Level 3, Bureaucrats, and Stigmatization: Why "Mainstreaming" Literacy Failed in Canada

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Abstract

The article examines why the promise of "mainstreaming" (adult) literacy in Canada was never realized, although there was a period of time, from the late 1980s until the early/mid-2000s, when interest in literacy was strong among the public, in the media, and with policy-makers. Based on recent and previous research, including interviews with key stakeholders, we argue that mainstreaming literacy has failed and explore the reasons for this failure. The chapter is structured in three sections. In the first, we recount the history of literacy in Canada over three phases: i) the period from the 1970s up until the launch of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1994; ii) the story of IALS and changes occurring up until around 2005, and, iii) the period from around 2006, which marked a clear policy shift in the approach to literacy. The second section examines the reasons for the failure of the mainstreaming of literacy in Canada. We conclude by reflecting on the present situation of adult literacy, which has been largely reduced to employability skills which are under-supported.

Keywords: Literacy, Canada, International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)

1 Introduction

In the late 1980s, adult literacy emerged as a policy issue in several industrialized countries including Canada (Barton & Hamilton 1990). The first adult literacy surveys, such as the Southam newspaper report *Broken Words*, published in 1987, followed by the report *En toutes lettres et en français* (1989), published by the Institut canadien d'éducation des adultes (ICÉA) for the francophone population, revealed the extent of poor literacy skills among the adult population in Canada and provoked public debates and policy responses. Canada is a particularly interesting case, as, at one point, interest in literacy was strong among the public, in the media, and with policy-makers. Canada was a driving force behind the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), conducted in collaboration with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which furthered the adult literacy agenda in the country. Between the 1970s and 1990s, considerable infrastructure was built up for literacy in the form of national and provincial organizations. However, in the past

decade, the Canadian adult literacy infrastructure has been dismantled. The promise of mainstreaming literacy in Canada was never realized.

This chapter provides new insights into the Canadian literacy story. It is based on recent and previous research, including nine interviews with key stakeholders who played a part in the story, such as government officials, experts and academics, and NGO representatives involved in literacy-related policy-making, research and advocacy work in Canada. Drawing on theories of "issue framing" (Nelson 2011) and "agenda-setting" (Béland & Howlett 2016), we argue that mainstreaming literacy has failed in Canada and explore the reasons for this failure. This chapter is structured in three sections. In the first, we recount the history of (adult) literacy in Canada over three phases: i) the period from the 1970s up until the launch of the IALS: ii) the story of IALS and changes occurring up until around 2005, and, iii) the period from around 2006, which marked a clear policy shift in the approach to literacy. The second section examines the reasons for the failure of the "mainstreaming" of literacy in Canada. We conclude by reflecting on the present situation of literacy, which has been largely reduced to employability skills which are under-supported.

2 What do we mean by "mainstreaming (adult) literacy"?

> "So, the question of literacy training at the end of the day isn't or shouldn't be independent of a whole range of essential skills. And it shouldn't be independent of teamwork skills. It shouldn't be independent of language training for immigrants...The correct policy answer... is to move it [literacy] into the mainstream." (Interview with EI[1], Former Assistant Deputy Minister in the Canadian Federal Government)

> "So it's very important that [literacy] be institutionalised, to be connected with everything. So it doesn't fall between the cracks." (Interview with AR, former high-level officer in Human Resources and Skills Development, Canadian Federal Government)

> "I would say that [mainstreaming literacy means] it needs to be not off on its own, sort of a renegade. It has to find its place within a suite of activities and look like the other programmes and act like the other programmes." (Interview with RA, former program director in the National Literacy Secretariat, Canadian Federal Government)

Throughout the industrialised world, adult education has long been lamented as the "poor cousin" (Newman 1979; Rubenson 1999) to compulsory schooling, and has clamoured to capture government attention as a policy issue. In Canada, as in other Anglo-Saxon liberal welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1996), adult education has long been associated with basic education for poor people with low literacy skills. And, accordingly, as veteran Canadian adult education researcher and practitioner Allan Quigley (1990) has long noted, it has been stigmatised and learners have largely been ignored. Literacy practitioners have been associated with volunteer do-gooder gran-

1 The interviews are anonymised.

nies in cardigans, rather than professional teachers, and adult literacy has, by and large, existed outside the mainstream of education.

