



Canadian Education Association

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Policy BRIEF

The Promise and Problem of Literacy for Canada: An Agenda for Action



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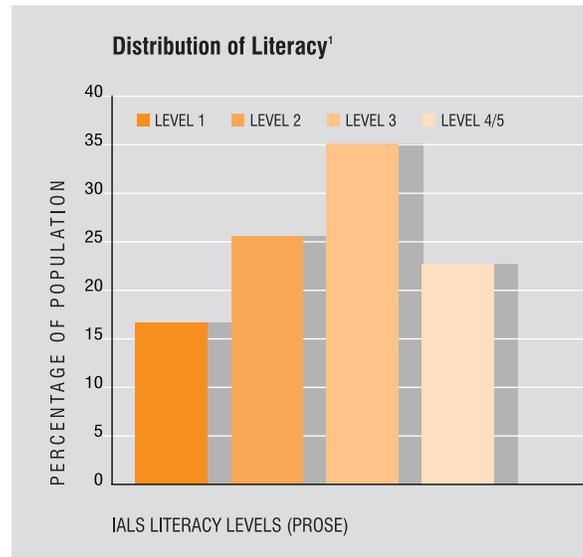
The Promise and Problem of Literacy for Canada: An Agenda for Action

Literacy in the knowledge age is multifaceted and complex and “involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.”

Two of five Canadians would have difficulty reading this sentence, following the instructions on a prescription bottle, finding out information about how to vote, or filling out a permission form for their child’s upcoming school trip. Although for nine of the past 14 years, Canada has ranked first on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), a measure of a country’s relative wellbeing, complacency would be a serious mistake. Low levels of literacy – especially among adults and vulnerable groups – remain a significant challenge to Canada’s continued wellbeing. As our performance on the HDI and other international rankings confirms, we have a solid foundation on which to build; but we must not underestimate the significance of literacy problems in this country. The groups most vulnerable to low literacy are the poor; persons of Aboriginal ancestry; persons whose native language is neither English nor French; persons in rural and isolated communities; and persons with certain disabling conditions. Given the rise in skill levels demanded throughout the labour market, the ubiquity of new technologies in daily and work life, and the desire of people to engage with public issues, those with poor literacy will become even further marginalized.

I’m now forty-three years old and I still can’t spell, my reading is very poor and I am no good at math. I have seen where I would sit down and maybe try to read a bill that came in the mail or something from school, but I couldn’t read it. In addition I am overweight and have many health problems. Therefore, you tell me who is going to hire someone like me. All I have been able to do with my life is sit at home, collect welfare and clean a house here and there for some extra money. Cindy

We no longer think of literacy as a prescribed set of skills to be acquired in a formal learning environment and measured simply by the ability to read and write. Today we understand literacy as a skill that is developed and evolves throughout the lifespan. Literacy in the knowledge age is multifaceted and complex and “involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.”²² These are rights that all Canadians should enjoy, and governments must take whatever steps they can to create a fully and equitably literate society. ●



The Personal and Public Benefits of Literacy

Almost half of all Canadians function at literacy levels that make it difficult for them to meet their own needs. Poor literacy skills both diminish their personal satisfaction and threaten Canada's social and economic health.

Literacy is both an individual and a social benefit, affecting economic, educational, social and health outcomes for individuals and for the society as a whole. Higher literacy levels are related to higher earnings, higher employment levels, reduced reliance on social welfare, better health, greater participation in cultural and political life, lifelong access to learning, and reduced crime rates. Those with weak basic literacy skills are more likely to hold low paying jobs, more likely to be unemployed, and more likely to require income assistance. People with low literacy levels have no opportunities for post-secondary education and limited opportunities for adult education and training.

A recent analysis of evidence from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) shows that a 1% increase in adult literacy produces a permanent 1.5% increase in the gross domestic product.³ For Canada, that would result in a permanent increase of approximately \$18 billion dollars per year.

