

# Community Dispatch

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## A PROFILE OF LITERACY SKILLS AND NEEDS IN HALTON

The study, *A Profile of Literacy Skills and Needs in Halton*, investigates the literacy skills and literacy needs of the Halton population. It assists educators, business and labour, not to mention government and civil society, to understand the social and economic conditions that influence literacy in Halton.

Literacy in Canada, Ontario and Halton is important not only to the individual but also to society. Lack of literacy skills in a society creates conditions for economic, social and political exclusion. The *Highlights* from the Canadian Report, *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada* states:

*“Society rewards individuals who are proficient and penalizes those who are not, whether expressed in terms of employment opportunities and job success or active social, cultural and citizenship participation in society. Literacy is also important to nations, as these skills are building blocks. They enable the creation of a labour force capable of competing in a changing world – a key step to economic growth and improvement of the human condition. They are also the cornerstones of democracy and of the exchange of knowledge and information.”* (Statistics Canada, 1996a, p.1)

Today, adult educators no longer speak of being literate or illiterate but rather of a continuum of literacy skills. Location on that continuum affects an individual's daily interaction in the workplace and in the community. Essentially literacy skill levels speak to the varying capacities of individuals to understand and use information necessary to participate fully in modern society which increasingly requires higher communication and information processing skills (Statistics Canada, 1996a, p.1).

The factors influencing literacy are complex and are often interrelated. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), a study conducted in 1994 in seven countries<sup>1</sup>, provides information on the following three literacy domains: i) prose literacy (based on materials such as editorials, news stories, poetry and fiction), ii) document literacy (based on materials such as job applications, transportation schedules, maps, tables and graphics) and iii) quantitative literacy (numeric skills based on activities such as balancing a chequebook or figuring out a tip). The IALS data suggest that low levels of literacy skills are found in Canada particularly in Quebec and the Maritime provinces. *Highlights* of the report, *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada* states:

- i) about 22% of adult Canadians 16 years and over fall in the lowest level of literacy. They have serious difficulty dealing with printed materials and most likely identify themselves as people who have difficulties reading; and
- ii) another 24-26% fall in the second lowest level. Such people can deal only with material that is simple and clearly laid out, and material in which the tasks involved are not too complex. They read, but not well (Statistics Canada, 1996a, p.2).

Regional differences in literacy skills are explained by differences in accessibility to education, hence, educational attainment. **Increasingly the completion of secondary school is being used as the benchmark or necessary basis for having developed a level of**

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<sup>1</sup> The countries participating in this study are Canada, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States.

**literacy skills.** It is also a benchmark for maintaining literacy skills. It is evident that public policy and a corresponding investment in education over the decades in Canada have increased access to education, educational attainment and greater literacy skills.

Ontario's literacy levels are somewhat higher than the national average with 55.8% of the Ontario adult population having sufficient literacy skills while the national average is 52.4% for Levels 3, 4 and 5 on the IALS. However, as reported in *Adult Literacy in Ontario: The International Adult Literacy Survey Results*, **20.2% of Ontario's adult population do not have basic literacy skills (Level 1) while a further 24% are considered to have inadequate literacy skills (Level 2) to meet changing labour market needs** (1998, p.3).

### **IALS Halton Summary**

Findings of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) indicate that in Halton, approximately 20% of the adult population is at the lowest level of literacy, Literacy Level 1, for prose, document and quantitative literacy domains. **When Level 1 and 2 are collapsed, you have about 50% of the population at low literacy levels. For Halton, this means a slightly higher level of low literacy than that of Canada. This does not bode well for a society that claims that an educated workforce is the basis on which its communities will succeed in the global workplace.**

**Younger generations have higher literacy skills than older population groups.** This correlates with the literature and 1996 Census data for Halton. This pattern raises issues of employment and social integration as individuals age. Slightly more women than men are located in the lowest literacy levels in the region of Halton.

When looking at the IALS data for highest level of schooling, it demonstrates the relationship between educational attainment and literacy level. **Those individuals without their secondary school diploma are clustered in Level 1 and 2, low literacy skills (about 50% of the Halton adult population). This is quite a commentary**

**on the literacy skill level of our community members. This relationship further affects an individual's life chances as demonstrated in the strong relationships among education attainment and income and regular employment.**

### **Report Highlights**

- The patterns associated with age, gender and literacy level is similar in Halton to that of Ontario and Canada. The literacy levels of individuals vary with age. Younger generations have higher literacy skills than older population groups. This correlates with the literature and 1996 Census data presented in the report. These patterns raise issues of employment and social integration as people age. Slightly more women than men are located in the lowest literacy levels in the region of Halton. This varies from the discussion in the literature, which suggests gender differences do not appear to have statistical significance.
- The IALS survey data demonstrates similar patterns across Halton, which is consistent with the trends identified in the literature and the 1996 Census. Approximately 50% of those working in Halton do so using low literacy skills. This raises serious questions about the present literacy skills used in our economic sectors:
  - Is there an underuse of literacy skills hence a devaluing of human capital?
  - Do the literacy skills of our population deteriorate if they are not exercised in the workplace?
  - How do you build and maintain literacy skills appropriate to Canada's emerging role in the global economy?
 Public policy could direct investment toward the development of human capital to raise literacy skill levels that are necessary to create jobs in emerging sectors.
- This study clearly establishes that the region of Halton follows trends documented in the research on literacy. Strong relationships exist between:
  - Literacy skills and age
  - Literacy skills and education

- Literacy skills and income
- Literacy skills and employment
- This study demonstrates that increasing levels of poverty and disparity exist in Halton and given the significant relationship between poverty and literacy, we conclude that there is a need for literacy skill development for this specific population group. Those members of our community considered poor fall into many groups such as single parents, unemployed, working poor, disabled, etc. Therefore, reaching members of this group will require creative and flexible programming.
- A Literacy Risk Index has been developed as a way of capturing the various factors (income, education and employment) contributing to a risk of literacy problems. Within Halton, literacy risk varies, indicating a concentration of socio-economic factors that affect the attainment of literacy skills.

In addition, the study draws to our attention the following:

- that to create a workforce capable of responding to the demands of the changing nature of work, economic development requires a social investment in education and training over the life course.
- that those receiving benefits, particularly from social assistance, are at high risk of deficits in literacy skills and may need literacy skills upgrading if they are to be meaningfully incorporated into the economic and social development of society.

- that older workers have not had the opportunity for educational attainment due to the lack of accessibility to public education before World War II; therefore, new training opportunities are required.
- that educational opportunities for immigrants to acquire literacy skills in English or French are necessary if these individuals are to be included in our economic prosperity and participate as full citizens in civil society.
- that training and education be innovative and adaptable to meet the needs of the many groups involved like youth, single parents, learning disabled, physically disabled, those with mental health issues and the prison population
- that many of those in need of literacy and educational upgrading cannot participate in such programs if supports are not offered such as transportation, flexible hours, child care, etc.
- that employers recognize the need to invest in employment based training to enhance and maintain the skills of their workers.
- that employers utilize fully the literacy skills of their employees
- that education and training to support literacy skills is part of the fight against poverty in Canadian society.

A copy of the report may be purchased by contacting the Halton SPC office.