As the quotes above suggest, "mainstreaming" (adult) literacy is about bringing literacy in from the periphery to the centre of both education and social policy. It refers to embedding literacy into existing vocational, language, and skills curricula in a contextualised manner (Conway, Lopez & Casey 2007); and, it involves institutionalizing adult literacy policy so it links with other policies and government bodies to which it connects (for example, housing, homelessness, correctional services, employment etc.). The hope is that adult literacy, and adult education more broadly, will no longer be thought of as existing for a small and marginalized subset of society, that literacy itself will finally be conceived of as present in everything we do, and that its connection to all other social policy questions will be recognized.

In principle, it can be a good thing to mainstream; for example, human rights were mainstreamed throughout the world after World War II. Mainstreaming is part of the strategy of the United Nations to support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. They define mainstreaming as helping governments "to land and contextualize the agenda at national and local levels; ultimately reflecting the agenda in national plans, strategies and budgets" (United Nations Development Programme 2017). Furthermore, embracing a contextualized, situated approach to literacy could be compatible with the research emanating from the new literacy studies movement, pioneered by Brian Street (1984, 2003) and others (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic 2000; Gee 2004). As one of our interviewees notes in the quote above, literacy is and could be part of language teaching, employability skills, citizenship education, taught in a situated, contextualized manner, connected to people's lives and needs. Further, developing a policy structure in which literacy is understood as central to many other social policy issues is not only laudable but good public policy. At the same time, moving literacy away from the community or regional bodies can result in a narrowing of literacy in content and purpose, with attendant deleterious effects. For example, previous research on New Zealand's success in developing a national literacy strategy showed how mainstreaming literacy resulted in the creation of a workplace, employment agenda, while undervalorising community literacy organizations. Furthermore, such mainstreaming was accompanied by an intensification of administrative work and bureaucracy, increasing competition for funds, and a disregarding of difficult-to-quantify literacy outcomes (Walker 2011). One of our interviewees used the term "institutionalize" in terms of establishing greater bureaucratic control over literacy. In our view, mainstreaming can be a double-edged sword.

Unlike New Zealand, however, Canada has never really succeeded at mainstreaming, professionalizing, or institutionalizing adult literacy. This is particularly curious given Canada's chief role in the creation of the OECD's major international adult literacy surveys – specifically, the IALS and Adult Literacy and Lifeskills (ALL) surveys, on which the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) builds – and its leadership in the research and practice of adult education. As we explore below, there was a period of time, from the late 1980s up until the

early/mid-2000s, in which adult literacy had the ear of the government, national bodies existed, and there was an optimism that a pan-Canadian literacy initiative was possible. Since this time, most of the literacy organizations and research institutes have become defunct, core funding for programming has diminished, and the literacy community remains disillusioned (Smythe 2018). Canadian adult literacy practitioners, researchers, and literacy advocates likely had reservations at what mainstreaming literacy could entail; there is, as Addey (2018) explained, a danger of a single story in monolithic and hegemonic interpretations of literacy emanating from the OECD, and in a culture of measuring literacy and comparatively ranking countries in their achievements. Nonetheless, bringing literacy out from the cold has been a continuing desire expressed by many practitioners and supportive government officials alike. After presenting a brief chronology of adult literacy in the country from the 1970s until today, we put forward theories for why the promise of mainstreaming literacy in Canada has not been realized.

3 The history of adult literacy in Canada: From the 1970s to today

Canada is well known by adult education scholars throughout the world for its pioneering adult literacy achievements: the Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia remains an inspirational model for the development of cooperatives and an approach to community development that can come through teaching reading, writing, and financial literacy to workers (Selman & Dampier 1991). Similarly, Frontier College, originated in the 1800s in university extension by sending students to remote communities to help teach literacy to lumber workers, continues to offer numerous literacy and language programs to Canadians, new immigrants, and refugees (ibid., p. 56). As adult education scholars, we acknowledge the rich history of literacy movements and organizations in this country. For the purposes of this paper, however, we start by examining the national state of adult literacy from the 1970s up until this day. This is because there was arguably no Canadian "literacy movement" or much discussion of problems with adult literacy prior to the 1970s (Atkinson, forthcoming; Hautecoeur 2001).