High literacy levels contribute to a civil society. People with high literacy skills are more likely to become community volunteers, sponsor or coach community recreation groups, work on community projects, and vote. Those with poor literacy skills have limited access to a wide range of public information and are less likely to take an active part in the affairs of their communities. Few would deny that the quality of life Canadians enjoy depends in part on the active participation of citizens in community life.

Almost half of all Canadians function at literacy levels that make it difficult for them to meet their own needs.⁴ Poor literacy skills both diminish their personal satisfaction and threaten Canada's social and economic health. As Canada faces rapidly increasing social, cultural, political and economic demands, the need to improve literacy levels becomes more urgent. ●



I returned to school on January 4, 1999. I have had a lot of positive changes since I came back. My son is in grade seven this year. At the first of the year, he wasn't doing very well. When I started back, and started to put a lot of hours and work in my books, he decided to do the same with his own. He has brought his marks up and is trying really hard to pass grade seven. We do our homework every evening together and he has helped me with my math. It makes him feel good that he is helping his Mom out. Estelle

Factors Facilitating the Development of Literacy

Literacy levels are not fixed during childhood; they are also influenced by factors later in life, particularly factors that affect how much an individual reads.



Given the apparent relationship between school-age literacy success and later adult economic success, the fact that large numbers of students leave school without durable literacy skills represents a challenge for educators and raises the spectre of huge opportunity costs associated with lost productivity.

Preparation for literacy learning begins before birth. Mothers who eat well, exercise, and avoid tobacco and alcohol during pregnancy have healthier babies who are more ready to learn. A proper diet, sufficient nourishment, and a safe, nurturing and stimulating environment during childhood also contribute to successful literacy learning. Developmental delays and sensory problems affect readiness to learn, as well; screening programs for newborns and young children can often identify these problems and pave the way for intervention that can minimize their effect on learning.

Reading to children makes them better readers. Parents and caregivers who speak and read to children from birth prepare them to learn at school. Programs that offer stimulating environments to pre-school and school age children from economically or socially disadvantaged backgrounds also help students become literate.

During the school years, many factors influence the development of literacy. While the influence of each factor may be small, the combined impact can be significant. Such factors include: the degree to which teachers have specialized training in reading instruction; the presence of a demanding reading curriculum; diagnostic resources to identify students who are struggling and the provision of additional help for them; a thoughtful assessment system; smaller class sizes in elementary grades; a positive and productive classroom climate; and the expectation that all students will learn to read. Peer interactions also play a role; schools in which students of mixed abilities are combined in the same class produce outcomes superior to those in which students of differing ability or achievement are taught in separate groups or classrooms.

Instructional support clearly improves success in acquiring literacy skills. The results of the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that almost all children can acquire high literacy levels given the proper instruction. In that assessment, Canadian students placed second among those from the world's most advanced nations.⁵ Yet, data from PISA and other assessments also show that, even with good classroom instruction, children from vulnerable groups require additional attention and support both within and outside of school.⁶

Schools are essential players in teaching literacy, but they cannot succeed on their own. Literacy levels depend on many other factors, some of which extend over the lifetime of the individual, including: a home environment in which there are adequate financial resources; the amount of time parents

spend reading to their children; the quality of early childhood experience; the availability of opportunities for post-secondary education; and adult education and training.

Literacy levels are not fixed during childhood; they are also influenced by factors later in life, particularly factors that affect how much an individual reads. Like muscles in the body, the more literacy is used, the stronger it becomes. Adults who read at work, at home and in the community continue to improve their literacy skills and demonstrate to children the value of reading. Graduates of secondary school with high literacy skills are more likely to continue their education in a post-secondary institution where they acquire more skills; they move on to jobs that demand greater levels of literacy and offer more opportunities for adult education and training; and they choose to read more in their personal lives. On the other hand, adults who leave secondary school with lower literacy skills face much lower demands for reading on the job, participate less in adult education and training to maintain their skill levels, and choose to read much less outside the workplace; as a result, their literacy skills weaken over time.

