

Seniors and literacy: Revisiting the issue

by Linda Shohet, Editor LACMF

Having recently done a literature review on seniors and literacy, I was struck by the considerable body of research on the literacy needs and interests of older people, much of it in the field of educational

gerontology. Nevertheless, despite many years of interest, experience and research, there has been little policy or action. Many questions remain unanswered about this complex issue. This summary outlines a few of these and suggests some possible directions.



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The 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) confirmed what many researchers and practitioners had long claimed -- that seniors have lower levels of literacy skills than any other segment of the population. The IALS, still the main source of comparable data on adult literacy in Canada until the recent IALSS is released, found that 38% of Canadians between 56 and 65, and 53% of those over 65 fell into Level 1. A further 26% and 27% of the same age groups fell into Level 2. IALS also found correlations among literacy level, health and poverty, links that have since been explored more fully in relation to seniors.

Who are seniors and what is literacy?

However, there is ongoing debate about who constitutes the senior population and about the nature and extent of the literacy problem among seniors. In studies across disciplines, seniors are variously called “older adults,” “the aged” and “the elderly”. The age cut-off is not fixed. People 45+ are called “older workers.” IALS provided data for groups to age 69; other studies have looked at those over 80. Seniors are not a homogenous population. Studies in gerontology confirm that physical and psychological differences increase with each decade among those over 65. Additional distinguishing factors include geography, place of residence, and culture.

The definition of “literacy” differs in various studies. In some it is reading only, in some a set of reading and writing skills, and in others a broader set of information-processing skills. Health literacy is a growing concern. The current notion of “multiple literacies” involves media other than print, or other ways of making meaning from symbols. Computer literacy is sometimes included as a component of general literacy and sometimes presented as a different but necessary type of literacy for today’s world.

Ways of measuring literacy have changed over time. In place of proxy measures (self-

reporting, grade levels, etc), recent “direct measures” evaluate how samples of individuals perform everyday reading tasks of increasing difficulty. Since data from different measures are not comparable, we have no reliable way of comparing literacy over generations. Some researchers assert that none of the measures provide accurate portraits of seniors’ abilities since the designs did not take account of their interests or special needs. Few studies have looked at groups older than 69.

Is seniors’ literacy a problem?

There are conflicting claims about the impact of low literacy on seniors. Some suggest that low literacy interferes with daily functioning. Others propose that seniors ,ho have functioned effectively for many years may perceive the value of literacy differently than younger people do. Older adults and literacy service providers may also identify seniors’ educational needs differently. Seniors may rely quite effectively on family, social networks and means other than print to communicate and receive information.

There are arguments about whether seniors’ literacy merits attention and action. Some suggest that the problem is time-limited since, as the current generation is replaced by a more highly-educated group, the literacy gaps will diminish. Others conclude that with people living longer, the current generation will be with us for many years. Some suggest that the aging process itself brings some natural loss of physical and mental capacity, and that literacy among seniors will always be an issue, although its meaning may change.

Despite the disagreements, however, there is a large body of interdisciplinary knowledge about seniors and learning.

Research on the connection between learning and successful aging confirms that seniors have the capacity and the desire, the time and interest, to continue learning to a very advanced age. Learning keeps mental capacities strong and enhances health and a sense of well-being. Seniors have different reasons for learning than younger people do. Employment is not a motive for those over 65. They generally return to basic education for self-actualization, personal fulfillment, or socialization.

Early studies of functional literacy and the elderly in the 1980’s found that little attention had been paid to older age groups in terms of conceptualization, measurement criteria, or treatment of data. Nevertheless, they consistently found that the elderly are less advantaged than younger people in meeting the literacy demands of our society. One strand of research and practice has examined materials, teaching methods, recruitment and funding models for literacy programs for older adults.



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Literacy programs for older adults have been designed since the late 1970’s and 1980’s, in many American states and in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and PEI. In Canada,

One Voice, a seniors' advocacy group sponsored a study, set up a national task force and in 1991 published a National Literacy Strategy for Older Canadians, much of which remains pertinent today.