From the 1970s to pre-IALS

In the mid to late 1970s, an infrastructure around adult literacy began to be built and the question of adult literacy started to gain federal government attention. An incipient network was formed between practitioners and the few researchers publishing on adult literacy, which ultimately became the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL), established in 1977 (Draper & Carere 1998, p. 69). MCL subsequently developed a coalition of ten literacy organizations across the country called the Canadian Alliance for Literacy, that later released the high-profile publication, *A Call to Action on Literacy*, which was disseminated throughout national media (Shohet 2001). As

Hautecoeur (2001, p. 413) writes, "the Movement for Canadian Literacy acquired an almost monopolistic legitimacy in the provinces and with the Federal Government". In addition, the national government started to commission research on adult basic education for the labour force, and the Canadian UNESCO Commission convened, for the first time, a working group to examine literacy in Canada. Québec was arguably key in growing an adult literacy sector and interest. In particular, the ICÉA, formed in 1946 to bring together civil society French language adult education organizations in Canada, started to examine questions of adult literacy from a Freirean perspective; and the ALPHA publication series on literacy and basic education research, committed to supporting "literacy awareness" in French and Creole across the world, was launched in 1978.

Up until the mid-1980s, formal schooling tended to be used as a proxy for adult literacy (Atkinson, forthcoming), and adult basic education was almost entirely provided by night schools, or community organizations rooted in popular education and influenced by the work of Paulo Freire. However, by the 1980s, many policymakers, researchers, and literacy organizations were no longer satisfied in equating years of schooling with skills and literacy (Jones 1990). In 1986 (results released in 1987), Canada conducted its first national survey of literacy skills. The Southam Survey, commissioned by the eponymous newspaper chain, examined Canadians' ability to complete "everyday literacy tasks", defining literacy in a way that was adopted almost verbatim in 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). The survey found that 38 % of Canadians were below the literacy level deemed adequate for succeeding in society (Calamai 1987). Surprised by the results of the Southam survey, in 1989, Statistics Canada commissioned the LSUDA survey (Literacy Used in Daily Activities). The precursor to IALS, LSUDA measured Canadians' reading, writing, numeracy and information processing skills across five levels.

During the mid-late 1980s, the federal government started to pay serious attention to literacy. Thanks to lobbying by MCL and other literacy advocates, and to the worrying results of the Southam survey (see Hautecoeur 2001; Rubenson & Walker 2011), a funding commitment to literacy was made in 1987 by the Conservative Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, to create the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) which then formed part of his re-election platform. As Darville (1992, p. 7) noted, "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". At this time, the link between the economy and literacy was being made strongly in media and by politicians (Walker & Rubenson 2014), which coincided with the time around which the OECD began publishing reports on the topic (Atkinson, forthcoming). Following the establishment of the NLS, federal monies were put towards the creation of three additional national bodies of adult literacy: The National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) (1989), ABC Literacy Canada (1989), and Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français (FCAF) (1989). Furthermore, "UNESCO's International Literacy Year of 1990 gave literacy a new visibility in Canada and, in part, prompted the

government to lend greater financial and moral support to [literacy]" (Rubenson & Walker 2011, p. 3). By the beginning of the 1990s, there were six national adult literacy organizations, all but one created between 1977–1989.[2] From all appearances, and for the first time ever, literacy advocates, researchers, and practitioners were no longer outside the mainstream.