Given the apparent relationship between school-age literacy success and later adult economic success, the fact that large numbers of students leave school without durable literacy skills represents a challenge for educators and raises the spectre of huge opportunity costs associated with lost productivity. It would be wrong to suggest, however, that adults have no control over their literacy levels after they leave school. Many adults have, through dint of effort and personal sacrifice, overcome the odds to become literate in all senses of the word.

Canadian business and labour organizations play an important role in motivating adults to increase their literacy levels. Workplace literacy programs that ensure workers meet health and safety standards, offer training in the use of more advanced methods and equipment, and provide financial support for the acquisition of literacy skills all help to promote literacy among adults. Canadian employers also help motivate adults to increase their literacy levels by rewarding literacy skills more than specific job qualifications, paying for them even when they are not strictly required for the job. ●

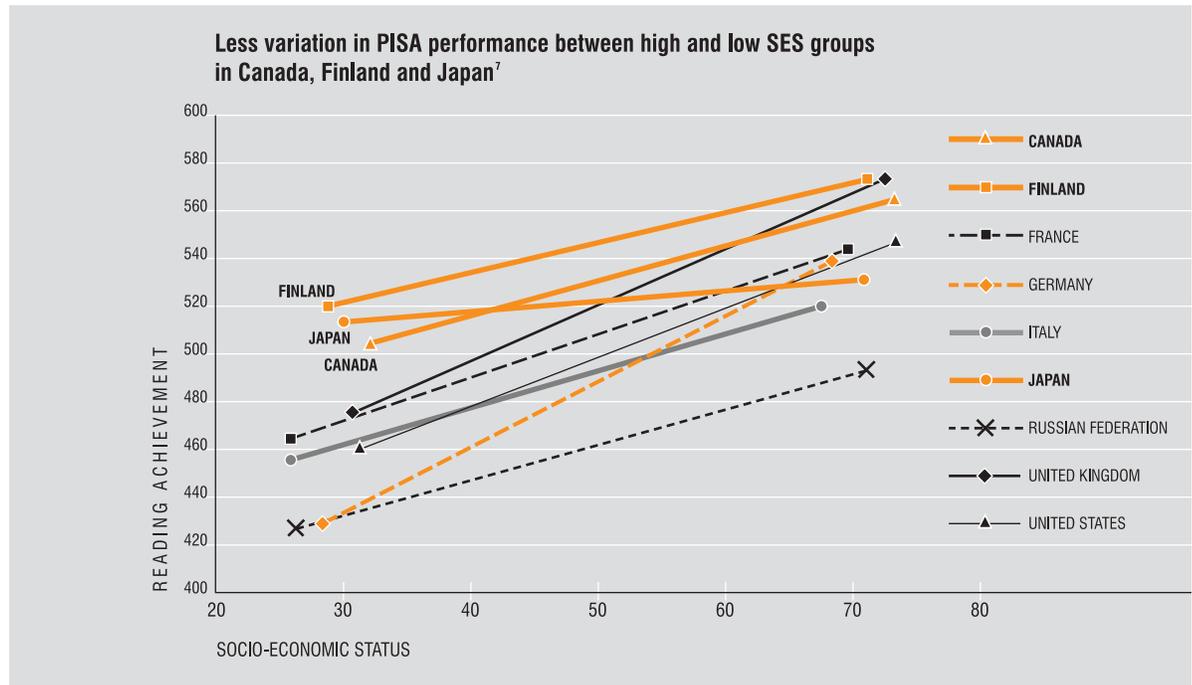
I am from Guyana and I now live in Toronto. I did not see the need for it at the time. I came to Canada and worked as a motor mechanic for one year. The Ministry of Transportation wanted me to have a license. I did not tell anyone that I could not read or write. I quit the job and then went to work at a sheet metal shop where I learned on the job and became good at it. Unfortunately, the company went bankrupt in 1990.

I was on E.I. for two years. I went to look for a job but I could not fill-out the forms. I kept this to myself for three years. Then I decided to let people know how I felt. Some people thought that I was just joking about not being able to read and write. They said that I was smart and could get by the way I was forever. Abdul

Canada's Literacy Challenges

Canada's multilingual population is a great social and economic resource, but until the right mechanisms are put in place to ensure that linguistic minorities can attain adequate literacy levels to be full participants in society, the under-utilization of this valuable resource blunts the positive impact of immigration policies.

