

Public Policy Brief

Increasing Literacy Levels of Canadian Students

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Raising the literacy levels and increasing the abilities of Canadian children to read and write is a primary concern of government, universities, schools, teachers, and families. Without the ability to read and write effectively, Canadians will not be able to compete in the rapidly changing global economies of the 21st century. It is critical that we address issues of literacy and schooling now to ensure that Canada's current position as a world leader remains intact. Moreover, if we are to achieve Premier Gordon Campbell's goal of British Columbia being the most literate jurisdiction in North America, policy must be informed by an understanding of the nature of literacy in Canada, not hearsay or headlines. We should advocate for literacy teaching practices founded upon a critical consideration of the research, as well as on Canada's successes and needs, rather than approaches that are tied to politicized agendas and failed policy pursuits from afar. Canadian literacy education policy discussions, including our own, should be scrutinized to ensure the perspectives on literacy are well-informed (research- and practice-based), and draw upon an understanding of Canada's changing demographics and the research of a diverse group of literacy scholars in Canada.

Building on Success

Education in Canada is a multicultural, multi-linguistic endeavor. The percentage of Canada's population that is foreign-born has reached its highest level in 75 years, almost 20 per cent of the population, according to the 2006 Canadian Census. Seventy per cent of these newcomers speak a "mother tongue" other than Canada's two official languages.

Canada has a history of educating children from all over the world, representing diverse cultures and speaking a wide range of languages. This enviable reputation is the result of national values of equality of access, equality of opportunity, and cultural pluralism.

However, Canada as well the rest of the world still faces the challenge of providing effective education for historically marginalized populations. First Nations peoples continue to struggle with attaining literacy abilities sufficient to participate meaningfully or successfully in an increasingly complex world. Selected immigrant groups representing historical marginalization also struggle to achieve. Their children continue to achieve at lower levels as

compared to children from more privileged communities and to drop out at higher rates than others.

In addition, all Canadian children will face an increasingly complex world as adults. Canadian schools must anticipate and respond to changing social and economic realities by providing instruction that reflects the new realities. These realities include changing economic and social contexts for literacy as a result of changes resulting from globalization, technological advances such as web 2.0 and other developments. Emblematic of the changes afoot, the provincial government in British Columbia is moving forward on initiatives that link education and economic issues associated with immigration and global connectedness. A new government office has been created, Office of the Trade Commissioner for Education and Skills Development, to promote B.C. schools abroad while supporting educational practices that prepare children in B.C. to succeed in global, multi-cultural and multi-lingual contexts.

Old models will not suffice. Nor will proposed models based on old realities serve our children well.

Build on Scientific Evidence

For such an important undertaking as this, we must be sure that we are operating with the best possible information. This policy brief addresses several basic claims that are being made in this light.

Claim #1: There is a crisis in literacy in Canada

The one piece of evidence that is used to support the claim that Canada faces a crisis in literacy education comes from the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALLS). For several years now, the public has been confronted with the claim that "almost half of Canadian adults cannot read or write well enough to participate effectively in their daily lives." This is crisis-mongering at its worst. This conclusion comes from the fact that about 44 per cent of the people assessed with the IALLS scored in the first two levels, with levels 3-5 considered adequate to highly proficient.. Does this mean that almost half of Canadian adults are bumbling around, unable to locate grocery items or get on the right bus? Clearly not. In fact, when those adults who scored within the first two levels of the assessment were asked if they thought their literacy skills present them with any difficulties, they said no – they were sufficient to meet everyday needs. Further studies on the results of the IALLS have shown that only a few of the Level One & Two people have limited capacity in reading skills, measured with assessments of subskills, or 'reading components'. In Level One, only four per cent of the English-speaking participants had trouble with reading and only two per cent of the French-speaking participants. In Level Two, only about 3 per cent of English and French-speaking adults had reading

problems. What about the others? They either did not speak English or French as their native language – think of all the other languages spoken in Canada – and the assessment was only given in English and French! Or they did not typically read the types of texts that were used in the IALLS assessment and thus were unfamiliar with their structures, purposes, vocabulary, and grammar.