IALS and ALL in Canada

The story of IALS goes back to 1976 when the OECD sent a delegation to Canada to conduct a country report on education which sparked many headlines and educational initiatives in Canada (Interview with AO, former director of a leading Canadian adult education NGO). At the time, the push for more data about adult education came, to a large extent, from Canadian NGOs, in particular the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE) and their francophone counterpart, ICÉA. These two organizations, with funding from the federal government through, the Department of the Secretary of State, had commissioned studies on adults' participation in education in the 1980s, such as the Adult Education and Training Survey (AETS) and One in Every Five, a survey of participation in adult education in Canada, published in 1984 by Statistics Canada and the federal Department of the Secretary of State (Draper & Carere 1998). Based on the results of those earlier studies, the 1987 Southam newspaper survey, and the LSUDA study of 1989, these and other Canadian NGOs, as well as other public advocates such as the Canadian journalist and broadcaster Peter Gzowski, were lobbying the federal Department of the Secretary of State to invest in a broader study. The department was interested, and sought to involve the OECD which "could provide substantive analytical oversight and international credibility" (Interview with DI, senior official in the Department of the Secretary of State). Another reason to involve the OECD was to avoid working with the provinces, which hold jurisdiction for education in Canada: at the time, the provinces resisted publicising any findings on literacy problems in Canada (Interviews with AO, former director of a leading Canadian adult education NGO; and with CU, a methodological expert involved in IALS). The IALS study was then conducted cooperatively between Statistics Canada and the OECD. The expertise for the study came from Canada and the American Educational Testing Service (ETS), building on the same team of statisticians that had already worked on the LSUDA study. The OECD was in charge of the overall coordination, recruiting countries, and planning and framing the reports and products that came out of IALS. The first IALS study, published in 1994, was conducted in Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. The funding for the study was shared by these countries, with the United States being the most important financial contributor to the development of the methodology (Interview with CU). IALS examined literacy (broken into sub-com-

2 Frontier College had been formed in 1899; in 1981, another national literacy organization was formed, Laubach Canada, a community-based literacy program which has its roots in the US and is a global literacy initiative. All national literacy organizations, except Frontier College, are now defunct.

ponents of prose and document) and numeracy. Later versions of the study also looked at additional areas, such as life skills and problem-solving using technology.

According to IALS, 42.2% of Canadians were estimated to be in the two lowest levels of the prose scale (out of 5 levels) (OECD & Statistics Canada 1995). Level 3 was considered the minimum for a person to be able to function adequately in society (we will come back to Level 3 below). The results were widely debated in the media and policy circles, contrary to other countries such as Germany, where the IALS results were equally alarming, but never discussed, or France, which rejected the results and withdrew from the study (Thorn 2009). IALS, as also the precursor studies, could be considered a "focusing event" that opened and sustained a "window of opportunity" (Kingdon 1984) for literacy as a policy issue. For the next decade, IALS greatly contributed to advancing the literacy agenda in Canada. The funding available through the NLS (that had also funded the Canadian contribution to IALS) helped to build up a literacy infrastructure, with provincial organizations being created across the country (Interview with RA). In the years after the publication of the IALS study, the budget of the NLS was increased (Shohet 2001). According to a former staff member, the NLS was "really golden" at that time: "We had all our International Literacy activity, we had all the start up stuff, things were starting to snow ball and then it rolled into IALS and then that added momentum" (Interview with RA, former program director in the National Literacy Secretariat, Canadian Federal Government). Prominent literacy advocates, who acted as "policy entrepreneurs", defined by Kingdon (1984) as "people who are willing to invest their resources in pushing their pet proposals or problems [...] prompting important people to pay attention" (quoted in Béland & Howlett 2016, p. 223), added to that momentum, particularly Senator Joyce Fairbairn. When IALS was published, she was leader of the government in the Senate and Minister with Special Responsibility for Literacy. She had been one of the driving forces behind the creation of the NLS and used her extensive political influence to lobby for literacy. Her influence cannot be underestimated: "What triggered the strong government [response to IALS] was Senator Fairbairn; she was a force of nature" (Interview with former federal government official EO). In 2003, a follow-up study to IALS was conducted, the ALL. The goal of the survey, in which 12 countries participated – seven in the first round 2002–2003, five in the second in 2006 (Thorn 2009) – was to measure progress since IALS. The ALL results showed very little difference compared to IALS (Rubenson & Walker 2011). The Canadian data that were published in 2005 were known as the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALSS). The IALSS data underpinned the launch of the Literacy and Essential Skills Agenda that was part of the Canadian government's Workplace Skills Strategy announced in December 2004 (Jackson 2005). The shift to "essential skills" signaled a move away from the citizenship and collective dimensions of literacy and reduced literacy to individual skills required for the job market.

