



Reading, Writing and Neighbourhood Renewal

by

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Introduction

Renewal efforts in communities typically concern themselves with bricks and mortar. Safe, decent and affordable housing comprises the core of a healthy community. In recent years, however, there has been growing recognition of the equally important social components of revitalization. Improved literacy lies at the heart of these efforts.

Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) is a pan-Canadian initiative that involves national and local partners in revitalizing and improving the quality of life in five selected neighbourhoods. The four national partners are United Way of Canada-Centraide Canada, Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the National Film Board of Canada and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

The community partners are local United Ways located in Halifax, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Regina and Vancouver. These local partners convene representatives from diverse sectors including voluntary organizations, business, government and people living in the neighbourhoods in an effort to revitalize their communities.

Action for Neighbourhood Change is financed by five government partners: the Housing and Homelessness Secretariat, Office for Learning Technologies and National Literacy Secretariat (all of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada); Canada's Drug Strategy (Health Canada); and Canada's Crime Prevention Strategy (Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada).

The Action for Neighbourhood Change initiative does not focus specifically upon literacy – or upon housing, crime or drugs, for that matter. Each of the five neighbourhoods is developing a unique strategy with its own priorities. Despite their uniqueness, the neighbourhood plans incorporate one or several elements related to each of these areas. They all recognize, explicitly or implicitly, the vital role of literacy in improving employment prospects, promoting physical and mental health, and ensuring safer communities.

Literacy is the ability not simply to read and write but also to understand and use information. It is a skill linked to a range of positive social outcomes. People with good literacy skills tend on average to have higher incomes and better health, and to participate more actively in communities. This paper presents the most recent evidence – both in terms of what we know about literacy and how we can apply this knowledge at the neighbourhood level.

Employment Prospects

Recent results of the International Adult and Literacy Skills Survey, described below, confirm a not-surprising fact. In a knowledge economy, there is a direct link between literacy and employment

[Statistics Canada 2005c: 2]. The higher the literacy proficiency, the more likely that an individual will be employed and earn a reasonable income.

About 57 percent of adults aged 16 to 65 at Level 1 were employed compared to more than 80 percent of those who scored at Levels 4 and 5, the highest. The Survey found a noticeable increase in the employment rate even between individuals in Levels 1 and 2, the two lowest proficiency levels. About 70 percent of individuals at Level 2 were employed [Statistics Canada 2005c: 2-3].

There is also a clear relationship between literacy and earnings. Poor literacy skills are linked to higher unemployment and to work in occupations with lower skill requirements and associated pay. “Just under a third of men who were earning at least \$60,000 a year were at the highest level of prose proficiency, compared to 15 percent among those earning less than \$20,000” [Statistics Canada 2005c: 4]. Studies have documented the relationship between low literacy and reliance on welfare as a primary source of income support [SARC 1988].

Recent evidence on the impact of literacy upon immigrant earnings, in particular, found that literacy and numeracy skills affect a range of labour market outcomes including employability, stability and duration of employment, and wages. “Without exception, higher average skill levels are associated with better average labour market outcomes” [Statistics Canada 2004b: 1]. Immigrants or refugees not literate in their native language face even greater challenges in mastering either English or French when they come to Canada.

The Northwest Territories Council reported similar relationships north of 60. Individuals with low literacy skills are twice as likely to be unemployed. They may have trouble getting and keeping employment. When workers with low literacy do find employment, they typically are engaged in part-time, insecure, seasonal, unskilled and low-paying jobs. For employers, low literacy skills mean higher costs to recruit, train and keep workers [Northwest Territories Council 2000].

Changing expectations in the labour market have compounded the problem. The requirements of the knowledge economy make it increasingly difficult for individuals with limited literacy to find decent work, let alone a job that pays higher than poverty-level wages. Even entry requirements in most training programs and apprenticeships are tougher than ever.

The knowledge society has also raised the bar in terms of broader educational requisites. Basic readiness now involves higher levels of educational attainment and mastery of numeracy, computer and communications skills. Knowledge occupations in such fields as pure science, applied science, engineering and computers grew at more than twice the rate of total employment during the 1990s [Massé, Roy and Gingras 1998].

Rising educational requirements have created a need for ongoing training and upgrading to ensure that knowledge and skills keep pace with fast-moving changes. Again, not surprisingly, those with high aptitude are at a significant advantage.

Data on involvement in various forms of adult education and learning, such as training courses, found a substantial difference in participation rates between those with the lowest and highest levels of literacy. In all regions of Canada, 70 percent of adults with the highest literacy scores participate in adult education and learning. The proportion is way down – at 20 percent – for those in the lowest literacy bracket.

Investments in literacy are crucial not only for the well-being of individuals and their families. These investments are vital for the overall health of the economy. Education and the skills it creates are significant drivers of economic growth. Gains in skills lead to gains in the economy [Statistics Canada 2004a: 1].

