for those aged 55 to 64, it was 23% (Peters, 8). Although the survey data from 1994, 1997 and 2002 demonstrate consistently high workplace training participation rates for younger adults, the AETS data indicate that as a group, older adults have experienced the strongest increase in workplace training. Between 1997 and 2002, the participation rate for workers aged 55 to 54 increased by 50% (Peters, 8).

Peters reports that the 2002 trends regarding employment training for particular employment sectors were similar to past AETS findings. The highest rate of participation in workplace training was for workers in professional and managerial occupations: 35%. White-collar workers in clerical, sales and service occupations participated in training at a 20% rate, and blue-collar workers participated at a rate of 16%. Kapsalis similarly reports that the IALS data demonstrate that professionals and managers have a higher incidence of training than craftsmen, operators, or assemblers in Canada and in the other participating countries (25). Peters notes that participation rates in the following three industries were high in 1997 and increased substantially in 2002: public administration, utilities, and educational services (Peters, 14-15). The only industry to experience declines in participation rates was professional, scientific and technical support (Peters, 15).

The data consistently demonstrate that smaller companies are less likely to support workplace training. Kapsalis found a similar pattern in all countries that participated in the 1994 IALS: smaller firms (those with 100 employees or less) had a relatively lower incidence of training (26). According to Peters, the well-documented pattern of training participation based on organizational size was maintained by the 2003 AETS (15). The lowest rates of participation in employer-supported training were found in the smallest organizations (15).

6. Nonparticipation in Literacy Programs

In their study of the nonparticipation of adults in literacy and upgrading programs, Ellen Long and Leanne Taylor provide an in-depth discussion of the complex and interrelated reasons why some adults do not participate in these programs. Their study concludes that if literacy and skills upgrading programs were offered in the workplace, this would alleviate some of the factors affecting participation in literacy programs. The study also provides information that could inform outreach efforts about workplace literacy programs. There are structural barriers to enrolling in literacy and upgrading programs as well as cognitive-emotive factors that may deter some adults from taking part in

upgrading programs. The results of the survey provide information which could complement knowledge gained from studies of best practices in workplace literacy programs.

The majority of research in the field of adult literacy relies on data from adults who have participated in literacy or upgrading programs. However, these adults represent a small number of Canadian adults with literacy needs: only 5% to 10% of adults with low literacy levels ever enrol in programs to improve their skills (Long and Taylor, 11). The extensive two-stage study of adult nonparticipation in literacy and upgrading programs commissioned by ABC Canada aims to address this gap in the literature. The first stage of the study was conducted by Ellen Long and Leanne Taylor and was a qualitative study of adult nonparticipation in literacy and upgrading programs (2002). The second stage of the research included a quantitative study⁶ of nonparticipation (2002). Both parts of the research explored the question: “Why, in the face of increasing public policy initiatives and highly visible outreach campaigns, are the majority of people with low literacy skills still reluctant to participate in literacy programs?” (Hart et al., 7).

The researchers’ investigation of qualitative and quantitative data related to this question provides critical information for workplace literacy programs. Understanding the barriers and deterrents to individual participation in literacy programs is important to the design of workplace literacy programs and outreach efforts. The possible role that workplace literacy programs can play in addressing the socio-economic barriers to participation is crucial.

During the first stage of the study, Long and Taylor interviewed 48 adults who had not participated in literacy or upgrading programs. Their purpose was to gain insights into how adults view their nonparticipation and their perspectives regarding literacy and upgrading programs (11). Qualitative data gathered from these interviews structured the second stage of the study, which involved a phone survey of 866 people who had not taken a literacy or upgrading program since leaving school without a diploma. The survey produced quantitative data regarding adult nonparticipation in literacy and upgrading programs.