In 2005, Claudette Bradshaw, who was Minister of State (Human Resources Development) and, similar to Joyce Fairbairn, an advocate for literacy, set up the federal Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills (the Bradshaw Committee),

which put forth a broad vision for a national literacy strategy, that was backed up by a commitment on the part of key actors in the federal government to increase its dedicated $28 million in annual spending on literacy by $30 million over three years (Hayes 2013). But nothing came of the momentum and the activities set in motion by the literacy advocates in the NLS and the federal government. In the years from around 2005 onwards, we can see a clear shift in the policy approach to literacy.

2006 to present

Months after their election in 2006, the newly elected Conservative Harper government announced it would cut $17.7 million in funding to adult literacy, effectively dismantling the NLS. In spite of 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 arefunctionally 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).

The shift in adult literacy policy can only partially be attributed to the newly elected Conservative government, however (Hayes 2013). Indeed, it had already started in the 1990s with institutional changes in the federal government (Smythe 2018).

In 1993 the NLS, originally housed in the department of the Secretary of State, which had responsibility for citizenship, was transferred to Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), tying literacy to the labour market (Hayes 2013). In 2007, what was now called Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) abolished the NLS to create the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) (Hayes 2009). While the literacy strategy pursued by the NLS was community-based and inspired by a view of literacy as a driver of social and personal development, the HR(S)DC's interest in literacy focused exclusively on employment (St. Clair 2016). Even before a Conservative government was elected in 2006, there was a group of civil servants in the HRDC that actively worked against greater investments in literacy. As EO, former federal government official said in our interview, "the late 90s I would say is when there might have been this shift from the bureaucratic side [...] to institutionalise literacy." There was tension between the people working at the NLS and the "bureaucrats" in the HRDC: "Because of their [people working in the NLS] style of doing business within the government, HRDC people [...] were pulling their hair out" (Interview with EO). When it came to implementing the recommendations of the Bradshaw Committee, "the bureaucrats stalled and they stalled and they stalled until there was an election that brought in the conservatives" (Interview with EO). According to a former NLS staff member, the NLS had been distributing funding to all kinds of non-governmental organizations, provincial organizations, and community groups, in a rather un-bureaucratic and collaborative manner. As former NLS program director RA said in our interview, "at the time the NLS was all about partnerships." That changed in 1999 with the scandal that ensued after an HRDC audit that condemned the management of grants and contribution funds (Sutherland 2001).

Several of the NLS files were deemed as problematic by the auditors, who criticized poor documentation and claimed missing funds (Hayes 2009). The audit led to New Public Management reforms, introducing greater accountability measures, and tightened bureaucratic processes. Before the audit scandal, the NLS had entertained collaborative relationships with literacy organizations across the country: "Mostly we collaborated, so there wasn't a call for proposals back then at the national level" (Interview with RA). This way of working became much more difficult after the audit. According to RA,

> "we [the NLS] had to have calls for proposals and we weren't allowed to talk to anybody if the proposals came through and…the whole atmosphere changed…the leadership at the NLS at that point shifted to just really managing grants and contributions".

As discussed by Elfert and Rubenson (2013, p. 225), these new bureaucratic arrangements "resulted in a transformation of the relationship between the federal government and the provinces, in which the provinces [were] no longer partners but clients".

It is fair to say that literacy programs have since been decimated across the country. The dismantling of the NLS in 2007 and whittling away at support for literacy reached a culmination in 2014 and 2015 when all national literacy organizations were defunded. Jason Kenney, Minister of Employment and Skills Development (as the HRSDC was renamed), declared in 2014:

> "Our government is committed to ensuring that federal funding for literacy is no longer spent on administration and countless research papers, but instead is invested in projects that result in Canadians receiving the literacy skills they need to obtain jobs" (quoted in Smythe 2015, p. 16).

This reduction of literacy to skills for the job market is represented by the shift from literacy to essential skills. The HRSDC's nine essential skill areas, subdivided in five levels of complexity that can be tested through a workplace skills test called TOWES, derive from the IALS and ALL methodology (Jackson 2005; Pinsent-Johnson 2011; Smythe 2015). OLES made applying for grants more competitive and bureaucratically cumbersome, which has had a devastating effect on community organizations in Canada. Furthermore, OLES has failed to apportion the little funding it has (Hayes 2018); as noted by one of our interviewees, only 50 % of OLES allocated funding was spent in 2017.

