

Literacy: The Key to a Skilled Workforce

Literacy Service Planning 2016-2017

Written by: Tamara Kaattari

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Literacy Service Planning: A Look Behind

Not many people, government staff or perhaps even adult literacy agencies know that Literacy Service Planning (LSP) is a process that has been in effect all across Ontario since the early 1990s. LSP is facilitated by regional literacy networks. There are 16 such networks in Ontario and they are responsible for bringing together adult literacy agencies on a regular basis.

Originally, Literacy Service Planning groups discussed adult literacy services in individual communities and how such services compared to local demographics or potential indicators of adult literacy service (population, low-income areas, areas with lower rates of educational attainment etc.) There was also a focus on identifying gaps and duplications in adult literacy services, to ensure that the funding and resources allocated to adult literacy were being used as effectively as possible. In the early days of LSP, the main partners sitting around LSP tables were adult literacy providers.

Over the past 25 years, the partners around many LSP tables have grown as have the topics for discussion. From a cataloguing exercise (who provides what services for whom), the LSP table expanded to invite representatives from Ontario Works (OW), Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), employment service providers, Early Years Centres, Apprenticeship, Local Planning Boards, secondary school student re-engagement staff, and others.

Topics of discussion grew to include professional development needs, common assessment, adult literacy government initiatives, curriculum changes, client pathways, transition points for adult learners, program capacity, information and referral, program data analysis, labour adjustment, and workforce development needs – both current and emerging.

Each year, regional literacy networks and community literacy agencies have been asked to formally report on their literacy service planning efforts. Some years, regional networks developed their own reports, having some latitude both in terms of what to report on and how to share the information.

More recently, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU), now the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD), has given regional networks a template to complete, consisting of a narrative, information on agency waiting lists (if any) and service delivery charts – charts that show which adult literacy agency is providing which levels of service for which client pathways.

Many government Ministries talk about the importance of planning at the local level, of collaboration, of reducing silos and increasing transparency. Adult literacy agencies in Ontario may be unique in that they have both been formally mandated to do this work and they have actually done it for more than two decades. It would be interesting to see if any other government funded programs or streams have engaged in the same degree of community collaboration with such limited and status quo resources.

Most adult literacy agencies in Ontario have had no increases in funding for the past fifteen years. These agencies should be commended. Not only have they striven to provide the same level of client service in the face of increasing annual costs, year over year, but they have also spent significant amounts of time initiating planning with community members to improve services for clients.

Why Are Adult Literacy Programs Critical?

Historically, many people have viewed adult literacy programs as little grassroots agencies, run by volunteers, to assist those few individuals who wish to learn to read for pleasure. To some extent, this description may have been relevant 40-50 years ago. However, it certainly does not apply now.

People attend adult literacy programs because they have a need – a need to develop skills that will help them get a job, keep the job they have, or apply for promotions; a need to develop the necessary skills that they can use to acquire additional academic skills; or even a need to build their skills to achieve personal goals in their lives. According to the last (and only) 3 International Adult Literacy Surveys, just under half of adult Ontarians struggle to some extent to demonstrate the level of literacy and numeracy skills considered necessary for everyday life.

Literacy and Poverty

While not directly correlated, there is a relationship between literacy skills and poverty. People who have lower levels of literacy skills are more likely to live in poverty. Our Ontario adult literacy (LBS) program statistics confirm this relationship.

In the last 35 years, except for a short period in the mid-1980s to 1991, the poverty rate in Ontario has hovered between 9% to just over 12%, using the Ontario Government's official poverty measure (Low Income Measure – After Tax) and the latest Statistics Canada low income figures. (Source: www.povertyfreeontario.ca/poverty-in-ontario/status-of-poverty-in-ontario/).

According to the 2014-2015 CMSM data, of the 43,619 adult literacy learners served in Ontario, 37.37% were on Ontario Works (OW), the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or a dependent of someone on OW/ODSP. A further 11.54% of clients reported “No Source of Income.” Some of these individuals may have been supported financially by a spouse or other family member, but many would either be between jobs, couch surfing, or perhaps did not want to disclose they were on Ontario Works.

In September 2014, Ontario launched the second *Poverty Reduction Strategy, Realizing Our Potential, 2014-19*. In doing so, the province identified four key commitments:

- to recommit to the original Strategy’s goal of lifting 25 % of Ontario children out of poverty in five years;
- to move towards employment and income security for vulnerable groups (including women, single parents, people with disabilities, youth, newcomers, visible minorities, seniors and Indigenous people);
- to end homelessness; and
- to build the evidence base required to guide effective poverty reduction policies and programs.

