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An examination of IALS and its influence
on adult literacy in Canada

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, adult literacy has been taken up as a topic of national interest by media, think tanks, literacy advocacy groups and government in Canada. IALS has been influential in framing this as a national issue, but it was not the first, or even the principal, catalyst. Notwithstanding the attention given to adult literacy over the past two decades, according to official surveys and national examinations, the literacy abilities of Canadians have changed very little since the first major survey was conducted in 1987.

A comprehensive paper on the influence of IALS in Canada would require an overview of how influence has played out in each province and territory where jurisdictional responsibility for education resides. Instead, in our paper we look at Canada as a whole and the construction of a national adult literacy issue, despite the jurisdictional divisions in the country. We present an overview of the influence of adult literacy and IALS in Canada, and discuss how influence has happened in adult literacy here. We conclude with some general thoughts on adult literacy, IALS and the construction of a national adult literacy agenda in Canada.

Building on the foundations: From mid-1980s until IALS

In 1994, the OECD and Statistics Canada conducted the International Adult Literacy Survey in Canada. Not only were the results disseminated on already fertile ground, but the survey itself was driven by—and developed in response to—what had happened during the period from mid-1980s until the mid-1990s. Indeed, while Canada has a long history of adult literacy programs, the turning point for media coverage, government policy and public interest occurred in the mid-1980s (Darville, 1992).

The 1987 Southam newspaper chain's survey of everyday literacy skills in Canada acted as a principal driver of an adult literacy agenda in Canada. It and the Survey of Literacy Used in Daily Activities (LSUDA) are considered IALS' precursors in this country. The Southam survey (Calamai, 1987) defined literacy in very similar terms to IALS: "Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential." (Darville, 1992, p.13), and applied a methodology developed in the United States to assess adult literacy based on everyday literacy tasks. According to Darville, the survey provided the background for fifty different stories in English newspapers across Canada. Two years later, in

1989, Statistics Canada undertook LSUDA—the Survey of Literacy Used in Daily Activities—which was even more similar in design to IALS (see Statistics Canada, 1991). While the Southam survey used the term “functionally illiterate” and assigned a cut-off point between literate and illiterate, LSUDA plotted reading, writing, numeracy and information processing skills across five levels. The results suggested 38% of Canadians were below the level deemed necessary to perform simple reading and writing tasks (ibid).

During the mid-late 1980s, the federal government also began to make literacy a policy platform. A funding commitment was made in 1987 by then Conservative Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, and the National Literacy Secretary (NLS) was created—with a \$110 million grant to be distributed over five years—to act as a catalyst for literacy (Polanyi, 1988). Darville writes, “In 1988...for the first time, the platforms of the political parties included substantial plans to mobilize governmental programs to respond to the literacy issue” (1992, p.7).

To understand the drivers of both policy formation in adult literacy and of media coverage, it is important to examine at least three things in addition to the two surveys noted above: 1) the development of adult literacy advocacy groups; 2) International Literacy Year and Literacy Day; and 3) the increasing link argued between the economy and literacy.

Five years prior to IALS, there were six National Adult literacy organizations:

- i. The Movement of Canadian Literacy, formed in 1977. It helped develop a coalition of 10 literacy organizations across the country called the Canadian Alliance for Literacy (now defunct) who wrote the influential report *A Call to Action on Literacy* published in two high-profile/high-readership publications, *MacLeans Magazine* and *The Globe & Mail* (see Shohet, 2001)
- ii. Frontier College, formed in 1899 as the Reading Camp Association, and committed to adult education in Canada
- iii. Laubach, a community-based literacy tutoring program, established in 1981
- iv. The National Adult Literacy Database (1989), the Canadian adult literacy information network¹
- v. ABC Literacy Canada (1989)²; and,
- vi. Fédération canadienne pour l’alphabétisation en français (FCAF) (1989)

A number of these organizations have helped drive media coverage of adult literacy. The first three organizations influenced the creation of NLS; the last three were created after and funded by NLS. All six, as well as many other literacy organizations, were supported, expanded and funded by NLS.