4 Why the mainstreaming of (adult) literacy failed in Canada

As shown above, there was a moment when a "window of opportunity" or "policy window" existed for mainstreaming literacy in Canada. According to Kingdon (1984),

these policy windows open when the "separate streams of problems, policies, and politics come together at certain critical times" (quoted by Béland & Howlett 2016, p. 222). The "problem stream" relates to the public perception of a problem that demands a policy response. The "policy stream" is related to experts examining problems and proposing policy solutions. The "political stream" "comprises factors that influence the body politic, such as swings in national mood, executive or legislative turnover, and interest group advocacy campaigns" (ibid., p. 222). All of these streams crossed to some extent in Canada between the mid-late 1980s and approximately 2005. The various literacy studies that had been conducted in Canada since the 1980s and the way the issue of literacy was taken up by advocacy groups and the media framed literacy as a public "problem". The IALS survey was greatly analyzed and followed up upon in Canada through investments and the creation of institutions promoting literacy as a policy issue and delivering literacy programs. "Policy entrepreneurs", including high-level politicians, had created a favorable political climate for literacy.

However, the policy interest was short-lived. In our view, the policy window was only ever partially open and with a moderate breeze, easily blew shut. Indeed, the notion of mainstreaming adult literacy in Canada has always been fragile and subject to the vicissitudes of government. Despite a strong adult education tradition in the country, there has never been adequate long-standing infrastructure. As Smythe (2015, p. 7) noted, "the Canadian context makes for an interesting case of how the adult literacy field in Canada is coordinated by a small cluster of powerful texts, in the absence of a coherent policy framework". Bégin, Eggleston and MacDonald (2009), quoted in Smythe (2018, p. 141), describe Canada as "a country of perpetual pilot projects." Adult literacy lies under the shadow of international surveys and measurements – which presents a contradiction to the sociocultural (new literacy studies) understanding of literacy as a plural and dynamic social and cultural practice "with different literacies according to the different domains of life and defined by the individual and wider community goals and cultural practices" (Addey 2018, p. 317, drawing on Barton et al. 2000). Starting with the Southam newspaper survey, then continuing with LSUDA, leading eventually to IALS, literacy has been – also through the influence of the media – constructed as a measurable and standardized skill that a person either has or doesn't have. Level 3 was constructed as the threshold to determine those who are literate and those who are not. Level 3 was used to frame literacy in a way that it "was no longer about citizenship, empowerment, motivated training and being learner-centered. It was about moving people to 'level 3'" (Hayes 2009, p. 22). From a framing and agenda-setting perspective, level 3 represented "second-order agenda-setting", which means that a complex and multi-faceted policy issue is simplified by emphasising one particular aspect of the problem (Nelson 2011, drawing on McCombs 2004).

IALS and ALL were a double-edged swords: They helped bring literacy to the attention of media and policy makers but at a cost. The IALS survey has been widely criticised as contributing to the construction of literacy as the "single story" (Addey

2018), a "project of social ordering" (Hamilton 2001), serving literacy as a "competitiveness project" (Darville 1999) and making illiteracy "a national sickness" (Hautecoeur 2001, p. 411). For some of the experts who worked on the IALS, "level 3" constituted "a line in the data that's absolutely clear" (Interview with CU). At the same time, others criticised level 3 as it negated the very notion of literacy existing as a social practice and on a continuum. According to another statistician involved in IALS, the construction of "level 3" as the "watershed" of functional literacy put "a label on [people], as inadequate" (Interview with TO). Ultimately, the "single story" damaged literacy in Canada as it contributed to stigmatising people, such as French Canadians and the Indigenous population who were more likely to have literacy scores below level 3. Literacy learners were "framed" by placing them in categories and referred to as "'level ones', 'level twos'" (Smythe 2015, p. 9). Funding was invested towards raising people to level 3, neglecting those with lower literacy levels. A report by the Conference Board of Canada (2013), a Canadian think tank, argued:

> "Moving this group [those currently at level 2] up to a solid level 3 – considered to be the minimum 'job standard' level that enables employees to cope with the demands of work – would be less expensive and involve fewer resources, per capita, than moving the group of employees with extremely rudimentary level 1 literacy skills up to level 3." (quoted in Smythe 2015, p. 11)

As the follow-up studies to IALS did not yield significant measurable improvements, policy commitments to literacy turned out to be unattractive in the shifting political climate characterised by an accountability and outcome-oriented approach to policy-making. Rather than "situating literacy within the context of full citizenship" (Hayes 2009, p. 19), literacy efforts were increasingly measured against "tangible delivery outcomes such as the number of jobs created and the number of people employed" (ibid., p. 20). Another effect of the focus on measurable results was that many of the interesting findings of the IALS and ALL surveys were hardly discussed, such as the enormous difference in literacy skills found in Québec between the generation prior and after the quiet revolution of the 1960s. The studies also revealed new information about how adults learn that was largely ignored because it was not deemed politically interesting. In the words of a person very familiar with the data:

> "There's a lot more information in the results that anybody ever really made use of because most of the rhetoric and policy that came out of it focused on how many people are in a particular level. Which meant a lot of [...] educationally significant information never really got into the public policy" (Interview with TO).

The focus on the economic argument for literacy led to its downfall as a political issue, as evidence for economic benefits of adult literacy are difficult to quantify within the timeframe of an election cycle. There are outcomes of adult literacy education that cannot be accounted for in narrow assessments, such as people developing the ability to make phone calls, to show up for work on time, etc., which are not considered relevant. In other words, IALS could have been used to mainstream literacy in a

way which allows for multiple narratives, but Canada has chosen a single story. The NGOs and community organizations did not resist the "single story" enough as they used the IALS numbers to lobby for more funding. At the same time, the literacy community became disillusioned with the effects of the big data from IALS. As former NLS program director RA said:

> "What started as [...] an awareness, a population level glimpse at what people could do became [...] all pervasive [...] by the time PIAAC came along things had really gone sideways in terms of how people in Canada viewed IALS."

The increasing disconnects between "bureaucrats" and adult literacy learners and practitioners that some of our interviewees referred to were exacerbated by institutional reforms in public management. While the period of the "high time" of the NLS was characterized by partnership-oriented and collaborative relationships between the federal government and literacy organizations and stakeholders, the bureaucratic reorganization of government structures furthered the separation between the policy level and on-the-ground literacy learners and practitioners. There has been a trend of increasingly professionalized career bureaucrats who move from one unit to another without any expertise and no background in education. As we have shown above, it was mainly the middle-level civil servants – and not the elected politicians – who resisted particular policy attention to literacy.

The federated nature of Canada constitutes another challenge to integrating literacy into the mainstream of education. Policy processes in the field of adult education differ from those in relation to schooling. While the provinces have a clear mandate for schools, the responsibility for adult education is spread across sectors, more complex in its delivery and linked to labour market policies. Québec is the only province that has mainstreamed literacy to some extent. Since 2001, Québec has a Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training (Gouvernement du Québec 2002), which differs from those in other provinces in that it emphasizes a rights-based approach to adult education and the responsibility of the state in providing adult education opportunities. Although this policy has long been neglected due to changes of government, Québec has set a system in place in which the school board offers adult education provision. This integration of literacy in the formal education structure is unique in Canada, as in the other provinces literacy and basic education provision are more ad hoc and diffuse.

Another reason why adult literacy has failed to be mainstreamed in Canada is that literacy is associated with poverty, stigmatized groups, and with adults who "made poor choices" (Quigley 1990). Unlike children, adults have no appeal to innocence and so are blamed for their educational "failures", particularly in Western liberal societies dominated by current neoliberal frameworks. As one of our interviewees said, discussing a (successful) pilot project with single mothers that was never expanded, "single moms on welfare are lazy, undeserving citizens. That's the rhetorical structure" (Interview with CU). Unlike children, adults are seen as responsible

for their own failures and therefore responsible for their own education. As some of our interviewees pointed out, "literacy" as a concept is always stigmatized.