To move towards employment and income security for vulnerable groups will undoubtedly require additional investment in Literacy and Basic Skills, Ontario’s adult literacy program.

Literacy and Transitions

In addition to being a safety net for those who need a place to build their self-esteem and self-efficacy, adult literacy programs also serve as a springboard to other opportunities. Adults use adult literacy programs to build their skills so that they can achieve higher levels of education, explore other skilled training opportunities or move directly into employment. What other government program funded in Ontario offers the same breadth of transitions as the Literacy and Basic Skills program?

Literacy Service Planning is a process through which transition points in a community are identified. Adult literacy agencies want adult learners to successfully make transitions, so the skills required to be successful in the “next step” of a learner’s path are reviewed. These skills and the achievement of them are built into adult learner plans. Adult literacy agencies may also develop exit assessments and tasks that adult learners must prove they have the skills and competencies to do before they are deemed ready to leave the adult literacy program.

Literacy and the Labour Market

Literacy Networks and Workforce Planning Boards both have a long history of planning. Workforce Planning Boards have had the responsibility for, as their name suggests, workforce planning, defined as:

The systematic identification and analysis of what an organization is going to need in terms of the size, type, and quality of workforce to achieve its objectives. It determines what mix of experience, knowledge, and skills are required, and it sequences steps to get the right number of right people in the right place at the right time.

Source: <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/workforce-planning.html>

When you think about literacy planning and workforce planning, the analogy of nesting bowls is appropriate. The planning that Literacy Networks do around literacy services can and should directly impact or be considered within the context of workforce planning. Literacy planning is a part of workforce planning, especially now that many employers are also noting the lack of soft skills, such as problem solving, teamwork and time management. Adult literacy agencies have been teaching clients these skills for years, and are well positioned to lend this expertise to employment services and to employers.

While the value of Literacy Networks and Workforce Planning Boards working together on workforce planning has been known for some time (albeit more in some geographical areas than others), the planning cycles of both groups – as defined by their funder – has not allowed for optimum collaboration. The alignment of these planning processes would result in more impactful workforce planning at the local level.

In 2015, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU), now known as the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD), introduced Local Employment Planning Council (LEPC) pilots:

LEPCs will promote place-based approaches to workforce development, while generating and analyzing local labour market information.

LEPCs drive local approaches to the planning and delivery of employment and training programs and services. They will also improve local labour market conditions through enhanced collection and distribution of local labour market information.

The ministry is piloting LEPCs in eight communities: Durham, London-Middlesex-Oxford-Elgin, Ottawa, Peel-Halton, Peterborough, Thunder Bay, Timmins, and Windsor.

Source: <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/programs/lepc.html>

The LEPCs began the start-up phase of their work in December 2015 and completed it at the end of March 2016. All eight pilots have begun to implement the strategic plans they developed in the start-up phase and their work will culminate in the development of Local Community Labour Market Plans.

Literacy and soft skills, while certainly not the only player on the workforce planning stage, is an important player. It will be interesting to see to what extent the eight pilot LEPCs are working collaboratively with their Literacy Networks to both glean information on the potential workforce supply and to share labour market information and products related to workforce demand.

Literacy and Youth

Ontario's adult literacy program has very few eligibility requirements and that's a good thing. However, even though our literacy agencies serve a diverse range of clients, through statistical analysis, we are able to ascertain at the local level who is accessing our programming and whether or not any trends are developing.

A definite provincial trend over the past 3-5 years has been an increase in the number of youth accessing the LBS program (youth being defined as under 29 years of age).

According to the Consolidated Municipal Service Management (CMSM) catchment area data for 2014-2015, produced by MTCU (now the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development or MAESD), 45% of the 43,617 adult literacy learners served were under the age of 29. Of these youth, 18.3% were 19 and under, 48.6% were 20-24 years of age, and 33.1% were aged 25-29.

CMSM data for 2015-2016 shows that this cohort of learners remained consistent - 44.6% of the 42,211 adult learners served were under the age of 29. Of these youth, 18% were 19 and under, 48.5% were 20-24 years of age, and 33.1% were under the age of 29.

Since the economic downturn of 2008, many communities saw an influx of learners 45-64 years of age, as many workers in this age bracket lost long-term jobs that they had been able to acquire with less than Gr. 12 education many years ago. Such workers, now unemployed, realized they had to achieve a Gr. 12 in order to be remotely competitive in the labour market. Yet most could not go directly into adult credit

courses, even if they had finished Gr. 9, Gr. 10 or part or all of Gr. 11 in their past. The nature of literacy and numeracy skills is that you “use them or lose them.”