¹ Now calling itself Canada’s Literacy and Essential Skills Network, and funded by federal government Office of Literacy and Essential Skills at Human Resources Development Canada (HRSDC). See: <http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/LES/index.shtml>

In addition to the importance of literacy organizations, UNESCO's International Literacy Day, celebrated in September of each year since 1965, and the International Literacy Year of 1990, gave literacy a new visibility in Canada and in part prompted government to lend greater financial and moral support to the issue; plays were launched, postage stamps were issued, TV programmes, educational and music videos were created (Darville, 1992).

Notwithstanding such drivers, it is doubtful that literacy would have taken such a hold on the media or government's imagination if it had not been for the shift as literacy began to be promoted internationally as a tool for individual and national economic prosperity. Mulroney included in his platform the idea that literacy skills were necessary for participation in an advanced economy, and demonized illiteracy as an economic strain on Canadian businesses (Pipa, 1986). According to a report issued by the Canadian Business Taskforce on literacy, low literacy was costing Canadian businesses \$4 billion a year in profits, and \$10 billion in increased accidents and lost productivity (Enchin, 1990; Polanyi, 1988).

IALS and after: Construction & (partial) deconstruction of an adult literacy agenda

Canada's performance

In 1995, the results of IALS were released. Canada's performance in the survey fell squarely in the middle of countries—better than the U.S, for example, yet much worse than Sweden, which soon became countries of comparison for Canadian media, think-tanks and literacy advocates and researchers. In general, it was found that a little under half of Canadians were at Levels 1 and 2. Indeed, in a joint press release, the OECD and the HRSDC announced that 48% of Canadians between 16 and 65 had literacy rates below the minimum level necessary to function in society (see HRSDC, 2005), and about 58% had adequate prose literacy.³ Disparities between different demographic and regional groups were pronounced; particularly worrying, data placed the reading, writing and problem-solving abilities of Aboriginal Canadians at around 50-60% of the Canadian average, and even lower in some of the territories (HRSDC, 2005). Ten years later, the Canadian results on the International Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALL), were published, reporting on Canadians' performance in the survey conducted in 2003. Once again, Canada was in the middle of the pack. Moreover, as one can see from the graph below, the official results show very little difference between IALS and ALL results:

² Renamed ABC Life Literacy Canada

³ See <http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/cs/sp/hrsdclp/publications/2005-002752/page00.shtml>

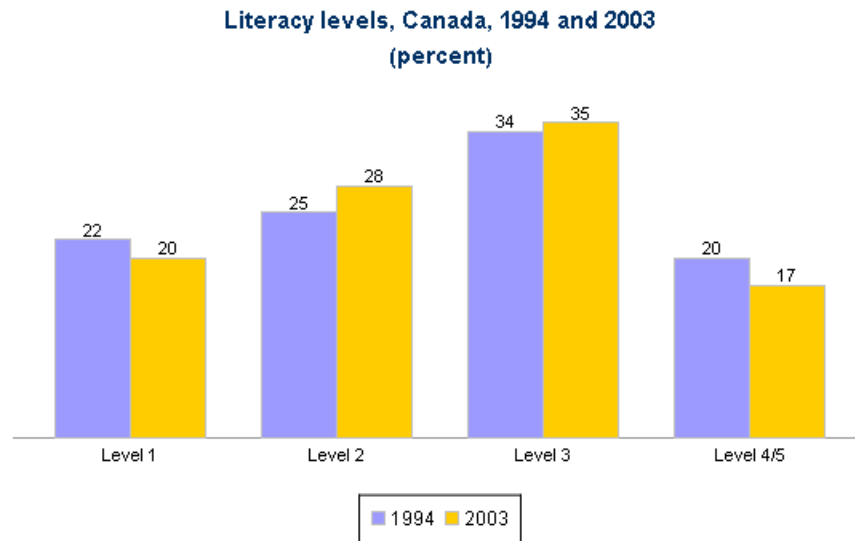


Table 1: Source: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, and Statistics Canada. (2005). *Building on our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey 2003*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

So what influence did IALS, and later ALL, have in the media and on government? Below, we illuminate the impact of and reaction to IALS and ALL in the media, academic world, and government.