The reasons for adult nonparticipation in literacy and upgrading programs are highly contextual and interrelated, state Long and Taylor, and some patterns emerged in the respondents’ discussions of their nonparticipation (11). For many people, life events or highly developed coping strategies made the thought of improving their literacy levels seem irrelevant (Long, Foreword, 9). Long and Taylor identified these factors as “diversionary factors,” and defined them as factors which “influenced respondents’ life paths in directions other than toward formal education” (39). Most respondents reported having experienced a moment in their lives when they considered enrolling in a program to improve their skills (Long, Foreword, 9). The researchers identify these moments as “transition points” and “aha moments.” Factors which impeded or deterred respondents from enrolling in a literacy or upgrading program were identified as “intervening factors.” These intervening factors include socio-economic-circumstantial factors such as

⁶ The follow-up study was conducted by Doug Hare, Ellen Long, Helen Breslauer, and Chris Slosser.

financial problems and family or work responsibilities. The qualitative research also demonstrates that nonparticipants' perceptions of what programs would be like were further deterrents to their participation (Long and Taylor, 11).

The study's interviews suggest that for many of the respondents, diversionary factors deterred them from participating in literacy or upgrading programs. In Long and Taylor's view, diversionary factors "shaped respondents' life paths, attitudes and actions in a way that made formal programs seem less relevant to them" (42). For some respondents, the diversionary factor was their life context. For example, respondents left school at a young age because of a need to work, or they left school because of problems with alcohol and substance abuse, or neglect and physical abuse (43). For some respondents who lived in rural communities, they did not perceive the need for higher levels of literacy (43).

Ethnic and cultural values were also identified as factors which affected peoples' engagement with the formal education system. The study identified the negative experiences of Aboriginal respondents in formal schooling, which included experiences of cultural alienation, discrimination, forced attendance at residential or other schools, and separation from family and community (46-50). These negative experiences with the formal education system – and for some respondents, undoubtedly traumatic experiences – are identified in the study as diversionary factors. Other diversionary factors include respondents not perceiving the need for increased literacy skills or not having an interest in taking a literacy or upgrading program (51). Some respondents had highly developed coping strategies, such as relying on social networks to help them with tasks requiring literacy skills (55). These coping strategies were also identified as diversionary factors which made participation in literacy or upgrading programs seem irrelevant to some respondents.

Most respondents who participated in the first stage of the study had experienced moments in their lives when the idea of upgrading their literacy skills occurred to them, however, there were other factors which discouraged or impeded their participation in these programs. The second stage of the study found that 60% of the respondents had considered upgrading or completing their high school education since their early departure from school (Hall et al., 9). The first stage of the study found that economic opportunity was one of the central reasons cited by respondents for enrolling in a program to improve their skills (Long and Taylor 61). The survey data from stage two of the study reinforced this finding: work-related reasons were cited most often for considering taking a skills upgrading program (Hall et al., 9). Although most respondents had considered enrolling in a formal educational program to improve their skills, they identified various factors which had discouraged or prevented them from doing so. Respondents faced such constraints as: work-related barriers; general economic constraints; childcare and family responsibilities; and transportation and health issues (Long and Taylor, 61). Respondents usually identified several socio-economic-circumstantial factors that affected their ability to enrol in programs and the difficulties involved with maintaining their current responsibilities while taking a course (ibid).

The qualitative data demonstrated that many work-related barriers affected the respondents' ability to take part in educational programs. Many respondents had unstable work and they did not feel comfortable asking for flexible hours to take a course (Long and Taylor, 61). Time constraints due to work obligations, the nature of shift work and seasonal work were also identified as factors that affected the respondents' ability to register for courses (*ibid.*, 61-62). Money and financial concerns were also identified as impediments to participation. The second stage of the study clearly reinforced these trends. For respondents who had considered taking an upgrading program, work-related concerns were most often cited as reasons for not enrolling in a program (Hall et al., 9). More than half the responses for not enrolling in programs were socio-economic-circumstantial (*ibid.*). The highest ranked concerns were general worries about money and conflict with paid employment, followed by concerns about the distance of programs (Hall et al., 10).

The quantitative data also suggests that family responsibilities were an intervening factor in participation in literacy or upgrading courses, but this may affect individuals differently, depending on their age and gender. For respondents aged 18 to 29 and those over the age of 65, work and family concerns accounted for more than half the reasons why they did not enrol in upgrading programs. For respondents aged 30 to 49, family and work are cited 40% of the time, and for those aged 50 to 60, these same concerns accounted for just under 40% of the reasons given for nonparticipation (Hall et al., 9). In the case of women who had considered taking an upgrading or literacy program, one-third offered family reasons for not having enrolled in a program. Another third of the women cited work-related and work and family reasons for not enrolling in literacy or upgrading programs (Hall et al., 9-10). For women who have not considered enrolling in a program, about half cited work and family reasons for not doing so (*ibid.*, 10).