5 Further exploring the present situation

Adult literacy policies and programs have fallen out of favor in Canada as elsewhere. It is important to note that the most recent study of adults' literacy skills, the 2013 PIAAC, which built on the IALS and ALL surveys, has abandoned the concept of "literacy" – as have most public policies – in favor of "skills" and "competencies". However, within a bifurcated high skills/low skills society like Canada (see Brown, Green & Lauder 2001) the focus is more on supporting the skills of the already literate and "productive" segment of society than investing in those with lower literacy skills. Most institutional structures of adult literacy in Canada have now been destroyed – so, even with a slightly more sympathetic government as the current Liberal government may very well be, the effort it would take to mainstream literacy would be more than they care to invest. Smythe (2018), in a chapter about the closure of the National Adult Literacy Database, writes about the infrastructure that cannot be easily replaced once it is gone. As one of her interviewees, Sue Emson, said, "I don't know if the knowledge from the field is still out there. This is the problem of the infrastructure that has been lost" (ibid., p. 188).

Against this background, it is not surprising that PIAAC, according to St. Clair (2016) and our interviewees, has had no policy impact in Canada so far: "PIAAC died in Canada four days after it was released" (Interview with RA). The reasons, according to one of our interviewees, are "political" – news about low adult literacy skills is not favourable to "getting re-elected" (Interview with CU). Another interviewee pointed to the lack of federal leadership: "There was nobody out there promoting it [PIAAC] [...] nobody was the flag bearer on the file" (Interview with RA). Priorities have also shifted towards K-12 schooling and education for the Indigenous population:

> "Canada spent a lot of money and didn't see any results [...] governments change, different governments have different emphases, the federal government in Canada is under a lot more pressure to put its educational interest into Indigenous education [...] for children, which is just a disaster in this country" (Interview with TO).

This is not to say that PIAAC might not have a more indirect policy influence along the line, as some of our interviewees suggested:

> "In many countries, it is seen as one of the major data sources that you can use when you want to justify certain directions that you go, it will kind of play out differently in different countries, depending on the policy context" (Interview with JU, an academic who was involved in IALS).

IALS fell on fertile ground because it capitalized on a "window of opportunity". "There was money" and "a number of people from civil society, a few public servants and a few people in leadership roles felt that this was something to do" (Interview with DI). "Policy entrepreneurs", such as politicians, the media, and the public alike were interested at the time to get to the bottom of the literacy problem and there was hope that the data could be used to implement reforms that would benefit employers and workers. As Steiner-Khamsi (2004, p. 208) argued:

> "The potential of influencing educational reform depends on whether a controversy over educational reforms already exists – attractive if at that particular time policymakers are in need of additional external support for an already existent agenda".

There was also a certain favourable policy window, involving initiatives such as UNESCO's International Literacy Year in 1990, a general drive for data, and a more unbureaucratic way of governing. Actors among the Canadian NGOs, and in the federal government, Statistics Canada, the OECD, and academia, formed a policy network that pushed for IALS, albeit with different motivations. It is interesting to note that the initial push for more data about literacy came from the Canadian NGOs with "the educationally disadvantaged adult" (Interview with AO, former director of a leading Canadian adult education NGO) in mind. They lobbied for IALS, but then the file moved to the federal government and the OECD. PIAAC has now been taken over solely by the OECD as part of the "PISA engine" (Interview with CU, methodological expert involved in IALS). Ultimately, IALS was used by the federal government to underpin the employment-oriented Essential Skills agenda, which is "arguably not in relation to instruction and learning at all, but rather in relation to assessment and screening" (Elfert & Rubenson 2013, p. 227).

By now disillusionment and fatigue have set in, resulting in a lack of response

> "The most frequent response to OECD-type studies is indifference. In fact, in most countries, comparative and international studies pass unnoticed by politicians or the general public and cause little excitement – positive or negative" (Steiner-Khamsi 2004, p. 208).

After the "golden years", when the data showed no quick improvements and the political economy changed towards bureaucratisation of governance and less NGO and civil society influence, the lack of a robust literacy infrastructure enabled the dismantling of literacy in Canada in a relatively short time. As one of our interviewees said: "We went from the real high of being totally engaged down to like nobody even knew it happened" (Interview with RA).

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