Reaction in the media

In many senses, IALS represented a new focal point, and a platform from which to proclaim a national crisis of literacy. Media took up the IALS results and studies were published in mainstream media comparing both LSUDA and IALS, and the earlier Southam report and IALS (Calamai, 1997). Journalists reported that little had changed in terms of the literacy skills of Canadian adults. The title of Peter Calamai’s article captures this conclusion: *Canada’s Struggle Against Illiteracy: 10-Year Effort Succeeds in Raising Awareness, but Little Else*. When ALL results were released in 2005, articles reiterated Calamai’s sentiment of seven years earlier: “Illiteracy rate not budged in a decade” (Mahoney, 2005). Media reaction was generally framed in terms of disappointment rather than shock, given the country had already been subjected to some surprisingly distressing results a few years earlier through Southam and LSUDA.

Starting in the late 1990s, journalists began to use IALS statistics, though they did not always make explicit that they were drawing on IALS. Indeed, writers often did not cite where they drew their statistics from when asserting 42% of Canadians have trouble completing everyday tasks (Brown & Girard, 2006) or in reaching “Level 3”, considered the minimum level for one to be able to function well in society e.g. Galt, 2006).⁴ Indeed, the number “42” or the phrase “almost half” became commonplace in articles describing the percentage of Canadians with low literacy. Yet given the comparative element of IALS, media has also sometimes drawn on

⁴ According to the media, IALS also led more organizations to focus on literacy (Small, 1997). The connection between literacy programme development and IALS is a topic ripe for close examination.

IALS statistics to instil national pride, or at least reassure citizens that Canada is in better shape than the US ('The United States is no model', 2000) or the U.K (Schoon, 1998).

Think tanks and advocacy groups analysed IALS and ALL results and presented them in new light (e.g. CCL, 2006). Other think tanks, inspired by IALS, conducted new studies that further investigated the connection between literacy and social and economic indicators (see, e.g., Coloumbe & Tremblay, 2005; Conference Board of Canada, 2006; 'Reading your way', 2008). Discussions on literacy and its importance for participation in the knowledge economy/society intensified.

Government responses

IALS statistics motivated increased government support of literacy. Literacy coalitions expanded across almost every province and territory thanks in part to increased funding through the NLS (Shohet, 2001). The centre-left Liberal government, elected in 1993, announced increases in funding; for example, \$173 million to training in 2001 which included a substantial amount earmarked for adult literacy (Calamai, 2001). The Liberal government released two key reports during this time, as part of their innovation strategy, predicated on a perceived beneficial relationship among innovation, the economy, social cohesion, and literacy skills (Government of Canada, 2002a, 2002b). This Liberal government, in power until 2006, made an even stronger case for why Canada — and all Canadians — should care about the reading, writing, numeracy and problem-solving skills of the country's citizens.

Notwithstanding the release of (disappointing) ALL results in 2005, adult literacy was dealt a serious blow after the Liberal government was voted out of power. Months after their election in 2006, the Conservative Harper government announced it would cut \$17.7 million in funding to adult literacy, effectively dismantling the NLS. Notwithstanding a budget surplus, Conservative MP John Baird lent support to his government's decision announcing, "I think if we're spending \$20 million and we have one out of seven folks in the country that are functionally illiterate, we've got to fix the ground floor problem and not be trying to do repair work after the fact" (quoted in Delacourt, 2006). In addition to closing down NLS, the government cut funding to the Canadian Council of Learning (CCL), which closed in 2009, and shut down the previously prolific Centre for Policy and Research Network's think tank.