As Long notes, data from the second phase of the study demonstrate a clear hierarchy of concerns regarding attending programs. In general, concerns regarding socio-economic-circumstantial issues and program/policy concerns ranked higher than cognitive-emotive concerns (Foreword, 10). In relation to the program and policy considerations, respondents cited concerns about a program's length, the level of difficulty, pace, and content relevance (*ibid.*). General nervousness was cited as the highest cognitive-emotive factor raised (*ibid.*).

The qualitative study also revealed the strong beliefs and fears that respondents held regarding what the programs, teachers and other learners would be like. Respondents expressed nervousness about attending programs, with some feeling the nervousness normally associated with starting something new and others feeling terrified of the idea of being in classroom setting (69-71).

The research team from stage two of the study make several suggestions about addressing socio-economic factors for nonparticipation in upgrading or high school completion, and presented strategies to address the program/policy concerns and cognitive-emotive concerns of potential learners.

In relation to the socio-economic/circumstantial factors affecting participation in upgrading programs, the researchers suggested that there be outreach to target both employers and unions and to encourage their involvement in facilitating employee participation (Hall et al., 12). The involvement of these two groups could improve the work-related conflicts that act as deterrents to enrolling in the programs. The researchers also suggested that efforts be made to find solutions to family responsibilities, including the provision of childcare and eldercare to encourage participation (Hall et al., 12). The researchers suggested that income replacement programs be provided to assist with financing participation in upgrading classes (ibid).

To address the cognitive-emotive concerns, the researchers recommended that the nervousness and anxiety felt by many adult learners be acknowledged, and ways found to reassure learners and emphasize success (12). Program and policy concerns could be addressed through outreach efforts that dispel myths and provide information about what the classes are like, who the learners and teachers are, and what types of materials are used (12). From the research, a clear image emerged of the type of program formats and locations that learners would prefer. This included one-on-one learning and small groups in classrooms in educational settings (12).

7. National, Provincial and Territorial Policy, Programs and Initiatives

The literature on adult literacy policy in Canada includes historical accounts of the field's development and the recommendations of government officials and researchers regarding adult literacy policy. Researchers have also examined provincial policy reforms in the area of adult education and training, and there is some analysis of Canadian policy from a comparative perspective. In general, the literature tends to address the broad topic of adult literacy policy in Canada, and discussion of workplace literacy policy is within these broader discussions. However, two articles were found that focus primarily on workforce literacy policy and programs.

Audrey Thomas provides an historical overview of the development of Canada's adult literacy field from 1948 to 2000 (2001). The 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognized education as a human right, provides the starting point for Thomas' overview. She identifies key literacy developments within the international and Canadian contexts. She reviews the federal government's literacy initiatives, provincial approaches to literacy, and grassroots literacy work. The article maps out the development and roles of key international and Canadian literacy organizations, including the National Literacy Secretariat.

An understanding of the Canadian political system is central to understanding literacy policy in Canada. The development of the adult literacy field here has been characterized by regional differences and by a constant but limited presence of the federal government, as Thomas summarizes below:

The history of adult literacy in Canada is the history of many adult literacies, through which the federal government presence can be found in different ways in different periods. However, its presence is always shaped by the constitutional

fact that education in Canada is under the control of the provinces and there is no strong central federal power in education per se (xvi).

In 2000, Human Resources Development Canada also produced an historical analysis of adult literacy policy, programs and practices. Kathryn Barker authored the report, “Adult Literacy: Policies, Programs and Practices, Lessons Learned” which examined developments in the field from 1990, the International Literacy Year, to 2000. The study summarizes lessons learned over the decade from adult literacy policies, programs, and practices within the context of industrialized economies (Introduction, 1).

