

## What Literacy is Not

Although many English as a Second Language (ESL) learners benefit from literacy programs, they are not included in our national literacy statistics. Literacy statistics are gathered from people whose first language is English.

### ESL is for people whose:

- First language is not English.
- English Reading/Writing/Speaking/Listening skills need improvement.
- Read and write in their first language.

### ESL Literacy:

- First language is not English.
- Have difficulty reading and writing in first language.
- English Reading/Writing/Speaking/Listening skills need improvement.

Whether Literacy or ESL, we can help you find a program. Please call us at 416-961-5557 if you know someone who needs help with their reading and writing. We can help them find a suitable program in their neighbourhood.



Access to the written world<sup>^</sup>



MTML is a network of individuals and organizations who are involved in and support adult literacy. We are an independent, non-profit organization, we provide leadership and work actively to develop and promote adult literacy in Toronto and York Region.

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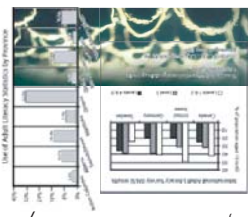
## What is Literacy?

In our knowledge economy, literacy is more than a simple matter of reading and writing. It also involves social, cultural, and functional codes that help us participate in our society. It means being aware of our rights and privileges as employees, community members, and citizens. It is also about having the 'systems knowledge' to navigate in our information-based society. This may help to explain why the recent International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS) found that 42% of Canadians are below the minimum level considered necessary for coping with the demands of modern life and work. To understand the literacy problem in Canada, and why it is so prevalent, please read and share this brochure.



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## In Canada you say?



Low literacy levels in Canada may seem shocking and hard to believe, especially when we hear reports of developing countries with much higher literacy rates. For instance, when the United Nations presents literacy measures alongside of other quality of life indicators like gross domestic product and life expectancy at birth, we see developing countries listed as having 88 percent literacy rates. We must understand however, that these literacy measures are based on an arbitrary standard like the ability to sign a name, and do nothing to represent a population on the literacy continuum.

The Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS) of 2005, which found that nearly 42% of Canadian adults are below a functional level of literacy is a far more comprehensive measure of adult literacy. A joint project of Statistics Canada and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it defines literacy as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."

The survey finds that 14.6% of adult Canadians have serious difficulty with even the most basic written materials; another 27%, can work with printed information but not well; and that literacy rates have not improved since the last survey ten years ago and that our youth are faring worse. In order to understand these high numbers, we need to consider the barriers that adults experience, many of which result from adult education policies that don't recognize their social and cultural realities. For instance, take the cultural reality it can happen that cultural values encourage

## How can this be?

people to engage with language in ways not accounted for in formal classroom settings. This can mean that many young students start their educational career at a deficit — a deficit of cultural capital. For example, a child who has limited access to "academic" literacy practices in the home, like crayons and workbooks, will likely be at a disadvantage when beginning school. Their other language abilities and potential may be high but these are not accounted for. Such early shortcomings can lead to frustration and worse, a negative experience of the classroom, which can have a perpetual effect. As their classmates are learning to read and then reading to learn more and more, those who don't get with it are left further and further behind. In Grade 10, with the literacy test looming, and still lacking the skills being tested for, many drop out.

This is one of many scenarios that are as diverse as Toronto's cultural realities. What they all have in common is a need for second chance learning. Years later they may decide to take that second chance. Although they may not rely on traditional literacy methods in their life roles, they are engaged in everyday learning activities. The problem comes down to a lack of resources. Currently we have enough literacy programs to serve less than 1% of what the ALLS identifies as those most in need. When we consider the research supporting increased investment in adult basic education and the long-term payoffs, it is puzzling why this is not a national priority.

A report from the C.D. Howe Institute states that raising a country's literacy scores by 1% relative to the international average is associated with a 2.5% relative rise



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in productivity and a 1.5% rise in national income per person. This amounts to 18 billion dollars which could be invested in other priorities. The same report goes on to state that "while much of the recent policy debate has focused on increased spending to improve public health care, not enough attention is being paid to the equally crucial goal of investing in the literacy and numeracy skills of Canada's population."

We are still waiting for policy shifts that happened in the health field in the 1970's to happen for adult education. In the early 1970's the research overwhelmingly supported a move away from the medical model of health, which was primarily concerned with disease and its treatment, toward a social model of health that emphasized social and environmental factors, and defined health from the point of view of the individual's functioning within their society. Rather than treating the symptoms the emphasis turned to the origins of disease and prevention. This policy shift resulted in Fitness and Wellness campaigns like *Participation*, which had such widespread benefits for the health of Canadians and the Canada Health Act of 1985.

Research on how adults learn overwhelmingly supports the move towards wider perspectives, similar to health care, that view literacy not just as an economic issue but also as a social justice issue. Our current policy strategy focuses only on the symptoms - the economic effects of low literacy, and ignores the root causes of the problem - a lack of suitable learning opportunities for adults. Its quite simple really, when the policy strategy in Canada begins to approach learning as an end itself, rather than the means to an end, we will see positive changes in our adult literacy rates.

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## What can be done?