[L]ow literacy levels in their own languages increases Aboriginal Canadians' risk of linguistic and cultural assimilation, while below average literacy levels in the official languages increases their risk of social and economic exclusion, poverty and poor health.



Recent international assessments have mapped the literacy landscape in Canada, providing us with data about the level and distribution of literacy skills across the country. While Canada ranks high among industrialized nations, the assessments reveal a great disparity in literacy levels, with some provinces ranking much higher than others. Even within high-ranking provinces, pockets of poor literacy exist, particularly among vulnerable groups.

Linguistic minorities face serious challenges in achieving high literacy levels. In the 2001 Census, one in five Canadians identified their first language as a language other than English or French. Although many of these individuals are literate in their first language, they will have difficulty thriving economically and socially unless they achieve adequate literacy in one of the nation's official languages. Immigrants with low literacy levels in their mother tongue are doubly disadvantaged.⁸ Although one in five Canadians report that they are bilingual, French-speaking Canadians living in predominantly English-speaking regions sometimes experience challenges in developing their first language literacy.⁹

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For Canada's First Nations, Inuit and Métis, literacy has a double significance. Literacy in Aboriginal languages helps Aboriginal Peoples maintain their own traditional languages and cultures – essential to maintaining cultural identity and preventing linguistic and cultural assimilation. At the same time, access to literacy in one of Canada's official languages translates into jobs, educational opportunities, government services and, ultimately, power. Thus, low literacy levels in their own languages increases Aboriginal Canadians' risk of linguistic and cultural assimilation, while below average literacy levels in the official languages increases their risk of social and economic exclusion, poverty and poor health.

In some communities, attitudes about education and literacy may be changing more slowly than economic and social demands.



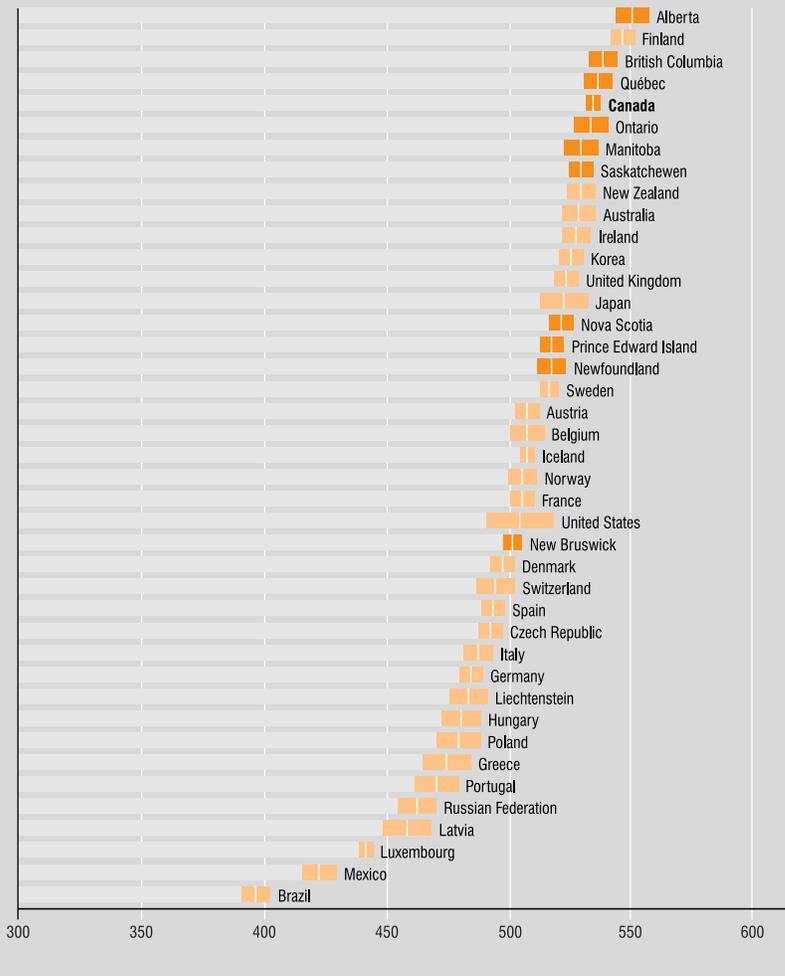
Although lower literacy levels are observed among both adults and children from poorer backgrounds in all countries where literacy is measured, the relationship is not one of cause and effect.