A comparison of 14 OECD economies found that investment in human capital, such as education and skills training, was three times as important to economic growth over the long term as investment in physical capital. “A country that achieves literacy scores 1 percent higher than the average ends up, in a steady state, with labour productivity 2.5 percent higher than other countries and GDP per capita 1.5 percent higher, on average” [Statistics Canada 2004a: 1].

Higher literacy has also been found to contribute to productivity through enhanced performance. In a US study of the economic impact of literacy, ten Chicago-based manufacturing companies making products from hydraulic valves to bubble gum provided basic English language, reading and mathematics education to more than 700 employees. The evaluation of six of these companies found that the programs had a positive impact on organizational effectiveness, including increased productivity, job performance, safety and communication [Stricht 1999]. Most employees said that the workplace literacy programs had improved their functioning not only at work but also at home and in the community.

Health

Educational levels are linked intrinsically to occupation and level of income – both of which are powerful predictors of health. However health is defined or measured, people with limited literacy skills are worse off than those with higher literacy skills [Health Canada 2001].

In fact, the protective effects of education and higher incomes appear to be substantial. Low-income individuals have a shorter average lifespan and run a greater risk of illness and disability than those with higher incomes. One study of this relationship found that life expectancy at birth for males ranged from 73.9 years for those in low-income neighbourhoods to 75.9 years for the second-lowest areas, 76.7 years for middle-income neighbourhoods, 77.2 years for the upper-middle income neighbourhoods and 78.1 years for the highest-income areas [Wilkins, Berthelot and Ng 2002: 7].

Research conducted by the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) focused explicitly upon the links between literacy and health. It found a complex relationship in which low literacy proficiency

had both an indirect and direct impact upon health. The indirect impact appears to come through life on low income, which harms health through poor diet, inadequate housing and high stress. The direct effect results from the inability to follow health- and safety-related instructions.

With respect to the latter, individuals with poor reading skills reported that they often did not comply with medical directions due to their lack of capacity to read written instructions or because verbal instructions were not easily understood [OPHA 1998: 22-23]. Nearly half the respondents provided examples of errors in the use of over-the-counter and prescription medications as a result of literacy difficulties. Public health nurses identified several instances in which infant formula was misused – e.g., some mothers were not diluting concentrated formulas, while others were adding water to ready-to-feed formulas. Either way, they were placing at risk the health of their babies.

Research conducted by the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy and Evaluation at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Manitoba, also explored the links between literacy and health. The Centre superimposed literacy levels from the 1991 Census on the provincial medicare databank in order to determine the relationships between these two factors. The study found that the incidence of certain diseases, epidemics, hospital usage by children and violent death were more prevalent in areas with low levels of literacy [Sarginson 1997]. Difficulties in comprehending precautions related to farm and recreational machinery, in particular, meant that workers with limited literacy skills had higher-than-average rates of occupational injuries.

Participation

Literacy plays a vital role in ensuring a healthy democracy. While literacy itself does not create a just and egalitarian society, it does provide the means for participating in all spheres of a community and the nation. In fact, higher levels of prose literacy have been linked to greater involvement in community organizations and volunteer activities [Statistics Canada 2005c: 5]. Poor literacy skills, by contrast, tend to constrain this economic and social participation [Shalla and Schellenberg 1998].

Various government surveys have found that Canadians with lower levels of educational attainment generally are less optimistic and have difficulty adapting to change [Canada Information Office 2000]. They typically are less familiar with government initiatives in areas that affect them, such as health care, education and employment.

Literacy is being understood increasingly as essential currency in a knowledge-based world. Just as adults with little money have difficulty meeting their basic needs, those with limited literacy skills typically find it more challenging to pursue their goals – whether these involve job advancement, consumer decision-making, citizenship or other aspects of their lives [US Department of Education 1993].

There are also strong links between low literacy and involvement in criminal activity. On average, offenders experience literacy problems at a rate three times that of the general population. They are also four times more likely to have learning disabilities. Thirty-six percent of offenders have not completed Grade 9 education [Movement for Canadian Literacy 2001].

Literacy Skills

These figures on the links between low literacy and crime raise serious concerns, especially in light of recent results from an international survey on adult literacy. It found a significant percentage of the Canadian population functioning at the lowest proficiency level.

The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) is the Canadian component of the Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, a joint project of the federal government, the US National Center for Statistics and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The Survey was conducted in 2003 and its results released in 2005. The IALSS tested more than 23,000 Canadians on their proficiency in four domains: prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy and problem-solving.