Most of the workers laid off from manufacturing, while very good at the jobs they had been doing, had lost some of the skills they had once learned and that they would now need to build upon in order to achieve higher level credits. These individuals upgraded in adult literacy programs in order to be successful in completing their high school credit courses or taking the General Educational Development (GED).

The economic downturn of 2008 illustrates how with a very small infusion of funding, adult literacy agencies in Ontario were able to increase their capacity and provide service to individuals who had lost their jobs. This is an example of client-centeredness.

But back to youth, since about 2010, many communities in Ontario have seen a steady increase in the number of youth accessing adult literacy programs. The challenges with young people finding employment have been well documented and this increase in uptake in adult literacy programs may be a reflection of these challenges. Without decent skills (translation: a Grade 12 or a GED, should we mention soft skills?), many young people cannot hope to be meaningfully attached to the labour market. Instead, they find themselves in a revolving door – finding entry-level, low-paying jobs, but not being able to keep them due to their lack of skills.

MAESD has been increasing its financial support to employment programs in Ontario, introducing three new programs geared specifically to youth in the past year (Youth Job Connect, Youth Job Connection Summer and Youth Job Link). An interesting aspect of Youth Job Connect (YJC) is that it was developed specifically for youth who:

...experience multiple and/or complex barriers to employment by providing more intensive supports beyond traditional job search and placement opportunities. Youth Job Connection, which began in October 2015, will continue to provide more intensive, targeted support for unemployed youth between ages 15 and 29 with multiple barriers to employment including poverty, homelessness, disability and mental health.

Source: <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/programs/yjc.html>

So, YJC is intended to assist youth who are furthest from the labour market – those who are living in poverty, with homelessness, disability and mental health issues. One of the major differences between YJC and current youth employment programming is that YJC can offer a client up to 60 hours of intervention, primarily, if not exclusively, in the form of workshops. Those who are seriously at risk may access up to 90 hours of service. Sixty to 90 hours of intervention may seem like a lot, but perhaps not when you break it down. If you break it down, it equates to approximately 2-3 weeks of programming and not even individualized programming at that.

To offer a comparison, the average length of stay in an adult literacy program for a client is 3-6 months. Adult learners with more or greater challenges, such as those being served by YJC, will probably stay longer – 9 months to a year or more, and they will receive hundreds of hours of service.

Think about the time that the average teenager spends in school in the course of a year....a minimum of 6 hours a day for a conservative estimate of 38 weeks x 5 days/wk = 1140 hours. That’s to make up for

one year of missed high school. Adult literacy programs see youth (and other adult learners) who may be anywhere from kindergarten in terms of their skills (cannot read and write the alphabet) to Gr. 11. And their self-esteem has taken a beating, they need some assistance in developing resiliency and trust as well.

It's reasonable to believe that there are thousands of youth in Ontario who require increased skills (literacy) in order to get a meaningful job. They will not get these skills in employment programs. But they are paid to take the 60-90 hours of training in YJC. The fact that YJC can pay youth to participate in their programs has actually resulted in a decline in youth in literacy programs in some communities. While undoubtedly unintentional, MAESD has provided youth with an incentive to skip over skills development and look for work – work that they are unlikely to keep or be able to use to advance to other, more meaningful jobs.

There is much work to be done to ensure that Ontario's youth have the skills AND the employment opportunities to really make a future for themselves and to contribute to the tax base that Ontario needs. A further investment in the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program is required.

Diversity of Adult Literacy Programs

The Literacy and Basic Skills program is not homogenous. For decades, adult literacy programming in Ontario has been accessible in four different cultural streams: Anglophone, Francophone, Indigenous (referred to historically in LBS as Native) and Deaf/Blind. LBS is proud of its learner-centred approach. Each cultural stream of literacy requires different materials and different approaches.

The number of different cultural stream literacy agencies in a given area can affect planning in significant ways. Some Literacy Service Planning (LSP) groups have only one cultural stream to work with (for example, Anglophone), some LSP groups may have all streams present in one community, and yet others may work with 2-3 of the streams.

The number of cultural streams and their particular needs affect planning processes and product development. For example, if an LSP has a number of Francophone agencies, should the regional network facilitate LSP in both French and English? This would be very challenging, as most regional networks have had no increases in funding for the last 15+ years and certainly don't have the funding to conduct meetings and develop resources/materials in both official languages.