The legacy of IALS is visible, however, in NLS' replacement: the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES). Still housed in Human Resources and Skill Development Canada (HRSDC) and created in 2007,⁵ OLES reflects the OECD's position (manifest in IALS) that literacy, above all, is important to the competitiveness of business and economic benefits of a skilled labour force (Hautecoeur, 2000).

⁵ It is of interest to note the NLS was initially administered by the Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship. The relocation from one government department to the other signals a greater embrace of skills for economic productivity and self-reliance and deviation from skills for social cohesion, which had been championed—at least in part—by earlier governments.

OLES has further promoted HRSDC's Essential Skills framework, created in 1995 under the Liberal government, arguing that there are 9 Essential Skills Canadians need to function well in society, expanding the skills identified by the OECD and Statistics Canada in the IALS and ALL surveys and drawing on IALS methodology (Pinsent-Johnson, 2011). This Essential Skills Framework, as it has been interpreted and used by OLES, became the grounding for funding priorities and grant applications, narrowing the adult literacy terrain (Pinsent-Johnson, 2011).

In addition, the Conservative government has further embraced a charity/corporate sponsorship approach to funding adult literacy (Delacourt, 2006) and devolved greater responsibilities to the provinces for adult learning (Gibb & Walker, 2011). Yet, despite a seeming shift in priorities, literacy has not been shelved as an agenda item: in response to the economic downturn starting in 2008, the federal government announced a \$630 million boost over the following two years for training, literacy and employment programs to help those hit by the recession ('Ontario seeks more cash', 2011).

Reactions from Canadian academics

IALS has been both exploited and critiqued by literacy researchers in Canada. On the one hand, IALS helped spawn a number of studies that draw on its data (e.g. Boudard & Rubenson, 2003; Taylor, 2006). For example, Taylor's study investigated the types of learning activities outside of formal and non-formal adult education in which adults at levels 1 and 2 in IALS engage. IALS has also been praised as an example of an inclusive approach to literacy (Ho, 1998). In her article, Ho (1998) argues for the alignment of Canada's Language Benchmarks—used to assess skills of non-native speaking immigrants—with IALS, which she refers to as an inclusive measure of skill.⁶

On the other hand, critics have also been vociferous—as they have elsewhere (see, for example, the work of Hamilton & Barton, 2000; Hamilton, 2001)—regarding IALS' methodology and their perception of its failure to fully embrace the idea of literacy as social practice. Writing in the *Canadian Journal for Studies in Adult Education*, Sticht (2001) questions IALS' reliance on performance tests and self-assessments as appropriate measures of the nature of literacy and of the skills distribution across the population. Krahn and Lowe (1999) similarly question the positive contribution of IALS, presenting their own study that compared the literacy skills of Canadians on IALS with self-reported use of literacy on-the-job. They report that 20% of Canadians are working in positions that do not utilise their literacy skills. Their conclusions mirror those of Livingstone (1999) who also refutes IALS'—and IALS' supporters'—claims that Canadians have lower literacy skills than they need for success in the labour market. Indeed, for some, IALS' legacy has been overwhelmingly negative. In other examples, Darville (2011) criticizes the dominance of indicators and psychometrics in the test and maintains that the development of a literacy regime in Canada has been based on scare tactics and misinformation resulting in the perversion and co-optation of literacy from its original social justice roots. Elsewhere, Pinsent-Johnson's research has found that the government's Essential Skills agenda (based on IALS

⁶ According to language education researchers, the CLB has since been articulated to the IALS.

methodology) converted what was a large-scale assessment approach (as employed by IALS) into an accountability pedagogical regime for adult educators.