Canadians who live in rural or isolated communities demonstrate lower reading skills than those in more highly populated areas.¹¹ This urban-rural literacy gap may be explained in part by different levels of access to educational opportunities and resources; however, community culture and values may also have an effect. Traditionally, jobs in rural Canada have been based on the agricultural or primary resource sector, where formal education has not been essential for economic success. In some communities, attitudes about education and literacy may be changing more slowly than economic and social demands.

Many Canadians whose linguistic or social circumstances contribute to low levels of literacy also live in poverty. The relationship between poverty and literacy is complex. Although lower literacy levels are observed among both adults and children from poorer backgrounds in all countries where literacy is measured, the relationship is not one of cause and effect. In some countries and some provinces in Canada – Finland and Saskatchewan, for example – the correlation between poverty and literacy is relatively weak. Many factors, including the educational attainment of parents, resources available in the home, expectations for achievement of children, and the kinds of jobs people hold interact to limit literacy learning for many people. The challenge is to reduce the impact of factors associated with poverty on learning generally and on literacy in particular. Changing the patterns of literacy in a country with two official languages within a complex, multilingual and multicultural society presents special challenges. However, until those challenges are met, significant numbers of Canadians will be unable to fully benefit from, or contribute to, the rich fabric of Canadian society. ●

Ranking the Reading Performance of Canadian 15 Year Olds¹²



Things are slowing down at the fish plant and a lot of people are losing their jobs. Knowing how to read is becoming more important all the time. I would like to get a permanent job so I wouldn't have to look for work every year or depend on government work projects. Bud



The Way Forward: An Agenda for Canada

Canada needs collaborative and coordinated literacy leadership to overcome the shortsightedness of a fragmented approach and to fashion a coherent and comprehensive agenda for literacy.

The importance of raising literacy levels among Canadians has not gone unnoticed by policymakers. Numerous literacy initiatives have been introduced, but they lack coherence. Some are misdirected, others poorly implemented, and almost none are well evaluated. More significant are the missed opportunities for the development of complementary policies and programs that would substantially improve literacy in Canada. Literacy should not be seen as a policy issue in isolation, but as an integral component in all social, economic and cultural policy. We need to look at policy issues through a ‘literacy lens.’ Canada needs collaborative and coordinated literacy leadership to overcome the shortsightedness of a fragmented approach and to fashion a coherent and comprehensive agenda for literacy.



“I’m a mom of six kids, 43 years old and I’ve raised my kids. I knew I needed to upgrade myself so I could get a job. ... I ended up in a class where I was helped with my spelling and writing skills. As time went on my confidence was beginning to get stronger. My teacher suggested that I enter a writing contest that was held in conjunction with Toronto’s Word on the Street. Let me tell you, I didn’t think I could do it. I wrote a story called “Mists- of-Time-Stands-Still” about a place that I dream of ... I won first place. I was amazed. Bridget

A Canadian Agenda for Literacy, therefore, must take a life course perspective, addressing factors from before birth to old age that positively impact literacy development and that are amenable to public policy action. The agenda should include policies aimed at a) improving literacy skills and b) ensuring that literacy skills are required and valued in both social and economic contexts.



The following policy objectives are based on policies, practices and strategies that have been shown to improve literacy in a variety of contexts. Because literacy learning and literacy activities permeate many areas of personal and public life, and because Canada’s political and social institutions cross several jurisdictional boundaries, it is not always possible to clearly identify who should be responsible for developing and implementing specific policies designed to improve literacy. The overarching requirement, therefore, is for a national strategy that calls on all levels of government to work with all partners to meet the literacy needs of Canada.