Consider also those LSP areas that have numerous indigenous/Native agencies. The issues that impact indigenous/Native programs vary significantly from those that affect the other streams. The needs of multiple groups must be identified and managed at the LSP level in order to effectively plan services for clients.

The diversity of LBS programming is critical, but also challenging for some aspects of planning. For example, the needs of clients who are Deaf/Blind are very specific. LBS agencies that work with these clients in the Deaf/Blind stream do an excellent job of increasing literacy skills. However, extremely rarely, if ever, has there been an employment program to which a Deaf/Blind literacy client can transition.

Much time and energy is spent during LSP meetings discussing transitions and how to make them more effective. When there simply is not an agency or service to refer a client to, frustration can abound.

Consider too that indigenous/Native agencies are often funded at both the federal and the provincial level. In some communities, there are several employment and training programs for indigenous persons, but some are federally funded. As such, they are not required to participate in LSP (a provincial mandate). Instead of working collaboratively with local LBS Native stream agencies, they may compete for the same clients.

LSP creates a space to raise issues and try to solve them.

Different Geography: Different Challenges

Literacy Service Planning happens at the local level. Where possible, the boundaries of the LSP are determined by learner mobility habits, usually defined as a particular community or county. Of course, not all parts of Ontario are the same. Some areas are urban and some are rural. Some have many adult literacy agencies; others have only one or none. Geographical differences add another layer of discussion and complexity to Literacy Service Planning.

In some areas of the province, there is a lack of transportation. There is no public transit which creates issues in terms of adult learners accessing services. In most communities, adult literacy agencies have access to Training Support dollars for learners, but these dollars do not go far when adult learners have to rely on taxis. In fact, in some communities, it is actually much more cost-effective to pay for a practitioner to go into a community to provide services, but, unfortunately, the policies that accompany Training Supports do not provide this flexibility.

In areas where the geography is too vast for any kind of actual transportation to take place, Literacy Service Planning tables may discuss the role of technology – either e-Channel (online learning) or the use of Skype or other person-to-person interfaces to try to provide services to remote areas.

As was mentioned earlier, the number of service agencies in any given area (literacy or other programs) can have a significant effect on Literacy Service Planning. For example, in areas of the province where there is only a single adult literacy agency and few other programs or services to which literacy learners can be referred, information and referral protocols are much simpler and local services are easier to navigate.

The downside, of course, is that adults are complex and have many different requirements. It's difficult then for a single adult literacy program to "be all things to all people" and necessary transitions may just not exist in a particular community. For example, in some areas, there is no adult credit presence, so adult literacy learners who are upgrading because they want to achieve their Gr. 12 do not have a next step to transition to, creating frustration for literacy learners and agencies alike.

In more urban areas, the opposite can be true. There can be many programs or services – adult literacy programs and referring programs. In these situations, the impact on Literacy Services Planning is the increased work to document services and how they differentiate from one another and to establish clear referral protocols and client pathways.

Since no two communities are exactly alike, these geographical differences impact programming significantly and Literacy Service Planning meetings provide a space for these issues to be discussed.

Educational Levels

The educational level of learners is also a topic of discussion at Literacy Service Planning tables.

Obviously not all learners enter Literacy and Basic Skills programs with the same level of education or functional ability. In some areas, there are significantly higher numbers of adults who have less than Gr. 8 education. Southwestern Ontario has such pockets – areas where there are significant numbers of Mexican Mennonites.

Where adult literacy agencies provide services to significant numbers of such individuals, there can be significant program differences. The learners will take longer (in some cases, much longer) to achieve their goals and the professional development and resources needs of these programs differ from other adult literacy programs in the same community. Literacy agency staff and tutors need more training and resources – learning resources and funding resources – to adequately serve this client group.

An unusual feature of our current Literacy and Basic Skills funding structure is that all adult learners “count” the same. The person of Mexican Mennonite background who may spend 5 years in an adult literacy program, leaving during times of harvest to work and returning in the late Fall each year, is counted the same as the individual who spends 3 months in an adult literacy program to brush up on skills before entering credit programming or postsecondary programming.

Literacy Service Planning: A Look Ahead

Adult literacy agencies and regional literacy networks have moved from planning amongst each other to inviting agencies from other areas of the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD) such as employment and apprenticeship, as well as representatives from the Ministry of Community and Social Services. Increasingly, adult literacy agencies and regional literacy networks are also connecting and planning with the other Learning Ministries.