Studies have also focused on computers and seniors. Some look at computers as a tool for literacy instruction and for motivation, while others consider computer literacy and online communication as ways to deal with isolation and to maintain family and community links in a mobile society.

Seniors in Canada today

Life expectancy in Canada is increasing, baby boomers are approaching retirement, retirement age is being extended, and some seniors are re-entering the workforce. Social and technological change are straining our ability to cope. Families are mobile, often leaving older parents isolated and alone. With people living longer, their social networks become more fragile due to illness and the death of family and friends. Seniors in Canada are an increasingly diverse group. The percentage from visible minorities will increase greatly over the next two decades.

With predicted worker shortages and the possibility that some older workers will have to or want to stay in the workforce longer, the right type of programming and marketing might reach the group between 45 and 56, traditionally one of the hardest to reach in any country. This is likely the only segment of an "older" population who might respond to job-related literacy upgrading.

However, the problems presented by older Canadians who will not participate in the labour market still warrant attention and action. A strand in the literature recommends compensation or accommodation in social and government systems to meet the needs of the large majority of seniors who may not or do not want to enter literacy programs.

What we know

The givens: Older Canadians are disproportionately represented at the lowest levels of literacy regardless of the measures. They have many health problems, some the result of aging, and limited literacy is a barrier to access and to selfcare. Individuals with low literacy are disadvantaged in a print and computer-based society. On the other side, older adults have the capacity and interest to learn. Learning brings wider benefits in terms of health, self-esteem, and independence. International and Canadian research and experience on program design, materials, and teaching methods can tell us what older adults prefer in literacy programs and introductory computer programs. We know that only a small percentage of older adults expresses a demand for literacy when it is called "literacy" or "basic education," but that many more respond to the idea of improving reading or writing skills.

We know that older adults are increasing in numbers and influence, and that education levels are rising. But we also know that aging brings about a natural decrease in physical and cognitive capacity, including some loss of hearing, vision and memory, that interfere with reading and communication. We know how to accommodate special needs with the use of adaptive technologies, although we have not generally applied this knowledge to the needs of seniors.

What we do not know

We do not have specific assessment tools for an older population. We do not distinguish different age groupings among those over 65. We do not know what the actual demand is for reading and writing upgrading among the various age groups. We do not know to what extent negative impacts, such as noncompliance with medical instructions or financial abuse by unscrupulous care-givers, are attributable to low literacy. We do not know what role literacy plays among a combination of factors that create risk situations for seniors.

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We do not know how accommodating special needs could mitigate some of the effects of low literacy among seniors.

Although direct assessment such as IALS has actually increased the estimated numbers of seniors with literacy problems, little has changed in terms of policy or practice in more than twenty years.

What now?

The literacy issue as it relates to seniors has to be addressed in the context of research agendas and of adult literacy policy, and in the broader context of policies and programs for seniors across the spectrum of programs of the federal government, between layers of government, and in national and local health, education and social service agencies.

The 1991 *National Literacy Strategy for Older Canadians* prepared by One Voice deserves to be revisited.

Research should address questions such as development of appropriate literacy assessment tools, analysis of literacy and learning needs by age group and sub-populations, and testing of hypotheses about the impact of literacy on seniors. Strategies that can help seniors cope with low literacy have to be compared for effectiveness. Cross disciplinary perspectives have to be shared.

Funding agencies, government departments at all levels, institutions and organizations should examine their agendas to identify the programs and policies that touch on or are affected by the issue of literacy and seniors in all its complexity.

Program provision and funding guidelines in many jurisdictions have to be broadened. If funding remains heavily tied to labour market outcomes or to higher education, there is little likelihood that the interests or needs of a majority of older learners can be met.

The Movement for Canadian Literacy should consider the weight they want to give to



seniors issues as they continue to promote a Pan-Canadian adult literacy agenda.

Literacy, and its counterpart, accommodation, are essential for the participation of every individual, regardless of age, as citizens in an open democratic society. The current interest in lifelong learning and skills has tended to focus a disproportionate amount of attention on early childhood learning. It's time to redress the imbalance.

See the bibliography on p.31 for selected references on seniors and literacy. The full annotated bibliography can be accessed at: www.nald.ca/litcent.htm

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