Getting busted was the best thing that life gave me: a chance to explore learning. I am now doing something that I wish I had done 40 years ago. I don’t have to tell jokes to fool people anymore. After ten months of schooling, the doors of my mind opened like the petals of a rose. With the writing and reading skills that I have acquired, I now stand on my own two feet. I am unafraid! Jeannine

A Canadian Agenda for Literacy must take a life course perspective, addressing factors from before birth to old age[.]

a) Improving literacy skills

Policies to improve the literacy success of young children should include:

- Improving pre-natal maternal health and well-being, ensuring that pregnant women are less vulnerable because of poor nutrition, smoking, and substance abuse, since these factors have a significant impact on the educability of their children.
- Screening for developmental problems following birth to reduce the number of children who will later encounter difficult learning problems that will impair their literacy.
- Increasing the opportunity and readiness to learn across social groups by providing subsidized high quality childcare and other pre-school environments, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Encouraging parents to read to their children and provide access to quality reading material.
- Raising the level of financial support to poor families with children.

Policies to improve the literacy success of school-age children and youth should include:

- Simultaneously pursuing the goals of excellence and equity in learning outcomes for all children including:
 - identification and support for children who are struggling to read;
 - access to diagnostic and remedial services;
 - smaller class sizes in primary grades;
 - a strong and demanding curriculum;
 - a thoughtful assessment system;
 - access to a wide range of learning resources;
 - a classroom climate that is conducive to learning;
 - engaging parents in support of their children's learning;
 - raising teacher expectations in respect of the capacity of children and youth to become literate.
- Ensuring that teachers, particularly primary teachers, receive specialized preparation in reading instruction.
- Increasing access to and participation in post-secondary education, including reducing the cost of attendance through reasonable tuition costs, tax credits and provide better access to needs-based financial assistance for post-secondary education.
- Providing opportunities for students whose first language is neither English nor French to acquire full literacy in at least one official language.



Policies to improve the literacy of adults should include:

- Increased direct funding for adult literacy and basic adult education programs.
- Improved curricula, instructional and assessment methods for adult literacy.
- Funding for appropriate bodies to investigate the human resource development needs, including literacy requirements, of specific industrial sectors;.
- Support for family literacy programs that seek to simultaneously improve the literacy levels of multiple generations.
- Guaranteed access to language learning programs in at least one official language for adult speakers of languages other than English and French.

b) Ensuring that literacy skills are required and valued in social and economic contexts

Policies to meet these objectives should include:

- Development of tools to assess prior learning and experience, particularly those of immigrants, in order to establish equivalent credentials.
- Cooperative efforts to increase the portability of credentials in order to improve mobility of both students and workers and to increase the effectiveness of pre-employment and promotion screening.
- Community access to the World Wide Web and digital resources in all Canadian communities.
- Increased support for libraries and electronic access to reading materials in official languages in minority contexts and for non-official language speakers.
- Tax policies to reduce the cost of reading materials.
- Incentives for firms to offer more training, including literacy training.
- Social marketing to increase the reading behaviour of adults and increase appreciation for the value of literacy.
- Support for research into and dissemination of information on literacy – its level, distribution, determinants and outcomes. ●

The Call to Action

We know what policies, practices, and educational strategies will improve literacy levels. What we need is the political and professional determination to act on this knowledge.

Canada is a nation rich in human and economic resources, poised to be a major contributor to the growing global knowledge-based economy. Its governments and its people profess a commitment to education, and its institutions are built around the assumption of a literate public. And yet, almost half of adult Canadians function at a literacy level inadequate to meet the demands of their daily lives, and too many young people still leave school poorly equipped to pursue post-secondary education or meaningful work. We know what policies, practices, and educational strategies will improve literacy levels. What we need is the political and professional determination to act on this knowledge.