Understanding influence: the tools and builders of a national literacy concern

To help us better understand the mechanisms by which influence has occurred, we have drawn on theories of agenda setting from media studies (e.g. McCombs, 2004) and political science (e.g. John, 2006). We borrow from political theory to look at “windows of opportunity” (Kingdon, 1984) that have opened up for adult literacy to help bring it to the attention of the government and public. In adult literacy policy, windows of opportunity have included: *i) Partisan shifts*, e.g. going from a Liberal to a Conservative government, *ii) Policy Entrepreneurs*, who sell an idea to a political leader that then gets taken up in the media or vice versa, *iii) Changes in indicators or statistics*, such as those released by IALS or LSUDA, *iv) Focusing events and crises*, such as International Literacy Day or a literacy crisis (e.g. chemical leak in a building because someone could not read the instructions) (see Birkland, 2003; John, 2006). We tease out some of these drivers of influence below.

- i. Partisan shifts:* Adult literacy was championed under a centre-right government in the 1980s. It continued to be supported by the incoming centre-left government during the 1990s and early 2000s who basically continued the Conservatives’ trajectory and increasing funding in response to IALS fall-out. A partisan shift from Liberals to Tories in 2006 signalled a closing of a window for literacy, or perhaps a radical redefining of the window for adult literacy.
- ii. Policy entrepreneurs:* We find the main entrepreneurs in adult literacy in Canada were the key literacy organizations nurtured over the 1980s and 1990s and who have had a strong media presence. Inspired by, and re-interpreting, IALS’ data, think tanks such as the Conference Board of Canada, CD Howe Institute and Canadian Council of Learning have also been strongly influential in garnering political and media attention.
- iii. Changes in indicators:* IALS and ALL presented new statistics for journalists, governments and think tanks to pick up and compare to previous indicators (e.g. the analysis of ALL data for health literacy). Think tanks drew on these statistics to promote a need for adult literacy. They also conducted their own studies, providing additional statistics that acted as fodder for journalists and literacy advocates.
- iv. Focusing events:* The United Nations’ 1990 International Literacy Year was a catalyst for a number of literacy initiatives (Darville, 1992; ‘International adult literacy’, 1990). More interestingly, the publication of many Canadian newspaper articles released since the mid-1980s have coincided with the advent of International Literacy Day: of the 94 newspaper articles on adult literacy we read, 22 articles were published in September (23.4%) instead of an expected 8.33%, or 8 articles, if they had been uniformly distributed over a 12-month period.

In examining influence in adult literacy we also draw on Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (McCombs, 2004), whose agenda-setting research has shown a strong correlation between the extent to which the media covers a story and public perception that a story or issue is important. The role of media in driving the adult literacy agenda cannot be overstated: the first literacy survey, Southam, was conducted by a newspaper chain; CanWest, another media chain, sponsors a nationally prominent literacy-focused “Raise-a-Reader” campaign;

the three “Peter” heroes of literacy in Canada have been ,and are, all first-and-foremost reporters: Peter Gzowski, Peter Calamai and Peter Mansbridge. Media were the first to bring IALS to public attention. Media partners help promote and channel think tanks’ and literacy advocacy groups’ agenda. Media, government and advocacy groups or think tanks join forces to support adult literacy, exemplified in ABC Life Literacy’s “Good Reads” project, a series of 100-page books that use language aimed at adults with literacy levels at around Grades 3-5 (Barber, 2010).

Below, we display our understanding of how influence works in adult literacy in Canada, where media represents the central node in influencing government directly and through the public.