Prose literacy refers to the knowledge and skills required to understand and use information from texts, such as brochures and instruction manuals. Document literacy involves the knowledge and skills used to locate and employ information in various formats, such as maps, transportation schedules and charts. Numeracy comprises the knowledge and skills required to effectively manage the mathematical demands of diverse situations. Problem-solving is the goal-directed thinking and action in situations for which there are no routine solutions [Statistics Canada 2005b: 9].

The Survey found, on average, that 42 percent of the population aged 16 to 65 – or about 9 million Canadians – scored below Level 3 in prose literacy. That is the level considered to be the desired threshold for coping with rising skill requirements in a knowledge economy. “Level 3 performance is generally chosen as a benchmark because in developed countries, performance above Level 2 is generally associated with a number of positive outcomes such as increased employment opportunities and higher civic participation” [Statistics Canada 2005b: 8].

When those aged 66 and over were included in the results, the proportion scoring below Level 3 in prose literacy rose to nearly 48 percent – an estimated 12 million adults. The proportion of the population aged 16 and over with numeracy skills below Level 3, at 55 percent, was even more pronounced [Statistics Canada 2005b: 2].

Close to 15 percent of the population – one in every seven Canadians – scored at Level 1 in prose literacy, which is the lowest performance ranking [Statistics Canada 2005a: 2]. More than one-half of the Aboriginal population in the Yukon, about 69 percent of the Aboriginal population in

the Northwest Territories and 88 percent of Inuit in Nunavut performed below Level 3 on the prose literacy scale [Statistics Canada 2005b: 4].

Residents in Saskatchewan, Alberta, BC and Yukon scored significantly higher than the national average in all domains. Yet even in these top-performing jurisdictions, at least three in ten adults aged 16 and over attained the lowest levels in prose and document literacy. At least four in ten adults achieved less than Level 3 in numeracy [Statistics Canada 2005b: 1-2].

Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Manitoba and the Northwest Territories had average scores in all domains that were about the same as the Canadian national average. Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick and Nunavut achieved results that fell significantly below the national average in all domains. In the areas of numeracy and problem-solving, average scores in Quebec were about the same as the national level. For the two literacy domains, by contrast, Quebec ranked below the national average [Statistics Canada 2005b: 1-2].

Unfortunately, national averages mask the progress that may have been made by individuals or by households in certain neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, the overall figures do provide a telling barometer of our performance.

The results of the most recent survey were similar to those of an earlier study – the International Adult Literacy Survey conducted in 1994. The more recent International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey was expected to show improvement over the earlier results in response to the retirement of older, less educated workers; the fact that new immigrants tend to be more highly educated; and growth in the proportion of the Canadian-born population with postsecondary education [Statistics Canada 2005b: 2].

Contrary to expectations, however, there was little improvement in the overall literacy proficiency of adult Canadians since these were assessed almost a decade ago. There appear to be a number of explanatory factors, some of which relate to changing demography. While new Canadians are more highly educated than in the past, for example, many come from countries in which neither English nor French is the primary language [Statistics Canada 2005b: 2].

The results call for concerted action. Over the years, the National Literacy Secretariat has helped sponsor a range of efforts that promote literacy in schools, at home, in workplaces and in communities. But it is clear that considerable work is still required to raise the national bar.

Role of Neighbourhoods

There is no shortage of literature on methods to enhance literacy and improve educational performance, more generally [Alon 2005]. Descriptions of literacy initiatives supported by

governments, in particular, are presented in a Council of the Federation report written jointly by the provinces and territories [Council 2004].

The first and most obvious solution to improve literacy is for schools to provide additional and special assistance to students having difficulty with basic literacy and numeracy skills. Increasingly, however, literacy solutions are moving beyond a sole focus on identified students to include families, neighbourhoods and workplaces.

Many of the efforts have been spearheaded, for example, by ABC CANADA – a joint initiative of business, labour, education and government. It seeks to raise awareness of literacy and numeracy issues, foster a culture of lifelong learning and support workplace literacy programs by acting as a resource to the private sector. They also sponsor national Family Literacy Day on January 27 each year, encouraging families to read together and organize various events across the country.

The Canadian Labour Congress heads up a workplace literacy project that promotes the proficiency of workers. Broad-based approaches to literacy have been pioneered as well by Frontier College, which trains and places volunteer tutors directly in communities to identify and assist those with reading difficulties.

Perhaps the most noteworthy national effort to promote family literacy is the CanWest Raise-a-Reader campaign. The campaign is a year-round initiative with fundraising events taking place throughout the year in 13 cities across Canada. These events lead up to CanWest Raise-A-Reader Day. Since its inception in 2002, the campaign has raised more than \$5 million for family literacy programs across Canada.

Reading circles have emerged as one of the most popular methodologies for promoting family literacy. These circles can be organized anywhere. They can involve virtually anyone. They provide a means of bringing schools and communities closer together by putting individual students in contact with a range of caring adults.

