

Literature Review Executive Summary of the Literature Review

This literature review was conducted as one part of the Seniors' Literacy Research Project. It was undertaken with the purpose of reviewing past research in order to inform our face-to-face qualitative interview process. It started by setting definition parameters in describing seniors' literacy issues, then examined current literature on specific topics of seniors literacy. A research paper wouldn't normally have an Executive Summary for the Literature Review by itself, but numerous contacts throughout this project suggested one for the convenience of the reader.

For our research, we chose to **define "literacy"** as a person's ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential. We chose to **define a "senior"** as a person 65 years of age and older in keeping with most major research.

In examining the **"big picture"** of seniors' literacy issues, we started with the International Adult Literacy Survey statistics that showed 80% of Canadians over age 65 have low literacy (Level 1 and 2). We also found that most documentation acknowledged literacy as a Human Right and a basic skill to participate in democracy.

The **historical perspective** shows that events such as the Depression, World War I and II interrupted schooling for seniors in their formative years. Schooling was not valued when compared with economic survival. The Canadian population was rural and resource-based. Literacy was simply considered a luxury.

The **International Adult Literacy Survey** (IALS) statistics showed 80% of Canadian over age 65 have low literacy (Level 1 and Level 2). IALS statistics also reveal that 40% of Canadians over 65 have not completed primary school. Canada has 1.6 million people over age 65 at Level 1.

Women continue to be the largest portion of the adult population, yet they continue to be economically and socially disadvantaged. By the year 2016, 10% of the population of Atlantic Canada will be women aged 65 and over, and 29% of these will be 80 or older. Education is a major indicator of human capital and social stratification. Rural women's educational attainment lags behind urban women, therefore, they are disadvantaged in the labour market increasing the risk of poverty in old age.

Cultural diversity and literacy issues are noted through the International Adult Literacy Survey showing that for immigrants, 59% have low literacy in English/French compared with 45% of people born in Canada. However, 22% of immigrants have high literacy skills versus 19% of people born in Canada. The proportion of immigrants with Level 4/5

literacy skills in English or French was higher than the proportion of non-immigrant Canadians.

Currently, Canadians with low incomes and low levels of education are more likely to have poor **health status**, no matter which measure of health is used. Research has found that older adults with low literacy skills tend to be less physically healthy than more literate seniors. They are also less likely to use preventive health measures and more likely to use medical and health services inappropriately.

Low literacy is noted as a threat to our international **economic competitiveness**. Our workforce is our greatest asset for attracting new investment. Employability and productivity of older workers will be important if the length of their engagement in the paid work force is extended. Among Canadians with lowest prose literacy scores on the IALS, 47% live in low-income households. Women are particularly vulnerable; women at Level 1 prose equaled 59% low-income rates. Recipients of social assistance had markedly lower literacy skills than either the general population of Canadians or those who received Employment Insurance benefits.

The best guess is that in the late 1980's, only 2% of adults with low literacy skills were in **upgrading classes** and now that figure is up to 5%. IALS statistics showed 8% of those over 65 years were engaged in adult education and training. That means only a minority of persons with low literacy are seeking opportunities to enhance literacy skills. Most people at Level 2 don't think they have a literacy problem or they overestimate their literacy skills. This reflects a lifetime of coping through avoidance or with the help of support networks.

What motivates older learners? Some answers include education as an end in itself and learning directed towards some further outcome. Intellectual stimulation, fear of cognitive decline, learning as a hobby and personal enhancement are all motives for life long learning.

Community-based social marketing is a method of reaching the public with messages designed to lead to social change. Social marketing recognizes that multiple barriers and benefits exist for any behaviour, that program design needs to be based on social science, and that programs need to be piloted and evaluated. Some strategies previously employed include finding champions for literacy; precisely targeting the message and the messenger; incorporating messages of democracy and nation-building with the literacy message; using the messages to develop a learning culture in Canada; and creating campaigns to overcome stereotypes and stigma attached to low literacy.

Should we convince seniors that their literacy levels need to be raised? It was noted that government and private industry has to recognize the new markets that the senior population is creating and must take measures to help people access their products and services. We need to think of plain language everywhere.

Life long learning is important for employment and income. For each additional year of education, you add 8-10% to your income. There are attitudes about life long learning to be

overcome. If you didn't learn well in school, you may want to avoid that situation. Through life long learning, seniors can be role models for their grandchildren and society. Even with education factored out of the IALS results, there is a significant decline in literacy as age increases. This decline is sharpest for those with low education. However, it is not literacy, but practice that declines with age. Practice is affected by many factors such as eyesight and reaction time. Intelligence is not affected by age.

Through a wide variety of projects and programs, seniors have had the opportunity to comment on what they feel are the **best practices** in dealing with the issue of seniors' literacy. This literature review touches on a sampling of projects and programs and highlights some **key findings**.

And, finally the literature review captures some of the most significant details to consider when **conducting qualitative research with seniors**. This includes informed consent, dealing with memory and hearing loss, state of health and the physical and mental stress of the interview process.

This literature review gives the reader an overview of some of the most pressing issues of seniors' literacy. It is not comprehensive as new research is being conducted daily that continues to inform this issue.