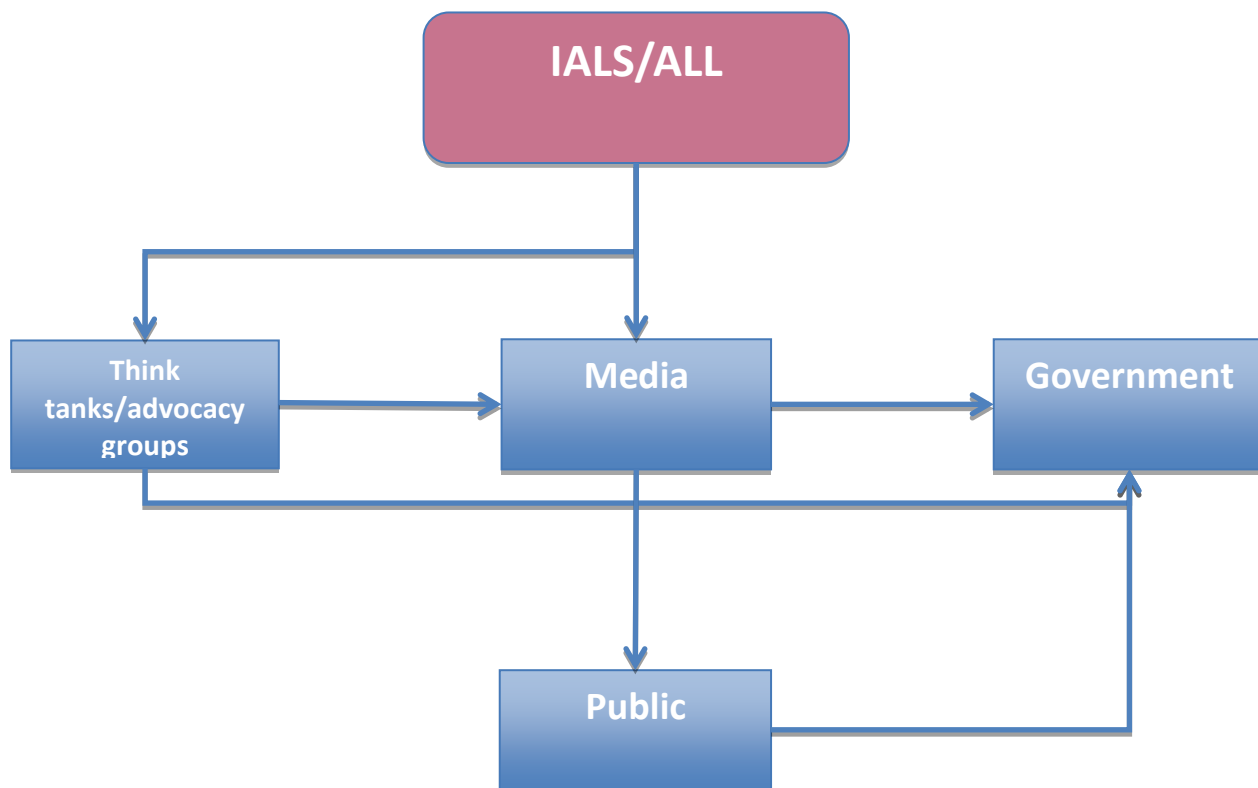


Figure 1: Mapping IALS influence

Concluding remarks

In Canada, IALS, like those surveys before it, has provided a tool for advocates, politicians, think tanks and media to help them garner support for a national literacy agenda. The influence of IALS is evident in academic articles, government strategies, policy reports and budget speeches. However, IALS is better understood more as a continuation of an existing adult literacy concern, rather than the advent of something entirely new.

Furthermore, there is evidence that the influence that IALS has had, has not resulted in a transformation of the field—notwithstanding the increased financial support for literacy it has brought. Currently there is no Canadian adult literacy strategy. While advocates dream of a pan-Canadian body devoted to adult literacy (Advisory Committee, 2005), it is likely its construction will fail given the levels of fragmentation in the federal state. The NLS, which most resembled a national body committed to literacy, no longer exists. Adult literacy continues to be framed by think tanks, activists and media conjuring up a national imagery, though national cohesion is weak. The Federal government is offering short-term rather than longer-term sustainable funding to the field. The PIAAC results are set to be released over the coming year. It remains to be seen if anything substantial will change about adult literacy in Canada.

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