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FAST FACTS

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Literacy, Women and Poverty

The Manitoba Government recently announced increased funding of \$700,000 per year for adult literacy programs and Adult Learning Centres, bringing the yearly total to 20.6 million. This was a welcome increase against the backdrop that, according to the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS), 285,000 working age Manitobans or 40% of the population have literacy scores below the level considered the minimum for full participation in a knowledge-based economy and society.

It turns out that women are at multiple risk for exclusion from “full participation in economy and society” if they are at the lowest two levels of literacy, and even more so if they are Aboriginal or immigrant¹. More specifically, the IALSS determined that:

- 10.2% of Canadian women at the second lowest level of literacy are unemployed, compared to 7.4% of men. Of the women who are employed, 46.3% are in low-paying jobs, compared to 19.4% of men at the same literacy level.

- 15.1% of Canadian women at the lowest level of literacy are unemployed, compared to 10.7% of men. Of the women who are employed, 56.9% are employed in low-paying jobs, compared to 25.5% for men at the same literacy level. (No information was available on whether this work was part-time or full-time, shift work, or unionized, although we know that women are over-represented in non-unionized casual and temporary employment.)

A deeper analysis reveals that many of the women living with lower levels of literacy and low incomes are also single parents. If 42.5% of Manitoba’s social assistance recipients are single parents, and 80% of single parents are single mothers, then it can reasonably be assumed that single mothers would constitute an important target group for improving provincial literacy levels, both in the short term and in the long term. Not only might an important segment of Manitoba’s population be able to attend properly-designed literacy programming, but invaluable educational foundations would be laid for the next generation.

But what kind of literacy programming and supports are needed to make upgrading truly accessible for these low-income single mothers? The new funding provides an opportunity to analyze and re-vision lower-level literacy programming in Manitoba. In the places where

¹ While individuals between Levels 3 and 5 can manage the various reading tasks of their daily lives, people at Levels 1 and 2 struggle with anything but the most familiar tasks.



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gender, poverty and literacy intersect, adult learning can be slow and difficult. Attendance is affected by long bus trips to the food bank, visits with the children's school counselors, and meetings with social workers. Unstable family dynamics, financial crises, and health issues are a constant reality. The concept of accessibility must therefore be based on the schedules, course content, and supports that would allow low-income single parents to manage their complex lives and still get to school.

Important as work-skill acquisition is, we do our society a huge disservice if we do not value personal, family and community health as much as increased employability or income. Unfortunately, literacy programs aimed at producing productive employees are exponentially more common than programs designed for people who are farther removed from the economy and labour market. Since 2006, the national literacy agenda has shifted so significantly towards work-focused programming that literacy for family, social or political participation has all but disappeared from our educational discourse. We have become so accustomed to measuring success in economic and statistical terms that we are seriously at risk of forgetting that literacy is also about individuals being able to "read their world", inform themselves about choices, engage in community projects, or just help their children with homework.

Not part of the workplace perspective or economic agenda, low-income women are at risk of being forgotten in literacy programming. And yet, the UN recognized the value of applying a gender lens to literacy programming with its message on Literacy Day 2010:

"Literacy transforms the lives of women, their families, communities and societies. Literate women are more likely to send their children, especially their girls, to school. By acquiring literacy, women become more economically self-reliant and more actively engaged in their country's social, political and cultural life. All evidence shows

that investment in literacy for women yields high development dividends".

Taking a gender perspective on low literacy in Canada, not just in developing countries, would be invaluable. We have applied geographic, ethno-cultural and socio-economic lenses to the statistics with interesting results, but looking at women's educational needs at the lower levels of literacy might be equally informative. New funding gives us this opportunity for reflection and, if necessary, redirection.

Based on the analysis, we can then create innovative programming models that serve as a long-term investment in literacy for social transformation, regardless of whether or not the participants will someday show up in the job market. Improved literacy leads to more engaged citizenship, more effective use of the healthcare system, increased community safety, and reduced impact on the justice system. Improved literacy leads to a more positive self-image, and stronger family and community role models.

If, for some reason, we can't find *these* arguments compelling enough to re-vision adult literacy programming for the most marginalized Manitobans, we can hardly argue against the value of the investment for their children. April 2-9 is International Adult Learners' Week in Canada, sponsored by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. Let's take the opportunity to think about the places where gender, low literacy and poverty meet, and collaborate on some solutions.

"If you think literacy is expensive ... try ignorance".
Dorothy Silver, Literacy Action Day, February 1999

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