Barker identifies adult literacy as a policy issue because of the number of adults in Canada – as in the other industrialized countries – who do not have the level of literacy skills required to participate actively in the community, the economy and lifelong learning (Problems..., 1). Barker states that there are many problems associated with adult literacy that are personal, social, economic and political in nature (ibid). In her view, this has resulted in literacy policies, programs and policies taking one of the following two forms: “1) efforts to understand and address the problems that individuals face; and 2) efforts to promote plain language and appropriate readability” (ibid., 2).

Barker identifies five areas to which adult literacy policy has been directed in Canada. First, policy has supported research into the nature of literacy. Second, policy has sought to promote literacy through public education campaigns. Policy has also supported the development of delivery models and materials. Fourth, policy has encouraged plain language initiatives. And lastly, policy has encouraged the delivery of literacy programs by the non-governmental sector (Adult Literacy..., 1).

In her study, Barker asserts that “adult literacy programs benefit both individuals and society, but these benefits have not been fully realized due to insufficient levels of public interest and political support” (Adult Literacy..., 1). She outlines the benefits associated with workplace literacy programs for individuals, employers and for industries. She notes that despite positive outcomes, policies, programs and strategies have not led to the development of a national or pan-Canadian initiative in the field of adult literacy (ibid, 3). For Barker, an additional lesson learned was the improved success of adult literacy programs aimed at specific target groups, such as family literacy programs and workplace or workforce literacy programs, for example. Barker also outlines some characteristics of successful workplace literacy programs (ibid., 6).

As Barker and others have noted, there is a lack of a national pan-Canadian initiative or policy in the area of adult literacy. Many stakeholders in the field have recommended that the federal government develop a national approach to adult literacy, and this has been reflected in the 2004 policy recommendations of the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and The Status of Persons with Disabilities. In the Committee’s report, members assert the need for the federal government to take leadership in the area of adult literacy (Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response).

The Standing Committee's discussion of the need to increase adult literacy levels in Canada is framed by the results of the International Adults Literacy Survey and how Canada's literacy levels compare to those of other countries. The results of the IALS and the presentations to the Committee convinced Committee members that low literacy levels are a national problem "requiring a nation-wide response that is more coordinated and effective than our current efforts, and that entails more resources to enhance our capacity to address this very important problem" (12). The Standing Committee encourages the federal government to work with the provinces and territories on this issue and calls for "a meaningful allocation of federal resources to address this serious problem" (3).

The Committee also stated that government leadership is needed to coordinate and deliver a nation-wide response, due to the private and social costs of literacy and the risk of these increasing without an adequate national approach (14). The Committee's first recommendation is to establish a national accord on literacy and numeracy skill development. If this is not possible, the Committee recommends establishing bilateral literacy accords with interested provinces and territories (15).

Within the field of workplace literacy, the Committee identifies a need for increasing levels of literacy in the workplace and asserts that "...a more highly skilled and literate workforce is one of the keys to improving productivity and the economic well-being of Canadians" (65). The Committee was "somewhat mystified" by the low incidence of workplace literacy programs when there are so many workers with low literacy skills and the economic gains related to increasing literacy levels would be great (65).

The following barriers to starting workplace literacy programs were brought to the Committee's attention: being unaware of the problem and the economic benefits related to fixing it; the belief that adult education is the responsibility of the public education system; and many businesses, particularly small ones, do not feel that they have the financial resources to finance workplace literacy programs (67).

The Committee felt that stronger partnerships were important to workplace literacy programs, and they outlined related suggestions in Recommendation 19:

The Committee recommends that the National Literacy Secretariat continue to promote and develop partnerships that pool resources and utilize best practices for creating opportunities for workplace literacy (71).

The report also asserts the need for incentives to encourage employer investments in literacy training (68). Recommendation 20 suggests legislative changes and changes to the Employment Insurance Act to encourage investments in literacy training (71-72). Recommendation 21 suggests implementing a pilot project to give tax credits as an incentive for businesses starting workplace literacy training programs (November 2004, 72).