Clearly, if we are to maintain our place in the new economy, and if our people are to enjoy the full benefits of Canadian society, leaders at all three levels of government, in school districts and educational institutions, in the private sector and NGOs, in civil society and communities throughout the country, will need to demonstrate a collective commitment to collaborative action.

We call upon all governments to work together to provide a strategic framework and the actions required for all Canadians to achieve the levels of literacy they desire and our country needs. ●



I would like to add that people like me deserve the chance that I am getting but there is not enough awareness. Everybody deserves a second chance, somebody should give it to them. I got mine. Diane¹³



Notes

- 1 IALS defined prose literacy as “the ability to understand and use information from texts such as editorials, news stories, poems and fiction.” Level 1 indicates very low literacy skills, where the individual may, for example, have difficulty identifying the correct amount of medicine to give to a child from the information found on the package. Level 2 respondents can deal only with material that is simple, clearly laid out and in which the tasks involved are not too complex. Level 3 is considered as the minimum desirable threshold in many countries but some occupations require higher skills. Levels 4 and 5 show increasingly higher literacy skills requiring the ability to integrate several sources of information or solve more complex problems. See: Government of Canada. 1996. *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Human Resources Development Canada, National Literacy Secretariat. <http://www.nald.ca/nls/ials/ialsreps/ialsbk1.htm>
- 2 “Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.” UNESCO. 2004. *The Plurality of Literacy and Its Implications for Policies and Programmes: UNESCO Education Sector Position Paper*. Paris: UNESCO, p.13. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001362/136246e.pdf>
- 3 Coulombe, S., Tremblay J. and Marchand, S. 2004. *Literacy scores, human capital and growth across 14 OECD countries*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. <http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/89-552-MIE/89-552-MIE2004011.pdf>
- 4 Government of Canada. 1996. *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. <http://www.nald.ca/nls/ials/ialsreps/ialsbk1.htm>
- 5 Bussière, P., et al. 2001. Measuring up: The Performance of Canada’s Youth in Reading, Mathematics and Science OECD PISA Study—First Results for Canadians aged 15. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. <http://www.pisa.gc.ca/pisa/81-590-xpe.pdf>
- 6 Willms, J.D., ed. 2002. *Vulnerable children: findings from Canada’s National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.
- 7 PISA scores in each of three reading literacy scales were divided into five levels of knowledge and skills. Level 5 corresponds to a score of more than 625, Level 4 to scores in the range 553 to 625, Level 3 to scores from 481 to 552, Level 2 to scores from 408 to 480, and Level 1 to scores from 335 to 407. See: Bussière, P., et al. 2001. Measuring up: The Performance of Canada’s Youth in Reading, Mathematics and Science OECD PISA Study—First Results for Canadians aged 15. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. <http://www.pisa.gc.ca/pisa/81-590-xpe.pdf>
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- 9 Wagner, S. et al. 2002. *Literacy and Literacy Training of Francophones in Canada: Results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. <http://www.nald.ca/NLS/inpub/frlite/frlite.pdf>
- 10 Statistics Canada. (2003) *Census of Canada, 2001: Selected Educational Characteristics, Aboriginal Identity, Age Groups, Sex and Area of Residence for Population 15 Years and Over, for Canada, Provinces and Territories*. (Special interest tables; 97F0011XCB01042) Ottawa: Statistics Canada <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/home/Index.cfm>
- 11 Cartwright, F. and Mary K. Allen. 2002. *Understanding the Rural-Urban Reading Gap*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Human Resources Development Canada, and Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. <http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/81-595-MIE/81-595-MIE2002001.pdf>
- 12 See: Allen, Mary. 2002. *What we know about skills in Canada*. Presented at Literacy, Numeracy and Lifelong Learning in Canada. Winnipeg, Manitoba. http://www.cea-ace.ca/media/MAllen_Measuring_Skills.ppt
- 13 The stories of learners that appear in this document are from *The Book of Changes*. 2002. Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) Learner’s Advisory Network. <http://www.literacy.ca/lan/bookchng/intro.htm>