There are three learning ministries: MAESD, the Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade (MCIIT) and the Ministry of Education (EDU). It might not be obvious to everyone as to why adult literacy agencies and regional networks should be working with MCIIT and EDU programs. MCIIT programs include English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Popular opinion suggests that MCIIT programs work with immigrants and Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs, under MAESD, work with Canadian-born individuals who need to improve their communication, numeracy and Essential Skills. This is a rather simplistic view.

There is a significant “grey” area between the two programs. Immigrants who have been in Canada for years do not necessarily see themselves taking ESL classes. Stories abound about immigrants who have been in ESL classes, sometimes for years, without making significant progress. Or they graduate from ESL, but still find their English communication skills – both oral and written – are far from where they need to be to secure meaningful employment in Ontario.

In addition, it is rare to find ESL offered via one-to-one tutoring. LBS programming CAN offer one-to-one instruction, which is essential for many individuals who have learning disabilities or who are affected by

PTSD, anxiety or other social issues. So there are many immigrants – new and not-so-new - who would benefit from the LBS program and a need for ESL and LBS agencies to plan together to meet client needs.

So what does the LBS program and Ministry of Education programs have in common? Of course, there are adult credit programs offered through EDU. But that is not the only connection between the two learning ministries. While the graduation rates reported by the public school boards have shown increases over the past decade, every year at least 15% of students drop out of high school in Ontario. And 15% of students is not a small number. It's about a quarter of a million people every year.

Of course, students leave high school for a myriad of reasons, but we know it's not because they have had job offers they can't refuse. Many of them have not been able to acquire the skills they need and struggle with literacy and numeracy levels well below Grade 12. And, due to the rising level of skills required to find and keep a job in Ontario, they're not waiting long before they realize they need to improve their skills.

Some of these "dropouts" find their way into adult literacy programming. There's a reason why the number of youth in adult literacy programming has been growing over the past 10 years. Better connections between LBS and secondary schools, including student re-engagement programs, would result in more youth finding programming that will enable them to build the skills and credentials employers need.

Gaps/Duplications

Each year, since Literacy Service Planning was first introduced in the early 1990s, communities have been asked to identify gaps and duplications in adult literacy services. Given the diversity of adult learners and their upgrading needs, very few duplications are ever identified. Even in communities where two or even three adult literacy agencies offer the same services, other factors need to be taken into account. At Literacy Service Planning meetings, the other factors include location (access) and methodology (is the program 1:1, small group or classroom-based?).

In the earlier days of Literacy Service Planning, adult literacy providers thoughtfully spent time identifying gaps in service. However, since adult literacy programming in Ontario has had status quo funding (no increases in core funding for most) for the past 15 years, the enthusiasm and interest in identifying gaps in services has waned. Adult literacy agencies struggle to maintain their current services and have little time or resources to spend on identifying new gaps which they lack the capacity to do anything about.

Regardless of their funding limitations, adult literacy agency staff are aware of trends in their local communities and of the learners who are attending their programs. They will notice when they are seeing an increased number of individuals who are on Ontario Works (or a decrease) and they will note when they are seeing increased numbers overall, such as during the manufacturing downturn of 2008-2009.

Such trends and the reasons behind them are topics of discussion at Literacy Service Planning tables and changes in services that result from these trends benefit adult literacy learners.

Planning Successes

The QUILL Network region LBS service providers have worked hard to collaborate with community partners to serve learners.

Presently

- all but 5 sites are co-located with Employment service providers
- 3 sites co-located with a library, school board office, federally funded
- 2 sites on campus with Georgian College where LBS learners can access the same resources as college bound students
- common referral forms are used between programmes and community services
- Adult Learning Programs of Perth received extra funding to support laid-off workers from Kraft-Heinz
- Adult Learning Centre Grey-Bruce-Georgian (ALC GBG) have expanded into Durham and Meaford in the last two years to support learners in the community and reduce transportation issues
- Georgian College will expand to an itinerant site in Meaford with the ALC GBD and other community services
- In Listowel, Avon Maitland DSB will pilot LBS delivery for all 3 levels in all 5 goal paths to fill a gap in service in that community
- majority of LBS staff have received training on *Soft Skills Solutions* curriculum

In the QUILL region LBS programs reported the following

- 92% of targets were met in 2015-2016
- 39% of learners are under 29
- 70% of learners have Grade 12 or less
- 29% of learners are attached to the workforce
- 54% are unemployed
- 15% of learners were referred in from ES
- 31% of learners report that they heard about LBS programmes through Word of Mouth