To conclude from the IALLS that almost half of Canadians cannot read or write well enough to participate effectively in their daily lives is incredibly wrong. We cannot conclude that a *crisis* of literacy exists in Canada, but perhaps we can conclude that with the more than 250 different language groups represented in the schools, we need to take a close look at our ESL/FSL programs for children and adults. A 2008 Statistics Canada report based on the results of the 2003 IALLS reinforces the need for a nuanced understanding of literacy levels in Canada.ⁱ The report noted that, “individuals with low literacy skills were older, less educated, immigrants or had a mother tongue other than English or French.”ⁱⁱ Immigrants, for example, represented sixty per cent of people who performed below Level Three on the IALLS.ⁱⁱⁱ

Instead, the StatsCan report emphasizes the need for more targeted adult literacy programs that will serve to increase the English literacy abilities of immigrant populations at all levels of proficiency as well as to address the real reading needs of those relative few native-born Canadians who evidence decoding and comprehension weaknesses. We would agree.

This, however, does not imply much about the nature of the literacy instruction in the K-12 Canadian schools, despite attempts to draw such a link.

Claim #2: Literacy Instruction in Canada Does Not Teach the Basics

Once a crisis mentality is established, it is fairly easy for different interest groups to rush in with 'solutions.' We are close to this situation. Ignoring the fact that there is NO evidence of a literacy crisis in Canada, let's look at some of the solutions that are being proposed as if there were. These solutions generally reflect a type of free-floating anxiety that Canadian teachers do not spend enough time teaching the 'basics' of reading. These include things like knowing the sounds of words (phonemic awareness), knowing how to sound out words (decoding), vocabulary knowledge, and how to understand what you are reading (comprehension strategy knowledge). More structured and systematic teaching of 'skills' is called for.

Again, let's look for evidence of these claims. There is none. This is not to say that it is possible that there is some truth to them. But we don't have the research to support them. So, what we have here is an unsupported claim of crisis in literacy in Canada and an unsupported claim of cause of that unsupported crisis. This is not a good place to be. This is not a good foundation for policy.

Claim #3: Systematic Skill Instruction is the Solution

Climbing even higher on this house of cards, we find proponents of systematic skill instruction proposing 'new' models for literacy instruction. They use as support for these proposals research that was gathered in the United States to pave the way for contentious and failed programs from the Bush administration such as No Child Left Behind and Reading First. But, let's step back and look at some much-needed evidence.

First, we absolutely agree that children must be taught, and taught systematically, the skills of reading and writing. To argue otherwise is to engage in magical thinking – "They'll figure it out as they go along." This is dangerous and irresponsible thinking.

Second, systematic skill instruction is not "new." Nor is there any real evidence, scientifically gathered and analyzed, that concludes that Canadian children are not receiving skill instruction. Before we proceed with new policies, programs, initiatives, etc. – all of which will cost Canadian taxpayers a great deal of money – let's start to gather the data needed to support such efforts.

Third, supposing such data are gathered and support new initiatives, let's not simplistically import failed U.S. models into our Canadian context.

A recent report by the U.S. Department of Education evaluated the reading comprehension of first, second and third graders who participated in the \$6 billion (US) Reading First program, part of the 2002 No Child Left Behind law.^{iv} Reading First curricula and practices focus on “scientific-based” teaching, primarily phonics-based instruction and comprehension, and standardized testing to evaluate reading progress. The report found that weekly reading instruction increased on average by 45 minutes for first graders and one hour for second graders subject to the Reading First program.^v However, despite additional instruction time, the reading comprehension of these students did not improve when compared to students who weren't subject to *Reading First* instruction methods.^{vi}

The report noted:

“At its core, Reading First is a federal funding process designed to influence local education policy and teacher behavior with the ultimate goal of improving student reading proficiency...However, after up to three years of funding, the study finds, on average, that Reading First's impact on student reading achievement was not statistically detectable.

