

Does it matter what we call it?

"Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response," 1the Parliamentary report, released in June 2003, was the culmination of a long process of community advocacy and internal government research. Canada has been among the small number of industrialized countries that does not have a national strategy in this area, as part of a larger lifelong learning agenda. Deterrents have included jurisdictional divisions that have given provinces control over education since Confederation, and control over manpower training since 1996. While literacy is not solely part of either education or training, the boundaries are vague enough to cause uneasiness on both sides of the divide. This report broke ground when it recommended that the Minister of HRDC meet with provincial/ territorial education and labour market ministers to create a pan- Canadian accord on this issue, to agree on some common goals, priorities, funding levels and evaluation mechanisms while recognizing the primary responsibility of the provinces and territories.

The November response to the report [See BOX p.2] was supportive but muted. This was not unexpected given the impending change of leadership in the Prime Minister's office and the Cabinet. The response did, however, promise that the government will develop its policy framework, including accountability measures, to guide and account for its own activities. This commitment is vague enough to make us ask whether the way that literacy is currently defined and positioned in various jurisdictions and in the field will lead to the policy outcomes we hope for, and how we can clarify our own positions.

This may seem like a frivolous question, but there are currently some serious disconnections between the rhetoric and the policy of adult literacy in many countries, including our own. Looking at Canada, the federal response says that literacy "issues" have priority in an innovation and learning culture, and that literacy is a key element in a lifelong learning strategy. Literacy "issues", however, are not synonymous with "literacy." The June report was prepared by the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Does this make literacy a disability issue? It overlaps in some aspects, but most researchers would not categorize it that way. Does the positioning determine the limits of policy initiatives? At this point, with the possibility that Human Resources Development may be split into different departments, the question has increased significance.

The provinces, meanwhile, are at different stages of development of their own policies on adult education. Contradictions are evident here as well. While Quebec has chosen a broadbased vision of literacy as the foundation for further learning, Ontario has opted for a narrow employability-based policy.

Canada and the provinces are engaged in versions of the same debates that are going on in industrialized countries worldwide, most particularly in the European Union. What do we mean by literacy? Is it a narrow or broad concept? Is it education? How is it related to schooling, employment, citizenship? Is it part of a lifelong learning

agenda or separate? How much of current policy is based on evidence and how much on politics?

This issue of LACMF looks at Quebec adult learning policy and at issues from abroad to start a conversation on policy and practice that will deepen at our June 2004 Summer Institute.

Conclusions of the government response to "Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response"

- Overall, the Government of Canada agrees with the Committee's analysis and with the thrust and spirit of the Committee's recommendations. The Government agrees with the Committee that raising adult literacy skills requires a pan-Canadian response.
- The Government of Canada views literacy issues as having priority in the context of an innovation and learning culture. The Government has recently made investments in learning initiatives that can contribute to adult literacy skills.
- The Government of Canada agrees, however, that all partners need to work together as part of a concerted effort to address literacy issues in Canada. Literacy must be a key element of a lifelong learning strategy.
- The Government of Canada is taking a leadership role in fostering that concerted effort; the Government will engage partners in discussions to work towards a pan-Canadian strategy on literacy.
- At the same time, the Government of Canada is developing a literacy policy framework, including accountability measures, to help bring a more coherent approach to literacy in its own activities.
- In moving forward on these two fronts – engaging partners to work on a pan-Canadian strategy and developing a policy framework to guide and account for its own activities - the Government of Canada will continue to take into consideration the more detailed recommendations that the Committee makes.

http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/dept/reports/responses/031105/4_e.shtml

1 The full report of The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities can be found at: http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/dept/reports/responses/031105/1_e.shtml