The National Film Board of Canada released a package called *Let's All Read Together* to promote family literacy. It is a series of short animated films intended for parents and children ages 5 to 9 and includes both a reader and activity guide. Its key messages seek to foster an interest in knowledge and learning through story-telling and reading together.

The Centre for Family Literacy in Edmonton has been recognized for its innovative approaches to bolstering literacy on Family Literacy Day. Its 'classroom on wheels' bus, for example, travels to communities across the province to promote family literacy activities, such as stories, puppet plays and songs. With support from the Family Literacy Centre, each community develops unique programs, such as a story-telling festival, around the two-day visit of the bus.

Another type of intervention focuses specifically upon the educational skills of parents in order to promote literacy proficiency within the family and for children. The Vibrant Communities project in

Saint John, for example, is helping young single mothers complete their high school education [Torjman 2005]. The project is founded on the assumption that this educational investment – directly in the young mothers and indirectly in their children – will have a long-term payoff in terms of breaking the cycle of poverty.

The Saint John project's approach is consistent with the emerging research on healthy outcomes in child development. This body of literature points to the crucial influence of mother's level of education as one of the strongest predictors of cognitive and behavioural outcomes during the early childhood years and throughout elementary school [Willms 2002: 341].

Improvements in literacy and educational attainment, more generally, are key contributors to healthy child development. This research is supported by the results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS), which found that parents' level of education has a substantial impact upon the literacy scores of their children [Statistics Canada 2005a: 4].

There is another body of relevant work, commonly referred to as 'crime prevention through social development,' which involves strategic social investment in building self-esteem and skills as a way to prevent and reduce crime. Literacy is a core element within this stream of practice.

Typical approaches to crime reduction invoke situational measures and incapacitation measures. The former include interventions – such as neighbourhood watch, home security devices and increased police presence – that reduce the opportunity for crime. Incapacitation measures, including mandatory sentencing requirements, are after-the-fact solutions that punish criminal behaviour.

Governments often rely upon situational and incapacitation measures, which provide immediate and visible responses. Yet a growing body of literature and practice is pointing to the value of crime prevention through social development by addressing not only the symptoms – but more importantly the root causes – of crime [Waller and Weiler 1984].

Social development programs typically address factors associated with youth delinquency and adult criminal activity – e.g., domestic violence, unsupportive family life and parental behaviours, failure in school and low literacy skills, drug and alcohol abuse, poor housing, and unemployment and poverty. These initiatives assist families by seeking to improve negative conditions in their neighbourhoods, sometimes referred to 'neighbourhood effects.' The approaches also engage a range of players within communities to address the identified problem, such as poor overall literacy proficiency.

An example of this approach is a program known as *Together We Light The Way*, supported by Canada's National Strategy on Crime Prevention. The program is a school-based prevention model that involves a set of coordinated community-wide interventions. The program targets the needs of children ages 4 to 14 who may engage, in future, in anti-social behaviour.

The initiative seeks to promote the high-quality and consistent nurturing of children within a physically and emotionally safe environment. Its primary objective is to enhance the success of these children by helping them develop self-worth, self-respect and responsibility, and by connecting them to their neighbourhood in meaningful ways.

A key methodology is to ensure that community members – including school leaders, teachers and parents – work together to create a consistent and caring environment for the children. More specifically, the program tries to reduce anti-social behaviour through seven interconnected elements integrated within the school curriculum. These include teaching students how to respect themselves and emphasizing the need to make informed and responsible choices.

Another component involves community members in honouring and recognizing students for their accomplishments in scholastics, sports and school activities, and for their community service both within and outside of the classroom. *Parent Rap* enables parents to provide informal support to each other. It encourages meaningful parental involvement with their children and with the school, more generally. The program also places strong emphasis upon literacy enhancement. Its *Circles of Love: Reading Together* approach encourages a passion for reading and books.

Together We Light The Way is but one example in practice of an important principle. Family- and community-based approaches to literacy are rooted in neighbourhoods at their very core – both as a point of entry for intervention and as a source of interested citizens who can help support these initiatives.

Communities can also play an active role in promoting literacy through investments in cultural amenities, such as libraries and museums. The challenge is to line up cultural investments with social goals. Financial support for libraries, for example, should be directed not only toward the building and the books. Equally important are programs, which libraries can sponsor, to encourage reading and literacy enhancement.

The Bottom Line

A large and growing body of evidence points to literacy as a central driver of economic and social well-being. Efforts to influence the root causes of complex problems, such as unemployment, poverty and even crime, sooner or later (preferably sooner) must turn their attention to bolstering literacy. The evidence also makes clear that high proficiency in literacy has significant economic and social pay-offs not only for individual households but also for the entire economy.

Literacy begins at home and in neighbourhoods. These provide a natural entry point – and focal point – for linking reading, writing and neighbourhood renewal.

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