No Child Left Behind and Reading First are on their way out in the U.S. and under serious scrutiny by U.S. Congressional oversight committees for improper influence peddling and corruption. To import such models is somewhat akin to the situation in many developing

countries that take in discarded buses that no longer meet emissions standards in countries like the U.S. and Canada. These buses go on to pollute the air of the receiver country. Surely, Canada can do better. Instructional models that have failed and are being discarded in the U.S. should not be recycled with Canadian children.

Literacy policy and instruction in Canada must build on its strengths and values to begin to directly address these educational challenges. Sufficient evidence exists to suggest a way forward. Further evidence is needed to document and develop this path.

Equality of Access, Opportunity, and Cultural Pluralism

Equality of access, opportunity, and cultural pluralism are values that are firmly rooted in the Canadian conscience. These values are not addressed by models of literacy teaching and learning that fail to account for the significant ways in which families and cultural communities impact young children's language and literacy development. These models operate with blinders on when they only focus on the classroom versus the individual and when they promote a one-size-fits-all model of teaching and learning. We know better than this. Our children deserve better than this.

Let's look at what the research tells us about effective literacy instruction in light of Canada's desire to improve the literacy achievement of marginalized groups:

What We Know About Effective Literacy Instruction

- Beginning reading programs approved for the U.S. models focus exclusively on the 'skills' and all children proceed in unison through them. However, research shows that children come to school with clear models, gained from their homes and communities, of what literacy is—who does it, what it's for, and familiar texts. They learn to read and write – take from their instruction -- from these models. Teachers must be aware of what the children come to school knowing, and not knowing, and then must be allowed to tailor beginning reading instruction that will make a difference for all children.^{vii} What children know, and don't know, goes far beyond (but includes) simply letter names, phonemic awareness, or sound/symbol relations.
- Children learn basic skills such as letter/sound relationships better and faster when they are presented in the context of real reading and writing activities.^{viii} Teaching models that strip down reading and writing to technical skills outside of meaningful practice may show what looks like good results on skills tests, but these gains are quickly lost after grade two.^{ix}

- Children learn to read and write better when teachers respond to them based upon knowledge of them as individuals and as members of cultural communities.^x Effective teachers observe children across a range of settings and activities and do not restrict their observations to a few pre-selected texts. Scripted instruction, which forbids such teacher response, denies all children opportunities and access to effective literacy instruction.

Recommendations

- Fund and conduct large studies to learn, first, what Canadian teachers do and do not do in their literacy instruction. Consider the findings in light of what we know about effective literacy instruction (see above).
- Identify teachers and schools where a full model of effective literacy instruction is implemented. A full model is one where the skills are taught alongside a great deal of real reading and writing activity that is based on the community knowledge and beliefs of the children. Such schools and teachers exist in Canada.
- Fund and conduct research on these 'full model' instances to detail what such literacy instruction looks like and is composed of and to document outcomes as compared to other models.
- Finally, focus on the real crises in literacy in Canada – the underachievement of First Nations children and other marginalized groups – and drop the rhetoric of crisis that is not supported by evidence.

ⁱ Statistics Canada. Grenier, S. S. Jones. J. Strucker. T.S. Murray. G. Gervais and S. Brink. 2008. *Evidence from the International Survey of Reading Skills*. Statistics Canada. Catalogue no. 89-552-MIE-No. 19. Ottawa. International Adult Literacy Survey.

<http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/89-552-MIE/89-552-MIE2008019.pdf> (downloaded May 7, 2008)

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p 37.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 31.

^{iv} Gamse, B.C., Bloom, H.S., Kemple, J.J., Jacob, R.T., (2008). Reading First Impact Study: Interim Report (NCEE 2008-4016). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

^v Ibid. p. 41.

^{vi} Ibid. pp. 38-40.

^{vii} Chall: The Great Debate; Dykstra; Effective schools—Pearson, Taylor, & Pressley; VPG;

^{viii} Duke & Purcell-Gates; Stahl, etc.,

^{ix} Longitudinal studies

^x Rose, possible lives, Pressley – effective first grade reading instruction-motivation