Contemporary government literacy policy has been analyzed by several researchers in the field. Adrian Blunt characterizes the dominant approach to literacy policy in Canada as

being based on a technical-rational paradigm that views improving literacy skills as a way of increasing human capital (8). Adult literacy policies are informed by a view of citizens that sees their salient role as being commercially productive (103). From this viewpoint, education would focus on preparing citizens to play this role, Blunt asserts (103). Blunt argues for a more holistic view of citizens, one which sees them as actors with multiple roles in society, including within community relations. Blunt argues that this viewpoint would inform a policy that does not privilege one literacy practice over another (103). Blunt describes how a new literacy discourse could lead to more fruitful literacy programs and policies:

Many of the tensions in workplace literacy policy and practice originate from disagreements over the legitimacy and priority afforded to investment in particular literacy applications. A literacy discourse is needed to recognize that workplace learners are also community learners whose social contexts are shaped by their multiple life-roles and their multiple subjectivities as raced, classed, gendered and sexualized persons. From such a post-modern discourse, policies and practices could emerge to sustain literacy learning and extend applications to the complex economic and social realities of the new century (103).

A more detailed analysis of literacy policy in Canada is found in Nayda Veeman's 2004 dissertation which compares adult education in Canada and Sweden. Although Veeman does not specifically examine workplace literacy policy, her thoughtful and well-developed approach towards adult literacy policy provides a good orientation for others undertaking a comparative analysis. In addition, her study provides valuable background information about the global, Canadian and Swedish contexts. The goal of her research is to gain an understanding of how public policy might account for the differences in adult literacy levels between Canada and Sweden (Veeman, 2004, 1).

Veeman provides an overview of many competing definitions and discourses in adult literacy, and she orients the reader to theoretical approaches to educational policy. For example, she provides a detailed discussion of the varied historical meanings of literacy and how governments have supported literacy campaigns in order to meet political goals, such as inculcating the public with appropriate religious and moral ideals, and using literacy campaigns to meet the goals of nation-building.

Veeman's discussion of literacy policy in Canada and Sweden is framed by Guba's typology. Guba characterizes policy as consisting of three phases: policy-in-intent, policy-in-practice, and policy-in-experience (Veeman, 2004, 56). Veeman provides an important discussion of federal policy development, as well as an analysis of policy developments within some provinces. She discusses the roles of funding and public awareness in supporting policy goals. Her analysis includes a well-developed chart comparing Canada's policy to that of Sweden. She compares the two countries along such lines as the terminology used to describe adult literacy in both countries, the goals of the policy, the public philosophy regarding literacy education, and policy networks. She also compares policy tools such as funding, public awareness and social policy (2004, 203). The manner in which Veeman structures her comparison and the conceptual tools

she applies to the study of Canadian and Swedish case studies are of particular value to those who wish to further compare adult literacy policy in an international context.

There are two other reports that specifically address workplace literacy policy. One is Sue Folinsbee's briefing paper, "Literacy and the Canadian Workforce," prepared for the Movement for Canadian Literacy (2001). The other is a preliminary report by Richard Brisbois and Ron Saunders for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Skills Upgrading Initiatives in Canada: Regional Case Studies" (2005). The studies represent different perspectives on workplace literacy. Folinsbee's work takes issue with the predominantly human capital approach towards workforce literacy, and challenges the "overemphasis on literacy as an economic issue" and as an "individual problem" (Briefing Paper). In contrast, Brisbois and Saunders examine workforce literacy through a human capital lens.

In her paper, Sue Folinsbee's goal is two-fold. First, it seeks to provide a synopsis of central issues and trends in the field of workforce literacy in Canada. Second, it forwards recommendations to government policy-makers (Introduction). Folinsbee draws on data from a national summit on literacy and productivity, interviews with leaders in the field of workforce literacy, and the literature on literacy and work (ibid). Folinsbee provides concrete policy recommendations in the following areas: the development of an adult learning vision and strategy for Canada; principles and good practice, public awareness, and partnership; and financial and resource commitments.

As noted earlier, Brisbois and Saunders' report is written from a human capital perspective. It provides a useful overview of key economic indicators in Canada and of government policy initiatives in the area of skill development, specifically those of the federal government and the governments of Alberta and the Northwest Territories. The report also examines case studies of skill development programs in Fort McMurray, Alberta and in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. The policy and the labour market context provided by the authors for the regional case studies is thorough and informative.

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See also International Perspectives

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